

# *A Territorial Delegate in Action*

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WHEN HENRY HASTINGS SIBLEY, Minnesota's first territorial delegate to Congress, made his initial appearance on the floor of the House in 1848 "there was some disappointment."<sup>1</sup> "It was expected," he wrote, "that the delegate from this remote region would make his debut, if not in full Indian costume, at least with some peculiarities of dress and manners." Members of the House saw instead a tall, dark-haired gentleman of flawless manners and broad education.

During his four years as a delegate from Minnesota Territory, Sibley was the clearinghouse for much that related to the region he represented. His activities, as reflected in the letters he received during his four years in Washington, indicate that some of his work was not centered in the House of Representatives and that part of his time was spent on projects not strictly in the line of duty. Many of the delegate's correspondents asked his assistance in investigating land claims, pensions, and territorial positions. Sibley was obliged to spend much time and effort both in the land and pension offices, ensuring to residents of Minnesota Territory the land they had settled on and improved, or obtaining for them pensions to which they were justly entitled.<sup>2</sup>

Although the delegate had no official authority to act as a placement officer, residents of the territory nevertheless expected him to exert considerable influence over appointments. Sibley, too, felt that he should be consulted in the selection of territorial officials, especially if territorial residents were being considered for positions. In this Governor Alexander Ramsey agreed with him. Outsiders as territorial officers were not well received in Minnesota, and Sibley probably was the only person in Washington qualified to speak on a Minnesotan's suitability for office. The appointment of a governor and judges from the Eastern states brought

<sup>1</sup> Sibley was then a delegate from the part of Wisconsin Territory west of the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, excluded when Wisconsin became a state in 1848. In this position he secured passage of the bill creating Minnesota Territory; he returned to Congress the next year as Minnesota's first territorial delegate. Sibley, "Reminiscences of the Early Days of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:270.

<sup>2</sup> See David Olmsted to Sibley, January 15, 1851. Sibley Papers; Sibley to James E. Heath, May 24, 1851, Sibley Letter Book no. 4; *Congressional Globe*, 32 Congress, 1 session, 1, 109, 2324. Much of the present narrative is based upon Sibley's correspondence, which he carefully preserved. Unless otherwise indicated, letters cited herein are in the Sibley Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

little criticism, but there was evident discontent over the naming of outsiders as secretary and marshal. Appointees had scarcely arrived in Minnesota when a movement was launched to have them replaced by residents. Sibley stated his position on this subject in a letter to John H. Stevens, dated January 30, 1853. "There are scores of applicants for every office in Minnesota from other States," he wrote, "but I shall war against all importations except perhaps of judges."<sup>3</sup>

Constituents besieged the delegate with all manner of letters asking personal favors. He was approached by those who wanted to borrow money for investment in Minnesota lands, and, in some instances, by Minnesotans stranded in Washington without sufficient funds to return home. In 1851, when Judge Allen Pierce of St. Paul asked the delegate for a loan of fifty dollars, Sibley replied that he had advanced so much money to farmers for use in entering their lands that his own finances were strained. Nevertheless, he sent Pierce the money. John McNiff, a farmer living near the mouth of the St. Croix River, asked the delegate through a friend, William H. Forbes, to forward sixty or seventy dollars to his mother in Ireland, so that she and his sister might take passage to America and thus escape the situation resulting from the famine of 1845-47. Sibley obligingly did so, and upon his return to Minnesota was reimbursed by McNiff.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the delegate frequently was asked to subscribe to newspapers and to send publications to his friends. A letter from the territorial secretary, Charles K. Smith, is characteristic of many found in Sibley's correspondence. "I shall be greatly obliged if you will call at the *Intelligencer and Union* offices and pay my subscription for those papers for the last year, if unpaid and have the papers continued to me for next year," wrote Smith.<sup>5</sup>

Other requests made by Minnesotans indicate that their relationships with the delegate were both close and personal. Martin McLeod wanted Sibley to buy him a good gold watch, "cased for traveling," and costing not more than \$60.00. Sibley's brother-in-law, Dr. Thomas Potts of St. Paul, asked him to "Tell Sarah [*Mrs. Sibley*] she might write to Abb [*Mrs. Potts*] . . . and give her a description of the 'Fashions' for under clothes." After telling Sibley that the Reverend James L. Breck and other Episcopal clergymen planned to establish a school in Minnesota, the Reverend Ezekiel G. Gear appealed to the delegate for a donation for

<sup>3</sup> Sibley to Stevens, January 30, 1853, and to Ramsey, January 28, 1853, Ramsey Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. See also *Minnesota Pioneer*, November 8, 15, 1849.

<sup>4</sup> Sibley to Pierce, October 26, 1851, Sibley Letter Book no. 4; Forbes to Sibley, February 12, 1850. Nancy MacKaniff's letter to her son John McNiff is also in the Sibley Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Smith to Sibley, February 10, 1851.

the project. He also wanted Sibley to call at a certain address in New York and select a new dress coat for him, specifying that he pay not more than \$32.50 for it. Some residents of the Canadian settlement on the Red River commissioned Sibley to buy a church bell for them and send it to St. Paul. A few months later a St. Paul paper reported the fate of the bell: "A part of the last Red River train from St. Paul last summer, was robbed by the Indians. They robbed them, amongst other things, of a church bell which the train was taking through to the Selkirk Settlement."<sup>6</sup>

Many prospective settlers asked the territorial delegate about the Minnesota country, and Sibley conscientiously replied encouraging them to settle there. John Deming of Mishawaka, Indiana, wanted to establish a nursery and raise fruit trees in Minnesota. He wanted to know, "What is the character of the winter? Have you late spring frosts? What is the description of wild fruits natural to the country?" When a man from Maine who had been in the lumber business considered moving his family to Minnesota, he wrote to the delegate for information about business opportunities there. The correspondent revealed that many of his neighbors had gone to Minnesota and others were contemplating leaving for the territory in the fall.<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 1850 Dr. Potts wrote Sibley that a Danish clergyman who was interested in bringing a large number of Danish and Norwegian families to Minnesota had been in St. Paul and had consulted with Governor Ramsey. "We want such a population," he wrote, "for they are honest industrious good farmers." Probably Potts was referring to the Reverend C. L. Clausen of Rock County, Wisconsin, who is mentioned in a letter written to Sibley the following winter by George Merkle of Rockport, Indiana. Clausen expected seven or eight thousand of his countrymen to emigrate in the spring, and since the price of land in Wisconsin was high, Merkle suggested that Sibley write Clausen about a suitable location for the newcomers in Minnesota.<sup>8</sup>

The Minnesota delegate made frequent attempts to tell the folks back home about important issues before Congress. At the beginning of each session he wrote to friends in the territory, including the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, describing the make-up of Congress. Sibley's correspondence for 1849-50, when the extension of slavery into the territories and the admission of California as a free state were leading questions

<sup>6</sup> McLeod to Sibley, September 16, 1850; Gear to Sibley, August 23, 1850; Potts to Sibley, January 15, 1850; *Minnesota Pioneer*, March 6, 1850.

<sup>7</sup> Deming to Sibley, March 2, 1850; Hiram Rose to Sibley, July 18, 1850. Similar letters from Jason Rogers of Baltimore and P. P. Furber of Milo, Piscataquis County, Maine, are dated July 23 and December 6, 1850.

<sup>8</sup> Potts to Sibley, May 29, 1850; Merkle to Sibley, February 13, 1851.

before Congress, is rich in references to these dominant issues. The delegate did not criticize members of Congress for the views they held, but merely reported what was taking place.

Sibley's practice of publishing articles of general interest in the territorial press gradually caused many Minnesotans to feel that he was obliged to give his personal opinions on all questions. This was a short-sighted view, for the delegate could not afford to take a definite public stand on the issues which were dividing Congress. While in Washington he took care to speak on measures affecting only his section of the country. To obtain passage of his own measures he needed the support of a majority, and he could give little or no attention to political or sectional differences. The delegate could have his own political connections in the territory, but in the national capital he was forced to cultivate members of all parties in order to obtain their support.

As a territorial delegate, Sibley occupied a delicate position. Although he had a seat in the House of Representatives and had the right of debate, he was not permitted to vote. He could, however, offer motions, present resolutions, introduce bills, and appear before committees. Since he did not have a vote which could be solicited by other House members, the territorial delegate was largely dependent upon his personal ability, influence, and charm to obtain passage of his bills.

Fully aware of the delicacy of his role, Sibley realized that his constituents looked to him as the one official through whom they could gain Congressional recognition and favor. As the representative of a rapidly expanding region, the delegate was kept busy obtaining federal appropriations to meet the requirements of the growing Minnesota country. Among the new territory's most pressing needs were more roads and better mail service. Acting upon Governor Ramsey's recommendations, the first territorial legislature dispatched memorials to Sibley asking federal appropriations for these improvements. Sibley promptly presented the memorials to Congress and introduced appropriate bills.<sup>9</sup> While the bills were in committee, Sibley was busy seeing legislators and appearing before the committees to urge the needed appropriations. He corresponded with some of his constituents to tell them of his progress, and wrote regularly to the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, frequently asking that his letters be published so that Minnesotans might be informed of the progress of the bills.

Sibley also consulted with the heads of various government departments in his efforts to improve chances for favorable action on Minne-

<sup>9</sup> Under the dates October 20 and October 27, 1849, the memorials are filed among the Sibley Papers. See also *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 session, 89, 94.

sota bills. On some occasions he visited government offices to gather information needed for answering direct questions which might arise during the course of House debates. Early in the winter of 1850 he went to S. R. Hobbie, first assistant postmaster general, to ask about possibilities for improving mail service between Prairie du Chien and St. Paul. On February 5, 1850, Hobbie replied, "The Dept. is constrained to decline the application for two additional weekly trips . . . as it appears that the cost of the route will be over three fold the amount of its revenue."<sup>10</sup>

In May, 1850, Sibley introduced a bill asking for an appropriation of thirty thousand dollars for the construction of five roads in the new territory. The routes of three were to follow the lines of settlement along river valleys, where small towns had developed and where mail service was sorely needed. The others were intended to facilitate the movement of troops and supplies to forts and Indian agencies.

On the floor of the House during the debate on this bill Sibley proved anew his value to the territory. A Congressman from Tennessee attacked the measure, contending that the territories should follow the example of the states and build their own roads. Sibley immediately replied, citing figures to show that Wisconsin Territory had been liberally provided for in this respect; during the period from 1836 to 1845 it had received a hundred and four thousand dollars for roads and harbors. He also reasoned that since the government was the largest landowner in Minnesota Territory, it should construct roads to open up lands to settlers. He pointed out that since some of the roads led to military posts and Indian agencies, the government would save more than the sum requested in reduced costs on the transportation of military supplies. A Virginia Congressman objected to a part of the bill which appropriated five thousand dollars for the construction of a military road from the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Big Sioux on the Missouri. Since the army had not recommended it, the speaker was anxious to know whether this was to be just another road for the convenience of territorial residents. In his reply Sibley pointed out that the road could serve the double purpose of transporting troops and promoting prosperity in the territory, for it was to run through the center of the Minnesota country. With the addition of an amendment providing that the territorial governor submit a detailed annual report on the expenditure of monies appropriated for the use of the territory, the bill passed both the House and the Senate, encountering little opposition in the upper house. The grant

<sup>10</sup> Hobbie to Sibley, February 5, 1850.

of thirty thousand dollars for the construction of roads was only one of many Congressional appropriations for this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Another territorial need is reflected in a letter which Ramsey wrote to Sibley in February, 1850. The governor reminded the delegate that "We are in daily experience of the necessity of a Territorial prison, and I believe the general sentiment is that [it] is our greatest want & you could not better serve the Territory than by getting us an appropriation for such purpose. At present our prisoners are incarcerated at Ft. Snelling;—but this should not be: twenty thousand dollars would build us a serviceable prison."<sup>12</sup>

When the territory was organized the federal government had appropriated twenty thousand dollars for buildings to be erected after the territorial capital was permanently located. Because the territorial legislature could not decide where to put the capital, Congress would not permit the erection of buildings at St. Paul, the temporary seat of government. Ramsey and others realized the need for a territorial prison and they felt that the federal government should bear the expense. Sibley introduced a bill appropriating money for public buildings in Minnesota Territory, and in March it was favorably reported from the committee on territories. Several weeks later the Minnesota delegate took the floor for the measure and obtained twenty thousand dollars for a prison. The same bill provided for the expenditure of another twenty thousand dollars for the erection of a capitol at St. Paul as authorized by the Minnesota Organic Act of March 3, 1849.<sup>13</sup>

After the bill had passed the House, Sibley made it clear that his responsibilities had not been confined to the floor of the House. "The House behaved very magnanimously toward me," he wrote to Ramsey, "but I had paved the way for success by long & persevering *electioneering* previously. I consider these important measures as safe for I do not anticipate any danger in the Senate. I shall however not cease to work for them, until they are entirely secured. When that takes place, and we have \$80,000 of Uncle Sam's money ready to be applied, (including the \$20,000 for public buildings) I think I shall allow myself a *leetle* frolic by way of relaxation, for thus far I have had but a dog's life of it."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 session, 1074, 1075, 1089, 1348, 1356. For the complete bill, see *Statutes at Large*, 9:439.

<sup>12</sup> Ramsey to Sibley, February 28, 1850.

<sup>13</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 session, 465, 1074. The Organic Act provided that the legislative assembly was to hold its first meeting at St. Paul. The governor and the assembly were to proscribe for the permanent seat of government, and the territory could then spend \$20,000 for public buildings. United States, *Statutes at Large*, 9:407. Until a capitol was built, the territorial legislature met in rented quarters in St. Paul.

<sup>14</sup> Sibley to Ramsey, May 30, 1850, Ramsey Papers.

The bill was challenged in the Senate by Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina, who questioned the need for a prison in such a wild and remote area as Minnesota. Butler suggested that the federal government could save money by hanging the culprits to saplings. He also questioned the wisdom of granting funds for buildings in a temporary capital. He ventured to guess that at some future date the Minnesota legislature might decide to move the capital and then want more money. Senators Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, George W. Jones of Iowa, and Henry Dodge of Wisconsin—all friends of Minnesota Territory—took the floor to reply to Butler's objections and the measure was passed.<sup>15</sup>

In March, 1853, at the close of the Thirty-second Congress, Sibley retired from the office of delegate. He was anxious to return to his home at Mendota and to give attention to his private business. His withdrawal from public office was of short duration, however, for in 1854 he was elected to represent Dakota County in the territorial legislature, and in 1858 he became the first governor of the state of Minnesota. During his years as a territorial delegate Sibley had served Minnesota Territory well. In the position of governor he continued to foster the prosperity of the new state.

<sup>15</sup> Butler's prediction almost became a reality when in 1857 the territorial legislature voted to move the capital to St. Peter. The scheme failed because of an unparliamentary proceeding. See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:381-387 (St. Paul, 1921).

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MEMBERS OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY who join its annual historical pilgrimage for a visit to the Pipestone Quarry on September 23 and 24 will be especially interested in the earliest description of this historic spot to be published by an eyewitness. He was George Catlin, the famed artist of the American Indians, who explored the Pipestone area in 1836.

After an adventurous journey westward from Fort Snelling, Catlin "found the far-famed quarry or fountain of the Red Pipe," long held in reverence by the Indians. "The principal and most striking feature of this place," wrote Catlin, "is a perpendicular wall of close-grained, compact quartz, of twenty-five and thirty feet in elevation, running nearly North and South with its face to the West. . . . This beautiful wall is horizontal, and stratified in several distinct layers of light grey, and rose or flesh-coloured quartz; and for most of the way . . . highly polished or glazed, as if by ignition." Catlin reported that in a level prairie at the base of the wall "the Indians procure the red stone for their pipes, by digging through the soil and several slaty layers of the red stone." This spot, he explained, had been for generations a place of resort for many "different tribes, who have made their regular pilgrimages here to renew their pipes."



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