

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

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## How Stillwater Came to Be

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THE STORY of Stillwater begins with the name of Joseph Renshaw Brown, one of the most colorful personalities in the early history of Minnesota. He did not remain a resident of Stillwater for many years, but he set the scene for its very beginnings and influenced the affairs of its early days before other interests called him elsewhere. A man with a creative imagination, with a shrewd mind alert for any new challenge and a roving foot to follow the challenge, wherever it led, he influenced widely varied ventures and instigated many enterprises. After he ran away from his home in Pennsylvania at the age of fourteen, he joined the army and was sent to Fort Snelling under Colonel Henry Leavenworth; later he became at various times a trader, pioneer farmer, lumberman, legislator, public officer, editor, politician, Indian agent, inventor, and speculator. Dr. William W. Folwell writes that Brown "is entitled without controversy to the distinction of being called pioneer Minnesotan."<sup>1</sup>

When he left the service at Fort Snelling in 1825 at the age of twenty and became an Indian trader, it was natural that Brown should find his way deeper into Indian country. It was natural also that he should become the pioneer of pioneers on the St. Croix, that he should have a trading post on the west side of the river and should be found cutting logs near the falls when Franklin Steele arrived in 1837 to stake a claim. Brown explored the length of the river, not

<sup>1</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:231-238 (St. Paul, 1921); Folwell, "Minnesota in 1849: An Imaginary Letter," *ante*, 6:40; J. F. Williams, "Memoir of Joseph R. Brown," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:201-204.

merely by paddling up and down it, but by trading and living with the Indians and studying the land. Inevitably, he absorbed the wild fascination of the region and felt its potential greatness. Once again his roving feet were halted. In 1838 he staked a claim, which he called "Dakotah," at the head of Lake St. Croix, and began to build a house of tamarack logs, with the dream that a great city of the future would grow up about it. In 1841 he took his family and the family of his sister, Mrs. Paul Carli, to Tamarack House, and so established the nucleus of future Stillwater.<sup>2</sup>

Spring came to Tamarack House in 1842 without a sign that this was a momentous season, that in this very place the spark of an idea would culminate to shape the destiny of the St. Croix. No one had planned it. No one knew about it. Life at Tamarack went on as usual, burdened and enlivened by occasional wayfarers. One of those who arrived that spring was Jacob Fisher. He was sent to St. Croix Falls as a millwright by a lumbering concern in St. Louis, and he found on his arrival that construction on the mill had not progressed to a point where he could begin his job. Alert and energetic, he was not one to wait in idleness. Instead, prompted by curiosity and glad of the opportunity for exploring, he drifted southward and in early winter arrived at Tamarack House, where he became a temporary member of the household.

While there, he walked about on the plateau one day in search of a stick of wood suitable for fashioning an ax handle, and came upon raccoon tracks in the snow. Intrigued by them, he was led inland and finally reached McKusick Lake, out of which Pine Creek, now known as Browns Creek, flowed in the direction from which he had come. Rambling thoughtfully about, he was impressed by the lay of the land, and finally returned home ruminating. A startling idea had begun to take vague shape, and when a new idea was born in Jacob Fisher's mind, he could not rest till he had fed it to maturity.

<sup>2</sup> Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:233, 234; Edward D. Neill, *History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley*, 113, 219, 498; Augustus B. Easton, *History of the St. Croix Valley*, 1:5, 8, 9 (Chicago, 1909); Maggie Orr O'Neill, *Early History of the Friendly Valley and the Falls of St. Croix*, 3 (St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, 1937). The latter is a compact little story written by the daughter of one of the founders of St. Croix Falls. She is still a resident of the place. For her information she has drawn in part on Neill, but she has interwoven his facts with much that she remembers or has heard.

In a few days he returned to the scene and carefully considered its possibilities. These were the times and this was the region to challenge speculation and court opportunities, and Fisher fitted perfectly into the times. He began to co-ordinate the facts at hand. Here was the source of a stream at a reasonable distance from an ideal river, at a promising height, but with a too gradual drop. Could it be directed on a steeper course than it now followed and give water power at its entrance to the river to turn a mill wheel? Why not? The idea flashed and grew. Why couldn't a canal be cut from the headwaters of the stream into the northern end of the lake and another to lead the stream out of its southern end, whence the fall to the river would be adequate?

Fired to action, he was soon staking out a claim directly south of Brown's. There the matter rested until June. Then Fisher was joined by Elam Greeley, who had been employed at St. Croix Falls, and together they captured and rafted logs which had escaped the dam above. Providentially, too, in this month Elias McKean and Calvin Leach, on a job of rafting lumber from Marine to St. Louis, found themselves windbound near Pine Creek and naturally went to Tamarack House.<sup>3</sup>

The four men were congenial companions, all interested in lumbering, and anxious to establish themselves independently as soon as possible. It was natural that talk of the days' activities should be heavily interlarded with opinions on lumbering, its progress and prospects, emphasized at last by a remark from Greeley that he would give more for a sawmill near Tamarack House than at any point near St. Croix Falls. Though earnest enough, he stated his thought casually, in view of its supposed impracticability. Jacob Fisher could not have wished for a better opening, and he declared that for a fair consideration he would show Greeley a millsite within a mile of the place. Greeley, however, who knew Browns Creek thoroughly, declared its use for a mill absurd and impossible.

But by this time Fisher had thoroughly digested his scheme, and he presented it with full assurance; though the others remained unconvinced, it is understandable that the matter must have proved a

<sup>3</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 498, 499, 512; Easton, *St. Croix Valley*, 1:17.

meaty subject to be chewed with considerable satisfaction. In the end, banter and argument merged naturally into the speculation that the plan might possibly be made to work. Before the men slept, it was agreed to look the situation over. The next day the party set out to view the scene of Fisher's fantastic dream, jesting unmercifully along the way. After a careful survey of the terrain, the group agreed enthusiastically that the plan appeared both feasible and inexpensive. But ways and means had to be found to execute it. Four speculative minds had been set seething, and, somehow, sometime, the project was a certainty.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, Greeley and Fisher went on rafting logs, and McKean and Leach proceeded to St. Louis with their lumber. There they discussed the mill plan with another lumbering man, John McKusick, to whom Fisher had already written about it. An apparent mischance crystallized it into a reality.

Shifting about as lumbering men were wont to do, McKusick and Greeley were, a short time earlier, working for a company in Marine. When the job was finished, they were obliged to take logs as part payment for their services. What were they to do with them? Joe Brown, called the first lumberman on the St. Croix, had floated logs down the St. Croix, but no logs had been rafted down the Mississippi, and such an undertaking seemed precarious. Emergencies are likely to furnish a spur to action, and in this case, the predicament proved to be the final stimulus needed to make the mill plan a reality. A sawmill on the spot seemed the ideal solution of the problem and a prospect for good future business.

The four interested loggers got together in earnest, and by October, 1843, the original plan had been thoroughly discussed and mapped out, funds had been obtained, and Fisher had agreed to sell the group his claim for three hundred dollars, with the provision that he be hired as millwright. On the twenty-sixth day of October a formal agreement of partnership for cutting logs was signed by John McKusick, Elam Greeley, Elias McKean, and Calvin F. Leach.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 499.

<sup>5</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 500, 501, 512; Easton, *St. Croix Valley*, 1:21; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:233.

No one dreamed of the development of a town about the mill-site, the idea of a mill being not only paramount but absolute. But a company must have a name, and a millsite must be called something. The name selected by mutual agreement was the Stillwater Lumber Company. It was suggested by John McKusick, perhaps with a bit of nostalgic sentiment for a village in his native state of Maine, with its remembered tang of pine and zest of lumbering. There must have been a flick of amusement, too, at the absurdity of locating a mill on the still waters of a lake. The Indian name for the place was "Kee-go-shagewa-minnie," meaning "the place of jumping fish." Like all Indian names, this one was literally appropriate. It refers to the fact that in the days before commercial fishing began, large sturgeons were plentiful in St. Croix Lake, where they could be seen jumping from the water in an effort to shake off the lamprey eels, which attached themselves to the fish. Though interesting, the Indian interpretation did not affect the name, which remained Stillwater.<sup>6</sup>

The machinery for the mill was obtained in St. Louis, and plans for canals were carried out. After going through a bank of fifty feet at the southern end of McKusick Lake, one led the water to a ravine which conducted it by a direct route through a flume down what is now Mulberry Street in Stillwater to the St. Croix. A fall of about a hundred and fifty feet was thus obtained, and the necessary power to drive the mill wheel was supplied. Work on the mill progressed rapidly, and by the spring of 1844 it was sawing logs.<sup>7</sup>

What had appeared to be a harebrained dream had materialized into a profitable reality when thought through by levelheaded businessmen. And thus another logging center was established on the St. Croix, one destined to rank high among lumber centers of the land.

Although the millsite is now occupied by other business and lies a block inland, in the days of untampered shore lines the mill stood

<sup>6</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 500; Easton, *St. Croix Valley*, 1:20; Orris E. Lee, "Legends, Traditions and Some History of Our Old Town." The latter item is a small scrapbook, in the Stillwater Public Library, containing undated articles by Judge Lee clipped from the *Trade News* of Stillwater.

<sup>7</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 513.

on the lake shore, lapped by high waters in the spring. Its busy saws produced about a wagonload of lumber a day. Years later, old men liked to tell how as boys they rode on the old water wheel, much to the dismay of McKusick. Whether or not that was true, they did ride for hours on the log carriage to the swishing music of the saws.

Should you visit Stillwater now, you would find no trace of the old mill, and few could tell you where it stood. The shuffling tread of time has made its site unrecognizable, but locally the mill will remain famous. For the original dam at the Falls of St. Anthony, it sawed lumber which was hauled by Anson Northup across the country by way of White Bear Lake. It sawed lumber for the Sawyer House, for years the center for leading business and social affairs of Stillwater; for the Stillwater store owned by Isaac Staples in the early years of the town's prosperity; for buildings along the lake at Hudson and Prescott; for others in St. Paul and Hastings. It furnished lumber for increasing numbers of settlers' homes. And for most of these the mill manufactured sashes, doors, and blinds, in an addition built after its original activities had ceased. It also served for a time as a gristmill.

Among the well-known lumbermen connected with this early business venture were Louis E. Torinus, head sawyer, Albert Stimson, Jerry Stuart, Robert Hasty, Albion and J. N. Masterman, and William McKusick. Some of these men were destined to fame of their own. After a time John McKusick became sole owner.<sup>8</sup>

Steadily the creek turned the mill wheel to establish firmly the industry which was to build a city. Then, in 1852, occurred what appeared to be a major catastrophe in the life of both mill and settlement, but it proved itself a disguised blessing instead. Heavy spring rains caused unusual freshets. Browns Creek became a raging torrent in its steep incline. The walls of the southern canal were washed away, roads were torn out and clogged, and a tremendous wash of silt swept down into the mill. The machinery was covered and operations ceased. Clearance work began at once, greatly aided

<sup>8</sup> The foregoing paragraphs are based upon an account of the mill's destruction by fire on March 27, 1901, which appears under the title "Burned the Old Mill" in the *Stillwater Daily Gazette* for March 28, 1901, and in the weekly edition for April 3. See also Easton, *St. Croix Valley*, 1:19.

by water still gushing down the incline, and although steam had come into use and was operating Stillwater's second mill, the first mill was operating as usual in a short time.<sup>9</sup> When the main building was eventually torn down, it had gone far beyond the dreams of its builders in serving its purpose.

In the *Stillwater Gazette* for November 6, 1907, is this pertinent article, which, though unsigned, is presented with the inimitable touch of A. B. Easton, founder and first editor of the paper:<sup>10</sup>

Through the courtesy of Web. McKusick we have come into possession of an ancient document, recently discovered by him in a long-forgotten crypt or other out-of-the-way niche or cranny in which were stored a number of manuscripts, now yellowed by the ravages of Time.

This document is designated as the "Stillwater Lumber Co.'s Time Book," this being the line at the head of the page dated October, 1843.

No name is given as to the identity of the person who did the writing, but he was a most excellent penman, who ever he was. Blue ink appears on two or three pages, the rest being in brown.

Each page is ruled and cross-ruled, so as to show the day[s] each worked, and each line across the page contains 31 squares.

The employes whose names appear on the first page are Jacob Fisher, Nelson Goodenough, Joseph Brewster, Isaac D. Weld, James Patten, A. J. Drake, William Middleton, Hugh McFadden, James Hickman, C. Simonds, and O. F. Strickland.

A note on the lower margin of the sheet explains that "A. J. Drake commenced work the 29th day of August, made full time in September," and that William Middleton began at the same date, and that Hugh McFadden commenced his labors simultaneously with the others, but in addition to this, he worked two Sundays in September. Which may be taken as a gratifying evidence that they did know when Sunday came.

On the November page the Simonds name does not appear, but several new ones are employed — Sylvester Statelar, E. W. Phillips, F. Brunaw, N. LeRoy, Jesse Taylor and H. H. Remy. Sixteen men, according to the records, were employed in the construction of the mill.

On the 10th of January, 1844, Paulette Provost appeared and was set to work. At the end of three days he evidently became discouraged, as the time sheet shows, he on[ly] got in a few half days and the word "settled" appears opposite his name.

At the lower margin of the page under "Remarks" we find this: "4th, Leroy killed the Dunn ox; 16, Jesse Taylor left for St. Peters."

Lemuel Bolles and James M. Bierman are added to the force in Febru-

<sup>9</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 508.

<sup>10</sup> The article appears under the title "Aged and Venerable Manuscript" in the weekly edition of the *Gazette*. Much the same account appears in Easton's *St. Croix Valley*, 1:18.

ary, and the "Remarks" are only to the effect that "F. Brunaw is with Middleton ditching."

In March the force was still further augmented, the number reaching 22. The marginal "Remarks" begin to assume considerable importance. For instance: "13th, Let the water on the wheel; 28th, Started one saw for a few revolutions; 30th, The first board cut in the McKusick mill."

April is designated as the "Backwater Month" by the time-keeper, who seems to be a new man on the clerical force, and, as compared with his predecessor, writes an atrocious hand. The "Remarks" are not seemingly of great significance: 1st, Greeley and McKean up Apple river; 6th, Steamboat Otter at St. Peters; 9th, Greeley and McKean up Apple river; C. Carli and H. H. Remy gone with their raft; 11th, Lemuel Bolles quit; 18th, St. Boat New Haven arrived.

The merry month of May glided by without incident, at least nothing appears of record. And likewise June.

On every page up to July the name of Jacob Fisher has led the list. . . .

The reason for Fisher's prominence is obvious. The mill was his brain child, and as millwright, he kept it in parental care. Besides, no one was more confident than he of the possibilities of the St. Croix Valley, or more determined to develop them. As time went on, his name was on the public tongue in Stillwater and its surroundings almost as much as Joseph R. Brown's, and his sagacious mind was as active.

Easton continues his notes from the old time book as follows:

At the foot of the July page we find this entry, written in bold letters, as if the hand that formed the words felt the pride that naturally comes from the realization of something accomplished.

"July 6, First raft left Stillwater for St. Louis, Missouri."

This was supposedly a lumber raft, as in the records of Stephen Hanks' long and strenuous life as pilot on these northern streams, it is stated that he took out the first log raft for the Stillwater Lumber Co., in the early summer of 1844, and also, later in the season, took a lumber raft for the same concern.

In August the force of men was increased to 38, and in October to 46, at which date our story ends; at least we come to the last page of our manuscript.

Contrary to expectations, a settlement was established. During the first half of 1844 all indications pointed to a temporary camp with buildings far inadequate for the housing of the growing business. As a site for a town, the place seemed wholly undesirable, being but a marshy, bowl-like enclosure, with high bluffs at the back



slashed by several deep ravines and bordered on the east by an unstable shore line, which changed considerably with the seasonal stage of the river. This was not a choice site for a town, but the broad and placid waters of Lake St. Croix made a perfect situation for sawmills, with room for rafts and logging operations of all kinds.

As usual in such exploits, the founders had planned on quick returns and temporary residence. As usual, they had been as unprepared for the hypnotic spell of this vast, free land as for the unbounded exultation which possessed them as their work progressed. As usual, they had failed to realize the need for home associations. Within a year, they knew individually and surely that they were forever part of this new world and that a settlement was a necessity. Evidently, they knew how to combine persuasiveness with the sense of adventure inherent in all youth. Women began to arrive.

The year 1845 was an important one, with eight women on the scene: Mrs. Paul Carli, a Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Andrew Mackey, Mrs. Anson Northup, Mrs. Jesse Taylor, Mrs. William Cove, Mrs. S. Nelson, and Miss Sarah L. Judd. The village was organized. John McKusick built the first dwelling house. He was elected mayor. A post office was established, and Greeley was made postmaster. In 1847 John McKusick married Phoebe Greeley; and in 1850 Hannah Hinman, one of Stillwater's most influential pioneer women, became Mrs. Elam Greeley.<sup>11</sup>

The town gained a real impetus in 1848, when there was a flood of immigration. New buildings went up in a hurry. Streets were improved. The quagmire of Main Street was rudely covered with mill slabs. Lying about twelve feet lower than it is today, this street was completely flooded in times of high water. Consequently, homes and business houses had to be built up on stilts and approached by steps. It is said that in one especially wet season, Joe Carli rowed a bateau up and down the street with blazing torches in the bow.<sup>12</sup> Cross streets naturally could reach only to the hills at the west, and they were scarcely a block long. But in spite of such limitations, the place began to lose its camp aspect and continued to grow and im-

<sup>11</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 506, 576; *Stillwater Daily Gazette*, October 26, 1900.

<sup>12</sup> Easton, *St. Croix Valley*, 60, 61.

prove, emerging from the cluster of crude cabins and shanties of 1844 into a village.

Nature took a hand in improving the townsite in the calamitous torrent of 1852, for the great freshet which temporarily stilled the McKusick mill wheel washed tons of earth into the marshy hollow, tore out roads, and filled in others, giving the people an idea for constructive changes. First of all, Main Street was built up, and as years went by the water line was pushed back foot by foot, until today it parallels Main Street two blocks away. In the meantime, clogged streets were excavated and some of them rerouted.

For years the only way to reach the South Hill was by a winding road up through a steep ravine, now disappeared, in the place where the gas works later were built. The old government road followed Second Street to Cherry, ran west for two blocks, and then wound itself to join the road to Marine. Third Street existed only in portions and was cut by very steep cross streets, one of them leading through the Myrtle Street ravine toward the west, known then and for many years later as the St. Paul Road. The high Myrtle Street hill reached down to Third, and there it towered fifty feet above the site where the First Methodist Church now stands. When this hill was cut back, workmen unearthed a huge tusk of some prehistoric animal, which caused excited speculation and was sent eventually to the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. In time, streets parallel to the river were cut through on higher levels, and the bluff was cut back at its base for a real Main Street all along the water front. This is evident in the Stillwater of today.<sup>13</sup>

As improvements progressed, excavators sometimes dug up evidences of the 1852 flood. Years later, workmen digging at Myrtle and Main unearthed two huge logs, preserved as fresh as new. Undoubtedly, they had been covered by the landslide when it moved part of the west hill downward with a great commotion.<sup>14</sup> This not

<sup>13</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 509, 554; Mrs. E. Rhodes, "Stillwater as It Was 'Befo' the War," in *Stillwater Messenger*, January 14, 1905. The present writer's information about the development of Stillwater is based, in addition to the works cited, upon familiarity with its present plan, upon observation, and upon interviews with a number of early residents, including Mr. Lyman Sutton. The tusk probably was destroyed in the fire which demolished the Minnesota Capitol in 1881.

<sup>14</sup> See an unidentified clipping in a scrapbook kept by Mrs. Samuel Bloomer, a

only emphasizes the amount of hill taken down, but indicates the waterline at the time of the eruption.

A human bit of local interest was uncovered in the same manner. The *Stillwater Messenger* of June 24, 1905, says:

We can give a good guess as to who was the probable owner of the cook stove unearthed while workmen were excavating for the basement of the new shoe factory, a few weeks ago. Thomas W. Welch, one of our oldest residents, says that there used to be a little barn, belonging to John McKusick, about where the shoe factory is now being built. That neighborhood was headquarters for ball playing and the boys were in the habit of climbing into the loft of the barn to watch the ball game. The barn was stored with old truck of different kinds and Mr. Welch thinks it is more than likely that the stove was in the barn — stored there by Mr. McKusick — and when the flood of mud and water covered everything up in that section of the town, it buried the barn and stove with it. Mr. Welch gathers this impression from the fact that some fifty years ago he remembers the barn, stored furniture, and had a season ticket to the loft of the barn that enabled him to view the ball games to a good advantage.

What a warm link with the far past, when boys yelled their approbation or derision at the progress of a ball game as they do today, and nearly fell or pushed each other from the loft in their excitement!

Although the McKusick mill carried on into the 1870's, steam had triumphed over the mill wheel by 1850, giving the later mills a great advantage. The Sawyer and Heaton mill of 1850, the Schulenburg and Boeckler mill of 1853, the Hersey, Staples and Company mill of 1854, and others followed in rapid succession, until eleven linked five miles of lake front.<sup>15</sup> Their buzzing activity constantly increased the output of all kinds of lumber, fed by millions of giant logs. Their enormous mill and rafting activities called other industries to life. Boat building swung into high tide. Iron works flourished. More and improved flour mills were necessary. Business in general expanded. Mills buzzed. Shops hummed and hammered. Steamboats

Stillwater pioneer. The present item is in volume 3, page 77, of the books, which are in the Stillwater Public Library.

<sup>15</sup> Neill, *Washington County*, 513-519. The total number of mills was ascertained by interviewing old residents of Stillwater, especially loggers. They usually begin with the second mill, for by the time it was built the first was engaging in grist milling and the manufacturing of sashes and doors. The work of the first mill did not meet the speed of steam power.

took the place of paddling raftsmen and maneuvered huge rafts of logs and lumber down the St. Croix in an endless stream. Lusty, nimble-footed rivermen peopled the scene. Gay excursion steamers made their periodic trips to Taylors Falls. It is understandable that old settlers recall with gnawing nostalgia the panorama of activity and color that paraded daily between the river's wooded banks.

Because of its advantage on the broad, smooth waters of St. Croix Lake, which facilitated lumbering maneuvers, Stillwater outgrew all the other river towns almost at once. "Queen of the St. Croix" it was called, and it was expected to become the metropolis of the Midwest. But when the vast timber lands gave out, the silent pall which every other lumbering city had experienced settled over Stillwater. St. Paul began to flourish as the terminal of trade routes, and flour mills brought fame to Minneapolis, leaving Stillwater out of the race to face its slow adjustment to a great change.



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