SHOWN slightly larger than life-size is a page from the Snake River diary of 1804–05, long thought to be the work of fur trader Thomas Connor. Recent evidence, as explained in this article, calls this hypothesis into question. Photo is courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.
Who Wrote the “Diary of Thomas Connor”?

TRACKING DOWN a fur-trading post or identifying the author of an anonymous diary may sometimes be seen as minor historical puzzles with little relevance to the broad sweep of history. Historians, though they secretly enjoy such intriguing problems of detection, often feel that questions of this sort are trivial. Unwilling to spend time challenging conclusions or hypotheses of their predecessors, they follow the well-traveled path rather than striking out on their own. Yet trivial mysteries often turn out to have crucial importance. In re-examining the solution to a minor problem, we may find that we have revised the general picture.

One case of historical detection with the potential to revise the common view of an important period of Minnesota history concerns a reconstructed North West Company trading post in Minnesota’s Pine County about midway between Duluth and the Twin Cities. The post sits on the south bank of the Snake River, one mile west of Pine City. Built in the 1960s, it is a replica of the original erected in 1804.

Minnesotans learned of this fur-trading post through a diary written by the trader in charge of its establishment and operation. The diary, which was never signed, lay unheralded in the manuscripts collections of the Public Archives of Canada until the 1920s when a Minnesota historian found it and had it copied for scholars at the Minnesota Historical Society. One of these scholars, recognizing the importance of the diary, edited it for publication in 1933 with the announcement that it had been written by a local trader named Thomas Connor.

Many years later a collector came across artifacts from what he believed to be Connor’s post in a cultivated field near his home. Following more detailed study by professional archaeologists, the land was purchased by the state of Minnesota. From the archaeological findings, the

The authors would like to acknowledge that these introductory remarks were inspired by Dale L. Morgan’s illuminating essay, “The Fur Trade and Its Historians,” in Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference, 3–8 (St. Paul, 1967).

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diary, and other records, the Minnesota Historical Society reconstructed the post and opened it to the public in 1970 as "Connor's Fur Post." Later, an archaeologist involved in the excavation of the site came to believe that Thomas Connor could not have written the diary and thus could not have been the man who was in charge of building the post. He suggested that the diary was the work of another trader named John Sayer. With this suggestion and his own subsequent research, he set in motion an extensive examination of the puzzle which has only recently been completed.

What research steps led to the re-examination of such a long-held theory? How has this altered our understanding of the early history of Minnesota? What does the investigation tell us about the general nature of historical research? Who in fact did write the "Diary of Thomas Connor"? To arrive at answers to these questions we must recall the historical events that led up to the construction of this short-lived Minnesota fur-trading post.

DURING the American Revolution, the western Great Lakes region was an area of fierce trade rivalry between Michilimackinac and Montreal traders competing for the produce and allegiance of the Indians. Heavy traffic passing through the logistical bottleneck of the Grand Portage limited the efficiency of individual fur-trade enterprise until a series of agreements between traders was reached, giving rise to the North West Company. ²

This confederation of traders, intent on capturing the business of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Northwest, at first ignored the opportunitiessouth of the present Canadian border. In part this was due to the lingering instability of that region. For a half-century following the 1736 Dakota Indian attack on La Vérendrye's men at Lake of the Woods, Ojibway groups infiltrating from the east had been at war with the Dakota over the plant and animal resources of the northern woodlands.³

By the mid-1780s the Ojibway Indian position in the area encompassing the headwaters of the Mississippi, St. Croix, and Chippewa rivers was secure enough to allow regular trading to be established. Among the first to enter the region were independent Michilimackinac traders, or loose, short-lived combinations such as the General Company of Lake Superior and the South.⁴

In 1791 the well-known merchant and trader, Alexander Henry, the elder, financed an expedition designed to exploit the northern fringes of the fauna-rich intertribal zone then separating the Dakota and Ojibway. The great success of this expedition and its glowing reports of future prospects attracted the attention of the North West Company. Two years later the company commissioned the building of Fort St. Louis, a regional depot at the "Fond du Lac," or western end of Lake Superior, 140 miles southwest of Grand Portage. Put in charge of this fort was former Michilimackinac and Sault Ste. Marie trader, John Sayer. From it he administered a chain of subsidiary posts stretching east to the Keweenaw Peninsula, south to the St. Croix and Chippewa rivers, and west to the Red River. Much of the area, known as the Fond du Lac district, was North West Company trading territory until 1816, when control passed to John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company.⁵

The North West Company did not, however, have an exclusive hold on the region during this period. In the early years of the nineteenth century the XY Company, under the leadership of famed explorer Alexander Mackenzie, set up many rival posts throughout the area. One region of intense competition was the Folle Avoine department, at that time a subdivision of the Fond du Lac district. Named for the French term for the wild rice that grew abundantly there, the department consisted of the St. Croix River area of present-day Wisconsin and Minnesota. There, on the Snake River in the fall of 1804, a North West Company trader directed the construction of a wintering post. The trader, his Indian wife, and a small crew of French-Canadian engagés and clerks spent the winter among the local bands of Ojibway, bartering for provisions and furs and doing their best to starve out a nearby XY Company competitor. The following spring, their canoes loaded with pelts, skins, and maple sugar, they left the area, probably heading for Fond du Lac. The log structures they left behind were apparently never reoccupied and eventually fell into ruin and were burned.⁶

Much later, in the 1950s, the old wintering site was relocated by Joseph Neubauer, a local collector, in a cultivated field adjacent to his home near Pine City, Minnesota. Subsequent investigations by the late Professor Emeritus Leland R. Cooper of Hamline University confirmed the site's archaeological potential, and in the summer of 1963, under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society, he began a program of systematic excavation that continued at irregular intervals for twelve years. At the urging of the society, the state purchased the site in 1965. Later, the legislature appropriated funds that allowed the society to reconstruct the site.
THIS AERIAL VIEW (below) shows the site of "Connor's Fur Post" on the south bank of the Snake River. At right, archaeologists excavate the post in 1964.

RECONSTRUCTION of the Snake River post (above) began in the late 1960s, and it was opened to the public in 1970. At left, the current manager of the site, Dennis Hoffa, greets visitors as his alter ego, Jacques Desevre, one of the original voyageurs there in 1804.
Historic fort based on its archaeological and historical record. In 1970, amidst much fanfare and publicity, the site was opened to the public as "Connor's Fur Post." 1

Who was Thomas Connor, and why was the reconstructed post on the Snake River named for him? Minnesota historians had first learned of the Snake River site in 1924 when an unwavaged diary in English, describing the construction of the original post, was discovered by fur-trade historian Wayne E. Stevens in the Louis R. Masson Collection of the Public Archives of Canada. The term "discovered" must be used loosely since Canadian archivists certainly knew they had the diary and a copy had actually been in the hands of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin as early as 1911. But then, to neither organization did the diary have the significance that it was to have for the Minnesota Historical Society. 8

Stevens, who was doing research for the society, arranged to have a negative photostat of the diary sent to Grace Lee Nute, then curator of the society's manuscripts collection. In 1929, after much contemplation, Nute tentatively suggested in a letter to Stevens that the author of the diary might have been Thomas Connor, a man known to have been active in the Snake River trade throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. To support this hypothesis she offered two lines of evidence. First, she thought that the location of the 1804 Snake River post was the same as the well-known post used by Connor until 1840. Second, she pointed out that Connor's name appeared on an 1805 roster of North West Company employees as a voyageur in the Fond du Lac district. This she did not discover until she looked at the original manuscript roster, since the poorly transcribed and incomplete version of it published in Louis R. Masson's Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, that she had relied on for years, spelled Connor's name incorrectly as "Caron." 9

How certain Grace Lee Nute was about her identification of Thomas Connor as the diary's author is not altogether clear. She appears to have had private doubts, and even her public statements were hedged. For example, when she first announced her hypothesis in a guide to Minnesota fur-trade posts published in the December, 1930, issue of Minnesota History, she specifically cited "Thomas Connor's Diary." But, in speaking of the North West Company post on the Snake River, she remarked ambiguously that "Thomas Connor seems to have erected it in the fall of 1804." Nute again qualified her identification the following year in a footnote in her book, The Voyageur, when she wrote that "The diary is anonymous but references in contemporary lists of traders seem to indicate that Thomas Connor was in charge of the Snake River Post." 10

Later, when Nute wrote her introduction to Charles M. Gates's Five Fur Traders of the Northwest (1933), which contained an edited version of the "Diary of Thomas Connor," she made no mention of any doubts she may have had about the Connor hypothesis. Gates, on the other hand, who undertook the project of editing the book at Nute's urging and worked closely with her during the entire project, seemed far less certain. "Less is known," he remarked, "about the author of this interesting diary than about any of the others in this volume. It appears probable that the journal was written by one Thomas Connor, but little is known of his character or the facts of his life." Gates then cited evidence which placed Connor in the St. Croix Valley for many years subsequent to the winter reported in the diary, and, mentioning the 1805 roster that identified Connor as a voyageur working for the North West Company Fond du Lac district, Gates concluded that "The diary leads one to the conclusion that he held a position of higher rank." 11

After the publication of Five Fur Traders, reviewers did not question the Connor hypothesis, although noted fur-trade scholar W. Stewart Wallace did criticize the book for misidentifying a number of traders. In the years following, little was done in the way of new research on Connor or the diary until after the old wintering site was rediscovered. Yet, despite the guarded opinions of Nute and Gates, subsequent writers did not question their basic assumptions and remembered only that Nute and Gates had suggested Connor as the author of the diary. They did not choose to recall or were unaware of the reservations Nute and Gates had expressed. Thus, with each retelling of the story the identification of Thomas Connor as the author of the diary became more certain, even though no new evidence was offered to support the hypothesis. By the mid-1960s it appeared to be a foregone conclusion. 12

8Wayne E. Stevens to Solon J. Buck, July 5, 1924, Buck to William Smith, November 25, 1924, in MHS archives, MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
9Grace Lee Nute to Wayne E. Stevens, February 27, 1929, in accessions file 2279A, in MHS division of archives and manuscripts; Louis R. Masson, Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, 1:110 (Reprint edition, New York, 1960); North West Company, "List of Men at Fond du Lac Department For the Year, 1805," original in McGill University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Montreal, photocopy in North West Company Records, MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
12W. Stewart Wallace review, Canadian Historical Review, 15:76 (March, 1934).
In 1965, the same year the Snake River site was purchased, the Minnesota Historical Society brought out a new edition of *Five Fur Traders*, correcting some of the earlier errors noted by Wallace. The new foreword by Theodore C. Blegen revealed the casual confidence with which Minnesota historians were then associating the diary with both Connor and the archaeological site. Throughout the late 1960s, the excavation and rebuilding progressed, and with its opening in 1970, postcards, brochures, magazine articles, highway signs, and news releases all proudly dubbed the site "Connor's Fur Post," or the "House that Tom Built." Inspired by the presence of a new tourist attraction on the outskirts of town, the businessmen of Pine City quickly proclaimed an annual celebration called "Thomas Connor Days." 13

In 1972 a chapter on Connor's Fur Post appeared in a new edition of Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide, by June D. Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins. The authors contributed some new biographical data on Connor, reporting that he was born in Great Britain about 1779, immigrated to Canada in 1798 to become a clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company, and by 1804, as an employee of the North West Company, had "apparently displayed the intelligence, loyalty, and stamina" to merit a clerk's position and a new post on the Snake River. Despite these statements and others which provided a more complete life history of Connor than any available up to that time, Connor's relationship to the diary was not called into question. 14

IT WAS AT THIS POINT in 1973 that Douglas A. Birk, an archaeologist on the historical society's staff, began the ethnohistorical research needed to complete a site report on the Snake River post. Having already spent some time analyzing the artifacts and other archaeological data, he felt secure with the theory linking the diary with the site. In fact, he had given a paper on this subject at the Plains Conference in Winnipeg in 1971 and, despite a vague awareness of certain flaws in the Connor theory, he did not seriously question it. Shortly thereafter, in the face of new evidence and with an awakening skepticism, his certainty was to dissipate. 15

Trained as a prehistoric archaeologist, Birk admits that the research he was to do took him into areas he was then little qualified to travel. But after spending months in the field on this and other projects, trying to verify what often turned out to be an unwarranted assumption, he felt that he was no longer afraid to test the historian's assumptions with the historian's evidence. While he did not set out to be a trampler of legends or a toppler of traditional beliefs, Birk believes that every valid historical or archaeological assumption should stand the test of new empirical evidence. Each positive test should lead to higher levels of understanding, while assumptions with little basis in fact must be modified or abandoned in favor of more plausible explanations. But finally, the question of the validity of any historical hypothesis becomes a matter of personal choice, with each person having different levels of acceptance. What one perceives as the best explanation of the accepted facts does not necessarily imply an absolute understanding of those facts, but, rather, a relative understanding based on intellect, theoretical orientation, and, perhaps, the persuasiveness of previous scholars.

Birk's skepticism about the Connor hypothesis was first aroused by one unexplainable piece of evidence. This was the record of an 1847 meeting between Connor and St. Croix Valley lumberman and chronicler William H. C. Folsom, during which Connor bragged of building a trading post on the south shore of Pokegama Lake in 1816. This was, said Folsom, "three years before Fort Snelling was located" at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, and, as he did not say, was the same year that the North West Company withdrew from the Fond du Lac trade. Considering the evident pride with which Connor recounted his 1816 accom-


14 Holmquist and Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites*, 79–83. These statements about Connor's early life seem to have been based on Alfred Merritt's reminiscences, preserved in the collections of the St. Louis County Historical Society. In them Merritt states that he recalled meeting a man named Patrick Connor at the present site of Duluth in the 1850s. "This man, Patrick Connor, came out to Hudson's Bay from the North of Ireland and entered the employment of the fur company when he was 19 years old, as a clerk. I remember his telling my brother Leonidas and myself in 1856, that he wintered on Rice's point forty-four years before that time. He was a well posted man. His wife was a Chippeway squaw, and they had a family of two boys and one girl. One of the boys was named Patrick, the other Peter, and the daughter was named Elizabeth." Although evidence in the 1860 census of the area, listing Thomas Connor and his family, suggests that the man Merritt met was indeed Thomas Connor, no other sources corroborate the statement that Connor was at one point employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. For more on Connor's early years in the fur trade, see below, pp. 181. See also Alfred Merritt, "Reminiscences of Early Days of the Head of the Lakes," in *St. Louis County Historical Society Collections*, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, Duluth, Walter Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County, Minnesota: Their Story and People*, 1–45 (Chicago, 1921); U.S. Manuscript Census Schedules, 1860, St. Louis County, Oneota Township, p. 5, in MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

15 Birk would like to thank the following for their assistance and support: Donna Coddington, Russell W. Fridley, Douglas George, Diana Mitchell, Grace Lee Nute, Ruby J. Shields, Robert Wheeler, and Susan Zeik.
plishments, it seemed surprising to Birk that he would have forgotten to mention building a post near the same site in 1804.16

The archaeological record of the excavated wintering post strongly suggested a short-term occupation dating to the 1800-1810 period. Furthermore, contrary to Nute's belief in the 1930s, Birk now knew from a variety of sources that Connor built his 1816 post on the south shore of Pokegama Lake, about two miles west of the reconstructed 1804 post. When Connor sold his improved holdings to United States government farmer Jeremiah Russell in 1840, it was said that he had traded at that site for about twenty-five years. The location of Russell's farm was independently verified by the original land survey records of 1851 and other documentary evidence that left little doubt as to the original site of the trading post Thomas Connor occupied from 1816 to 1840.17

Then, too, there was the curious matter of the diary itself. Even a casual reading suggested that its author was a literate man of uncertain British origin and a high-ranking employee of the North West Company. His maturity and close familiarity with his surroundings seemed to suggest an experienced trader with a prior knowledge of the St. Croix and Snake rivers. Unlike many novice clerks, the writer was not easily intimidated and wasted little ink or high wine describing or pampering his trading-post band of Ojibway. The narrator's disposition is reflected in such entries as that of September 26, in which he reported that the Indians "were importunate & insolent, which determined me not to give them a Single Dram." On another occasion the narrator was threatened by an Indian who attempted to stab him. He remarked simply that "luckily I had a Stick with which I disarmd him & drove him into his hut."18

The narrator's mere appearance, which caused his XY opponent to turn pale and pass by on the river "without uttering a syllable," further suggested that the writer was a man of considerable reputation. In addition, the diary revealed that the writer carried a timepiece and a thermometer, was accompanied by an Indian woman, had sufficient status to warrant his own private living area, was keenly aware of company policies, wrote frequent letters admonishing his clerks, and during the winter received a messenger direct from Montreal bearing news of the recent XY and North West Company merger. At face value, these facts alone hinted at a man of greater experience and standing than the young Thomas Connor could possibly have had at that time.

Finally, there was the letter Birk received from the Public Archives of Canada in December, 1972, which flatly stated that the institution had never accepted the Connor attribution. Birk did not realize the significance of this correspondence until the following August when he had nearly completed a historical background section of the final site report. In this draft, using the early history of the Fond du Lac trade to set the stage for the arrival and activities of the Snake River diarist, he included the following footnote expressing his understanding of the situation at that moment:

Although this writer has grave doubts concerning Connor's authorship of the alleged "Connor's Diary" it is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper to attack this precedent. In view of the fact that the diarist carried enough weight to dictate the activities of such other well-established clerks as Seraphin La Mare, Joseph Reaune, and Joseph La Prairie; and employed at least one interpreter it seems likely that he may have been of bourgeois status... and since Hugh McGillis, the bourgeois in charge of the Company's Fond du Lac District in 1805, spent his winter at the company's Leech Lake post, it is not inconceivable that John Sayer, the director of that District in 1804, could have wintered at the St. Croix valley that year... and could have — not ruling out other possible candidates — been the author in question.19

In his search for a high-ranking trader who was familiar with the St. Croix Valley in the early 1800s, yet who was not named by the 1804 diarist, Birk had casually seized upon the possibility that Sayer might fit these criteria. Then he recalled from an earlier reading of the journal of XY trader Michel Curot that Sayer had spent the winter of 1803-04 on the Yellow River in Wisconsin. A quick re-examination of this source demonstrated that Sayer had also been accompanied by his native family.

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16 W.H.C. Folsom, Fifty Years in the Northwest, 262 (St. Paul, 1888). Another version of Folsom's meeting with Connor is contained in Obituary Record, St. Croix Valley Old Settlers Association Papers, in MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
19 A copy of the rough draft of Douglas Birk's archaeological report will be filed in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. The information on Hugh McGillis may be found in Elliot Coues, ed., The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, 247 (Reprint edition, Minneapolis, 1965).
that year and in the spring of 1804 had actually spent several weeks on the Snake River, perhaps appraising the trade situation for the following autumn. If Sayer had written the so-called Connor diary, these facts might account for the diarist’s familiarity with St. Croix Valley geography, traders, and Ojibwe.20

Looking back at Masson’s roster of North West Company employees, it became obvious to Birk why Nute, in the process of elimination, did not choose a wintering partner as a candidate for authorship. The roster is broken down by regional departments, with the personnel in each entered by their occupation or rank. At the head of the roster is a separate list of the company bourgeois, none of whom is assigned to any particular department. For this reason, perhaps, the introductory list, which includes the name of John Sayer, had been repeatedly overlooked by Minnesota historians attempting to identify the diarist from the roster of Fond du Lac employees.21

Then Birk remembered the earlier letter he had received from the Public Archives of Canada. He quickly exhumed the letter from his files and now reread it in quiet amazement:

In reply to your letter of 30 October I regret to inform you that a search of the various indexes and logical sources in our custody has failed to produce any information which would indicate that the diary you are interested in was written by Thomas Connor. In our finding aid to the Masson Papers we describe it as a journal “kept by a wintering partner in the vicinity of Lake St. Croix 15 September 1804–27 April 1805 (65 pages) with some accounts of 1791–1793 (52 pages).” There is no notation either with the diary or in the diary suggesting that it was written by Thomas Connor. We do not know who first attributed the diary to Connor nor do we know why it was thought that he had written it.22

Here were two other pieces of information that cast even more doubt on the Connor hypothesis, while bringing Sayer further into the realm of possibility. First, authorship was credited to a wintering partner, a status compatible with Sayer’s, yet never enjoyed by Connor. And second, the diary was filed with other earlier accounts that had previously been overlooked.

Full reproductions of all of these associated documents were by then in hand and available for examination. The volume, always referred to only as a journal or diary of 1804–05, was indeed found to contain numerous other items that seem not to have been known to Nute, Gates, or later Minnesota scholars. In part, these consisted of an itemized inventory labeled an “Abstract of Sundries for F. L. [Fond du Lac] Department 1804,” a record of the 1796–97 financial affairs of John Sayer, and some business accounts of 1791–93 that also made frequent reference to Sayer. Though having no pretensions of being a handwriting expert, Birk felt that the handwriting in these accounts was not dissimilar in style and execution, and if they had all been written by the same person, they probably were not kept by Connor, since in 1791 he was apparently no older than twelve years of age, and since he reportedly did not arrive in the New World until 1798.23

For the first time, Birk began openly pursuing his research under the premise that Connor was probably not the author of the Snake River diary. He carefully studied the known facts about the diarist and compared them with the growing file of biographical information about Sayer. The results were encouraging. Sayer had been a North West Company wintering partner in 1804 and was the proprietor of the Fond du Lac district from its organization by the North West Company in 1793 until his retirement about 1805. From 1791 to 1793 he had been North West Company agent at Sault Ste. Marie and could well have kept the earlier financial records while in that position. Like the diarist and other bourgeois, Sayer also often spent his winters at trading posts remote from the district’s headquarters. In 1797–98, for example, he wintered at Cass Lake, and the following year he was at Pembina. Other sources indicated that, like the diarist, Sayer owned a timepiece, had a native wife, kept his own private living space at wintering posts, was aware of company policies from his attendance at the annual company meetings at Grand Portage, or Kaministikwia, and, finally, frequently admonished his underlings.24

Hoping to compare the handwriting of all the pages in the volume with a known example of Sayer’s handwriting, Birk sent queries to five Canadian repositories known to have additional North West Company records. Four negative replies had been received when the Public Archives of Canada again surprised him by forwarding a copy of a one-page document entitled “Extracted from

20Curot, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 20:396–471.
22E. Frost to Susan Zeik, November 29, 1972. Zeik was assisting Birk with his research at this time. The letter will be filed with Birk’s research notes in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
23At this point in his research, Birk attempted to interest several local and national law enforcement agencies in making a handwriting examination of the diary and accounts, but all declined, for various reasons, to undertake such an analysis.
AT LEFT is a page from the 1791–93 ledger preserved with the Snake River diary. Below, for comparison, is an enlarged section of the 1804–05 diary. Photos courtesy of Public Archives of Canada.

ABOVE is an enlarged portion of the 1791–93 ledger, which contains many references to future North West Company partner, John Sayer. At right is one of the 1796–97 ledger pages, also with references to Sayer. Photos courtesy of Public Archives of Canada.
### John Sayer’s Journal 1804/5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 7</td>
<td>10 below Freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2</td>
<td>20 Degrees below Freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 30</td>
<td>10 Degrees above FP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1</td>
<td>Summer heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14</td>
<td>108 Degrees High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Diary of Thomas Connor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cold Day wind N. thermometer 10 Degs below Freezing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cold &amp; Cloudy thermometer 20 Degs below F P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cloudy Mild weather. thermometer up 10 Degs above F P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warm Day. thermometer up at Summer Heat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Hot Weather. thermometer at 108.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A COMPARISON of the weather remarks in the so-called diary of Thomas Connor and the 1805 abstract of weather entries from a journal of John Sayer reveals an exact correlation of meteorological information.

Somehow unrelated, it is likely that the extracted list came from a geographical location so close to the diarist’s wintering quarters that it would have been visible from the latter site. Such an imaginary second post on the Snake River, however, especially one occupied by a bourgeois of the same company as the diarist, is not mentioned anywhere in the unsigned journal. And finally, the fact that the extracted list was transcribed in Montreal less than five months after the last journal entry, at a time when Sayer was scheduled to have rotated to Lower Canada, and at a time when he drops out of all known records of the Fond du Lac district, would further suggest that the copyist was not simply guessing at the author’s identity.

Significantly, a similar four-page document in the Public Archives of Canada, written on the same date in what appears to be the same hand, was “Extracted from Hugh McGillis Journal Leech Lake 1804/5.” Though the McGillis journal has long since disappeared, it is known that he did in fact winter at Leech Lake that year for the North West Company. Also, at the bottom of the longer, more complicated McGillis list, the copyist wrote “Errors Expected,” a qualification that could as easily have been added to the Sayer list.

By this time Birk had gained a fair cradle-to-grave knowledge of John Sayer’s life and was struck by the importance of the man to an understanding of the British
period of the fur trade in northern Minnesota. It seemed amazing to him that Sayer had never attracted the attention of Minnesota's fur-trade historians. With the Sayer hypothesis well sketched out, Birk, at the invitation of Robert C. Wheeler, then associate director of the Minnesota Historical Society, had a quiet luncheon with Grace Lee Nute in November, 1973. Nute was warm and receptive and not in the least bit surprised that her theory might be proved incorrect. In fact, it was through her expert and helpful guidance that Birk was later able to reconstruct the events that originally led to the idea that Thomas Connor was the author of the diary. Sufficient evidence was now in hand to clear up any doubts Birk himself had about the Sayer hypothesis, and he wanted to get on with redrafting the archaeological report to align with this new probability. Even though the lion's share of his research had been accomplished by correspondence, by digging through published sources, and without leaving St. Paul, he was satisfied with his evidence and his conclusions.

AS WITH historical debates of any kind, the levels of acceptance and understanding of the Connor-Sayer problem varied among concerned individuals at the Minnesota Historical Society. Some were skeptical of the Sayer hypothesis and of Birk's reasoning, while there were others who found the Sayer hypothesis to be convincing. To help settle the debate and forestall fruitless speculation, it was generally agreed that additional research into the Connor and Sayer theories was needed.

What other evidence existed buried in fur-trade manuscript collections linking either Connor or Sayer to the diary or post? Could samples of the handwriting of either man be found? Chosen in November, 1974, to undertake the investigation into these questions was Bruce M. White, then a research assistant in the society's publications and research division. Assigned to the project by June D. Holmquist, the society's assistant director for research and publications, he was asked to examine thoroughly all aspects of the problem and do whatever further research was needed. Pursuing the problem was to take White much of the next six months and many scattered moments in the years since.

White's qualifications for the work he was to undertake were perhaps spotty. Although he did have a good knowledge of French, which he had first learned as a child and had later studied in college, he had very little familiarity with the permutations of the language in its fur-trade context. He had previous experience and a knowledge of the technical problems of historical research, but he had never studied the fur trade. However, because of his fondness for mystery stories he did have a strong inclination to see history as a puzzle that needed solving. And working on the project was to be its own education in the fur trade.

The first months of research White spent in acquainting himself with the fur-trade history of the period and with the evidence relating to the problem which Birk had turned over to him. It soon became clear to him that, as Birk's skillful detective work had so amply demonstrated, the research itself would be only part of the job. Uncovering facts did not help if you did not know what to make of them.

An important example of this was the often-cited North West Company roster of 1805, the one that had originally linked Thomas Connor to that company. While it was true that Connor's name appeared on this list of men in the Fond du Lac district for the year 1805, it was not altogether clear what this meant. For one thing, although the original list regularly indicated whether the person was a clerk, interpreter, fisherman, steersman, or summerman, Thomas Connor's status was not specified. This could mean that he did occupy one of these positions and was not listed as such merely through an over-
sight. More likely, it meant that Connor was an engagé possessing no specialized skills.\(^{29}\)

Another problem with the list was that, although it was dated 1805, no month was given, so there was no clue as to when during the year the list was compiled. The North West Company's close competition with the XY Company did not end until some time after the death of North West Company leader Simon McTavish in July, 1804. After that, negotiations began between the two companies, and in November, 1804, they agreed to combine. The merger agreement laid down many conditions, the first of which was that the amalgamation would begin with the 1805 outfit, that is, not until the following year's outfitting of the traders. This meant that although the two companies might have agreed to co-operate, as the narrator of the Snake River diary pretended to do with his XY opponent, officially and financially the merger would not take place until the following trading season. The affairs of the two companies would continue to be separate until after the returns of the 1804 outfit were inventoried in the spring and summer of 1805.\(^{30}\)

In fact, Masson, in his published version of the list, labeled it as referring to the North West Company after the merger ("après la fusion de 1804"). If Masson was correct, one could not be sure which men on the list were North West Company men hired before the merger and which were former XY Company men who only became North West Company employees after the merger. There was, then, no way of telling merely from this list who Thomas Connor was working for during the winter of 1804-05, the period covered by the diary.\(^{31}\)

Other evidence, brought to light after the 1930s, suggested that Connor was actually working for the XY Company during that winter. In particular there was a document found for the society in the late 1960s by the tireless Canadian researcher, Marie Gerin-Lajoie. This "List of Men for Fond du Lac Department" was dated June 29, 1805, and was part of an inventory of employee accounts taken by Alexander Mackenzie and Company (major shareholder in the XY Company) at Grand Portage, no doubt preparatory to the merger of the XY and North West companies.\(^{32}\)

Among the men listed for the Folle Avoine (or St. Croix River) subdivision of the Fond du Lac district appeared the typically misspelled name of "Thomas Con­nor." Three figures followed his name. The first, in a column headed "Balance due Sir AMcK Co," was 772.13 (probably Canadian livres). The second, appearing in a column of "Advances at CP 1805," was 138. The third figure, under the column labeled "Total," was 910.13, the sum of the two previous figures. The document suggested that, since the first figure was obviously carried over from a previous date, Connor must have been employed by the XY Company prior to June 29, 1805.

Other evidence confirmed that Connor's relationship with the XY Company had begun before June, 1805. In an account book of Alexander Mackenzie and Company, White found an entry dated May 1, 1803, crediting a company agent named St. Valier Mailloux. "For the following advances to men & expenses attending engaging thereof &c." Among the men listed was one "Thomas Conard," who received the sum of 102 livres. Evidence in the account book showed that Connor and the others listed there as being hired by Mailloux were engaged under contracts signed in the office of Henri Crebassa, a notary of Sorel, a town near Montreal.\(^{33}\)

When White wrote a preliminary research report on his interpretations of the Sayer-Connor problem in May, 1975, he suggested that an examination of Crebassa's notarial records, preserved in the judicial archives at Sorel, might provide further evidence. Later, in April, 1977, on a trip to Sorel, he located the Connor contract. Dated October 1, 1802, it stated that Connor would winter for the XY Company for two years in the Athabasca country ("chez les Rabasqua") with his uncle named Labrie ("avec ses oncles Labrie") at a salary of 750 livres annually. One might conclude from this evidence, which appeared to place Connor in a trading area distant from Minnesota from 1803 to 1805, that the man who made this contract was an entirely different Thomas Connor, except for the fact that a later source on Connor's activities in Minnesota in the 1820s refers to him by the nickname, "Labrie." (Is it possible that Connor's mother may have been a French-Canadian woman named Labrie, sister of traders of the same name?) In any case, where Connor was sent by the XY Company after his hiring in 1802 probably had little to do with where he himself wished to go and quite a bit more to do with where the company wanted to send him.\(^{34}\)

It is also interesting to note that, if this is indeed the Thomas Connor who was to be listed in both the North

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\(^{29}\) North West Company, "List of Men at Fond du Lac Department," 1805.

\(^{30}\) Wallace, Documenta, 145.

\(^{31}\) Masson, Bourgeois, 1:395.


\(^{33}\) See entry dated May 1, 1803, in accounts of 1803 outfit, in volume of "Accounts of expenditures and returns," 1799-1804, in Alexander Mackenzie and Company Papers, Séminaire de Québec, Quebec, Canada, microfilm copy in MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

\(^{34}\) Thomas Connor contract with Alexander Mackenzie and Company, October 1, 1802, original in Superior Court Judicial Archives, Palais de Justice, Sorel, Canada, photocopy in Canadian Notaries' Records, MHS division of archives and manuscripts, sketch of the fur trade attributed to Clement H. Beaulieu, in Henry M. Rice and Family Papers, MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
West Company and XY Company Fond du Lac rosters of 1805, the yearly salary of 750 livres is not that of a clerk or interpreter. The Mackenzie and Company letterbook for the period indicated that this was 50 livres less than the annual wage normally paid a novice canoe man who signed on for three years, certainly a far cry from the status of the narrator of the Snake River diary. Even more significant was another fact revealed in this contract. It was, however, something of which Birk and White and others involved in the Sayer-Connor question were by then sure. The contract was signed with an "X," the usual signature of the illiterate.

THE QUESTION of Connor's literacy was not new. Jedediah Stevens, a missionary who met Connor and his family on the Snake River in 1830, reported that Connor "had a large family of children his wife half breed they have no books & not one of them can read, all going on to destruction together." To this Grace Lee Nute, in a footnote to her edited though unpublished version of the Stevens diary, had remarked that "if Stevens' statement that 'not one of them can read' was meant to apply to Connor as well as to his wife and children, the theory that Connor was the author of the anonymous diary must be given up." Still, in the spring of 1975, toward the end of the first phase of White's research, no direct evidence existed one way or the other. Although no authenticated example of Connor's handwriting had been located, neither had positive evidence been found apart from the Stevens diary to prove that he did not know how to write.

In May, 1975, Alan Ominsky, designer with the society's publications and research division, was asked to investigate the problem while on a trip to Washington, D.C. He followed a lead earlier suggested by Nancy L. Woolworth, a White Bear Lake writer and researcher who was also interested in Thomas Connor. Woolworth's evidence had shown that Connor received money under several Ojibway Indian treaties with the United States government. Ominsky looked into the records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the National Archives and within a few hours discovered, in Connor's claim file for past trading debts due him under the Lake Superior Ojibway treaty of 1837, that Connor had put an "X" on an affidavit attesting to the amounts due him by the Indians. Here at last was positive evidence that Connor could not write.

Later, in December, 1975, White went to Washington and, while examining other records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, found a power of attorney for Connor's similar claim under the La Pointe treaty of 1842, also signed with an "X." In addition, an affidavit for another claim under the La Pointe treaty of 1854 was not only signed with an "X," but also contained the enlightening information that no account books had been submitted by way of proof with Connor's claim of that year because "this affiant being wholly unacquainted with bookkeeping kept no accounts himself except with notched sticks or other similar perishable materials which have all in the long distance of time become lost so that he is unable to make out any account in items or fill any books with the Commissioner." Thus, by December, 1975, it was altogether clear that Connor was an unlikely candidate for authorship of the Snake River diary kept by a North West Company employee, not only because of his employment by a rival firm and his humble status in the trade, but also because he did not know how to write.

INVESTIGATING CONNOR and his relationship to the Snake River diary was only a part of the task that June Holinquist had set for White in November, 1974. The other half of the problem was to test further Birk's hypothesis linking the diary to John Sayer. Would the evidence stand up as Birk claimed? Was the 1805 abstract of weather entries from "Sayer's Journal" borne out by other evidence? Was there evidence linking the diary to someone other than Sayer? Could samples of their handwriting be found?

In answering these questions White was to be only partially successful. The additional evidence that he uncovered about Sayer was, at least in the beginning, less clear-cut than what he had found out about Connor.

In correspondence with Shirley A. Smith of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg, he learned of an account book in the collection of North West Company records there which contained accounts of "John Sayer & Co." for 1795-96. On later examination, this account book proved to be a collection of invoices, inventories, employee accounts, and fur returns for the various posts and traders supervised by Sayer across north-

35 Letter of Daniel Sutherland to Jean Baptiste McBean, November 9, 1802, in Alexander Mackenzie Letterbook, 1805-09, in Alexander Mackenzie and Company Papers, Séminaire de Québec, microfilm copy in MHS division of archives and manuscripts.
36 The original of the Jedediah Stevens diary belongs to the MHS. The typescript of it with Grace Lee Nute's footnotes may be found in Nute, comp., "Manuscripts Relating to Northwest Missions, 1810-1896," in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. See p. 68 and note 23 for references to Connor and the Snake River diary.
37 Thomas Connor, claim file 145, no. 21, in Special Files, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives Record Group 75, microfilm edition M574, roll 29, frames 1058-1061.
38 Thomas Connor, power of attorney, January 19, 1844, in Connor claim file, no. 1003, in Indian Claims, Office of Second Auditor, General Accounting Office, National Archives Record Group 217, Connor claim file 103, no. 15, in Special Files, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives Record Group 75, microfilm edition M574, frames 490-500.
A DOCUMENT (above) dated October, 1802, reveals that Thomas Connor, unable to write, signed on with the XY Company in Sorel, Canada, by marking an “X.” Two later documents, dated 1855 (left) and 1839 (below), also demonstrate Connor’s illiteracy. The 1855 document reports that Connor knew nothing of bookkeeping and kept track of his accounts with the Indians by making notches on sticks. The signature of 1802 is courtesy of the Sorel judicial archives. The later signatures are from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.
ern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The document expanded the society's general knowledge of Sayer and illuminated his key role in the Fond du Lac trade.39

Other evidence, including a letter written by one of Sayer's clerks in 1797, and four notarized documents signed by Sayer in the years following his retirement from the Fond du Lac trade, were helpful in filling gaps in Sayer's biography. They were to be most useful, however, in dealing later with the question of the handwriting in the Snake River diary.40

If this early research told White little about the questions he was attempting to answer, one thing that he was able to do in the early months of 1975 was especially helpful to his own understanding of the problem. This was his examination in April, 1975, on a research trip to Canada, of the volume in the Public Archives of Canada's Masson Collection that contained the Snake River diary.

It was clear from this examination of the volume that the diary and the accounts were not merely filed together, but were in fact integral parts of the same volume and had been so from the beginning. The volume had originally been used to keep the ledger entries of 1791–93. It had later been picked up by someone, perhaps its original author, who turned it over and, starting at the back of the volume, had recorded the 1796–97 accounts. The pages following these accounts were then used for the diary of 1804–05.41

Were all these accounts kept by the same person? Or had the diary been abandoned or passed on to another trader, who, while keeping the later records and diary, was more or less scrupulous in preserving the original records? Studying the handwriting, White, like Birk, became convinced that the 1791–93 accounts were kept by the same person who kept the later diary.

Nonetheless, White was and is still less sure of the 1796–97 accounts. He now thinks it more likely that these accounts were kept by a North West Company clerk named Anthony Shepherd, who, White believes he can also demonstrate, kept the Sayer account book preserved in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Shepherd was hired by the North West Company as a clerk in 1794 and some time after that seems to have been assigned to keep Sayer's accounts. In fact, the 1795–96 account book contains a complete record of Shepherd's own financial dealings with his North West Company employers.42

The clincher, however, as far as White is concerned, is a letter now in the Burton Historical Collection in Detroit in which Shepherd, on his way to Montreal, wrote from Michilimackinac to George Meldrum of the Detroit firm of Meldrum and Park. In handwriting clearly similar to that in the 1795–96 and 1796–97 accounts, Shepherd wrote that he was enclosing a letter from John Sayer and that:

Being thoroughly acquainted with Mr. Sayer &

his circumstances, and knowing how much he feels indebted to you for past favors, you will permit me to inform you that he has come to an explanation with the agents N.West Co. with respect to the Bill that was returned you Protested, the result is, that it will be duly honored: he requested me even to say more, that if they would not allow him to draw for a certain Sum annually, that you might expect to see him at Detroit this fall: in order to wind up his old Balance with you.43

Significantly, the 1796–97 records also contain mention of an amount debited to John Sayer's account with the North West Company "by amount of my dft. favor G. Meldrum." This is probably the very draft spoken of in Shepherd's letter of the following year, a draft which Shepherd, acting as Sayer's accountant, could have drawn for him against the North West Company and to the credit of George Meldrum.

What of the possibility that Shepherd may have been

39John Sayer and Co. account book, 1795–96, in North West Company Records, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg. For a description of the account book, see White, comp., The Fur Trade in Minnesota, 26.40From these legal documents and other available information it is possible further to sketch out Sayer's later life. In 1807, North West Company minutes mention that, in return for retiring from the fur trade and giving up one of his two shares in the company, Sayer would be given title to a farm at Lac des Chats on the Ottawa River. Sayer apparently accepted this offer, for in 1809 he sold the farm to Duncan Cameron. In 1810, Sayer was living in the village of St. Anne's (now Ste. Anne de Bellevue) on the western tip of the island of Montreal. That year he sold his other share in the North West Company to McTavish, McGillivraes and Co. for 1,100 pounds. In 1815, Sayer was still living at St. Anne's, and he reportedly died there on October 2, 1818, at the age of 68.

Sayer's will, which was probated in 1819, reveals that at the time of his death he was married to a woman named Elizabeth McPherson. In the will there is also mention of a natural daughter named Margaret Sayer and natural sons named Henry and James, as well as his "beloved niece Louisa Nash Walker." Although the document was filed as a holographic will, affidavits filed with the will by Peter Grant, Sr., and Henry Mackenzie testify only to the authenticity of the signature. But this signature appears to have been originally written in pencil or lightly in ink and later retraced in a darker (and different) hand. Thus neither the will nor Sayer's signature on it can be considered as unquestionably authentic samples of his handwriting. See Sayer contract with Duncan Cameron, October 17, 1809, and McTavish, McGillivraes and Co., June 27, 1810, in records of notary Jonathan A. Gray; Sayer obligation to David David, November 22, 1815, in records of notary Henry Griffen; and John Sayer holographic will (filed erroneously under the name Sawyer), probated June 15, 1819; all these documents in the National Archives of Quebec at Montreal. Photocopies of these documents are available in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. See also Wallace, Documents, 247. For other references to Sayer and the farm at Lac

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the author of the Snake River diary? Besides the dissimilarity of handwriting, which White believes could dispose of the possibility, there is no record of Shepherd either working for the North West Company or appearing in the Fond du Lac district after his trip to Montreal in 1797.

Another question that White addressed had to do with the 1791–93 accounts. From their presence in the same volume as the diary, and the apparent resemblance in the handwriting in both sections, it appears likely that the diary and 1791–93 accounts were written by the same person. Could we not, then, by demonstrating the author of the earlier pages indirectly identify the author of the diary itself?

Working under this assumption, White tried to find evidence that would corroborate the hypothesis that the ledger pages were kept by Sayer, perhaps as Birk had earlier suggested, during the trader’s years as North West Company agent at Sault Ste. Marie. From the entries in these pages, it was evident that whoever kept the records had, like Sayer, an ongoing business relationship with the firm of Meldrum and Park, as well as business relations with Joseph Réaume, one of the very traders later mentioned in the Snake River diary. In addition, there were references in the ledger pages to the “Company at St. Mary’s.” But more significant were the references in these entries to John Sayer himself.

His name appeared many times in the ledger pages. This, of course, neither proved nor disproved the hypothesis that the records were Sayer’s. While it is true that in a diary the author might not mention his own name, in a financial record of this kind he would be much more likely to do so. What was significant about the 1791–93 ledger pages was only not that Sayer’s name appeared so many times, but the way in which it appeared.

Unlike transactions involving other individuals listed there, particular transactions involving Sayer not only showed up on his own debit-credit pages, but also on those of other individuals. For example, Joseph Réaume, on his pages, was shown as indebted “To J. Sayer as per blotter” for the sum of 6 livres and 14 sols. On the credit side of the page devoted to John Sayer, the same transaction was listed. Another entry, showing Sayer as indebted to Meldrum and Park for the sum of 56.16 livres, was also on the credit side of the ledger pages concerning Meldrum and Park.

An examination of the ledger's debits revealed that almost without exception the debts of most individuals were "to" various kinds of merchandise obtained from the keeper of the account book. Exceptions to this involved only John Sayer, "the company" (perhaps the North West Company), or drafts against other persons.

From this analysis, White believes that either Sayer himself kept the ledger pages or that he was associated in some way with the person or company (unnamed) for which the ledger was being kept. Why else would Sayer's own debts to a number of separate people be recorded there?

As mentioned before, White in the course of his first months of research came across four documents signed by John Sayer after his retirement from the Fond du Lac fur trade. As of May, 1975, these were the only samples of Sayer’s handwriting that had been found. On the basis of the similarity between these signatures and the writing of Sayer’s name in the 1791–93 ledger pages, and the basic similarity between these accounts and the handwriting in the diary itself, White wrote in his preliminary report that, when added to Birk's discoveries, the evidence was consistent with the hypothesis that Sayer was the author of the Snake River diary. White did recommend, however, that further efforts be made to locate samples of Sayer's handwriting so that eventually a handwriting expert could be found to make a detailed comparison.

This search took place in conjunction with White's...
John Sayer had not kept the Snake River diary it was written. White concluded his research into the Connor-Sayer question to a Canadian handwriting expert.

NOW THAT their research has been completed and all that remains is the expert analysis of the handwriting in the diary and the related documents, Birk and White remain convinced that Sayer was the author of the Snake River diary. They recognize, of course, that their conviction is based on their own understanding of the evidence they have uncovered. They also know that those who follow them must do as they have done — find new answers to old questions and ask new questions about old evidence. They believe that their research, far from dealing merely with a single instance of mistaken identity, has more general ramifications for the fur-trade history of the region. Out of it has emerged a new recognition of the importance of John Sayer to the fur trade of northern Minnesota from the 1780s through the early 1800s. Long neglected by historians, Sayer may yet find his place in Minnesota fur-trade history.

It also seems to them that the problem they have studied demonstrates the usefulness of a detailed examination of fur-trade records in revising our understanding of the subject. It is generally no longer useful or even possible to write about the fur trade solely on the basis of secondary sources and interpretive works. Fresh examinations based on original records of the fur-trade companies and traders must be undertaken if we are really to understand the early economic and political history of Minnesota.

The same is true of fur-trade archaeology. Much remains to be done. How, for example, do we know the truth of the occasionally repeated statement about the Snake River post — that it was a "typical" wintering post of someone so close to Sayer that he had been given Sayer's account book, so humble that he kept a diary and allowed Sayer to get credit for it shortly afterwards, and so shadowy that he left not one solid piece of evidence of his existence to associate him with the diary or the Snake River post? White felt that he had done his part. In the summer of 1978, he forwarded the document samples relating to the Connor-Sayer question to a Canadian handwriting expert.
THE SIGNATURE that John Sayer affixed to a document in 1810 (above, top) bears a striking similarity to the writing of his name in the accounts of 1791–93 filed with the Snake River diary (above, bottom). Below for comparison is an enlarged section of the diary. At right is one of the July, 1804, contracts with which John Sayer hired two winterers for the Folle Avoine or St. Croix River area. The latter photo is courtesy of the McCord Museum in Montreal.
— unless we compare it with other excavated examples within the same trade district? Given the contrasting economic and social ranking of Sayer and Connor, the archaeological record of the Snake River post can be as valuable as written documentation in providing information on the builder of the post. (These and other aspects of the subject will be dealt with in Birk’s soon-to-be-completed ethno-archaeological report.)

Birk and White also hasten to add that, although their conclusions discredit Thomas Connor as the author of the diary, his importance to the St. Croix fur trade from the 1820s to the 1840s remains intact. Thus Connor is still a legitimate subject of commemoration and research, but for different reasons than previously assumed.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the people of Minnesota owe a great debt of gratitude to Grace Lee Nute and Charles M. Gates for their work on Five Fur Traders of the Northwest. Had they not called attention to the “Diary of Thomas Connor,” there would probably have been no excavation or reconstruction of the Snake River post and our understanding of the site would have suffered. That their hypothesis about Connor was allowed to stand for so long without further testing has more to do with the unwillingness of those that followed to make such an extensive examination than with any desire on their part to have that hypothesis stand untested. Changing the name of the author of the diary does little to detract from their original work. Rather, it promises to enhance its value for the future.

POSTSCRIPT

IN THE SPRING of 1976, the society’s historic sites division, as a result of the research described here, changed the name of “Connor’s Fur Post” to the “North West Company Post,” a name which is certainly an accurate one no matter which fur trader was in charge of its operation. 47

At the time of the society’s announcement, the Pine City Pioneer reported that Ann Vach, a local researcher, working independently in 1969, also came to the conclusion that the Connor hypothesis did not hold up and that much further research needed to be done on Connor to prove that he was connected with the 1804-05 diary or post. 48


In June, 1978, archaeologists from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin began excavating two related fur-trade sites on the Yellow River which may be the location of the post where John Sayer spent the winter of 1803-04, as described in the diary of Michel Curot.

Examination, by a Canadian handwriting expert, of the various documents in the Connor-Sayer case, is still in progress. A report on this analysis, once it is completed, will appear in a future issue of Minnesota History.


THE PHOTOGRAPH on p. 173 of the excavation was taken by Leland Cooper and belongs to the MHS division of historic sites and archaeology. The reconstruction picture and the aerial view on the same page are from the MHS audio-visual library. Dennis Hofta’s picture was taken by Bruce M. White. The Sayer signature on p. 187 is reproduced courtesy of the National Archives of Quebec at Montreal.