

FURNISHING THE FRONTIER HOME ¹

Furniture used in homes on the Minnesota frontier paralleled in quality and character the domestic architecture of the territory. Although St. Paul cabinet-makers supplied their patrons with furnishings in Gothic designs, many settlers used skills developed in cabin-building to complete the equipment needed in their homes. One hardy pioneer declared, "I would saw off blocks of wood enough to give each of the children a seat and have some left for company."² Tables and benches were made by splitting logs in two, smoothing off the flat sides, and inserting legs into the curved surfaces.

The one-legged bedstead was supported by a post placed upright near the corner of the cabin about four feet from one wall and six feet from another. Into this post was inserted at right angles two logs, which served as rails for the side and end of the bed. The loose ends of these logs were fitted into grooves in the walls of the cabin. Slats were placed between the longer rail and a crevice in the wall. The arrangement was not always very secure, and the slats sometimes slipped if their burden became too heavy. Cords were used instead of wooden slats in well-

¹ Like the articles on frontier housekeeping, food, and domestic architecture by the same author which appear in the last three issues of the magazine, this article is based upon a master's thesis on "Frontier Homes and Home Management," which was submitted at the University of Minnesota in 1933. The photographs of the interior of the Minnesota Historical Society's log cabin and of a quilt in the society's museum, which are among the illustrations that accompany this article, are by Norton and Peel of Minneapolis; the other photographs that appear herewith were made by Mr. Jesse Douglas. The china, glassware, pewter, and other objects depicted are from the society's collection. *Ed.*

² Seth Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier*, 13 (Minneapolis, 1931).

made beds.³ Trundle beds and cradles in which children slept were brought out at night and tucked under a larger bed during the day. Four-legged bedsteads were more difficult to make than those with only one leg, but they were used frequently because they could be moved to various parts of the cabin. When the four-poster bed, with its ample cordage, came into use, it was considered a luxury. Vital Guerin's bunk in his rough cabin in St. Paul was made of boards, with hay and a red Mackinac blanket for bedding; but when he married in 1841 his enterprising bride procured some feathers and made a more comfortable mattress.⁴

Furniture for the cabin home of the Hibbard family at East Prairie was made by the father. It included four bedsteads, two lounges or frames which the mother upholstered, a table with drop leaves and drawers, a work stand, and wooden candlesticks. Some experiments in the domestic manufacture of furniture at Crow Wing in 1862 are described by Mrs. Abby F. Abbe as follows:

The horse kicked one of my chairs to pieces when I went to get on him. . . . I could have forgiven him anything else, for chairs are a rarity in this country. However, Polly has taken to cabinet-making with wonderful results. I tell her I've only two objections to her manufacture—they are too high church for [my] style, and look better than they feel, but she says it is because I am not fashionably shaped, and maybe she is right.⁵

The number of comforts in a cabin depended somewhat on the amount of baggage which a family was able to take

³Wright T. Orcutt, "Minnesota Lumberjacks," *ante*, 6:7; A. E. Strand, ed., *History of Swedish-Americans of Minnesota*, 125 (Chicago, 1910).

⁴Harriet Bonebright-Closz, *Reminiscences of Newcastle, Iowa*, 36 (Des Moines, 1921); J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul*, 105 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4).

⁵Julia K. S. Hibbard, "Reminiscences of Early Days, 1856-68," p. 9; Abby Fuller Abbe to Elizabeth Fuller, June 11, 1862, Fuller Papers. Unless otherwise indicated, the manuscripts and newspapers used in the preparation of this article are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

into the territory. One man advised his brother in 1856 to bring with him to Minnesota only dishes, bedding, and good tools, and to sell his furniture and buy a few new chairs and bedsteads in St. Paul. A Swedish settler living in Iowa in 1869 advised friends in the Old World who were planning to emigrate to bring with them a feather mattress, pillows, and ordinary quilts. The latter were to be used on the journey only, for they would be too small to use on the large beds of the frontier. The writer did not recommend that the newcomers bring "fell" comforters, because they were not fashionable in this country. The fell comforter was made of the hide of the sheep with the wool unshorn—fluffy, warm, and very thick. Such comforters were often used as mattresses. Many immigrants did store them in bulging trunks, and they found them practical, if not fashionable, in their new homes.⁶ Blankets for bedding were often made of hand-woven material that was either brought from the East or made on a loom in the cabin. Several hand-woven blankets—one of which was a blue and white plaid—were brought to Northfield in 1857 by a settler who did no weaving while living in the territory. Ten years later, another pioneer mentioned weaving thirteen yards of dotted red and blue woolen cloth for bedding.

Carpets and rugs added warmth and comfort to many cabins. Skins and fur robes were often used as floor coverings, though they were usually replaced by braided and crocheted rugs after the first few years of settlement, when the mother found time for such handiwork. One pioneer wove twenty-four yards of carpet for two rooms.

Many different kinds of dishes and cooking utensils were used in the frontier cabin. Cups and bowls carved out of

⁶ Horatio Houlton to William H. Houlton, February 28, 1856, Houlton Papers; George M. Stephenson, ed., "Typical America Letters," in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Year Book*, 7:90 (St. Paul, 1922).

wood were often found in rural homes. A kettle suspended on a hook over the hearth was used in cooking meat and vegetables. Pies were baked on plates in skillets set into the fireplace and covered with hot coals. Since it was difficult to get an even heat for baking by such methods, cookstoves were often used in cabins. Lucy Lewis in her home at Leech Lake had a cookstove in one corner of her kitchen, although she also had a fireplace in her living room. A cupboard for dishes and shelves to hold kettles and water pails occupied another corner of her kitchen. A rough shelter near Lake Minnetonka was visited by a traveler of 1853 who relates that it was equipped with a cookstove and shelves with a good supply of pans, platters, and kettles. The writer continues:

Heavier cooking vessels were ranged below with a washing tub and two or three wooden pails. . . . A small and roughly constructed table stood on the side nearest the door, and beside it the jug which usually contained spring water. The platters and cooking implements were clean, but the floor seemed guiltless of scouring.⁷

Cabin walls were usually left with the rounded surface of the logs exposed, but the walls of frame houses were frequently plastered and papered. Charles Scott of St. Paul advertised in 1849 that he was prepared to do "plastering, plain and ornamental in all its various branches." Plastered walls called for paper, which was offered for sale in satin, damask, gilt, and velvet finishes "containing beautiful patterns" in 1852 by Le Duc and Rohrer, St. Paul dealers. The prices ranged from ten cents to three and a half dollars a roll. In 1855 rich wall papers, borders, and mountings in the latest French patterns were in the stock of Howitz and Company of St. Paul. By 1857 one man in the same city occupied himself entirely with the sale of wall

⁷ Lucy M. Lewis to John Seward, December 17, 1844, Lewis Papers; Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Summer Rambles in the West*, 125 (New York, 1853).

paper.⁸ Decorative window shades were supplied to residents of the territory by St. Paul stores. "Fine transparent painted window curtains of the beautiful scenery of the Northwest" were sold by J. Holland and Company. Not to be outdone, Le Duc and Rohrer carried a stock of plain, figured, and landscaped curtain paper, and Gothic and landscaped shades at various prices.⁹

Various types of woodwork were to be found in the houses of the fifties. Highly polished butternut was used in one home in St. Cloud. The Alfred E. Ames home in St. Anthony had white woodwork in all the rooms except the kitchen and pantry, which were of grained oak. "Costly mantles of marbled iron" adorned the rooms, and the ceilings were elaborately ornamented with plaster of Paris work. In a well-constructed home in St. Paul the woodwork was made of Allegheny pine that had been seasoned for three years, and the stairway was built of Norway pine. The doors, although they were high and heavy, were said to open and shut without the slightest noise or jar.¹⁰

An effort to disguise iron as gold or marble was characteristic of the period. A home constructed for William Banning of St. Paul in 1855 had mantels of "enamelled iron fashioned to represent precious marble." Several years earlier J. Holland and Company, painters, were prepared to apply imitation finishes of mahogany, maple, oak, rosewood, and marble, as well as to do gilding and varnishing.¹¹

In 1849 a St. Paul store operated by J. Frost carried an assortment of furniture, including chairs, tables, cupboards, bedsteads, bureaus, lounges, stands, center tables, cradles,

⁸ *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), July 4, 1849; August 22, 1855; June 5, 1857; *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), June 23, 1852.

⁹ *Pioneer*, May 12, 1849.

¹⁰ *St. Cloud Visiter*, May 27, 1858; *Pioneer*, September 2, 1860; *Falls Evening News* (St. Anthony), October 2, 1857.

¹¹ *Pioneer*, May 12, 1849.

Furniture ! Furniture !



KINKEAD & FOWLER,
Manufacturers and Dealers in
ALL KINDS OF FURNITURE,

Keep constantly on hand a general assortment of New Furniture, consisting of

PARLOR AND CHAMBER SETS,
ROCKERS, PARLOR CHAIRS,
SOFAS, TETE-A-TETES,
Mahogany and Black Walnut
CARD, EXTENSION, AND CENTER TABLES,
BUREAUS,
BEDSTEADS AND LOUNGES.
All orders in the Cabinet line promptly filled
Metalic Burial Casses furnished when required.
Furniture repaired and revarnished.

From the *St. Cloud Democrat*,
July 10, 1862.

and cribs. Stees and Hunt offered among their wares in 1855 mahogany and walnut sofas, and rosewood, oak, and walnut chairs with carpet seats. In St. Cloud, Windsor chairs, bedsteads, and secretaries were advertised. Black walnut upholstered chairs were sold in St. Paul in 1859. Residents of the territory sometimes advised relatives in the East who were planning to migrate westward to dispose of their property and purchase new furnishings in St. Paul rather than pay shipping charges on their belongings.¹²

Furniture manufacturing was well established in Minnesota by the time of the

Civil War. Local cabinet-makers appealed to the residents of St. Paul in 1853 as follows:

We take it for granted that the people of our Territory would . . . prefer to have their chairs, washstands, bureaus, and tables made to order. . . . We think our people would rather have articles made of the timber that grows here in the Territory manufactured by our own mechanics, who have cast their lot in Minnesota, for better, for worse.¹³

¹² *Pioneer*, August 9, 1849; *St. Cloud Democrat*, September 15, 1859; Horatio Houlton to William H. Houlton, February 28, 1856, Houlton Papers.

¹³ Lester B. Shippee, "Social and Economic Effects of the Civil War with Special Reference to Minnesota," *ante*, 2: 402; *Pioneer*, August 18, 1853.

The high quality of workmanship demonstrated by a Minnesota cabinet-maker is described in a newspaper of 1859 as follows:

The furniture is made in what is called the gothic and serpentine style, with mahogany finish, and in beauty of design and excellence of workmanship, is certainly very creditable to the taste and skill of Mr. Warner. . . . No need of sending to the East when such can be manufactured here. With . . . water power at command and . . . an inexhaustible abundance . . . of timber within reach, it is easy to foresee that the manufacture of furniture . . . must become a . . . prominent business at the Falls of St. Anthony.

Five furniture stores carried on business in St. Paul in 1859, manufacturing most of their goods in the state. A lack of seasoned lumber made it necessary to use the wood just as it came from the mill, full of sap and soaked with river water. Embroidering and other types of handwork on cushions and upholstery enhanced the beauty of the furniture. Four chairs with cushions embroidered by Harriet E. Bishop were exhibited at a territorial fair in 1857.¹⁴

A piano frequently made a home a center of social activity in a frontier community. A St. Paul woman wrote in 1853: "Amanda is over to Mrs. Bass' singing. She has a piano and some of the young people have met there to practise." In that year, also, there was brought up the Mississippi on the "Grey Eagle" a French harpsichord piano that is now preserved in the Godfrey House in Minneapolis. An enthusiastic resident of St. Anthony in 1855 made the comment:

It sounds like civilization to take a walk through the streets of this city in a cool evening. As you get out of the sound of one piano, another is heard; a person fancies that he is in some broad parlor where music reigns supreme. It is a good calling for young ladies where they have no flax or wool to spin.

Pianos, however, were not so numerous as these remarks would seem to indicate, since in 1858 only fifteen were as-

¹⁴ John H. Stevens, *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, 106 (Minneapolis, 1890); *Pioneer*, October 10, 1857; April 28, November 13, 1859.

essed in St. Anthony and ten in Minneapolis.¹⁵ In 1856 melodeons could be purchased at prices ranging from forty-five to three hundred dollars. A seven octave rosewood piano with a harp pedal and a full iron frame was advertised in 1862 for a hundred and fifty dollars, and prospective buyers were assured that it would "stand better than any sold for four hundred or five hundred dollars by old methods of manufacture."¹⁶

By 1852 the demand for glass and dishes in Minnesota Territory had reached such proportions that Richard Marvin of St. Paul found it worth while to deal exclusively in glassware, china, and crockery. He found it advisable to establish direct trade relations with the Staffordshire potteries by going to England, where he purchased about sixty crates of china and arranged for its shipment to New Orleans and up the river. During the panic of 1857 the credit of his company was not impaired, but he suffered financial loss during the Civil War, when importation by way of New Orleans was impossible. Marvin also carried stocks of German and Bohemian glass; many varieties of American cut, plain, and pressed glass of eastern and western manufacture; white and decorated china; luster ware; painted, printed, and white granite; and blue and mulberry earthenware. Casters, pitchers, fruit bowls, cruets, salt-cellars, soda goblets, water tumblers, Japanned tea trays, and Britannia coffee pots and teapots are enumerated in newspaper advertisements of the fifties. Covered vegetable dishes, pickle dishes, gravy boats, muffin dishes with covers, butter plates with covers and drainers, cake molds,

¹⁵ Mrs. Louis Blum to her parents, November 18, 1853, Cory-Forbes Papers; A. J. Russell, *Loring Park Aspects*, 56 (Minneapolis, 1919); *St. Anthony Express*, August 11, 1855; Assessment Roll, Hennepin County, 1858. Territorial tax records for St. Anthony and Minneapolis are in the auditor's office of the Hennepin County Courthouse in Minneapolis.

¹⁶ *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), January 24, 1856; *Lake City Times*, July 26, 1862.

pie plates, and butter jars were available to settlers in various sizes and patterns. Flat silver, including knives, forks, spoons, and butter knives, was offered for sale. Spoons were available in German, sterling, and plated silver.¹⁷

Pewter, copper, and brass utensils were used extensively. Kitchen utensils included potato mashing boxes, rolling pins, chopping trays, dippers, waffle irons, ladles, skimmers, coffee mills, saucepans, frying pans, and patent enameled iron kettles. A common dasher butter churn could be purchased for two dollars, but a Kendall churn, valued at four dollars, was thought to be an economical labor-saving device.¹⁸

Irish linen and bleached and natural damask table covers were available in 1849 in many parts of the territory. The editor of the *St. Cloud Democrat* in 1858 commented on the beautiful display of snowy damask, crystal, silver, and china to be seen at dinner parties in that town.¹⁹

Special stands were sometimes used to hold candlesticks. Massive candelabra in the parlor and dining room and brass candlesticks in other rooms illuminated the Joseph R. Brown house near Henderson during twilight hours in the fifties. One St. Paul housekeeper of 1853 had several girandoles in her living room on the mantel and on a mahogany stand, and her marble center table held some candlesticks and a basket of wax fruit.²⁰

Rag carpets were widely used. The housewives assembled the rags and in rural districts often wove the rugs, but in the cities much of the weaving was done by professional weavers. E. M. Walters, a carpet-weaver who learned his

¹⁷ *Pioneer*, May 5, 6, 1849; October 28, 1852; *Minnesotian* (St. Paul), September 20, 1854; T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul*, 281 (St. Paul, 1886).

¹⁸ *Pioneer*, September 26, 1850; August 28, October 9, November 27, 1851; July 8, 1852; July 21, 28, 1853; May 23, 1854; *St. Anthony Express*, April 15, 1858.

¹⁹ *St. Cloud Democrat*, November 25, 1858.

²⁰ Mrs. Louis Blum to her parents, November 18, 1853, Cory-Forbes Papers.

trade in England, served St. Anthony and St. Paul patrons in 1853. Mrs. B. Norcutt advertised in 1861 in Mankato for work in this line. A bride who went to Superior, Wisconsin, in the fifties bought in Milwaukee dark ingrain carpets which she laid over straw to keep them from wearing out.²¹

“Barley straw best for filling mattresses, should be preferred to wheat, oat, or other straw” was the advice given to housewives in 1852. Mattress ticking could be purchased in St. Paul to encase the straw. When Mrs. Abbe settled at Crow Wing in 1860, she had “carpets to make, comforters to tack, and worst of all, a mattress tick to make, and a hair mattress to make over.” Husk mattresses were recommended because they were more pliable and durable than those filled with other materials. Three barrels of corn husks were required to make a good-sized tick. “Feather beds ought to be done away with,” ran a statement in a St. Paul newspaper of 1855, “especially in warm weather. . . . There is no better time to procure husks than when the corn is being harvested. . . . It is calculated that a good husk bed will last from twenty-five to thirty years.” Mattresses filled with corn shucks were prepared by Bailey and Primrose, St. Paul dealers, for those who did not care to make their own. A man near Faribault furnished the inhabitants of that town with corn husk mattresses which he guaranteed would be free of “earth or pebbles.” Spring beds were exhibited in the New England Boot and Shoe Shop in St. Paul in 1856.²²

Housekeepers on the frontier vied with one another in designing unusual quilts and spreads for their beds. The skillful needlework of women made the bed a decorative

²¹ *Express*, September 10, 1853; *Semi-Weekly Independent* (Mankato), January 3, 1861; Lillian K. Stewart, *A Pioneer of Old Superior*, 180 (Boston, 1930).

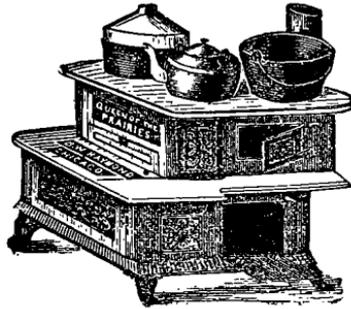
²² Abby Fuller Abbe to Elizabeth Fuller, December 30, 1860, Fuller Papers; *Express*, October 4, 1856; *Pioneer*, December 3, 1855.

feature of a room's furnishings. A blue and white coverlet was used as a spread on a four-poster bed in a home near Traverse des Sioux, but on special occasions this was replaced by a lily quilt. A silk quilt displayed at a fair in Dakota County in the late fifties was made in an unusual pattern: "Every block was arranged in mathematical precision to show the apparent projection of a cubic block upon the face of the quilt." Common patchwork quilts were exhibited at the same fair. A "friendship quilt" was brought into Minnesota Territory by one family. Each block had been made by a different friend in the community from which the family came, and the name of each donor was worked into the design. Quilt patterns were often exchanged by housewives.²³

Among the various kinds of cooking and heating stoves used in frontier Minnesota were Resor's Cincinnati Premium, Rathbone's Air Tight,

²³ *Pioneer*, October 8, 1856; *Express*, November 3, 1855; clipping from *Hastings Independent*, in Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 47.

Queen of Prairie Stove,



FOR Sale by F. S. NEWELL, on Third Street, between Jackson and Roberts Sts., St. Paul. This is the best cooking stove in use.

Chicago, April 1st, 1850.

We the undersigned hereby certify, that we have the "Queen of the Prairies" cooking stove in use in our families, and consider it all it is recommended to be in this book, and superior to any other stove we are acquainted with.

James Curtis, } ex-Mayors.
 J. P. Chapin, }
 P. A. Baker, Landlord of Baltic House,
 T. Dyman, Philad'a House,
 S. Demaris, Lafayette House,
 Mm. Stacy, Boarding House,
 M. S. Stearnes,
 Hiram Wheeler,
 Dr. C. V. Dyer,
 Dr. J. V. C. Blaney,
 Henry W. Clark, Att'y,
 A. Huutington,
 M. D. Ogden, Esq.,
 Charles Follansbee,
 J. McClellan, Jr.

J. Binn, Agent Packet Boat company, thinks they are all they are recommended; don't suppose he could have any stove on the boats that would answer as well.

Galena, Sept. 9, 1849.

"Dear Sir: The "Queen of the Prairies" in this market is becoming renowned. It maintains the just celebrity as a cooking stove it has acquired. It is fast becoming a favorite. Persons who have them in use proclaim the queens to be superior to other stoves they had used, and I regard eulogy as unnecessary, the stove fully recommending its advantages when put to the test.

{Signed,} Respectfully,
 50tf. NICHOLAS DOWLING.

From the *Minnesota Democrat* [St. Paul], November 10, 1851.

Prairie State, Ohio Premium, and Queen of the Prairies. Grant's Cylinder Heating Stove was considered a special adornment for the parlor and it was said to consume less fuel than an ordinary stove. A large proportion of the homes on the frontier depended upon some type of stove rather than on a fireplace for heating. An observer in St. Cloud in 1858 had seen only one residence with open fireplaces.²⁴

The proper arrangement of furniture was discussed in an article entitled "Taste in Furniture" in a Red Wing newspaper in 1856. "Regard must be had to . . . the fitness of things," according to the writer of this account. "Sometimes a showy centre table is seen in the middle of a room, where the carpet and every other article is shabby . . . or a flashy looking-glass stands above the chimney piece. . . . Secondhand furniture is sometimes preferable to new." Eight chairs were recommended for use in an ordinary parlor. A square drop-leaf mahogany table, or a circular one with a tripod stand, might be used in the center of a room; and a sofa, a sideboard, a chiffonier, or a bookcase might be placed against the walls. "If there is no sofa," the report continues, "then an easy chair takes its place in a snug corner near the fireplace; in another corner stands a small work table or a light occasional table near the window to hold a flower basket or other ornamental article." It was not considered good taste to cover the mantelpiece with a variety of knick-knacks. "Three or four vases of white porcelain, a small statue, and a shell or two" were recommended.²⁵

A St. Paul woman complacently described her parlor, in which she had a handsome carpet, two divans, two ottomans, four chairs, a beautiful little side table, a center table, two little stands, three handsome vases, and a cologne

²⁴ *Pioneer*, November 9, 1860; *St. Cloud Visiter*, May 13, 1858.

²⁵ *Red Wing Sentinel*, February 9, 1856.

bottle. The furniture was covered with plush. At the windows were pretty white muslin curtains. Although the space unoccupied by furniture must have been very limited, she added, "Things are not at all crowded."²⁶ A poor shoemaker's home in St. Paul in 1860 contained only a cookstove, a miserable straw mattress on a rickety bedstead, a few broken dishes and chairs, a bench with some tools, and several barrels. In one of the latter was a piece of raw pork, the only food in the house.²⁷ A simple, yet comfortable, country home of the sixties included in its furnishings a what-not, a corner bracket holding a vase, and a bookshelf on which lay several books. There was a pantry with cupboards for crockery, glass, and silver, and shelves for cooking utensils.²⁸

The interior decoration of a pioneer home reflected to a large extent the economic status or the resourcefulness of its owners. Elaborate and expensive furnishings were found where incomes permitted their purchase. But in the homes of settlers who lacked means and who were accordingly obliged to depend mainly upon their own labor and skill, the furnishings reflected the energy and ingenuity of the individual members of the family. Museum collections and family heirlooms suggest today the variety of furnishings used in frontier Minnesota homes.

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²⁶ Lilliore Fuller to Elizabeth Fuller, February 11, 1853, Fuller Papers.

²⁷ *Pioneer*, January 28, 1860.

²⁸ Gail Hamilton, *Wool Gathering*, 79 (Boston, 1867).



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