

*Mrs. Coen, a former member of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' staff, is now assistant professor of art history at St. Cloud State College. She is the author of several art history books for children.*

## Edward K. Thomas

# FORT SNELLING ARTIST

RENA NEUMANN COEN

AMONG the crowded notices and advertisements in the *Minnesota Pioneer* of June 27, 1850, appeared the following announcement: "Sergeant E. K. Thomas, has a painting handsomely framed, now at the Central House, Saint Paul—being a copy of that celebrated painting of the Last Supper by Di Vinci [*sic*]—which he will dispose of in a Raffle, thirty-five chances, at one dollar each number; to be raffled for on Saturday, the 6th of July, at Slosson & Douglass' Store, at 1 o'clock, P.M."

This artist, who identified himself further as Sergeant Thomas of Fort Snelling, had previously advertised on May 30, June 6, and June 13 his original portraits of the Sioux warrior, Wah-ah-cor-dah, and the Indian squaw, We-no-na, whom he described as "the most renowned of the Dakota belles." Both Indians were "represented in their native costume of two centuries ago," and their double portrait was offered to the public, this time in a fifty-chance raffle at one dollar a number.

Who was this enterprising soldier-artist of 1850? Where did he come from, and where did he go after his tour of duty at

Fort Snelling? What did he paint besides Indian portraits and copies of old masters?

Part of the answer, at least to the last question, can be found in the pages of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, Minnesota Territory's first newspaper, founded in April, 1849, by James M. Goodhue. In the March 13, 1850, issue, Goodhue begged "leave to say that there is at Fort Snelling, a painter of rare merit. . . . We have now before us one of Sergeant Thomas' landscapes . . . the view of Fort Snelling. We see nothing in it to criticise, unless perhaps, that the masonry of the fort lacks in that depth of coloring which belongs to massiveness. The buildings look rather too fresh; but then, a new painting, like a new building, *will* look fresh." Then, interjecting a note of that curious nineteenth-century blend of patriotism, idealism, and nostalgic romanticism, he added: "There are but few scenes in our new country, to remind us of the massive grandeur of European architecture; and this of Fort Snelling, perhaps approaches as near to it as any other. But even Fort Snelling shows something upon its face of the fresh impress of our *annexing* Democ-

racy. We suffer nothing to decay — we have no broken turrets for the ivy to entwine, no crumbling ruins, no ancient castles.”

It is by such views of the fort that we know Thomas' work today, for his copies of old masters have vanished and his portraits of Indians have yet to be identified. Some of his Fort Snelling paintings survive, however, and one wonders which one of them was before Goodhue as he wrote. Four separate versions can be tentatively identified today. Although they differ in small details and are variously attributed, they are almost certainly by the same hand. One is in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Another, perhaps erroneously attributed to James McClellan Boal, belongs to the Minnesota Historical Society. The third is in the possession of Burton D. Reinfrank, Jr. of St. Paul, and the fourth is in the Sibley House in Mendota. All are painted in oil on canvas, but they differ in size. It is possible that several more such views, unknown or incorrectly attributed, are scattered throughout Minnesota and the neighboring states.

Thomas may well have produced these paintings as souvenirs of a frontier post in Minnesota Territory. He attempted to satisfy the demand of both the citizen and the contemporary traveler for accurate representations of the local landscape. Goodhue referred to Thomas' quickness with the brush and the “astonishing fidelity” of his pictures which the editor found as faithful to nature “as the reflections of a mirror.”<sup>1</sup> It may be tempting today to discount a good deal of the aesthetic judgment of a pioneer journalist in a frontier outpost with few, if any, artistic works of high quality with which to make comparisons. Nevertheless, there is little reason to doubt the general accuracy of Goodhue's description and analysis of Thomas' efforts. The essential topographical features of the Fort Snelling area have not changed much since Thomas' day, and some of the structures he so carefully represented still stand.

THE HISTORY of Fort Snelling is too well known to be repeated in detail here. It was the northwesternmost of the military posts that the United States government established after the War of 1812 to extend American authority over areas still under British influence. Built in the early 1820s at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, Fort Snelling also helped cut down warfare between the Chippewa, Sioux, and other Indian tribes; protected land-hungry pioneers who pushed frontiers ever westward during the first half of the nineteenth century; and encouraged American fur trade. The fort's stone walls varied in height from ten to twelve feet, and inside them the soldiers erected fifteen buildings around a diamond-shaped parade ground. Included in the original fort were the Round and Hexagonal towers, both of which are familiar and cherished landmarks to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Sergeant Thomas viewed Fort Snelling from the south. He painted the scene from across the rivers, above and behind the village of Mendota, on a slight rise known as Pilot Knob. Taking the main and best preserved example, the Thomas painting now in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, one sees in the foreground a band of war-bonneted Indians, dancing around a scalp-bearing totem, and two tepees. This is the only version with such gruesome detail, included, one assumes, to indicate the location of the fort in a still uncivilized frontier.

Behind the dancing Indians is Mendota, the oldest permanent white settlement in Minnesota. It is probable that the small log cabin on the left is the one which Jean Baptiste Faribault donated to Mendota's

<sup>1</sup> *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), March 13, 1850, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive study of the fort, see Marcus Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858* (Iowa City, 1918). See also Russell W. Fridley, “Fort Snelling: From Military Post to Historic Site,” in *Minnesota History*, 35:178-192 (December, 1956).

Roman Catholics for use as a chapel. Two of the state's earliest stone houses, both of which have survived to the present time, are depicted. The two-story building on the left was built about 1839 by Faribault, who had been trading with the Indians in Minnesota Territory since the early 1800s and had settled in Mendota about 1826 after having lived on Pike Island. To the right, in front of a two-story stone warehouse, is the house that Henry Hastings Sibley, agent of the American Fur Company in Minnesota Territory and later governor of the state, built in 1835-36. The frame warehouse of the American Fur Company, which is no longer standing, is visible behind the rise of the hill. Beyond these buildings the Minnesota River sweeps around Pike Island to meet the Mississippi, while in the distance, occupying the high bluffs above the rivers' junction, stands the fort itself.<sup>3</sup>

The identity of the three cottages to the left of the fort is the subject of some controversy. Unfortunately, freeway construc-



*Self-portrait of Edward Thomas at the age of seventy-six*

<sup>3</sup>Fort Snelling Park Association and the Minnesota Historical Society, *Old Mendota*, 6 (n.p., 1966); June Drenning Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide*, 9-16 (St. Paul, 1963).

<sup>4</sup>The sutler's house is identified on the map included in the "Conveyance of described lands in the Fort Snelling Reservation by the United States Government to Franklin Steele," January 4, 1871, in the Minnesota Historical Society, and on the "Map of the Military Reservation of Fort Snelling—Minnesota, surveyed by S. Eastman, Major 5th Infantry, by order of the Secretary of War, 1857," National Archives Record Group (NARG) 77. Major Clark's daughter, Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve, discusses the stone cottages in her memoirs, *Three Score Years and Ten*, 61 (Minneapolis, 1888). The buildings are labeled on First Lieutenant Ephraim K. Smith's map of "Fort Snelling and Vicinity," October, 1837 (location of the original is unknown), and on Indian agent Lawrence Taliaferro's map of the Fort Snelling area in 1837, number 540 in the cartographic records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARG 75. The Taliaferro map is reprinted in James B. Rhoads, "The Fort Snelling Area in 1835, A Contemporary Map," in *Minnesota History*, 35:22-29 (March, 1956). The Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies of the last three maps.

tion destroyed the site of all three. The structure closest to the fort was probably the home of Franklin Steele, who served as sutler to the post from 1838 through 1857. In the Minnesota Historical Society's version, the white fence around the house extends almost to the river's edge, leading one to conclude that this view was painted slightly later than the other examples. It would seem that the two small stone structures at the extreme left were those built by Captain Nathan Clark and Major John Garland in 1825 or 1826 to replace their inadequate quarters. Their houses were later occupied by the Indian agency.<sup>4</sup>

The main features of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' painting appear in the three other versions with only minor variations of detail. The Reinfrank view, for example, includes a large decorative tree which rises majestically, stopping just short

of the low clouds that hang like an ornamental scallop from the upper edge of the painting. In place of the two tepees and war-dancing Indians of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' version, Mr. Reinfrank's picture contains a single tepee with two peaceful Indians standing beside it. Both the Sibley House and Minnesota Historical Society views also depict one tepee in the foreground. The latter shows a solitary Indian sitting beside the tepee, while the former has two figures, one of whom holds aloft an unidentified object. In all three versions Thomas probably added the tepees and Indians as much for the indication of scale as for the touches of local color they provide. The Sibley House version contains no new elements except the Indian in the foreground. It measures 41 by 34 inches, as compared to the 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ -by-24 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch Reinfrank painting.

The Minnesota Historical Society's version differs from the others in the prominence given to the root cellars which were built under the landing road leading from the river to the fort's gateway. It is the smallest of the four views, measuring 24 by 17 inches inside the frame. It also is in the poorest condition and may have some later overpainting.

The Reinfrank and historical society views contain a scattering of large, sharply outlined boulders, which cast deep shadows and have what can be described as a mouselike shape. The boulders and a peculiar technique of indicating changing terrain by long, sinuous shadows are so characteristic of Thomas' work that they constitute an artistic signature.

ALL FOUR VIEWS of Fort Snelling betray the hand of a self-taught artist who was, nevertheless, possessed of enough skill to excite the enthusiastic praise of his contemporary public and to cause modern critics to attribute, mistakenly, some of his paintings to Captain Seth Eastman. Eastman was a better known and more sophisticated artist who, as it happens, was also

senior officer in charge of Fort Snelling four times from 1841 to 1848. He did, in fact, paint a number of views of the fort, both in oil on canvas and in water color. His compositions, however, are more unified than Thomas', and his drawing is softer and more atmospheric. It is, of course, entirely possible that Thomas saw and was influenced by paintings which Eastman had left behind or given to friends at the fort.<sup>5</sup>

Other telltale characteristics in Thomas' Fort Snelling views betray the less sophisticated artist. Unlike the single vantage point perspective used by Eastman, Thomas' landscapes stretch out maplike, in the bird's-eye view common to the primitive artist. Precisely detailed objects are scattered throughout the scene with little regard for such artistic niceties as compositional unity and the blurring of distant objects in the haze of atmosphere. In the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' version, the fort in the background is as clearly defined as the two tepees in the foreground. Pike Island merely occupies space on the canvas, without receding at all into the distance. A profusion of decorative detail, none subordinate to any other, and a bright midday light make up in the charm of unaffected naïveté for lapses in proportion and perspective.

Until recently the Reinfrank and Sibley House views were the only ones attributed to Thomas, the former because of the signature — "Sgt. E. K. Thomas" — which appears on the back. Mr. Reinfrank inherited his painting from his great grandmother, a resident of St. Paul in the early 1850s, who received the picture as payment from a boarder, possibly Thomas himself. The Sibley House Association purchased its version, which has long been attributed to Thomas, from Lucy Leavenworth Wilder

---

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Eastman and his work, see John Francis McDermott, *Seth Eastman: Pictorial Historian of the Indian*, especially page 32 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961).



Morris sometime between 1915 and 1931. Mrs. Morris apparently bought it from Eli Pettijohn, who had owned it for over seventy years.<sup>6</sup>

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts' painting, which for many years was credited to Eastman, was recently examined and photographed under both infrared and ultraviolet light by the museum staff. A five-line inscription, barely decipherable, emerged on the back of the 34-by-27-inch canvas. The following words are still legible: (line 1) "Fort Snelling;" (line 2) "Mendota;" (line 3) undecipherable; (line 4) "Painted;" (line 5) "Sgt. Thomas, U.S.A."

Abram S. Elfelt, a successful St. Paul merchant who died in 1888, donated the view now in the Minnesota Historical Society. The painting has been attributed to James McClellan Boal, probably because his name is on an old label stuck to the back of the frame. Boal was a prominent, well-regarded settler of St. Paul in the late 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. Like Thomas, he was a native of Pennsylvania and a painter. He had arrived in Minnesota in 1846 and three years later was elected to the Territorial Council from Ramsey County. From 1851 to 1853 he held the post of adjutant general of the territory. His name occasionally appears as "McBoal," and there is a McBoal Street in St. Paul which honors him. Although Boal may have unsuccessfully submitted a design for the territorial seal, not one of his works has been positively identified. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the Minnesota Historical Society's painting, which is so close in subject matter and style to the known Thomas works, should be credited to the latter. One may surmise that the Boal label on the

back of the frame indicates ownership rather than authorship. Surely in as small an artistic community as Minnesota had in those days, Boal would have been familiar with Thomas' work, if not with the man himself. His possession of one of Thomas' views is not improbable.<sup>7</sup>

THERE IS one painting that should be included, tentatively at least, with the four discussed above. Now in the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, this picture, like the view in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, has been attributed to Eastman. It is particularly interesting because it depicts not the view *toward* Fort Snelling but the opposite one *from* the fort, looking across Pike Island and the two rivers toward Mendota. An Indian and an American soldier, who survey the scene from the foreground, again identify by their dress a United States military establishment in Indian country. Other Indians are scattered throughout the scene, standing near their tepees on Pike Island, leading a fagot-laden horse, or paddling canoes on the river. As in all the other versions, these canoes are shown only broadside. The problem of foreshortening may have proved too much for the painter. Again, the peculiar mouse-shaped boulders cast their characteristically sharp shadows. Here, too, is the strange perspective of the Fort Snelling pictures with the distant Mendota as clearly shown and seemingly as close as Pike Island in the intervening distance. The dollhouse-like quality of the village, the smooth rolling terrain laid on with a rather full brush, even the treatment of trees and foliage are all suspiciously like the views of the fort. A recent ultraviolet examination of the painting revealed no signature. Therefore, on the admittedly risky evidence of a black-and-white photograph, this writer, without having seen the original, suggests that the Gilcrease work, too, properly belongs in the oeuvre of Sergeant Edward K. Thomas.

<sup>6</sup> Sibley House Museum Record Book I.

<sup>7</sup> J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, 158 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4, 1876); Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 61, 203 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14, 1912); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:460 (St. Paul, 1956).





*View of Fort Snelling and Mendota owned by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*

*Version owned by Burton D. Reinfrank, Jr. of St. Paul*







*Version in the collection of the Sibley House Association*

*Version owned by the Minnesota Historical Society*





In spite of a certain pictorial naïveté, the views of Fort Snelling and Mendota display a confident hand in the representation of the volume and mass of three-dimensional objects, a sensitive, if sometimes too vivid, approach to color, and a developed sense of design. A keen awareness of locale and an accurate eye in recording it are revealed in these canvases. Although probably unschooled in the art of painting, Thomas was by no means unaccomplished.

WHAT IS the background of this obscure soldier-artist of Fort Snelling? The standard histories of American art are silent on the subject, and the usual reference biographies contain no mention of Edward Thomas. However, the Ramsey County census for 1850, as well as newspapers and the records of the Veterans Administration housed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., provide some clues to his private and military life. From the last source in particular, one may recreate at least the general outlines of the life of this too-long-forgotten artist who left a vivid record of the appearance of Fort Snelling over a hundred years ago.

Edward Kirkbride Thomas was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on June 26, or July 25, 1817, the son of Hartshorn and Mary Thomas. His roots were deep in American history. His maternal grandmother was Prudence Kirkbride, whose family came to America with William Penn. His paternal grandfather, Edward Thomas, was a colonel in the Continental army during the Revolutionary War. The military tradition was strong in the Thomas family. The artist's first cousin was General George H. Thomas, who became commander of the Army of the Cumberland during the Civil War and is generally credited with ending Confederate resistance in the West by defeating General John B. Hood at Nashville, Tennessee, in December, 1864.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas spent the early part of his life in Philadelphia. Although he apparently did

some portrait painting in his youth, it is not known whether he had any formal artistic training. In August, 1838, at the age of twenty-one, he enlisted in General Winfield Scott's Fourth Artillery Regiment and fought in the war against the Seminole Indians in Florida. He was honorably discharged from this, his first tour of duty, at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, on August 29, 1843, with the rank of first sergeant.<sup>9</sup>

During these years Thomas met a young Englishwoman, Mary Eliza Weldrick, whom he married in Detroit, Michigan, on February 20, 1840. Five of the children, two girls and three boys, born to him and Eliza reached maturity. According to Thomas, Mary, the eldest, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in January, 1847, while McLaren and Charles were born in 1849 and 1851, respectively, at Fort Snelling. Edward and Isabel, or "Belle," were born in 1853 and 1855, respectively, probably in Detroit.<sup>10</sup>

FOR SOME TWENTY YEARS following his marriage, Thomas' life was a series of re-enlistments in the army, interspersed with stretches of civilian life devoted to painting. The family moved around a good deal. In 1846 it was living in New York, where Thomas re-enlisted in the Sixth Regi-

<sup>8</sup> Although Thomas' birth date is given as June 26 in the records of the Woodmere Cemetery in Detroit, Michigan, and in the *Detroit Journal*, January 12, 1906, p. 16, he gave it as July 25 in his Declaration for Original Pension, June 6, 1886, and in his Declaration of Survivor for Pension, September 24, 1887, records of the Veterans Administration, NARG 15. The same sources furnished other biographical detail.

<sup>9</sup> *Detroit News*, January 12, 1906, p. 14; R. C. Drum, adjutant general, to the Commissioner of Pensions, November 1, 1886, NARG 15.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, who referred to his wife as Eliza, gave the names and ages of his living children in a circular addressed to the U.S. Pension Agent, Detroit, Michigan, March 22, 1898, NARG 15. The U.S. Manuscript Census Schedules, 1850, Ramsey County, p. 37, in the Minnesota Historical Society, gives Mrs. Thomas' first name as "Mary" and lists the children as "Lewis C., 10, New York," "Mary, 6, New York," and "Charles, 1, Minnesota."





*"View of Mendota" which has been attributed to Seth Eastman*

ment, United States Infantry. Thomas served with this outfit for sixty days in the Mexican War before he was wounded. Apparently his injury was not serious, for he was sent from Mexico to Cleveland to drill recruits. After further duty in New Orleans, Louisiana, and in St. Louis, Missouri, Thomas was sent to Fort Snelling to serve out the balance of his enlistment. He was honorably discharged there with the rank of orderly sergeant on May 15, 1851.<sup>11</sup>

For seven years thereafter, Thomas remained a civilian. He went back to Detroit where, between tours of duty, he made his permanent home and resumed his career as a painter. In 1858 he enlisted for another five years. After the Civil War began in

1861, he was detailed to take charge of the recruiting station in Detroit. He drilled the first regiment of troops to leave that city for the front, a fact in which he apparently took great pride. Later Thomas himself saw action at Hilton Head, South Carolina, where "exposure and hardships" aggravated the ill health that had plagued him since the Mexican campaign. Heart and kidney disease and rheumatism forced his discharge, this time at Newport Barracks, Kentucky, on October 12, 1863.<sup>12</sup>

Only three months later, on January 20, 1864, Thomas re-enlisted at Fort Wayne, Michigan, for one final tour of duty. He did not complete his full term. On October 14, 1865, he was discharged at Fort Reno in Washington, D.C., "by way of favor" and at his own request, in order to provide more adequately for his family. The army records do not state the nature of the work Thomas was to undertake to improve his family's fortunes. It is fairly certain, however, that it was connected with his artistic

<sup>11</sup> Drum to Commissioner of Pensions, November 1, 1886, NARG 15; Thomas, Declaration of Survivor for Pension, September 24, 1887, NARG 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Detroit News*, January 12, 1906, p. 14; Thomas, Declaration for Original Pension, June 6, 1886 (quote), and Declaration for Invalid Pension, August 19, 1890, NARG 15.

ability. He was as highly thought of as an artist by his contemporaries in Detroit as he had been fifteen years earlier in Minnesota. An anonymous correspondent, writing in the evening edition of the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* on January 24, 1865, complained that "the War Department cannot be acquainted with Sgt. Thomas' abilities as an artist or they would have given him a more important post. He made some of the finest sketches that have been made in the Ordnance Department in South Carolina, including drawings of all the Bursted Great Guns, the Swamp Angel, and others. He was also a favorite in his line. We shall always be glad to hear of his being raised a step or two, because we happen to know that his artistic abilities and soldierly qualities entitle him to a favorable consideration."<sup>13</sup>

With this sort of encouragement it was probably not difficult for Thomas to devote the rest of his life to painting. From 1878 to 1898 the Detroit city directories listed him, in fact, as "painter," "artist," and, once, "fresco and ornamental painter." The only known painting from his hand during this long period, however, is a self-portrait, dated October 13, 1893. Owned by his great granddaughter, the late Helen F. Humphrey, for many years, the portrait is now in the possession of her brother, William E. Humphrey of Chicago, Illinois.<sup>14</sup>

The army heard from Thomas again on June 6, 1886, when he first applied for a pension on the basis of injuries suffered during his service in the Mexican War. His petition was successful. Mary Eliza died in 1893 or 1894, and toward the end of the decade Thomas retired to the shelter of Michigan old soldiers' homes, first in Bay City, then in Grand Rapids, and finally in Detroit. He died in Detroit at the home of his daughter Isabel (Mrs. Alfred Nelson) on January 12, 1906, at the age of eighty-seven.<sup>15</sup>

His was an obscure life, lived modestly and, for the most part, anonymously. He served his country honorably in its military

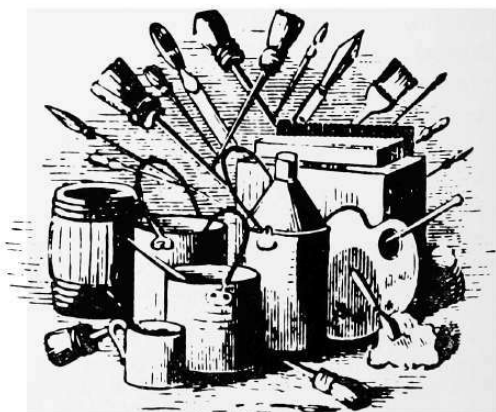
establishment, taking an active part in three of its wars. He entertained himself and at intervals made a living with his brush. Although it is difficult to separate the documentary interest from the aesthetic value of Thomas' Fort Snelling and Mendota views, his pictures do have considerable artistic merit. His stature as an early American artist might well be enhanced by the correct identification of some of his later paintings. The Thomas works discussed represent one chapter in his artistic career. There were undoubtedly others.

<sup>13</sup> Drum to Commissioner of Pensions, November 1, 1886 (first quote), and Thomas, Declaration for Original Pension, June 6, 1886, NARG 15.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas was also listed as an artist in the biennial *Michigan State Gazetteer and Business Directory* from 1887 to 1897, with the exception of 1889; Mrs. William E. Humphrey to Kenneth Carley, March 19, 1969.

<sup>15</sup> *Detroit News*, January 12, 1906, p. 14; *Detroit Journal*, January 12, 1906, p. 16.

THE AUTHOR wishes to express her appreciation to Arthur Hopkin Gibson of Wheaton, Maryland, for his assistance in researching the life of Thomas. The paintings on pages 322, 323, and 325 are reproduced through the courtesy of their owners—Burton D. Reinfrank, Jr., the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Sibley House Association, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art in Tulsa. Mr. and Mrs. William E. Humphrey of Chicago granted permission to reproduce the self-portrait of Thomas on page 319, and Theodore Grunsten of Evanston provided the photographic copy. The illustration on page 326 is from Clarence P. Horning, *Handbook of Early Advertising Art*, 1:205 (New York, 1956). Eugene D. Becker of the society made three of the transparencies on pages 322–323.







Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).