



*DAR meeting at the Sibley House, about 1917*

# House Work



The DAR  
*at the*  
SIBLEY  
HOUSE

*Ann Marcaccini &  
George Woytanowitz*

“It was a beautiful evening, that night of July 20th [1951], so quiet and peaceful,” recalled Lucetta Bissell, a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Mendota’s Henry H. Sibley and Jean B. Faribault Houses, the DAR-administered homes of the state’s first governor and an early fur trader, constituting Minnesota’s first historic site, “were casting long shadows on the sloping lawn. . . . The flag had been taken down and put away for the day. . . . Up at Sibley Tea House . . . guests were arriving for dinner, and small tables were spread on the veranda. Nowhere,” she continued, “could one find a more pic-

*Ann Marcaccini is a member of the Minnesota DAR and the Friends of the Sibley Historic Site. She is a writer for business and industry. George Woytanowitz, Ph.D., teaches history at the University of St. Thomas and is a staff member at the Sibley Historic Site.*

turesque spot than the five acres that General Henry Hastings Sibley chose for his home beside the Minnesota River.” But suddenly the wind rose, and a violent storm forced the Tea House manager to hustle patrons and employees into a dugout cellar under the front of the house. When the gale finally subsided, no one had been hurt, but electric power had been lost and roads were blocked by uprooted trees. Not until late in the evening did volunteer firemen rescue the trapped diners.<sup>1</sup>

While the storm caused only minor damage to Sibley’s home, the Faribault House lost part of its roof. Rain poured in all night, damaging a rare collection of Native American objects on display. The Tea House, once the home of

Sibley’s clerk Hypolite Du Puis, also suffered damage, and 60 trees were split, twisted, or toppled. Facing massive cleanup, repair, and restoration costs with characteristic aplomb, Bissell wrote, the DAR “considered the cost. . . . The greater part of the expense will be shared by the forty-six Chapters that make up the Minnesota D.A.R. Can we do it? No one asked that question; we only considered *how* we could do it.”<sup>2</sup>

This plucky response was typical. The DAR had been considering *how* they could do it for some 40 years. Long interested in the Sibley site, Minnesota’s oldest European-American settlement and one-time home to a grandson and great-grandson of Revolutionary War soldiers,

<sup>1</sup> Lucetta Bissell, “A Storm at Sibley House,” *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, Feb. 19, 1952, p. 118, 128; Lenore Pidgeon to author, May 16, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Bissell, “Storm,” 118, 128.

*Five early Mendota buildings (foreground, from left), Faribault’s low log cabin and two-story house, a large stone warehouse just behind the Sibley House, and the white frame American Fur Company warehouse. Fort Snelling sits across the Minnesota River at the confluence with the Mississippi (far right) in this detail from Sgt. Edward K. Thomas’s painting, about 1850.*



the DAR had secured title to it in 1910. Then this group of women ambitiously made plans to create a midwestern Mount Vernon, a monument to the colonial era to which members traced their ancestry.

Because Mendota, a Dakota word meaning “meeting of waters,” occupied the strategic junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, it became a trading and supplies center as early as 1779. Fort Snelling went up on a bluff across the Minnesota in the 1820s. In 1835–36 Sibley, partner in the Western Outfit of the American Fur Company, directed stonemason John Müller and a crew including Dakota men and women to build a comfortable dwelling from yellow riverbank limestone. Large for its time and place, the two-story building with two-foot thick outer walls had hand-hewn beams and floors that were fitted together with wooden pegs.<sup>3</sup>

Marrying Sarah Jane Steele in 1843, Sibley added a wing at the rear for his large, growing family. Serving as territorial delegate to Congress (1849–53) and the state’s first governor (1858–60), he lived in Mendota until 1862, when he donated his property to St. Peter’s Catholic Church and moved to St. Paul. From 1867 to 1878 the Sisters of St. Joseph operated a girls’ boarding school there, and for three summers in the late 1890s Minneapolis artist Burt Harwood ran an art school on the grounds.<sup>4</sup>

Some 150 yards west of the Sibley House,

Müller constructed another home in 1839–40, this one for Jean B. Faribault, his métis wife, Pelagie Hanse (Ainsse), and their children. Similarly built of yellow limestone, the roomy house with billiard room and bar doubled as an inn for travelers. Faribault’s grandson kept a hotel there for some years before the family sold the property in the 1890s. The DAR acquired it in 1934–35.<sup>5</sup>

Completing the historic complex managed by the DAR was a two-story brick house erected in 1854 for the last of Sibley’s many clerks, Hypolite Du Puis. Purchased by the DAR in 1922, it eventually became the popular Sibley Tea House.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning, the DAR women had envisioned Mendota’s Sibley House as a public museum. Its first artifact—field glasses used by General George A. Custer in his Indian campaigns—was donated even before trans-

fer of the house deed, and the collections would grow to more than 4,000 objects, works of art, and Native American treasures.<sup>7</sup>

The DAR also wanted the site to be a place of education. For 50 years most students graduating from Minneapolis and St. Paul schools toured the houses at least once. At its peak of popularity in the late 1950s and 1960s, tens of thousands of people visited the complex each summer.<sup>8</sup>

To accomplish their goals, the DAR women hired caretakers and contracted for continual



Henry H. Sibley, about 1849

<sup>3</sup> June D. Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota’s Major Historic Sites: A Guide* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1972), 9–12. See also Rhoda R. Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” *Minnesota History* 42 (Winter 1970): 124–29.

<sup>4</sup> Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 13–15; Notebook for Guides, 22–23, Sibley House Archives, Mendota; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Mar. 25, 1934, sec. 2, p. 10, reprinted in Maude C. (Mrs. Fred) Schilplin, *1835–1935, The One-Hundredth Anniversary of Sibley Homestead* (St. Cloud: Minnesota Society DAR, 1935[?]), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Colonial Chapter, “Faribault House,” typescript, Sibley House Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Fort Snelling State Park Association and Minnesota Historical Society, *Old Mendota—A Proposal for Addition of Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1966), 2–6; Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Society DAR (MSDAR) and Sibley House Association (SHA), Minutes, Mar. 12, 1910, Sibley House Archives; “Numerical List of Articles Belonging and Loaned to Sibley House Association,” vol. 1–2, Sibley House Archives; Lisa Krahn, site manager, interview with author, Mendota, Feb. 6, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy M. Bennett, *Highlights in the History of the Minnesota State Society of the NSDAR 1891–1991* (n.p.: Minnesota State Society NSDAR, 1994), 99, 103.

repairs to basements, roofs, plumbing, and sprinkler and heating systems. They operated the Tea House restaurant to raise funds for the site. They collected original Sibley family furnishings and other pieces to decorate the houses. And they volunteered uncounted hours of time and a good amount of their own money for the Mendota buildings' care.



In 1970 the Sibley, Faribault, and Du Puis Houses, three other historic structures around them, and neighboring St. Peter's Catholic Church, built in 1853 and the state's oldest church in continuous use, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Mendota Historic District. By that decade, however, the DAR's resources and membership had declined. Private organizations and local and state historical societies were beginning to restore homes and develop public history programs, which created competition for visitors. In the end the DAR women could no longer meet the financial demands of their beloved site. On May 21, 1996, they gave the Sibley, Faribault, and Du Puis Houses to the State of Minnesota, which then transferred authority to the Minnesota Historical Society, thus closing a long chapter of loving stewardship for a unique historic resource.<sup>9</sup>

The National Society of the DAR originated in 1890 to protest the unwillingness of the Sons of the American Revolution to recognize women's contribution to the war. Its service mission is to foster patriotism, historic preservation, and education. Early DAR members included Clara Barton and Susan B. Anthony.

St. Paul women formed a local chapter in 1891. As elsewhere, these women also belonged to other elite organizations such as the Schubert Club and the New Century Club; they served on their churches' widows and orphans

committees and were members of the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic. Their names reflect their Anglo-Saxon ancestors and husbands—Adams, Monfort, Newport, and Winslow. Some St. Paul chapter members also organized the state DAR in January 1892.<sup>10</sup>

It was in 1909, on a Minnesota River cruise, that Julia M. Johnson, dean of women at Macalester College, first pointed out the deteriorating Sibley House to new DAR member Lucy McCourt (MacCourt), a St. Paul dentist's wife. Johnson described how it and the neighboring Faribault House had been leased from the Catholic diocese for use as warehouses but seemed to be occupied by transients, who hopped off the trains running on the nearby tracks. Believing it tragic to allow the home's decay, McCourt opened correspondence with Archbishop John Ireland about the situation.<sup>11</sup>

McCourt recorded in her diary her swift progress to a surprising end:

Friday, January 28, 1910. Received word over the phone that the old historic Sibley House was donated with two lots, measuring 146 x 157 feet, to the St. Paul Chapter, DAR. . . .

Saturday, March 12, 1910. Attended the Annual State Business meeting . . . and informally offered the Historic, Old Sibley House to the State D.A.R. Mrs. [Martha] Bronson of Northfield made motion to accept said offer. . . . A rising vote of thanks was given me for said offer.

Monday, March 21, 1910. Mrs. [Etta] Baird and myself went to see the old Sibley Mansion. . . . We found the walls, chimnies and roof of the main building in good condition, also a brick building [summer kitchen and wash house] which can be remodeled at a small cost for temporary quarters for the care-taker while the main building is being restored. On the east side of the house we found the ruins of an old ice-house.<sup>12</sup>

From January to June 1910, eager crews of DAR women worked to prepare the house and grounds for its opening on Flag Day, June 14.

<sup>9</sup> Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 15; State Historic Preservation Office, *The National Register of Historic Places: Minnesota Checklist* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1991), 17; Minnesota Historical Society, "Sibley Historic Site Transferred to State," press release, May 21, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *Highlights*, 1–2; Kara M. Korsgaard, "The Meeting Adjourned and Tea was Served: The Organizational Lives of Elite Women in Late Nineteenth Century St. Paul" (master's thesis, Hamline University, 1988), vii, 103, 133, 148. In 1996 Minnesota had 29 DAR chapters with about 1,100 members. The national society's membership is about 200,000.

<sup>11</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Mar. 1917, Sibley House Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy McCourt, "Report of the Sibley House Committee (As read from Diary)" (hereafter "Diary"), transcribed by Mrs. B. T. Willson, 1940–44, in Notebook for Guides, p. 5–6, Sibley House Archives.



*The deteriorating Sibley House, photo by Edward A. Bromley, about 1893*

According to McCourt's transcribed diary, on March 29, "In company with Mr. John Carlson, contractor, Mrs. [Carrie] Jerrard, Mrs. [Jennie K.] Emmons, and my son Robert, I went to Mendota to plant vines, take pictures, make necessary calls, and get estimates on all needed repairs."<sup>13</sup>

Two days later, "Mrs. Julia M. Johnson and myself made personal calls and secured the promise of Archbishop Ireland and Gov. [Adolph O.] Eberhart to make addresses on Flag-day. . . . The same day received estimates of repairs [totaling \$1,453]." Again, two days later, "Received of David L. Kingsbury the first one dollar toward the Sibley House Dollar Fund. . . . Received of Mrs. Sarah [Sallie] Sibley Young twenty-five dollars. . . . also the first book for our library, 'Ancestry, Life and Times of H. H. Sibley,' and the promise to secure, if possible, the first piano ever brought into the state." The following week the energetic McCourt and Mrs. M. Helen Moss

went to Minnehaha, army headquarters, to secure addresses of possible care-takers, and were directed to Capt. Harris, Old Capitol, St. Paul. From there we went to Fort Snelling



*Lucy McCourt,  
rescuer of the Sibley House, about 1910*

<sup>13</sup> Here and below, McCourt, "Diary," 6–7.

to invite the Commandant and his staff to Mendota, June 14th, and incidentally to secure the band for that day. . . . From the Fort we went to Mendota where we were to meet Gov. Sibley's daughter, Mrs. Young. . . .

We found the house had been cleaned as directed, but all refuse had been dumped out of the open windows on the lawn, which in turn must be cleaned. Paid first bill of fifty-five cents for broom and two dollars for the cleaning, referred to above. Our party, seven in number, spread out a basket-lunch, and after this enjoyable refreshment and rest, went through the Sibley Mansion, taking notes of everything Mrs. Young said about "just as it used to be"; after which Mrs. Young took us home in her auto.

An unexpected hitch in ownership of the property developed in October when the national DAR ruled that state groups could not incorporate. Not willing to give up now, the women incorporated the Sibley House Association with members defined as Minnesota DAR members. On November 11, title to the house and lots accordingly passed to the new association.<sup>14</sup>

Money remained the biggest concern. Fifty appeal letters sent to DAR chapters yielded \$200, but house debts amounted to \$1,089 before interior refurbishment began. Prominent Minnesota families such as the Crosbys, Hills, Livingstons, and Weyerhaeusers donated funds and were awarded life memberships in the Sibley House Association. The state legislature showed its support with a \$1,500 appropriation. The St. Paul DAR chapter sponsored a colonial ball—DAR women frequently donned colonial costumes and powdered wigs for events—that raised \$1,300 for buying the property between the front of the house and the railroad tracks to prevent it from being built upon. In 1911 the house association purchased bonds (whose interest income would support ongoing operations), hired a caretaker (to be paid \$20 a month), and established a fee of 10 cents for tours. It erected signs on the roads leading to the site, purchased insurance and fire extinguishers, prohibited smoking, and adopted for-

mal, double-entry bookkeeping.<sup>15</sup>

The women then tackled restoring and furnishing the house. The Minneapolis chapter donated \$500 for a slate roof. Larger, more affluent chapters offered to decorate the eight rooms: "St. Paul wished the lower front room, Northfield the wing room and Duluth the birth-room. The large hall is to be used as a historical Museum" and the "collection of Indian relics to be placed in the attic of Sibley House where the Indians used to stay." The women decided that gifts of furnishings from chapters would need board approval and should be "harmoniously . . . in keeping with the age of the building" and, further, that gifts would be "genuine furniture so far as possible." The board also formulated plans for various rooms, so that "no incongruous things should be accepted."<sup>16</sup>

Association members created specialized committees such as house and grounds, historian, relics and furnishings, and Indian loan and relics. The Josiah Edson (Northfield) and Nathan Hale (St. Paul) chapters donated several boxes of relics. The women requested and received a cannon and 20 cannon balls from the U.S. War Department that were eventually placed on the grounds. Members then agreed that "a complete inventory of all articles and furnishings be made" and that tags for labeling each article be printed.<sup>17</sup>

Turning to appropriate works of art, the portraits and photographs committee urged the desirability of securing pictures of pioneers taken in "middle or active life," rather than old age, and later reported that 18 had been obtained. Members commissioned a small cast of Abraham Lincoln, and painter H. H. Cross visited the house and promised pictures of Indian scouts John Otherday and Daniel Boone. Sketches of the Fifth Minnesota Regiment in the battle of Corinth by Edwin H. Blashfield, whose paintings were in the state capitol, were accepted. Emily Hartwell, an art student who had spent summers at the Sibley House, donated paintings of Indian life with the proviso that they be framed.<sup>18</sup>

In August 1912, after Lucy McCourt urged the necessity of making a plan for the grounds, the board agreed to pay landscape gardener

---

<sup>14</sup> Bennett, *Highlights*, 23–25. In 1913 the chapter purchased 8½ adjoining lots for the sum of \$2,000, which it presented to the state organization in 1917; Bennett, *Highlights*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Oct. 21, 1910, Feb. 11, May 25, Aug. 26, 1911, June 18, 1912.

<sup>16</sup> McCourt, "Diary," 8; MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Oct. 21, 1910, May 25, Aug. 26, 1911, July 8, Aug. 22, 1912.

<sup>17</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Feb. 11, Aug. 26, 1911, May 23, July 8, 1912.

<sup>18</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, May 23, July 8, Aug. 22, Oct. 26, 1912; Acquisitions records, 1969–84, Sibley House Archives.

Paul Mueller \$50 for a watercolor drawing of the planting improvements, with preliminary work to be done before the next Arbor Day. Mueller's watercolor (on view at the Sibley House today) shows that as early as 1912 the women envisioned a tea house for the property. Before Arbor Day of the next year, 87 shrubs, 912 vines, and 33 trees costing \$321.19 had been planted. Trees honored Sibley family members, and a Regents Walk honored each DAR state regent. A tree could be planted in someone's name with an identifying tag for a donation of \$5.00. The Minnesota Historical Society was honored by the planting of a native oak. In 1914, \$500.00 in donations doubled the number of plantings.<sup>19</sup>

The 1920s and, ironically, the 1930s were years of expansion for the site's area, structures, and collections. Most importantly, the Tea House became a reality after the acquisition of the two-story, brick Du Puis House. As noted in the house and grounds committee's report from September 1922, "At the Annual Meeting . . . the advisability of purchasing the long coveted Catherine Fee property (which is adjacent to Sibley House grounds) was presented. . . . Lively giving indicated great interest taken in the project and in less than ten minutes, one hundred five (\$105.00) Dollars had been pledged." The minutes report that Fee, whose family had bought the property from Du Puis in 1869, decided to accept \$1,000: a first payment of \$200 and \$200 a year for the following four years.<sup>20</sup>

While the women recognized the building as an ideal place to provide visitors with refreshments, that goal eluded them throughout the 1920s, "material and labor being at peak prices." Maintenance work continued on both houses during the decade: gutters were replaced, chimneys rebricked, caretakers hired and dismissed, fire extinguishers recharged, and additional gardens and trees planted, including an "Old Fashion Garden" and four elms. When the grounds needed to be graded, members "enlisted the aid of the army at Fort Snelling and borrowed a water wagon from a

## *Report of Relics & Furnishings Chairman, October 1940*

The following articles have been presented to Sibley House Association since the May meeting—

- 1 pair Carved Ivory Tips for knitting needles; to place on needles when not in use to keep knitting from slipping off. Period of 1830.
- Daguerreotype taken in 1861 of Alta Maria Felton, age 3 years. She is wearing the dress she had on when Lincoln picked her up and held her in his arms at his inaugural reception in April, 1861. She came to Minn. with her parents soon after the Civil War. Her father, a Civil War officer, knew General Sibley.
- Knitted Night Cap, made in Vermont in 1790 by Susannah Gates, of very fine thread on tiny needles. Brought to Minn. soon after the Civil War by the Felton family mentioned above.
- Ear Ring of 1800.
- Two Dress Clamps, or Skirt Loopers, used in 1850–60 to fasten onto a lady's train to hold it from the floor while dancing.

threshing rig to get their new plantings watered." Historical artifacts including clothing, textiles, furniture, firearms, books, flags, silver, photographs, tools, and handiwork continued to arrive from local chapters. The site's admission price remained steady at one dime.<sup>21</sup>

Ferry service had operated between Fort Snelling and Mendota since 1839, but in 1926 the new Mendota Bridge provided much easier

<sup>19</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Aug. 22, Oct. 26, 1912; Planting Committee, Minutes, 1913–14, in House and Grounds Committee Minutes Book, 1913–25, all Sibley House Archives.

<sup>20</sup> House and Grounds Committee, Quarterly Reports, Sept. 27, 1922, Sibley House Archives.

<sup>21</sup> House and Grounds Committee, Annual Reports, May 24, 1923–May 22, 1924, May 22, 1924–May 28, 1925, Sibley House Archives; Bennett, *Highlights*, 103, quoting *Minneapolis Star*, July 10, 1969, 1C, interview with Helen Grant.



access for DAR volunteers, visitors, and school groups wanting to tour the site. Before the bridge existed, DAR member Helen Grant recalled, women “took the trolley out to Fort Snelling, scrambled down the bank and waved at the ferryman to come and get us.” Carrie Jerrard, longtime chair of the house and grounds committee, said that “when the ferry boat wasn’t running, [we] walked the railroad bridge” to the house. (The bridge’s ruins are visible below the new Mendota Bridge, completed in 1994.) Grant also revealed, “Of course, we were toting our mops and pails. It was quite an adventure in those long skirts we wore.” Marie Brodwolf, 103 years old in 1996, remembered that the women once had to wait for the ice to freeze on the Minnesota River to move an out-house to the site.<sup>22</sup>

Summer tour attendance rose from 6,790 in 1924 to 8,447 in 1934, and the Minnesota legislature continued its support. Carrie Jerrard reported success in obtaining a state appropriation “for our work/\$1,000 a year for two years, the first \$1,000 available . . . for maintenance only.” Even in 1932, a depression year, the women won a legislative appropriation, although it was “secured with some difficulty.”<sup>23</sup>

In May of that year the Sibley Tea House opened. Its purpose was to yield a profit that would assist in operating the historic site. Unlike the Sibley House and museum that the women primarily staffed and operated themselves, the Tea House had paid cooks and managers, although DAR members continued to volunteer as hostesses. Facilities were limited, and piped water was lacking. Lenore Pidgeon remembered that the DAR women washed dishes on the back lawn to help the cook.<sup>24</sup>

Some managers proved to be better than others. Marie Brodwolf recalled umbrellas and chairs frequently being set out on the lawn for the long line of people waiting. In the 1930s the Tea House became an elegant place to dine on a summer day. One popular manager offered to build, at his own expense, an addition onto the Du Puis House to expand dining space, but the DAR declined his offer. In 1935 the association added a glazed porch at a cost of \$3,000 and, in 1937, a water and sewage system. Judging from committee minutes, building repairs and main-



*DAR women at the restored Sibley House, about 1920*

tenance took constant attention.<sup>25</sup>

Tea House managers received living quarters on the second floor of the Du Puis House as part of their compensation. This kept operating expenses low but carried some hidden burdens. One night Lenore Pidgeon called Marie Brodwolf with the news that Mendota police had arrested their manager for drunken and disorderly conduct. Both women attended his court appearance. A quintessential DAR lady though barely five feet tall, Lenore Pidgeon

<sup>22</sup> Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 10; Bennett, *Highlights*, 103; Marie Brodwolf, telephone interview with author, Mar. 7, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> House and Grounds Committee, Annual Report, May 22, 1924–May 28, 1925, 2; Bennett, *Highlights*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Lenore Pidgeon, telephone interview with author, Feb. 28, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Brodwolf interview. See also House and Grounds Committee, Minutes, Sibley House Archives.



effectively pleaded for leniency because he and his wife, the cook, were good at their jobs and “never drank during working hours.”<sup>26</sup>

During War World II, the Tea House closed because gas rationing made it difficult for patrons to get to Mendota, and food rationing made menu planning difficult. The patriotic DAR women turned their attention to supporting the war effort and donated the cannon and balls to a scrap-metal drive. After the war the Tea House reopened, and for the next two decades it continued to offer a fashionable country dining experience not far from the

Twin Cities.

By 1970, however, suburban development made it difficult to compete for clientele with nearby eating establishments offering liquor, and the Tea House closed. The DAR estimated that \$10,000 in capital equipment would have been required in order to meet new health codes. For 40 years the Sibley Tea House had contributed to the historic site, bringing in visitors even in the years it did not make a profit.<sup>27</sup>

In early 1935 the DAR acquired a third Historic Mendota building, the Faribault House. Stonemason Müller had completed the house in 1839–40, and one of Faribault daughters recalled that, “its walls rang with laughter and music at gay officers’ parties.” The midcentury emergence of St. Paul as a popular downstream landing, however, meant that few travelers disembarked at Mendota, and following the death of his wife, Faribault left to live with his son, Alexander, in the town named for the family. After the house passed from family ownership in the 1890s, it was occupied by other families and then became a warehouse for vegetables.<sup>28</sup>

In February 1934 Minnie L. Dille, Mrs. C. O. Kipp, Mary E. Jameson, Helen Kindy, and Roxy N. H. Learned of the DAR met with Rex Green of Minnesota’s highway department and Theodore Wirth of the Minneapolis park board to discuss the DAR taking over the deteriorating Faribault home. Since the highway department wished to acquire a corner parcel of land owned by the DAR, a deal was struck in which the DAR obtained the house, the sum of \$1,600, and a commitment by the Works Progress Administration to repair and restore the house in exchange for the land. Negotiations with state and federal agencies seem to have required constant attention. Learned wrote that she and committee women “worked for two years while the Federal F.E.R.A., the W.P.A. and the P.W.A. were effecting restoration.” Little attention was paid to accuracy, however, when two rooms were combined into one on the first floor and a stone fireplace was installed. Another governmental agency, the National Park Service, directed landscaping around the house. In 1937 the house was added to tours, with the first-floor room used for DAR

---

<sup>26</sup> Brodwolf interview.

<sup>27</sup> Pidgeon interview.

<sup>28</sup> Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 13–15; Colonial Chapter, “Faribault House,” Sibley House Archives.



*Art-school classes near the Faribault House, 1897*

state and chapter meetings.<sup>29</sup>

In the same year the Faribault House received an eclectic treasure. According to the minutes of the relics committee, the “priceless collection of Indian relics” of the late Mrs. W. O. Winston consisted of about 214 items including “50 pieces of pottery, some Mexican a few Alaskan, a grass skirt, several pairs of horns, a papoose carrier, articles of birch bark, many pairs of beautiful beaded moccasins. . . . [and] 66 baskets, large and very small, some in sets, some in nests, one contains dog bone beads.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1939 the house association paid \$1,500 to purchase one-half—some 550 items—of Bishop Henry Whipple’s collection of Native Americana, which had been on loan to the DAR since 1937. Whipple had arrived in Minnesota at the time of statehood and served 42 years as an enthusiastic missionary among the Dakota and Ojibway. He set up schools, ordained clergy from their ranks, and sponsored an innovative

lace-making program to improve their economic circumstances. Over the years Whipple purchased or was given many artifacts: pipes, moccasins, ceremonial clothing, beadwork, quillwork, and various kinds of bags, as well as an extensive collection of photographs. These now found their way to the DAR’s Faribault House for display.<sup>31</sup>

To publicize its expanding Mendota site, the DAR promoted historical anniversary commemorations. In 1934, the centennial of Sibley’s arrival in Minnesota, costumed interpreters at the Mendota complex portrayed Sibley and greeted visitors. Some 260 guests from the Minnesota Historical Society convened on the lawn of the Sibley House. Here Mother Antonia McHugh, the president of the College of St. Catherine, read her paper about the girls’ boarding school conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph in the Sibley House in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1949 the one-hundredth anniversary

<sup>29</sup> Colonial Chapter, “Faribault House”; Notebook for Guides, 23—both Sibley House Archives; Bennett, *Highlights*, 62; Holmquist and Brookins, *Historic Sites*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Site Accession Files, Sibley House Archives; Relics Committee, Minutes, Mar. 1954–Mar. 1955, Sibley House Archives; Brodewolf interview.

<sup>31</sup> MSDAR and SHA, Minutes, Oct. 6, 1937; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 29, 1981, picture sec., p. 29; Mary Dwyer, “Native American Lace,” *Piecework*, Nov./Dec. 1993, p. 66–71.

## *A fourth grader's report on her visit to the Sibley House in 1932:*

### OUR SIBLEY HOUSE TRIP

We arrived at the Sibley House around 1:30 P.M. . . . Some of us . . . saw some dolls that were in a cupboard. There was also a watch and glasses and many other things of Gen. Sibley's. . . . some arrowheads. . . . We saw ceilings and walls that were made of straw and mud (from the bottom of the river) and sticks. . . . In the attic we saw a canoe, a side-saddle, the saddle on which Sitting Bull rode. . . . We saw Gen. Sibley's room. In it was a bed and some of his children's toys, and a bed warmer, a writing desk, and a piece of cloth that one of the school children made having the alphabet on it. We also saw Grandmother Steele's room which was much the same as Gen. Sibley's. . . . We then went to the basement and saw the fireplace where the men ate and cooked. We saw another room with some hooks on which they used to hang meat. . . . We went to the Sibley House because Gen. Sibley was the first Governor of Minnesota.

SOURCE: Marilyn Hoagberg Ford, school report, Sibley House Archives

of the arrival of territorial governor Alexander Ramsey was noted with a historical pageant that recreated the fur trade. In 1958 a garden party to which 500 were invited observed the statehood centennial and the day that Sibley became governor. Sesquicentennial anniversaries of the Sibley and Faribault Houses were also observed in 1986 and 1991, with descendants of both families attending.<sup>32</sup>

Special events came and went, but tours by school children were a constant from the beginning. In 1936 nearly 2,700 school children visited the site. Fees were nominal—in 1995 only 50 cents.<sup>33</sup>

Tours apparently changed little between the 1910s and the 1970s. Children were ushered through the house by DAR guides, often dressed in colonial costumes in the early years, and told to look at the “relics” in the cabinets and display cases. The guides might or might not have had information to supplement artifact labels, that might or might not have been accurate, a situation not uncommon at historic sites run by volunteers across the country.

Lacking serious competition for visitors, the Sibley House, Tea House, and Faribault House with its Indian artifacts had no trouble attracting visitors. Annually, guests from most states



*DAR women celebrating the centennial of the Sibley House, 1935*

<sup>32</sup> Mother Antonia McHugh, “The Convent School at Mendota, 1867–1878,” transcript of lecture, Jan. 1, 1933, College of St. Catherine Archives, St. Paul; “The State Historical Convention of 1934,” *Minnesota History* 15 (Sept. 1934), 312–13; Bennett, *Highlights*, 94, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *Highlights*, 66.

and a dozen or two foreign countries signed the register. DAR records list the following: in 1935, more than 9,000 visitors; in 1947, some 11,000 visitors; in 1958, the state's centennial, 22,000; and in 1968, perhaps as many as 35,000.<sup>34</sup>

Changes in and around the DAR's site were slowly bringing to an end its exclusive claim to operate Minnesota's most important historic site. In 1960 director Russell Fridley of the Minnesota Historical Society moved that organization into the field of public history by beginning to save, restore, and authentically interpret key historic sites. Fort Snelling, less than a mile from the Sibley site, became an important focal point for this effort. Saved from highway contractors, restored, rebuilt, and interpreted with a large cast of

carefully educated and authentically costumed interpreters, it brought to life this frontier outpost of the 1820s. Visitors saw people at daily work and soldiers drilling and firing the cannon. The home of Sibley's political rival, Alexander Ramsey, underwent similar development. Around Minnesota, county historical societies and private groups restored houses for tours. Throughout the 1960s the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities offered museums a variety of programs of self-assessment, conservation, research, exhibit construction, and staff development.

By the early 1970s the Sibley House site appeared increasingly dowdy and behind the times. Visitors gazed passively at artifact exhibits with a minimum of interpretation. Unaccustomed to seeking assistance beyond a long-standing but modest legislative appropriation,

---

<sup>34</sup> Relic Committee, Annual Report, Mar. 1954–Mar. 1955, Sibley House Archives; Bennett, *Highlights*, 64, 79, 95, 99, 103.

*Sibley's study as restored by the DAR, 1961, with painting of Sibley on horseback*





*Looking southwest in 1971: (from left) the Sibley House, with St. Peter's Catholic Church on the hill behind it, the Faribault House (obscured by trees), and the Mendota Bridge*

the DAR had no method of tapping into national resources and bringing the site up to modern standards. As fundraising for nonprofit groups became professionalized, the amateur, sporadic efforts of DAR volunteers produced meager results. Declining membership also plagued the organization. More women sought paid careers, but local chapters failed to change meetings to times when working women could attend. During the Vietnam War era, the appeal of vocally patriotic organizations diminished. Negative perceptions of the DAR lingered long after its refusal in 1939 to let African-American contralto Marian Anderson sing at its Washington, D.C., auditorium.

In the 1970s the older DAR members had become too old and the few younger, working members did not have time to volunteer at the Sibley House. In the red by 1980, the house association borrowed money from the DAR scholarship fund for operating capital, but only \$3,000 was available to pay double that amount in bills. Additional expenditures loomed ominously on the horizon. The site's buildings, although of sturdy construction, were nearly 150 years old. Not only did they require expen-

sive stabilization, but they also needed to be rewired and heated for visitor comfort and artifact protection. Now part of the 7.5-acre Mendota Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the site needed archaeological sampling before stabilization work could begin.<sup>35</sup>

To increase revenues the board rented out the former Tea House manager's apartment. Making the Mendota complex available for wedding receptions proved a problem, however, when liquor consumption endangered the site and its collections. On one occasion, association president Lola Schenk "received a call from the nightclub across the street. They called to complain they had lost all their clientele to the wedding reception. It seems the bride worked in a Far Eastern restaurant, and one of the belly dancers was performing for the couple on the lawn of the Du Puis House." In the 1980s the board turned to a more traditional revenue source, the legislature, which increased its appropriation from \$40,000 in 1980 to \$93,000 in 1989. Unlike the days when Lucy McCourt simply accompanied a contractor to the site and asked him to do a job, howev-

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Moses, telephone interview with author, Jan. 12 and May 6, 1995; Russell W. Fridley, "Preserving and Interpreting Minnesota's Historic Sites," *Minnesota History* 37 (June 1960): 58-70; Krahn interview.

## Digging Down at Mendota

In 1995 and 1996, before stabilizing and waterproofing the Sibley House foundation, archaeologists excavated plots totaling 110 square yards. Digging down six feet, they found extensive undisturbed and layered deposits indicating multiple occupations of the site by European Americans and, before them, Native Americans.

Stone drain gutters and a buried limestone drain channel from the 1830s–1840s attest to chronic water problems at the site. The remains of two large rain barrels indicate a likely attempt to save rainwater for cooking and washing.

Careful excavations discerned that Sibley raised the grade level two feet before construction to force water to run away from the house foundation. Archaeologists identified earthen layers associated with the site's later use as an art colony, school, and warehouse. They also found fur-trade artifacts dating to Sibley's occupation, including glass trade beads, dinnerware, bottle fragments, tobacco pipes, food remains, and construction materials.

Going down three more feet below the earliest European-American materials, archaeologists found pottery and stone tools, including spear and arrow points. These artifacts range in age from A.D. 1000 to as early as 1000 B.C. (Estimates will be confirmed in the future by radiocarbon dating.)

Because of the ongoing nature of restoration at the Mendota complex, archaeological research will continue into the near future. During spring and summer 1997, visitors may observe archaeologists' efforts to uncover remnants of the lives of the early Minnesotans who found the land at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers an inviting place to live.

Information generated by MHS's archaeological and historical research may be viewed on the "Excavations On-Line" Web page at:

<http://www.umn.edu/marp/>.

—ROBERT CLOUSE, Head, MHS Archaeology Department

*The Sibley Historic Site on state highway 13 is ¼ mile east of the Mendota Bridge (state highway 55) and 2 miles west of Interstate Highway 35E (exit 102). It is open to the public from May 1 to October 31 (closed Mondays). Fees are charged for guided tours. For more information, call 612-452-1596.*



er, now a formal study costing several thousand dollars was needed first to assure that any work done would not damage the structural, architectural, or historic integrity of the buildings.<sup>36</sup>

Pressed by the demands of upkeep and maintenance, as well as spring flood waters in 1971, the board finally decided in 1982 to hire its first professional site manager with the financial support of the Minnesota legislature. Edging away from daily oversight of operations, the board gave the manager power to hire and train interpreters who interacted with visitors. DAR members acted as hostesses and gift-shop clerks for a time, but this, too, ended. The manager and his successors modernized the museum's management and operation, including drafting mission statements and policies for handling artifacts. Cataloging and storage of artifacts improved. By the 1980s, some seven decades after its purchase by the DAR, the Sibley House ceased being a cabinet of curiosities and took on the look of a comfortable midnineteenth-century home. Extensive archival research yielded a wider factual base for site interpretation and destroyed many myths about the site which had flourished for decades. The ice house, for instance, converted into a carriage house decades earlier, was restored to its original appearance, and interpretation emphasized the site's role in the fur trade.<sup>37</sup>

Outsiders began participating in Sibley site events. A fur-trade reenactment group and a Victorian living-history organization visited regularly. Site managers increased the number of visitors with events such as "Christmas in October" and an outdoor arts and crafts fair. A diverse, educated group of interpreters welcomed opportunities to do research, interpretation, archaeology, public relations, and artifact preservation.<sup>38</sup>

Change did not come easily for some of the elderly women who had volunteered time and

<sup>36</sup> Lola Schenk, telephone interview with author, Jan. 15, 1995; Nancy Moses interview; Minnesota Historical Society and Sibley House Association, "Sibley Site Ownership and Management Report: A Report Prepared for the Minnesota State Legislature" (1991), p. 9, Sibley House Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Site Manager Contracts file, Sibley House Archives; Bennett, *Highlights*, 105; Judy Payne, telephone interview with author, Jan. 11, 1995; Marveen Minish, telephone interview with author, Oct. 17, 1995. Among the site managers at the Sibley site are Jeff Norden (1982–83), Judith Payne (1984–94), and Lisa Krahn (1995 to present).

<sup>38</sup> Krahn interview.

money at the site, however. Their day-to-day involvement challenged site managers, until, by the end of the 1980s, the board evolved into a group of women comfortable with the changes. The board also created an advisory body from outside the ranks of the DAR, and state regent Nancy Moses developed the Friends of the Sibley Historic Site, open to anyone with an interest in early Minnesota history. Funds raised by this group repaired attic fans and leaky roofs, purchased computers, printed brochures, and assisted the manager. Board member Marveen Minish's program "Befriend an Artifact" made possible restoration of Charles Deas's painting "Lion" of Sibley's favorite Irish wolfhound, a first edition of Longfellow's *Evangeline*, Sarah Sibley's music box, and a doll that belonged to the Sibley children.<sup>39</sup>

When the highway department closed the Mendota Bridge for a year-long reconstruction in 1993, the board and manager closed the site, emptied the Sibley House of its collections, and, for the next 11 months, installed central heat, rewired, stabilized the basement, and stripped, replastered, painted, and stenciled walls in period colors. Artifacts received protection from ultraviolet radiation, and the security system was updated.<sup>40</sup>

Necessary changes at the site in the 1980s and 1990s, however, had made the home association increasingly dependent on financial support from the state. More than 80 percent

of its budget was coming from the annual legislative appropriation. And major expenses still lay ahead to bring the three major buildings up to acceptable standards of safety and authenticity. Accordingly, in 1990 the association approached the Minnesota Historical Society about transferring the site and its collections. The state legislature signaled its approval in 1994 by appropriating \$500,000 for archaeology and restoration pending the legal transfer. Currently the Sibley House Association is managing the site, while MHS is stabilizing and repairing the buildings.<sup>41</sup>

Credit for preserving Minnesota's first public history site, however, clearly goes to the DAR, women with no professional experience in management, historical restoration, museums, or landscaping. For more than 80 years they volunteered as guides and maintained the buildings out of their love of history. They may have mixed historical eras by wearing colonial-style dresses to give tours of a house built 60 years after the Revolutionary War. And while they

donated odd curios like button collections and socks said to have been worn by Daniel Webster, they also acquired and preserved hundreds of Native American and early Euro-American photos and artifacts for public viewing. When the DAR finally ends its management of the site, it will have accomplished a century of patriotic housework.<sup>42</sup>



<sup>39</sup> Minish interview.

<sup>40</sup> Payne interview.

<sup>41</sup> *Laws of Minnesota*, 1994, chap. 643, sec. 19, subdiv. 10, p. 2443.

<sup>42</sup> Robert S. McCourt, *The History of the Old Sibley House* (St. Paul: DAR, 1910), 21–23.

*McCourt's portrait is from Robert S. McCourt, The History of the Old Sibley House (1910); photo of women in colonial dresses, Minneapolis Tribune, July 25, 1935, p. 8. All other items are in the MHS collections.*





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).