

## IGNATIUS DONNELLY AND HIS FADED METROPOLIS<sup>1</sup>

The passage of eighty years sheds a mellow light on most events. Passions that raged and that may have divided families or set one community against another cannot retain their bitterness through eight decades. Follies that aroused derision are viewed through the mist of years with benevolent good humor. The hopes and ambitions that filled the breasts of the far-off generation of the fifties have either succeeded and been accepted with approval, thus becoming assimilated into our everyday life, or they have failed and may now be appraised with generosity and in a spirit of understanding.

It is in this spirit that we may now look back on some of the events of 1856 and the years immediately following and note the way in which developments in Minnesota have veered from the course mapped out for them by people of that day. One may smile, for instance, when he recalls that over seventy years ago the United States government made a survey of Rice, Goodhue, and Dakota counties with the object of developing a short steamboat route from the Minnesota River to the Mississippi via the Cannon River and a series of locks—a water course that now cannot be navigated in a rowboat. Yet, that was a project that Ignatius Donnelly, one of Minnesota's most world-renowned citizens,

<sup>1</sup>An address presented on June 27, 1936, at the Hastings session of the fourteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. In a prefatory statement, here omitted, Mr. Harmon explains that he did not single out one episode in Donnelly's life for discussion because he considered it "either the most typical or the most important in that busy lifetime," but rather because it seemed a particularly appropriate subject for the society's 1936 tour. Many other events in Donnelly's life, in the author's opinion, were "freighted with far deeper significance for the people of this state and nation" than the one here chosen for treatment. *Ed.*

put through Congress as a step in the development of the young state. In its time it did not seem any more preposterous to talk of steamer traffic on the Cannon River than it now seems to the people of Miami to talk of ocean traffic through a Florida canal.

We are gathered this morning near the spot that Donnelly hoped and believed was to become a metropolis, "Ninninger City," once the proud and confident rival of Hastings. Hastings has survived the ups and downs of more than three-quarters of a century, but the metropolis of which Donnelly dreamed in the buoyant days of his promoter-idealism is only a name, albeit a name around which clings a mass of historic anecdote and history that becomes more and more revered as the years slip by and current events are metamorphosed into tradition.

When Donnelly left Philadelphia in the spring of 1856 and came with his bride and another young couple to Minnesota on a journey of exploration, he came thrilled with the thoughts of an empire builder. He had read all the books he could find about travel in the West. He held in high esteem that injunction for which Horace Greeley has become famous, "Go west, young man, go west." He visited Chicago, and was inspired by its location and the fact that it was even then, in the infancy of railroad building, a recognized railroad center. He saw the prairies of Illinois, the rich farm lands of the Ohio Valley and Iowa, and he was sure that a great tide of emigration would soon be rolling over them. He traveled up the Mississippi on one of the elegant steamers of the time and felt the pulse of a mighty commerce throbbing along its course. It was the Father of Waters in its primeval greatness that impressed him most of all. He multiplied in his mind's eye the scores of steamboats that churned up and down its sparkling tide. He multiplied to the nth degree the crowds of settlers he saw swarming and jostling each other toward the gateway to the forests and prairies of Minnesota. When he reached

St. Paul, where influential people from his own state already were making fortunes, he was once and for all convinced that here, somewhere near the head of navigation of the Mississippi, was a spot that could by energy and the intelligent use of publicity become the Chicago of the Northwest. He intended to found and develop that Chicago.

It did not daunt him that the spot on which his fancy lighted was only three miles from Hastings, already an established town. On the contrary, he noted that land in this little city had risen from acre values as farm land to as much as three thousand dollars for one city lot, and he argued that there was no reason why he could not bring about a like miracle on the same kind of soil on the shore of the same river near by. He never lacked confidence in his own plans and ability. He was certain that his chosen site of Nininger had an even better place for a steamboat landing than did Hastings, better contours for streets, a more entrancing view of the landscape. But above all, as he said in many ways during the next two years, he believed in force and energy as the proper stimuli for building a city. "Western towns have heretofore grown by chance," he said. "Nininger will be the first to prove what combination and concentrated effort can do to assist nature." It was his theory that Hastings was a good illustration of a town that had grown up by chance, and that had not been greatly blessed by nature; whereas he had selected the site of Nininger with forethought, with an eye to its future, with a sense of geography that made it the logical hub of a wheel with spokes that would reach toward St. Peter, Glencoe, St. Paul, and St. Anthony, Lake Superior, and all other points of the compass.

So with the help and encouragement of Alexander Ramsey, his countryman from Pennsylvania, of John Nininger of Philadelphia, and others, he set about laying out the nucleus of a metropolis on the river bluffs three miles across

country from Hastings. What a fever of excitement and activity he stirred up that fall and the next winter with his tireless torrent of eloquent advertising, persuasive letters, and convincing talk! The whole country, of course, was keyed up to a touch-and-go pitch of expectancy. The California gold rush was a recent occurrence. There were many new towns scattered through the West and increasing daily in population. Donnelly was as much the victim of this general expectation of quick and easy wealth as he was a promoter of it. Since he was convinced in his own mind that there were fabulous possibilities in the rise of land values and the growth of cities, his efforts to direct special attention to Nininger met with a certain measure of success.

Such was the influence of some of his friends that, stranger though he was and young, he was given the opportunity of addressing the Minnesota Historical Society, already an old institution as institutions were gauged in those days, and his topic was the coming grandeur of Minnesota and of the Northwest. Speaking on May 4, 1856, he said:

No person can travel in this Territory and question the fact that it will yet play an important part in the great drama of human advancement. . . . If we glance at the map we will almost conclude that here in the innumerable small lakes of Minnesota we find the rudiments or the remains of some large lake, the head of the great chain of lakes, first in position and of a size beside which Superior would appear dwindled.

He dwelt upon the waterways, the timber and soil resources, the climate, and the growth of commerce and business, and drew a picture of the rapidly approaching time when great cities would spring up where savages had roamed. Portraying this development in his own eloquent way, he said:

The embers of the Indian's fire will scarcely have disappeared from the heath where his wigwam stood, before the halls and palaces of the most elaborate social life will rise upon their site.

It is a fact of which every son and daughter of Minnesota may be proud that Donnelly always looked toward the civi-

lizing effect of settlement fully as much as toward its wealth-begetting features. His reference in this address to the elaborate social life that was to come is a key to his thinking and his character. Never throughout the harrassing experiences of his later life did he lose sight of the fact that progress is wrapped up in the social life of the race. It was for that he labored through his most versatile and strenuous years, for that he wrote his books.

As the Minnesota Historical Society pauses today so near the spot that is rendered almost sacred by the hopes and trials, the defeats and triumphs of this great man, it is interesting to note some of the practical details by which he sought to bring forth a center of elaborate social life in the midst of the wilderness. The names of many of his associates still linger in the families that reside here, and it may be that in this group today is someone whose ancestor was a pre-emptor on the land that became, for a time, Nininger City. Jesse M. Stone, Peter Caleff, and John Bassett were the three settlers whose farms were drawn as if by lot from the lavish hand of nature to become Donnelly's metropolis. From these three men, whose pioneer homesteads stretched from the brow of the bluffs northwest of us down to the sandbars and cottonwood bottoms of the Mississippi, Donnelly and John Nininger bought eight hundred acres of land at a total cost of twenty-two thousand dollars. Included in the purchase was a little sawmill valued at two thousand dollars. It became the property of Donnelly in the course of the deal, and he afterward tried to sell it for cash to help tide him over some of the shoals he did not foresee for his little city as he confidently mapped the future in that glorious summer of 1856. Of this total area 674 acres were put into the townsite, which was surveyed into 3,800 lots by C. L. Emerson, a civil engineer of St. Paul. When all the expense incident to getting the frontier farms converted into city lots had been figured up, it was found that each lot cost exactly six dollars, and Donnelly determined to sell them to

the great and eager public at cost — with, however, a string attached.

The string that he tied to every sale was that the buyer was to put up improvements equal to the list price of the lots, beginning the work within six months and completing it within two years. The list price was arbitrarily set at a hundred dollars for most of the lots, with higher figures ranging up to as much as five hundred for the choicest business corners and river-front positions. The deeds were so drawn that the buyer would not get a valid title if he failed to make the improvements on time. Thus Donnelly and his associates hoped to bring in a great flow of capital at the same time that his city would literally be springing up on the former site of Indian wigwams. The lots were so cheap and Donnelly's youthful description of the opportunities so altogether glowing and convincing, that many lots were quickly sold and some improvements were begun.

Not least by any means in Donnelly's list of great opportunities was his assurance to the world that Nininger City was to have the first railroad to be built in Minnesota. This, in his mind, was no idle boast, but a development that he thought would unfold like the sequence of the seasons, a development for which he worked indefatigably for two or three years, and which he did not abandon until after all others had long discarded it as fanciful. The railroad was to run to St. Peter, then a relatively important point in the plastic stage of settlement. Donnelly expected the railroad to gather produce from the Minnesota Valley and from the rich farm lands along the right of way, all of which was to be dumped on the busy wharves of Nininger, there to be loaded onto steamers and shipped to the cities of the lower Mississippi and the Ohio valleys. This route would be a shortcut that would, he thought, replace the occasional and uncertain steamer travel on the Minnesota River. By being first in the field with a railroad, he was confident that he would outstrip and outshine Hastings, which was two years

or more ahead of him in date of origin, and which had a population of one thousand or twelve hundred at a time when the farms of Stone, Caleff, and Bassett were still the occasional haunts of deer.

Donnelly set great store by the dramatic in his plans for attracting population. To him the thought that Nininger City was to have the first railroad in the territory was a feature that would certainly attract the public. He also sensed the element of novelty in the matter of getting a steam grist mill for his city at a time when most cities, if they had a mill at all, had nothing more than a water-power plant. "The farmers will go hundreds of miles with their grist to a steam flouring mill," said Donnelly, in an enthusiastic letter to one of his associates, G. O. Robertson. Doubtless he visioned such a plant as one of the show places of Nininger, one that would draw admiring sight-seers as well as farmers with their grist, and be another evidence of the superiority of Nininger over Hastings.

So Donnelly worked to develop lines of travel that would bring emigrants and the produce of the farms from all parts of the country to the gates of Nininger. From there he planned that they should be redistributed to the many points that beckoned to freight and population—but not without having first given the prestige of their passing to his city that was to be the center of it all. He projected wagon roads to Cannon Falls and to the other towns west and south of Nininger, and he published the distances to such points as Empire City, Northfield, and St. Peter to show how convenient it would be for those settlements to get their supplies at his new and important shipping point on the river.

A favorite project entertained by Donnelly from the first was that of tapping the St. Croix Valley. This oldest farming section of Minnesota Territory was to pay tribute to his enterprise by being afforded a quick, direct, and easy outlet for its farm products to the Mississippi, with its many busy steamers. In the summer of 1856, on his first trip to the

territory, Donnelly foresaw the need of a ferryboat to make access to Nininger from Point Douglas, Cottage Grove, and other points in the valley tempting and convenient. This ferry service was to be free, a link of friendship and an irresistible magnet to business. A somewhat similar bid for favor was made in the provision that no wharf charges were to be levied on boats landing at Nininger, although both St. Paul and Hastings assessed fees against the boats that visited their levees. Planning for this St. Croix Valley trade on the same grand scale he followed for other features of his project, Donnelly was not to be content with a mere man-and-cable ferryboat, but was to have a powerful steam ferry that could ply up or down the river to various points and bring farmers with their produce and consumers with their needs to the markets and the storehouses of Nininger, which were to be plentifully supplied.

There is much interesting correspondence among the Donnelly Papers, which the Minnesota Historical Society with great pains has made available to the delver in Minnesota lore, touching the origin and the laggard development of the ferryboat scheme. For instance, there is a letter from P. F. Geisse, boatbuilder of Wellesville, Ohio, dated in December, 1856, making a proposition to Donnelly for the building of the projected boat. Geisse proposed to build a ferryboat sixty feet long and sixteen feet wide, with ten-foot aprons at both ends and with, as he promised, "All of Best Material & Workman ship with gaurds Railing & Housing all painted & Compleat . . . with Deck pump and all Ready to Raise Steam for the Sum of two Thousand Dollars." If this craft was not on a large enough scale to meet the needs of Nininger City he would build a still larger boat for twenty-five hundred dollars. The boat was ordered built and five hundred dollars was paid, and as the spring wore away and Donnelly found it necessary to encourage his more easily discouraged associates, he often told them cheerily of the progress that was being made on the

ferryboat, as well as of such other triumphs as his success in obtaining a post office for Nininger City and a charter for the Nininger and St. Peter Railroad Company.

As the panic of 1857 took a more and more strangling hold on the whole country, and on Donnelly's project along with the rest, he seems to have bethought him of economies that might be practiced. He wrote to Geisse, the boat-builder, suggesting the possibility of loading the ferryboat with freight destined to the Nininger wharf, and wondering if this would not materially help pay for getting the craft delivered. Geisse wrote back that he thought this a fine idea. Put a more powerful engine in the "Bear,"—it was already named,—load it with freight, and run it to its home port under its own power. By making only daylight runs from Wellesville to Nininger, Geisse thought the boat could be taken through by an engineer and pilot, without an extra crew. To tow the boat down the Ohio River to St. Louis and thence up the Mississippi would ordinarily cost about a thousand dollars, he said, although he hinted that he had friends who might be persuaded to do it for four hundred dollars. In June the builder wrote to Donnelly that the boat was finished; in August, as it was not called for, he threatened to sell it for the balance due. That ends the correspondence, and the boat was never delivered.

The next spring Donnelly sought once more to open the St. Croix Valley, but on a scale how different! Instead of a two-thousand dollar ferryboat with painted guard rails and deck pump, he planned a one-man scow operated on a chain across the river. Donnelly offered to build a hundred-dollar ferryboat and turn it over to an operator if the operator would guarantee to have it running by the opening of navigation in 1858. The town council of Nininger—the community was granted a charter by the legislature in February, 1858—offered to lend the credit of the town to such an operator to finance the buying of the chain and allow him ten months in which to pay the debt. Thus ended

a project that Donnelly hoped would link the populous and fertile farms of the lower St. Croix Valley with the river port of Nininger City and give his coming metropolis a commercial advantage over Hastings.

As one looks over the site of this town of long ago, with little to mark the scene of former hope and activity except the decaying mansion of its onetime champion and a few scars on the landscape where streets and avenues used to run, it is not hard to realize that Donnelly must have encountered tremendous difficulties in trying to force the development of a city on a spot which did not call for it. Donnelly, in one of his greatest efforts to boom the town—his speech at the Broadway House, New York, in March, 1857—contrasted the East with the West in this halo of words:

Those who seek the means of merest life emigrate here; those who seek the means of wealth and fortune emigrate from here westward. In the east we live amid immense competition, climbing to independence only over the shoulders of those less fortunate around us. . . . Here are men calling for room: there room calling for men.

And indeed Nininger City was a place calling for men, calling for them in siren songs of advertising, in gems of the word smith's art, garnished with the mingled logic and eloquence of which Donnelly was the master. He said:

The peopling of a great continent is progressing—a theatre of exertion and enterprise perhaps never again to be repeated in the world's history is before us. Rolling on, rolling on, and we are carried with the current. . . . There is no opportunity that has passed that a greater one does not await us.

He told how the settlers, galvanized into midwinter energy by the invigorating climate of Minnesota, had laid thirty foundations in Nininger with the snow two feet deep in the streets, and he portrayed this nucleus of opportunity in these words:

And then look too at the future of Nininger. If she has done all this during the winter what will she not accomplish when the breath of Spring puts life into all nature, stirs up her vitality. What pro-

portion shall she receive of the boat-loads which during next year, will be ascending the Mississippi in search of homes? What numbers will not the energy of those connected with her crowd into her from all parts of the land?

Over and over in the columns of the newspapers Donnelly told of the economic advantages of Nininger. From its limestone ledges was being burned the finest white lime, a product so good that the kiln could not keep up with the demand for it from other points down the river. Nininger had fine clay for the making of brick, building stone for its business edifices, timber for construction, splendid water, and was surrounded by a rich farming country. Nininger had mills, stores, a school, fine hotels, a wonderful steamboat landing, and a newspaper. Ah! the newspaper! That was indeed a noteworthy enterprise, and to the lover of historic lore the faded single volume of the *Emigrant Aid Journal* now guarded carefully in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society is a treasure house. Pathos and humor mingle delightfully in its quaint columns and radiate from the stained and faded pages, a pathos and humor that it is well for us to sense, for they are a part of the history of our state. They are redolent of the hopes and yearnings, the efforts and disappointments, of those who lived and worked here eighty years ago. Struggling against the oncoming waves of a financial disaster that was engulfing the whole land, trying to sound a cheering note for the encouragement of Nininger's small but valiant band, the columns of the *Emigrant Aid Journal* are full of human interest. Here are a few items from the news of the period.

Referring to the abundance of deer, fish, prairie chickens, ducks, and pigeons that were found in and near the metropolis, and to those who regarded the place more as a hunting ground than a city, the *Journal* said: "We would caution our 'shooters,' to be careful in their rifle practice, and not select the most convenient tree for a target, as though Nininger was the same wilderness it was a year ago." And the

editor reminds his readers that in the eight months since the town was founded it had accumulated a population of nearly five hundred inhabitants, while "residences, mills and stores have gone up to a number between ninety and one hundred." In another item telling of a deer that came bounding into town one day, the *Journal* comments naively: "The poor brute must have been astonished to find a city here where last year it may have roamed at ease." On the Fourth of July, 1857, when Nininger City was host to Cottage Grove, Prescott, St. Anthony — yes, and Hastings too — at a grand celebration, the *Journal* advised the visitors who strolled about taking in the sights, that everyone ought to get maps of the city, which could be had at the office of George H. Burns, real-estate dealer, located on Seventh Street in Nininger. Then, although in another column, it adds with charming ingenuousness that the "plowed lines" indicating the streets "give promise of being marked by the uprising buildings that will extend along in close array."

The pages of the *Journal* also record that Nininger City could not persuade the mail stages that ran between St. Paul and Hastings to swing around that way and drop the mail, although they passed within sight of Nininger's housetops. It related how Postmaster Louis Loichot had to trudge three miles to Hastings twice a week through deep snow to get the mail. When summer came and the mails were carried on the steamboats again, the case was not improved, for the boats of the great packet lines ignored Nininger's fine landing and still put the mail off at Hastings. Nor was this the only transportation woe of the struggling young metropolis.

The boats refused to let passengers get off at Nininger. They would either land them at Hastings or carry them on twenty miles farther upstream to St. Paul, whence they had to find their way back to Nininger by team or stage. Occasionally the earnest pleadings of some emigrant family that had come from the faraway East out to the city of

opportunity would touch the heart of a packet captain, and he would nose up to the Nininger wharf to let a family disembark — generally, however, only upon payment of an extra landing fee of three to five dollars. The inconvenience and loss of prestige which Nininger suffered because it could neither get the mail nor the passengers destined to its doors caused sharp controversy between the city's backers and the steamboat company, on the one hand, and between them and the post-office department on the other. By the time the argument was settled in Nininger's favor the tide of hope was ebbing fast, and many of the town's own residents and supporters were beginning to lose faith, though Donnelly long kept up his courage and refused to admit defeat.

Among the blows to Nininger's prestige, when at last the city was definitely on the down grade, was a series of advertisements printed in a St. Paul newspaper by a waggish individual, who was either chuckling up his sleeve at a huge joke or venting his spleen. The advertisements appeared in September, 1857, a few days after a final puff of boom optimism from Donnelly had been printed in another St. Paul paper, stating that one lot in Nininger had recently been sold for three thousand dollars. In ironic jabs, which would not be printed in any paper of today, even as paid advertisements, the writer, Thomas B. Winston, lampooned several of Donnelly's pet enterprises — the ferryboat, the tapping of the east side of the Mississippi River, and the railroad project. One of the ads reads:

To All Whom It May Concern. Wanted. — Stock in the "Nininger City" Ferry Boat, (built or not built) \$2 00 for \$25 paid, \$3 75 for \$50 paid, or \$4 04 for \$57 paid.

Land enough, (opposite side of river) to lay out an "Enterprise" of 11,000 lots, and additions to same to make up 22 to 26,000 lots of, say 25 x 75 feet to 30 x 75, so as to sell on various conditions, one half at \$1 25 to \$3 75 each.

And then this climax of waggery:

A Tremendous Sacrifice! Nininger and St. Peter Rail Road Stock. — I am accused of being largely interested in the above named Rail

Road project. I will sell all my interest for four dollars, and it cost me five dollars in cash.

This outburst of drollery or malice, whichever it was, may not have had much effect on the fate of Nininger City, which had already been sealed by the panic if not by its location, but it came at a time when the town was slipping steadily.

Nininger City was never connected with the St. Croix Valley by Donnelly's ferryboat. The Nininger and St. Peter Railroad was never built. The city itself survived a languishing decline for only a few years, and today there remains little but the odd, outmoded house, with its broken windows, its rotting sills, its sprawling foundation stones. In a few more years this relic of a unique period and character in Minnesota history will have fallen into final ruin, even if it is spared by fire, and the environment in which the brilliant mind of Ignatius Donnelly conceived *Atlantis*, *Ragnarok*, *Cæsar's Column*, *Doctor Huguet*, *The American People's Money*, and the *Great Cryptogram* will be lost beyond recovery.

Here he penned books that set civilization agog, that thrilled and startled thinkers into new channels of scientific speculation, and that shook the literary world to its foundation. Here he worked by the light of kerosene lamps and penciled through two tons of paper. Here he achieved at once world-wide renown and obloquy, the praise of many critics and the derision of many others, the violent denunciation of political enemies, the confidence and adoration of the common people. "Sage of Nininger!" His fame and the name of the spot which knew him will linger long in the traditions of this country, even though the next generation may not be able to see the quaint, antique house or set foot in the fine old library that are hallowed by his labors.

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