

A Militia Cartridge Box from Minnesota

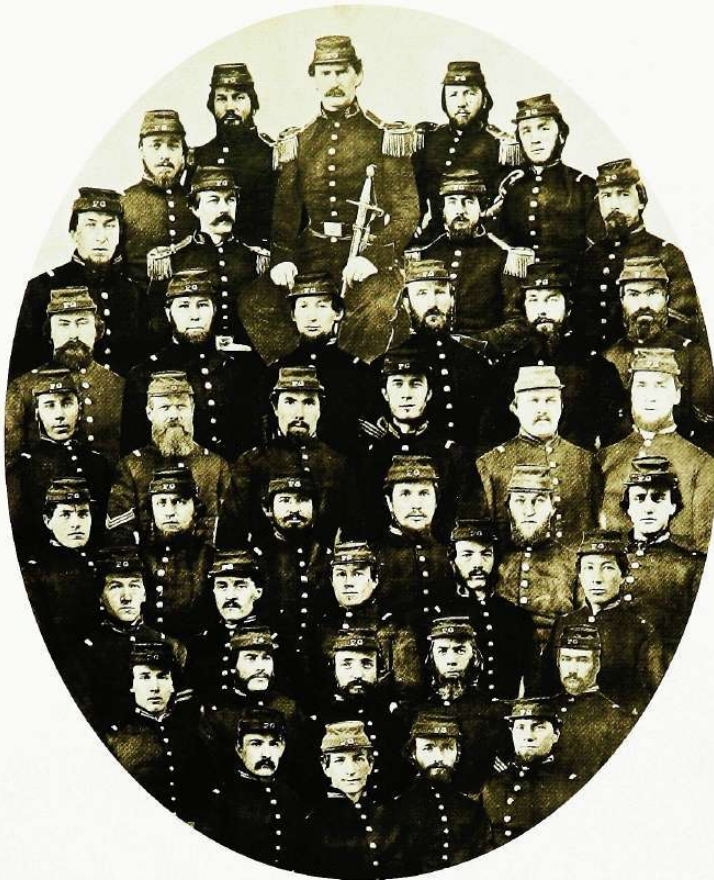
“**T**he object of this Company in the formation of a Military Corps is to promote among our citizens martial discipline, and to foster among us a military education, whereby we will be enabled more effectually to defend our country from danger and insult, and to guard intact, the honor of our flag.” So reads Article II of the Constitution of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, formed in St. Paul in

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Cartridge box of William A. Van Slyke, Minnesota Pioneer Guard, about 1856. Approximately 7½ x 4 inches with a 50-inch long cotton strap, the lined box held 10 paper cartridges.



Minnesota Pioneer Guard, 1858; Lt. Van Slyke is the man with epaulets at the sword-bearing commander's right hand

1856. Its 12 officers and 44 privates comprised the first militia in what was shortly to become the State of Minnesota.¹

Such volunteer organizations were common after the American Revolution, particularly in the decades leading to the Civil War. During that conflict, most were incorporated into state regiments and saw active service. Militia companies began to decline when the National Guard

was created in 1870. The last of Minnesota's individually named companies was assimilated into the National Guard by about 1883.

Within a few weeks after adopting a constitution, the Minnesota Pioneer Guard had decided on a uniform and accoutrements. According to early records, "The company immediately proceeded to provide themselves with the Uniform adopted; and a contract was made with Messrs. D. Devlin & Co. of New York to furnish them.

"The Uniforms and Equipment were received . . . on the Third of July, Eighteen hundred and fifty six, and a draft was transmitted by the Company to Mess. Devlin & Co. in payment."²

The cartridge box shown here may well have been part of this order. A recent acquisition of the Minnesota Historical Society, courtesy of Mike Stanton of the Minnesota Weapon Collectors' Association, it is of typical militia construction: tarred leather with a plain, woven-cotton strap and a single tinned-iron liner to hold 10 paper cartridges. An inscription on the under side of the box flap points to its owner: "Minnesota Pioneer Guard/ Cartridge Box/ Organized 1855 [sic]/ First Military Organization/ Minn. Territory/ Wm. A. Van Slyke."

Born in New York State in 1835, Van Slyke moved to Minnesota in 1854, but his name does not appear on the 1856 roster of the Pioneer Guard. He is recorded as being third lieutenant on an 1859 roster; if he was still a member in 1861 when the Pioneer Guard became Company A of the First Minnesota Regiment of Volunteers, he did not make the transition to active duty in that famed group. On March 26, 1862, just as the Peninsula Campaign was launched in the East, Van Slyke was mustered in as second lieutenant of Company G of the Fifth Minnesota Regiment. He resigned his post in July 1863. In the years after the Civil War, Van Slyke made his mark in the grain-commission business.³

¹ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, Organized April 17, 1856* (St. Paul: Pioneer and Democrat Job office, 1856). See also Gertrude W. Ackermann, "Volunteer Guards in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 16 (June 1935): 166-77.

² "Records of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard, Organized 17th April, 1856," n.p., in *Orderly Book, M.P.G., Minnesota Pioneer Guard Papers*, Minnesota Historical Society.

³ Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912*, Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, vol. 14 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1912), 807; "Records of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard," and "Constitution and By Laws of the Minnesota Pioneer Guard . . . Adopted April 12, 1859," both in *Orderly Book*; Ackermann, "Volunteer Guards," 176; Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1890), 1:293.

The photograph and cartridge box, photographed by Peter Latner, are in the MHS Collections.



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