

THE NORTHAMPTON COLONY AND CHANHASSEN

ON APRIL 19, 1853, some seventy-five settlers from Massachusetts, members of the Northampton Colony, arrived in St. Paul on the steamboat "Time and Tide."¹ A few days later a group of these colonists left for Lake Minnetonka on an exploring expedition which resulted in the permanent settlement of ten or fifteen of them in what came to be Chanhassen Township in Carver County. The exploring party was gone from April 25 to 28, and soon the men were building a road to their claims and erecting log houses.² The *St. Anthony Express* of May 6 announced that the colonists were well pleased with the Minnetonka region and that the county commissioners had "located a road through" from St. Anthony to the settlements on the lake. "We presume a hundred farms will be opened there the coming season," it added.

Since members of another eastern colony, the Excelsior Pioneer Association of New York, arrived in the Minnetonka region at about the same time as the Northampton colonists, they have sometimes been confused. Colonel John H. Stevens, for example, forgetting, perhaps, that he had introduced the Reverend Henry M. Nichols and Levi Nutting of the Northampton Colony to the Minnetonka region in February, 1853, wrote many years later :

The county of Hennepin . . . through the agency of the New York Excelsior colony, received several permanent settlers of great merit.

¹An account of the organization of the Northampton Colony and of the arrival of its members in Minnesota is given by the present writer in an article on "Henry Martyn Nichols and the Northampton Colony," *ante*, 19:129-147. See especially p. 138, 140, 141.

²Mrs. Henry M. Nichols to a sister in Massachusetts, May 29, 1853. This letter is among the Nichols Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Among them were Rev. Mr. Nutting, and his brother Gen. Levi Nutting, now of Faribault, Rev. H. M. Nichols, Hon. Arba Cle[a]veland, Geo. M. Powers, H. M. Lyman, and Joshua Moore, all from Massachusetts, and Burritt S. and Wm. S. Judd, from Ohio; and Rev. Chas. Galpin, and his brother Rev. Geo. Galpin, natives of Connecticut; and Peter M. Gideon. . . . Mr. Bertram, the leader of the colony . . . certainly accomplished a good work for Minnesota by introducing so many good men into the territory.

Without taking any credit from George M. Bertram, it must be noted that the Massachusetts men were not under his leadership. Later Stevens speaks of the "Northampton farmers, so-called, belonging to the Excelsior colony." They were pleased with the productiveness of the soil. Cleaveland, for example, planted two potatoes from which he raised a bushel and a half.³

The naming of the new settlement makes an interesting story. Mrs. Cleaveland, in a letter written on August 22, 1853, shortly after a visit from her brother-in-law, Nichols, wrote "Chan-has-san" before the date, and in the margin she said, "You see we have named our place. It means 'maplewood.' Do you like it?" And on March 30, 1854, she wrote at the top of a letter, "Please direct to Chanhassen. We have an office now of our own."⁴

³ John H. Stevens, *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, 200, 209 (Minneapolis, 1890). On page 211 of the same work, Stevens refers to the death of "F. Nutting, of the Northampton colony," but adds that "This was the first death among those who came west under the Excelsior auspices." Only four of the Massachusetts colonists named by Stevens — Cleaveland, Powers, Lyman, and Moore — settled in Chanhassen. Members of the Northampton and Excelsior colonies not only intermingled in their locations, but also joined in the organization of the Excelsior Congregational church in 1853. Four of the original members — Joshua and Hannah Moore from Easthampton, Massachusetts, and George M. Powers and Clarissa Cleaveland from Belchertown — were from the Northampton Colony. Although the minister of this congregation, the Reverend Charles Galpin, was a member of the New York group, he joined the Congregational Association of Minnesota, upon its organization in 1853, from the Hampshire East Association of Massachusetts.

⁴ Mrs. Cleaveland's letters are among the Nichols Papers. In a column entitled "Notes by the Way," Dr. V. Fell published the following statement in the *Minnesota Republican* of St. Anthony for November 30, 1854: "Chanhassen is the name of a post office and settlement midway

Newspaper comment on this name is to be found in the *St. Anthony Express* for January 21, 1854:

Messrs. James Philips, L. Griffiths and others of the New York Colony, with Messrs. A. Cleveland, Geo. M. Poiners [*Powers*], and the balance of the Mass. Colony have named their fine township of land Chanhassen the Indian name of Sugar Maple, or maple leaf. They sent in a petition to the Board of County Commissioners of Hennepin County at the late session to have a precinct established in their locality and to have the election held at Mr. Cleveland's. The petition was granted, and the new precinct named as they requested, which in our opinion is the most beautiful of all the names that have as yet been bestowed upon the fine and splendid rural districts of Minnesota.

The official vote on the name for the whole township did not occur, however, until May 11, 1858. According to Edward D. Neill, "at the suggestion of Rev. H. M. Nichols it was voted to call the town Chanhassen, which is an Indian word signifying sugar-maple." A full account of this meeting may be read in the first record book of the town. It was kept by Powers of the Northampton Colony, then clerk *pro tem*, who was chosen by the citizens at the meeting as first clerk of the township. At the top of the first page he wrote: "Pursuant to notice and in accordance with an act entitled an 'act to provide for Township Organization' the citizens of township 116 N Range 23 W met at the School House situated upon Sec. 16 in said township and transacted the following business." One of the first items of business reads as follows: "Voted to call the town Chanhassen."⁵

The name seems originally to have been spelled "Chanhassan," but unfortunately this did not become standard usage. The Dakota or Sioux word means "tree of sweet juice," or "sugar maple tree." On the cover of the ledger used by Powers, he wrote "Chanhassan Town Records," between Excelsior and Yorktown on the Minnesota. Like Excelsior and vicinity, the population are mainly from Massachusetts, and are nearly all Republicans."

⁵ Neill, *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 376 (Minneapolis, 1882). The first record book is now in the keeping of Mr. H. H. Aspden, the present clerk of the township.

and at the top of the first page appears "Journal of Records of the Town of Chanhassan." But the records themselves use "Chanhassen," the spelling that was current in the newspapers of 1858.

Only one man invariably used the spelling "Chanhassan" until the day of his death, and that was the traditional chooser of the name, Nichols. He was in the habit of writing an occasional letter from Stillwater for the *Minnesota Republican* over the signature of "Max." After a visit to Chanhassen, from February 20 to 23, 1855, he wrote an enthusiastic letter to the *Republican*, which appeared on March 8.

Was you ever at Chanhassan, Mr. Editor? Two years ago, Chanhassan was nowhere. Now, or rather last fall, it polled some fifty votes: and there is hardly a vacant claim left in the township. The settlers are far above the average of new settlements, in respectability, morality, and intelligence; and rarely can a pleasanter, or more desirable community be found, than that now settled in Chanhassan. Nearly in the center of the township is Lake Owassa, or Lake Hazeltine, as Surveyor Adams has named it,—a lake containing some two or three hundred acres, and surrounded by fenced farms under good cultivation.⁶

The face of the country here differs from almost every other portion of the Territory. It is not a prairie, neither is it timber, nor yet is it openings, such as we call openings in other places. There is a plenty of large heavy timber, maple, ash, oak, bass, &c., but the trees stand alone, as if a part of what had once been a heavy forest, while the rest had been taken off, without leaving a vestige behind.

Sometimes not more than a dozen or twenty of these trees will be found on an acre; while again, on an acre or two they stand like a forest. They shade the ground but little, being tall with small tops, like forest trees, as indeed they are, with but little of the forest. Thus a man has the strong soil of a timber farm, without the labor of clearing off the timber.

Here are also some splendid meadows, where the grass grows higher than a man's head. Take it all in all a more desirable place for a residence could not well be found in Minnesota. It is only some 3 or 4 miles from the Minnesota river, and about the same distance from Minnetonka Lake.

⁶The lake was named for Susan Hazeltine, who opened the first school in Carver County in the fall of 1855 in Arba Cleaveland's house. See Neill, *Minnesota Valley*, 375, 376. Miss Hazeltine later married Adams.

A Lyceum is well sustained, with debates every week, and the "Portfolio" published weekly. I had the pleasure of being present last week. The gathering was at the spacious log cabin of one of the farmers, who by the way is a daguerrean artist of no mean skill, and who still pursues his business, as the sides of his room amply testified. Here the Lyceum discussed with much animation, the Land Limitation Bill, after which came the cream—the reading of the "Portfolio," by Mrs. Bingham. This was decidedly a paper of ability, not wanting in true poetic merit, and showing as much of talent as often is collected at such times. The conductors of the Garlands, Caskets and Wreaths must look to their laurels.⁷ The Chanhassen Portfolio will be hard to be surpassed.

Of the original members of the Northampton Colony settled in Chanhassen, three were particularly in the public eye. Lyman was the first postmaster, Powers was town clerk, and in 1855 Cleaveland was elected to the territorial house of representatives from Carver County on the new Republican ticket. The next year he was a vice-president of the territorial agricultural society, and he was one of the town supervisors at the time of his drowning in Lake Calhoun on July 5, 1860. The homestead of Arba Cleaveland on land west of Lake Hazeltine seems to have been the center of the township in more ways than one. It is pictured in two letters of Mrs. Cleaveland, written to a young niece in Belcher-town, Massachusetts, which have a fine, firsthand flavor of pioneer life in Chanhassen.⁸ On June 15, 1853, she wrote:

I live in a little log house, with four windows in it, the bedrooms on the west end, and parlor, sitting room, kitching, & pantry, all in one. At the east window have a beautiful view of the lake. . . . I have a walk made from my door down to the brook, and my flowers on either side, they are all up, and my dahlias all alive. It will look some like home to see old Mass[achusetts] plants in Minn[esota]. I wish I had brought my white rose-bush with me, it would have lived. . . . We have an Indian canoe, on our lake. Mr. Powers goes out and gets us pond lillies: it is a pretty little sheet of water about a mile or more long; the children can fish in it when they get a little older.

⁷ Nichols refers to portfolios prepared by lyceums in Minneapolis and St. Anthony.

⁸ The original letters are among the Nichols Papers.

The following extract is from a letter of March 30, 1854:

The prairie fires . . . have been raging all the month. Some nights, when there is no moon, the whole heavens are illumined and it looks like one mighty conflagration. Other nights, when the fire is near I can see to pick up a pin anywhere, but it does not frighten me at all, for I know it is harming no one, or at least it will not, if they take the precaution they should to burn around everything they have. I have heard of but one being burned out near us, that was a German 3 miles west of us. We burned round our house & barn last fall. I should not dare to sleep one night when it was not burnt. We have winds in the spring, and a fire rushes on faster than a horse can run; there is such an amount of vegetation in the woods that the fire will run there, as well as in the meadow where the grass is 14 feet high, (for there was grass in Mr. Lyman's meadow as high as that). You can only faintly imagine how such a fire looks, with the flames rising as high as the tops of trees, roaring, crackling, and sweeping onward with a velocity nothing can check, but the want of fuel. The country is so destitute of mountains or large hills, that we can see the reflection of fires, that are miles, & miles, distant.

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