

STEAMBOAT TRAVEL ON THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI IN 1849

In the settlement of any community or country the question of accessibility is always of importance. If there is some means of transportation readily available, settlers will flock into the region in search of good lands upon which to build new homes. Rivers and lakes from time immemorial have formed the highways of travel for migratory peoples, and a glance at the map will show the wonderful advantages of this sort which Minnesota possesses. Nearly every part of the state can be reached by water, and the explorers, fur-traders, and settlers were quick to take advantage of that fact. In 1823 the first steamboat, the "Virginia," reached the mouth of the Minnesota River with supplies for the new military post, Fort St. Anthony, and the era of steam navigation on the upper Mississippi began. The number of boats plying on the upper river as far as St. Paul and Fort Snelling increased steadily, and the rivalry among them became intense. Larger and faster steamboats with better accommodations for passengers were built and put into this trade, and Minnesota came to have a regular instead of a spasmodic connection with the rest of the United States.

Naturally many persons made the long trip between St. Paul and points down the river,—for instance, St. Louis and Galena,—enjoyed the wonderful scenery, endured the discomforts of steamboat travel, and recorded their impressions in one form or another. For some of these travelers, including the writer of the following letters, this was merely the first step in the long pilgrimage to visit friends and relatives in the East. It was apparently not uncommon for such wanderers to send accounts of their travels to the editors of newspapers for publication. The following letters, originally published in the *Minnesota Pioneer* for November 8 and 15, 1849, are worth reprinting because they give a vivid picture of steamboat travel

on the upper Mississippi in the year Minnesota became a territory.¹ The identity of the author, who appears to have made his home in St. Paul, has not been learned.

WILLOUGHBY M. BABCOCK

[*Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), November 8, 1849]

COMMUNICATED.

S. B. FRANKLIN, No. 2, Oct. 25, 1849.²

I confess to a feeling of sadness as the Senator swings away from my new home, Saint Paul. The original Saint Paul, is my especial favorite; and there *is* something in a name. I like Saint Paul for what it is and more for what it is destined to be; yet an angel of mercy must visit it and touch its moral vision, before it will rejoice in the sunlight of true prosperity. No town has a more vigorous pulse. It is not easy for a town to die in which the tide of business throbs like the heart of a steamboat. Saxon muscles, Saxon sinews and Saxon spirit, are there working one of the most wonderful of those startling miracles of American enterprise, which are transforming the face of our continent; but there is there, a spirit of recklessness—an indulgence in gambling and drinking whiskey, a disregard of the hallowing influence of Sunday, and a want of stable, religious principle, which is greatly to be lamented and vastly detrimental to the true welfare of the town. Religion, education, and morals—these are things for all good men to unite in establishing in Saint Paul.

¹ The writer of these letters continued to describe his travels in subsequent issues of the *Pioneer*. He progressed by steamer up the Illinois River to La Salle and then changed to a packet canal boat for Chicago. Here he took the Michigan railroad for Detroit, where he embarked on a Lake Erie steamer for Buffalo. The railroad served him again for the last lap of his journey from Buffalo to Boston and Lowell, Massachusetts.

² The "Dr. Franklin No. 2" was purchased on the Ohio River early in 1849 by Captain Daniel S. Harris and put into the St. Louis and St. Paul trade. It was known as "Dr. Franklin No. 2" to distinguish it from the "Dr. Franklin," or "Old Doctor." Russell Blakeley, "History of the Discovery of the Mississippi River and the Advent of Commerce in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 381, 382, 387.

LAKE PEPIN.

It is evening. The lake looks hazy; and were it not for the moonshine, we might expect to stick in a fog-bank before morning. Our boat is relieved of her dead freight, and she rushes adown the current like a colt. All pleasant within. The two captains are among us, Harris for the main chance, Montfort for fun. Montfort's countenance is always propitious as the new moon. Lieut. Nelson of Fort Snelling is aboard—ordered on a recruiting service to St. Louis. The Lieut. likes some of our Minnesota come-outers, better than their politics. Also Geo. Zane, Capt. Chrysup and the Stillwater wag—Collier. "No sleep till morn when youth and beauty meet." Ring, too—Eleazer, the great relieved from his wife Elzora Ring—is aboard. Eleazer has been an invalid. He is better now. Eleazer and Elzora once flourished in Conneaut, Ohio. He was pastor of the first Methodist church there, and his wife was a free-willed Baptist. Elzora was a perfect tiger-cat. She had no passive qualities—she either scratched or purred. She would attend conference meetings with Eleazer, and pray with a most melting unction. She seemed gifted. No sooner had she gotten into the wagon to return home with her husband than she would fix her eyes upon him and with her thumb and knuckles twist his non-resistant flesh into black and blue spots. At times, she was all he could wish—would almost smother him in her caresses. In a twinkling she would turn, in her fierce love, and bury her claws in his face. Poor Eleazer has been all the way to Saint Paul to find sympathy. The thorn is extracted—thanks to the Legislature.³

SATURDAY MORN.

Last night we came upon a shoal; but we didn't stick. The boat walked right over on stilts. The chandeliers rattled as though we were stumbling over the hump of an earthquake. Woke at 6 and found the Franklin in bed with the Yankee under

³ The bill to divorce Eleazar F. Ring from his wife Elzora passed the House, apparently without much discussion, on October 18, 1849, and the Council on October 24. Ring evidently left St. Paul immediately after the passage of the bill, without waiting for the governor's sanction to the law. Several other special divorce laws were passed during the same session. *Council Journal*, 1849, p. 113; *House Journal*, 1849, p. 117.

a lee bluff.⁴ The Franklin was discharging upon the Yankee a few bbls. of pork. Pork is the tender now. The Franklin pays her wood bills in pork.

PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, 12 M.

What an old rain-beaten town! How scattered away on the plain. It seems when close to, to be afar off as in the perspective of an inverted spyglass. Something like a desolate Italian campagna. It makes one homesick.

A warm, strong, south wind, and sunshine. The bluffs are dressed in the finery of red and yellow like a culprit going to the gallows — making the best of it before winter sets in.

Here comes the Highland Mary, showing her smoke pipes over the willows.⁵ Full freight with two barges in tow. Pork and flour are the staples wanted in Minnesota. The demand upon these down-river towns is very drastic — a poor man's plaster. Prices keep rising. Hope the Minnesotians will look less sharkish next spring than they did last spring when the first boat arrived. Seven hyperborean months in a region over 300 miles from the nearest supplies makes one shudder. Next year Minnesota will do much for her own supplies. She has the soil; she only wants the farmers. They will come in by scores next spring.

CASSVILLE, 6 Sat. eve.

"*Urbs antiqua fuit.*" Indeed there is not much to be seen here but herbs. This Carthage, consisting of one huge brick edifice, now in a state of "shabby splendor" two or three unpainted stores and several groceries, will detain us till daylight. 2000 pigs raised by W. O. Schmid — out of the mines — in Beetown, are to be taken aboard to night.

SUNDAY MORN, day-break.

Creeping into the crooked harbor of Dubuque like a burster going late to bed. Sun-rise. Dubuque is washing her face for

⁴ The "Yankee" was commanded by Captain Meeker K. Harris, brother of Captain Harris of the "Dr. Franklin No. 2." In the summer of 1850 this steamboat set a record by taking an excursion party three hundred miles up the Minnesota River. George B. Merrick, *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi*, 294 (Cleveland, 1909).

⁵ The "Highland Mary," captained by Joseph Atchison, ran in the Galena and St. Paul trade in the summer of 1849. Blakeley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 386; Merrick, *Old Times*, 274.

Sunday. She is a fair town, and in our opinion will never be less. The buildings are generally brick, the streets are regular and dry. Dubuque, we must say, looks slightly slack about the feet and ankles. — There is about many of the houses a margin of “clutter” where all should be clean. One street, well built for a new town, extends, apparently, three-fourths of a mile, leaving room for an extension on the same level beyond. We saw no hogs about town. The houses are underpinned, so we infer, the hogs are kept for service and not for society.

The Senator showed her eye-balls last evening while we lay in Cassville.⁶ We saw her *but* a moment — for she felt herself belated, for a Saturday night. The Senator respects the Sabbath. So does the Doct. Franklin in her internal order. It has never been clearly settled in our mind, whether there is a Sabbath in new countries. Mr. Webster says there is no Sabbath in revolutionary times — pity he wouldn't grant a dispensation to new countries. It would cloak a multitude of sins. Adieu.

[*Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), November 15, 1849]

EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE

DR. FRANKLIN, No. 2
Galena, Sunday Morning, Oct. 29. }

The streets are quite Sunday-like in aspect. People dressed for church. Some young gents. of florid countenances, are promenading our saloon. That bridge is a bad thing; the Doctor had to squeeze through the draw, like a pig squeezing through a stile. If the Galeneans will play hog, as they did in quarrelling about the location of a bridge, they would not “ring” us into the game. One bridge is enough, and that might perhaps, as well have been a ferry. Speaking of pigs — Galena shows upon the landing, the usual quantum of mineral pork. We like Galena. It is active, civilized, and the other end of that Railroad.⁷

⁶ The “Senator,” rival boat of the “Dr. Franklin No. 2” was commanded by Captain Orrin Smith, and owned by the Galena and Minnesota Packet Company. Merrick, *Old Times*, 288.

⁷ Only a small part of the railroad between Galena and Chicago had been completed in 1849, for a stage trip of thirty-six hours from Galena was necessary in order to reach the end of the railroad eighteen miles from

We have worked our way out of Fevre river, and are once more snorting over the plain of the broad Mississippi. The stream is in a hurry, as usual. The Mississippi never tarries, is always a freshet—a raging lion; tearing down bluffs and trees—resistless.

Here is Bellevue by moonlight. A huge flouring mill on the river's brink, propelled by a stream that empties here, has just turned out another grist of 150 barrels for St. Louis. "Down with *them* barrels, boys!" This mill cost \$16,000. Flour at \$3.75. Here stands the old black house, in which the famous horse thieves were cornered by the good citizens, a few years ago, and shot down dead. Capt. Summary keeps excellent order in these parts, now-a-days.

Senator Jones of Iowa is aboard.⁸ He thinks it does not lie in the mouths of Taylor whigs to upbraid Mr. Sibley for taking party ground. Gen. No-party Taylor has not only acted the radical partizan in stocking all the offices of Minnesota with whigs, but he has done our delegate the contempt of never, for once, having respected the newly established precedent of allowing a *part* of the nominations, at least, to come from the Delegate. Pray, what claims have the Whigs upon Mr. Sibley? but that he should defend himself as an independent man. They must take it out in swinging their arms and swearing. It has come out since the election, that while the whigs of Minnesota were showing a hypocritical face of neutralism, they were Jesuitically counting their men, one by one, and holeing their ears. We speak that we do know—one of the '*imports*,' (Ohio,) told us the other day (confidentially) that the whigs of St. Paul, before

Chicago, according to a letter under the heading "Western Notes" in the *Pioneer* for November 8, 1849. By 1851 preliminary surveys had been made for the third division of the road between Rockford and Galena. Galena and Chicago Union Railroad Company, *Fourth Annual Report*, 16-18 (Chicago, 1851).

⁸ George W. Jones made his first appearance in Congress as a delegate from Michigan Territory in December, 1835, and a year later upon the organization of Wisconsin Territory was elected delegate from that territory. On December 7, 1848, he was chosen as the first United States senator from the new state of Iowa. John C. Parish, *George Wallace Jones*, 14, 20, 35 (*Iowa Biographical Series*, Iowa City, 1912).

election, were counted to a man! What a godly man Mr. No-party is!

MONDAY MORNING, Daybreak.

The Doct. Franklin is grinding his belly on the shoals — or playing whale on the Davenport rapids. “Turn back the larboard!” “Starboard,” “go ahead!” We are off. The river is wide here. A stranger, until the boat grinds, would observe no signs of the rapids here. Though he wonders why these saw-mills are clinging under the bank on each shore with their long flipper water wheels reaching out into the current. These mills filch their hydraulics out of the natural current, by means of wheels about the height of steamboat paddles, only a “nation longer.”

Pity, constitutional objections, were not obliged to go down over these rapids, on pine bottoms at low water — reckon they come in for the Northwestern doctrine, though we might “want the money for the war.” Warp the Constitution, but don’t break through our bottom! We say, We go for the Davenport memorial. The upper rapids extends 18 miles. The boats, at the present middle stage of water, must go over by daylight. Great Heavens! what a rake that was. We had supposed that we were over. Well, we are over now.

DAVENPORT Iowa, and Rock Island, Ills. — two towns opposite each other — two bright eyes looking out from the wilderness. Here, standing out amid-stream, are the old grey relics of Rock Island Fort — once the eyesore of Blackhawk. Moline, just below, is a prosperous town. But the three towns lie too thick in a bed — two of the three will wake up some morning, strangled by the strongest. The West wants people. These rich prairies, these waterfalls, with open arms, invite the world to take them. Emigration to Iowa, within the last four or six weeks, is computed by the Davenport Banner, at some 100,000 persons. A big story, but we swallow. We account for it in this way — there is much hog and hominy in Iowa, and these people are wintering here with a view to Minnesota in the Spring. Harkee!

Here is Muscatine, which has just shuffled off its alias, Bloomington. More bowling alleys, than churches. But we are from St. Paul — we must not preach a sermon too near home.

Oquawka, looks better than it sounds to some ears. It has the best landing we have seen — paved along the water's edge some hundred rods. Oquawka — we like to dwell on so poetical a name, is a bright and prosperous town.

BURLINGTON by moonlight. "It is a perfect lone love" of a town. We were so taken, that we were tempted to unship ourself and stay for life. But not yet, we must visit the city of 10,000 factory girls first.⁹ Women are scarce all over the West. We are constrained to say that woman and civilization go hand in hand.

FORT MADISON. — It looks well in the dark. Montrose, the head of the "Lower Rapids." It looks as though it was built in one day some ten years ago — the inhabitants got drunk the same night and remained drunk ever since. A sad spectacle of little old weather beaten, unpainted houses. Here we put 60 tons of lead, and a vast amount of other freight upon a lighter, to ease us over the rapids. Twelve miles of rapids. We are in for a "liberal construction" again. Five steamboats, and as many lighters, (huge flat boats,) all squirming in one spot to get over the rocky bottom. On the shore, are two four horse teams towing up barges.

KEOKUK — very much stuck up. Quite high and thirsty. We went aboard the new steamer Minnesota, at Montrose; she is a high decker, a very superior boat.¹⁰ Her cabin is not so large as Dr. Franklin's, nor quite as pleasant.

CHURCHVILLE, Mo., Tuesday, 10 A. M.

Col. Benton will arrive here to day, and address the people.¹¹
Adieu.

⁹ The writer apparently is referring to Lowell, Massachusetts, for in a letter written from that place on December 3, 1849, and published in the *Minnesota Pioneer* for January 9, 1850, he states: "Here are 10,000 female operatives away from home and the supervision of relatives. . . Most of them are young — from the age of fifteen to twenty."

¹⁰ The "Minnesota" was commanded by Captain Robert A. Riley in the fall of 1849, according to Merrick, *Old Times*, 280.

¹¹ The allusion, which needed no explanation to the newspaper readers of 1849, is of course to Thomas H. Benton, the veteran United States senator from Missouri.



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