

April, 1861

MINNESOTA *GOES to WAR*

THE FIRST gun of the Civil War was fired at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. The following day, after thirty-three hours of bombardment, the fort surrendered, and as the United States flag was lowered the telegraph clicked off dispatches which carried the word to Washington. There it was received with intense excitement by the horde of office-seekers, politicians, and statesmen that had engulfed the capital since the inauguration of the new administration on March 4. Among them was Alexander Ramsey, governor of the three-year-old state of Minnesota, who noted in his diary with characteristic brevity: "News this evening of the surrender of Sumter."¹

Though on a political errand at the time, Ramsey, like many others, put aside personal business the following morning.² Accompanied by Senator Morton S. Wilkinson of Minnesota, he hurried at an early hour to the office of the secretary of war, Simon Cameron, a friend of many years. To Cameron he tendered one thousand men for national defense, and, at the secretary's request,

committed the offer to a letter which bears plain evidence of the haste with which it was composed:

"Sir: As the Executive of the state of Minnesota, I hereby tender to the Government of the United States, on the part of that state one thousand men, to be ready for service so soon as the necessary information can be communicated to the people there.

"As the Legislature is not in session, and will not be, unless specially convened, before January of next year, may I ask whether you would feel justified in saying that the reasonable expenses that may be involved will be furnished by the General Government in view of the facts above stated?

"I am pleased to say that in all this I have the advice and support of the senators

¹ April 13, 1861, Ramsey diary, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

² That Ramsey was concerned with certain federal appointments in Minnesota is suggested by letters from Robert R. Fisk, March 13, 22, April 1; J. M. North, March 13; Stephen Miller, March 27, April 3, 1861, Ramsey Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

from Minnesota, and know that it will be heartily and promptly responded to this action [*by the people?*].”³

Cameron, who had been on the point of leaving for the White House, took the letter and presented it to President Lincoln. Thus on April 14, 1861, Minnesota became the first state to offer troops for the Union cause.

As Ramsey later acknowledged, it would “have been more gratifying to our pride, if the State had been able, like its older and wealthier sisters, to have advanced the sum required” for outfitting its troops, but the treasury was bare, and even in the heat of a dramatic moment, Ramsey declined to burden his people with debt “for the mere *eclat* of an empty display.”⁴ Men Minnesota had, and of them the state gave freely, but of money there was little in the struggling frontier commonwealth.

ON THE following day the president called forth the militia, and Ramsey was informed that his state would be required to furnish one regiment. Immediately he sent off a wire to the adjutant general of Minnesota, William H. Acker, instructing him to “Issue proclamation in my name, calling for volunteers.” Problems of protocol arose, however, when the state’s twenty-

nine-year-old lieutenant governor, Ignatius Donnelly, objected to this procedure. He had been requested by Ramsey to go to St. Paul in order to carry on the routine business of the governor’s office, and on April 14, 1861, the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat* had noted that Donnelly was “filling the executive chair at the Capitol, in the absence of Governor Ramsey.” Donnelly assumed that such an absence constituted a “temporary vacancy” in the governor’s office and that he was in fact the state’s acting governor. Thus he was offended by Ramsey’s dispatch, which, as he complained to his wife, “totally ignored my existence here.” With the agreement of Adjutant General Acker, he proceeded to issue the proclamation over his own name instead of Ramsey’s.⁵ When it appeared on April 16, it read:

“WHEREAS, The Government of the United States, in the due enforcement of the laws, has for several months past been resisted

ALEXANDER Ramsey in the early 1860s



³ The text of this letter appears in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:1 (St. Paul, 1892). The original is in the National Archives.

⁴ Alexander Ramsey, *Annual Message to the Legislature of Minnesota*, 26 (St. Paul, 1862). Equipping the troops became a knotty problem when nearly a thousand volunteers were assembled at Fort Snelling a few weeks later. With no money from the state and only promises from the federal government, the adjutant general was forced to rely upon credit extended by the St. Paul mercantile firm of Culver and Farrington. Thus the First Minnesota was supplied with the black pants, red flannel shirts, and slouch hats which served as uniforms through the battle of Bull Run and until the war department provided regular outfits in August, 1861. See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:80 n. (St. Paul, 1924); *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:32–38.

⁵ *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:2; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:77; Samuel P. Jennison to Donnelly, April 8, 1861; Donnelly to Mrs. Donnelly, April 17, 1861, Donnelly Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Washington City
April 14, 1861

Hon. Simon Cameron
Secy War

Sir

As the Executive of the State of Minnesota I hereby tender to the Government of the U States, on the part of that State one thousand men, to be ready for service so soon as the necessary information can be communicated to the people there

As the Legislature is not in session and will not be unless specially convened before January of next year, may I ask whether you would feel justified in saying that the reasonable expenses that may be incurred will be furnished by the Genl Govt, in view of the facts above stated

I am pleased to say that in all

this I have the advice and support of the Senators from Minnesota and know that it will be heartily and promptly responded to this action

Very Respectfully
Yours obs. sl.

Thos. Ramsey

by armed organizations of citizens in several of the Southern States, who, precipitating the country into revolution, have seized upon and confiscated the property of the nation to the amount of many millions of dollars, have taken possession of its forts and arsenals, have fired upon its flag, and,

at last, consummating their treason, have under circumstances of peculiar indignity and humiliation, assaulted and captured a Federal fort, occupied by Federal troops; And,

"WHEREAS, All these outrages, it is evident are to be followed by an attempt to

seize upon the National Capital and the offices and archives of the government; and,

"WHEREAS, The President of the United States, recurring in this extremity to the only resource left him, the patriotism of a people who through three great wars, and all the changes of eighty-five years, have ever proved true to the cause of law, order and free institutions, has issued a requisition to the Governors of the Several States for troops to support the Government.

"Now Therefore, in pursuance of law and of the requisition of the President of the United States, I do hereby give notice that volunteers will be received at the city of St. Paul for one regiment of infantry, composed of ten companies, each of sixty-four privates, one captain, two lieutenants, four sergeants, four corporals and one bugler. The volunteer companies already organized, upon comply-

ing with the foregoing requirements as to numbers and officers, will be entitled to be first received. The term of service will be three months unless sooner discharged. Volunteers will report themselves to the Adjutant General at St. Paul, by whom orders will at once be issued, giving all the necessary details as to enrollment and organization.

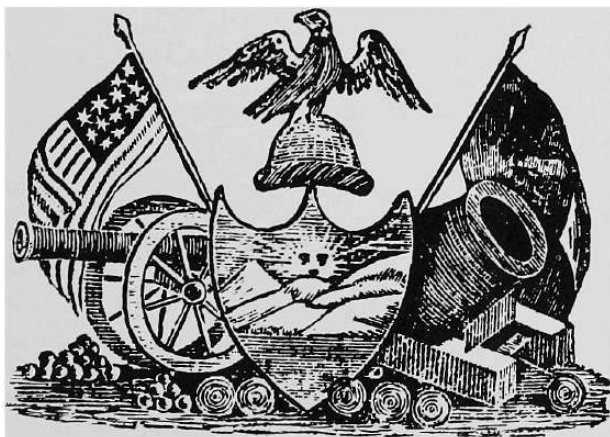
"Given under my hand and the Great Seal of the state at St. Paul, this sixteenth day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-one."⁶

The document was signed "Ignatius Donnelly, Governor ad interim." The interim proved short, however, for Ramsey left Washington on April 18, arriving in St. Paul five days later. Meanwhile patriotic meetings were held throughout the state and volunteers poured into St. Paul. On April 27 the adjutant general announced that ten companies had been formed, and two days later at Fort Snelling the men were mustered into United States service as the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteers. They were the vanguard of more than twenty-four thousand men furnished by Minnesota to the Union armies, men who saw service on the major battlefields of the Civil War — at Bull Run, Ball's Bluff, Mill Springs, Shiloh, Fair Oaks, Savage's Station, Antietam, Iuka, Corinth, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Nashville, Gettysburg, Allatoona, Guntown, and Murfreesboro.⁷

⁶ Executive Journal A, 324, Governor's Collection, in Minnesota State Archives.

⁷ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:78; John D. Hicks, "The Organization of the Volunteer Army in 1861 with Special Reference to Minnesota," in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 2:331-334 (February, 1918); *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:4; Annual Report of the Adjutant General, in *Minnesota, Executive Documents*, 1865, p. 11.

THE PICTURE of Ramsey is from a portrait taken by Mathew Brady which is included in the Minnesota Historical Society's picture collection. The drawings on pages 212 and 215 are from a recruiting broadside issued in Hastings on April 19, 1861, and preserved in one of the Donnelly scrapbooks, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.





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