IN 1853 Peter M. Gideon, a self-educated horticulturist and spiritualist, moved from Illinois to the south shore of Lake Minnetonka, not far from Excelsior, Minnesota, where he took up a 160-acre claim. "He brought to the young territory a colorful, eccentric personality, a bushel of apple seeds, and an unquestioning faith in his ability to grow fruit in this northern climate," wrote one horticulturist many years later.¹ For the next forty-five years Gideon worked to develop fruit, particularly apples, that could withstand the cold weather. He introduced several new kinds of apples, the most important of which was the Wealthy.

Success brought Gideon few material rewards. Indeed, he pursued his lifelong vocation often at great expense and even personal hardship. Moreover, his mysticism and fierce adherence to his own beliefs and principles frequently put him at odds with many of his colleagues. But before he died in 1899 at the age of eighty-one, Gideon had earned their respect and admiration. On June 15, 1912, the Native Sons of Minnesota unveiled a tablet honoring him in Gideon Memorial Park on the old homestead along Gideon Bay (named for him) a short distance west of Excelsior.² John H. Stevens, Minneapolis pioneer, said after Gideon's death: "He had no superior, or an equal, as a horticulturist in the Northwest."³ Oliver M. Gibbs, another horticulturist, said at the time of the dedication that Gideon would have been pleased "to know that this monument has been erected to his memory here at the old home, where he worked, not for money or for fame, but for his love of working for the benefit of his fellow man."⁴ In 1965 the Minnesota Historical Society also erected a marker near the site of the farm.⁵

Peter Miller Gideon was the son of George and Elizabeth (Miller) Gideon, who were of German and English-Welsh descent, respectively. The elder Gideon, who was from Loudoun County, Virginia, enlisted from Leesburg to fight in the War of 1812. In 1817 he emigrated to Ohio, settling first at Millerstown, a village named for his wife's family, then moving on to a farm near Woodstock, where Peter was born on February 9, 1818. Young Gideon spent his childhood and early manhood in central Ohio. Then, in 1841, the family moved westward once more, this time to Clinton, Illinois. During Peter's twelve-year stay there — on January 2, 1849 — he married Wealthy Hull, for whom he named the famous apple he eventually developed. Wealthy Hull Gideon was herself a member of a family prominent in early American history. She was a direct descendant of Joseph Hull, founder of the town of Barnstable on Cape Cod, and a niece of Isaac Hull, commander of the United States frigate "Constitution" ("Old Ironsides") in the

³ Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1900, p. 25.
⁴ Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1912, p. 251.

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WEALTHY APPLES

War of 1812. Seven children were born of this union, two of whom preceded Gideon in death. For health reasons, Gideon moved in 1853 for the last time — to Minnesota. With his wife and two children, he arrived at St. Paul on April 19 aboard the steamboat "Time and Tide" in company with Massachusetts settlers who were members of the Northampton Colony. This was an association of Connecticut Valley people who had banded together to emigrate to Minnesota to take up claims. Henry M. Nichols, later second minister of Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, was the colony's president. With a half dozen or so other families, the Gideons moved to the south shore of Lake Minnetonka and immediately took up a claim.

Although Gideon's primary interest was fruit growing and breeding, he also engaged in the usual agricultural pursuits. He became a livestock breeder, bought and sold farm animals, and, in the 1850s and 1860s, was a pioneer in breeding and raising poultry in Minnesota. His attempts to improve the various poultry strains were not very rewarding but, like his concurrent, and more successful, experiments in fruit culture, were an indication of the man's character. No matter what field he worked in, he sought doggedly to better the product.

Gideon was not a trained horticulturist. His formal schooling, in fact, did not progress much beyond the "three R's, with the rod not spared," but at home he had read Edward Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, the Bible, and other works. At home, also, he acquired from both his parents the love of growing fruit. When the family settled in Ohio, the first land cleared was devoted to garden and orchard. Gideon began growing fruit while still a child. He planted some peach seeds, transplanted the trees into the apple orchard, and before he was nine years old was eating the fruit from the trees.

Gideon never acquired wealth nor did he show any inclination to do so, in spite of the great gift of apples and knowledge he bestowed upon the people of the Upper Midwest and fellow horticulturists. In the early years especially, he and his family lived on the verge of poverty. The second year after he settled along Lake Minnetonka, Gideon hired two men to drive some cows from Illinois to Minnesota. Instead, the men started selling the animals off. He lost most of his cows, "all he was worth," and went $500 in debt. Gideon worked his land for fourteen years without a team of horses, spending two days when he could have worked one with a team. Nevertheless, he persisted in clearing trees, tilling the land, and growing fruit.
Beginning in 1854 he planted 350 apple trees and about 50 pear, cherry, quince, and English plum trees. He continued to plant apple seeds over the next nine years, and he watched — and continued to replant — his trees as they were destroyed by cold or disease. Those that did produce were of poor quality and were discarded. The fruit was not equal to varieties grown in areas farther east and south. “Every year for nine years I persevered,” Gideon said in a report of 1899, “and at the end of ten years, I had one tree left, and that one was a crab seedling.”

IT WAS PROBABLY at this low period in his life — in 1860 or 1861 — that Gideon and his family faced another cold winter with the barest of necessities, one cow, and a few chickens. He had $8.00 in his pocket and desperately needed a winter coat. As he was pondering his situation — and considering leaving Minnesota — “an invisible being came to him and told him to write to a certain address in the state of Maine for apple seeds.”

Gideon sent his last few dollars to a man in Bangor, who shipped him “five times the money’s worth” in seeds and scions (shoots). For a coat he patched and tacked two old vests together, took the legs of an old pair of pants, re-enforced some worn areas, and produced a garment “more odd than ornamental.” But this antiquated and makeshift coat was one means by which Peter Gideon finally achieved success. His decision to spend his last few dollars on apple seeds rather than badly needed clothing resulted in the development of the Wealthy apple.

Peter Gideon’s invocation of a “spirit” or “being” in this incident may help illuminate his single-minded persistence and devotion to horticulture. He was a very religious man, but not in the conventional sense. He was a spiritualist, a believer and an active participant in spirit communications to the end of his life. His attitude toward fruit growing was touched by an aura of mysticism, as though some higher force were using him to make this contribution to his fellow men. Thus he approached his task with a perseverance that was remarked upon almost with awe by all who knew him.

“Peter Gideon was the only man in America to pay attention to apple breeding before 1860,” wrote U. P. Hedrick in his history of horticulture. Another historian has written that Gideon “must be recognized as the father of fruit breeding on the prairies.” As a true pioneer, he had almost no precedents to follow. He took a pragmatic, trial-and-error approach to horticulture, favoring practical results over theory.

Gideon found quickly that the apple varieties grown farther south and east were not hardy enough to withstand the cold winters of Minnesota and nearby areas. He believed that, by combining the hardy crab apple with the larger varieties of the common apple (Pyrus malus), he could obtain a good quality apple that would survive the weather. After many setbacks and disappointments, he developed several kinds of apples, the best of which was the Wealthy. His success with this apple probably came in 1868. It marked an epoch in American apple growing, for it was the first full-sized variety to survive cold winters, bear regularly, and have good keeping qualities. To growers of the Northwest it was for decades the most profitable apple for market.
It was far superior to most of the Russian types being introduced in the northern United States at about the same time. Years later, Gideon himself wrote of his triumph:

"Twenty-three years ago I planted a few Cherry crab seeds, obtained of Albert Emerson, Bangor, Maine, and from those seeds I grew the Wealthy apple; in seven years it fruited, and that fruit convinced me that the true road to success was in crossing the Siberian crab with the common apple, and on that line I have operated ever since, with results surpassing my most sanguine anticipations. I did not suppose that in the short space of sixteen years, the time since the Wealthy first fruited, that I should have more than twenty first-class apples [varieties] — as good as the world can produce — in succession from the first of August to March, and in hardiness of tree surpassing all known varieties of the common large apple. But it is done, and in the doing the problem is solved as to what to do and how to do it, with the material at hand with which to attain yet greater results. At the outset it was test and try, but now that the problem is solved it is onward, with great results certain."18

Other horticulturists recognized at once that the Wealthy was an important new development. The December, 1868, issue of Farmers' Union, an agricultural newspaper, described the new fruit this way: "A seedling apple of good size, the best on exhibition [by the state agricultural society], by Peter Gideon of Excelsior, called the Wealthy Apple." In the January, 1869, issue of that publication, a correspondent for the Cultivator and Country Gentleman of November 19, 1868, is quoted as saying he is mailing "a couple of specimen seedlings ... grown from seed sown 13 [sic] years ago by Peter M. Gideon, and by him named the Wealthy, and presented at the State Fair in Minnesota." The writer goes on: "I never saw a finer specimen in appearance and quality. This new seedling Wealthy will be the starting point in native apples in Minnesota." The seedlings arrived, the article continued, and the writer added: "The beauty of this apple, together with its good quality and its reputed hardiness, may render it of great value at the west in market."19

Eastern pomologists pronounced the Wealthy to be superior to any new brand of apple that had been introduced in the decade between 1860 and 1870. Within just a few years, as many as ten states exhibited the Wealthy at a horticultural exposition at Omaha — "a grand success over a wider range of country than any new fruit of my knowledge," wrote a colleague from Florida.20

GIDEON SPENT the rest of his life working on such improvements of the Wealthy as developing a slightly tougher skin so the apple would be a better "keeper." Out of all the experimentation, both in producing the Wealthy and improving it, he originated a number of new kinds which, in his own words, were "adapted for this climate, hardy and suited for every month in the year." To emphasize this fact he gave such names as August, September, and October to different types.21 Better known than these, however, were the apples he developed and called the Peter (which closely resembled the Wealthy), the Gideon, and three crab varieties, the Florence and the Martha (named after two of his daughters) and the Excelsior.

Perhaps most important, he had proved that it was practicable to cultivate good fruit in a region long supposed to have too severe weather for growth of choice varieties. Although not a scientist, Gideon contributed some essential knowledge and information to the science of pomology. Samuel B. Green, the first professor in the horticulture department at the University of Minnesota (1888) and eventually the dean of forestry, made a verbal bow to the achievements of the Lake Minnetonka farmer: "He has contributed quite a large amount of scientific interest and in so doing he has opened a broad field."22

The Wealthy's popularity and growth in reputation were helped considerably by the enthusiasm of Gideon's admirers, notably Suel Foster, an early horticulturist from Muscatine, Iowa, and a founder of Iowa Agricultural College (later Iowa State University) at Ames. Foster planted some seedlings Gideon sent him and became an avid champion of the Wealthy. The Iowan claimed he sent the apple into every state of the union and was quoted as saying that "one of the greatest things that could be done for humanity was the planting of the Wealthy apple tree."23 Others also were effusive in their praise of the newly developed fruit, especially as time

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18 Gideon, "Our Seedlings and Russian Apples," in Minnesota State Horticultural Society, Annual Report, 1867, p. 152. Although most sources say the development of the Wealthy occurred in 1869, and Farmers' Union and other journals mention it that early, Gideon's dates in this paragraph would put the first planting in 1864 and fruition of the Wealthy in 1871.
20 History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, 67; A. W. Sias, in Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1900, p. 100 (quote).
21 Quotes by S. B. Green, in Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1900, p. 22.
22 Green, in Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1900, p. 22.
23 Kent Pellett, Pioneers in Iowa Horticulture, 15, 16 (quote) (Des Moines, 1941).
THE STATE FAIR was held at Fort Snelling in 1860. The display of fruit was meager, but its very paucity spurred efforts to develop horticulture in Minnesota.

passed and the apple proved both its excellent quality and profitability. A 1915 seed catalog advertised the Wealthy as "without a doubt the most popular apple in its class." The same company said of it twenty-five years later: "Wealthy is still our leading apple of the season. [It] has undoubtedly made more money for the commercial growers in Minnesota and adjoining states than any other variety." 24

DURING THE YEARS of Gideon's early experiments — in the period contemporary with the state's beginnings and early growth — Minnesota horticulturists began to organize and give direction to their activities. From the time of Gideon's arrival in the territory until 1866, nearly fourteen years, there was no regular, concerted activity among Minnesota fruit growers. Each grower pursued his own, solitary way in seeking to find the best method of establishing fruit culture. L. M. Ford and John H. Stevens founded the Minnesota Farmer and Gardener in November, 1860, to publicize horticultural developments, compare experiences, and stimulate discussions on experimentation. Both men were leaders and future members of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society, and Stevens was subsequently also president of the organization. The state fair held at Fort Snelling in 1860 featured a horticultural department, but the exhibit was meager.

Fruit growing attempts in the area commanded increased attention, however. The horticultural displays at the state fair held at Rochester in 1866 were more impressive than at the 1860 fair, and during the Rochester event — on October 4 — the Fruit Growers' Association was formed. It was the basis and beginning of the state horticultural society. A leading spirit in the movement was Daniel A. Robertson of St. Paul, a professor of agriculture at the University of Minnesota. He was elected the association's first president. In 1867 the association renamed itself the Minnesota Horticultural Society. In 1873 it changed its name to the present Minnesota State Horticultural Society and codified its goals. Its objectives, as stated in the articles of incorporation, were "to collect, condense and collate information relative to all varieties of fruits, flowers and other horticultural productions, and dispense the same among the people." 25

Although Peter Gideon was not a charter member of the new organization, his name appeared on its rolls starting in 1868, and he was one of the signers of the articles of incorporation. He frequently took part in the annual meetings of the group and contributed several papers to the society and to its yearly reports. Among his writings were descriptions of various phases of his work, including his report in 1873 on his development of the Wealthy and related experiments, one called "Our Seedling and Russian Apples" in the 1887 annual report, and some comments in the 1899 report. 26 Gideon was never one to withhold knowledge for his personal aggrandizement; on the contrary, he was eager to share it unselfishly with his fellow horticulturists.

An important part of Gideon's participation in the society's affairs stemmed from his work as superinten-

26History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, 38; Gideon in Horticultural Society, Annual Report, 1887, p. 152.
dent of the State Experimental Fruit Farm. The legislature established the farm on March 8, 1878, on a 116-acre plot of land immediately adjacent to the Gideon property on Lake Minnetonka. The farm was placed under the jurisdiction of the University of Minnesota board of regents, which was authorized to buy the land at a cost not to exceed $2,000. Another $1,000 was appropriated to support the farm. Governor John S. Pillsbury appointed Gideon, then recognized as Minnesota's leading horticulturist, to head this undertaking. He held the position until February, 1889, after making his last report to the board of regents.

During his administration of the farm, Gideon continued his apple experimentation, concentrating on the development of "long keepers." In his 1887 report he said that practical results proved the soundness of his theories. "[It is] beyond a question that the crab infusion is to be the foundation of successful fruit culture in the Northwest," he wrote. Thousands of seeds from the state farm's experimental trees were planted. To ensure their widespread distribution, Gideon proposed that the seedlings which resulted be offered free of cost to anyone willing to dig them up or for a small fee to those wishing them shipped. All that Gideon asked for this largess was that the recipient properly care for the trees and report on results. With the approval of the horticultural society, some 10,000 apple seedlings were distributed in Minnesota and throughout the Midwest in 1889. Gideon's stint of public service ended with this distribution (he was then in his seventieth year), but it did not terminate his contributions to Minnesota horticulture. He continued to be active in the nursery business and to carry on his experiments until the end of his life.

THE DEMISE of the state's Minnetonka farm — it was abandoned and the property sold in 1889 — may have been hastened by Gideon's eccentricities and personality. As was required of all University of Minnesota staff members, wrote one historian, Gideon made annual reports to the board of regents, "but he otherwise operated the experimental farm as a completely independent unit. This 'lone wolf' attitude so characteristic of all his activities did not make him popular with University administrators... It is unfortunate that clashing personalities prevented him from assuming more constructive leadership in the great fruit breeding program that was to develop throughout the region." Gideon's unusual ideas and convictions — which he not only devoutly believed but, as he was not a modest and retiring man, insisted on professing publicly — led to disputes with members of the horticultural society. He bitterly opposed fast horses and horse racing and at one meeting of the society presented an address, which he later had printed in a book called *Fruit Culture and Fast Horses: The Civilizing Effects of the Former and the Demoralization Caused by the Latter.* The Arabian civilization, he contended in developing that theme, was a prime example of this demoralization. When the Arabs had only the trudging donkey they "grew their fruits in profusion, and as their fruits grew the people rose in morals and intelligence," but when they acquired fast horses their plains became deserts, he said, and their

GIDEON AND HIS FAMILY lived in this house which the horticulturist built himself. The house, although altered over the years, was put on the National Register of Historic Places in September, 1974. The simpler, rear section is the original building. The more elaborate, "neo-colonial" front was added later, probably early in the twentieth century. The home is still occupied.

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27 *Minnesota, Laws,* 1878, p. 128-29; *Minneapolis Journal,* May 22, 1938, world affairs and editorial section, p. 3; *Minnetonka Record* (Excelsior), September 5, 1940, p. 2; John B. Gilfillan, "History of the University of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections,* 12:17.

28 *Alderman, Development of Horticulture,* 72.

29 *Horticultural Society, Annual Report,* 1887, p. 154 (quote); Green, in *Trees, Fruit and Flowers,* 1900, p. 23.

30 *Alderman, Development of Horticulture,* 72.
culture barbaric. He also attacked conventional religions, the general morality in the nation, and the treatment of Indians and Negroes and commented on domestic happiness and other subjects guaranteed to raise passions. It was apparently his outspokenness that led to a break between Gideon and the other members and caused him to absent himself from horticultural society meetings for several years. In the winter of 1882-83, Gideon was persuaded to return to the organization in what was termed a “peace conference,” “love feast,” and a “sort of compromise with spiritualism.”

Gideon never changed his views, however. So strongly did he feel about the subject of horse racing that for years he refused to exhibit his fruit at the state fair because races were held there. Later, he softened his position and did exhibit, but never for money. “It seems to me there was something grand and fitting that the old man, whom we all knew was poor, should sit there among his fruit, too proud to exhibit it for a premium,” said Samuel Green.

Gideon, a deeply religious man in his own way, refused to take part in conventional denominational worship, and he disapproved of opening secular meetings with prayer. He was a good friend and neighbor of several frontier clergymen but rejected their spiritual ministrations. He even wrote a book about his religious beliefs — Peter M. Gideon’s Views of Christianity, published in 1887.

After Gideon died, a number of eulogies were published in the horticultural society’s annual report. In the process, however, note was taken of his “faults,” his eccentricities, his outspoken and blunt manner, and his peculiar ideas. He was termed a complex man, “a close and warm friend, a very bitter and sarcastic enemy,” a kind and unwaveringly honest man, fond of children and happy to fill their hands and pockets with flowers and apples and seeds. One writer recalled a revealing incident during a visit to Gideon’s place. The old man admonished him to step carefully around a toad sitting by the path, for “he is the best friend I have, for he catches many injurious insects, and he works for nothing.”

Another anecdote was related by a former neighbor: “He drove an old white horse who was inclined to stop suddenly in the middle of the road. The uninitiated would say that the horse was balky, but Gideon said the horse saw visions of obstacles in his way, and Peter Gideon was willing to sit until the horse was ready to be on its way. I’ve seen that horse stand straight in the middle of the road in a nice shady spot comming with spirits while its master waited patiently five or ten minutes at a time.”

A temperance advocate, Gideon abstained from liquor, tobacco, coffee, and tea and was temperate in his eating habits — almost a vegetarian. He was an early supporter of the abolition of slavery. At the age of eighteen he made a trip to Missouri “and being an advocate and well posted on the abolition question, soon found it necessary for his health to leave on short notice.” He continued to raise abolition and temperance questions when he went to Illinois; he was also espousing Universalism, “being the first advocate of each doctrine ever seen in these parts at that date.” He supported women’s suffrage and strongly favored prohibition. He detested men’s beards and “was outspoken to the wearers.” He favored simplified spelling, too. In a letter to John H. Stevens he wrote, parenthetically, “I have adopted the nu mode ov speling, leveng out all silent and superfluous letters, speling words as I pronounce them. . . . A system if generly adopted would save half the time spent bi ail students in getting a good education.”

Gideon continued to work with his apples and other fruits until the summer of 1899 when ill health forced him to halt his investigations. He died on October 27, 1899, at the age of eighty-one. Wealthy, his wife, had preceded him in death several years earlier, and the old man had lived on in lonely devotion to his chosen work.

A HISTORIAN of this region’s agricultural scene has suggested that Peter Gideon might have been a more effective leader in fruit breeding if he had been less of a “lone wolf” and had had a more conciliatory nature. The same man then added that Gideon nevertheless had to be considered the “father of fruit breeding on the prairies.” These somewhat paradoxical attitudes toward this complex man followed him even after death. He was praised and damned in a single sentence. Yet perhaps his very eccentricities, his dedication and perseverance in his long, lonely quest, were qualities which made him a successful scientist. Though he died poor, he had

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31 Peter M. Gideon, Fruit Culture and Fast Horses, 3 (quote) (n.p., 1882).
33 Green, in Trees, Fruit and Flowers, 1900, p. 23.
38 Atwater, History of Minneapolis, 2:1292.
40 Gideon to Stevens, February 8, 1851, in manuscripts division, Minnesota Historical Society.
added "millions in horticultural wealth" to the area. Along with developing the Wealthy apple and other species, Gideon added greatly to the science of fruit breeding, gladly sharing his knowledge, and demonstrated that it was practicable to raise quality fruit in the Upper Midwest despite the cold winters there. He thus paved the way for others. It is probably not a coincidence that fruit production rose sharply following the development of the Wealthy — some tenfold in the decade of the 1870s alone — and Gideon's work must be regarded as at least a sizable contributing factor.

His daughter, Florence Gideon Webster, perhaps best summed up the complexities and contradictions of the man and his work:

"That which impresses one most was his devotion to his idea and his years of persistent toil, just as devoted and persistent without aid or encouragement as with it. He lived close to Nature, and much that most of us have to glean from the study of many minds seemed revealed to him direct.

"He believed thoroughly in his work and in his ideas. . . . But his ideas were often as blighted and frost bitten as his beloved trees. His religion, his philosophy and his politics, which cost him so many sympathizers, were as truly his own production as the Wealthy apple. . . . as his work was directed to the production of a perfect apple, his ethics betray a striving for an [sic] universal ideal which few would have the boldness to conceive or the hopefulness to maintain. No man had ever more the courage of his convictions. He knew no compromise."  

THE PHOTOGRAPH of the apple display on page 103 is published through the courtesy of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society. Alan Ominsky took the photographs of the Wealthy apples. All other photographs are from the society's picture collection.

THE PLAQUE BELOW, erected by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1965, commemorates the Gideon homestead. Within view of the marker is the site of the original orchards.

THIS BOUNTIFUL DISPLAY of a variety of Minnesota-grown apples would not have been possible without the work of Peter Gideon and others like him who worked to develop fruit that could grow in cold climates.