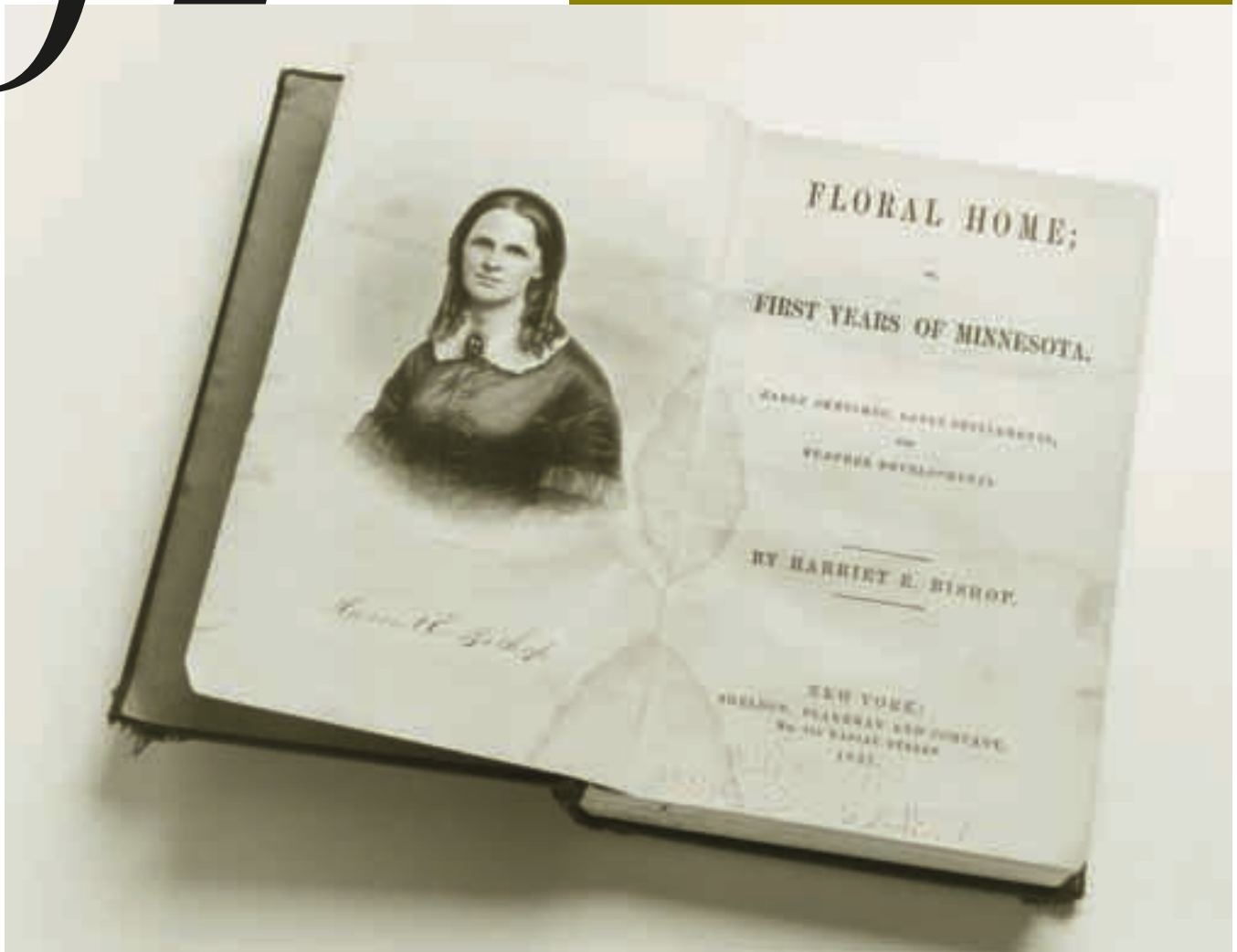


Harriet E. Bishop

A DOER AND A MOVER



One hundred fifty years ago Harriet E. Bishop traveled by steamer up the Mississippi River to what was to become the Territory of Minnesota. A doer and mover, this single woman arrived in July 1847 to start a school and stayed to begin many

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early social, religious, and educational endeavors. She is

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buried in St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery, final resting place

of contemporaries such as Governors Alexander Ramsey, Henry H. Sibley, and Willis A. Gorman.

In recent years an excursion boat and a trolley car in St. Paul, a playground on Harriet Island (named for her in the 1850s), and a school in Rochester have been given her name. Her picture hangs behind the bar at the St. Paul Grill, a circumstance she would most certainly not approve. Her early schoolhouse is gone and her books are long out of print, but she lives on in these volumes and a few other remnants of her busy life, all preserved in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Born in Vermont in 1817, Bishop taught in Essex County, New York, for about 10 years before moving to the village whose name had only recently been changed from Pig's Eye to St. Paul. It had not yet succeeded in casting off its reputation as a wild river town dominated by liquor and loose living. She arrived under the auspices of the National Board of Popular Education, which sent more than 400 teachers to settlements from Ohio to California between 1847 and 1850. Bishop was a member of the first class trained and was the first teacher the group sent "to the West."¹

Within a week of her arrival, Bishop started a school in an abandoned log cabin at what is now St. Peter Street and Kellogg Boulevard. That first winter she organized the St. Paul Circle of Industry to raise money for a new building, finished in 1848. This new school also served as a polling place, courtroom, lecture hall, and church. After Minnesota was declared a territory, a flood of new settlers arrived, and by 1850 the city needed three schools.²

In addition to her secular teaching, Bishop established the first Sunday school in Minnesota on July 25, 1847. Classes met in her school until being divided into Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist groups two years later. She was also the driving force behind the organization of the First Baptist Church on December 29, 1849. In

LEFT: Title page and portrait of Harriet Bishop from her first book, published in 1857

1851 she organized the St. Paul Baptist Sewing Society to do needlework in order to pay off the mortgage on the new church building. (The church's third building, erected in 1875, stands at Ninth and Wacouta Streets.) She helped form the Sons of Temperance in 1849 and persuaded many students to sign the required pledge of abstinence.³

An author and promoter, Bishop recorded her impressions and the story of her early years



Sampler dated 1828, when Bishop was 11 years old: an early example of her expert needlework.

in her new surroundings in *Floral Home; or, First Years of Minnesota*, published in New York in 1857. A large section extols the virtues of Minnesota ("The climate of Minnesota is one of its greatest attractions") and invites new settlers to the state. She made several return trips east and represented New England investors who wanted to buy land in the booming city of St. Paul. Her other publications include *Dakota War Whoop, or Indian Massacres and War in Minnesota of 1862-63*, an account that reflects the outrage of Minnesota settlers, first published in 1863; a book-length poem, *Minnesota Then and Now* (1869); and a section of verse that appears in

¹ Polly W. Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 40; Winifred D. Wandersee Bolin, "Harriet E. Bishop: Moralizer and Reformer," in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 7-10.

² Here and below, J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 168-70, 178-80.

³ Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 170, 215; Harriet E. Bishop, *Floral Home; or, First Years of Minnesota* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Co., 1857), 87-89, 107-09; Bolin, "Harriet Bishop," 13.



Bishop's History of the First Baptist Church of St. Paul and Societies, a leather-bound volume with gold-stamped title, handwritten about 1880. Numerous pictures, such as these of Rev. Andrew M. Torbet and his wife, Caroline, are attached to the pages and bordered with gold trim.

the 1864 compendium *The Poets and Poetry of Minnesota*. She was clearly an active part of St. Paul's literary circle, and in 1857 she became the president of the newly organized Philecclesian Literary Society, a group of several dozen women and men who met weekly.⁴

In 1858 Bishop married John McConkey, a widower with four children whom she raised during the Civil War while he fought with the First Minnesota Regiment. McConkey returned with a medical discharge and a problem with alcohol. The unhappy marriage was ended in 1867, and Bishop petitioned to have her maiden name restored, after which she was known as Mrs. Harriet Bishop.⁵

In 1867 she helped organize the Ladies Christian Union which, two years later, established the Home for the Friendless, still in existence as Wilder Residence East. She was forced to defend her reputation in Ramsey County District Court when a New York speculator claimed he had not authorized her to make land purchases for him. After this, she left the city for about two years, traveling and lecturing in California. When she returned in 1875, she was listed in the city directory as an author and lecturer living at 442 Broadway Street.⁶

An energetic crusader, she became the first organizer appointed by the Minnesota Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1877, traveling

⁴ See, for example, *Floral Home*, 129; *Philecclesian Chronicle*, Nov. 5, 19, 1867, Philecclesian Society Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

⁵ Bolin, "Harriet Bishop," 16, 17; *General Laws of the State of Minnesota, 1867*, Special Laws sec., 387.

⁶ Minutes, Sept. 11, 1867, Ladies Christian Union of the City of St. Paul Papers, MHS; Bolin, "Harriet Bishop," 14; *Van R. Humphrey et al. v Palmer E. Havens et al.*, case file 2556, Ramsey County District Court Records, Minnesota State Archives, MHS; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 9, 1883, p. 7.

throughout the state organizing new chapters. She is listed first among the founders of the Minnesota suffrage movement in 1881.⁷

After her death in 1883 a contemporary described her as “of comely appearance; tall, with a good figure, a bright, expressive face; earnest and decided in manners, and quick in speech. She had an air of active business about her, and always seemed in a hurry.” Noting that history should preserve her deeds, he added, “She came among the early settlers of this city, educated the young, taught religion, and aided in every way she could to elevate the scale of morality.”⁸

Unfortunately, this energetic, literate woman’s personal papers have not been located; instead, her legacy is found in the records of organizations she established or joined. As far as is known, four chairs with embroidered seats that she exhibited at the first Territorial Fair in 1857 have not been preserved. But the few tangible traces of her life, pictured in this article, remain in the Minnesota Historical Society. Her story is regularly told in the *Minnesota A to Z* exhibit at the Minnesota History Center by a costumed interpreter.

St. Paul’s first teacher left her most indelible mark on the young people she guided and the organizations she founded that helped transform a raw river town into the capital city of Minnesota. If she were alive today, Harriet Bishop could still look down with pride from the site of her first school on Kellogg Boulevard to Harriet Island, named for her more than a century ago.

Bishop’s sewing table, about 1850, probably mahogany veneer with a bird’s-eye maple lid stained mahogany on the outside. Inside the lid is a large mirror used to reflect candlelight onto the handwork; the cylindrical drawer was often used for storing fabric, embroidery hoops, and work-in-progress.



⁷ Bessie L. Scovell, comp., *Yesteryears, A Brief History of the Minnesota Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement* (St. Paul: Minnesota Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, 1939), 37; Ethel E. Hurd, *Woman Suffrage in Minnesota: A Record of the Activities in its Behalf since 1847* (Minneapolis: Inland Press, 1916), 7.

⁸ T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers* (St. Paul: the author, 1886), 63–64.

All illustrations are in the MHS collections: the church history in the First Baptist Church of St. Paul Papers; Floral Home in the research center; and the sampler and sewing table in museum collections. The photos on p. 320 and 322 are by Eric Mortenson; p. 323 is by Peter Latner.



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