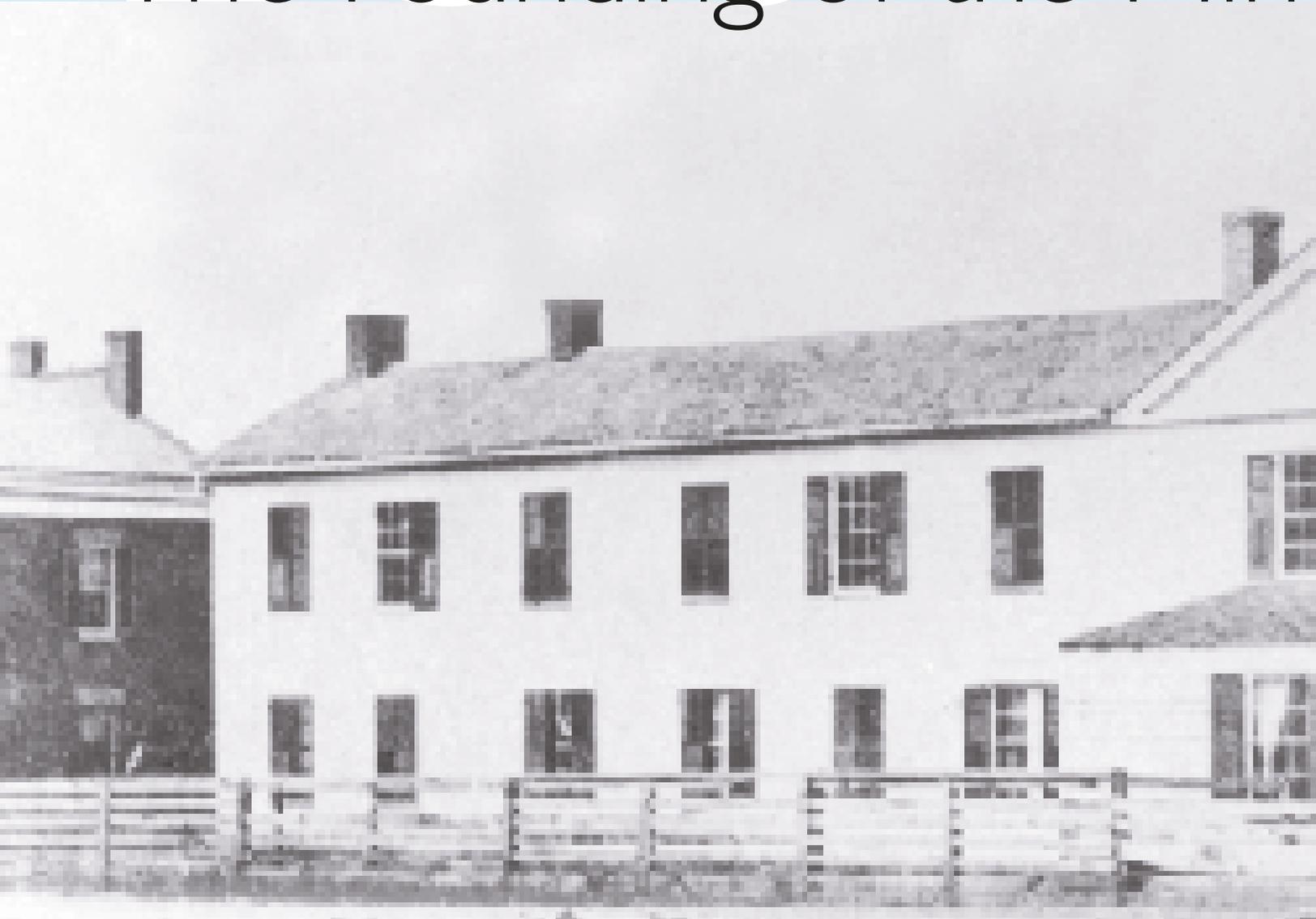


VALERIE HAUCH

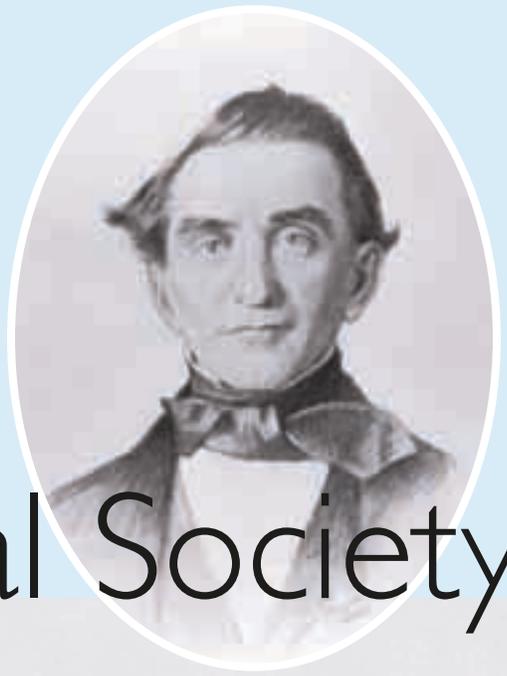
150 YEARS AGO

# The Founding of the Min



**Charles K. Smith, territorial secretary and founder of the Minnesota Historical Society, as sketched by Carl Bohnen, about 1915, and Central House, the seat of government and site of Smith's office. Bohnen, a St. Paul artist who studied in Munich, was commissioned to paint portraits—from life and photographs—of five Minnesota governors and numerous other officials.**

*1999 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Minnesota Historical Society. Keenly conscious of the need to preserve the history that they themselves were making, the Society's founders laid out an ambitious program. Evolving through a century and a half of tumultuous social and political changes, the MHS now greets the new millennium as an outwardly focused, active institution. The following article explores its firm foundation.*



# Minnesota Historical Society



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"SOCIETIES OF DIFFERENT ORDERS are being organized here," noted Charles K. Smith in a letter to his hometown newspaper in Hamilton, Ohio, just three days after his arrival in St. Paul in June 1849. He had journeyed to the newly created Minnesota Territory to assume the official duties of territorial secretary, joining with Governor Alexander Ramsey and the other officers appointed by President Zachary Taylor to initiate the work of government. Smith himself soon proved to be an active and able organizer in many areas of the frontier community's emerging civic and cultural life. An attorney and associate judge in Ohio as well as a member of several local societies and associations, he became busily engaged in his new surroundings, establishing schools, churches, a Masonic lodge—and the Minnesota Historical Society. "He was the founder of this Society, and for the first few months of its history he may be said to have been the Historical Society. It was one of his hobbies," recalled a chronicler of the territory's early days.<sup>1</sup>

Smith's passion for history and his key role in establishing the Minnesota Historical Society were described by William G. Le Duc, one of the organization's first members, in an address commemorating its fiftieth anniversary:

Charles K. Smith . . . was thus indoctrinated with the historical fervor . . . . He drew up an act, in two sections, to incorporate the Historical Society of Minnesota, and included as incorporators, with himself, the names of eighteen others, embracing the members of the territorial government and the principal other persons then in Minnesota Territory who would probably feel any interest in the subject. None of the incorporators were consulted; it was assumed that they would not object to be included in an act of incorporation . . . by which no apparent responsibilities were incurred.

The bill, passed by the territorial legislature in its first session, was the fifth act signed into law by Governor Ramsey, and the society was formally organized on November 15, 1849, in the office of Secretary Smith.<sup>2</sup>

Le Duc, who himself had grown up in Ohio, linked the founding of the Society to Smith's activities in his home state and to the growing popularity of history

among a generation of young men in the early nineteenth century: "We were all antiquarians, collectors, and historical society boys," he remembered. Smith and his contemporaries were excited by the writings and lectures of Caleb Atwater, whose survey and descriptions of the earthworks of prehistoric peoples in Ohio gained a national audience when published in 1820 and who later wrote Ohio's first state history. Le Duc concluded that Smith, in creating the Minnesota Historical Society, "was pushing a fad, for which presumably none of his associate incorporators . . . had much if any sympathy."<sup>3</sup>

SMITH'S EFFORTS TO FORM a society that would collect and preserve the materials of Minnesota's history, in fact, represented the latest chapter in a broad national movement that began with the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791 and traced its antecedents as far back as 1572 to the founding of Society of Antiquaries of London, the oldest historical association in the world. The eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, marked by a spirit of inquiry into all branches of knowledge, sparked a proliferation of learned societies, including historical organizations in France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Scotland. Across the Atlantic, the first learned societies were the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, created in 1780.<sup>4</sup>

When Congregational minister and historian Jeremy Belknap of Boston began contemplating the need for a historical society in the 1780s, the United States, unlike Europe with its rich libraries and archives, lacked even the most basic collections of source materials. In a letter to John Adams in 1789, Belknap lamented: "The want of public repositories for historical materials as well as the destruction of many valuable ones by fire, by war and by the lapse of time has long been a subject of regret in my mind. Many papers which are daily thrown away may in future be much wanted."<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the Massachusetts Historical Society was "collecting and communicating the Antiquities of America." It would be the duty of each member to gather "manuscripts, printed books, and pamphlets, historical facts, biographical anecdotes, observations in natural history, specimens of natural and artificial curiosities, and any other matters which may elucidate the natural and political history of America from the earliest times to the present day." Belknap also envisioned a national network of historical societies, led by Massachusetts, that would communicate and exchange publications.



The scholarly Edward D. Neill posed with blank paper and later wrote on this albumen print from March 1868: "This photograph taken by my friend Joel Whitney is considered a fine specimen of the art. Accept with the regards of E. D. Neill."

The historical-society movement unfolded slowly at first. By the close of the 1820s groups had formed in all New England states except Vermont and in New York, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Michigan. Two national associations had also been founded—the American Antiquarian Society (1812) and the Historical Committee of the American Philosophical Society (1819)—as well as a handful of local and county groups. Although Belknap's dream of a coordinated network under Massachusetts's leadership did not develop, these early organizations shared a common purpose, as stated in 1826 by Harvard professor Jared Sparks, who held the first academic appointment in history in the United States: "To collect manuscripts, to publish the best of them, and preserve those of less value in such a manner that they can be consulted by the historian and curious inquirer."<sup>6</sup> This was ground-

breaking work, for in early nineteenth-century America, historians had not attained professional status, nor was history a subject of academic study and research.

The need for access to sources and an unprecedented popular interest in history fueled the historical-society movement in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>7</sup> By the time Minnesota Territory was organized in March 1849, most of the nation's 30 states had formed state or local societies, although several proved short-lived or inactive.

Charles K. Smith was undoubtedly acquainted with the activities of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, chartered in 1822 but not organized until 1831. The articles of incorporation that he penned for the Minnesota Historical Society shared many similarities with the Ohio group's charter. Furthermore, Smith quickly conferred honorary membership in the MHS to a number of Ohioans, including members of the Historical and Philosophical Society. His good friend and noted local historian James McBride of Hamilton, Ohio, wrote to Smith early in 1850, expressing appreciation for his election to membership: "Your Society commences at the right time—commencing so early in the settlement of the country will enable them to preserve the History of the country entire. Had a society similar to yours been instituted in the Miami Valley at an early period, many incidents of history might have been preserved which are now lost forever."<sup>8</sup>

DURING ITS FIRST YEAR, the Minnesota Historical Society continued to be largely the work of Smith, its secretary. Although Governor Ramsey did not actively participate until 1851, his position as president lent prestige to the new organization and helped forge the close relationship with Minnesota's seat of government that became a hallmark of the institution. Smith also quickly involved one of the territory's most learned men—the Reverend Edward Duffield Neill, a young Presbyterian minister and educator who figured prominently in Minnesota's early cultural life and development. According to Le Duc, the publication of Neill's first address to the Society garnered national recognition, as it "received praise from many scholars and historians, and put the Minnesota Historical Society upon a plane of respectability."<sup>9</sup>

At home, the territorial community was prepared to accept the Minnesota Historical Society as a valuable cultural institution. As historian David Van Tassel has shown, schools, churches, fraternal organizations, and historical societies "served as evidence to their own citizens as well as to prospective residents that 'civilization'

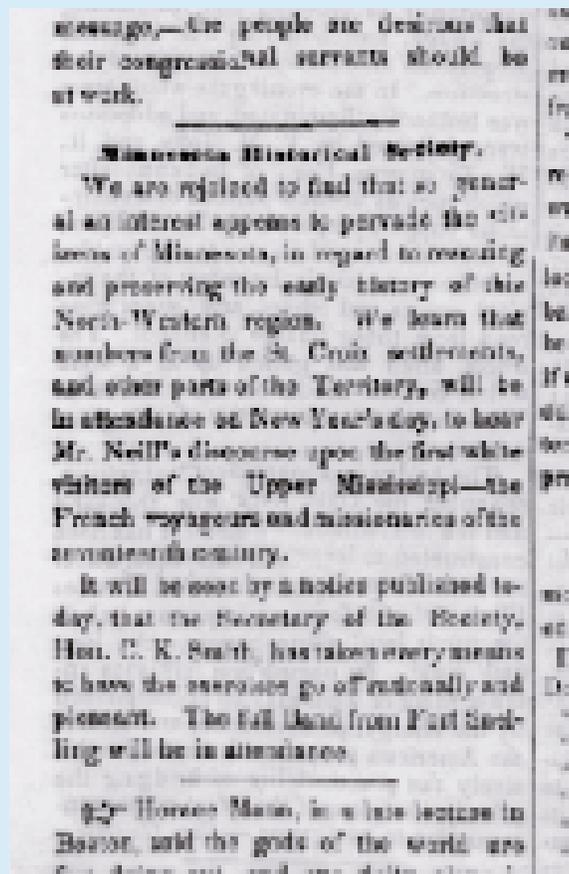
had [arrived].” Minnesota residents had an early opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the new society. On New Year’s morning in 1850, just six weeks after being organized, the Society held its first annual public program, attracting a sizable audience. Neill presented a lecture on the early French voyageurs in Minnesota and at the close of his address charged community members to support their new historical society: “Prosecute then the objects for which the Society was incorporated with vigor. ‘Write your history as you go along,’ and you will confer a favor upon the future inhabitants of Minnesota, for which they will be ever grateful.”<sup>10</sup>

This event and a ball held later that evening were the highlights of Minnesota Territory’s first New Year’s Day. A newspaper account reported enthusiastically that Neill’s lecture “was not merely instructive, but thrillingly eloquent. . . . Every listener was delighted, and the exercises were enlivened by the instrumental music of that excellent band from Ft. Snelling.”<sup>11</sup>

At its first annual meeting two weeks later, the Society adopted a constitution mandating the collection and preservation of a library and objects illustrating the history of Minnesota Territory, providing for an annual meeting to be held in January, and establishing an executive council of officers as the Society’s governing body. By-laws, also adopted at this time, included the appointment of a committee “to edit and superintend the publication of works authorized by the Society.” Two categories of members—resident and corresponding—were defined. To these documents were appended the names of 122 resident members “who . . . were expected to pay the initiation fee of one dollar and sign the constitution before participating in the business of the society.” It seems that in his eagerness to secure the

Society’s future, Smith had freely named both incorporators and members without consulting them. He had, at least, created an organization unlike some eastern societies that restricted membership to a small number of educated professional men. Nor were women constitutionally excluded, although Harriet Bishop, St. Paul’s first schoolteacher, appears to have been the only woman Smith initially invited to join.<sup>12</sup>

At this first meeting the eight members present also endorsed Smith’s plan to begin a series of publications, deciding to print and distribute Neill’s lecture together with the Society’s constitution and by-laws. (This became the first volume of the *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society*.) Smith wasted no time in circulating this pamphlet locally and nationally “in order to produce an interchange of reciprocities.” A prefatory statement elaborated the Society’s purpose and solicited contributions:



St. Paul’s *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, December 29, 1849, commented on the widespread interest in the MHS’s goal of “rescuing and preserving the early history of this North-Western region.”

The Society is in its infancy, and will require the exertions of its members and the support of friends to give it a vigorous growth. Whatever aid you can give us in our enterprise by the donation of books, manuscripts, mineralogical specimens, Indian curiosities and anything else calculated to illustrate and perpetuate the history and settlement of our Territory, will be thankfully received and the favor reciprocated whenever we shall acquire the ability; we expect to publish the most valuable manuscripts that come into our possession. . . . We are particularly desirous to do justice to the Indians, and for that purpose, shall endeavor to collect anything of interest concerning them.

This attitude toward collecting Indian materials was common in its day. For Smith and his contemporaries, “to do justice to the Indians” meant making every effort to gather and preserve evidence of

their cultures prior to what was predicted to be their inevitable disappearance before the tide of white civilization.<sup>13</sup>

THROUGHOUT 1850 SMITH received positive responses to the certificates of membership he had sent with the Society's pamphlet to individuals in the territory and around the country. Among others, Presidents Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore, cabinet members, and United States senators accepted membership. So, too, did individuals associated with historical or learned societies in a number of states, some of whom also sent contributions. For example, Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (founded only three years before the Minnesota Historical Society), expressed appreciation for honorary membership and gave Smith a copy of the first volume in the Smithsonian's Contributions to Knowledge series.<sup>14</sup> This early association with the Smithsonian soon proved instrumental in furthering the Society's publishing goals.

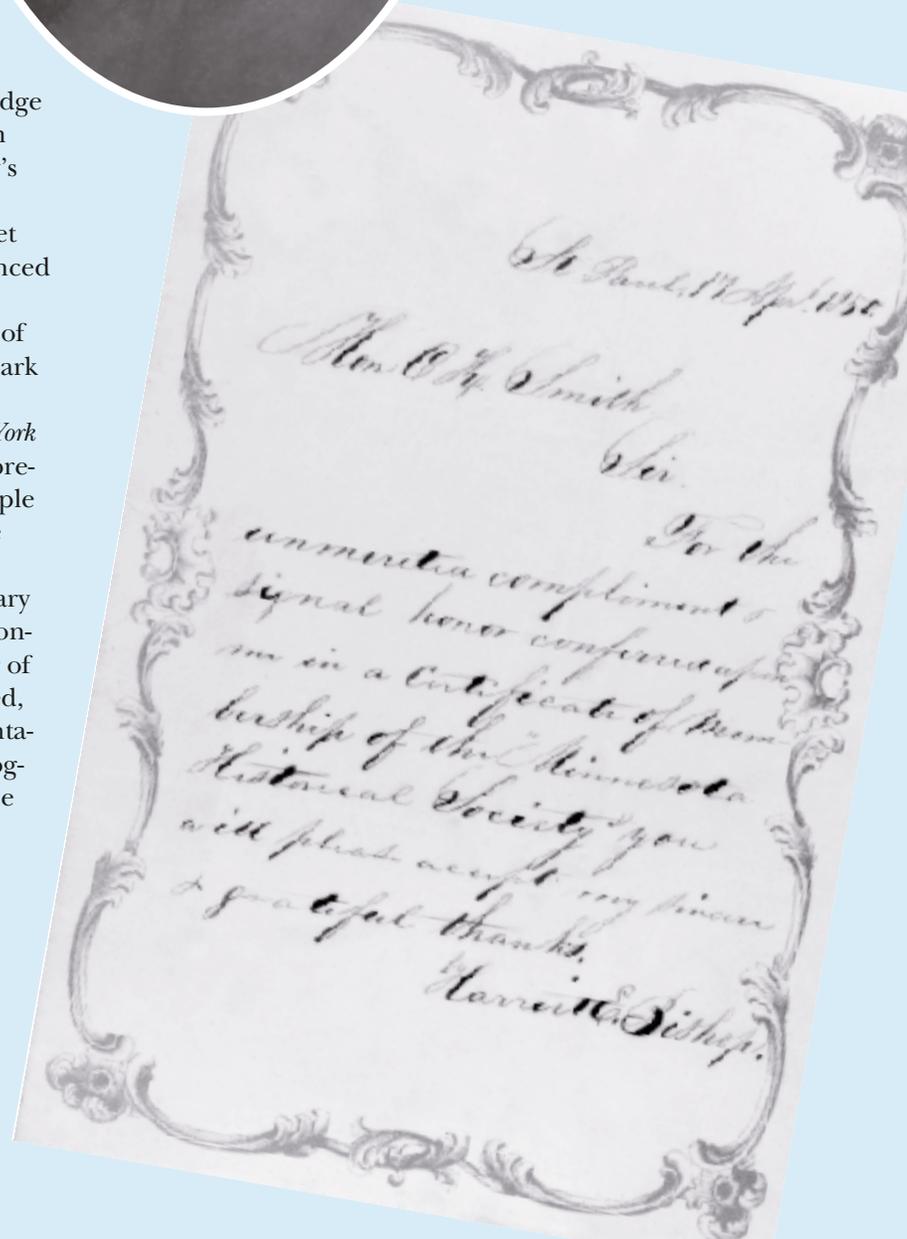
Smith had also forwarded the Society's pamphlet to selected newspapers. The *Chicago Journal* announced to its readers: "We have received a neatly printed pamphlet, containing a record of the organization of the Society, and an interesting address. . . . It is a mark of wisdom thus to write up the history of a country from the title page." The *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* wrote, "There is nothing too flattering to predict of the future greatness and prosperity of a people who commence to write their history as soon as the foundations of their commonwealth are laid."<sup>15</sup>

At the Society's second annual meeting in January 1851, "The number of persons present was quite considerable, and among the audience were a number of ladies." For the first time Governor Ramsey presided, delivering a salutary address followed by the presentation of papers on Minnesota's early history and geography and the Dakota language. Two weeks later the Society's executive council adopted a resolution to sponsor the publication of a Dakota-language dictionary edited by missionary Stephen R. Riggs. Subscriptions were solicited to pay for this project, published by the Smithsonian in 1852, and also to print the second volume of the Society's *Annals*.<sup>16</sup>

Before the acclaimed *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language* was published, however,



Harriet Bishop, who penned a note of "grateful thanks" for the "unmerited compliment and signal honor" of being named a member of the Minnesota Historical Society



# MINNESOTA Historical Society.

The Minnesota Historical Society, will  
hold its annual meeting in the

METHODIST CHURCH,

to-day, at 2 o'clock, P. M., instead of  
holding it in the Hall of the House of  
Representatives as heretofore stated. It  
is believed the latter room will be too  
small to accommodate the meeting com-  
fortably, which induces the change of the  
place of meeting.

C. K. SMITH,  
Secretary.

St. Paul, Monday, Jan. 13, 1851.

Charles K. Smith had returned to Ohio to pursue a quiet life on his farm, far away from the political rancor that had attended his tenure as territorial secretary. A confirmed Whig, he became a constant political and personal target for James M. Goodhue. This opinionated editor of the Democratic *Minnesota Pioneer* claimed that Smith had interfered in the legislature to prevent his appointment as sole territorial printer. Goodhue's ongoing vicious attacks and accusations apparently led to Smith's resignation in November 1851. He left behind a historical organization with the beginnings of a library, a few publications, and a small group of members who met annually. He also left a vital foundation for the Society's future growth, which continued under the able leadership of Edward Neill, Smith's successor as secretary.<sup>17</sup>

HISTORIAN JULIAN P. BOYD has cautioned against focusing too narrowly on the limited accomplishments of the nation's early historical societies: "One may measure

[their work] by high standards of scholarship and find much of it defective, or one may compare it with a void and be grateful that so much has been done." In Minnesota, Smith had launched an organization that was from the first perceived as valuable, receiving praise and approval from the local press and commanding sizable attendance at its annual public programs. The Society's continued success after Smith's departure demonstrated that it had taken root in the community. It had also attracted national attention with its first publications. In 1856, a few years after Smith's departure, Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian wrote to Neill: "I have from the first been much interested in the establishment and progress of your Institution, and have referred to it as a model for imitation in other newly settled portions of our country."<sup>18</sup>

The foundation established for the Minnesota Historical Society 150 years ago has proved strong and enduring. In the last century and a half, the Society has grown to become a comprehensive historical organization, today serving more than 1.6 million people annually through a wide variety of educational programs. The Minnesota History Center, the Society's St. Paul headquarters, offers families, school groups, and the general public a 550,000-volume library, museum exhibits designed to engage visitors of all ages and backgrounds, and a community gathering place for special events and programs. The Minnesota Historical Society Press, with almost 200 titles currently in print, and the Society's statewide network of historic sites bring history to people across Minnesota and beyond. These programs and a vision of expanded service to all Minnesotans in the century ahead are firmly rooted in the Society's historic mission to preserve and communicate Minnesota's history. In marking the Society's sesquicentennial anniversary, it is evident that the founders' convictions and hopes have been realized in the continuing support that Minnesotans have pledged to saving and sharing their history. □

## NOTES

1. Charles K. Smith to the Hamilton *Intelligencer*, July 1, 1849, reprinted in *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), Sept. 1, 1849; William P. Murray, "Recollections of Early Territorial Days and Legislation," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 12 (St. Paul, 1908): 109. Smith was referring to

the St. Paul temperance society, founded the month before his arrival.

2. William Le Duc, "Organization and Growth of the Minnesota Historical Society," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9 (St. Paul, 1901): 560–61.

3. Le Duc, "Organization and Growth," 560, 567–68; Caleb Atwater, "Description of the Antiquities Discovered in the State of Ohio and Other Western States," *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 1 (Worcester, MA, 1820): 105–267; Caleb Atwater, *A History of the State of Ohio Natural and Civil* (Cincinnati: Glezen and Shepard, 1838). On Atwater's abilities, see Philip Skardon, "Caleb Atwater as Historian," *Ohio History* 73 (Winter 1964): 27–33.

4. Louis L. Tucker, "Massachusetts," in *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791–1861*, ed. H. G. Jones (Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society and North Carolina Collection, 1995), 5; Leslie W. Dunlap, *American Historical Societies, 1790–1860* (Madison: Cantwell Printing Co., 1944), 6; Walter M. Whitehall, *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston: Athenaeum, 1962), 7, 113.

5. Here and below, quotes from Tucker, "Massachusetts," 3, 6. Early historical societies, including Minnesota's, uniformly included natural history within their collecting.

6. Jared Sparks, "Materials for American History," *North American Review* 23 (Oct. 1826): 291. On the development of historical societies in the United States, see Jones, ed., *Historical Consciousness*; George H. Callcott, *History in the United States 1800–1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); Clifford L. Lord, ed., *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*; Dunlap, *American Historical Societies*.

7. Callcott, *History in the U. S.*, vii–viii.

8. *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1851); James McBride to Charles K. Smith, Mar. 4, 1850, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Archives, general correspondence file 1849–55, MHS Library, St. Paul. Among the Ohio members of the MHS were historian Jacob Burnet, who had served as president of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Edward Mansfield, its vice-president, and James McBride, curator for Butler County.

9. Le Duc, "Organization and Growth," 561. Neill's great-grandfather had been an early member of the American Philosophical Society and a personal friend of Benjamin Franklin; see "Obituaries," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 8 (St. Paul, 1898): 497.

10. David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Societies in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 96–97; Edward D. Neill, "The French Voyageurs to Minnesota During the Seventeenth Century," first published as a pamphlet, later bound into the 1850 *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society*, and reprinted in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 1 (St. Paul, 1872): 32; *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, Jan. 5, 1850.

11. *Minnesota Pioneer*, Jan. 2, 1850.

12. Le Duc, "Organization and Growth," 563; Constitution and By-Laws of the Historical Society of Minnesota, in

*Proceedings of the Minnesota Historical Society from Its Organization . . . to the Admission of the State* (St. Paul: Ramaley and Cunningham, 1878), 4–6; Harriet E. Bishop to Hon. C. K. Smith, Apr. 17, 1850, MHS Archives, correspondence file 1849–1855.

13. Charles K. Smith to Rev. E. D. Neill, Jan. 1, 1850, MHS Archives, correspondence file 1849–1855; *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1850), preceding act of incorporation.

On attitudes toward Indians, see, for example, Alexander Ramsey's statements in his first address to the Society: "While the Indians are within our reach, we should hasten to record their traditions, to describe their manners and customs, their religious rites, their domestic observances, their peculiarities in peace and war . . . we should not overlook the necessity of preserving their languages. . . . It must be evident to all that they are destined to pass away with the tribes who speak them"; "Our Field of Historical Research," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections*, 1:50–51.

14. See MHS Archives, correspondence file 1849–1855, including Joseph Henry to Charles K. Smith, Mar. 5, 1850; E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley, Comprising the Results of Extensive Original Surveys and Explorations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1848).

15. *Chicago Journal* quoted in "First Annual Report of C. K. Smith, Secretary of the Society," *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1851), 10; New York paper quoted in Mary W. Berthel and Harold D. Cater, "The Minnesota Historical Society: Highlights of a Century," *Minnesota History* 30 (Dec. 1949): 293.

16. *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, Jan. 27, 1851; Alexander Ramsey, "Our Field of Historical Research," 43–52; *Proceedings of the Minnesota Historical Society*, 8.

17. See Carolyn I. Cavender Schommer, "Foreword to the Reprint Edition," in Stephen R. Riggs, *A Dakota-English Dictionary* (1890; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1992), vi. The Smithsonian's 1890 edition was a revision of the 1852 original. Goodhue's memorable parting shot to Smith was that he "had stolen *into* the Territory, and stolen *in* the Territory," and, as earlier predicted, then "stole *out* of the Territory"; Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue* (St. Paul: MHS, 1948), 52.

The actual number of paid members is not known. Seventy-eight are listed in the 1850 *Annals*, but it is unclear whether all had paid the initiation fee and signed the constitution. Le Duc, "Organization and Growth," 563, claimed that the names of 122 resident members were appended to the first draft of the Society's constitution.

18. Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," *American Historical Review* 40 (Oct. 1934):11; Joseph Henry to B. F. Hoyt, P. Paine, and D. J. Robertson, June 10, 1856, MHS Archives, correspondence file 1856–60.

*All images are from the MHS collections, including p.449, bottom, and p.450 in the MHS Archives.*



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