JOSEPH FARR REMEMBERS THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN ST. PAUL

In the spring of 1895, three decades after the end of the Civil War, Joseph Farr sat down at home with a writer for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. *Farr reminisced about his early days in the city and his involvement with other local African Americans in the Underground Railroad.[1]*

Beginning during colonial times in America, this secret network of black and white antislavery activists had helped more than 100,000 African American slaves escape to free parts of the United States as well as Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Not an actual road of cars and tracks but an assortment of clandestine, illegal "stations" and routes operated by heroic individuals, the so-called railroad reached its height of activity in the decades before the war. At the time, few of its participants dared keep written records,

EDITED BY DEBORAH SWANSON

which would be dangerous to themselves, other railroaders, and escaping slaves. Only later did some African American veterans feel safe enough to tell about their experiences, sometimes after many years had gone by and some dates and details had faded from memory.[2]

Looking back, Farr recalled that he had come to St. Paul in 1850, when he was about 18 years old, to work for his uncle, William Taylor. Taylor had a barbershop next to the city's post office on Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard), near Minnesota Street, and lived with his wife, Adeline, in a house on the opposite side of Third.[3] Near the busy lower levee on the Mississippi River, the shop served as an information center and the house as a station on the Underground Railroad.

William Taylor and the other barbers in his shop were on the alert to help fugitive slaves, who stayed at the Taylors' house for protection until proceeding farther along the escape route to freedom. As traditional male gathering places, barbershops were hubs of local news and contacts, which aided Taylor and his associates in operating the Underground Railroad. A number of barbers also socialized around town as musicians, broadening their network of contacts. Taylor, himself, was described by a contemporary as "a good performer on the fiddle or violin, and was a great favorite at balls and parties. He was a fine-looking fellow, large, portly, well-dressed, easy in his manners, and possessed of a pleasant and musical voice."[4]

Minnesota had been created as a free territory in 1849, the year before Farr and the Taylors arrived in St. Paul from Galena, Illinois.[5] Although slavery was supposedly not allowed in Minnesota, many vacationing southerners traveled north up the Mississippi River with their slaves during the summers, staying in hotels in and around St. Paul, Minneapolis, and St. Anthony. The national Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1850, required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners, giving a measure of federal protection to owners who either visited the territory with their slaves or whose human property managed to come within its boundaries by other means.

Reproduced below is the article from the May 5, 1895, St. Paul Pioneer Press *containing Farr's rare reminiscence that describes how free African Americans, at great risk to themselves, successfully shepherded their precious cargo along the Underground Railroad. —DS*

REMINISCENCES OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

During the early [18]50's St. Paul was a way station on the great highway of the fugitive slave—the "underground railway." Many a black man and woman found the way to freedom and a home on the Canadian side of the boundary through the good offices of the people who came to their rescue at St. Paul.

One of the lowly philanthropists who did so much for the individual members of their race in St. Paul still lives here, in fact, there are several here still. Joseph Farr, who, in the years from 1850 to 1855, helped many a slave to freedom, is drawing on to a comfortable old age, surrounded by a clever family and in a cosy [*sic*] home earned by his own industry.

Farr was born in Washington [D.C.] sixty-three years ago and came West to Galena, Ill., at the age of twelve years. He came thence to St. Paul in 1850. For two years prior to settling at St. Paul Farr was on the [Mississippi] river; he was a cabin boy on the old Dr. Franklin [steamboat], and he became accustomed to seeing the desperate efforts made by slaves who were trying to make their way to a place of safety.[6]

When Farr came to St. Paul to live he went to work for his uncle, William Taylor, who kept a barber shop next to the old post office at Minnesota and Third streets. Taylor was a very well-known character and the leader of the colored people here in those days, and even in later years. He was killed by the Indians during the Sioux outbreak in 1862.[7] Another well-known colored man whose arrival here antedated that of Farr is David Edwards, who still lives in St. Paul and who was one of those who were concerned in the "underground railway."[8]

Mr. Farr talked of the trying days before the war to a Pioneer Press man the other evening as he sat in his parlor surrounded by his family. Two of Mr. Farr's daughters are teachers in the public schools, and he is a man of intelligence himself.[9] He greatly regrets not

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having preserved the memoirs of the affairs that took place while the "underground" was in operation, for names and dates have escaped him.

THE UNDERGROUND ROUTE

"I think," said Mr. Farr, "that there must have been fifty or sixty colored people here in 1850, and they were all concerned in getting the slaves out of the way of their pursuers. We even went farther than that, and made arrangements to get them away from their owners. The principal agents in the business at this end were my uncle, William Taylor, David Edwards and a man who worked for my uncle, James Hywadin.[10] There was no society or anything of that kind, but we were doing whatever we could. We had a man on the river named Eugene Berry—a colored man—and he used to take

care of the escaped slaves out of Galena. Our agent at Galena was a man named Johnson, and he used to get up all kinds of schemes to get the slaves away from their masters.[11] He would disguise them as well as he could and get them aboard the Dr. Franklin, and then Berry would take charge of them and stow them away among the freight.

"When the boat came into St. Paul my uncle, or one of the others I have mentioned, would be at the wharf and the fugitive would be brought to my uncle's house, where I lived. One escape that I remember very well will illustrate the difficulties we had at the time.

"One Sunday morning in the summer of 1852 the boat brought up a fine looking, well dressed young colored fellow. He had plenty of clothes and was much better dressed than was common with colored people at that time. Berry brought him straight to my uncle's house, which was right across the street from my uncle's barber shop on Third street. When he came into the house he sat down and begun to cry at a tremendous rate, and kept at it while Berry took my uncle and myself off to one side and told us that the 'young fellow' was a girl and that [she] had got away from her master at Galena. The owner had brought her North, and when Johnson went and proposed to her that she escape she was tickled to death. It was easy enough to get her out of Galena, but the trouble was to get her to a place of safety. And the master would know that she had come on to St. Paul and would soon be

"Happy to serve citizens and strangers," William Taylor advertised his St. Paul barbershop and shaving saloon. It was probably located to the left of the post office (sketched by Robert O. Sweeny) on Third below Minnesota Street in 1852.
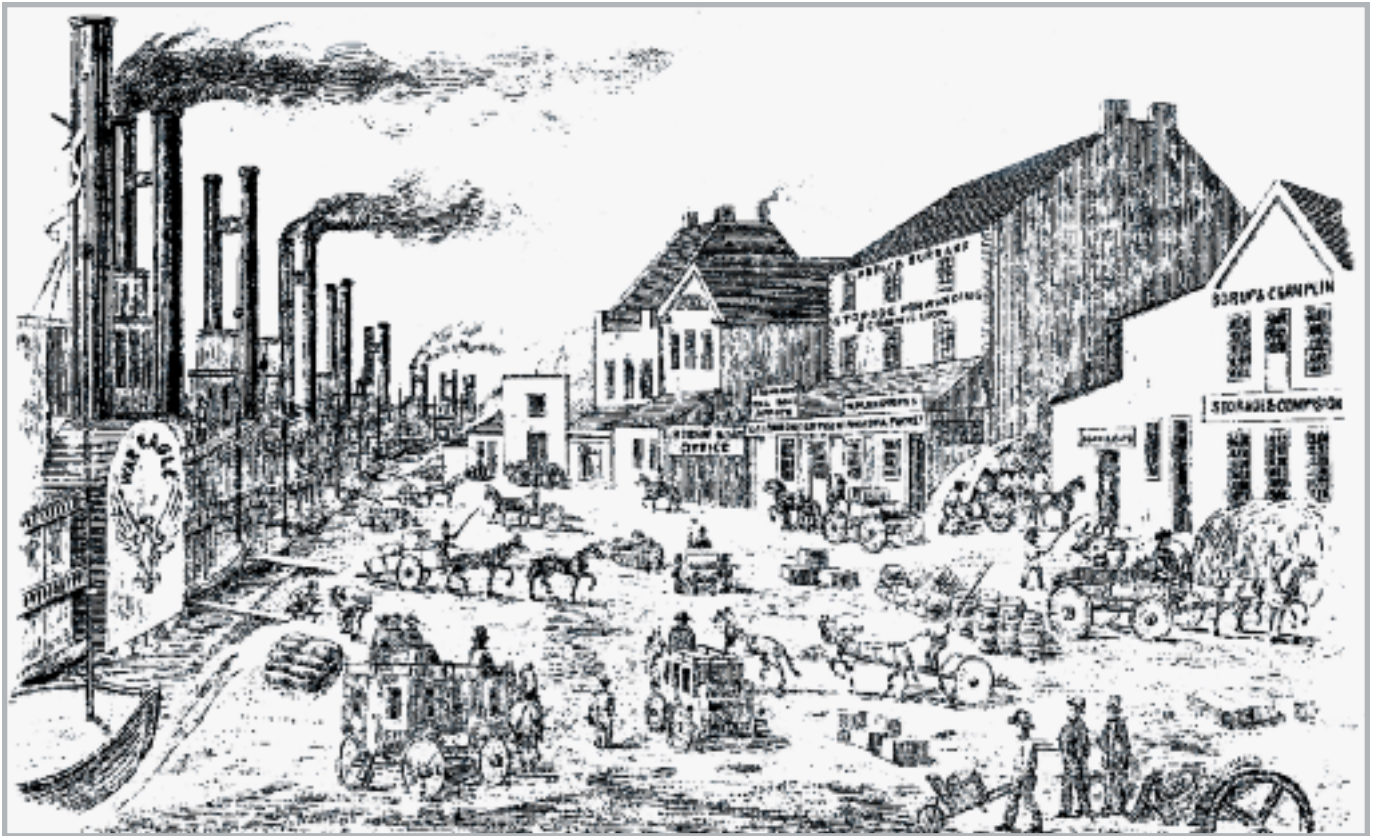
The bustling lower levee on the Mississippi, where boats coming upriver offloaded passengers, freight, mail, and, sometimes, fugitive slaves

after her. She was young and fine looking and would probably be worth a couple of thousand dollars in the South, so it was a sure thing that there would be a great effort made to find her.

"Well, she stayed with my aunt that night, and we intended to get her away the next day if possible. The next morning I was at work in the shop with Taylor and James Hywadin, when in comes a big man dressed as the southerners were always dressed in those days, with a wide-brimmed light hat and expensive black clothes, and as soon as I laid my eyes on him I knew that he was

THE FUGITIVE'S MASTER

and that it would be all day with her. 'See here,' said he to Taylor, 'I understand that you know all about the fugitives that come here, and I suppose you know where my girl is. I lost a girl and I am going to have her back. Find her for me and it will be worth $30 to you.'

My uncle kept him talking for some time. The minute he came in Hywadin went out the back door and across the street to the house. I looked over there and saw the girl sitting at the window. Fortunately her master didn't look in that direction and went away satisfied when Taylor told him that he would do what he could.

"Meantime, Hywadin had got a horse and rig, from Col. [Alvaren] Allen,[12] I think, and got the girl, still dressed in men's clothes, into the buggy and cut off into the country. He drove out, as I remember it, to the neighborhood of White Bear, where he had an acquaintance named Fournier, a Frenchman.[13] He told Fournier how it was with the girl, and the Frenchman promised that he would take care of her. And he did. His wife did all she could for the slave, and when the officers got close on her trail Fournier took her off to the woods four miles from his house and kept her there for a couple of weeks. It was in the days of Sheriff [Aaron W.] Tullis, and Mr. [Alfred B.] Brackett was his deputy, and they made a very thorough search for the

girl, but never got her.[14] After the hunt was over we brought her back to town, gave her another disguise and sent her to Chicago. From there she made her way to Canada and, a few months afterwards, my uncle got a letter from her, saying that she was safe.

"A good many slaves who came to St. Paul with their masters were stolen away. There had been a law introduced by a man named Sloane, allowing slave-owners to bring their slaves here with them when they came to visit here and they felt quite safe at first.[15] But latterly they never brought slaves here, for we made it too hot for them. And sometimes it was too hot for the fugitives.

"In those days the old International hotel[16]—it was afterwards burned down—was much patronized by southern people. There was a planter stopping there with his family once and he had a young slave woman in whom we had become interested and we thought we ought to free if we could. She was told that she could get away and said that she would like to. One day, while the family was out, we got the girl out and took her

TO A HIDING PLACE

we had on Fifth street. It was in a little ice cream saloon and stood right where the Washburn block[17] now is. There was a great row about her disappearance for her owner thought a great deal of her. We fixed everything to get her out of town, but it took a couple of days to do it and before we could get all the arrangements made the girl got homesick for her master's family and insisted on going back. They had always treated her kindly and she felt as though she was leaving her own family in leaving them. Of course there was no use in trying to help a slave to escape when she didn't want to, and we let her go back, after she had promised that she would say nothing about who had tried to rescue her.

"Even among the ex-slaves there were traitors, though, and we had trouble with them sometimes. A southerner had brought a young slave up here and had him for a body servant. It was in the later years and the owners had become so much afraid of the 'underground' people that it was hard work for a colored man to get close enough to a slave to speak to him. But we got after this fellow and told him that he might have his freedom. One night he left the hotel—this was the International, too—and came to Mr. Taylor's place. We got him right out into the country, and the next day there was a great ado made about it. He was a valuable man and his master offered a big reward for his capture. We had sent him to Point Prescott [Wisconsin] and thought he was safe enough there. He was in the

ARRANGEMENT FOR 1852.

GALENA AND MINNESOTA.

UNITED STATES MAIL LINE.

Consisting of three first class boats,
NOMINEE, Capt. O. Smith.
BEN CAMPBELL, Capt. M. W. Lodwick.
DR. FRANKLIN, Capt. R. Blakely.

Leaving Galena,
The Nominee, Capt. O. Smith, Mondays at 12 o'lock
The Dr. Franklin, Capt. R. Blakely, Wednesdays, at 12 o'clock.
The Ben Campbell, Capt. M. W. Lodwick, Fridays, at 12 o'clock.

The above Boats will run regularly during the ensuing season. Having the Mail Contract, their punctuality can be relied on. They will remain at St. Paul sufficiently long to enable passengers to visit the Falls of Saint Anthony.

Of speed and accommodation, these Boats are unsurpassed, and every attention will be paid to Passengers and Freight. They will leave punctually at the hour named.—The Nominee will make the trip so as not to be out on Sundays.

Goods shipped to the Agents at St. Louis or Galena, to go by this line, will be forwarded free of charge.

Galena being the terminus of the great thoroughfares leading Westward from Chicago and Milwaukee, nearly all the travel from the Eastward, destined for the Upper Mississippi, takes passage by Steamboat from this point. Also, nearly all the Steamboats on the Southern trade, from St. Louis and other ports below, come into this port for reshipment for points above.

AGENTS.
R. F. Sass, St. Louis, Nelson, Gilbert & Co.
B. H. Campbell & Co., Nelson's Landing.
Galena. C. R. Read, Lake Pepin.
G. R. West, Dubuque. L. Hertzell, Point Douglas.
J. M. Langworthy, do., Churchill & Nelson,
A. McGregor, Stillwater.
McGregor's Landing. J. W. Babcock, St. Paul.
B. W. Brisbois, P. du Chien S. H. Sargeant, do.
F. D. Cowles, Lansing. Russell & Rice, St. Anthony.
Campbell & Smith, Jas. Peck & Co., Chicago.
La Crosse.
St. Paul, March 11, 1852. 47-tf.

ST. LOUIS, GALENA, DUBUQUE, ST. PAUL, ST. PETERS AND ST. CROIX PACKET.

The fine, substantial, safe and fast running steamer Excelsior, Ward, Master, having been newly painted and thoroughly overhauled and repaired, from stem to stern during the winter, has again taken her regular place in the Upper Mississippi trade, between St. Louis and St. Peters and all intermediate landings. This boat is well known on this river, and as heretofore, her officers and owners are determined that every effort shall be made on their part to ensure the utmost comfort and safety to passengers, and full satisfaction to shippers.

Thankful for past favors, we hope by strict attention to business to merit a continuance of the same.

For freight or passage, apply on board.

Agents at St. Paul—C. F. Tracy and Wm. Constans.
1—tf

Steamers visiting St. Paul stopped regularly at cities such as Dubuque, Galena, and St. Louis, with routine connections to packets visiting Vicksburg and New Orleans.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

FOR AN EXCELLENT INTRODUCTION, see *Underground Railroad,* a handbook produced by the National Park Service (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1998) and described, with ordering information, on the NPS's website about the Underground Railroad: www.cr.nps.gov/history/ugrr.htm. Also informative is *Underground Railroad,* a History Channel video hosted by actress Alfre Woodard (A & E Television Networks, 1999).

WILLIAM STILL (1821–1901), a free African American in Philadelphia, was one of the few Underground Railroad participants who kept a written record; he hoped that it would later help reunite families and friends. Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), has been reprinted by Johnson Publishing Co. (Chicago, 1970) and Arno Press (New York, 1968). Judith Bentley's *"Dear Friend": Thomas Garrett and William Still, Collaborators on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Cobblehill Books, 1997) is based on correspondence between Still and a fellow activist.

BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS include *From Slave to Abolitionist: The Life of William Wells Brown,* adapted by Lucille Schulberg Warner (New York: Dial Books, 1976, 1993), the autobiography of Brown (1815–84), who was born a slave but escaped to freedom and worked against slavery. *The Fiddler's Secret,* by Lois Walfrid Johnson, a novel set on a Mississippi steamboat and in St. Paul, tells the story of a fugitive slave, his friends, and his greatest enemy (Riverboat Adventures series, no. 6; Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998). Ellen Levine's book, *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1993), imaginatively recreates the experiences of fugitive slaves and their rescuers.
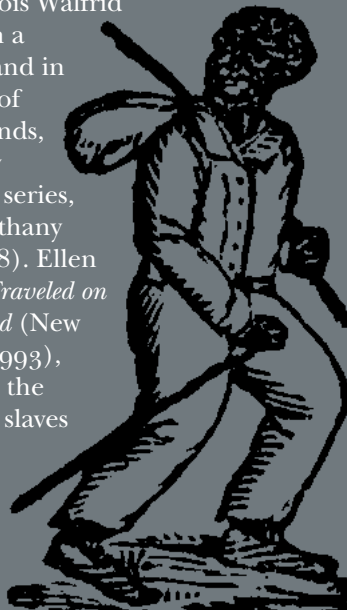
care of a colored man and that ought to [have made] him safe. But it didn't. The colored man who was taking care of the escaped slave heard of the reward and came into town and gave the poor wretch up. I suppose he nearly got flogged to death, but the fellow that gave him up never got any good of his money and left this part of the country soon afterwards.

"Oh, I can't tell how many slaves we got away, but we were so industrious that the slave owners gave up bringing their slaves with them, when they came up here, long before the war."[18] ❑

NOTES

1. The writer was probably Return I. Holcombe (1845–1916), a prolific author, editor, and historian who produced many historical items for newspapers and books. Holcombe "did much work as a newspaper writer, especially for the *Pioneer Press* and the *Dispatch,* from 1890 to 1905"; Warren Upham, "Return Ira Holcombe," *Minnesota History* 2 (Feb. 1917): 7–11 (quote, 8).

2. Linda Russo, *Underground Railroad: Management Concepts/Environmental Assessment* (Denver, CO: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Denver Service Center, 1996), 15, 135.

3. Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1972), 45.

4. T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers* (St. Paul: the author, 1886), 196–97.

5. William and Adeline Taylor seem to have been on the move during 1850, as they were enumerated in the federal census of 1850 for both St. Paul (on September 15) and Galena (on December 17); Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census,* 45; Galena manuscript census, 307. They had married in 1846 in Galena, where William's barbershop was listed in the 1847–49 city directories. Farr was included in only the Galena census, living in the Taylor household as a "Boatman"; Galena information, including census citation, Scott Wolfe, historical librarian, Galena Public Library District, to editor, May 16, June 2, 2000.

6. This steamboat was probably the first of two boats named *Dr. Franklin;* Frederick Way Jr., *Way's Packet Directory, 1848–1983: Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System since the Advent of Photography in Mid-Continent America* (Athens: Ohio University, 1983), 131.

7. Taylor had accompanied an annuity party that went to the Lower Sioux Agency on the Minnesota River to make payments from the federal government to the Dakota (Sioux). It was not uncommon for civilians to go with such parties, treating the trip as a pleasant outing, and Taylor apparently went for the sociality and to cut hair at the agency. Tragically, he was

caught up in the hostilities and shot to death; Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 241.

8. During his early days in St. Paul, Edwards worked as a cook in several hotels, including the International at Jackson and Seventh Streets. He was also known as David Edwards Talbert; *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* Dec. 11, 1887, p. 12.

9. In 1895 Joseph Farr and his wife, Sarah, lived with their daughters Bessie and Minnie and sons Charles and Richard at 59 East Eleventh Street. Bessie taught at Madison school, and Minnie at Lincoln; *St. Paul City Directory,* 1895, p. 527. Joseph Farr died in St. Paul on December 29, 1910, at the age of 78; *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* Dec. 31, 1910, p. 9.

10. Probably James Heighwarden (or possibly Highwarden), an African American barber who was born in Virginia; Harpole and Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850,* 80.

11. The agent was likely James Garrett Johnson, an African American listed in the 1850 Galena census as a laborer (p. 297) and ten years later as a steamboat porter (p. 57). He was also a trustee of the local African Methodist Episcopal church; Johnson identification and information, Scott Wolfe to editor, May 16 and 26, 2000.

12. Allen operated a livery business; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies, 1655–1912,* Minnesota Historical Society Collections, vol. 14 (St. Paul, 1912), 8–9.

13. This may have been G. A. Fournier, a native of Canada; J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875*

(1876; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 168, 268.

14. Tullis was sheriff of Ramsey County in 1856–58 and 1860–62; he appointed Brackett deputy sheriff; Newson, *Pen Pictures,* 594, 701; Upham and Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies,* 70.

15. Farr was probably thinking of Levi Sloan, a territorial legislator who served in the House during the 1854 session and voted in favor of a defeated bill that provided "for the good conduct of negro and mulatto persons"; Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the House of Representatives, 1854,* 250–60. This "Black Law" would have required all individuals of Negro blood in the territory to give bond of $300 to $500 as a guarantee of good behavior; Earl Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison, 1961), 27.

16. In 1856 the Fuller House opened in St. Paul at the corner of Jackson and Seventh Streets. Renamed the International Hotel by 1863, it burned in 1869; C. C. Andrews, ed., *History of St. Paul, Minn.* (Syracuse, N. Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1890), 519–20; *St. Paul City Directory,* 1856-57, p. 90, and 1863, p. 130.

17. The Washburn Building was located at 15–19 East Fifth Street; *St. Paul City Directory,* 1895, p. 1387.

18. Reflecting on his long-gone days with the Underground Railroad, Farr may have remembered his clandestine activities and those of the railroad ending in about 1855, following the loss of the *Dr. Franklin.* The steamboat collided with another boat at McCartney, Wisconsin, in May 1854; Way, *Way's Packet Directory,* 131. Newspapers and the Winslow House register indicate that many parties of southerners and their "servants" visited the area and stayed at hotels including the Winslow House as late as 1860.

The slave linecut is from William Still, The Underground Rail Road
(Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872); ads are reproduced from the Minnesota Pioneer,
Aug. 5, 1852; the levee scene is from Map of City of Saint Paul, Capital of Minnesota
(Goodrich and Somers, 1857). All are in the Minnesota Historical Society Library.