ONLY TWO SHORT YEARS after Minnesota achieved statehood, there appeared, as the First Annual Report of the commissioner of statistics, a valuable little volume entitled Minnesota: Its Place among the States. This work and a second report published in 1862 contain a wealth of factual information on the agriculture, climate, commerce, and manufactures of the new state. Both have long been familiar to students of Minnesota history. Not so well known, however, is the story of how their author, Joseph A. Wheelock, came to hold the commissioner's office and how he persuaded economy-minded legislators to publish his reports.¹

Wheelock, who is usually remembered as a successful newspaperman, arrived in Minnesota in 1850 at the age of nineteen. A frail youth, he had left his home in Nova Scotia two years earlier and made his way westward in search of a healthful climate. After serving as editor of several St. Paul newspapers in the 1850s, he helped to found and became one of the owners of the St. Paul Press in 1861. When that paper consolidated with the Pioneer in 1875, Wheelock became editor in chief of the St. Paul Pioneer Press, a position he held until

¹ The material in this article was adapted from Professor Wilson's unpublished doctoral thesis on "Joseph Albert Wheelock: A Study of His Life and of the Impact of His Editorial Direction in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Northwest," submitted in the University of Minnesota School of Journalism in 1953. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.
his death more than three decades later. Thus, during the course of his long career, he earned a substantial place in the annals of Minnesota journalism.\(^2\)

While editing the *Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul in 1859, Wheelock conceived the idea of publishing a book that would call attention to Minnesota's location, natural resources, trade routes, climate, agricultural productivity, railroad prospects, water power, and social institutions. He hoped that the state would employ him as a statistician and publish his work. Such an arrangement, he believed, might make financially possible his marriage to his fiancée, Katharine French of Concord, New Hampshire. To pave the way for his new venture, Wheelock resigned his newspaper editorship in October, 1859, and began a campaign to obtain legislative approval for a bill to create the office of Minnesota commissioner of statistics.\(^3\)

The idea for a statistical pamphlet had been in the young journalist's mind for some months before he gave up his position on the paper, and he had already begun to collect data for such a book. Soon after severing connections with the *Pioneer and Democrat* he outlined his future plans in a letter to Miss French. "I am going to get a bill through the Legislature creating the office of Commissioner of Statistics — in which case the Governor is going to appoint me," he wrote. "The Legislature will print my book, and probably order a few hundred copies, and I shall have the entire benefit of the copyright — worth one or two thousand dollars probably this year and if times improve twice as much next. Good scheme, eh?"\(^4\)

The conditions under which Wheelock pressed ahead with his statistical work were hardly ideal. He described his lodgings in a "bizarre brown building" as "quite too small to contain a great deal of comfort." He informed Miss French that in his "economic scale of living," his room and adjoining bedroom cost him the "enormous sum of fifty dollars rent per year." The rooms were on the second floor, with one large window looking out upon the street and curtained with the remains of an ancient dressing gown which he had worn in better days. A broken pane at the top was stuffed with a pair of trousers from the same epoch. The rooms were at the end of a dark hall.\(^5\)

On December 4, 1859, this "snug little hole" was destroyed by fire when a "wizard touched the ghostly fabric . . . and it vanished into thin air." Wheelock was out at the time, and when he reached the scene the adjoining wooden building was already "sheeted with flame." Theodore French, his fiancée's brother, and a score of other men had rescued Wheelock's furniture, books, and most of his papers, but some completed sections of the manuscript of his statistics book were lost.\(^6\)

"Dreadfully cold" temperatures had driven Wheelock from the building shortly before the fire. He wrote Miss French on December 4 that he "never had such experience of cold" as he had in those rooms. "I absolutely burnt up a half a cord of wood in five days," he told her, "and then had to sit with my overcoat on. ... I wondered as I watched the fierce red fire climbing into the windows . . . whether as the hot flames filled my old room full to the brim, it had finally got warm enough for me to have sat there without my overcoat on." Then he continued, "Nothing pleased me so much . . . as the cordial good-will which lots of people, whom I did not know, manifested for the safety of my trash. Not a book was lost, nothing . . .

\(\text{"For published information on Wheelock's career, see Richard B. Eide, North Star Editor: A Brief Sketch of Joseph A. Wheelock (New York, 1944).}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{2} Wheelock to Miss French, October 30, 1859. Unless otherwise noted, all manuscripts cited are among the Wheelock Papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{3} Wheelock to Miss French, April 7, December 13, 1859; Ellen Wheelock, sketch of the Wheelock and French families, p. 20. A copy of the latter is in the author's possession.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{4} Wheelock to Miss French, November 27, 1859.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{5} Wheelock to Miss French, December 4, 1859.}\)
was stolen.... It was, in fact, a very pleasant fire... although it entails upon me several weeks hard work to replenish the loss to my desk."

New Year's Day, 1860, found Wheelock pulling political strings. On this bitter cold day he penned a small paragraph to be inserted in Governor Alexander Ramsey's inaugural address recommending the appointment of a state commissioner of statistics. While returning from the governor's mansion that evening, he froze an ear.

The next day Wheelock witnessed the inauguration of Ramsey and heard the governor read his address. In the paragraph recommending the statistics appointment Ramsey said: "The collection and classification of the statistics of the State, and the intelligent dissemination of the facts thus got together, would greatly promote our interests, and afford the best of arguments in favor of immigration. It would be well, at this time to provide for such collection and arrangement of public statistics." To keep expenses down, the governor suggested that the state should "let the officer in charge of the bureau [of statistics], in lieu of a salary have the exclusive copyright of any compilation from, or publication of such statistics, which he should choose to make. This, with the addition of a small appropriation for stationary [sic] and postage requisite for the office, would, I think, be sufficient to effect the desired object."

DURING THE MONTH following Ramsey's inauguration the outlook for Wheelock's appointment as Minnesota's statistics commissioner was in a "state of suspended animation." A bill to create a bureau of statistics, introduced in the legislature on January 8, made slow progress. On January 21, Wheelock complained that he had been forced to spend "three or four weeks of my precious time to get it as far as it has gone." By January 28 he was weary and almost sorry he had attempted the project. "I am terribly out of patience with those wooden headed Legislators," he wrote. "I have had to fight my little scheme inch by inch, and to devote my whole time to logrolling and lobbying [sic] and buttonholing and thimble rigging." He reported that he had not accepted a single social invitation during the weeks of waiting.

On February 1 Wheelock protested that the pecuniary provisions of the bill were "so restricted by amendments" that it did not entirely meet with his approval. Two days later he informed Miss French that Representative William L. Banning was opposing the statistics bill in the House. Wheelock wrote that he doubted the legislator "could succeed in defeating it," but warned in anger that "if he does it will be the worst little job for him which he ever undertook." He was exuberant when the bill passed the House. "It was a beautiful thing to see the way the enemies of the bill were whipped out in the House," he reported. "The difficulties I had to contend with in getting it passed may be estimated from the fact that the prevailing hobby of the session is Retrenchment, and I count it no small triumph that — while they have been cutting down the salaries of every officer of the Government and reducing the fees of every petty functionary in the country and even the per diem of the members of the Legislature themselves — that I was able to procure the assent of a large majority of both branches to a measure which creates an additional office and new expenditures. The best joke of all," he confided, "was however that I roped in the old Governor himself who recommended the measure in his message — although entre nous I did not vote for him in the last election. That of course is in strict confidence. I shan't tell him so.
unless he should ask me. You see I am getting to be a very rascally politician.”

Wheelock was ill in his room at the Fuller House on the day the Senate voted final approval. Helpless and exhausted he lay on the bed unable to get an answer to his feeble calls for assistance. He finally crawled down the stairs, paid his bill, and left the hotel to accept the “kind hospitality” of a friend – James Wickes Taylor. That night Wheelock was routed from his bed by flames which destroyed the Taylor home.

A few days later, on February 6, Wheelock was appointed commissioner of statistics for Minnesota. He had already moved into the Capitol preparatory to beginning work. Under the terms of the law creating his position, Wheelock was “annually to collect and compile from official and any other reliable sources, the statistics of the State of Minnesota, including all useful facts which he may be able to gather, bearing upon the material and social interests of the State, and tending to spread abroad a correct knowledge of its resources and progress.” He was to hold office for five years without salary. A hundred dollars was appropriated for stationery, postage, and circulars. For a small fee, state and county officers were required to furnish him with information from their records, and they were to be fined fifty dollars for neglect or refusal.

Wheelock’s work on the statistical report was delayed when his friend Theodore French became ill and died in February, 1860. Miss French and her father traveled from New Hampshire to St. Paul for the funeral, and she remained there for a time with her bereaved sister-in-law. This gave her an opportunity to assist Wheelock, who was working as rapidly as possible to complete his book. She prepared some of the tables and added “a great many long columns of figures.” Modestly reporting to her father that her work was “not much in itself,” she added that it would nevertheless have required “a great deal” of Wheelock’s “precious time.”

The credit of the state of Minnesota was improving, wrote Ben S. Brodbelt of the state auditor’s office on May 31, when he submitted financial material for inclusion in the book. “You will readily perceive,” he told Wheelock, “the difference between democratic & republican rule, notwithstanding the cry of retrenchment.” He added, “It seems to me that you might make a sort of little note or something of that kind so that people could see the real truth, but as you claim to be neutral? perhaps it might not be in good taste.” Then a hint of the presidential election campaign raging at the time crept into the letter, and Brodbelt suggested that Wheelock “vote for [Stephen] Douglas, as I am sure you prefer him to that long legged rail mauler [Abraham Lincoln].”

Wheelock completed the manuscript of his report late in May, and the lieutenant governor, Ignatius Donnelly, acting in Governor Ramsey’s absence, authorized publication “at the expense of the State, [of] not more than 3,000 copies of a book containing the statistics collected.” On May 25, W. F. Dunbar, the state auditor, approved an order providing the necessary funds. “The State Printer having delegated to J. A. Wheelock the Commissioner of Statistics the privilege of procuring the publication of his book whenever he may choose,” Dunbar wrote, “this is to guarantee that when 250 copies of the said book are published and delivered to the State Library, according to the terms of the Law, orders

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will be drawn by me, upon the State Treasury for the Amount of the Appropriation, to the order of said Commissioner.” He noted that $510.00 had been appropriated by the legislature to cover the cost of printing the report. Wheelock arranged with Case, Lockwood and Company of Hartford, Connecticut, to print his book. He personally took the manuscript there in June when he accompanied Miss French on her trip home to New Hampshire.

Upon his return to St. Paul on July 28, Wheelock found the prospects for the sale of the volume encouraging. “I am in hopes of receiving the first shipment of books immediately,” he wrote to his printers on July 31. “The country never was so prosperous—everybody feels well. My book will sell well if it comes soon.” He asked that about fifty copies be bound in cloth with the title stamped in gilt letters.

The first books arrived in St. Paul about August 12, and copies were placed on sale immediately. Wheelock wrote that he expected them to “go off with a little effort like hot cakes,” since much of the material contained in the report had never before been assembled in a single volume. There, for example, Wheelock reported that in 1859 Minnesota exported $160,000 worth of furs, 10,300 bushels of cranberries, 203,000 pounds of ginseng, and 369,625 bushels of wheat. He wrote: “Two years ago, Minnesota imported flour to supply the deficiencies in her own product. She has now probably one hundred and forty grist mills, one hundred and twenty-two being the sum of those actually reported to this office. Some of these mills are very large and fine, and the quality of flour produced rivals the best eastern brands.”

In general, the book contains in its 174 pages information on the state’s “Commanding Geographical Position,” its climate, rainfall, soil, agriculture, crops, commerce, freight rates, steamboat traffic, railroad

15 Donnelly’s statement and a copy of Dunbar’s letter are in the Wheelock Papers.
16 Wheelock to Miss French, July 28, 1860; to Case, Lockwood and Company, July 31, 1860.
17 Wheelock to Miss French, August 12, 1860; Minnesota: Its Place among the States, 121, 155.
prospects, exports, and manufactures of lumber and flour. It describes and locates the principal towns, gives the area of counties, the population, the number of voters, tax valuations, the number of schools and churches, appropriations for roads, and data on Minnesota's public lands.

Although Wheelock's printers were slow in making deliveries, his future sister-in-law was able to report in August, 1860, that "there is nothing like tardiness in the sale" of the book. Doubtless because the book was selling well, its author was "in fine spirits." He worked hard to promote sales. Late in October he went to Winona to organize a "movement to set on foot a subscription list among the business men for my book." He found "no difficulty in getting some of the prominent merchants" to organize a committee to canvass for subscriptions.

Readers of the St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat were urged to obtain copies for distribution among prospective settlers in the East. An article in the New York World, based on data from Wheelock's book, was written by the famed journalist Manton Marble, whose kind co-operation was much appreciated by Wheelock. The two men had become close friends in 1859 when they were companions on an expedition to the Red River Valley.

Evidence that Governor Ramsey approved of Wheelock's work is to be found in his annual message for 1862. The governor informed members of the legislature that "The labors of the Commissioner of Statistics are justly regarded as of the highest importance to the welfare of this new but partially known State. That indefatigable officer, by the collection and dissemination . . . of the statistical evidences of the progress and capabilities of Minnesota," Ramsey continued, "is sowing the seeds of a great appreciation of the State abroad, which has already had a marked influence, and cannot fail to result in great and lasting benefits." Ramsey added that a second report, which was then nearly completed by the commissioner, "will repay as an emigrant document a hundred fold the small expenditure incurred in its publication and distribution."

After his first report was published, Wheelock turned his energies to laying a "deep and broad foundation for the Bureau of Statistics." He was assured of the "cordial cooperation" of Governor Ramsey and other influential men in what he termed his "conspiracy" to obtain additional funds to carry on his statistics work. Wheelock predicted that the bureau would not "only be well endowed on its own individual nerve" but that it would "have some interesting features added to it" in the next legislative year.

These features, in the form of amendments to the original statistics act, reflect both the success of Wheelock's report and his adeptness at political logrolling. In a law approved by the legislature on March 8, 1861, a thousand dollars was provided to cover Wheelock's expenses in the preceding year, and an additional fifteen hundred dollars was appropriated for his salary and expenses in 1861. In the year following, a thousand dollars again was provided by the legislature to pay the commissioner's salary for 1862.

Apparently the financial returns from his statistics work lived up to Wheelock's expectations, for on May 14, 1861, after numerous delays and postponements, he was married to Miss French. Wheelock traveled to New Hampshire for the ceremony, and the couple then returned to St. Paul together.

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18 Lydia French to Mrs. Theodore French, Sr., August 16, 1860.
19 Wheelock to Miss French, October 29, November 1, 1860; St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat, October 1, 1860. For information on Marble, see Frank L. Mott, American Journalism, 351, 433 (New York, 1941); and Allen S. Will, in Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, 12:267 (New York, 1983).
IN ACCORDANCE with the provisions of the 1861 act, Wheelock’s Second Annual Report as commissioner of statistics appeared early in 1862. It took the form of a pamphlet of 126 pages bearing the title Minnesota: Its Progress and Capabilities. In his preface, the commissioner stressed the report’s usefulness to all individuals interested in promoting immigration into the state. To equip every Minnesotan to promote immigration effectively, “to provide him with arguments derived from the collective experience of the whole State, to enable him to present to his friends in other States or countries a fair, candid and truthful statement of facts officially authenticated, is one, and by no means the least important, of the objects of the publications of this bureau,” wrote Wheelock.

But it was not long before the young journalist began to lose interest in the statistics bureau. In January, 1861, Wheelock had joined William R. Marshall and Newton Bradley in establishing the St. Paul Press. Although his connection with it was at first somewhat camouflaged, Wheelock was the real projector and founder of the paper. As time passed and he failed to achieve for the bureau of statistics what he felt to be a “proper pecuniary footing,” he turned more and more to his journalistic duties.

On January 19, 1863, Governor Ramsey informed the legislature that Wheelock planned to resign as statistics commissioner as soon as his report for 1862, which was partly in type but which had been delayed “owing to the difficulty of collecting returns from the disorganized western counties,” was completed, or as soon as a successor was appointed. The governor added that Wheelock was willing to complete the report without pay and to make future annual reports gratuitously, provided suitable appropriations were made for hiring a clerk and for printing and postage. “I regard the services of Mr. Wheelock of such great value to the State . . . that I should consider his entire relinquishment of this office as a special loss, and, therefore, recommend that his offer be accepted,” Ramsey told the legislature.

Because economy was so essential during the critical era of the Sioux Uprising and the Civil War, the legislature decided that the statistical service could be dispensed with. Instead of accepting Wheelock’s offer, it abolished his office and ordered him to turn its files over to the secretary of state.

The two published reports produced by Wheelock as commissioner of statistics between December, 1859, and January, 1863, are excellent compilations on the Minnesota of that day. His own paper, the St. Paul Press, carried the following favorable editorial comment on February 10, 1862: “We are indeed fortunate in possessing a gentleman so eminently fitted as our present Commissioner of Statistics for the important task. We doubt if in the entire Northwest or perhaps the entire Union can there be found united in any other individual his many qualifications for the post. To the unwearied industry of the book-worm, he unites brilliancy of thought and a breadth of conception which adorns and renders grateful the most barren array of figures.” The editorial adds that it “required a broad mind to conceive” the statistics bureau, “persevering industry to develop it, educated skill to clearly present it.”

Six years were to elapse before the state of Minnesota again published statistics showing its progress. Then in 1869 the assistant secretary of state was charged with the task of compiling reports similar to those produced earlier by Wheelock. The slender volumes assembled by the youthful journalist in his brief years as commissioner of statistics remain an important source of information on the emerging state of the early 1860s. To them, students are indebted for many details concerning Minnesota in the dawning years of statehood.

Wheelock to Miss French, December 31, 1860, January 10, 1861.

House Journal, 1863, p. 53.

General Laws, 1863, p. 104.