

HENRY M. NICHOLS AND FRONTIER MINNESOTA

AS I READ THE RECORD of Henry M. Nichols for the years from 1853 to 1860, written in his firm hand in diaries, letters, and manuscript sermons and addresses, and printed in the public press, I am impressed by the growing power and widening influence of the man.¹ From the early years in Stillwater, through the impassioned speeches of public reform which in the end brought about the burning of Plymouth Church in Minneapolis, to the final catastrophe of his tragic drowning in Lake Calhoun, his story throws light on a fascinating period of life in Minnesota.

Nichols began his work as "stated supply" of the First Presbyterian Church of Stillwater on September 30, 1853.² In November he wrote:

We have never found kinder people, or more genial social dispositions, and never found a people who literally compelled us to "take them into our hearts" as these. There is more than the old Methodist warm-heartedness there is *substantiality* about it, that makes it stay put. The people raise us \$300 and the Home Miss. Soc. pay \$300. The people paid the first quarterly installment within a week and poured in the provisions and necessary housekeeping articles upon us with a hearty relish. We cannot do otherwise than love them and thank the Lord that the lines have fallen to us in such pleasant places. . . . The church is a New School Presbyterian connected with the Minnesota Presbytery, but composed of those who heretofore have been New & Old School Pres[byterian] — Cong[regational] — Lutherans — Cumb[erland] Pres. — Ref[ormed] Pres. — & Asso[ciate] Pres. I still retain my connection with the Cong. Asso. but am supported here by the Am[erican] Home Miss. Soc. instead of the West[ern] Home Miss. Assoc.

¹ An account of "Henry Martyn Nichols and the Northampton Colony" in 1852-53 appears *ante*, 129-147. Ed.

² The Reverend J. C. Whitney was the first minister of this church, acting as stated supply from 1849 to 1853, when he went to the First Presbyterian Church of Minneapolis. Nichols was the second minister, and the first to be installed.

A year later he wrote: "The people are doing all for us that we could wish and expect; almost every week furnishes some new tie to bind us to them."³ But the "far-off land of the setting sun," as my grandmother had called it, was still not quite home in one respect—it still celebrated Thanksgiving in December.⁴ There is more than a touch of homesickness in the letter which my grandfather wrote on December 22, 1854:

Yesterday was our Thanksgiving, a very quiet time with us. Service in the morning, and dinner at a friend's two miles out of town. Nothing like our old New England Thanksgivings. We thought of you all, but not as much as we did a few weeks ago at the time of the Mass[achusetts] Thanksgiving. We pictured then the family gathering, and the vacant places for the Minnesota children, and we began to feel—well, let that go. . . . We had even proposed to celebrate the day ourselves, in memory of the friends at home and thought of having a splendid dinner and sitting down to it, in grand state . . . but then, we thought the visions of the circle at Belchertown, and the dinner there at the same hour, would bring up too many choking feelings, & mingle too many tears with the food, so we just gave it up, and behaved ourselves very soberly, not however, without some very ardent wishes when evening came, that we might run in to the little red house, a few minutes. There it is, soft around the eyes again, let us turn over the leaf.

The new leaf referred to his approaching installation:

Before you receive this letter you will probably have noticed in some of the papers I have sent, a notice of the Installation of Rev. H. M. Nichols as Pastor of the church in this place. . . . It will take place the 4th of next month. So I am to be a settled minister. How long I shall remain here I cannot tell, no longer probably for being settled, but it is better to be a Pastor than a stated supply.

³ One of these ties was a cow. "A few days since," Nichols wrote in a letter of June 1, 1855, "a couple of boys came driving a cow up to my house, and gave me a letter from their Father, in which was 'Bro. N. accept this cow as a free gift from the Lord. I cannot see three or four cows in my yard, while my Pastor has none. I have an investment of a cow in the House of worship, and now I want one in the Minister who preaches in that house.' Nothing in the shape of a cow here, can be bought for less than 40 dols."

⁴ The territory observed Thanksgiving Day about December 21, in connection with Pilgrims' or Forefathers' Day, though in 1856 it was celebrated on November 20, and in 1857, as early as December 10.

On the afternoon of January 4, 1855, Nichols became connected with the presbytery. "Had a long discussion," he wrote, "in the midst of which Capt. [William] Holcomb[e] & myself had some personal explanation." On the following day they continued their discussion, with the result that "Capt H. found he must allow to others, the privilege demanded for himself, viz. *Liberty*."⁵ On the evening of January 4 Nichols was installed. As reported in the *St. Croix Union* of Stillwater for January 9:

The introductory services were by Rev. G. H. Pond of Oak Grove, and Revs. J. S. Webber and A. C. Pennock, of this city. Sermon by Rev. R. Hall, of Point Douglass. Installing Prayer by Rev. C. Seccomb, of Saint Anthony. Charge to the Pastor by Rev. J. C. Whitney, of Minneapolis. Charge to the People by Rev. E. D. Neill, of St. Paul. Benediction by the Pastor.⁶

Life in Stillwater, as recorded in my grandfather's diaries of his first years there, was marked off by the freezing over of Lake St. Croix in the fall, when no more mail could come in by water, and by the breaking up of the ice in the spring and the coming of the first boat. He mentioned each boat by name on the day of its arrival. "'War Eagle' came in last night, about 12 oclock," he wrote on April 12, 1854, "but the whistle did not wake me." It was an exciting day when the "Excelsior" and the "Greek Slave" came in at the same time. Once, when the "Navigator" and the "Golden Era" both came in on Saturday night, the Sunday morning congregation was affected! Always, when he could, my grandfather traveled to St. Paul by water, for the journey by stage was very rough.

Nichols threw himself wholeheartedly into any movement which might improve community and state. He worked

⁵ On August 25, 1854, Nichols wrote in his diary: "Capt. Holcomb[e] is cool, thinks I am not enough a Calvinist."

⁶ Nichols had himself preached the afternoon sermon when Seccombe was installed as pastor of the First Congregational Church of St. Anthony on July 30, 1854; and at the installation of Whitney in Minneapolis on January 19, 1854, he had given the charge to the pastor. This was the first installation of a minister in Minneapolis.

not only for better churches, but for better schools. His first community work in Stillwater was an attempt to create an academy. As chairman of a committee to produce a plan for the "Stillwater Academy," and later as one of the seven trustees, he spent much time getting a room furnished and a teacher engaged. Because the teacher failed to appear, the academy never materialized.⁷ But Nichols loyally stood behind the efforts of the Baptist minister, the Reverend J. S. Webber, to start a school in the fall, and when Washington Seminary, "named after the county," was launched with a gala evening of dedicatory exercises, Nichols delivered an address on "The Pedagogue versus the Demagogue," in what the *St. Croix Union* of November 25, 1854, called his "usual happy manner."⁸ It is interesting to discover from his outline notes of the address that he sounded a warning in regard to the ignorance of the foreign-born population of the country. Demagogues in political parties, out for the foreign vote, were making mere shuttlecocks of the multitude. "The constant influx of such a vast foreign population," he said, "does much to weaken the strength & stability of our institutions. . . . If ever, our country founders, and our national ship goes down, it will be because demagogues triumph, through popular ignorance. . . . Educate the nation, and you have saved it."

In the third term the seminary died, however, and the principal moved away. Two years later, in August, 1856, after Nichols' old schoolmate of Wilbraham Academy, the Reverend Joseph A. Russell, had gone to Stillwater as rector of the local Episcopal church, and had opened a select

⁷ Diary, March 21, 24, 1854. An elaborate letterhead, similar to that of the Baldwin School of St. Paul, dated May 25, 1854, reveals that tuition was to have been five dollars for "English Branches" and six for languages; that Hiram Hayes, a graduate of Bowdoin College, had been elected principal; and that plans had been made for beginning a summer term on May 28. Hayes "threw up his engagement" in a letter received by Nichols on May 24.

⁸ In his diary entry for November 21, Nichols describes the dedication as "a pleasant happy time."

school, Nichols tried to organize the "St. Croix Seminary," as an undenominational enterprise of local importance. Russell was to be the principal, and two jury rooms in the courthouse were to be used as classrooms. The comment in his diary is the simple "did not succeed," but an elaborate appeal to the citizens of Stillwater, a manuscript which has furnished me with much information, shows that a great deal had been accomplished.⁹

Another public service concerned a Stillwater lyceum. On December 13, 1854, a meeting was held at the Minnesota House which was "eloquently addressed by Rev. H. M. Nichols and others," and "on motion of Rev. H. M. Nichols, it was unanimously agreed to take measures to organize a Lyceum." He served on the committee which drafted a constitution for its government, and regularly attended its meetings.¹⁰ The lectures, some very good and some "small affairs," were on all kinds of subjects. He noted them down in his diary, and frequently praised or censured the speaker's delivery.

Of special interest today, as examples of bygone manners and customs, are the ladies' "Portfolios" of the lyceum course, always read by one of the women. On January 10, 1855, after a lecture by a Catholic priest, my grandmother read the "Portfolio," and I find, from her husband's diary, that she "acquitted her self with grace and dignity." Some of these portfolios are before me now, in my grandmother's delicate handwriting, excellent examples of mid-century style and badinage. I like the one which points out that a writer for the "Portfolio" must be witty and sparkling,

⁹ The seminary was to have opened on October 13, 1856. Although it did not come into being, Nichols still labored for the public schools, serving on the board of trustees, of which he was president in 1858. He also was chosen one of the trustees of the College of St. Paul. Edward D. Neill to Nichols, February 15, 1856.

¹⁰ *St. Croix Union* (Stillwater), December 19, 1854. Nichols also worked to reorganize the lyceum and he presented before it his lecture on "Life," given a year earlier before the Minneapolis Lyceum. See his diary, December 31, 1855, January 4, 7, 1856.

that "A Lady must be like a dew-drop in the sunlight, like the sun-spangles on the Lake, like the ripple of the rill, like the foam of the cataract, like painted clouds, like the rainbow, like flashing icicles, like precious stones, like bright stars, like oranges, like ripe peaches, like anything that is bright, and pretty, and enchanting." "Now Ladies," my grandmother went on,

I have none of the qualifications demanded for a writer to your paper. I am not witty, nor sparkling, nor brilliant, nor enchanting.

Ah, No! not enchanting, I am common-place, I am not beautiful, I am not *very* youthful, I have passed the sunny side of thirty. . . . I never dieted on angels smiles, or star-rays, or coquetted with the moonbeams, or lisped to the zephyrs, or sighed over love tales, or wept over yellow novels.

And furthermore I never tried but once to ride Pegasus, and then I was thrown. . . . Oliver Wendell Holmes says Pegasus will not trot well under a side saddle. He is the man who never cares to write as funny as he can—did he mean to be very funny when he wrote that?

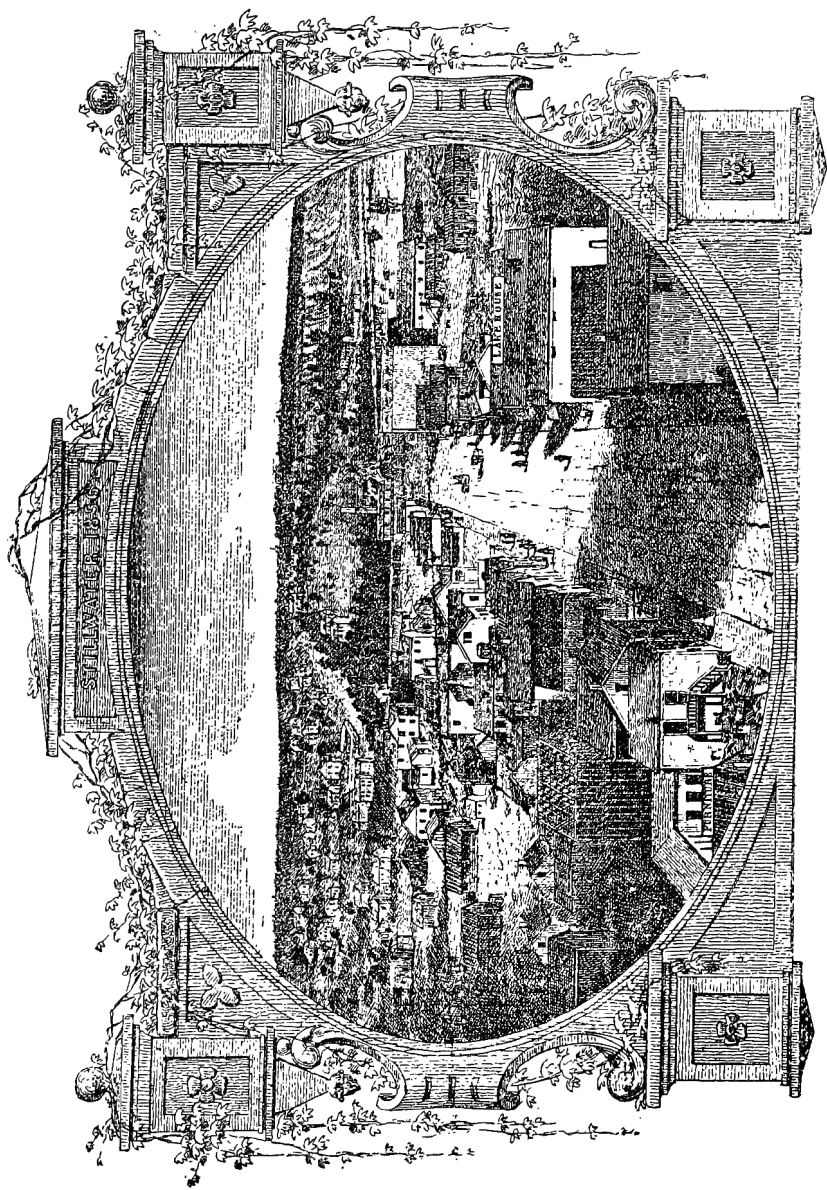
Even Nichols contributed to the ladies "Portfolio," writing the first two chapters of the "Book of the Chronicles of Stillwater," which begins:

Now it came to pass in process of time, when John whose surname was Tyler ruled over the land, there spake a man of the tribe of Mac, unto his fellows, saying, Behold we be increased in numbers and this place is becoming too strait for us. Let one of our number depart and seek an inheritance for us, and spy out some pleasant part of our land. . . .

Then spake John whose surname was Mac-Kusick, unto his brethren and kinsfolk, saying, behold we have heard with our ears, and the fame thereof has come even to our midst, that towards the setting of the sun there lieth at the distance of many days' journey, a land which is fair to look upon, and of great value—a land flowing with milk and honey. Now therefore if it seemeth good unto you, I will depart and seek that land, and spy it out and send you word thereof.

Through the two chapters run the names and deeds of the settlers, down to the coming of the men who were to sell the public lands:

And these, were men of military renown Abram called also the Major, to keep a faithful record of all that was done, and Nathaniel called the Colonel to be the receiver of moneys. . . .



STILLWATER IN 1856
[A letterhead in the Nichols Papers, July, 1859.]

Behold the rest of the history of Stillwater and all its notable matters, its growth, its greatness, and its high renown, is it not all written in the hearts of the early settlers?

During his Stillwater years Nichols gave many addresses which stirred various kinds of public interest in the town. His out-of-door Fourth of July oration in 1854 was a ringing battle cry for Democracy to put a stop to the encroachments of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill was but a few weeks old. "This day," the speaker said, "we have occasion to rejoice with trembling. Fair freedom has received a wound. And on this very hour, in many places in our land, the people are holding funeral service, and tolling the bells as they go to the burial." But his message to his "Fellow citizens . . . in this bright valley of the West on the banks of this beautiful lake . . . where . . . the track of the Indians birch canoe has hardly faded from our waters" was no message of defeat:

The spirit of prophecy breathes free on Independence day. Let faith and courage never falter. . . . Throughout this glorious West, let the *mission* of *Democracy* be full and complete. . . . Then let the shout go up, till the genii of the waters answer, and the sloping banks of Wisconsin give back the sound. Liberty & Union Now & forever One and inseparable.

The demand for this speech was evidently so great that Nichols was asked to have it printed, for he wrote in his diary on July 6: "copied my Oration for publication."

Nichols did not try to keep politics out of his sermons if the time seemed ripe for a protest from the pulpit against the encroachments of slavery. On June 8, 1856, he wrote of his morning sermon, "Some St. Louis men did not relish my reference to Kansas affairs and the assault upon Sumner." Now the Old School Presbyterians of this time did not believe in political references from the pulpit. That very week an Old School church was being organized in Stillwater, and when members of the Old School presbytery were invited to meet in November in my grandfather's church, the Reverend John G. Riheldaffer of St. Paul

preached a sermon on "the wickedness of preaching politics," while Nichols listened.¹¹ When Thanksgiving arrived, on December 10, 1857, and my grandfather preached a Thanksgiving sermon "before the different Protestant churches of the city" in the Second Presbyterian Church (Old School), it is not difficult to see why he recorded in his diary, "Made some mad, & some glad," for he said:

Different sections of the Church of God may wrangle, and waste their strength upon each other, rather than unite against the common foe; a disgrace to the christian name, and a slander on the religion of the Bible. . . .

Political desparadoes may combine to cram Negro Slavery down the throats of the freedom-loving inhabitants of a new Territory. . . . God reigns, and we believe it, the future shall grow brighter before us as we advance. . . . The stain spots on our political purity will all be removed. The black gangrene upon our southern limbs will be entirely healed. *Slavery shall die; its death knell shall come*, because, God reigns.

And the next Sunday evening, in his own church, he gave his preacher's *credo* in no uncertain words. The minister who follows expediency, he said, will not preach on slavery. "It is a delicate matter, and he may give offense, and besides it would look too much like taking sides with political parties; for it would be an unpardonable sin to use the word *politics* in the Pulpit, or to give any intimation that Religion had anything to do with the political relations of men." To Nichols, such an attitude was humiliating. "Out upon such temporizing expediency!" he cried.

Chains and shackles off from the Pulpit! Let there be one place where Truth goes not on crutches! Rather might my body be hung up as a prey to the birds of heaven, than allow my soul to be put in stocks or placed under the dictatorship of any one save the Almighty. And if ever I so far forget the dignity of my station as a Christian Minister, or my duty to God and to man, as to hold back any portion of the principles of Truth, or apologize in their delivery for fear of

¹¹ On the news that an Old School church was to be organized, Nichols commented, "this is a free country." But when "an Old School Colporteur came to help along the aggressive movement," he wrote ironically, "Long live sectarianism." Diary, June 10, 11, 1856.

offending my hearers, I pray God the people may take me out of this Pulpit, and close the doors of this house against me.¹²

Occasionally a sermon preached in his own church had reverberations throughout the town. On the evening of January 9, 1859, he preached an announced sermon on atheism. That night he wrote in his diary: "the Tom Paine club were mostly present, gave them some hard facts, & prayed God to strike them in with power. They were much stirred up." The next day he wrote: "Understand that Infidels are raving to day. think they must send to St Paul, & get Judge Goodrich to come over & reply to the Sunday evening sermon." And on Saturday, January 29, we find these words: "The great Tom Paine festival to night, & by the grace of God, I work here in my study against them."¹³ Other controversial subjects drew large congregations, but his largest evening audiences were composed of young men, when he dedicated a series of lectures to them, both for their own welfare and for the best interests of the growing city of Stillwater. The series of 1856, on such topics as stability of character, self-respect, public spirit, and heroism, brought packed houses, such crowds as he had never seen before, and the young men gave him a present of two hundred dollars in return.

As the sphere of his influence widened, he became more and more in demand in St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Minneapolis for addresses. My grandmother, in a letter of April 15, 1855, gave the reason for this public interest in her husband: "I think Mr N is doing a great good here," she wrote, and she always spoke of him as Mr. N. even to her own family.

He is known here as a great reformer, they send for him far and near to Lecture; The papers say of him "that he is the most talented man in the Territory," "and it is only wanted to be known that he

¹² H. M. Nichols, *The True Thanksgiving, and True Manhood: Two Sermons*, 16, 17, 19, 31, 33 (Stillwater, 1858).

¹³ The idea that Tom Paine should be called an atheist survived almost to the present.

Lectures or preaches and there is a jam." Allowing that some of that is gas, you can get an idea that he is appreciated a little. I can give you the reason. He courts favor from none, he tells them the whole truth without fear or favor, and feeling that he has God and the cause of right on his side fears no one. If he is Lecturing on temperance and knows that the most influential men of a place are there, and they are sure to be if they are rum-sellers, it only gives him more energy and he pictures them out in the most vivid colors, then holds them up to the ridicule and contempt of all good citizens, they do not feel very easy I can assure you.

Then she characteristically added: "But enough of this. I write this to you knowing that it will interest you, and it is not egotistical to write it to you."

As an excellent description of Nichols' method as a public speaker, I should like to quote from an article on his Minneapolis Lyceum lecture on "Life."¹⁴

The lecture delivered by the gentleman [*H. M. Nichols*] on Monday evening last elicited universal and high encomiums. The subject of the lecture was "Life," and it was treated in an original and interesting style. The lecture reminded us of the out-door influences of the past few days. Stepping out into the air, the rough wind startles you and for a few moments makes you falter and stagger. But, as if breathing in strength from the pure, fresh air, you gain renewed vigor and push forward with energy, while LIFE dances and leaps through your veins, swells and hardens the chords and the muscles, warming and exciting the material body to action. Thus, when the Lecturer commenced, he rushed right at his subject, startling his hearers out of all ideas of repose, perhaps, for the moment, confusing some minds. But the re-action followed, and each mind was aroused and invigorated, and the whole audience became unusually interested and earnest in following the speaker. Listening to such a lecturer as Mr. Nichols appears to be, an audience will be benefited beyond the instruction drawn from his lecture—the exercising and arousing of the minds of the audience will be productive of good to each one. We have said that the Lecture was "Life." We might have truly added that there was Life in the speaker and Life in his thoughts and their expression, and that these awoke and invigorated Life in the minds of his hearers.

It was an excellent method, but few were aware of the tremendous nervous and physical toll it took from the man.

¹⁴ The lecture was delivered on March 12, 1855. The quotation is from the *St. Croix Union* of April 17, 1855.

Many of Nichols' lectures outside Stillwater were considered too radical by parts of his audiences.¹⁵ When he addressed the Y.M.C.A. of St. Paul on January 6, 1857, on "Christian Heroism," he wrote that the members listened attentively, though evidently not all approved of the radicalism of the speaker. Then he added, "Hunkerism probably would never feel quite satisfied, with any thing I might write or say; & St Paul especially is one of the careful conservative places. I should like well the labor of going into St Paul, & starting an Independent, Congregational church. That element is needed there & will come in time." He did not like Hunkers!

Of a similar nature to "Christian Heroism," but certainly more radical, was his lecture on "Individualism or, The Democrat vs. The Autocrat," which he delivered on December 10, 1856, as the opening lecture in the Y.M.C.A. course at St. Anthony. He records that he was both cheered and hissed, and the *Minnesota Republican* of St. Anthony and Minneapolis remarked on the following day, "The bold talk of the lecturer has stirred up something of a muss; though well received by most of the large audience." A week later a whole column was given to the issue. A brief look at this lecture will illuminate the controversy concerning it.

In his address Nichols picked out examples of "men, whom history & poetry, crown as heroes, & hand down to later ages, as the great men of the world. The superficial mind," he said, "will undoubtedly take pleasure in marking the career of these heroes, as the child delights in some grand show. It is grand they say, to see how one man can rise above the mass, & how his eye or hand, can move with a glance or beck, the motley multitudes that wait upon his bidding. An exhibition of this nature is declared sublime."¹⁶

¹⁵ Except when he addressed the Odd Fellows Lodge, of which he became a member upon arriving in Minnesota. See *ante*, p. 134.

¹⁶ Nichols did not agree with Carlyle, either about Mohammed or about anything else. Though he believed in the true meaning of aristoc-

He felt that the history of such men had "been the expansion of the Ego, till its all encompassing folds" had "covered up the race, who may breathe, only as air may be vouchsafed them. . . . It has denied right & Justice to the mass, & centered all power in the hands of an irresponsible few." Nichols, always an ardent democrat, denied that the "nobility of human nature can be found in the exaltation of one above and at the expense of the many." "Each one in this mass," he believed, "must be . . . taught that he is an individual, with rights & immunities, with powers & privileges, sacred & inviolable by the very reason of his humanity."

One might well wonder why such an address should have created antagonisms in the little St. Anthony of 1856, or why the *Republican* in its issue of December 18 called Nichols' ideas "revolutionary."

The speaker was never undignified, sometimes a little grandiloquent—often satirical and sharp—bountiful in historic allusions—and liberal in spirit.

And yet he uttered sentiments radically at war with world-wide abuses—sentiments which are now working like *yeast*. . . . The Individualism of the Autocrat, which puts down *many*, that it may put up *one*, was mercilessly scored, and the Individualism of the Democrat, which puts up *all*, which would elevate humanity everywhere and always, was duly magnified.

The lack of good taste in a speaker who, in such a lecture course, introduces sentiments which may conflict with those of some of his audience, was debated in the press. The liberal *Republican* sided with Nichols, and rather sarcastically remarked that "tender-hearted people will probably not be hurt" at the next lecture, which was to be presented by James W. Taylor on "The Destiny of the North-West." As for the "illustrations and applications" which, according to the *Republican*, offended some, I can find only one pas-racy, he thought that "The *best* man, ruling & leading by common consent, comes at last to demand as a right, what has only been rendered as a tribute of respect to worth. . . . But when he comes to that, he ceases to be the *best* man." See Nichols' lecture on "Aristocracy."

sage which might have been taken exception to. My grandfather carried his argument over from the field of the state, where he discarded the doctrine of the divine right of kings, to the more dangerous realm of the church, where he refused to accept autocracy of government. He said that Protestants and Catholics alike had attempted ecclesiastical tyranny, at various times, and that he did not believe in persecution for religious beliefs, in the attempt to make all men think alike on religious subjects, and, if they will not do it willingly, "to compel them to it, by whips & thumbscrews, by dungeons and halters, stakes & faggots." He had no liking for heresy hunters, "whether the dicta issued from the halls of the Vatican, or from councils of Lawn sleeved Bishops, or solemn assemblies of Puritan divines." He believed in liberty of individual conscience, in the decrease of central power in both church and state government, in the "declaration, that became the watchword of American Democracy, 'A church without a Bishop, a State without a King.'" ¹⁷ There was the rub! And in understanding Nichols' position when he went to Minneapolis in 1859, it is quite necessary to keep this part of his 1856 address in St. Anthony in mind.

In the same spirit he attacked the tyranny of human slavery, and was, I think, the most ardent abolitionist I have ever read. He gave several antislavery addresses in the twin towns at the falls, but his finest effort was that of November 22, 1858, in St. Anthony, repeated the next evening in Minneapolis, an address entitled, "Glimpses at Duty for Anti-Slavery Men." There was no disagreement here. "However much you may disagree upon other topics," he cried, "I take it for granted you are every one of you, here to night, Anti-Slavery to the heart's core. Who says he is not? if any, speak, for him have I offended." The only parts of this address which remain of general interest now

¹⁷ *Minnesota Republican* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), December 11, 1856; lecture on "Individualism."

are the passages concerning what was happening in Minnesota.

This Slave power is not content, with holding its heel on three million slaves, but urges its claims abroad, & pushes its grim form up into our very faces. . . .

It claims protection, & bids us furnish the blood & the treasure, to preserve its power & extend its dominion. It demands the right, to bring its slaves up here, into our free air, hold them here at will, & then at will, return them again to Southern bondage.

And now comes the specific reference to the situation at the falls, spoken, be it remembered, nearly two years before the famous Eliza Winston case in Minneapolis.

And do you know friends, that here in Minnesota, just this insult, has been offered to our free-born State. Slave Masters, have brought their chattels here, & held them as such, before our faces & when they got ready, have taken them away again, & there has not been enough of the noble blood of Liberty in Minnesota, to protest against this outrage, in the name of God, & injured Human Rights.

This is the demand they make that all our free States, shall be a free tramping ground for them & their slaves, that if they please they may call their roll of slaves on Bunker's Hill, & we must stand by them, and support them in their right. And when these chattels personal escape as they sometimes will, (for there is not a Slave in all the South, but knows, which the North Star is, . . .) then these Masters tell us, we must turn man-hunters, & go off like hounds, baying on the track of the fugitive.¹⁸

The thing that needed to be done, he said, was the formation of a great antiadministration party. But that would not be enough. "You may fight against that, which upholds the wrong, & yet not fight against the wrong. . . . That sacred trust, of the elective franchise must not be used on the old 'ride & tie' principle, else as ever before, the slave power will tie us all up, and ride alone. That glorious power of the ballot . . . must not become an article in

¹⁸ Though a minister, Nichols was not a pacifist. In a sermon on the state of the world, January 1, 1860, he said: "Not being a believer in the doctrine of nonresistance to physical or moral evil, we have a strong conviction of the necessity of wars in the present state of our world, until the evil and the wrong shall be subdued, and the Omnipotence of Right shall triumph."

trade," he concluded, with a reference of particular force in St. Anthony Falls, "else our own names as freemen, will become like those stars & stripes that float ingloriously from Cheever's Tower."

It is quite obvious, I think, how appropriate had been the action of the Republican convention held in St. Anthony in March, 1855—a convention which approved a set of resolutions embodying the platform of the territorial Republican party—when, in appointing a central committee of seven to call a convention in St. Paul to perfect a permanent party organization, it included the name of H. M. Nichols.¹⁹

In the fall of 1859 it looked as if the mortgage on the new church building in Stillwater would be foreclosed, and Nichols began looking for another position. Recognizing that his church could not afford to keep him any longer, he preached his farewell sermon in Stillwater on October 23. Two Minneapolis churches were without ministers: the First Presbyterian and the Plymouth Congregational. Two Plymouth people called on Nichols to see if he could be induced to go to their church, and he preached for them on October 30. The Minneapolis people held a public meeting and canvassed the town, but could not raise five hundred dollars for six months of preaching. Early in November Nichols received word that the Presbyterians would accept an offer from the Reverend Edward D. Neill of St. Paul of two hundred and fifty dollars from the Presbyterian Church Extension Fund, and have preaching in the Presbyterian building. Eventually this offer was accepted by my grandfather, the people promising to raise another two hundred and fifty dollars themselves. He began preaching in the First Presbyterian Church of Minneapolis on November 13, leaving his family temporarily in Stillwater, and staying at the Cataract House. On December 18 he read

¹⁹ *Minnesota Republican*, April 5, 1855; "The Genesis of the Republican Party in Minnesota," *ante*, 2: 25.

from the pulpit a "Statement of church matters in Minneapolis" which explains very clearly what was happening to end the arrangement agreed to. It is so remarkable a document in the history of the Minneapolis churches that I shall reproduce it here.

Previous to my commencing preaching to the Presbyterian congregation in this place, I had an interview with Rev E. D. Neill of St Paul, who is the chairman of the Pres. Ch. Extension Com. for the Synod of Minnesota.

He then pledged \$250 for six months, from the Ch. Extension Fund, towards my support, in preaching here, offering to give me his personal note, for that amount, payable at the Banking office of Banning or Knox, in St. Paul.

At that interview it was suggested that the Pres. House would not be large enough to accommodate the congregation. And it was distinctly understood & stated, that while the Pres. Cong. should not enter into an arrangement or union *with* any other Society, they were perfectly at liberty to accept any *invitation* that might be tendered, to occupy any other more commodious place of worship, a portion of every Sabbath, if a part of the regular services were still held in the old house so that any question of title to the property could not be raised, as in the case of its entire abandonment.

Some Public Hall, the Plymouth House & the Free Will Baptist House, were named in this connection, & the only condition named, as the basis of the pledge, was the occupancy of the Pres. House a part of every Sabbath, with the liberty, to accept an invitation to any more commodious house, the other part of the time.

In accordance with this understanding & based upon the pledge of that amount of the support as secured, I commenced my labors here, the first Sabbath in the Pres. House making a statement, corresponding to what has now been read. A committe[e] was then appointed, & a subscription immediately started, to secure the remaining half of the support. The 2nd Sabbath, an invitation was rec'd & laid before the Congregation, from the Pew Owners of the Plymouth House, for myself & congregation to occupy their House, on the afternoon or evening of every Sabbath.

This invitation was accepted, for afternoon service, & notice given accordingly, & the order was then instituted as was supposed for the winter, to the acceptance of the people & the satisfaction of all concerned.

We had thus been proceeding some two weeks, when I rec'd a communication from Mr. Neill, stating, without any explanation, or asking any from me, that he should not pay the \$250 promised, unless I gave my whole time, to the Pres. congregation, *in their house of*

worship. An explanation of affairs was volunteered by myself, & Mr. LeDuc, & Mr. Tenney in separate communications addressed to Mr. Neill, & at the request of the Com. Mr. Raymond called personally upon Mr. Neill.

As a reply to these statements, I have rec'd a second communication from Mr. Neill, who also in a letter to Mr. Tenney has embodied the same results, viz. — that we may be at liberty to occupy any Public Hall in the place but that he will not pay the \$250 at first promised, if we continue to worship in the Plymouth House, offering to myself however if I will leave here \$75 per month, to supply his Pulpit, which situation I have not thought it best to accept. To this decision we have no further explanation to offer. Satisfied with the present order, which has been entered into, in good faith on the part of all, we can consent to no breach of that good faith, & see no necessity of any change, even for the purpose of securing \$250. Beside this statement of affairs I have no commentary to make.

Thus much, I felt it was in justice due to myself & the people to state. The whole of the correspondence, of which this is an abstract, is at my room, & can be read by any one, who desires, so to do.

The past arrangement having thus failed, I have only to announce, that this is our last service in this house, under that arrangement. The whole matter is in the hands of the people, for them to take such action as they may judge best.

MINNEAPOLIS, Dec. 18th 1859.

Read in the Pres. House in the morning & in the Plymouth House in P. M.

H. M. NICHOLS ²⁰

The day after Nichols read the above announcement, Plymouth Society held a meeting and appointed a committee to call on him and tell him that he must stay. He began

²⁰ Mrs. Nichols wrote from Stillwater on December 14, 1859, commending her husband's stand. "Do not yield one principle of right or honor," she said. "Let us live upon one meal a day, [rather] than yield to such unwar[r]antable dictation." She was glad that Neill had a "man that is not to be put down by him, he has been Bishop of the Presbytery, almost too long for his own good." Neill was obviously trying to save the Presbyterian church from possible amalgamation with Plymouth. I am sure he would not have objected to the title which my grandmother gave him, for, in a letter of February 2, 1874, to the presbytery relative to his transfer to the Reformed Episcopal church, he said: "I also accept as a *fundamental principle* the ecclesiastical parity of all Presbyters, but believe, with John Calvin, that it is not evil to have a Chief Presbyter, in a large city or over a district." *Correspondence Relative to the Transfer of the Rev. Edward D. Neill, from the Presbytery of Saint Paul, to the Reformed Episcopal Church*, 3 (Minneapolis, 1874).

preaching the following Sunday in Plymouth Church, and remained its minister until his death. He was later dismissed from the presbytery and once more joined the Congregational Association which he had helped to found, thus bringing his denominational affiliations to full circle, for he had grown up as a boy in the old Huntington, Connecticut, Congregational church.²¹

The closing months of Nichols' life were essentially dramatic. On March 26, 1860, Parker M. Edgerly, the twenty-three-year-old clerk of the Cataract House, died of delirium tremens. Mr. and Mrs. Nichols were both with him when he died, and my grandfather took charge of his funeral. The next Sunday evening, April 1, he preached a temperance sermon in Plymouth Church, on young Edgerly's death. The house was "jammed to suffocation." In that sermon he appealed to young men to "dash away" the glass before it was too late, and to the mothers of Minneapolis to close up the saloons. Monday morning a "Dashaway Club" of young men was formed, and Monday evening a committee of women was appointed to visit every place where liquor was sold. There was intense excitement in town that day, which kept up on Tuesday, when fifty women visited the saloons, most of them unlicensed, and reported to the men the names of all saloonkeepers who had refused to close. On Wednesday night, April 4, between eleven and twelve o'clock, Plymouth Church was burned to the ground.²²

²¹ In his diary entry of April 24, 1859, Nichols tells of preaching in this church, "where I was brot up," during a visit to the East. See also *ante*, p. 144. The presbytery met on January 17, 1860, in St. Paul, and the Congregational Association on June 8 in Anoka.

²² See Nichols' entries in his dairy for March 26, April 1, 2, and 5, 1860; *Falls Evening News* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), April 6, 1860; *State Atlas* (Minneapolis), April 7, 1860. My grandfather, who had been spending the night at Chanhassen, wrote on April 5: "reaching Minneapolis about 4 oclock found the Plymouth Church in ashes burned by the liquor sellers." The building had stood on the corner of Nicollet Avenue and Fourth Street, and had been dedicated on December 22, 1858.

There was no doubt concerning the origin of the fire. As the *Falls Evening News* pointed out, "there had been no service and no fire in the building since Sunday. Those who first arrived at the scene say that there was fire at both ends of the house and from the great rapidity with which it spread they believe that the floor was saturated with some inflammable material." The *State Atlas*, in more heightened language, said:

The liquor traffic in this community having written its history in letters of blood, it was no more than proper, perhaps, that it be read by the light of burning churches. . . . If by the light of the flames that swept so madly through the hall where men and women have been wont to worship God, they have been able to read those startling and terrible truths which have so long been concealed beneath the outside covering of the Rum Traffic, we may well rejoice at the sacrifice.

On Thursday night there was an immense indignation meeting in Woodman's Hall, at which Nichols spoke, and a "committee of fifty citizens was appointed to wait upon the liquor dealers and request them to abandon their business, and to ascertain upon what terms" they were willing to do it.²³ That night, while her husband was at the meeting, Mrs. Nichols was writing home, expressing fears for his safety, even though "the brethren would not let him walk the streets alone." "There was a watch set over the [Cataract] house last night," she said, "to prevent its being fired, as there is such a feeling against Mr N. by the saloon keepers."

The next Sunday morning Dr. Horace Bushnell preached an "excellent sermon" to the churchless congregation, meeting in the First Baptist Church, on "Where there is a will, there is a way." Nichols, preaching in the evening in the Methodist Church, "'freed my duty' to the Rum-

²³ *Falls Evening News*, April 7, 1860. A circular appeared after the church was burned, inviting all citizens of Minneapolis who were in favor of law and order, to meet at Ferrant's Hall "to adopt measures for the protection of the lives and property of our citizens, which are now threatened by violence." *State Atlas*, April 7, 1860.

sellers," as he expressed it, before a "perfect jam." He also arraigned the community:

The burning of our House of Worship is a loss to us as a church, but it is a greater loss to the interests of this community. We can afford our loss if this town can afford the name of having its churches burned. Let it go out to the world, that the Liquor Interest of Minneapolis, burn down churches when it takes their whim, & who suffers the most, the Plymouth people or the town where such an outrage is perpetrated. Citizens of Minneapolis can you afford such a name as that?²⁴

The weeks which were left to Nichols were few. They were fairly happy ones, however, though he did not feel quite at home preaching in the Free Will Baptist Church each Sunday morning, and in the Methodist Church each Sunday night. He went botanizing and geologizing with Dr. C. L. Anderson, down on the river bank, and there was Dr. Bushnell in the Winslow House across the river. His own people were kind. On April 21, Plymouth Church and Society called him to be their permanent pastor. Plans were being made for a new church.²⁵ A stranger put a ten-dollar bill in his hand one Sunday to help rebuild. "Think we shall live yet, if it be God's will," he wrote. But the diary stops at the end of June with these final words: "Prospect brightens for a new church."

By a curious coincidence Nichols had on January 1 preached a sermon from the text, "This year thou shalt die." By an even stranger coincidence his last sermon, preached on July 1, was from the text, "These all died in faith." On July 5, Mr. and Mrs. Nichols and their son Henry, aged twelve, were drowned in Lake Calhoun.

²⁴ Sermon of April 8, 1860. Nichols' wife was alarmed for his safety, and for a time after they had moved into a little house "out by Dea. Snow's," he carried a revolver. Nichols met Bushnell while he was residing temporarily in Minnesota for his health.

²⁵ Nichols gives the following information in his diary for May 8, 1860: "1st Cong. Soc. of Minneapolis was organized to night & Bell, Stone, Tenney, Harrison & Morgan, chosen Trustees. Prospect is good for building a new church."

They had driven to Minnehaha Falls in the morning for a picnic with the Cleaveland family of Chanhassen. Mrs. Nichols and Mrs. Cleaveland were sisters. On their way home they stopped at Lake Calhoun, and the two oldest Cleaveland girls and young Henry went bathing at a spot opposite the Lake of the Isles. About twenty feet out from shore was an abrupt drop off. The Cleaveland girls were presently in deep water and could not swim. Young Henry immediately swam to their rescue, but they clung to him and carried him under. Accounts of what followed vary, but apparently the two fathers rushed in. Nichols was a powerful swimmer, but he was fully dressed, and Cleaveland, who seems not to have been a swimmer, was presently dragging his brother-in-law down. Mrs. Nichols, standing on the edge of deep water, reached the hand of her husband, and was also carried down, calling to her sister to go back to the children left on shore—the two youngest Cleaveland girls and my father, who was less than three years old.

A few hours later hundreds of citizens of Minneapolis were at the scene, and six bodies were presently recovered from the lake.²⁶ The next afternoon at sundown six coffins were placed in a row on the lawn of the Nichols home, while over a thousand persons gathered in the neighborhood for the funeral. The little Plymouth choir sang, and the Reverend Charles Seccombe of St. Anthony, standing on the steps of the cottage, conducted the service, aided by the Reverend Charles B. Sheldon of Excelsior, the Reverend A. S. Fiske of St. Paul, and the Reverend James A. McKee of St. Anthony.

The whole community was deeply moved. On the next Sunday the tragic event was the theme of every sermon in the two cities at the falls. Bishop Henry B. Whipple of the Episcopal church preached in St. Anthony from the

²⁶ Mr. George Brackett, a member of Plymouth Church, once told me that he ran all the way to the scene of the tragedy.

words, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die." In the evening Seccombe preached to the bereft Plymouth congregation, using the same text which Nichols had used the Sunday before. The yellowed pages of his manuscript, before me as I write, contain some passages which I should like to quote:

Mr. Nichols . . . possessed a large & liberal heart, a degree of energy & fire that required a large room to breathe in, & a free air to breathe. . . . He possessed a depth & richness of voice . . . such as few public speakers comparatively enjoy, & this united with his impassioned eloquence gave him a great power over his audience. As a theologian, he was not a strict disciple of the schools. He inclined to union among Christians, & would have favored such an organization of the church as would permit all evangelical orders to unite; yet as it respects the government of a Church he loved the largest liberty, & could ill brook any ecclesiastical fetters.

Samuel C. Gale of Plymouth Church, a man of scholarly and discerning judgment, set down in his diary on July 13 the following words:

I never saw a whole community so stricken with sorrow. Mr. Nichols had a very strong hold upon the popular affection and filled a very large place in the society at large. . . . He thoroughly understood the people and had great confidence in the native ability and good instincts of human beings and always appealed to these qualities. Above this he possessed a most vigorous body, with great courage, a most remarkably clear and impressive utterance with the rare power of magnetizing and thrilling his hearers, this last the unvarying accompaniment of great orators. In short Mr. Nichols, if not great, was a very remarkable man and an orator, not onesided either although radical on most questions of reform. *Manliness* is the word above all others which designates the common character of the man.²⁷

The tributes of the Minneapolis press were printed in columns deeply bordered with black, and all agreed that "no man possessed a stronger hold upon the heart of the community." But I turn back to Stillwater, where this chapter began, to find the most fitting words with which to

²⁷ Quoted from the manuscript diary, with the kind permission of Mr. Edward C. Gale of Minneapolis. A copy of this diary, on film-slides, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

close. They were penned by A. J. Van Vorhes, Nichols' personal friend, in his paper, the *Stillwater Messenger*, which Nichols had enthusiastically helped to bring into existence. The editorial, printed on July 10, 1860, begins with genuine emotion:

Words are a feeble medium through which to convey the emotions of this hour, induced by the saddest event we have ever been called upon to record. The pen shrinks from the performance of its office, the heart is stilled into awe. The moistened eye, the measured tread, the saddened countenances of all with whom we meet, would reveal to a stranger that a great shadow had passed over and is still resting upon this community,—leaving its impress upon every heart. Last Thursday evening, Rev. H. M. Nichols, his wife and son Henry, bound to our citizens by inseparable cords of social and christian fellowship . . . were drowned in Lake Calhoun, near Minneapolis.

The tribute included in the editorial is particularly appropriate for the close of this paper:

As a writer and speaker, and a bold and genuine Reformer, we believe he had no peer in this State or the North-west.—Active in every educational, reformatory or other interest calculated to elevate and improve the social or moral condition of man, he was peculiarly adapted to a new country like this. He has left his impress upon the city and State, which will bless and perpetuate his name in the memory of the people. "He being dead, yet speaketh."

CHARLES W. NICHOLS

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