



THE *restored*  
Faribault house

## *The Alexander Faribault House*

KENNETH BJORK

IN THE FALL of 1826 Alexander Faribault set out from Fort Snelling with a small party of men and a horse-drawn cart loaded with goods of the kind used in trade with the Indians. Ten days later, as an agent of the North American Fur Company, he started a post at the Sioux village of Tetonka Tonah, located on what was later to be known as Cannon Lake. In 1835 he moved his trading post a few miles eastward to the confluence of the Cannon and Straight rivers, down which streams the Indians soon came in well-loaded canoes to barter their furs for the cloths, weapons,

and other goods kept by the trader who spoke their Indian dialect. About 1844 he moved the post again, this time to the present site of the city of Faribault in Rice County, and there, from the proceeds of his profitable fur trade, he built a gracious frame house in 1853.

The house so confidently and carefully erected on the west bank of the Straight River, although gradually encircled by downtown commercial establishments, has somehow escaped both fire and the wrecking bar and has remained, in fact, a satisfactory family residence until quite recently. With the passing of the years, especially after the death of Alexander Faribault in 1882, it has also served to remind citizens and visitors alike of qualities in the city's founder that merit general recognition.<sup>1</sup>

The Alexander Faribault house was the

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MR. BJORK, who is professor of history in St. Olaf College at Northfield, is a former president of the Rice County Historical Society. He also served as chairman of the society's committee in charge of refurbishing the Alexander Faribault house.

first frame residence in Rice County—quite probably in all of southern Minnesota. It was erected the year before the town of Faribault was laid out, and while it was still occupied by its builder, the teepees of the Dakota were more numerous in the village than the dwellings of the white man. For a short time it was in every sense a true civic center, even serving as a conference and polling place. In it Father Augustin Ravoux performed one of the community's earliest religious services. The house reflected, too, Faribault's happy married life with Mary Elizabeth, daughter of Captain Duncan Graham of Fort Snelling and his Indian wife. Ten children were born to the Faribaults, and the hospitality of their home drew enthusiastic praise from Governor Henry H. Sibley and others.

FARIBAULT himself takes on increased stature when viewed in the perspective of history. He was a descendant of the royal bailiff at Le Mans, France. His family had gone to the Northwest by way of Canada, where it had added a strain of Indian blood. Later members drifted westward and southward, along the familiar routes of explorers and fur traders, into Wisconsin Territory. Alexander was born at Prairie du Chien in 1806, the son of Jean Baptiste Faribault, and he later lived and worked with his father at Mendota. Alexander, in fact, continued to make his home there, although frequently absent, until his house at Faribault was completed.

Despite a relative paucity of written sources, the record of Alexander Faribault's career indicates unmistakably a man of generosity and compassion, tolerance and chivalry, imagination and flexibility of mind. Once a rich man owning most of the property in and about Faribault, he gave much

of what he possessed—both in land and money—to schools, churches, and civic projects. Among his many donations was one in the amount of three thousand dollars to Father George Keller, first resident priest of Faribault, for the erection of a church, and another of about ten acres of land to Bishop Henry B. Whipple and the Episcopal church that he served. The grounds of Shattuck and Seabury Divinity schools were gifts from his hand.

Faribault also attained state and national as well as local prominence. In 1851 he served as a delegate to the territorial legislature, where he became a friend of Henry M. Rice, a leading Minnesota politician, whose name Faribault gave to the county in which he made his home. In 1850 he was charged by the government to act as mediator in an Indian dispute, and when the next year two treaties, negotiated at Mendota and Traverse des Sioux, opened up the land of the Sioux west of the Mississippi for settlement, he served as official translator for the treaty councils. Shortly after, he negotiated successfully with Indian chiefs to secure their recognition of debts owed by the Indians to traders like himself. When Sibley was absent from Minnesota as territorial delegate to Congress from 1849 to 1853, Faribault, a loyal friend without ambitions for high office, served him at Mendota in the triple capacity of private secretary, executive assistant, and reporter on political developments.

Whatever Faribault's part in the making of treaties later violated by the whites, and despite the fact that he organized a company of men in 1862 to help crush the Sioux Uprising in the Minnesota River Valley, he was an unfailing friend and protector of the Indians during his entire career. Often they camped near his trading post, and when friendly Indians were under suspicion after 1862, he permitted them to live on his farm, gave them food and credit, and generally cared for them in their need. His qualities of fairness and sympathy have been frequently cited as the reasons why

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<sup>1</sup> Although Faribault built a stone residence late in 1855 on the bluffs overlooking the river, his second house was incorporated in 1873 into the buildings of the Minnesota School for the Blind, and thus tended to lose its identity as a dwelling place.



REFURNISHED parlor  
in the Faribault house

Rice County never experienced serious difficulties with the Sioux.

In other respects, too, Faribault was unusual. Almost from the start he saw rich possibilities for farming in Rice County. As early as 1835 he ordered two of his associates to start a farm for him near his post. He later devoted considerable time, there and elsewhere, to raising grain, livestock, fruit trees, bees, and poultry. He built a flour mill and a sawmill and stressed their importance in the area's economy. And, finally, although at first he naturally conceived of Faribault as a settlement of French Canadians and Indians, he gradually modified this view to one of ready acceptance of peoples of varying backgrounds. Similarly, he gave encouragement and assistance to the educational, charitable, and religious projects promoted by Protestant as well as Catholic groups in Faribault.

ESPECIALLY at meetings of a local Old Settlers' Association, which had been organized in 1874, the people of Faribault began about the turn of the century to discuss the possibility of a suitable monument to the city's founder. It was suggested, among other things, that his first residence,

if fully restored, would best serve the purpose. The idea made some headway after 1926, when the Rice County Historical Society was started. But not until November 1, 1944, did the society agree to acquire and to restore the Faribault house, and on May 22, 1945, the group formally accepted the building from the Faribault Foundation, a corporation created the year before to receive contributions for the restoration of the house and other civic projects.

Fortunately for the committee in charge of restoration, the plan of the house was well known. Originally, it had consisted of two sections. The first floor had contained an entrance hall, parlor and sitting room, an office or music room, a kitchen, and a summer kitchen. Upstairs there had been six bedrooms, a sewing room, and a large hall. The rear section that had included the kitchens and three upstairs bedrooms had been removed before the Rice County society acquired the house, apparently because it was in an advanced state of dilapidation.<sup>2</sup>

Careful examination of the house by members of the committee confirmed what they had known for some time—that it was in remarkably good condition, inside

and out, considering its age and relative neglect through the years. It was quickly learned that the front porch would have to be partially rebuilt, that shutters and siding needed minor repairs, and that a new roof was essential. The committee decided also to provide a concrete sidewalk and steps at the front of the house and to convert the yard into a modern lawn.

Inside, it was discovered that the walls and ceilings required replastering in many places, that the floor downstairs would have to be leveled by means of new supporting posts set on concrete footings in the dirt floor of the basement, that the floor upstairs required considerable repair in one bedroom, and that the woodwork and floors should be refinished throughout. Members of the committee thought it advisable, in the long view, to make provision at once for the future use of such utilities as water, electricity, and natural gas. After some discussion, it was decided to restore the miss-

ing rear section of the house according to its original measurements, but to provide, instead of a kitchen, an apartment for custodians downstairs and, in lieu of bedrooms, an unfinished storage attic on the second floor.<sup>2</sup>

The recommendations of the committee were accepted by the society, and the work of restoration proceeded as funds and labor were made available. Cash gifts, life memberships in the society, free labor—including that of the entire class and its instructor in industrial arts at the Faribault High School—together with liberal appropriations by the Rice County board of commissioners in recent years, brought the work of restoration to a point where the public was invited to view the repaired interior of the house in October, 1953, a hundred years after it had been built. By October, 1955, the rooms were partially furnished and ready for public inspection. Since then the project has been brought to completion, if indeed such an undertaking can ever be said to have been completed. It is estimated that something over ten thousand dollars has gone into the work of restoring the Alexander Faribault house, and this figure does not include the services and articles freely given by interested business firms and individuals.

<sup>2</sup> See Guerdon S. Allen, "The Alexander Faribault Home: Its History and Restoration, 1853-1946," for a detailed report on the project and a floor plan of the house. Mr. Allen was chairman of the restoration committee. A typewritten copy of his report is on file at the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> It has since become clear to all that a kitchen should be provided, and plans toward this end are currently being considered.

*MASTER bedroom  
in the restored  
Faribault house*





THE WORK of refurnishing the rooms, which was seriously begun in 1950, created the most difficult problem of restoration. Inasmuch as only a few items owned by the Faribault family had been found, it was necessary for the committee in charge of refurnishing to engage in considerable historical research. The hunt for proper wallpaper, for example, was successful only when papers, made recently in France and Germany in imitation of early patterns, had been secured. The basic criteria in determining what was to go into the house and what was to be rejected were the economic and cultural status of the Faribault family, the styles and customs prevailing in the early 1850s, and the general likelihood that the items were both available to the builder—at Faribault or in St. Paul—and appropriate for the house. A renewed effort was made to ferret out articles actually used by the Faribaults, to build carefully around these, and to use restrained historical imagination in completing the task. Two classes in home furnishing at St. Olaf College were recruited to assist in the research, to draw plans to scale, and to make recommendations for the committee. This and all other work was done in a spirit of high adventure and with the enthusiastic support of members of the Rice County Historical Society.

Limitations of space prevent either a full account of the restoration and refurnishing or a detailed report on the appearance of the house in its present form. But it might help the reader to visualize the whole interior if the contents of the two rooms pictured in the illustrations accompanying this article are briefly identified. In the parlor is a large braided wool rug—woven to order in a New England mill and made available to the society at cost by a Faribault business firm—a Bay State Franklin stove, a sofa and two chairs, a settee, a crystal candle chandelier, a square Steinway piano and stool, a comb Windsor chair, a center table, several small pedestal tables, and wall sconces, each for one candle—all dating

from the mid-Victorian or an earlier period. A portrait of Faribault hangs on the wall.

In the master bedroom on the second floor is a spool bed with a log-cabin quilt and a crocheted bedspread. In addition, the room has a washstand with a complete set of crockery, a towel rack with towels and a splashier, a bureau with a large mirror, and a marble-topped chest of drawers.

As compensation for the work and expense involved in the restoration project, society members could rejoice at several unique features of the house, quite apart from its solid construction and charm. Below the window casings in the parlor are wood-panel paintings, landscapes done in oil by Jean Baptiste Faribault. The black walnut stair railing has a simple beauty that rarely goes unnoticed. Of unfailing interest to visitors are the iron hooks that were set into hewn log beams in the basement; these usually precipitate speculation as to their original use. The stone foundation walls are equal if not superior to those in modern houses. Unusual, too, is the fact that sand had been generously poured between the studdings of the walls, apparently as insulation against summer heat and winter cold. For these and other reasons, among them its early Victorian design, the public has gradually come to the realization that in the restored Faribault house it has a seven-room dwelling that even the most demanding person would be proud to call his own.

The Alexander Faribault house is located at 12 N. E. First Avenue in Faribault and is open to the public by appointment from May 1 through October. Custodians living in an apartment at the rear of the house will capably and eagerly serve as guides. Individuals and groups—especially school children—are invited to visit and inspect the house. For it is the sincere hope of the Rice County Historical Society that the house symbolizes the ideals of its builder, and that it will serve both as a source of knowledge and as an inspiration for the generations of tomorrow.



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