

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 30 • PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1949 • NUMBER 2

## Zachary Taylor and Minnesota

*Holman Hamilton*

LIKE NEARLY ALL the commonwealths in the western three-fifths of the nation, Minnesota has not yet produced a president of the United States. No doubt its day is coming, but meanwhile the state can claim the twelfth chief executive—Zachary Taylor—as one who lived many months within the borders of what is now Minnesota, and who also played a significant role in the establishment of its territorial government.

“Old Rough and Ready,” as Taylor’s soldiers nicknamed him, served in the United States army longer than any other White House occupant. In the course of his thirty-nine years on active duty, he was stationed in other portions of the then Northwest—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin—as well as in what was to become Minnesota. He followed the flag and the frontier out toward the setting sun, his sturdy figure a familiar one, symbolizing strength and integrity in the eyes of pioneer and Indian.

Nearly everywhere Zachary Taylor went, members of his family accompanied him. Mrs. Taylor (nec Margaret Mackall Smith) was a Maryland girl whom the future president met and married in Kentucky. Four of their six children reached maturity—Ann Mackall Taylor, whose husband was Dr. Robert C. Wood, an army surgeon; Sarah Knox Taylor, a gay and gracious belle with a mind of her own, who lost her heart to Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, was his first wife, and influenced his career profoundly; Mary Elizabeth (“Betty”) Taylor, who as Mrs. William W. S. Bliss presided over White House social functions during her father’s administration; and Richard

*Copyright, 1949, by the MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.*

Taylor, soldier, author, sugar planter, and gifted raconteur, who won the battle of Mansfield in the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the entire family was with Taylor during the whole of his Minnesota stay, the record does not reveal with complete satisfaction. It is probable that Sarah Knox was in school in Ohio or Kentucky some or all of the time. But little Betty and the toddler Dick almost certainly were with their parents throughout the period. And when eighteen-year-old Ann married Dr. Wood at Fort Crawford on September 20, 1829, she was taken as a bride to Fort Snelling. It was at Fort Snelling that Zachary Taylor's eldest grandchildren were born — John Taylor Wood, later a famous Confederate naval raider, and Robert C. Wood, Jr., who commanded with ability the First Mississippi Cavalry at a time when his father was acting surgeon general of the Union army and his uncle was president of the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup> It may well be that these two grandsons of President Taylor were the first white natives of Minnesota to achieve a measure of military renown.

Taylor himself took command of Fort Snelling on May 24, 1828, when he was forty-three years old and had been in the army nearly two decades.<sup>3</sup> It was his first service on the northern part of the western frontier since 1818, when he had been the commandant of Fort Howard at Green Bay. In the interim duty had taken him to Mississippi and Louisiana, where he built cantonments and opened roads; to Louisville and Cincinnati, as superintendent of recruiting; and briefly to Washington, D. C., where he was a military board member. His rank at this time was that of lieutenant colonel, and his quarters at Fort Snelling were more comfortable than might have been expected in such an isolated outpost. Inside the diamond-shaped fortress and facing the flagstaff, the parade ground, and the old Round Tower, Taylor's new home contained four rooms on the

<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of the Taylor-Davis romance may be found in Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier of the Republic*, 100-109 (Indianapolis, 1941). Richard Taylor's *Destruction and Reconstruction* (New York, 1879) has perhaps the most delightful style of any Civil War book written by a prominent participant.

<sup>2</sup> John T. Wood was born on August 13, 1830, and Robert C. Wood, Jr., on April 4, 1832, according to a record in Zachary Taylor's own hand, in the Taylor family Bible, owned by Mr. Trist Wood of New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor entered the army in May, 1808, but he was a civilian during parts of the years 1815 and 1816.

main floor and kitchens and pantries in the basement. To civilian eyes, Fort Snelling looked impressive. Officers thought differently. "Main points of *defence against an enemy*," ran an official inspection report, "appear to have been in some respects sacrificed . . . to secure the . . . convenience of the troops in peace. . . . The buildings are too large, too numerous, and extending over a space entirely too great." As a visitor suggested, "the strong stone wall was rather erected to keep the garrison in, than the enemy out."<sup>4</sup>

Who was the enemy? There had been Indian trouble in the Fort Snelling-Fort Crawford region prior to Taylor's arrival, chiefly in 1827. Conditions had warranted the transfer of Taylor and his men of the First United States Infantry from Louisiana to the North as a precautionary measure against further outbreaks by the red men. Yet it is questionable whether the number of soldiers under Taylor's orders at Fort Snelling would have been adequate to hold the post in the event of a large uprising.

Taylor was not without doubts. In a semiofficial letter, here quoted for the first time, he wrote to the adjutant general: "Permit me to call your attention . . . to the situation of the command at this place; there are nominally here three companies, but only in effect two, & what with keeping a command at the public mills eight miles distant, & a party constantly with the cattle belonging to the commissaryes dept. . . . I shall be barely able . . . to mount a guard." Taylor feared that, with so few privates, he would have difficulty in posting sentinels "at hailing distance around this extensive work, which is sufficiently large to contain eight companies." The situation was not as critical that summer as he expected it to be the following spring, when the enlistment terms of many of his men would expire. "It is not to be expected that any of them will re-enlist here," he wrote. The worst feature lay in the fact that circumstance compelled the colonel to keep the cattle and the detachment charged with caring for them at some distance from the fort. "One half of the command at least are frequently at the mercy of the Indians were they disposed to commence hostilities," Taylor concluded. "I cannot for a

<sup>4</sup> Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 75, 76 (Iowa City, 1918); Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 64-78.

moment believe that the situation of this post is properly understood by those making the disposition of the troops, or it certainly would not have been left with its present garrison.”<sup>5</sup>

Although there were several minor shifts of troops at Fort Snelling during Taylor's period of service there, no substantial increase of the garrison occurred — and yet no Indian thrust developed. This may have been due, at least in part, to the limited precautions it was possible for Taylor to take. It is a tribute to him that not once in his eight years in command of posts in the present states of Wisconsin and Minnesota did the aborigines stage a full-scale assault on soldiers who looked to him for leadership or on settlers who depended upon him for protection. Taylor subsequently was highly critical of Brigadier General Henry Atkinson's conduct of Indian relations in the months immediately preceding the start of the Black Hawk War, when Taylor was absent in Kentucky.<sup>6</sup> Whether Taylor's foresight and understanding of the Indian character actually prevented shooting and killing while he was at Fort Snelling must remain a matter of speculation. As long as he lived, he sought to deal mildly though firmly — wherever possible — with Winnebago, Sioux, Chippewa, Sauk, Fox, and other tribes.<sup>7</sup>

If freedom from the horrors of Indian warfare was Zachary Taylor's portion at Fort Snelling, and if this was a relief to a man responsible for maintaining the peace, certain events and incidents of a private nature plunged him into a gloomy mood during most of his stay. The year after his arrival at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers was also the year of his father's death near Louisville;<sup>8</sup> other kinsmen, near and dear, passed away at about the same time. He likewise lost eight of his adult slaves, together with a number of little Negroes, in 1828 and 1829. Most of the time he

<sup>5</sup> Taylor to Roger Jones, July 1, 1828. The original is owned by Mr. Allyn K. Ford of Minneapolis; the Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies of this and other Taylor letters in Mr. Ford's collection.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, "Zachary Taylor and the Black Hawk War," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 24:308-310 (March, 1941).

<sup>7</sup> A long letter from Taylor to Albert Sidney Johnston, dated Fort Crawford, June 23, 1833, is a good illustration of Taylor's continuing interest in the Fort Snelling area and of his grasp of the Indian situation there. The original is in the war records division of the National Archives; the Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy.

<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Richard Taylor, Zachary's father, died on January 19, 1829.

"felt too much depressed to keep up a correspondence with my friends." The absentee Louisiana cotton planter was almost invariably pessimistic regarding his income from his crops, and this period—as his letters show—was no exception. Mrs. Taylor's delicate health improved while they were at Fort Snelling, and this should have offset at least a few of her devoted husband's reasons for unhappiness. But the man of property wrote a relative 'that he was out "twenty thousand dollars," due to bank failures and securityships. "I have now pretty much given up the hope of ever being able to locate myself comfortably in civil life," he confided to a brother officer.<sup>9</sup> Thus Taylor's picture of what is now the Twin Cities area may have been conditioned by a jaundiced view, induced by bereavements and financial troubles.

In any event, Taylor characterized Fort Snelling and its environs as "a most miserable & uninteresting country," as well as an "out of the way part of the world"—which it undeniably was. His specific illustrations of the nature of the region were more pleasing, however. "Fort Snelling," he wrote, "stands at the junction of the St. Peters [Minnesota], Mississippi Rivers in latitude 45 north, & seven miles below the falls of St. Anthony, those falls are several miles in extent, the principal cascade which extends quite across the river, is twenty-two feet perpendicular; the country is mostly p[r]airie[,] the timber, what there is of it, being for the most part confined to the margin of the water courses; Interspersed in every direction throughout the country are a number of beautiful lakes of the purest water from one to twenty miles in circumference, similar I presume to those in the western parts of N. York, & which are abundantly stocked with every species of Fish common to fresh water. The country around the falls is inhabited entirely by Indians. . . . The Buffalo have entirely disappeared . . . Bear and deer [*sic*] are now very scarce, the Indians subsist principally on Fish, wild rice [, and] wild fowl, the latter being uncommonly plenty spring & fall. A few valuable furs

<sup>9</sup> Taylor to Dr. Thomas Lawson, August 28, 1828; to Thomas S. Jesup, December 15, 1829, Taylor Papers, Library of Congress; to William Berry Taylor, April 12, 1830, in the possession of Reuben Thornton Taylor, Bagdad, Kentucky. The letter to Dr. Lawson has been published under the title "Zachary Taylor and Old Fort Snelling" in *Minnesota History*, 28:15-19 (March, 1947).

are still taken in the country by the indians, which they barter with the traders for clothing, guns, ammunition, traps &c. The soil is tolerable[,] producing vegetables [*sic*] common to those latitudes in great perfection, particularly potatoes.”<sup>10</sup>

In another private letter, penned shortly after he reached Fort Snelling, Taylor inserted a similar description: “The country for some hundred of miles around us is mostly prairie, what little timber there is, is mostly confined to the margin of the water courses. . . . A large portion of the soil is tolerable & if there was wood sufficient for fuel or a substitute for it, would admit of a pretty dense population. [Now] it is inhabited entirely by Indians, who are the most misir[able] set of beings I have ever been among, & I suppose will continue to be so, for the next century. We are eight miles below the fall of St. Anthony, which whould [*sic*] be somewhat of a curiosity if there was no falls of Niagara, they are several miles in extent, the principal cascade being about ten feet perpendicular & which extends quite across the river; the Mississippi here is however nothing in comparison to . . . what it is, where you have seen it. The country is filled with small lak[e]s, from six to twenty miles in circumference, which are well stocked with the best fresh water fish.”<sup>11</sup>

The discrepancies found in these two communications, one written when Taylor was at Fort Snelling and the other a few months after he left, suggest how important it is for the historian not to accept any single version of contemporary description as being accurate in each detail. The number of grammatical errors, here reproduced just as they appear in the originals, cannot fail to underscore Taylor’s lack of formal schooling. His educational equipment was perhaps smaller than that of any other president of the United States. He was almost always less careful, regarding commas and spelling, in private letters than in official ones. Thus the semiofficial report to Adjutant General Roger Jones, quoted earlier in this article and written in Taylor’s own hand, is virtually errorless, whereas the missives to his friends are marred by mistakes.

An example of the trivial matters handled personally by Taylor

<sup>10</sup> Taylor to William B. Taylor, April 12, 1830; Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor to Lawson, in *Minnesota History*, 28:17

during his Fort Snelling tour is found in another report to the adjutant general, which like some of the letters here quoted has not previously appeared in print. More than half the letter concerns the disposition to be made of one recruit, John Courtwright by name, who had been taken to Fort Snelling by a junior officer and whom Taylor suspected of being a deserter. After detailing the man's height, complexion, and the color of his eyes and hair, Taylor said he would have him remain until "I am instructed what to do with him. I shall accordingly await your decision upon his case." This indicates the petty nature of many duties of even the field officers on the frontier in the early years of the last century. More significant was Taylor's hope, expressed in the summer of 1828, that "the days of the present dynasty [*sic*] are numbered, & that the 4th of March . . . will bring about a complete change." Here he was referring to his preference for Andrew Jackson, as against John Quincy Adams, in the memorable presidential election which the former won. In the light of Taylor's own election to the White House as a Whig twenty years later, it is instructive to recall that "Old Rough and Ready" was a Jacksonian Democrat when at Fort Snelling. He broke with the Jacksonians not long after, and eventually became a Henry Clay Whig. But Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling, noted in his journal that a ball was given "in consequence of the Election of Genl Jackson" by the little group living at the post.<sup>12</sup> The triumph of "Old Hickory" was far from displeasing to Colonel Taylor. Taylor never voted in his life, but he harbored decided convictions on governmental affairs—especially those affecting the army.

Nothing of a particularly exciting nature transpired at Fort Snelling during Taylor's thirteen and a half months in command. Early in July, 1829, he received an order from Brigadier General Henry Leavenworth transferring him to Fort Crawford. He departed from his old post on July 12, and six days later superseded Major Stephen W. Kearny at his new one.<sup>13</sup> And nearly twenty years elapsed be-

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 112; Taylor to Jones, November 6, 1828; Taylor to Lawson, in *Minnesota History*, 28:18.

<sup>13</sup> Fort Snelling and Fort Crawford post returns, July, 1829, war records division, National Archives.

fore he influenced what is now Minnesota from a civil standpoint as importantly as he had done militarily. During the long interval, much happened both to the new Northwest and to the doughty Southwesterner who had helped provide for its protection at Fort Snelling, Fort Crawford, and Fort Howard. The climax of Zachary Taylor's army career was reached at the battle of Buena Vista, during the Mexican War, which made him the leading hero of the nation and a popular presidential possibility.<sup>14</sup> It was after he defeated Lewis Cass and Martin Van Buren in the three-way presidential race of 1848, and only two days before Taylor was inaugurated on March 5, 1849, that Minnesota Territory was organized by act of Congress.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it devolved on Taylor to nominate the first territorial officials. In this connection, his first duty was to pick a man for the highly consequential post of governor.

In the Thurlow Weed Papers at the University of Rochester, there is evidence that John C. Clark of New York had powerful backing for the Minnesota governorship, his most influential supporters being Weed and Senator William H. Seward. If Weed and Seward had enjoyed Zachary Taylor's favor in March to the extent achieved by April and May, Clark might well have been the president's selection. His candidacy for the Minnesota plum, however, was challenged by Vice-President Millard Fillmore, who headed the anti-Seward faction in the Whig party of New York. Fillmore sponsored his own law partner, Nathan K. Hall, for the position, and so evenly balanced was the influence of Seward and Fillmore at this moment that Clark and Hall canceled out each other—and Edward W. McGaughey of Indiana was tapped. Secretary of State John M. Clayton was later to testify that Senators James Cooper of Pennsylvania, Thomas Corwin of Ohio, and Truman Smith of Connecticut were given virtually a free hand in making up the Minnesota slate which McGaughey headed.<sup>16</sup> Clayton was often guilty of exaggeration, but in this instance he may have been correct. It seems likely that Cor-

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 232-242, 250-255.

<sup>15</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 2 session, 298, 635-637, 666, 681, 693.

<sup>16</sup> Seward to Weed, March 20, 1849, Weed Papers, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York; Clayton to John J. Crittenden, April 18, 1849, Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.

win was the chief booster for McGaughey, who was the Ohioan's close and confiding friend.

Now almost wholly forgotten except by specialists in the period, McGaughey had been a member of the federal House of Representatives in the Twenty-ninth Congress, and subsequently served in a similar capacity in the Thirty-first. Because he was destined to die young and to take no more prominent part in national politics than that usually allotted a two-term legislator in the lower chamber, his name has not been magnified on history's pages. McGaughey was by no means incompetent, however. Indeed, he seems to have been considered one of the promising younger Whigs. He appears to have owed his nomination primarily to the chief executive's decision not to include Caleb B. Smith in the new cabinet. Smith, who in 1861 was President Abraham Lincoln's first secretary of the interior, aspired to the postmaster-generalship in 1849. Like McGaughey, he was from Indiana. And he had been sadly disappointed when Taylor offered him nothing better than a seat on the Mexican claims commission. Having been turned down on one count in Smith's case, the Indiana Whig delegation in Washington obtained presidential backing for McGaughey for what was probably one of the two or three most desirable domestic noncabinet positions—the governorship at St. Paul. Indiana's having been overlooked once was a telling argument against its being by-passed a second time. So it was that Zachary Taylor named Edward McGaughey as his official choice for the key post in Minnesota Territory.<sup>17</sup>

For McGaughey, confirmation by the Senate was not as simple as nomination by the president. It happened to be one of the rare occasions in American annals when the legislative branch was controlled by a party opposing a brand new chief magistrate. Members of the Democratic majority in the Senate quickly took the occasion presented by McGaughey's nomination to highlight their independence of the president in particular and the Whig party in general. The Democrats lost little time in rejecting the gentleman from Indiana

<sup>17</sup> *Senate Executive Proceedings*, 8:84 (Washington, 1887); Newton D. Mereness, "Caleb Blood Smith," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 17:244; *Congressional Directory*, 831 (Washington, 1913).

for the governorship of Minnesota — nominally, at least, on the ground that while in Congress he had voted against sending essential supplies to United States troops fighting in Mexico during the late war. Such was the reason given by the leading Democratic newspaper in Washington, the *Union*, edited by Thomas Ritchie.<sup>18</sup> No doubt this was a flimsy excuse for a purely partisan display of power, since other Whigs whose votes in the House had paralleled Mc Gaughey's were confirmed for appointive jobs in the course of the next four years. So far as Mc Gaughey was concerned, however, he was through as a Minnesota gubernatorial prospect. Zachary Taylor perforce turned his attention to other active and passive candidates for the governorship.

William Pennington is remembered by students for his services as governor of New Jersey from 1837 to 1843, and also as the victor in the prolonged speakership contest in the Thirty-sixth Congress. It is not widely known that President Taylor offered him the governorship of Minnesota Territory after the Senate's rejection of Mc Gaughey. The record shows that this was the case, and he was confirmed by the Senate, but Pennington declined the honor.<sup>19</sup> An older man than Mc Gaughey, Pennington was far better known to the country at large, and he possessed the administrative experience which the position called for. A blunt, brusque, dominating personality, the New Jersey lawyer was ambitious for a diplomatic mission, which he did not get. He appeared better suited for the West than for the East or for the courts of Europe. Both his earlier and his later career suggest that Pennington was considerably less tactful, and perhaps less effective, than the individual who finally landed in the governor's chair at St. Paul. Moreover, it is probable that Pennington, like Mc Gaughey, was proposed for the Minnesota helm as much because his state lacked cabinet representation as for more personal reasons. New Jersey was one of the banner Whig states of

<sup>18</sup> *Washington Daily Union*, March 20, 1849; *Senate Executive Proceedings*, 8:89; Schuyler Colfax to Caleb B. Smith, April 2, 1849, Smith Papers, Library of Congress. Colfax blamed Senators Jesse D. Bright and James Whitcomb of Indiana for Mc Gaughey's rejection.

<sup>19</sup> *Senate Executive Proceedings*, 8:93, 98; Hugh McD. Clokie, "William Pennington," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 14:442; *Washington Daily Whig*, April 4, 1849.

the Union. Recognition of William Pennington may have been Taylor's way of acknowledging the state's prestige.

When Pennington turned down the governorship, the next man recommended by Taylor was the young and aggressive Alexander Ramsey, who was indeed a happy choice. Since he was born in 1815 near Harrisburg, he was only thirty-three years old when Taylor gave him the appointment. Nevertheless, for so youthful a participant in public affairs, he was relatively experienced in government and in party management. Already he had served two terms in Congress as a representative from Pennsylvania. It is probable that his record in the House helped him gain the Minnesota governorship, but his recent work as chairman of the Pennsylvania Whig central committee was an even better talking point. Because of the emphasis in history texts on the Barnburner-Old Hunker split in New York in 1848, with the resulting plurality triumph there for Taylor, it is not generally remembered that Pennsylvania also was a pivotal state in that spirited contest. As a matter of record, the eyes of Whigs and Democrats alike — in all parts of the nation — were focused on Pennsylvania during the final month or two of the campaign. Money was poured into the Keystone State. Popular orators were imported wholesale. Although the present writer believes that the Native Americans headed by Lewis C. Levin held the balance of power, the Whig organization — of which Ramsey was the dynamo — was accorded much of the credit for Taylor's Pennsylvania victory.<sup>20</sup>

Ramsey might have been nominated for the Minnesota governor's berth in the first place, in lieu of McGaughey or Pennington, had not Pennsylvania already been recognized — in the initial distribution of major patronage — when the president named William M. Meredith, a Philadelphia lawyer, as secretary of the treasury. Deputations

<sup>20</sup> Horace Greeley to Weed, October 28, 1848, Greeley Papers, New-York Historical Society; Philip Greely, Jr., to Weed, October 28, November 2, 6, 1848; Seth C. Hawley to Alvah Hunt, November 2, 1848, Weed Papers; Joseph Paxton to Ramsey, September 7, 1849, Ramsey Papers, Minnesota Historical Society; *Buffalo Daily Republic*, November 4, 1848; *Washington Daily Whig*, April 4, 1849; Allan Nevins, ed., *Polk: The Diary of a President*, 350 (New York, 1929). For biographical material on Ramsey and some discussion of his appointment, see James H. Baker, "Alexander Ramsey," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10:726; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:248 (St. Paul, 1921); and Solon J. Buck, "Alexander Ramsey," in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 15:341.

from North, South, East, and West were storming the executive mansion daily to advance the prospects of favorite sons of the various states for any available plum. Men whose states had no cabinet members could and did argue that, in the further distribution of the spoils, their candidates should be given precedence over Pennsylvania and the six other commonwealths from which Taylor's official family hailed. That Ramsey was able to win the governorship despite this handicap is a tribute to his ability, as well as to his friends at court.

The Minnesota career of Governor Ramsey is too well known to necessitate detailing here. After heading the territorial establishment from 1849 to 1853, he was mayor of St. Paul in 1855, governor by election during the critical period from 1860 to 1863, a United States Senator for nearly twelve years, secretary of war under President Rutherford B. Hayes, and finally chairman of the Utah commission.<sup>21</sup> It might be said without overstatement that no other Minnesotan of his time was a stronger or more compelling force in the Whig and later the Republican party. Considering his prominence and success in Minnesota, it is amusing to realize on what an accidental basis Alexander Ramsey originally went out to St. Paul from the East. McGaughey died in 1852, and Pennington in 1862. Long after these two Zachary Taylor nominees passed away, the erstwhile leader of the Pennsylvania Whig central committee was a personage of note in his adopted bailiwick.

In addition to Ramsey, President Taylor appointed many other early leaders of Minnesota to their first positions of trust in the territory. Outstanding among these was Aaron Goodrich, born in upstate New York but more recently an attorney in Stewart County, Tennessee. As chief justice of Minnesota Territory, he helped set up the laws and code of legal practice of the new state. An orator of note and a scholar of some distinction, he was later an author and a diplomat, and he became one of the founders of the Republican party in Minnesota.<sup>22</sup> Still other Taylor appointees were David

<sup>21</sup> Baker in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10:726-736; Buck, in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 15:341.

<sup>22</sup> Harry J. Carman and Reinhard H. Luthin, *Lincoln and the Patronage*, 98 (New York, 1943); J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and of the County of Ramsey*, 219-221 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4 — St. Paul, 1876).

Cooper of Maryland, a brother of Senator Cooper, and Bradley B. Meeker of Kentucky as judges of the territorial supreme court, Alexander M. Mitchell of Ohio as marshal, Henry L. Moss as United States district attorney, and Charles K. Smith as territorial secretary.<sup>23</sup> Mitchell alone was a personal friend of Taylor. A graduate of West Point, he had fought under "Old Rough and Ready" in the Mexican War and had been wounded in action. Meeker owed his appointment to the influence of his uncle, Senator Truman Smith of Connecticut. Correspondence in the Library of Congress shows that the leading Whigs in Kentucky regarded his selection with disfavor; they had candidates of their own, and resented Smith's interference where Bluegrass patronage was involved. Shortly after Meeker was appointed, the rumor spread that he had suddenly died—in which case Leslie Combs might have been designated in his stead.<sup>24</sup> The possibility of Combs's substitution for the supposedly deceased Meeker presents an interesting "iffy" to the historian. Combs was a friend of both Senator Henry Clay and Governor John J. Crittenden. His selection for a place on the Minnesota tribunal conceivably might have gone a long way toward healing the breach between these two eminent leaders of rival Kentucky Whig factions. Instead, Meeker turned up alive and kicking. And Clay eventually became the principal opponent of President Taylor in Congress, at least on the Whig side of the Senate.

During his sixteen-month occupancy of the White House, Zachary Taylor influenced the development of Minnesota Territory along various secondary lines, chiefly with regard to military security and Indian policy. The setting aside of the reservation that became Fort Ripley is an example.<sup>25</sup> Most of this influence, however, was of a rather routine nature and need not be recounted here. It is a curious coincidence that the one president who spent considerable time

<sup>23</sup> James M. Goodhue, Smith's bitter political opponent, later wrote that the secretary "had stolen *into* the Territory, and stolen *in* the Territory, and would in the end, steal *out* of the Territory." See Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 52 (St. Paul, 1948). On Cooper and his family connections, see W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest*, 569 (St. Paul, 1888). Brief sketches of Minnesota's territorial officers appear in Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 2: 425-428 (New York, 1908).

<sup>24</sup> Crittenden to Clayton, April 6, 11, 1849, Clayton Papers, Library of Congress; Clayton to Crittenden, April 18, May 7, 1849, Crittenden Papers.

<sup>25</sup> F. Paul Prucha, "Fort Ripley: The Post and the Military Reservation," in *Minnesota History*, 28: 206-209 (September, 1947).

within Minnesota's present boundaries was so largely instrumental in designing the pattern of the future state through the individuals he advanced for positions of power and honor. It is even more illuminating that so many of his appointees, who gave the territory and the state faithful service in the days that followed, were selected on what moderns would call the hit-or-miss basis of the spoils system. All were Whigs. Had Taylor been a Democrat, presumably all would have been Democrats. Such was the accepted procedure of the times. In Ramsey's case, the rejection of McGaughey and Pennington's disinclination to serve may have been little less than providential. On the precedent of past performances, it is questionable whether either of these men possessed the unusual qualifications of temperament—to mention only one trait—which were Ramsey's stock in trade. One wonders what might have happened in Minnesota had the election of 1848 hinged on some state other than Pennsylvania. Would Alexander Ramsey then have been considered eligible? Who might have been chosen in his place? Would that unidentifiable person have acquitted himself so well?

Taylor's administration was largely taken up with the acute problem of slavery extension, dramatized by the acquisition of the present states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming as a result of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Although he was the owner of over a hundred Negro slaves, and the bulk of his estate was tied up in cotton and sugar, Zachary Taylor proved himself a nationalist and set his face sternly against slavery's westward expansion.<sup>26</sup> Why a wealthy planter would think and feel this way—acting, as it seemed, contrary to his own ultimate economic interest—has yet to be explained in detail and with entire satisfaction. Taylor's death in July, 1850, removed the acute crisis which his resolution and stubbornness helped bring about. When the final Union showdown came a little less than eleven years later, another and a greater nationalist—Abraham Lincoln—found the Minnesota Taylor had protected and organized as responsive to his Union leadership as any other commonwealth in the nation.

<sup>26</sup> Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, 1:329 (New York, 1947); James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, 1:134 (New York, 1896).



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).