



Wm. G. LeDuc

WILLIAM GATES LE DUC¹

General William Gates Le Duc was, at the time of his death on October 30, 1917, nearly ninety-five years old—a remarkable age; and his was a remarkable and an eventful life, during which he filled many positions of honor and importance in the service of his country and of his fellow men. To a large extent the story of his life is contemporaneous with the history of Minnesota, both as a territory and as a state. Participating actively in its early struggles for existence and for admission to the great family of states, he lived to witness its marvelous development until it became universally recognized as one of the foremost members of the Union. In this great work of development he took an active and prominent part, and in the future annals of the state he will always be classed among its master builders. It is not the purpose of this memorial to do more than to outline the salient features of the life of this distinguished citizen, the detailed history of which must be written later by one who can give to the subject the examination and research its importance demands.

General Le Duc, a grandson of Henri Duc, who, as an officer of the French navy, came to this country under the command of Count D'Estaing during the Revolutionary War, was born in Wilkesville, Ohio, March 29, 1823. He received his early education in the Ohio public schools and at Howe's Academy, Lancaster. Intimate school companions of his were William Tecumseh Sherman of Civil War fame, whom he called Cumph, and Sherman's sister, known as Betty. Le Duc used to relate an amusing incident which occurred during their school days. It seems that at the close of a term, an exhibition was held in which some of the scholars, including Le Duc and William and Betty Sherman, appeared in an old drama—or what at that time was called a dialogue—entitled

¹A memorial read at the stated meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, October 14, 1918.

"Pizarro," founded upon events connected with the conquest of Peru. Le Duc took the part of the Spanish soldier, and, to judge from his stature and presence, he must have cut a very fine figure. In fact, he admitted that his appearance upon the stage created quite a sensation, and that, because of the applause and laughter of the audience, he was congratulating himself upon making a great success until he found that the cause of his sudden popularity was a large tag which Betty Sherman had pinned upon the tail of his coat, and which was conspicuously displayed at every turn he made upon the stage.

In 1844 Le Duc entered Kenyon College, from which he graduated in 1848. He then studied law in the office of Columbus Delano of Mount Vernon, and was admitted to the bar in 1849. He came to St. Paul in 1850 when the town was a mere hamlet, comprising a few small houses scattered along the river bank. He commenced at once the practice of law and shortly afterwards opened a bookstore, in connection with which he published a *Minnesota Year Book* for the years 1851, 1852, and 1853. In 1851 he was present at the negotiation and signing of the celebrated treaty with the Sioux at Traverse des Sioux, a very interesting account of which appears in his *Year Book* for 1852. Sixty-three years later he attended the unveiling of the monument erected by the state to commemorate this event, and in the course of an address to the audience assembled on that occasion he gave a vivid description of the Thunder Bird Dance, one of the ceremonial rites of the Sioux.

In 1853 Le Duc erected the first brick building on the south side of Third Street, on what was then called the bluff. It was occupied during the fifties by the *Times* and the *Minnesotian*, and in 1861 the first issues of the *St. Paul Press* were printed within its walls. In pursuance of a resolution of the territorial legislature, approved March 5 of this year, Governor Ramsey appointed Le Duc commissioner for Minnesota to the World's Fair held in New York City. This exposition will be remembered as the one for which the celebrated Crystal

Palace was built. At this time Minnesota was a veritable *terra incognita* to the people of the East, and the work done by the commission was largely influential in turning attention to this part of the country and to the unrivaled opportunities it afforded settlers.² Late in this year Le Duc interested several St. Paul men in the construction of a bridge over the Mississippi River, and mainly through his efforts the St. Paul Bridge Company, which built the Wabasha Street bridge, was incorporated by the territorial legislature of 1854. About this same time Le Duc, who had acquired some land on the west side of the river, laid out the town of West St. Paul.

In the latter part of April, 1853, a Sioux-Chippewa fight took place in St. Paul, of which Le Duc was an eye witness. Sixteen Chippewa arrived one evening and concealed themselves in the outskirts of the town, hoping for a chance encounter with some of the Sioux from Little Crow's village, six miles down the river. Early the next morning, according to Le Duc's narrative, they caught sight of a canoe containing three Sioux, a man and two women, coming up stream. As the boat turned toward the Jackson Street landing, the Chippewa hurried down in order to intercept its occupants before they could get ashore. A ravine that cut through the town impeded the progress of the Chippewa and the Sioux were able to reach the trading house of the Minnesota Outfit. As they stepped inside, the Chippewa fired, mortally wounding one of the squaws. Citizens who were in the building immediately locked the door and concealed the other two Sioux in a back room. The disappointed Chippewa turned and fled homeward. Governor Ramsey hastily called together members of the militia for the purpose of pursuing the retreating Indians who had had the audacity to pull off a raid of this character within the limits of the village, in fact at the seat of

²General Le Duc's account of the Minnesota display at the Crystal Palace Exhibition appeared in the MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN, 1:351-368 (August, 1916).

government of the territory. Le Duc gives a very amusing account of the expedition, in which he was a volunteer. It appears that the party followed some sort of trail to a point near White Bear Lake, whence no trace of the Indians could be found. Partly for this reason, but more especially on account of a failure of provisions, liquid and otherwise, the pursuit was abandoned, and the expedition returned in "light marching order."

Soon after establishing his residence in St. Paul, Le Duc, with a number of other prominent citizens, became interested in the future development of the region of which the town was the center. Among other projects they were successful in securing the passage at the 1853 session of the territorial legislature of acts incorporating the Mississippi and Lake Superior Railroad Company and the Louisiana and Minnesota Railroad Company of St. Paul. The former company was authorized to construct a railroad from St. Paul to Lake Superior; the latter, to build from St. Paul south along the west side of the Mississippi River to intersect with the Central Iowa Railroad on the northern border of Iowa. These were among the first railroad companies to be incorporated in the territory.

After 1853 Le Duc's interests became more and more centered in the village of Hastings. Associated with Harrison H. Graham, he erected a flouring mill at the falls of the Vermillion River. In 1856 he became its sole owner and operator, and he was the first miller to manufacture and introduce upon the markets flour made from Minnesota spring wheat. In 1854 he purchased, through Henry H. Sibley, Alexander Fari-bault's one-fourth interest in the townsite. In 1857, therefore, disposing of his St. Paul holdings, he removed with his family to Hastings, which he made his home until his death. To secure rail connections with outside points, he organized in 1856 the Hastings, Minnesota River, and Red River of the North Railroad Company, which was incorporated by the terri-

torial legislature in 1857. He was president of the company until 1870, and had charge of the building and operation of the first thirty miles of the road, known as the Hastings and Dakota Railroad.

In 1862 Le Duc entered the Union army and was at once appointed to a position in the quartermaster's department, with the rank of captain. He was afterwards promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and at the close of the war was brevetted brigadier general of volunteers. Although he was retained in the quartermaster's department throughout the war, his services were frequently sought in other departments, owing to his wide knowledge and varied experiences in the practical affairs of life. He served first in the Army of the Potomac, rendering efficient aid to General McClellan in the Peninsular campaign, and especially in the retreat incident to the Seven Days' Battles, during which his assistance in building corduroy roads probably saved a considerable portion of the artillery. He remained with the Army of the Potomac until after the Battle of Gettysburg, when he was transferred to the Western Army under General Hooker and participated in the campaign to relieve General Rosecrans' command, which was penned up at Chattanooga. At the beginning of Hooker's forced march to that point Le Duc was placed in charge of the base of supplies at Bridgeport, Alabama. It soon became evident, however, that, owing to the condition of the animals used in the transportation service and to the almost impassable roads, sufficient subsistence to supply the needs of this rapidly advancing force could not possibly be forwarded overland; and that, unless additional means of conveyance were employed, the expedition must either fail or be greatly retarded. Le Duc thereupon conceived the plan of building a steamboat, by the aid of which barges might be used in transporting supplies up the Tennessee River. Because of the lack of building materials and of adequate facilities, however, military men strenuously contended that the project could not be accom-

plished in time to be of any use in the emergency. Notwithstanding these objections Le Duc called together and impressed into service a number of men who had some knowledge of steamboats. Through his wonderful initiative, his inventive genius, and his indomitable energy, in a very short time a boat was actually constructed out of the material at hand and, under his personal supervision, was successfully employed in towing a number of barges up the tortuous stream, bringing to Hooker's army in the time of its greatest need the supplies necessary to ensure its further advance. This boat was afterwards of great service in opening the "cracker line" to the beleaguered forces at Chattanooga.

Le Duc accompanied General Sherman's army to Atlanta and was present at the capture of the city. Immediately prior to his departure on his celebrated march to the sea Sherman found it necessary to destroy a large quantity of public property and a number of buildings in order that the city might not be occupied by the Confederate General Hood after the departure of the Union army. Realizing that the carrying-out of his orders would necessarily involve the destruction of considerable private property, and wishing to mitigate as much as possible the severity of the blow, Sherman placed the matter of the removal of the people affected thereby in Le Duc's hands. Le Duc deplored deeply the necessity for the order, but he conducted the details of the removal with such care and humanity as to gain for himself the lasting respect and gratitude of those who suffered through its operation. Strong evidence of this was shown when Le Duc, a short time before his death, visited Atlanta. On this occasion he was made a guest of honor by the old residents, and many incidents of his thoughtful care and kindness were recalled and commended.

After the performance of the duty to which he was detailed at Atlanta Le Duc was attached to the command of General Thomas, and upon the retreat of the Union army after the Battle of Franklin he rendered important service in repairing

the bridge across the river at that place, over which the army was able to pass in safety. He was chief quartermaster under Thomas during the siege of Nashville by the Confederate army under Hood. Great credit has been given in history to Thomas for not attempting to raise the siege and to attack Hood in his intrenchments until supplies sufficient to ensure the success of such an undertaking had been obtained. Very little has been said, however, of the important and effective work performed by Le Duc in securing the vast amount of needed supplies.

At the close of the war Le Duc returned to his family at Hastings, and resumed active work in the affairs of private life and in promoting the welfare and best interests of the state. In 1877 President Rutherford B. Hayes, who had known Le Duc in the army and who recognized and appreciated the character and quality of his services, appointed him commissioner of agriculture. The duties pertaining to this office he performed with conspicuous energy and ability. He thoroughly reorganized the department and placed it upon a practical basis. The division of forestry was established, and the investigational work which has since grown into the bureau of animal industry was developed and organized—phases of the department's activities which have proved of inestimable value to the country. Le Duc also introduced the culture of tea in several of the southern states and encouraged the manufacture of sugar from beets, an industry of great importance to the country at the present time. As a special compliment to him and as a recognition of his splendid work in this field, he was elected in 1881 a member of the Agricultural Society of France, the only other Americans so honored up to that time being George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Thompson.

General Le Duc left many warm and appreciative friends in this state. Few men have lived who have so stamped the impress of their imperial nature upon the memory of those who

have known them as has this man. His life and his long-continued and important services impress one with what may be accomplished through a disposition to work and through the exercise of energy, zeal, and devotion in the performance of duty to self, family, country, and fellow men. In the positions of trust and responsibility with which he was so frequently honored he stood preëminently untarnished by a single reflection upon his fidelity, his ability, and his exalted manhood. In his *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota*, written in 1886, Major Thomas M. Newson thus speaks of the subject of this memorial: "A tall, quick, active man, with positive convictions, fertile in expedients, with a restless brain and unbounded energy, are the peculiarities which marked Gen. Le Duc as I saw him in 1853, and even later in life." "I little thought at this time that this same active, bustling, energetic, wide-awake man would be United States Commissioner of Agriculture and stand at the head in Washington of the greatest industry of the nation, and yet such is the fact."

General Le Duc became a member of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1850, and at once actively interested himself in promoting its welfare, shaping its policy, and advancing its standard of usefulness. He assisted largely in securing the real property on Wabasha Street, which proved so valuable financially to this association. He was always an enthusiastic worker in the society, and for many years he served as a member of its executive council. Even in the later years of his life he would come from his home at Hastings to attend meetings of the council, when many of the members residing in St. Paul would fail to be present on account of inclement weather. He attended such a meeting a very short time before his death, when he was suffering from the cold which accelerated that event; it is doubtful if he would have refrained from coming even had he known that the journey might hasten his demise, as he had often expressed the desire to remain in harness to the last, not wishing to live after the period of his

usefulness had expired. He was intensely interested in the location of the Historical Building upon its present site, attending every meeting when the question of a location was brought up and being strenuously opposed to any proposition that in any manner involved the possibility of a location elsewhere.

A record of nearly sixty-eight years as a member of this society is certainly worthy of recognition. In duration of time or in extent of service this record never has been and probably never will be surpassed. It is highly proper, then, that we should respect his memory, recognize his worth, and place his name high among those whom this organization delights to honor.

GIDEON S. IVES

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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