

## “Guilty as Charged”

IN THE ARTICLE, “Who Wrote the ‘Diary of Thomas Connor’?: A Fur Trade Mystery,” in the Spring, 1979, issue of *Minnesota History*, Douglas A. Birk and Bruce M. White of the Minnesota Historical Society staff described their efforts to identify the disputed author of an unsigned fur trade diary written in 1804–05. Preserved in the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa, the diary was long thought by Minnesota historians to be the work of Thomas Connor, a local Minnesota fur trader who operated in the St. Croix area. The diary describes the building of a wintering post on the Snake River near present-day Pine City. The post was later excavated by archaeologists and reconstructed and is now operated as an MHS historic site.

Birk and White left little doubt in their article that the diary was not the work of Thomas Connor (he evidently could not read or write) but instead was written by North West Company partner John Sayer. They agreed that a final research goal was to have a handwriting expert examine the diary and make comparisons with known samples of Sayer’s handwriting. In the postscript to their article, the authors said they had forwarded all their evidence to an unnamed expert who would make the comparisons and decide once and for all if Sayer were “guilty as charged.”

The expert who subsequently undertook the assignment was Adrian Crane of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Detection Laboratory in Ottawa. The arrangements by which the RCMP agreed to do the handwriting study were made with the help of Bruce Wilson of the Public Archives of Canada. The archives routinely consults the RCMP in solving problems of this kind.

Crane examined all of the various handwriting samples shown in the *Minnesota History* article and agreed conclusively that it was John Sayer who

wrote the diary. This is how Crane put it in his report, dated April 9, 1980:

**DATA:** Comparison of the questioned writing on exhibit F [the diary], pages 1, 11, 12, 15 to 65 (numbered in pencil) and the 1791 to 1793 Ledger pages, with the specimen writing on exhibits A, B and C has disclosed a number of significant similarities in common together with several features either not totally accounted for or for which comparable test was not available. **CONCLUSION:** The evidence found definitely indicates that substantially all of the questioned writing on exhibit F, pages 1, 11, 12, 15 to 65 (numbered in pencil) and the 1791 to 1793 Ledger pages[,] was written by the writer of the known writing on exhibits A, B, and C [John Sayer].

Later in an explanatory letter dated August 8, 1980, Crane elaborated:

In explanation of the “DATA” [section] — in any examination all the “features” in a handwriting can never be totally duplicated in the specimen (known) writing. Also, the comparison done evaluates combinations of letters. If the specimen writing does not have the same words or letter combinations, i.e., comparable text, then there will be some features which cannot be totally accounted for in the specimen writing. In this comparison there were sufficient, accounted-for features of identifying significance to far outweigh these unaccounted-for features.

On the basis of Crane’s report and the previous work done by Birk and White, the Public Archives of Canada, which has always referred to the diary as being the work of an anonymous “wintering partner,” has now re-catalogued the journal and its associate papers to attribute them to John Sayer.



Two handwritten signatures are shown. The top signature is written in a cursive script and reads "John Sayer". The bottom signature is also in cursive and reads "John Sayer". Both signatures are written in black ink on a white background.



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