

Robert O. Sweeny
in 1857

A Sweeny Sampler

MARY DUNNING NAGLE

ALTHOUGH “fashionable balls and parties were given — courts held and theatrical performances & &,” Minnesota Territory in 1852 could scarcely have been called a cultural mecca. Nonetheless, the lure of virgin land, uncut timber, and seemingly endless opportunity brought hopeful arrivals daily to the three-year-old territory. Among these was Robert Ormsby Sweeny, a Quaker from Philadelphia who celebrated his majority by establishing himself in St. Paul. He had been trained as a pharmacist, but the 1857 census lists his occupation as “artist” and the city directory for 1856–57 as “designer.” In that year he designed a seal for the new state that was approved officially in June, 1858, but it was never used.¹

Three years after Sweeny settled in the territory, his sisters Mary (Mrs. William L. Banning) and Catherine (Mrs. Jacob H. Stewart) and their husbands moved to St. Paul. According to the artist’s granddaugh-

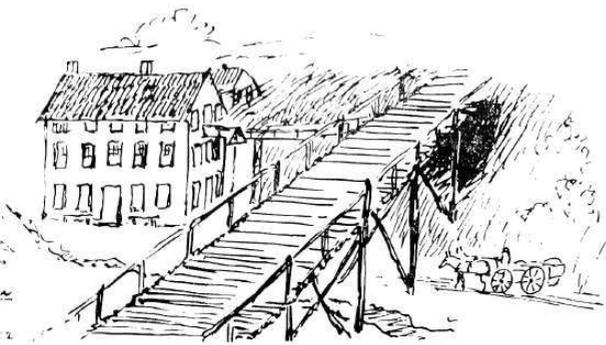
ter, Mrs. Donald T. Alexander of White Bear Lake, Sweeny served during the Civil War without pay as a pharmacist, working with his brother-in-law, Dr. Stewart. The reason for his army service without remuneration is obscure: it may have been due to his Quaker upbringing; it may have been that he was rejected because he was blind in one eye. (Mrs. Alexander recalls being told that her grandfather had lost vision as a result of some powdered drug getting in his eye, but among the papers still owned by the family is an army pass issued to Sweeny on August 26, 1862, allowing him to go “out of the St. Louis Division. . . . Lost left eye.”)²

In August, 1864, Sweeny married Helen

¹ The quotation is from a notation on a drawing by Sweeny in the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society; Robert M. Brown, “The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota,” in *Minnesota History*, 33:126 (Autumn, 1952).

² Interview with Mrs. Donald Alexander, January 31, 1968. All personal information not otherwise cited is from this interview and from papers in Mrs. Alexander’s possession.

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As Temperance House on corner of 4th and Jackson Sts
on Jackson Street over the ravine that crossed
nally from about the 5th & Robert St

Benezet, also a Philadelphian. The newlyweds must have traveled to St. Paul almost at once, for on September 13 the bridegroom was commissioned a first lieutenant in the state militia by Governor Stephen Miller. The couple set up housekeeping on St. Peter Street between Eighth and Ninth, and at about this time Sweeny was associated in business with W. S. Potts, a pioneer druggist. In 1866 he opened his own apothecary shop on Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) and Bridge Square. He continued in the drug business until the end of the eighties.³

But Robert Sweeny was a man of diverse interests. In 1870 he headed the group of prominent citizens who founded the St. Paul Academy of Natural Sciences, the forerunner of the present Science Museum. From 1875 to 1876 he was the president of the Minnesota Historical Society and served on its executive council for thirty-three years. The manuscripts department of the society has several stories based on Indian legends which attest to Sweeny's literary skill, and Mrs. Alexander still treasures illustrated tales, often in verse, which her grandfather wrote for the children of his family. A lifelong member of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, he spoke both Dakota and Ojibway and was also an outdoorsman whose concern for conservation led to his being named to the state's first Commission of Fisheries in 1874. He was elected president of that body when it was reorganized in 1891 as the Game and Fish Commission of Minnesota. By 1889

Sweeny moved to Lester Park in Duluth where he supervised the hatchery until his death in 1902.⁴

TO HISTORIANS, however, Sweeny's greatest importance lies in his talented pencil. His sketches of early St. Paul, usually dated and identified, provide an invaluable pictorial record of the infant city. They include views of Carver's Cave and its dimensions, dozens of St. Paul homes and business places, and an 1852 painting of Father Lucien Galtier's Chapel of St. Paul.

Much of the versatile artist-druggist's work came from beyond the urban area. He drew and painted Indians in various costumes and activities, including some of the Sioux hanged at Mankato on December 26, 1862—an execution witnessed by Sweeny. Red River carts and oxen, early lumber camps, and scenes of Lake Superior have

³ *Saint Paul Directory*, 1864, p. 114; *McClung's St. Paul Directory and Statistical Record*, 1886, p. 86.

⁴ Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 761 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14—1912); *Sunday Pioneer Press* (St. Paul), September 7, 1902.

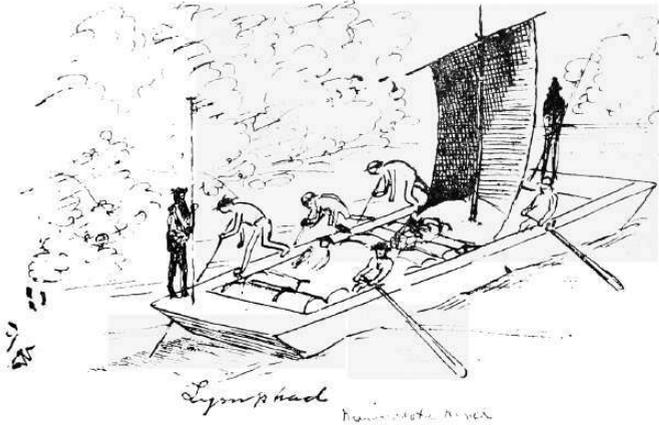


Sketch of the Indians

been captured by his brush. His fascination with nature combined with his scientific knowledge and artistic skill to create accurate pictures of Minnesota wild flowers, mushrooms, fish, archaeological specimens, and Indian artifacts. Occasionally, Sweeny turned his talent toward cartooning to make a comment on politics or to tell a story.

These pages present a potpourri of Sweeny's work. The sketch at the top of page 30 was made in 1852 and is of Moffat's Temperance House on the corner of Fourth and Jackson streets in St. Paul; on the same page is a Sioux family drawn thirty years later. The drawing above was done during Sweeny's first year in Minnesota Territory and shows a lymphad, a small vessel fitted with one mast and capable of using both oars and sails. Below is a caricature of local citizenry in front of the first drugstore owned by the artist.

Four scenes in Minnesota are reproduced on page 32 from the Sweeny scrapbooks in the society's picture collection: the portage at St. Croix Falls, upper left; the beginning of Wyoming with impressions of that town's first settler and his son, right center; an 1852 look at the Falls of St. Anthony, left center; and below, the ferry opposite Hastings on the Mississippi River.

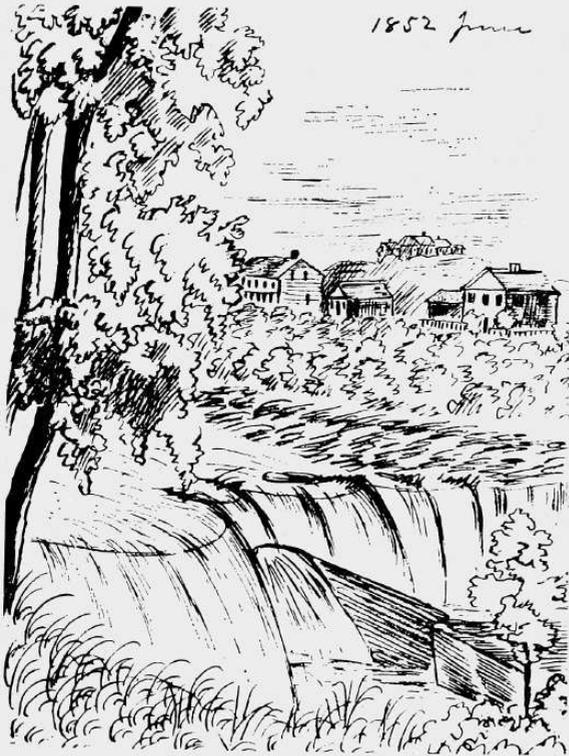


Other facets of Sweeny's talent are presented on page 33. The political cartoon comments on the 1894 Duluth mayoralty race which was won by Ray T. Lewis. The artist's fascination with nature is exemplified by the deadly Amanita, one of the many Minnesota mushroom varieties drawn by Sweeny; the stone hammers of the Yankton show some of the many artifacts he drew for the science collection. Below and "from life" is a conception of a Red River train—a view not unfamiliar to the artist from Philadelphia who contributed much to our visual understanding of early Minnesota.





Pottsville
 Portage St. Croix Falls
 better ground



1852 June



beginning of Wisconsin

first settler + son

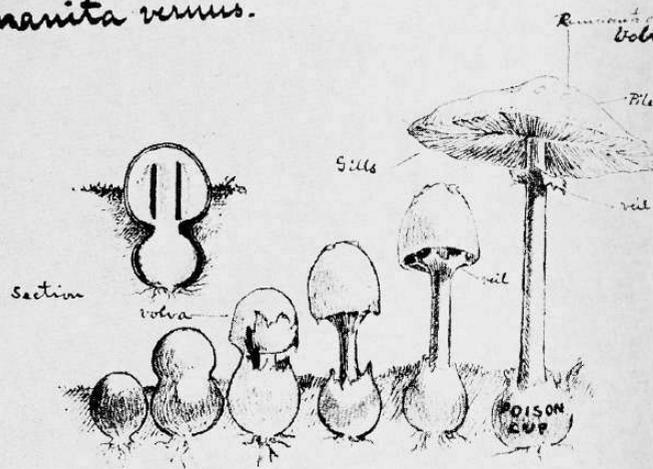


Mississippi River
 opposite Pottsville



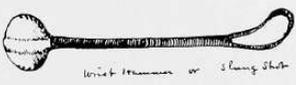
DULUTH
ELECTION
RETURNS
3000!
MAJORITY
FOR
LEWIS!!!

Amanita verus.



The deadly *Amanita* in various stages

Stone Hammers of the Yanktons



Stone Hammered

ed. net. R. D. Sweeney



Dakota
Medicine Mans bag.
of Corn skin.



from life

The Great Train on route



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