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PERSONAL POLITICS *in the* *Origin of Minnesota's DEMOCRATIC PARTY*

ERLING JORSTAD

POLITICAL PARTIES first emerged in Minnesota after the establishment of the territory in March, 1849. Most residents soon voiced allegiance to either the Whig or the Democratic party. From the outset the Democrats knew that they held a heavy majority over their rivals. With such voting strength, they were able to control Minnesota's elective offices until 1860, when Lincoln and the newly organized Republican party swept almost every free-soil state. The early success of the Minnesota Democrats, however, did not reflect a rancorous personal struggle for leadership within the organization's ranks—a struggle which almost wrecked the party before it was launched.

Two factors lay at the root of tensions within the party. First, Democratic leaders

found it unnecessary to keep their own ranks tightly unified because the Whigs had no appreciable following. Second, the office of the territorial delegate in Congress carried with it enormous political power. As the sole official representative of the territory in the nation's capital, the delegate was consulted by lawmakers and administrators on contracts, appointments, and patronage. Thus he enjoyed advantages which could help him hold the loyalty of friends and control votes. Consequently, the delegacy was the most coveted public position in young Minnesota.

Among those who well understood and appreciated the looseness of the territory's Democratic organization and the potential power of its delegate were Henry Hastings Sibley and Henry Mower Rice, two of Minnesota's most prominent businessmen. Both were Democrats; each wanted to hold the office of delegate. The resulting rivalry between them illustrates some of the problems faced by Minnesota Democrats as they attempted to establish traditional party organization in what was little more than unsettled wilderness.¹

Sibley had long been the acknowledged public leader in the upper Mississippi Valley. After his arrival at Mendota in 1834, the tall, dark-haired trader carefully built

¹ Hitherto unexploited information on the relations between Sibley and Rice is included in Rice's letter books for 1848-49 and 1854, which were found in St. Paul in 1947 and added to the Rice Papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, and in letters from Richard Chute and David Olmsted to George W. and William G. Ewing, in the W. G. and G. W. Ewing Papers owned by the Indiana State Library at Indianapolis. The Minnesota society has microfilm copies of the latter. These materials supplement information given in Wilson P. Shortridge, *The Transition of a Typical Frontier, with Illustrations from the Life of Henry Hastings Sibley* (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1919), and William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:240n. (St. Paul, 1921).

his fortune and reputation. With his wife and two children, he lived in a handsome limestone house on the Minnesota River opposite Fort Snelling. He also served as the region's chief agent for Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company, a St. Louis fur trade corporation of national scope. In addition to administering his fur business, Sibley served as postmaster, grocer, banker, and general advisor to the incoming settlers. By the mid-1840s he doubtless knew that he had built a reputation as a public-spirited citizen which could be useful should he decide to play a role in politics. His cautious, conservative manner stamped him as a man of ability and conviction.

Rice arrived at Fort Snelling from Vermont in 1839. A tall, wiry bachelor, he served first as assistant to Franklin Steele, Sibley's brother-in-law and the sutler at the fort. In 1842 Sibley and his partner, Hercules L. Dousman of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, hired Rice to handle their dealings with the Winnebago. The energetic Yankee quickly learned the mechanics of the fur trade and soon became wealthy by investing his small earnings in highly speculative land and fur trade ventures. Rice, Sibley, and Steele were the leading figures in the Fort Snelling-St. Paul area. So long as profits in furs remained encouraging, their relationships were both lucrative and friendly.

In the mid-1840s, however, the volume of the fur business declined sharply as the buffalo began moving from the Minnesota prairies into what is now western South Dakota—an area too far from the posts of the Chouteau agents for profitable trade. As a result in 1846 Sibley, Rice, and Steele turned to land speculation to supplement their incomes. By 1847, returns from the fur trade dropped so low that Dousman sold his contract with the Winnebago to Rice and William Brisbois. A few months later, the latter's interest was purchased by Sylvanus D. Lowry, a free-lance trader at Mendota, who then joined Rice in signing a contract with Sibley. By its terms, Rice and Lowry received full control of the Win-

nebago operations; the Sioux trade was left in Sibley's hands. Chouteau was to furnish the goods needed in these trading operations for a five per cent commission. As was his custom, he would hold half of the shares and divide the others equally among his agents—Sibley, Rice, and Lowry.²

For reasons not fully clear, the contract, due to expire on July 1, 1848, failed to mention a long-standing, informal agreement between Chouteau and his traders which permitted them to use company funds for land speculation. A trader could purchase choice town or farm property at low prices, registering it jointly in his name and Chouteau's. If the value rose, the trader could purchase his employer's interest, send him a share of the profits, and hold clear title for himself. Chouteau's field representative, Joseph A. Sire, introduced Sibley to this procedure in 1842 by purchasing several lots in Mendota and giving him joint title. Five years later Sibley and Norman W. Kittson, a trader for Chouteau at Pembina, held lands in this manner at St. Paul and Mendota.³

AFTER WISCONSIN was admitted to statehood in May, 1848, the triangle between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, which had been part of Wisconsin Territory, was left without organized government and the protection it afforded. The settlers in that area, as well as a few living west of the Mississippi, recognized the dangers of such a situation, and throughout the spring and summer of 1848 members of a politically minded group were drafting plans for territorial organization.⁴

In the midst of this activity, Sibley,

² Dousman to Sibley, February 24, 1846; Chouteau to Sibley, March 28, 1846, Sibley Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. An undated, unsigned copy of the Rice contract is in the same collection.

³ Charles D. Gilfillan, "The Early Political History of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9: 169 (St. Paul, 1901); Brisbois to Sibley, October 3, 1842, Sibley Papers.

⁴ William Anderson, *A History of the Constitution of Minnesota*, 17-28 (Minneapolis, 1921).

Rice, and Lowry renewed their contract with Chouteau in June. The terms were identical to those of the previous agreement, with one significant exception—upon expiration, on July 1, 1849, all property would be divided and sold to the best advantage of the parties concerned.⁵

Meanwhile the movement that led to the creation of Minnesota Territory was launched under the leadership of Sibley, Steele, and several St. Paulites. A group of sixty-one citizens met in convention at Stillwater in August, and there elected Sibley to go to Washington and work for the organization of the proposed territory. Although most of the convention members were Democrats, they did not dwell on partisan issues in their debates and resolutions, since they feared that such a stand would alienate much-needed Whig support in Congress for Minnesota bills. After the convention adjourned, however, the suggestion was made that the body had no legal authority, and that a delegate elected from the rump of what had been Wisconsin Territory “by color of law” would doubtless be accepted without question by Congress.⁶

Thus on October 9 a call for an election was issued by John C. Catlin, former secretary of Wisconsin Territory who was now posing as its governor, to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of its one-time delegate. At this point, Rice decided to enter the contest and challenge Sibley for the coveted Washington assignment. The two waged a brief but spirited campaign during October. Again, no partisan political issues were raised. The only one to emerge centered on the location of the proposed land



HENRY M. Rice

office; Rice wanted it at Stillwater; Sibley thought it should be in St. Paul. Sibley, the better-known candidate, had already won one election, and he was now “re-elected” on October 30.⁷ He left for Washington in late November to be on hand for the opening of Congress in December.

Rice had no intention of giving up the fight. He knew that if Congress approved territorial status for Minnesota, the voters would be called upon to elect a bona fide delegate for the next session. That office became his goal. Thus the partners in the fur trade became rivals in politics. Each seems to have realized that he would need partisan backing. Political parties, however, did not yet exist in Minnesota, so each had to build up his own support.

Rumors of Rice’s activities soon began to reach Sibley in Washington; for example, two St. Paul friends, David Lambert and Jacob W. Bass, wrote him that Rice was giving many of his lots in the community to his own followers. Bass commented, “By the appearance of things every constituents of the new town proprietor is getting a lott or two according to survices rendered

⁵ A certified copy of the contract, dated June 7, 1848, is in the court files on the case of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., et al *vs.* Henry M. Rice, et al, File No. A1785½, in the office of the clerk of the district court, Washington County Courthouse, Stillwater.

⁶ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 237–239; Anderson, *History of the Constitution*, 17–28.

⁷ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 239–241. For details of the campaign see Sibley to D. C. Fenton, September 4, 1848; to Dr. Thomas R. Potts, September 14, October 3, 1848; to H. L. Moss, September 20, 1848; and to David Lambert, October 11, 1848, Sibley Papers.

& promises hereafter." Sibley reacted by writing to Charles Cavileer that Rice was attempting to obtain support for himself for the future office of delegate by bribing voters.⁸

Congress adjourned on March 4, 1849, after making Minnesota a territory. Sibley returned home triumphantly, confident that his victory would assure his election as delegate.

BACK IN MENDOTA, Sibley resumed command of his fur trade interests, joining Rice and Lowry on April 16 in renewing their contract with Chouteau. The terms, to become effective on July 1, were identical with those of the 1848 contract.⁹ Sibley nevertheless continued his political activities. After Governor Alexander Ramsey issued his proclamation dividing the new territory into legislative districts and ordering the election on August 1 of members of the legislature and a delegate to Congress, Sibley was chosen for the latter post. Since he faced no competition for the office, he received all the 682 votes cast.¹⁰

Later in August Rice went to St. Louis to discuss his future with Chouteau, and there they made several decisions. Rice agreed to pay Chouteau \$12,000 on the debts of his outfit for 1848 and Sibley \$1,500 "in British gold." The two decided that, with Sibley's consent, their contract would be extended for a year beyond the July 1, 1850, expiration date. Finally, they planned to extend for a year an earlier agreement with Dr. Charles W. W. Borup, a retail dealer for Chouteau in St. Paul, as Rice's partner in the Winnebago and Chippewa outfit. After Rice left, Chouteau wrote a long, thoughtful letter to the Mendota trader, explaining why he wanted to keep Rice as a partner. "It may be better," he wrote, "for all parties to continue in good harmony for some time yet" to avoid opposition to some of Sibley's projects still pending in Washington.¹¹

Rice returned to St. Paul early in September, and on the fourth he met with Sib-

ley to discuss the proposals outlined at St. Louis. The Mendota trader probably felt that his rival had not told him the full story of his meeting with Chouteau, and delayed approving the extension of the contract. Following a day's reflection, Sibley wrote to Chouteau explaining his reluctance to approve the contract. "From what Mr. R. stated," he began, "it would appear that he had made quite a satisfactory visit . . . and that you approved of all his arrangements. . . I do not believe he would knowingly mislead you, but I know him to indulge so frequently in extravagance of expression . . . that I fear he may have given you a wrong impression as to the business of his Outfit." Sibley then warned his correspondent that Rice had "an utterly loose & uncertain mode of transacting business, and the total want of method," adding that "Mr. Rice . . . will undertake any amount of contracts &c . . . without the least estimate" of the facilities and money required to fulfill them.¹²

Sibley's charges were soon substantiated, perhaps unexpectedly, by Dr. Borup. On the very day when Sibley was writing to Chouteau, September 5, Borup was reporting to the former by letter on the results of his inspection of Rice's books undertaken as a partner in the Winnebago and Chippewa outfit. "I have never seen any thing like the confusion disorder & want of proper subordination which characterises that business," Borup exclaimed. "I say with the best of feelings to Mr R. that nothing but Mr. Chouteaus moneybags saved him and

⁸ Sibley to Charles Cavileer, February 15, 1849, Cavileer Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; Bass to Sibley, January 28, 1849; Lambert to Sibley, January 13, 1849, Sibley Papers. Information on Rice's property may be found in Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:367, 368n.

⁹ Rice to Chouteau, June 4, 20, July 6, 1849, Rice Letter Book, 1848-49; copy of contract, June 7, 1848, in File No. A1785½, Washington County district court. For the 1848 contract, see p. 260.

¹⁰ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:252, 253.

¹¹ Chouteau to Sibley, September 3, 1849, Sibley Papers.

¹² Sibley to Chouteau, September 5, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4.

his associates from ruin." The writer disclosed that "Not an account is in such state that any one can settle them. No one can tell his concerns liabilities. Property to large amounts is entrusted to men of very questionable character. Purchases are made at high rates, accounts opened with men, who had better work for their living."¹³

The news caused Sibley to draft a sharply worded letter to Chouteau, a copy of which is in his letter book under date of September 11. According to a marginal note the original was never mailed, but the writer's remarks reflect his bitterness. In it he asserted that Rice's debts totalled \$30,896, some held by business associates and others by persons totally unconnected with the firm. "How under Heaven the others got in for the sums stated I cannot say," Sibley protested. "There is something wrong in it all, and no time must be lost in demanding an explanation, and sifting matters to the bottom." It must have been on second thought that Sibley composed and sent a shorter note to Chouteau on September 12, stating that "thousands & thousands of dollars have been expended for objects having no proper connection with the business, and for which the Outfit will receive no corresponding benefit. Doct. B[orup] is absolutely horror-stricken at the way in which things are managed. . . . I would therefore urge that one of you come up without delay." Sibley believed it imperative that "the whole business be brought to a settlement, and if necessary to a conclusion."¹⁴

¹³ Borup to Sibley, September 5, 1849, Sibley Papers.

¹⁴ Sibley to Chouteau, September 11, 12, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4.

¹⁵ Rice and Olmsted to Chouteau and W. G. and G. W. Ewing, September 26, 1849, Rice Letter Book, 1848-49. See also Olmsted to G. W. Ewing, September 26, 1849, Ewing Papers. A certified copy of the contract of April 16, 1849, without Sibley's signature, is in File No. A1785½, Washington County district court.

¹⁶ Sibley to Chouteau, September 26, 27, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4; Rice to Chouteau, September 28, 1849, Rice Letter Book, 1848-49.

It was at this point that Rice himself took steps to end his partnership with Sibley, Chouteau, and other members of their firm and ally himself with their chief rivals in the upper Mississippi Valley fur trade, the Ewing brothers of Fort Wayne, Indiana. The terms of Rice's contract with the Chouteau firm required that it must have the full approval of all parties; since Sibley had not yet signed it in September, Rice could withdraw legally. His new business associates were George W. and William G. Ewing, who in the 1830s had expanded northward throughout the valley. By 1845 they were a serious threat to the Chouteau interests. Their representative at Mendota was David Olmsted, a trapper of long experience among the Winnebago. In a bold bid, Rice and Olmsted on September 26 pooled their resources and capital, established one price list for all goods, and allocated the Sioux and Chippewa trade to Rice and the Winnebago business to Olmsted. Trading goods were to be purchased from the Ewings, who would also act as the middlemen for the new partners on the world fur market.¹⁵

On the very day that Rice signed his agreement with the Ewings, Sibley again asked Chouteau to inspect Rice's books. "I am looking anxiously for one of you to come up," he wrote. "I do hope you will not fail to do so." The next day he stated bluntly, "If this warning so many times repeated does not meet with attention, I wash my hands of all consequences." At the same time Rice wrote Chouteau about his new business contract, and told him that the inventories and other necessary accounts had been sent to St. Louis for final settlement.¹⁶ He did not explain why he was leaving the firm.

The seriousness of the situation seems finally to have dawned on Chouteau, for early in October he sent Sire to St. Paul. On October 7, the field representative spent a day in Rice's offices, examining the books of the Chippewa and Winnebago trade. Convinced that Sibley's accusations against

Rice were valid, Sire asked the Mendota trader for advice. In response, on October 8 Sibley sent a message by courier to Sire in St. Paul, urging him to "get out a writ of injunction immediately stating the reasons for pressing necessity, which you can swear to before one of the Judges." Sire promptly applied for a writ before the judge of the first district court in Stillwater. Within the next few days Sibley, Borup, and Sire apparently discussed their methods for dealing with Rice, even considering the possibility of a lawsuit, but decided not to press charges before meeting with him.¹⁷

The injunction was issued on October 10 and on the following day Rice went to Mendota, where he promptly presented a claim of \$4,500 against Chouteau for goods the St. Louis trader had not delivered. Since Sire and Sibley were unaware of this debt, the claim caught them unprepared. Both understood that it would be valid in court, and they also realized that they lacked time and means to contact Chouteau for advice, since the nearest telegraph office was at Galena. Rather than postpone the settlement, they came to terms. Rice was released "from all individual accounts and liabilities" to Chouteau and Sibley. The latter and Borup agreed to pay all Rice's minor debts in the Winnebago and Chippewa trade. In return, Rice surrendered his claim against Chouteau.¹⁸

The problems relating to the ownership of property purchased by Rice still remained to be settled. Included were many city lots and extensive farm acreage acquired with his own funds, but not turned over to Chouteau in accordance with custom. Although Sibley and Sire wanted this lucrative property for the firm, after conferring with Rice they were forced to admit that he had a valid claim to the land. He was not bound by any written agreement to hold it in trust for Chouteau. At their meeting of October 11, Sibley, Rice, and Sire signed a settlement.¹⁹ As a result, Sibley no longer had to contend with Rice as

a partner, and the latter retained title to his real estate. Sibley, however, still had a formidable rival in Rice.

Freed from wrangling, Rice turned again to politics. Since the injunction of October 10 had been a matter of "great surprise" to some St. Paul residents, Rice's supporters channeled their sentiment to his advantage, arranging a testimonial dinner for him on October 11 at the American House, which he owned. One of Sibley's field traders, Alexis Bailly, who attended the event, reported in the *Minnesota Pioneer* of the same day: "It is rumored" that the dinner "is intended for political purposes and operates as a direct censure on the Hon. H. H. Sibley and Joseph Sire, esq., for the part they took in the late unfortunate misunderstanding" with Rice. "I wish to say to my friends and the public generally," Bailly added, that the rumors "are erroneous and unfounded."²⁰

RICE next undertook to discredit Sibley among Minnesota Democrats. On September 24 he and his followers laid their plans, scheduling a party rally for October 20. There Sibley would be asked to declare his

¹⁷ Sibley to Sire, October 8, 1849; to Lowry, October 9, 16, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4; Sire to Sibley, October 9, 1849, Sibley Papers. The writ of injunction, dated October 10, 1849, is in File No. A1785½, Washington County district court. The injunction was served to prevent Rice from disposing of his property before a lawsuit could be instituted. See Sibley to Lowry, October 16, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4.

¹⁸ A copy of the settlement, dated October 11, 1849, is in File No. A1785½, Washington County district court.

¹⁹ Copy of settlement in File No. A1785½, Washington County district court. The issue over property and Rice's records became the basis for a lawsuit instituted against him by Sibley and Chouteau, who charged that the trader had not presented a true picture of his accounts at the meeting in October, 1849. See Chouteau et. al. vs. Rice, H. M., et. al. in Chancery, in *Minnesota Reports*, 1:106-119 (1858). For the terms of the original contract, see p. 260 above.

²⁰ Ramsey Diary, October 10, 1849, owned by the Misses Anna E. R. and Laura Furness, St. Paul. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. For Bailly's letter, which, doubtless as the result of an error, is dated October 13, 1849, see the *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), October 11, 1849.

party preference. Although Rice knew his rival was a Democrat, he evidently believed that Sibley would refuse to commit himself, for at that point in the rally he planned to present his personal slate of candidates for a local election to be held on November 26 with himself as party leader. Apparently he hoped that the slate would be approved, giving him control of the party.²¹

Meanwhile, other politically minded Minnesotans were preparing for the contest. Sensing in early October that the dispute between Sibley and Rice might split the Democrats, a number of Minnesotans who opposed both of them organized the Territorial party—a group that hoped to present a full slate of candidates in November.²²

²¹ A report of the September 24 meeting appears in the *Pioneer* for October 4, 1849. Obviously, Rice's strategy was kept secret until October 20.

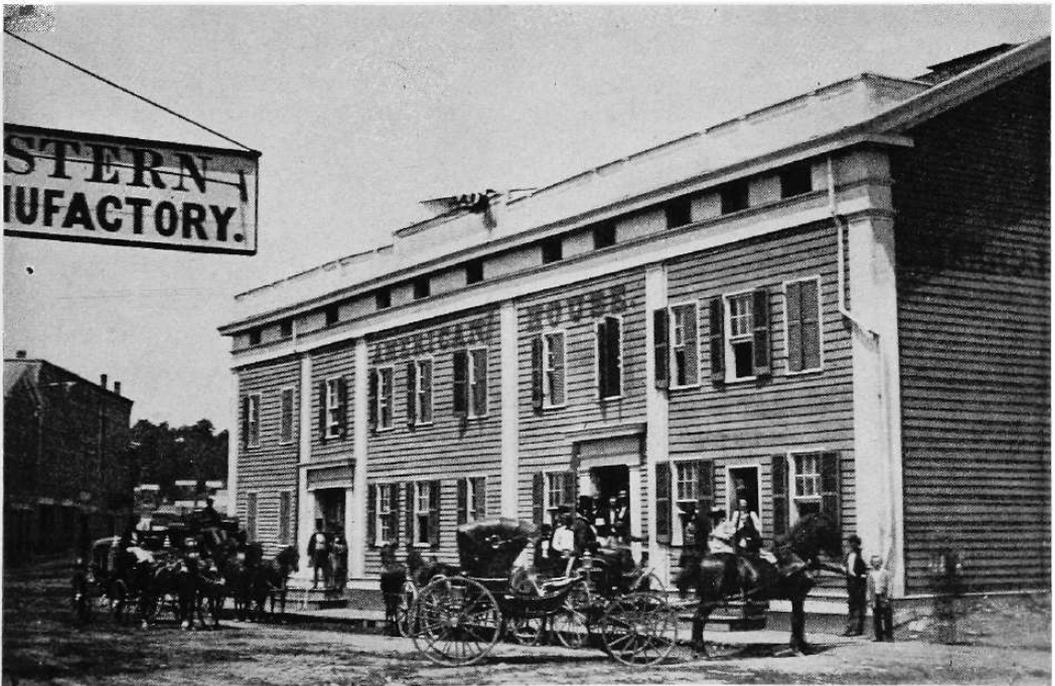
²² William J. Ryland, *Alexander Ramsey: A Study of a Frontier Politician*, 47–49 (Philadelphia, 1941); Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue*, 53 (St. Paul, 1948).

²³ *Pioneer*, October 25, 1849.

The long-awaited evening of October 20 finally came. Rice's carefully prepared plans would now be made public. About a hundred men gathered at the American House for the caucus. The roll call included the names of many leading Minnesotans; Franklin Steele, Joseph R. Brown, Rice, Henry Jackson, Borup, John Irvine, and others were present. Of the known Democrats, only Sibley was absent; at the last moment he sent his regrets and said that he had a prior business engagement.²³

But the Mendota trader was prepared with his own counterattack. Carrying a letter from Sibley, W. D. Phillips, a close friend, attended the caucus, gained the floor, and read the following message: "Permit me to take this occasion to say that I have hitherto maintained a neutral position so far as national politics were concerned, and I had hoped that it would not be considered necessary to agitate that question in our Territory, for the present at least; but it is evident that party lines are already virtually drawn. . . I am a Democrat of the Jeffersonian school, and as

THE American House, St. Paul, about 1856



such I stand ready at all proper times and places to take my place under the banner of the party." Nevertheless, after Phillips sat down, the resolutions committee proposed a platform agreed upon before the caucus. One provision was aimed directly at Sibley's nonpartisanship: "*Resolved*, That in organizing the Democratic party, it is important that our trusts should not be placed in any but those who are openly and unequivocally Democrats, fearlessly advocating Democratic principles at all times."²⁴

When the speaker called for a vote, the delegates faced the alternatives of supporting Sibley by rejecting the resolution or backing Rice by adopting it. The chair ruled that the Rice-sponsored resolution had carried in a voice vote. The delegates next selected a permanent steering committee composed of Rice, two of his supporters, Henry Jackson and P. K. Johnson, and two Sibley men, Steele and Brown. The snowball for Rice rolled on as the delegates approved his ticket of candidates for the November election. The Sibley men were helpless; their leader was absent and they had been outvoted on every vital issue.²⁵

The need for explaining his stand in the Democratic caucus is reflected in a letter from Sibley to a friend: "I have . . . been constrained to let my politics be known. . . . While I stated my intention . . . to carry out all my measures as Delegate with perfect neutrality, I claimed the right of every Citizen to make known my political sentiments."²⁶ These remarks notwithstanding, within a week, he and his followers broke with the American House ticket and gave their support to the Territorial party. Although Sibley campaigned for its candidates, neither side raised important issues, and the voters doubtless realized that the race centered about Rice and Sibley. They turned out in large numbers on November 26. When the results were announced, the mugs were lifted for the Sibley-Ramsey coalition. With one excep-

tion, the Whig-supported candidates of the Territorial party were elected. Ramsey, who was in Pennsylvania at the time, received the news from a friend who wrote: "We succeeded in making a regular Sibley and Rice affair of it, with the Sibley party *on our side*." Rice commented sourly, "Mr. Sibley wishes to be *the man* among the new settlers in the west. . . . What can be expected of him now?"²⁷ The hullabaloo died away after the election, leaving Sibley firmly in control of the political scene. That most of his candidates were Democrats running on a Whig ticket did not seem to have bothered the voters; they still supported him as a personality, rather than as a party politician.

NOW THAT he had been twice defeated, Rice may well have doubted his ability to upset Sibley in any subsequent election. Yet the Territorial party's victory in 1849 did not necessarily guarantee Sibley's reelection in 1850. If Rice could offer his own candidate for the delegacy—one with voter appeal who would be willing to take orders from the American House—he might well defeat Sibley. Rice seems to have found his man in the Whig marshal of the territory, Colonel Alexander M. Mitchell. He had not been involved in the Sibley-Rice dispute, he was ready to take directions from Rice, and he had friends in Washington. Apparently he and Rice reached an understanding, though their actions during the winter of 1849–50 received little notice in the St. Paul newspapers. Sibley made no more than passing references to Rice in his letters home from Washington, although both

²⁴ A report of the meeting, including Sibley's letter and the resolutions, appears in the *Pioneer*, October 25, 1849.

²⁵ *Pioneer*, October 25, 1849.

²⁶ *Pioneer*, October 25, 1849; Sibley to Isaac P. Walker, October 22, 1849, Sibley Letter Book 4.

²⁷ Henry A. Lambert to Sibley, November 27, 1849, Sibley Papers; J. F. Powers to Ramsey, December 20, 1849; Rice to Ramsey, December 1, 1849, Ramsey Papers. For the election results see the *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), December 1, 8, 1849.

Rice and Mitchell were in the nation's capital.²⁸

Without Sibley's knowledge, however, Rice was busily negotiating with the bureau of Indian affairs, which was in need of help in its dealings with the Winnebago. After the Black Hawk war of 1832, these Indians had refused to stay on the reservation assigned to them on a neutral strip in Iowa. The advance of white settlement had by 1846 forced the red men to surrender that reservation for the one at Crow Wing, near the Sauk and Mississippi rivers. As he had traded with the tribe since 1842, Rice was allowed to select the specific site and to move the Indians to their Minnesota reservation in 1848. The Winnebago detested their new hunting grounds in the vicinity of Long Prairie and soon scattered to areas they had known earlier in Iowa and Wisconsin and to the Missouri River. Settlers quickly complained that the braves were destroying much of their property. Spurred by petitions of their citizens, the governors of both Minnesota and Wisconsin demanded that the Indian bureau take immediate steps for relief of the settlers.²⁹

After offering the bureau his services in leading the Winnebago back to their reservation, Rice wrote to Ramsey, who was superintendent of Indian affairs for Minnesota Territory. "This morning [March 19] I made an offer . . . for removing the Winnebagoes," he announced. "It has been favorably considered here, & will be referred to you, and your opinion will decide the question. My object in writing you this is—to request you to keep the matter a

secret (if you can with propriety do so) Should your decision be favorable to me, and it should be known that I have the contract, there are many persons living on the Mississippi and in Wisconsin that would use all of their influence to disperse the Indians, not only for the purpose of keeping them in the Country, but to injure me personally. I know that I can remove them, and feel anxious to have something to do the coming summer."³⁰

What Ramsey and almost everyone else connected with Minnesota affairs did not know was that Rice had political motives in seeking the contract. It was evident that President Zachary Taylor, a Whig, would be willing to support a promising member of his party for the Minnesota delegate's seat. Working through the Whig commissioner of Indian affairs, Orlando E. Brown, Rice offered to support Mitchell for the delegacy in return for a patronage contract. Evidently, the president had no objection to dealing with Democrat Rice, for on April 13, 1850, the latter received a choice contract which, if carried out, would pay his debts, further his political career, and solve the thorny Winnebago problem. It guaranteed Rice seventy dollars per head to feed any wandering Winnebago and transport them to the Long Prairie reservation. No troops would be employed.³¹

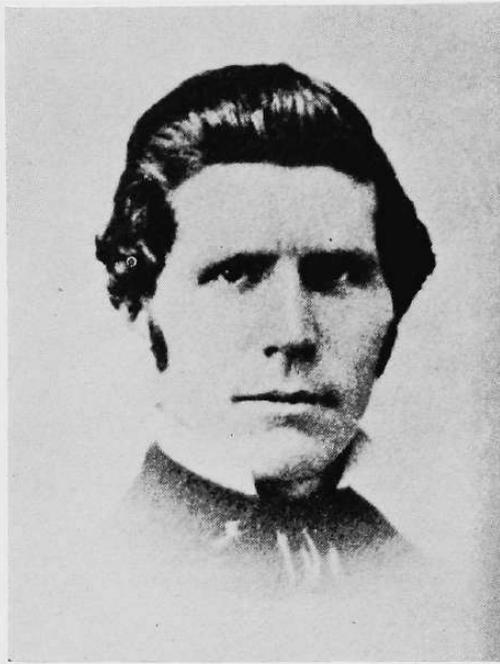
It was too late when Sibley and Ramsey realized what had happened. On April 17 Brown made public the terms of the contract with Rice. Sibley stormed into the commissioner's office the next day with a letter of protest in which he leveled five bitterly phrased charges against Rice. First, Sibley accused his opponent of deception in telling Brown that there were only three or four hundred Winnebago to be removed, whereas he estimated "fully a thousand or twelve hundred." Second, the seventy dollar fee was at least three times too high. Third, Ramsey had not been kept informed of the final negotiations. Fourth, according to Sibley, Ramsey had more influence among the Winnebago than Rice, and

²⁸ Rice to Ramsey, March 19, 1850; Olmsted to Ramsey, November 16, 1849. Ramsey Papers.

²⁹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 308-313.

³⁰ Rice to Ramsey, March 19, 1850, Ramsey Papers.

³¹ The text of the contract and other documents submitted in evidence to the Congressional committee which later investigated the matter appear in *Removal of the Winnebagoes* (31 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 501—serial 585). See p. 4-6 for the contract. On the patronage aspects, see the Ewing Papers, especially Richard Chute to G. W. Ewing, July 11, 1850. See also Rice to Ramsey, March 19, 1850, Ramsey Papers.



DAVID *Olmsted*, 1861

could more easily and more cheaply remove them. And, finally, Sibley himself had been ignored. Brown promised to review the matter.³²

A few days after wiring the news to Ramsey and asking him to protest to the bureau of Indian affairs, Sibley complained to the governor that "This iniquitous Scheme was concocted while I was confined to my room some twenty days, with inflammation of the eye," a condition which prevented him from conferring with Brown. Mitchell, meanwhile, attempted to dissuade Ramsey from supporting Sibley, telling the governor that "The government pays no attention to his [*Sibley's*] Protest, but looks upon it as consum[m]ate presumption. It is true Mr S. was not consulted because they supposed his opinion of no importance and could or would not shed any light on the subject."³³

In replying to Sibley's charges on April 25, Brown asserted that the removal contract was above suspicion. He contended that civilian authorities could best carry out the terms of the contract, which was

"in its design, one of humanity — such as has been too seldom practiced towards the Indians." Furthermore, Brown had Mitchell's assurance that the price was not too exorbitant. "Whether wise or not," the commissioner added, it "is a binding contract, and not subject to repeal, even if I desired to do so, which I do not."³⁴

Before any official protest could delay matters, Rice wired aides in Minnesota to obtain teams, equipment, and men; then he left for St. Paul. At Galena, by chance, he met Ramsey. The governor, enraged by the contract, had gone there to telegraph his protests to Brown. Rice, however, succeeded in persuading Ramsey to soften his complaints; realizing that the contract was binding, he decided to write, rather than wire, his objections. Upon returning to St. Paul, the governor named Olmsted, then president of the legislative upper house, as "Supervisor of the Rolls," and charged him with the responsibility of seeing that Rice did not pad the head count of Winnebago. The Whig appointee wrote Sibley that he regarded the contract as "infamous," assuring his correspondent that he and Borup would "spare no pains or expense in endeavoring to thwart this scheme" to put "thousands of dollars in the hands of some clerk or higher official connected with the Indian Bureau." According to Fred Sibley, the delegate's brother, Borup planned to send troublemakers among the Winnebago to break up the removal in the hope that the contract would be annulled. Sibley, however, wired Fred at Mendota: "Have nothing to do with Stopping Indians. Congress Will Settle Matters."³⁵

In the midst of the uproar over the Win-

³² Sibley to Ramsey, April 14, 1850; to Brown, April 18, 1850, Ramsey Papers. The latter is printed in *Removal of the Winnebagoes*, 6-9 (serial 585).

³³ Mitchell to Ramsey, April 23, 1850; Sibley to Ramsey, April 20, 23, May 6, 1850, Ramsey Papers.

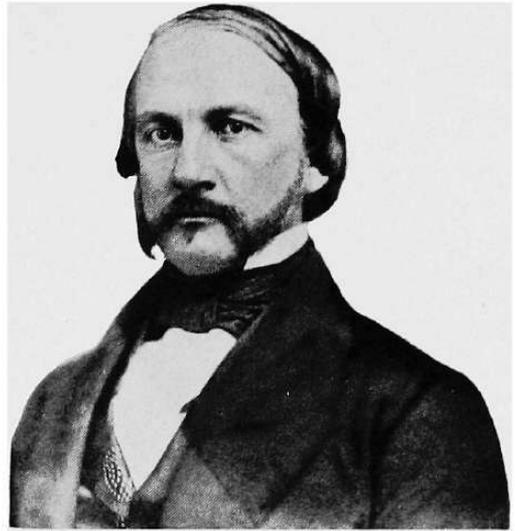
³⁴ Brown to Sibley, April 25, 1850, in *Removal of the Winnebagoes*, 9-12 (serial 585).

³⁵ Ramsey to Sibley, April 27, 1850; Borup to Sibley, May 2, 1850; Olmsted to Sibley, May 2, 1850; Fred Sibley to Sibley, May 4, 1850; Sibley to Fred Sibley, May 16, 1850, Sibley Papers.

nebago, Sibley learned from friends at home that Mitchell was seeking the delegacy. His concern over the situation doubtless is reflected in the appointment on May 6 of a House subcommittee on Indian affairs charged with investigating possible fraud in Rice's contract for the Winnebago removal. Although the group collected documents and correspondence relating to the controversy, it delayed action while allowing the issue to cool, and eventually it cleared Rice of fraudulent intent or action.³⁶

Sibley had hoped to return to Minnesota to campaign against Mitchell, but so long as the Winnebago issue was not settled, he felt compelled to remain in Washington to work for repeal of the contract, among other projects. He was advised repeatedly to visit Minnesota, but replied that he could not, since Rice had to be stopped first in Washington.³⁷

Meanwhile, Rice was facing serious problems at home. Since the Winnebago were reluctant to move, he looked to Olmsted for assistance, persuading him to resign the supervisor's post on June 3 and to help in the work of removal. In return Olmsted would receive half of the profits. The partners surveyed the situation, which was daily becoming worse. They were running short of goods with which to lure the Winnebago back to their reservation and the contract would expire in a few months. In desperation, they offered their arch rival, Borup, a quarter share for his assistance. He proudly refused. "We prefer standing aloof from any participation in the re-



HENRY H. Sibley, 1859

moval," he wrote, but added that his firm would gladly "furnish the necessary supplies . . . at reasonable rates." The offer was accepted. Fresh, high-quality goods served as an inducement, and the traders soon had the Winnebago moving back to Crow Wing.³⁸

With Sibley busy in Washington and Olmsted in charge of the removal, Rice was free to work out plans for the coming political campaign. Nevertheless, his tactics, which included a charge that Sibley was working for the fur interests and not those of the territory, failed to produce results. They were analyzed by Richard Chute, a local Ewing agent, in a letter written to his employers in July. He had decided that "The Whigs are an unfortunate set of men. Yankee Rice has completely *Gummed* Col. Mitchell & has got him to place himself in a very bad position.—Rice has promised to support Mitchell for Delegate . . . and as the administration would like to see a Whig elected, they gave Rice the Winnebago Removal Contract. . . . Rice will support Mitchell, *but the Whigs won't*, he is the most unpopular man in the Territory. . . . if the Winnebago Contract patronage had been placed in the hands of Gov. Ramsey . . . he would have sent a Whig as delegate, & a good one too, but

³⁶ For warnings to Sibley of Mitchell's intentions, see letters to him from Potts, January 15, April 17, 1850; Sam J. Findley, April 18, 1850; James Goodhue, April 22, 1850; G. W. Ewing, May 6, 1850, Sibley Papers. See also *Removal of the Winnebagoes*, 1 (serial 585), and p. 271 below.

³⁷ *Removal of the Winnebagoes*, 2, 12-46 (serial 585); W. H. Forbes to Sibley, July 11, 1850, Sibley Papers; Sibley to Ramsey, June 26, 1850, Ramsey Papers; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:316.

³⁸ Olmsted to Borup, June 2, 1850; Borup to Olmsted, June 4, 1850, Sibley Papers. The Rice-Olmsted contract, dated June 1, 1850, is in the Ewing Papers.

now the jig is up—It is understood that Mitchell got Rice the contract, & that floors him.”³⁹

SIBLEY directed his campaign for reelection from Washington. After learning that the Territorial party would hold its nominating convention on July 31, he wrote Ramsey that he would enter the race as a “neutral or territorial” candidate. “It is with un-affected reluctance that I consent to run again,” he said, “and I only do so because I conscientiously believe that certain parties wish to gain the control in the Territory to effect their own selfish ends. To defeat the united cliques of Rice, Mitchell, the Ewings and others of a like stamp I will make any personal sacrifice of my own comfort & inclinations.” Sibley suggested that Ramsey announce his candidacy on a nonpartisan ticket immediately after the Territorial party convention. The delegate hoped that this news would burst any bubble of enthusiasm created at the convention for Mitchell. Nevertheless, the convention jubilantly nominated Mitchell, and adopted a platform aimed at attracting voters from both parties.⁴⁰

The situation left the Democrats without a leader. Rice, their titular head, had gone over to the Whigs with Mitchell. Sibley refused to ask for party endorsement because he did not want to lose Whig votes for Minnesota bills in Congress. Without a leader or cohesion, the Democrats did not nominate a candidate for the delegation. They needed either Sibley or Rice, but neither was in a position to lead them.

Sibley showed no public alarm over his lack of party affiliation. His ardent supporter, James M. Goodhue, editor of the *Pioneer*, offered his readers long articles about Sibley, reviewing his activities in Congress, mentioning the incumbent’s role in obtaining the territorial organic act, the appropriation bills, and the treaties pending in the bureau of Indian affairs. Goodhue called on the voters to re-elect Sibley so he could complete his work.⁴¹

Some Whigs who were dissatisfied with both candidates convened on August 10 in St. Paul, where they nominated Olmsted as an independent candidate. Although he had not actively worked for the office, he tentatively accepted. Evidently taken by surprise and apparently fearing that another Whig candidate would draw votes from Mitchell, Rice offered Olmsted full control of the partnership the two had established in September, 1849. Probably because he saw no possibility of being elected, Olmsted withdrew as a candidate and accepted Rice’s offer.⁴² This easy capitulation drew gleeful jibes from Goodhue. “Without consulting with that Convention, which met expressly to nominate a candidate to *oppose* Colonel Mitchell,” he declared in the *Pioneer* on August 29, “Olmsted, when nominated, walks right straight over to the Rice side and surrenders to Col. Mitchell. OH! FOOL, OR WORSE!”

On election day, September 2, 1850, the political temper of the young territory was stirred as on no earlier occasion. Party wheel horses turned out the voters from the Canadian border to Iowa. Citizens and noncitizens cast their ballots in the “Fur versus Anti-Fur” campaign. The final count showed that Sibley had been returned to office by a narrow margin of 649 to 559. Most of his support came from the French, the half-breeds, and the older settlers. Goodhue did not restrain his prose in describing the event. He reported on September 5 that “Hope, fear, avarice, ambition, personal obligations, money, whiskey, oysters, patronage, contracts, champagne, loans, the promise of favors, jealousy, personal prejudice, envy, every thing that could be tortured into a motive, has been pressed into

³⁹ Chute to G. W. Ewing, July 11, 1850, Ewing Papers.

⁴⁰ Sibley to Ramsey, July 26, 1850, Ramsey Papers. For a report of the convention see the *Pioneer*, August 8, 1850.

⁴¹ *Pioneer*, August 15, 22, 29, 1850.

⁴² *Chronicle and Register*, August 12, 1850; Chute to G. W. Ewing, September 9, 1850; handwritten copy of the Ramsey Diary, August 29, 1850, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

the canvass. Mr. Sibley was absent at Washington. This was a great disadvantage to him in an election, turning as this did, so much upon personal preferences. Any other man in Minnesota, being a candidate, and distant hundreds of miles from the canvass, would have been signally defeated."⁴³

On learning the news, Sibley wrote Ramsey: "I hardly know whether to grieve or to rejoice. The station is no sinecure as you know, and requires the sacrifice of all my domestic comforts. Still it is something to have overcome a faction, many of whom are your personal enemies as well as mine, and who care not a curse for the interests of the Territory." The delegate was not being overly modest. He and his family longed for the pleasant Mendota home they had left the previous November. They were weary of Washington's crowded boardinghouses, the heat of its summers, and its political hubbub. But the Sioux treaties had not yet been negotiated, and Sibley remained in Washington to see that they materialized. His spirits were brightened when President Millard Fillmore, who succeeded to office upon Taylor's death in July, 1850, heartily congratulated him on his re-election.⁴⁴

DEFEATED for the third time, Rice lowered his sights. Of small consolation was the news that on September 17 the House investigating committee had cleared him completely of any charge of fraud in the Winnebago contract. Its provisions, the committee stated, were "provident, humane, and effective, and meet [with] the entire approbation of the committee."⁴⁵

⁴³ For the election results, see the *Pioneer*, September 5, October 17, 1850; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:372; J. R. Brown to Sibley, September 4, 1850, Sibley Papers.

⁴⁴ Sibley to Ramsey, September 16, 1850; Thomas Foster to Ramsey, September 14, 1850, Ramsey Papers.

⁴⁵ *Removal of the Winnebagoes*, 1 (serial 585).

⁴⁶ The later dispute is discussed in chapter 7 of the author's unpublished "Life of Henry Hastings Sibley." The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

Rice left politics to devote himself to his business affairs, and his dispute with Sibley abated in the next two years. The delegate achieved a distinguished record in Congress, and Rice became a prosperous merchant. For a brief period, they patched up their differences, and Sibley supported Rice in 1853 when he was nominated for and elected to the once hotly contested delegate's seat in Congress. Their competing business interests in railroads and lands caused the quarrel to erupt again in 1854. But that is another story.⁴⁶

The dispute of 1849-50, however, is identified with the birth of the Democratic party in Minnesota, which thus had its origins in a bitter personal rivalry between the territory's two leading businessmen. That personalities rather than issues should have dominated the party's early years is no surprise. The Minnesota frontiersmen who lived hundreds of miles from the centers of national political activity were comparatively untouched by such issues as tariffs, free soil, and internal improvements. They gave their attention instead to the hard, tense drama of the Sibley-Rice dispute, which offered ample compensation for lack of interest in political affairs of national scope.

Both Sibley and Rice expressed loyalty to the party, but neither was willing to accept its support when such endorsement might cost them an election. Neither campaigned actively on a national Democratic platform; both put local issues before the voters as matters of paramount concern. Neither came to the aid of his party in the summer of 1850 when its members failed to organize for lack of leadership. Yet the origins of the Democratic party in Minnesota can be traced to this bitter rivalry. So dominant was the struggle that it shaped the course of North Star party development for the remainder of the decade. Not until after a strong Republican group emerged in 1860 did the Minnesota Democrats begin to follow party, rather than personal, leaders.



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