MR. QUALEY has been professor of American history in
Carleton College, Northfield, since 1945. He is the author of
a study of Norwegian Settlement in the United States, which
appeared in 1938, and he now has in preparation a general
history of European emigration to America.

John Wesley North
and the MINNESOTA FRONTIER

CARLTON C. QUALEY

THE STORY of John Wesley North is of
more than ordinary significance, for he at­
tained prominence in four different sections
of the United States — Minnesota, Nevada,
Tennessee, and California. In each he fol­
lowed a pattern of optimistic promotion,
idealistic reform, and indifferent business
success — a pattern not unusual on Amer­
ica's frontiers. College graduate, religious
liberal, abolitionist, lawyer, politician, leg­
islator, university founder, constitution
maker, real-estate speculator, town builder,
surveyor, territorial judge, iron founder,
colonizer, and fruitgrower — all these terms
and more could be used to describe John
North at one time or another during his
seventy-five years of life.

North was born on January 4, 1815, at
Sand Lake, New York, east of Albany. He
was the youngest of six children and the

only son. His parents were hard-working
farm folk of the Methodist persuasion, origi­
nally from Connecticut. Not until he was
twenty-three was North able to obtain the
education necessary to enter a college, for
he had to teach school and do other work
to pay his way through Cazenovia Semi­
mary, a Methodist preparatory school at
Cazenovia, New York. He entered Wesley­
an University at Middletown, Connecticut,
in 1838. Its records show that he com­
pleted the classical course in three years,
but without special distinction. While
there, he seems to have broken with ortho­
doix religion on the slavery issue, for cer­
tainly from that time he was an ardent
abolitionist and a religious liberal.

After graduation he lectured for a year
or more for the Connecticut Anti-Slavery
Society, and then went to New York to
study law in the office of John Jay. He
started law practice in Syracuse in 1845,
and in the same year he married Emma
Bacon of his college town. She died without
children two years later. In 1848 North
married Ann Hendrix Loomis of Dewitt,
New York, daughter of Dr. George S.
Loomis. They had seven children, four of
whom were born in Minnesota.
WHY DID the Norths leave New York State and move to Minnesota? The reasons can be inferred from their letters, now owned by the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, as well as from other sources of information, but no direct statement about their motives has been found. It may be that North's law practice at Syracuse was inadequate for the standard of living he and his wife wished to maintain. Furthermore, his health was poor to the point of invalidism, and the hope of rebuilding it certainly was a major reason for choosing to go to St. Anthony Falls, his first place of residence in the West. The exact nature of his difficulty is not clear, but the symptoms would seem to indicate intestinal distress and fatigue, caused perhaps by nervous strain. His attitude toward slavery also may have influenced him to seek a home outside Up-State New York, which was a hotbed of abolitionism. Evidence that he was in the thick of the controversy is to be found in a group of letters to Gerrit Smith of Peterboro, a well-known philanthropist and reformer, in which North implies that they quarreled because he supported Van Buren at a Free Soil convention in Buffalo in 1848.

North made an exploratory trip to Minnesota early in 1849, and he returned to New York convinced of the great possibilities of the new region. The following autumn he and his wife departed from Buffalo on the steamer “Canada” for Detroit, traveling thence by “cars” to New Buffalo, Michigan, and on the steamer “Sam Ward” to Chicago. There they stayed at the American Temperance House while waiting for their goods. They viewed Henry “Lewis’ Panorama of the Upper Mississippi” and were delighted and encouraged by it.

From Chicago they went to Galena, traveling only twenty-seven miles westward by rail and taking a stage the remainder of the distance. The trip was marred by an accident two miles east of Galena, where the stage overturned. The Norths were scratched and bruised, but the chief casualty seems to have been Mrs. North’s hat. The stage company paid for a new one, and she chose a creation of green satin with a pink lining. After a week’s stay at Galena, again waiting for their goods, the travelers boarded the steamer “Dr. Franklin” bound for St. Paul. The trip upriver seems to have been an exhilarating one.

In a letter home, sent from St. Anthony Falls on November 6, 1849, Mrs. North told of the journey from Galena and waxed hilarious about the trip from St. Paul to St. Anthony Falls in a “Paper and Books peddler’s cart.” In the bustling little village of St. Anthony Falls the Norths could not find a house, but they were not discouraged. “We may have to build, but that is nothing here,” they declared. “Why, they almost build a house entire, within a day.” Mrs. North promptly fell in love with Minnesota which, she told her parents, might be “too new for you, but just the place for us.” The only place she found where she could write was a “seven by nine school room of Miss [Elizabeth] Backus,” for their temporary lodgings were too crowded, what with their landlord’s five children and various other lodgers in a story and a half house.

On November 8 Mrs. North wrote to her brothers, giving further details: “This is a very pleasant little village, and has grown amazingly since Mr. North was here before. There are three islands in the river here. The middle one and largest contains about 100 acres, is just above the falls, and..."
covered with forest. It is a delightful spot, and near one end of this, Mr. [Franklin] Steele, one of the wealthiest men here, is fixing a little house for us." This was a log cabin with two rooms and a garret. When "chinked up," boarded, and plastered it should prove adequate, Mrs. North thought. To reach the island, the Norths had to go through a sawmill and walk along a dam or on logs, and in winter they crossed the river on the ice.

On November 19 the newcomers were still living in their temporary lodging, although they were clearly impatient to move into the island house. Diet seems to have been limited, for Mrs. North wished for apples, and said she had had no eggs, milk, or cream. She continued to lack the latter through the winter. Finally, on November 25, the Norths were able to report to the Loomis family that they were living in their Nicollet Island cabin. The house was unfinished, but at least they were alone. Their belongings, including a piano, had come through fairly well and were now in the house. In a postscript to his wife's letter — his first note since arriving in Minnesota — John North reported on the fine opportunities to invest in lands. "I like this country more and more," he declared. "I would not go back to Syracuse on any account."

The letters written during the first winter in Minnesota indicate that North's health improved steadily, as he was buoyed up by his optimism. "I think he is doing pretty well for a sick man," his wife remarked. "But he no longer calls himself an invalid." Later she reported that "Mr. North's business prospects, I think, are good. There is only one other Lawyer in town, and he is young, and rather light. The people all seem very kindly disposed toward us and we have already, I think, some warm friends."  

THE COST of the move from Syracuse to St. Anthony Falls, including fares, freight, and expenses en route, came to $206.30, according to an inventory of expenses and income which North sent to Dr. Loomis on December 30, 1849. Household furnishings, food, and other expenses involved in getting established totaled $176.67. "I have

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1 Mrs. North to her parents, December 16, 28, 1849, North Papers.
done business since my arrival in the amount of $15.00," he added. On January 6, 1850, a second report on North’s economic affairs was addressed to his father-in-law, who clearly had helped to finance the trip west. North told of investing in lots at St. Anthony Falls and in farm land located between that place and St. Paul, with the hope of selling before payment came due. With an office in the post-office building, he expected his law business to pick up as soon as spring came and river navigation opened, and anticipated obtaining that of the sawmill at the Falls of St. Anthony, in which Steele had an interest. A few days later the Norths took a sleigh ride to Fort Snelling and called on Steele, who was sutler at the fort and lived in fine style. Later in January, Mrs. North reported that her husband had purchased two blocks of ten lots each in St. Anthony Falls as a speculation, and also a lot with a full view of the falls. She wrote: "We are full of hope."^5

To explain his business ventures, especially without capital, North wrote Dr. Loomis on January 28. He gave various reasons for going ahead: property was rising rapidly in value; at the time he could get good terms from Ard Godfrey and Steele, who owned the lots he was purchasing; an indebtedness to the mill company might help bring him its legal business; he could make the purchases without a down payment before the opening of navigation; and he had five years to pay at seven per cent interest on condition that a building be constructed on each lot. He again wrote Loomis on February 2, this time about a forty-acre farm he had acquired in the district between St. Anthony and St. Paul. Although he had only thirty-five dollars left of the money he had taken west with him, he was planning to build an office on one of his lots.

On March 3 North reported increased law business and a start on the foundation of a new house. Several letters written in March relate to an embarrassment caused by buying lots for a man in Syracuse who failed to advance the purchase price. Believing that his client would cover it, North had given a draft for the lots, payable on demand at a Syracuse bank. After several months of anxious correspondence, Dr. Loomis covered the draft, and North wrote: “You may rest assured I shall follow your counsel and not get myself into another such scrape.”^6 This chastening experience does not seem to have lessened his enthusiasm, however.

**MRS. NORTH** reported in lively fashion on her weekly doings, which included catching twenty-two mice in her island home. She wrote of attending reading and sewing circles, of the activities of a library association, of going to church and hearing the Reverend Edward D. Neill preach one Sunday, of Miss Backus’ school, and of household problems. Soon she was describing the breakup of the river ice as the spring freshets made a “sublime spectacle” of the falls and the rapids, which were visible from the Norths’ house at the upper end of Nicollet Island. A report of a steamer on Lake Pepin, which remained ice-bound long after the rest of the river was open, gave the Norths a feeling of release from the winter’s imprisonment.

Their loyalty to St. Anthony Falls was great, and on May 8 Mrs. North wrote her parents: “We think St. Anthony is bound to be the town of the Territory. St. Paul is doomed.” Temperatures in the eighties and nineties in May, 1850, not to speak of countless mosquitoes, did not diminish her enthusiasm. By late spring a newly constructed steamboat, the “Governor Ramsey,” was plying between St. Anthony and upriver points. In letters of June 9 and 10, Mrs. North reported to her parents about an excursion on this boat to Sauk Rapids and return. “O it was delightful!” she ex-

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^5 Mrs. North to her parents, January 13, 27, 1850, and appendix to letter of December 30, 1849, North Papers.

^6 North to Loomis, May 30, 1850, North Papers.
claimed. On the return trip ninety Chip­
pewa warriors, in charge of an army officer
and led by Chief Hole-in-the-Day, were
aboard. They were en route to a conference
with their traditional enemies, the Sioux,
arranged by Governor Alexander Ramsey
to prevent further warfare between these
tribes. The Indians were painted from head
to foot, mostly in red, some in black, one
all in white. The chiefs wore red, green, and
black feathers, and a few had blankets. As
they approached St. Anthony, the Indians
became excited over fear of Sioux attack,
but all went well.

In a letter of June 17, 1850, to his father-
in-law, North described his holdings in St.
Anthony Falls. With the aid of a sketch
map, he located his blocks — number 17 at
Third Street and Central Avenue, and
number 24 at Seventh Avenue between
Third and Fourth Streets. He also said he
was building a house — a two-story struc­
ture, twenty-four by thirty-four feet, with
a cellar and a cistern. This project proved
to be far more expensive than anticipated,
but it resulted in one of the better homes
in St. Anthony Falls. A long visit by Mrs.
North's grandmother helped her through
her first year in the new community. Dr.
Loomis' brother Gorton and his wife also
paid the Norths a visit that was both pleas­
ant and helpful, for North disposed of some
of his lots in St. Anthony Falls to Gorton
Loomis.

The 1850 Fourth of July celebration at
St. Anthony was described by Mrs. North
in a letter written to her parents on July 7.
Edmund Rice presided, and North read the
Declaration of Independence on a program
that was followed by a dinner, toasts, and
an excursion on the "Governor Ramsey."
North seems to have become actively inter­
ested in politics, and was outspoken in his
convictions. He was indignant about the
Compromise of 1850 and acid in his com­
ments on "dough-facism. "I was informed
the other day that the free expression of my
opinion was tending to injure my pop­
ularity among the people here," he told Dr.
Loomis in a letter of July 15. "This may
be so," he continued, "but I had rather
have an untrammeled conscience, than the
favor of dough-faces, and the luxury of
expressing my abhorrence of political base­
ness, is greater than my wish for office.
There is a great battle yet to be fought
before our country is redeemed."

NORTH'S interest in local politics led him
to become a candidate for representative
in the territorial legislature, and he was
elected to that body from St. Anthony
Falls on September 2, 1850. On the next
day, obviously elated over his decisive vic­
tory by a vote of 121 to 55, North wrote
his father-in-law, saying he had won against
the combined opposition of the fur com­
pany, the mill company, and the French,
and adding that he had incurred Franklin
Steele's displeasure by opposing the elec­
tion of his brother-in-law, Henry H. Sibley,
as territorial delegate in Congress. The leg­
islature, North reported, was to meet the
first Monday in January, 1851; it could sit
for ninety days, and the pay was three dol­
ars per day. In anticipation of being away
from his office, the newly elected represent­
ative formed a partnership with Isaac At­
water, a friend from his New York days
and a Yale graduate who spoke French
fluently.

A postscript that North added to a let­
ter his wife had written to her parents on
September 11 informed them that she had
given birth to her first baby, a son. He was,
however, a very frail child, and although
there was some hope of saving him, on
September 17 North reported his death.
The Norths rebounded bravely from this
blow.

On October 29, 1850, Mrs. North proudly
told her parents that the distinguished
Swedish author, Fredrika Bremer, who was
visiting Minnesota, "spent last night in
town, and what is more, came on this is­
land, and into our house and played on my
piano. Won't that be worth telling of?
But really, we had a pleasant though short
interview with her," Mrs. North continued. "She called with Governor Ramsey and Lady. Miss Bremer was afraid to cross the logs, and Mr. North paddled her over in a canoe. She is quite short, round-shouldered, has light hair and eyes, a large nose which was quite red as well as her eyelids." According to Mrs. North, Miss Bremer played a Swedish air on the piano as "a tribute to the God of the Rivers." The visitor refused to sing, however, saying that she sang only to children and to God, both uncritical. She seemed much pleased with the people she met, and she found the masses more intelligent than she had expected.

As winter set in, the Norths became increasingly impatient to get into their new home. In a letter written at intervals from November 19 to 29, they told their parents about household and other matters, and North enclosed a detailed statement of his financial affairs. It revealed that the house had cost to date $1,731.27, on which he had paid $1,465.50, leaving a balance of $264.17. This, plus $680.00 owed to other creditors, made an indebtedness of $944.77. Against this, North listed notes and other expectations to the amount of $840.00. He said he had cleared about a thousand dollars in real-estate speculations, and he valued his house and lot at twenty-five hundred dollars, his farm at six hundred dollars, and his law library, which was recently shipped from Syracuse, at six hundred dollars. Some income was received from the Atwaters, who were boarding with the Norths until they could find quarters.

At long last, in December the Norths moved from Nicollet Island to their new though not entirely finished house in St. Anthony. On the eve of his period of service in the territorial legislature, John North felt that he had done rather well during the short time he had lived in Minnesota. In this opinion of himself he had the support of Mrs. North's grandmother, Mrs. Anne Lewis, who lived with the Norths during the winter and wrote to her daughter in Dewitt that the Loomises should give some help to the struggling Norths. That such help came is indicated in Mrs. North's letter of February 9, 1851, giving thanks for a large remittance.

IN LETTERS to the Loomis family, North and his wife described his very active career as a member of the second Minnesota territorial legislature. They indicate that North immediately became embroiled in factional quarreling about the location of the capitol, the penitentiary, and the university, as well as the granting of the public printing to James M. Goodhue, editor of the Minnesota Pioneer, whom North despised. Mentioned also is a rearguard fight with Franklin Steele, who blamed the local representatives for failing to get the capitol for St. Anthony Falls.

On February 9, 1851, North wrote Dr. Loomis that "affairs at the Legislature have so far gone badly." North believed that there had been a corrupt bargain between St. Paul and Stillwater about locating the capitol and the penitentiary, and that both Sibley and Ramsey were in on the deal. As chairman of the school committee of the House, he could report, however, that "We now have a bill in progress for a charter for a University at this place [St. Anthony]. There is a good prospect for its success." In a continuation of the same letter, dated February 10 from St. Paul, North wrote: "There is a great want of moral principle among the members. Yet I think I shall get through a University charter which will locate the University at our place. This would be a grand thing for us in the future though it can not amount to much at present." He also reported that as chairman of the judiciary committee he had his hands full with a revision of the laws of the territory.

Writing from St. Anthony Falls on March 9, while at home with a toothache and a swollen jaw, North remarked to his father-

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Mrs. North to her parents, December 8, 1850; Mrs. Lewis to Mrs. Loomis, December 22, 1850, North Papers.
in-law that he was glad to be away from
the legislature for a time. "You will readily
infer from this that I act with the minority
in the Legislature," he commented. "My
old attachments for a 'minority' have not
left me and I had much rather stand with
a minority that has some show of honesty
and regard for right, than with a majority
that discard all pretension to honesty, and
are only governed by the present hope of
spoils."

North went on to explain that "there has
been a nefarious combination of political
elements during the present session of the
Legislature which has controlled almost
all its legislation. The Governor [Ramsey]
who is a Whig, and Mr. Sibley the Delegate
to Congress who is a professed Democrat
find it to their personal interest to act to­
gether. The Whigs are a minority in the
Territory and the Fur Company which is
under Sibley's control, and has no politics
but its own interests, holds the balance of
power. To secure their ends in the present
legislature these elements united. This is
what located the Capitol at St. Paul and
the Penitentiary at Stillwater. This is what
gave the public printing to the Pioneer and
broke down the Whig paper that had too
much virtue to countenance the coalition.°
Mr. Steele is with the dominant party, and
has done nothing to help us in any effort
to do anything for our Village this winter."

North then turned to his own activities
on behalf of the university: "Immediately
after the Capitol question was settled and
the Penitentiary was located, I commenced
laboring for a University," he reported.
"The Governor had recommended in his
message that Congress be memorialized for
a grant of 100,000 acres of land to endow
a University. But no one had thought of
getting such an institution chartered at
this time. There was an opportunity to lo-
cate the Institution at our place and we
determined to improve it. To make the
matter sure I went first to the Governor
and leading men of his faction, who all felt
that they had done St. Anthony wrong in
depriving her of any of the public build-
ings, and they could not do otherwise than
agree to go for the measure. I proposed a
bill in exact accordance with the Gover­
nor's suggestions but his followers found
fault with it, and we took a transcript from
the charter of the Wisconsin University,
and added to it the preparatory depart­
ment, and it carried. The Governor pre­
tends to think that we have got what is
better than either the Capitol or the Peni­
tentiary. Our citizens with their present
views would hardly take the Penitentiary
as a gift, and they are fully satisfied with
their Representatives."

For the failure of his attempt to make
St. Anthony Falls the county seat of Heu­
nepin County, North blamed Franklin
Steele. In another report to Dr. Loomis,
dated April 7, 1851, North wrote: "You
will see from the last Democrat April 1st
that I, with others, resigned my seat a day
or two before the close of the session. The
reason of this was that the majority in the
House were determined to pass a most iniq­
uitous apportionment bill, and refused to
transact any other business until that bill
was passed." By resigning, the group hoped
to prevent a quorum, but the bill was
passed anyhow, and the governor signed
it.°

At this time North shifted his political
allegiance to the Democratic party, which
he felt represented the only hope of suc­
cessfully resisting a Whig coalition, and he
saw no alternative but to go along with the
Democrats. This change of political alle­
giance brought him some obloquy and pro­
voked the editor of the St. Anthony Ex­
press to devote a column and a half of his
issue to sarcastic ar­raignment of North. After tracing his sub­
ject's political history back to his Wesleyan
days, the editor claimed that the election

* The Whig paper probably was the Chronicle and
Register.
° The "Act for the Apportionment of Representa­
tion in the Territory" appears in Minnesota Terri­
tory. Session Laws, 1851. p. 15.
of 1848, in which Van Buren and the Free Soil ticket were defeated, had left North stranded. "Such was the political eruption, which, from the fiery heterogeneous mass which the party composed belched forth John W. North, a burning stalagmite, and left him suspended between heaven and earth," declared the editor. "Wandering like an ignis fatuus, a year later found him in Minnesota," where he aligned himself with the Democrats, whose principles he had earlier opposed. "The very act by which he became a pretended Democrat was treasonable, and struck a deadly blow at the interests of the party," in the opinion of the editor, who was himself an ardent Democrat and was indignant that true Democrats were set aside for "such men." Although the journalist's fulminations are understandable, North's motives are clear. Jumping party lines, then as now, involved penalties. North seems to have ignored such political attacks, however.

That he continued his interest in the proposed university is indicated by a statement in a letter of August 5, 1851, to Dr. Loomis: "We set the stakes yesterday for the new University building, i.e. Preparatory Department. It will front on Third Street, and will be within 25 rods of my block."

DURING the summer of 1851, North's law partnership with Atwater began to show signs of strain, and on August 19 he reported its dissolution to Dr. Loomis. North sought election as district attorney, but dropped his campaign when the prospects seemed poor. Business declined as winter set in, and worries about his debts recurred. In spite of financial difficulties, he gave generously to various charities, explaining to Dr. Loomis in a letter of February 22, 1852, "that people suppose I am well off, and [I] must be considered mean if I am not liberal."

On March 3, 1852, North reported the birth of a daughter, with Dr. John H. Murphy, who used chloroform in delivering the child, in attendance. This time the baby survived and thrived. She was named Emma Bacon, for North's first wife.

North went East in the summer of 1852, presumably to arrange for credits. The fall and the succeeding winter seem to have been occupied with prolonged litigation in which he represented purchasers of lots in St. Anthony Falls who were seeking clear title from the mill company. Again his antagonist was Steele, and he gained little by these efforts.

On May 5, 1852, North sent another of his accountings to his father-in-law. With
an indebtedness of about two thousand dol-
lars, he estimated his real-estate holdings
to be worth eighty-one hundred dollars. Even allowing for over-estimates on the
real estate, he figured he was worth no less
than five thousand dollars. He thanked Dr.
Loomis for his generosity, without which he
could not have accumulated so much prop-
erty. Later in the same month, North again
went East, and he returned late in June
with replenished funds, presumably ob-
tained from Syracuse friends. On June 26,
1853, he reported the payment of a mort-
gage and the loan of funds entrusted to
him, and said that five per cent per month
could be had for loan money. Advertise-
ments of real estate for sale by North ap-
peared regularly in the St. Anthony Ex-
press starting with the issue of November
22, 1851.

The birth two days previously of a son
to be named George Loomis was reported
by North in a letter of September 8, 1853,
to Loomis. On the same date North ac-
knowledged receipt of a gift of a wagon,
shipped from Syracuse. Later he acquired
a horse, and in his letters he mentioned ex-
cursions into the countryside. His sister
Clara was living with the family, and she
became its mainstay through many years
to come. In the fall of 1853, business pros-
pects seemed good to North, what with rail
connections completed between the East
and Galena and prospects of railroad con-
struction up the river as well. Law business
remained good through the winter of 1853–
54. On February 5, 1854, North reported
to Loomis that a suspension bridge, financed
by a joint stock company, was to be built
across the river at St. Anthony. He said he
had invested thirteen hundred dollars in
this joint stock project, although he prob-
ably merely pledged this amount.

"The present is a great day for specula-
tion in our Territory," commented North.
Two railroad companies had been organ-
ized, and Henry M. Rice was attempting
to obtain land grants for them. North said
he received weekly letters from Rice in
Washington, and that he planned to take
five thousand dollars worth of each com-
pany's stock. He was treasurer and a direc-
tor of one company that was to build a
line from St. Paul to the Iowa border. This
was the precursor of what was later to be
known as the Minneapolis and Cedar Val-
ley Railroad. How much North actually
invested in these ventures cannot be deter-
mained, but certainly his indebtedness wors-
ened, and by July, 1854, he seems to have
been facing a crisis.

"I dislike to give up my business for I
am so deeply in debt that I need the avail-
s of it; and yet I fear that I shall be obliged
to relinquish it," wrote North to Dr.
Loomis on July 8, 1854. "I must try to
make a living by some out door employ-
ment," he continued, "and I am shaping
things that way as fast as I can. Had I the
means to operate in real estate it would be
the easiest and quickest way of making
money." North's health failed as his wor-
ries piled up, and on July 9 Mrs. North rep-
orted that her husband had resorted to
"hydropathy." His financial state seems to
have alarmed Dr. Loomis, for on August
20 North assured him that "My indebted-
ness is not at all alarming or embarassing
to me though it amounts to more than
$2000, besides the mortgage of $1000 &
interest that you hold against me. You will
be surprised that I owe so much & well you
may be. But I will now tell you where some
of it has accrued."

North explained that he found it neces-
sary to make expensive improvements on
his farm and his town property. He then
added that other "expenses have been heavy
the past year," including as they did "$100
for the sake of having a good paper here"
and "$50 & a good deal of hard work to
get a Temperance Free soil paper." As a
member of the legislature, North had
worked for a Maine liquor law, as both he
and his wife were ardent supporters of the
temperance cause. Such expenses notwith-
standing, North believed that "at a safe
cash estimate I am worth at least $8000
over and above my indebtedness & I think within a year or two it will turn me $10,000 clear of debt.” He declared that “My debts have not embarassed me as my credit is so good that when I want a thousand dollars or even $8000 I can get it on my own note.” Because of ill health, said North, he had made a will in favor of his wife. By the fall of 1854 he was endeavoring to extricate himself from his financial difficulties by disposing of his holdings, but money was tight, and he was unable to improve his situation.

IT WAS under these circumstances that the greener pastures of the Cannon River Valley, with their entrancing prospects of townsite speculation, began to beckon to North. His first excursion to the area is described in a letter to Dr. Loomis written on January 4, 1855, North’s fortieth birthday. After explaining that “The Cannon River empties into the Mississippi near Red Wing Village just above Lake Pepin,” he went on to explain that “The whole valley of this river is beautiful and very fertile, and is being settled very rapidly — more so than any portion of the Territory I have seen. The part I visited is on the route to Iowa and new villages are springing up all along the route. It is forty or fifty miles South of this and the seasons are said to be two weeks earlier. The crab-apple and wild plum grow there in great abundance, and furnish fruit to the settlers. The opportunities to make money there are now better than here, and if I could sell all my property here except my block and house I would spend the next summer and perhaps settle permanently in that vicinity.”

North predicted that “There are going to be flourishing Towns and cities along the line of travel between the Falls and Dubuque and one of these days there will be a Rail Road, and then they will shoot ahead like the interior Towns and cities of New York and other States. There are fortunes in those new Towns, especially those that will be County seats.” He did not believe that St. Anthony Falls would decline, but he expressed the hope that he could sell out on the crest of the boom. He offered to settle his debt to Dr. Loomis, which amounted to a thousand dollars plus three years interest, by turning over eighty acres of marshland. He concluded: “I am trying to get out of my profession, and if I can do so, mean to live by out door business.”

Prospects in the same area are the subject of comment by Mrs. North in a letter written to her parents on January 26, 1855. “Mr. North came home from Cannon River Saturday very well but so fatigued, and very much chilled,” she reported. She added that “He has since sold out his practice of law” to David A. Seacombe, who became North’s junior partner after the break with Atwater. She relates that North “of course dissolved the partnership,” since he “intends to direct his attention more to dealing in real estate.”

She then continues: “He purchased an interest in the town of Faribault (pronounced Farribo) on the Cannon River, and numbers are now making preparation to remove there. The town is to be surveyed very soon, and many already want to purchase lots. He bought one quarter of the town for $1000 — Sibley owns one quarter, and [Alexander] Faribault one quarter — Mr. Porter Nutting bought the other, and pays Mr. North $200 to share with him in the arrangement he has made with the others for selling lots, which is, they allow him some lots to give away, and give him every third lot for selling. They are to give Mr. North power of Attorney to sell lots for them, and $5 for every deed he makes out. He talks of moving down there. Perhaps when you come to see us next year you will find us down there.”

By August 7, 1855, Mrs. North could report to her grandmother that “Mr. North has sold his interest in Faribault, to E. P. Mills for $1000. He still retains his agency there but he will try to get that transferred to him [Mr. Mills]; and if he should do so,
he is to allow Mr. North half the avails of it. So now I think if we leave here at all, we shall go to Alexander," near Northfield. She goes on to relate that North "got back from Cannon River Saturday night. He found his business in better condition than he had feared."

On September 16, 1855, another boy was born to the Norths, this one to be named John Greenleaf. Along with his report of the new addition to the family, North enclosed an accounting of his investment on the Cannon River, presumably at Northfield, where he built a mill which cost a thousand dollars more than he had expected. He promised to convey a half interest in the project either to Dr. Loomis or to his son, George, who had joined the North family in Minnesota. Land values were rising at the millsite, according to North, who expressed a desire to get a run of stones operating as well as a sawmill. He reported that he was contracting for construction of a gristmill, to be erected by December 1, and that he expected to have a sawmill running by November 1, in order to take advantage of the big demand for lumber. "I never thought half as well of our enterprises as now; it looks more promising every day," he concluded.

The Loomises were obviously not too sure of the wisdom of the family's removal to the Cannon River Valley. In a letter of September 23, 1855, Mrs. North wrote to them: "Mother asks why I desire to go to Cannon River to live. You know, to a woman like me the place of one's residence matters little, so she can be with her own family, and have the convenience of a home. I find my attachments to this place diminish as I lose my best friends here." Many of the family's close friends had moved away, and North's activities were now almost entirely in the Cannon River Valley.

To try to secure mill machinery before the close of navigation, North went to Chicago in October. Mrs. North's letters increasingly expressed the hope that the family might be reunited soon. On December 9 she wrote her parents that she hoped to move to the Cannon River Valley within three weeks, and she suggested that letters be directed to Waterford, Dakota County, the nearest post office. In the same letter occurs the first use of the name "Northfield" to identify the place where the Norths were settling.19 The St. Anthony Falls home had been rented for two years and four months. Colder weather had set in, and on December 30, 1855, the temperature had dropped under forty degrees below zero. North was selling everything possible to get cash, even though prices were expected to rise. He had sold his law library to Secombe, his former partner, for four hundred dollars cash. In her letter of Sunday, December 30, Mrs. North said the family planned to move to Northfield on the following Tuesday. Later, North estimated that he had made twenty trips to the Cannon River country before the final removal.

NORTH wrote to Dr. Loomis for the first time from Northfield on January 6, 1856: "We are comfortably settled in our new home which you may have learned before this bears the euphonious cognomen of Northfield," he reported. "We arrived here last Thursday as cold a day as the coldest we had last winter. The snow had filled the track so that it took us a day and a half to come through with a four horse team. We had a covered lumber sleigh & put in a feather bed and comfortables for the children and a little rocking chair for Ann and the baby and we all wrapped up warm and got through well and quite comfortably."

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19 Although direct proof is lacking, it seems evident that Northfield is named for John North. On April 5, 1880, he wrote: "I did not at first contemplate starting a town, much less a city; I only thought of a mill. There was no road running through the place, but I got one laid out from Waterford, crossing the river just below the mills at Northfield. I then thought of a post office, schoolhouse, blacksmith shop, store, townsite, and finally a railroad, and by energetic work got them all." This letter is quoted in Edward D. Neill, History of Rice County, 397 (Minneapolis, 1882).
George [Loomis] has done wonders during the few days that I have been gone, getting the house ready for us so that we could make ourselves comfortable at once though the temperature stood that morning at 25° below zero. Two weeks ago the temperature was at 44° below zero at St. Paul by a spirit thermometer. We are having the coldest winter I have ever seen in the Territory. But we do not freeze and we enjoy ourselves finely." Despite the cold, North said, "Our mill keeps going night and day through the coldest of the weather; and we keep a gang of hands at work putting in the gearing for our circular saw which we hope to have in operation in the course of the week."

North told his father-in-law that "The day before I left St. Anthony I sold 80 acres of land near the town for $2000, and though I got less than $200 in cash from the purchasers, at the time I owed one of them $500 which applied as cash and I took a mortgage for the balance which I turned over in payment of another $1000 of borrowed money & took the cash for the balance of the mortgage; so that it turned out as good as the money for me all round." North had need of cash, for, he wrote, "Our expenses this fall have been enormous and I have had to be always ready with the money to keep things going; and our moving cost me over $200; but things look promising here and I have no doubt we shall do well. The prospect has never been brighter than at present." A list of expenses to date in Northfield, amounting to $4,365, not counting his own time, was enclosed with North's letter of January 6.

On January 13, Mrs. North found time to describe her new home to her parents. It was eighteen by thirty feet, two stories high, with a lean-to, she said. The partitions were stiff of unbleached sheeting, and rousing fires had to be maintained to keep out the intense cold. "Our house fronts the west," she explained, "and we have a fine view of the river, mill, and the woods on the opposite side. The ground descends from the house to the river handsomely." 11

In the spring of 1856 the Norths reported to the Loomis family that the mills were in full operation, but that expenses were still ahead of income. "But do not think for a moment that my courage falters," wrote North to Dr. Loomis on March 16. "The prospects of our place are growing brighter every day." New stores, shops, and houses were being built, and in addition a railroad that would pass through Northfield was being chartered. On May 15, Mrs. North reported: "We now have a Post-Office here, so that letters to us may be directed to Northfield, Rice Co., Minn." The new house was reaching completion by being plastered within and clapboarded and painted white outside. On Wednesday nights there were lyceum meetings and debates in the new community. 12 By the summer of 1856 the Norths had two cows, forty turkeys, and some chickens, and they seemed to be living well. On November 16, Mrs. North proudly reported to her parents that "A week ago last Friday, our school-house was dedicated, and I assure you, we had a good time."

From this point the North fortunes took a turn upward. The income from the mills increased, and North was able to borrow more money. Instead of proceeding conservatively, however, he plunged into more construction, including a block of stores and an inn, the American House, later to serve as Carleton College's first building. In addition to his investments in Northfield, he became active in promoting the Minneapolis and Cedar Valley Railroad Company, which he served for a time as president.

As Head of the Minneapolis and Cedar Valley road, North became involved in the notorious attempt to finance railroad construction to and in Minnesota in 1857 and 1858. The panic of 1857 made it impossible
for Minnesota railroad companies to raise money for preliminary surveys and construction which would qualify them for federal loans. In an attempt to provide them with funds, the legislature of 1858 passed the so-called “Five Million Loan Bill,” which authorized the state to issue bonds up to that amount for four railroad corporations, including that headed by North. He himself was opposed to such an ambitious scheme, and voted against it in the referendum, but when it was adopted his board of directors felt that the Minneapolis and Cedar Valley road should take advantage of the state offer. North therefore became active in marketing the state bonds which were to finance the new construction, but despite a trip for this purpose to New York, where he co-operated with Rice, the bonds could not be sold and the whole project broke up.

North’s close identification with the affair undoubtedly damaged him politically in Minnesota, and it must have resulted in serious neglect of pressing affairs in Northfield. Finally, in June, 1859, he was relieved of the presidency of the railroad, and General James Shields was elected in his place. In a letter of June 19 reporting this development to Dr. Loomis he wrote: “This takes a great load off my shoulders and is really a great relief.” But it also deprived him of an important salary.

North’s heavy investments in Northfield necessitated extensive loans, and the burden of interest charges on them brought his affairs to a crisis in 1859. In his letter of June 19 he told Dr. Loomis that “My financial affairs press hard upon me & I may find it difficult to get along without a salary; but I will trust providence, and hope for success. Mr. [Charles] Goodsell has been kind & stands by me like a friend. I owe him now near $10,000. . . . But other debts press hard and I must give my energies to the ways and means. I have some hope of selling property—a part of the Mill. But I have gotten along well in the past & I will hope for the future.”

On September 23 he informed his patient father-in-law that he had been forced to sell a fourth of his property in Northfield, retaining only his house and the land around it. With the money thus raised he staved off creditors in Hastings. During the months that followed he gradually liquidated his holdings to pay his debts, and by

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North to W. R. Marshall, March 24, 1880, in the Rice County Journal (Northfield), April 1, 1880.
August, 1860, he had largely sold out to Goodsell and two others, though there remained a considerable indebtedness to Goodsell which was not paid off until some years later. During the Northfield years, the management of the properties there was partly in charge of North's brother-in-law, George Loomis.

BEFORE LEAVING St. Anthony, North was actively interested in a convention of March 26, 1855, which resulted in the organization of the Republican party in Minnesota. This "Abolition Convention" was the subject of acid comment in the Democratic St. Anthony Express of March 31. It reported that about a hundred delegates attended on the first day and fifty on the second. Speeches were given against slavery and alcohol. The report concludes: "Requiescat in pace." Editorial comment on the convention in the same issue was likewise unfriendly: "For a party which claims all the virtue, it was one of the most curious gatherings of pie-bald and mongrel politicians we have seen in the Territory." The call to the convention was issued for all who were disgusted with the current degradation and corruption of political parties. Those attending certainly should know about this situation, the editor wrote, for they had been steeped in it. Among the prominent abolitionists present, he reported, was North. The editor hoped that the party would be successful in saving Minnesota Territory from the clutches of slavery! North was active in the Republican party from its inception in Minnesota.

When the time approached for a constitutional convention in anticipation of statehood for Minnesota, politics again beckoned to North. As a delegate from Rice County, he took a leading part in the proceedings of the Republican caucus, but unfortunately he did not report on the convention in the letters now available. Mutual suspicion prevented organization of the state constitutional convention by both Democratic and Republican delegates. On Monday, July 13, 1857, there was a race of the parties to capture control of the convention, and North was designated by the Republicans to call it to order and nominate a temporary chairman. But a Democratic delegate attempted to do the same, and to make an involved story short, the two factions could not get together, and so they met separately.

North played a prominent role in almost all the discussions of the Republican convention. His legal training made him especially useful. His longest speech—and an eloquent one it was, taking up ten pages of the printed Proceedings for August 6—dealt with the question of including the word "white" in the suffrage clause, which confined the right to vote to "free white male" citizens. North argued that such a provision was contrary to divine law and the convictions of the founding fathers, that it violated the principle of the Declaration of Independence that all men were created equal, that it was "inconsistent with the genius of our institutions," that Minnesota like other states should use the phrase "every male inhabitant," that it "makes us simply ridiculous" because it would be impossible to determine what percentage of colored blood made a person non-white, and finally that the clause would disfranchise the Indians, including some members of the convention. He concluded: "I hope we shall make such a Constitution as we shall not look back upon with shame and self-reproach in coming time." Although his motion lost, after the Civil War the word "white" was finally removed from the Minnesota Constitution. North, however, made a good fight for racial equality.

Three years later, North again turned to politics, this time in the hope of eventually
obtaining a government office after financial disaster at Northfield forced him to find some means of supporting his family. Elective office was closed to him because of his participation in the rail bonds affair, his outspoken support of abolition, and his antiliquor stand, but he was highly regarded among Republicans in Minnesota. At the state Republican convention in February, 1860, he was named a member of the Minnesota delegation to the party’s national convention in Chicago, and he became the state group’s chairman. Although the Minnesotans were instructed for Seward, at the close of the convention, North was appointed to “the committee to notify Mr. Lincoln of his nomination.”

As a member of this group, North informed Dr. Loomis on June 3, “I went to Springfield to see the next President. The Central R. R. gave us an extra train & paid all expenses. It was a long ride — more than two hundred miles. We arrived there in the evening & started back at midnight. We had a pleasant call on Mr. Lincoln and his Lady, got supper, heard several speeches in the capitol, saw a most brilliant display of fireworks, and then at midnight commenced our return without night cars” to Chicago. Thence North returned to Northfield to complete liquidation of his holdings. Even the Cedar Valley Railroad was foreclosed, he reported to Loomis on August 23, 1860, although North did not lose by it.

North took an active part in the presidential campaign of 1860, and he electioneered especially in Illinois, where he was associated on his tour with John P. Hale. In his letter of October 31, 1860, to Dr. Loomis, North asked: “What think you of the propriety of my applying for some office? I am told that I could get one, and what had I better aim at if anything? One man in our State has spoken of the Governorship of a Territory. Gov. Ramsey spoke to me of the Office of Superintendent of Indian Affairs, which pays some $3000 per year. There are other appointments to be had of various kinds. Had I better try to get one or not?”

Soon he was actively seeking an appointment, as indicated in his letter of December 2 to his father-in-law. North reported that “I saw Mr. Lincoln at his own House and had all the talk with him that I wished for. He treated me with courtesy and cordiality & when I had finished he said he would tell me a secret which was that he was going up to Chicago on the same train with me, to meet Mr. [Hannibal] Hamlin by appointment.” Since Hamlin was the Republican vice-presidential nominee, Lincoln suggested that North stop in Chicago to meet him.

North goes on to relate that “I came up on the train with Mr. Lincoln & his wife” and various “other notables.” In Chicago North “was invited, by Mr. [Norman B.] Judd, the Chairman of the Ill. Rep. State Com. to his house to tea with a few friends,” and there he met “Mr. & Mrs. Lincoln, Mr. Hamlin .. and a host of other notables.” North was introduced to Hamlin, who “said he had ‘known me well for a number of years’, and seemed very cordial. He made an appointment to see me at his room the next day at one o’clock when I had a frank free talk with him which was very satisfactory. I said but little myself, yet enough to let them know that I am going to apply for an appointment.”

“So far as they are concerned I stand well,” North felt. “Yet much depends on our Congressional delegation. And two of them I am confidant are against me. Yet to balance that influence I have the Gov and nearly all the State Officers on my side. The Chairman of our State Com & the member of the National Committee for our State. Also the Missionary influence who want the Indians under good moral influences. The Episcopal Bishop [Henry B. Whipple] promises to work for me, and the Rev. Mr. Neill Chancellor of the University and Superintendent of Public Instruction has given me a strong letter.”

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"North to Loomis, May 16, 1860, North Papers."
Lincoln and others suggested to North that he go to Washington for the inauguration, and he felt he must be on hand when political appointments were made, though he could ill afford the expense. He received more than forty letters of recommendation from some of Minnesota's leading men, according to a letter written to Dr. Loomis on January 17, 1861. In late February he left for Washington, where an extremely anxious period followed for him. His letters tell a story of calls on people of influence in Washington, from the president-elect down. The weeks from Inauguration Day until March 23 were especially trying. Ramsey's suggestion notwithstanding, the Minnesota Congressional delegation supported another candidate for the Indian commissionership. North's ultimate success in obtaining an appointment is reported in a letter of March 23 to Dr. Loomis.

"As I deposited the letter I wrote you today, in the Post Office," he told his correspondent, "I met a gentleman who informed me that I was appointed Surveyor General of Nevada Territory; and that my name was sent in to the Senate today. I could hardly believe it, and went immediately to see Senator Rice who informed me it was true. My first impression was not to accept it: it is so far off. But I am told by all, that there is hardly an office in the gift of the President that affords a better opportunity of making a fortune in a short time. It is in the region of the Washoe Mines; and is filling up faster than any spot on Earth." In this rich silver mining area, North was to receive a salary of three thousand dollars a year, in addition to office rent, fuel, and clerk hire. On the following Monday his appointment, which he soon decided to accept, was confirmed by the Senate. With his future assured, North's spirits rose, and he returned to Northfield to wind up his affairs.

North was in Northfield briefly in April, 1861, according to a letter of April 21, 1881, from George Loomis to his parents. It appears that North planned to leave Minnesota on April 29, 1861, and that George was to remain there for a time to close up matters. Then he was to go to Dewitt and later to follow North to Nevada. Mrs. North and her family went to Dewitt, where they remained with her parents until May, 1862, when she took ship from New York and traveled, as her husband had done the year before, via the Isthmus to California. She joined him at Washoe City, Nevada Territory, in June, 1862.

ALTHOUGH there are scattered references to Minnesota and Minnesotans in the North letters of later years from Nevada, Tennessee, and California, North did not return to Minnesota until 1883, when he briefly visited in the Twin Cities and Northfield while promoting settlement in southern California. He wrote his wife from Northfield on September 13, 1883, that he had been interviewed by William Watts Folwell about his part in the founding of the university, and that he had renewed friendships with Justice John M. Berry, Sibley, Rice, and many others. In Northfield he lectured on California and met old friends. He returned to California, where he died on February 22, 1890, and was buried in the family lot at Riverside, a community which he founded.

Between his departure from Minnesota in the spring of 1861 and his death in 1890, John Wesley North had three careers, each as significant in its way as the Minnesota one. Each, if fully exploited, would add a revealing chapter to the history of an American state.

A "Report of the Testimony of John W. North" relating to his connection with the founding of the university is among some miscellaneous items in the Folwell collection of the University of Minnesota Archives. Although it is dated merely "Minneapolis, Sept. 11," it must have been recorded while North was visiting in Minnesota in 1889.

THE PORTRAITS of Ann and John North on page 103 are reproduced through the courtesy of Mr. Carl Weicht of the Northfield News. The originals are daguerreotypes made in 1856.