

Emily Goodridge Grey

“WE DID NOT NOTICE any difference in the service to any person. . . . Civility and kindness seemed to be in the air in those good old pioneer days.” These were the opinions of 23-year-old Emily Goodridge Grey, who joined the small African-American enclave in Minnesota Territory in the spring of 1857. A native of York, Pennsylvania, Emily was the daughter of William and Emily Goodridge; her father, a former slave, had been active in the underground railroad. In the early 1850s Emily married Ralph Toyer Grey, who moved to the new territory of Minnesota in 1855.

Emily and her two-year-old son William T. journeyed west two years later to join her barber husband.¹

In her memoir, believed to be the first by a black pioneer in Minnesota Territory, Emily Grey described the rigors and the pleasures of nineteenth-century travel, including a problem that resonates more than a century later—flooding. She and her child made the trip from York by railroad, by steamboat, and, finally, by stagecoach to reach St. Anthony Falls where Ralph Grey awaited them. The young family became an integral part of a growing black community,

one which, according to the census, was more than 94 percent literate. In 1850 about 40 “free colored” were counted in the new territory, only one of whom lived in St. Anthony. The territory’s black population grew very slowly to 259 in 1860; the tiny St. Anthony community increased dramatically in 1857 with the arrival not only of Emily and William Grey but also of eight families from Missouri, Arkansas, and Illinois.² Emily surely knew each one, and as she settled into her new residence one can imagine the letter she wrote to bring her family back East up-to-date on her new life.

The Jarrett House in St. Anthony (right), where Ralph Grey set up his barbering business, photographed by Benjamin Upton in 1858. A store selling iron and steel nails, groceries, and other provisions stood next door; the elegant Winslow House sits higher up the Mississippi River bank at left.



4 July 1857
St. Anthony, Minnesota Territory
To William Goodridge
York, Penna.

Dear Father—

I take pen in hand to convey my thoughts to you on this warm day. I am sorry it has taken me so long to write and let you know that William T. and I arrived safely in Minnesota, although the trip did take longer than expected due to the flooded roads in Wisconsin. Our train was forced to stop in Boscobel, where the nice people gave us meals, mostly ham and eggs, but as we were pretty hungry, it tasted mighty good. We finally were able to continue on to the steamboat landing in Prairie du Chien for the last part of the trip. William T. was such a good little traveler and amused the other passengers with his funny faces and antics.

It was so good that cousin Hamilton and his wife, Mary, were able to keep me company on the trip, as I do believe it would have been lonely traveling with only William T. Hamilton and Mary are now settled in their home in Minneapolis, and we have been able to see them several times.

Ralph has set up his barbering in a very fine hotel called the Jarrett House and is doing right well. We stayed in two nice rooms there until our little house was made ready. Our house is located in back of the hotel and used to be a barn, but after Ralph put in partitions and floors, plastered, and built a chimney, the place has a very warm feeling. Yesterday I finished putting wallpaper in the last room, which surprised Ralph because he did not know I could do such work. Now the only thing I have left to do is sew the curtains.

It will be a little while before we have all of the furniture that we need, but there are three furniture stores nearby, and we will buy a piece whenever we have the money saved



**Stoneware preserve jar,
missing its lid, about 1850**

up and will make do with handmade things until then.

Ralph built me a fenced chicken coop and garden area, so every day I am up at dawn to feed the chickens and gather the eggs and prepare breakfast for Ralph. He has to be at his barber stand very early as there are so many traveling men at the Jarrett House who need to be shaved before they can be about their business. William T. and I spend the morning before it gets too hot tending the vegetables I planted. The weeds grow faster than the vegetables, but we will soon be enjoying fresh beans and carrots and potatoes. The tomatoes are not ripe yet. I am hoping to have an apple tree for delicious fruit pies.

My neighbors are kindness itself and have helped me in so many ways to feel comfortable in this new settlement. They promise to show me how to preserve vegetables, and I have learned new ways to bake bread from my New England neighbors. Mrs. Elizabeth Stone and Mrs. Hannah Munson are my favorite friends, and they stop by often to see how I am doing and to give me advice. They said they would help me learn to cut out and sew clothes for William T. and to knit so that I can make stockings for the family. It is hot now, but they advise

me that the winter can be very cold, so I must prepare.

There are not many colored folk here as yet and no church with which to be associated but we have been invited to join the First Congregational Church by the kindly Reverend Seccombe and his wife, and we have attended several of his services.³ The Reverend is a God-fearing man who believes in equality and is not afraid to speak his mind, and his sermons are lively.

Have you heard from brothers Glenalvan and Wallace? Have they set about to go to Michigan yet? Has brother William decided to go with them? I know that they will be successful photographers wherever they go. Give my love to sister Susan and to yourself. I think of you each day.

Your loving daughter,
Emily Goodridge Grey

EMILY GREY TOOK *active part in civic and religious organizations in St. Anthony and Minneapolis such as the Minnesota Territorial Pioneers and church mission work. She had two more sons and a daughter, and lived in Minneapolis until her death, at age 82, in 1916.* 🌸

—*Mary D. Cannon
and Patricia C. Harpole*

NOTES

¹ Emily Goodridge Grey, “The Black Community in Territorial St. Anthony: A Memoir,” *Minnesota History* 49 (Summer 1984): 47–48. The details of this story are drawn from her account.

² David Vassar Taylor, “The Blacks,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 73–74, 88n5.

³ St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church of St. Anthony, also known as First African Methodist Episcopal Church, was not organized until 1863; Taylor, “The Blacks,” 76.



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