

## NEW LIGHT ON THE NORTHAMPTON COLONY

THE NORTHAMPTON COLONY, which brought to Minnesota in the spring of 1853 some seventy-five settlers from Massachusetts, has been discussed by the present writer in two earlier articles in *Minnesota History*.<sup>1</sup> Since their appearance, the Minnesota Historical Society has acquired transcripts of numerous letters and other items relating to the colony that were published in the early 1850's in the *Northampton Courier*, a newspaper issued in the Massachusetts community where the colony originated. These items, which were copied for the society from a file of the *Courier* in the Forbes Library in Northampton, provide new data on the colony. It is now possible, for example, to give the names of members hitherto unknown to the writer, to state more specifically the aims of the colonists, and to add further information concerning their settlements in Minnesota.

The Reverend Freeman Nutting of South Hadley Falls, Massachusetts, who made a trip to Minnesota in search of health in the summer of 1851, was the founder of the colony. His first letter to the *Courier* was printed under the heading "Minnesota Territory. — A Colony! — Who will go?" The movement was seconded in a letter by the Reverend Henry M. Nichols of Williamsburg.<sup>2</sup> These ministers stressed the healthfulness of the climate in Minnesota, the richness of the soil, and the comparative inexpensiveness of taking over the unsurveyed land. Colonists could locate themselves to their liking and have two or three years in which to raise crops, which would pay for the land when

<sup>1</sup> See "Henry Martyn Nichols and the Northampton Colony" and "The Northampton Colony and Chanhassen," *ante*, 19: 129-147, 20: 140-145 (June, 1938, June, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> *Northampton Courier*, September 28, October 5, 1852.

the government surveyed it and brought it into the market at \$1.25 an acre, provided the Homestead Bill did not give it to them outright before that time.

The organization of the colony followed, with Nichols as president and Porter Nutting of Northampton as secretary and treasurer.<sup>3</sup> Proposing to settle upon the unsurveyed public lands of Minnesota, the colonists formed an association "under the name of the Minnesota Claim Association," each member having the privilege of making one claim not to exceed 160 acres.<sup>4</sup> The committee of finance was composed of Porter, Levi, and Freeman Nutting, H. M. Nichols, C. S. Johnson, Charles Hayden, and B. F. Sears.

They announced in the *Courier* of December 21, 1852, that they were making arrangements to emigrate to the Sioux lands of Minnesota Territory. They wished every member of the association to be well informed about Minnesota beforehand, and advised all to obtain E. S. Seymour's *Sketches of Minnesota: The New England of the West*, published by Harper and Brothers in 1850.

At a meeting of the association held in Springfield, Massachusetts, and reported in the *Courier* of February 22, 1853, the Reverend Chester Turner of Hartford, Connecticut, was chairman, and E. J. Crump of Webster, Massachusetts, secretary. A business committee consisted of the Reverend L. C. Collins, Porter Nutting, and J. E. Cathcart, and a committee to confer with agents for conveyance of members and freight was made up of T. D. Wood, S. J. Mantor, and Porter Nutting.

After their arrival in St. Paul on April 19, 1853, the members of the colony failed to stick together. An item in the *Courier* of June 14, 1853, states that Agent Freeman Nutting had selected a location on the Cannon River, and had kept it a secret from the inhabitants of the territory, but that when about half of the colony set out to view the location

<sup>3</sup> This name is incorrectly given as F. Nutting, *ante*, 19: 133.

<sup>4</sup> *Courier*, October 26, 1852.

they were turned back by hordes of men who were desirous of getting them to settle elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Nowhere has any corroboration of this story been found. Nichols wrote in his diary on April 23, 1853: "Cannon River company coming home sick." A local correspondent of the *St. Anthony Express*, in a letter printed on May 6, 1853, said that he had met some members of the Northampton Colony who had been told that the Cannon River country was the best part of the territory. "They were taken fifteen miles across a sandy prairie and left in a cold rain-storm, where there was not enough wood to kindle a fire. They remained without fire and shelter, and returned on foot with their baggage. Some of the party were so disgusted that they took the next boat down the river." That hardship had been a deciding factor is borne out by L. C. Collins, who said that the colonists were unused to pioneer life and that a score or so fled back.<sup>6</sup> His conclusion was that the New England men were not the right men to pioneer in a new country!

Freeman Nutting, without throwing further light on why the colony scattered, wrote to the *Courier* from St. Anthony on June 1 about the "unexpected explosion." The colonists, he said, intended to select a location, survey the land into claims of 160 acres each, and cast lots for claims. "But the Colony, numbering about one hundred men, after having traveled fifteen hundred miles together, and when within fifteen miles of the place selected by their Agent, suddenly and unaccountably broke up and scattered, and all but three refused to go to the place selected for them."<sup>7</sup>

Nichols, who had anticipated a scattering even before the colony arrived, also wrote from St. Anthony on June 1, and gave some additional information:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Nutting visited the Cannon Valley on his first trip to Minnesota.

<sup>6</sup> *Courier*, July 5, 1853.

<sup>7</sup> *Courier*, June 21, 1853.

<sup>8</sup> *Courier*, July 5, 1853. Nichols preceded Nutting to Minnesota as advance agent of the colony. The former's prediction that the colonists would scatter is quoted *ante*, 19: 138.

According to the predictions of our Western papers, the Colony arrangement, so far as settling together was concerned, was a nullity on the first attempt to carry it into execution. Be the cause of this failure whatever it may, one thing is certain, the settling in large companies with the expectation of each man being satisfied with his claim, cannot be accomplished. Unpleasant as the breaking up has been to many, yet I hesitate not to say, those who remain have pleased themselves better than they could have done by remaining as one company.

Whatever reports these may carry back who remained here but *three or four days*, we are willing to risk the reputation of the Territory with those who have made claims and gone to work. The fact is, any man will become homesick in our crowded western villages, paying high rates of board, and *doing nothing*. Between ten and fifteen of the original Colony have returned, nearly all of them in less than a week after their arrival. Those who remained are nearly all settled at three different points, viz: near Minnetonka Lake, 18 miles from St. Anthony Falls, — on the head waters of the Cannon River, 40 miles from St. Paul, — and on the Minnesota River, above Traverse de Sioux, about 80 miles from St. Paul. Each of these parties think they have the best place in the world, and the longer they remain, the better are they pleased.

One of the three persons who went directly to the place selected by Nutting was the Reverend E. J. Crump, who called it "the finest spot on earth." His claim consisted of eighty acres of prairie and eighty acres of wood, with the Cannon River between. Levi Nutting also located at the "Nutting settlement" on the Cannon River, and said that "the planting of a New England colony in Minnesota is *not* a failure," though the colony foolishly broke up. Finally Porter Nutting left for Minnesota, and evidently liked the Nutting settlement, for in 1855 the *Courier* reported that he had purchased a portion of the "town plot" for twelve hundred dollars. "It is thought," the item reads, "that this settlement, which is called *Fariboult*, will be selected for the county seat." The *Courier* also said: "The settlement on Cannon River, the place selected by Mr. Nutting as agent of the Massachusetts Colony, and where a part only of the Colony located, is prospering finely."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Courier*, June 14, July 12, 1853; May 15, 1855. On August 16, 1853, the *Courier* reported that Porter Nutting, Joseph Haskins, Harvey Holland, and Caleb Carver "started Friday on a trip to Minnesota."

The location "near Minnetonka Lake" became Chanhasen Township.<sup>10</sup> J. E. Cathcart, writing from there on December 26, 1853, said: "When I first came to this section of the country last spring, the only house was the broad heavens over our head, and the only bed the ground; now 14 families are located near us." He went into particulars about the number of "minnes" near him, explaining that "minne" is the Indian name for water, and that in the Sioux language the noun is put before the adjective. "So," he said, "Minnetonka means water large, Minnewasta, another lake, means water deer, or deer lake, as we translate."<sup>11</sup>

Nichols' numerous letters from Minnesota to the *Courier* are full of information about his adopted land, which he called "the New England of the West." And they are letters of praise. Before he left New England he had written of the colonists as a group which, by keeping together, would overcome the privations of an isolated pioneer life; instead of enduring a seclusion of several years from society, its members would carry with them their own New England society. But after his arrival in Minnesota he was quick to point out the culture which already existed there, and in a letter to the *Courier* from Stillwater he wrote as a proud Minnesotan:<sup>12</sup>

People pay more attention to the literature of magazines and papers, than at the East. You can hardly enter a family without finding Harper, Putnam, Graham and Godey, and oftener two of these than one. The Home Journal, and Arthur's Home Gazette visit hundreds of log cabins, and then, every body takes the Tribune.<sup>13</sup> We have heard of the annexation of Hawaii and the war in Europe, and we discuss and settle all these great questions as much as you do at the East, only we are about ten days behind you, that is all.

CHARLES W. NICHOLS

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<sup>10</sup> See "The Northampton Colony and Chanhasen," *ante*, 20: 140-145.

<sup>11</sup> *Courier*, March 7, 1854.

<sup>12</sup> *Courier*, October 5, 1852; September 19, 1854.

<sup>13</sup> Statistics in early Minnesota newspapers prove the popularity of the *New York Tribune* in the territory.



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