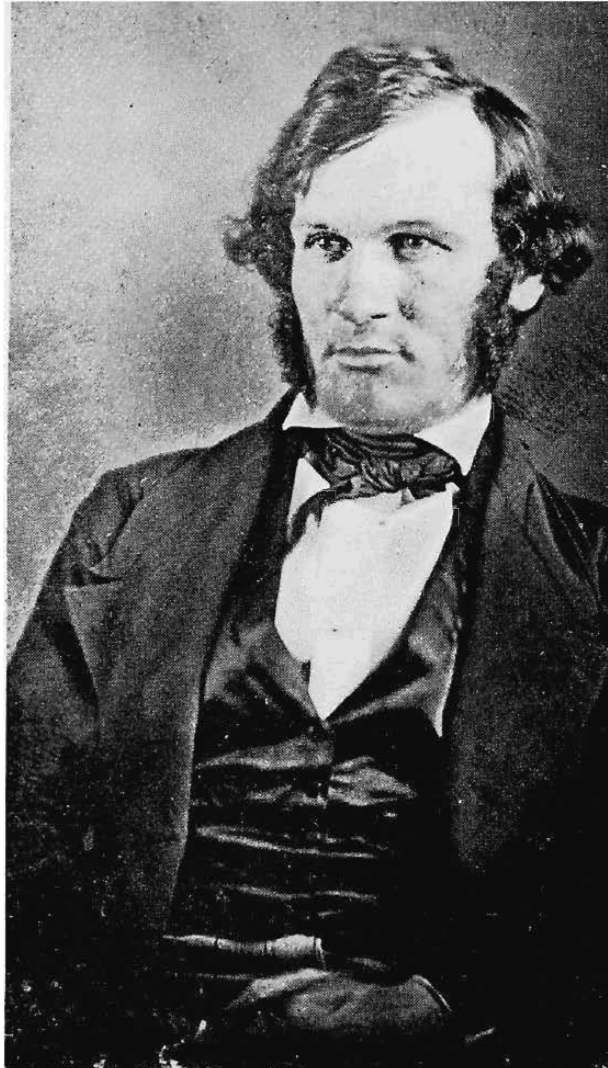


*A daguerreotype portrait
of Ramsey as a rising young
Pennsylvania politician*



ALEXANDER RAMSEY *and the*

Birth of Party Politics in Minnesota

JOHN C. HAUGLAND

AS THE American nation expanded westward across the continent, it brought to sparsely settled frontier areas the influence of government and the need to organize politically. This occurred in Minnesota immediately after the creation of the territory in 1849. The handful of fur traders, mission-

MR. HAUGLAND is the assistant dean of the graduate school in the University of Minnesota. The present article is adapted from his doctoral dissertation on Ramsey.

aries, and lumbermen who composed the major part of the region's scattered population were then called upon to form a framework of responsible local government and to align themselves with the great currents of national politics. Isolated as they were, the issues which divided the rest of the country — the tariff, slavery, and the nation's banking policy — meant little to them. Party politics did, however, impinge upon them through the necessity of electing a territorial delegate to Congress, and even more

directly through the appointment of territorial officers by the national administration.

These officers helped to crystallize the early political alignments in Minnesota, and, as governor, the most influential among them was Alexander Ramsey. His name thus became inextricably bound with the development of politics in the North Star State.

The years which witnessed this process also saw the decline and disintegration of the Whigs as a national party. This political organization had grown out of the heterogeneous groups that opposed the policies of Andrew Jackson's administration. During the party's rather brief history it had brilliant leadership, exemplified by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, but it never achieved a unity comparable to that of the Jacksonian Democrats.

When Clay and Webster were in their prime, the party was one of ideas and integrity. By 1848, however, it had been beaten on numerous important issues, and younger Whigs argued that the organization would wither unless it captured the national government and revitalized itself with the nourishment of public patronage. They accomplished this in 1848 with the election of General Zachary Taylor, whose chief qualifications were his popularity as a hero of the Mexican War and his acceptability to both the northern and southern factions of the party. It was he who appointed the officers for the newly created territory of Minnesota.¹

Alexander Ramsey was by no means the first man to be considered for the office of governor. Factional controversies had quickly canceled out the first two aspirants. They were John C. Clark of New York, supported by Senator William H. Seward, and Nathan K. Hall, the law partner of Vice-President Millard Fillmore. Edward W. McGaughey of Indiana, a former Congressman and one of the Whigs' promising young men, was next on the list. His nomination probably resulted from President Taylor's failure to include in his cabinet Congressman Caleb E. Smith of Indiana,

who had wanted to be postmaster general. The Senate Democrats refused to confirm McGaughey, however, and on March 21, 1849, President Taylor submitted the name of William S. Pennington, former governor of New Jersey, who had hoped to secure a diplomatic position. Although Pennington's nomination was confirmed by the Senate and his commission was delivered to him, he declined the appointment.²

Meanwhile two of Taylor's newly appointed cabinet officers, Secretary of the Treasury William M. Meredith and Secretary of State John M. Clayton, had pushed for Ramsey's nomination as a reward for work well done in Pennsylvania. As chairman of the Whig party's state central committee, Ramsey had been influential in swinging the Keystone State to Taylor in 1848 and had also secured a Whig victory in the local elections held earlier the same fall. The young politician, active for less than ten years, had compiled an impressive record.³

His training had included three years at LaFayette College in Pennsylvania and two more spent studying law in Harrisburg. He had been admitted to the bar in 1839 and was only twenty-four when, in 1840, he first entered politics to campaign for William H. Harrison. Pennsylvania as well as Dauphin County, where Ramsey lived, went for Harrison that year, and as a reward for his aid Ramsey was appointed chief clerk of the lower house of the state legislature. So began his climb up the political ladder. Two years later he was elected to Congress from

¹ The legislation creating the territory had been passed on March 3, 1849, in the closing hours of the Thirtieth Congress, and President James K. Polk had either not had time to make appointments or decided that selection of the necessary officials should be the responsibility of the incoming chief executive.

² Holman Hamilton, "Zachary Taylor and Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 30:104-107 (June, 1949); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:248 (St. Paul, 1956).

³ For a detailed study of Ramsey's early life, see William J. Ryland, *Alexander Ramsey: A Study of a Frontier Politician and the Transition of Minnesota from a Territory to a State* (Philadelphia, 1941).

a district consisting of Dauphin, Lebanon, and Schuylkill counties, a region mainly industrial in character. As a Congressman, he was a firm protectionist, and while he seldom spoke in the House of Representatives, his longest and most important speeches concerned the tariff. Ramsey was re-elected in 1844 but did not seek a third term in 1846 because of a strong demand in local party circles to have representation from one of the other counties in his district. He returned to the practice of law in Harrisburg in 1847, but continued his active role in state politics.

As a result of the 1848 Whig successes in Pennsylvania, Ramsey aspired to the position of collector of the port of Philadelphia, a lucrative post with considerable influence. Two days after the inauguration he called on the president, and the next day a body of his friends visited the chief executive concerning the Philadelphia office; but the appointment did not go to Ramsey, and a short while later he was convinced by his friends that he should accept the governorship of Minnesota. On April 3 he received his commission and ten days later the thirty-four-year-old governor took the oath of office at the home of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. In early May, accompanied by his wife, Ramsey called once more on the president and soon after began his journey west.⁴

Six other territorial officers had earlier been appointed to serve with Ramsey in Minnesota. Charles K. Smith of Ohio was

named secretary, although he had coveted the governorship. Alexander M. Mitchell, also from Ohio, was appointed marshal. A graduate of West Point, Mitchell had fought under Taylor in the Mexican War and was the only Minnesota appointee who was a personal friend of the president. The sole Minnesota resident in the group was Henry L. Moss, who was given the office of attorney general. Aaron Goodrich of Tennessee was appointed chief justice of the territory; David Cooper of Pennsylvania and Bradley B. Meeker of Kentucky were made associate justices. None of the three was a great lawyer, but they all had friends with political influence. Meeker was a nephew of Senator Truman Smith of Connecticut; Cooper was a brother of Senator James Cooper of Pennsylvania; and Chief Justice Goodrich had been pushed forward by Senator John Bell and other Whig leaders from Tennessee.⁵

RAMSEY REACHED St. Paul on May 27. His arrival, early on a Sunday morning, was practically unnoticed by the sleeping citizens. After a brief look around, he and his family went on to Mendota, where Henry H. Sibley, the man who had been largely instrumental in achieving territorial status for Minnesota, invited them to stay until they could secure suitable housing in St. Paul. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between Ramsey and Sibley, even though their political allegiances were with different parties.⁶

The arrival of the new chief executive meant the beginning of formal government and with it the beginning of organized politics. On June 1, 1849, Ramsey declared the territorial government established, and he was soon surveying the community, hoping that he would find fertile ground in which to initiate more vigorous party activity. His first impressions are recorded in a diary entry for June 19, 1849: "had conversation . . . relative to the difficulties of our position politically having among old settlers not one Whig [who] was prominent in Society. . . . If we had one good leading Whig among the

⁴ Frances Urevig, ed., "With Governor Ramsey to Minnesota in 1849," in *Minnesota History*, 35:353 (December, 1957). See also Ramsey's diary for the months of March, April, and May, 1849, Ramsey Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. His appointment was made during the recess of Congress and was not brought before the Senate until December, 1849. The Senate consented on January 9, 1850, without objection. United States Senate, *Journal of Executive Proceedings*, 8:98, 104, 117 (Washington, 1887).

⁵ Hamilton, in *Minnesota History*, 30:109; Robert C. Voight, "Defender of the Common Law: Aaron Goodrich, Chief Justice of Minnesota Territory," 28-30, an unpublished doctoral dissertation in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶ Urevig, in *Minnesota History*, 35:356.

old settlers, I would at once go for a Whig party organization."⁷

The road to achieving this goal was to be difficult and frustrating for the young governor. While political maturity in the form of well-organized parties did not exist in 1849, the leading citizens of the territory had Democratic proclivities. This fact, coupled with the Democratic control of Congress, made that party label — or at least a nonpartisan one — much more advantageous for the time being. It was probably for this reason that in territorial elections before 1853, those who opposed the regular Democratic nominees were merely labeled "Opposition Ticket" or "People's Ticket," and the generally unorganized opposition was called the "Territorial Party."

A month before Ramsey's arrival editorials had expressed the hope that there would be no two-party conflicts in Minnesota. The territory's first newspaper, the *Minnesota Register*, on April 27, 1849, hoped "that party lines will not be drawn in Minnesota until this trust (that of establishing well a commonwealth, and Empire, in Minnesota) is fully executed; for it will be impossible to discuss and wisely adjudicate great questions of state policy, under the influence of party animosity and prejudice." A correspondent wrote to Sibley in a similar vein, maintaining that the claims of party could be overlooked under a territorial government which was dependent upon Congress for support. Friends would have to be sought in both parties without regard to their affiliation.⁸ The *Register*, on July 21, again gave its approval to the seeming absence of political parties.

Nevertheless, while many Minnesotans professed publicly that neutrality was a necessity for the territory, expediency and even survival often required the drawing of party lines. Politicians — particularly those who considered themselves Whigs and identified with the administration — thought and operated on two levels. Outwardly they advocated, as did Ramsey, political co-operation with other factions under the Territorial

party banner, while at the same time they worked feverishly to establish Whig supremacy within that group.

In a letter to Secretary of State Clayton in August, 1849, Ramsey commented that "our" friends probably had a majority in each house of the territorial legislature, but he lamented the fact that there was no local Whig policy because there was no political organization. He wrote: "The ardent locos in the Territory say this cry of ours for 'no party' is all a trick, and that we secretly propose raising our flag so soon as we have drilled our forces, *probably* they are mistaken." Commenting on the politics in Minnesota when he arrived, he said, "I found the prominent men of the country opposed to us politically & it required good management to prevent a party array which would have resulted in our discomfiture & prostrated us for years." Then prophesying a bit Ramsey added, "if I can carry out our present policy for twelve months we can go into the field with a powerful & organized host."⁹

The disappointment of this hope was reflected a year later when Ramsey wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Thomas Corwin in Washington stating that he thought "it was important, at least for the first & second years of our existence that they [*the Democrats*] should not have the merit of victory here — for if they had it, the young and heedless would enlist under their standard, so above all other things, I bent my energies to defeat the democratic organization — to do this most effectually we got up what we called a Territorial party, under the auspices of which, in the elections that have occurred we have placed our friends in the best of the several county offices and have

⁷ Ramsey Diary, June 19, 1849. The governor's first proclamations are in *Minnesota Territory, House Journal*, 1849, p. 187, 194, 215-219.

⁸ John Catlin to Sibley, July 13, 1849, Sibley Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹ Ramsey to Clayton, August 8, 1849, Clayton Papers, in the Library of Congress. "Locos," derived from "locofocos," was a popular nickname for Democrats. It is said to have originated in New York City and originally referred to one faction of the party, which carried on a meeting by the light of candles and loco-focos (matches).

produced a general impression that the Whigs are the most numerous party here.¹⁰

Much the same view of Whig politics was voiced in February, 1850, by a Democratic correspondent of Sibley when he wrote "They [*the Whigs*] profess neutrality now, declare themselves opposed to party lines, and why? Because they are the weaker party and hope by joining a portion of our party to defeat the regular nominees, create disorder among us, provoke feelings of hatred and ill will, that may last for years, and prevent us from uniting and acting harmoniously against a common enemy."¹¹

The Democrats in Minnesota were indeed divided by factional differences. Personal rivalries between such men as Sibley, Henry M. Rice, Joseph R. Brown, and others, often led them to act independently and to the disadvantage of their party. Disagreements usually focused upon the office of delegate to Congress, which was the most powerful and sought-after post in the territory. Rice and Sibley both had ambitions in this direction, for as the sole representative of Minnesota in Washington, the delegate was consulted by political and administration leaders with regard to contracts, appointments, and patronage.¹²

Although Ramsey tried, he never was successful in having a Whig elected to represent the territory in Washington. He was forced, therefore, to work through a Democratic delegate, which in itself was not always disadvantageous, since the Democrats

controlled Congress. Fortunately for Ramsey, Sibley was twice elected to the post during the period 1849-1853. The personal relationship between the two men was always friendly and they co-operated when the interests of the territory were paramount. Another common bond was their mutual distrust of Rice, who in October, 1849, had succeeded in gaining control of what Democratic organization existed.¹³

It is interesting to observe how Ramsey attempted to carry out his duties as governor of a Democratic territory and at the same time maintain his standing with the Whig administration in Washington. The difficulty of the task was increased by federal appointments which served to appease various factions in Washington, but often resulted in bringing incompetent Whig officeholders to Minnesota. It is on the whole small wonder that Ramsey failed to establish a vigorous Whig organization in the territory. From what could it have drawn strength? The "personal politics" and factionalism which plagued the territory were but reflections of the national political scene. The immediate problems were different, but on both levels the breakdown of traditional party alignments was evident.

IN MARCH, 1850, Rice made a contract with Orlando Brown, commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington, to return a number of wandering Winnebago Indians to their reservation in northern Minnesota. This contract and subsequent events were important as a test of political strength between Rice and Sibley, and the issue also made clear the precarious position occupied by Ramsey. As governor of the territory he was *ex officio* superintendent of Indian affairs and should have been influential in negotiating any contract regarding the Winnebago. In this case, however, he was not even consulted, but was presented with a *fait accompli*. Even Sibley, who was in Washington as territorial delegate at the time, did not know of the contract until after it had been signed.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ramsey to Corwin, August 18, 1850, Corwin Papers, in the Library of Congress.

¹¹ William D. Phillips to Sibley, February 1, 1850, Sibley Papers.

¹² For a full account of the Democratic party factions at this time, see Erling Jorstad, "Personal Politics in the Origin of Minnesota's Democratic Party," in *Minnesota History*, 36:259-271 (September, 1959).

¹³ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:369; Jorstad, in *Minnesota History*, 36:265.

¹⁴ Sibley to Ramsey, March 22, 1850; Alexander M. Mitchell to Ramsey, April 23, 1850, Ramsey Papers; Ramsey to Sibley, April 10, 1850, Sibley Papers; Sibley to John H. Stevens, May 15, 1850, Stevens Papers, in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. See also Jorstad, in *Minnesota History*, 36:266-268.

Rice had written Ramsey that a contract was in the process of being negotiated, but nothing further reached Ramsey until he was notified that it had been awarded to Rice and that its terms called for a payment of seventy dollars for each Winnebago Indian returned to the reservation. Both Sibley and Ramsey were violent in their opposition to the agreement. Ramsey was so incensed that he took a boat to Galena, Illinois, in order to wire a protest to Washington. On his way he met Rice and was evidently informed that the contract was legally concluded and, therefore, nothing could be done about it.¹⁵

The plum had been secured through a political bargain between Rice and Alexander Mitchell, marshal of the territory. Rice pledged his support to Mitchell as delegate to Congress, and in return Mitchell agreed to get Rice the contract, presumably through his personal friendship with President Taylor.¹⁶ Evidently the president was willing to help elect a Whig delegate, but in so doing he ignored Governor Ramsey and Delegate Sibley. The whole affair was a political slap at both men and illustrated the behind-the-scenes activities which kept Ramsey in constant anxiety concerning affairs in Washington.

The election of a new delegate was held in the fall of 1850. Sibley had received the office by unanimous vote the year before, and Rice still hesitated to run against the enormously popular Mendota trader—thus his agreement with Marshal Mitchell. Having Rice's Democratic backing, Mitchell needed only Ramsey's approval for the Whig vote, and success might be almost within reach.¹⁷

The situation posed a dilemma for the governor. Throughout the first half of 1850 he remained noncommittal, although as early as January 28 Mitchell had sought his support in the race. On July 31 a convention dominated by the supporters of Rice named Mitchell as its candidate. Ramsey then made public his evaluation of Mitchell, stating that Rice and his faction had placed in nom-

ination a weak man who was but a tool in their hands. Following their leader's cue, Minnesota Whigs generally repudiated Mitchell, and Ramsey blamed him for acting in a fashion that would prevent the election of a Whig.¹⁸

In the meantime Sibley, who was by conviction a free-soil Democrat, had decided to maintain his nonpartisan stance. As early as February, 1850, a movement had been started to organize a "People's" or "Territorial" party to promote his re-election, but it was not until July 29 that Sibley announced his candidacy. Yet another "independent" convention met on August 10. Although seemingly led by a group of anti-Mitchell Whigs, it nominated David Olmsted, a lifelong Democrat.¹⁹

Thus the race was between Mitchell, a Whig nominated by Democrats; Olmsted, a Democrat nominated by Whigs; and Sibley, a Democrat nominated by himself under a nonpartisan label. Realizing that the real battle was between Sibley and Rice, Olmsted prudently made an agreement with the latter and withdrew a week before the election. To add to the confusion an article in the *National Intelligencer* (at this time the voice of the more conservative elements of the Whig party) contained the statement that "Party lines are not drawn in the Territory of Minnesota, and each party has made its nomination of a candidate as delegate to Congress. H. H. Sibley, the Democratic, and David Olmstead [*sic*] the Whig candidate."²⁰ Small wonder that Washington pol-

¹⁵ Rice to Ramsey, March 19, 1850, Ramsey Papers; Jorstad in *Minnesota History*, 36:268.

¹⁶ Sibley to Ramsey, May 6, 18, 1850; Ramsey to Sibley, May 7, 1850 (copy), Ramsey Papers; Jorstad, in *Minnesota History*, 36:267.

¹⁷ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:370.

¹⁸ Mitchell to Ramsey, January 28, 1850, Ramsey Papers; Ramsey Diary, August 21, 23, 1850; Ramsey to Sibley, August 18, 1850; Dr. Thomas R. Potts to Sibley, August 1, 1850, Sibley Papers; Jorstad, in *Minnesota History*, 36:269.

¹⁹ Samuel J. Findley to Sibley, February 24, 1850, Sibley Papers; Jorstad, in *Minnesota History*, 36:270; *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, August 12, 19, 1850.

²⁰ The quotation is from an undated clipping in the Ramsey Papers of August, 1850.

iticians could make little sense of the situation!

For Ramsey, who had so skillfully helped revitalize the Whig party in Pennsylvania, the election of 1850 must have been a great disappointment. His comments to Sibley in a letter of August 18 probably summed up his feelings: "I regret the folly of the friends of Mitchell in permitting him to be a candidate. For I verily believe but for this conduct of theirs, placing themselves in the leadership of Rice the Whigs might have had the next delegate to Congress. As it is, I wash my hands of this." Before the election he reluctantly endorsed Sibley.²¹

It was a bitter campaign. Sibley's enemies branded him as the friend of the American Fur Company, which they charged with monopoly, corruption, and impeding the territory's progress. Minnesota voters realistically abandoned party labels and designated the candidates "Fur" and "Anti-Fur." They re-elected Sibley by a majority of 90 out of a total vote of 1,208.²²

FOLLOWING the election Ramsey's position was an uncomfortable one. Mitchell and his friends eventually departed for Washington with threats against the governor, and he had good reason to fear political repercussions because of his support of Sibley. The latter was during this time Ramsey's unwavering friend in Washington. Writing to him in September, the governor requested "that before your return home you move among the best of cabinet officers and such of the heads of bureaux as I have to do with and have just such conversation as you may see fit." A few months later he lamented his bad luck, adding that although his only interest was the good of the territory, he received more curses than blessings, and the Whig administration which he



HENRY M. Rice, about 1860

sought to serve had thrown all its gains into the hands of its opponents. All he could do was bide his time, watch, and pray. Sibley and Dr. Thomas Foster, the governor's private secretary who was also in Washington, assured Ramsey that Mitchell was not to be feared, and that they would correct any wrong impressions which might arise.²³

In the meantime Sibley was being urged by members of his own party to abandon his lofty nonpartisan pose and come to grips with the political currents taking shape in Minnesota. "We are heartily tired and sick of this eternal Whig clamor of no partyism in the Territory," wrote Michael E. Ames, speaker of the territorial house of representatives, "for partyism *does exist*, and the Whigs in Minnesota are at this moment as thoroughly organized as in any part of the Union

²¹ Ramsey to Sibley, August 18, 1850, Sibley Papers; Ramsey Diary, August 21, 23, 1850.

²² Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:371.

²³ Ramsey to Sibley, September 4, December 31, 1850, Sibley Papers; Foster to Ramsey, September 14, 1850; Sibley to Ramsey, September 15, 1850, Ramsey Papers.

ADDRESS OF THE HON. HAL SQUIBBLE, TO THE DEAR PEOPLE OF MINNESOTA.

FELLOW-CHICKENS:

The time being at hand for the choice of a Delegate to represent the American Fur Company in the next Congress, I now, at the earnest solicitations of the members of that company, submit myself as a candidate, and humbly beg your support. I think I should be a little more sure of my election, if I had been permitted to have done this in person; but I shall not be able to leave my post without jeopardizing the interests of the company.

Sixteen years ago, the American Company, at Mackinac—elevated its grees—

or be left ashore. I was told that the Locos were the strongest—I came out a Loco—but alas! I was deceived. I made a mistake; and that is the reason I turned round and kicked the party organization into the drink. Experience has so far convinced me that it is policy to keep on the fence until I can see it without doubt, which is the case if again for v

abuse me. Don't condescend so low, I implore you. It is true I belong to a monopoly, but I don't make use of the means in which as will vote for me, das, ali-

*A satirical broadside
published by Sibley's political
opponents in April, 1850*

and act continually in concert under the direction of their Dutch Whig Governor, who while he is preaching against party political organization in 'so new a Territory' is pulling the wires that put every member of the Whig party into concert of action."²⁴

James M. Goodhue, editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer* and a loyal Democrat, advised Sibley to see the new president, Millard Fillmore, who had succeeded Taylor upon the latter's death in July, 1850. He wrote: "If, after explaining fully . . . the situation of things in Minnesota, you can satisfy him that an attempt at Whig organization here would be unwise, [and] you could get from him an expression in writing of that opinion, it would settle this business at once, and we should have a majority cemented in the Territory for all good purposes, that would last, certainly through this administration."²⁵

If it were the administration's intention to build a healthy Whig organization in Minnesota, appointees within the territory had indeed been poorly chosen. The continual presence of Minnesota territorial officers in Washington during 1850 became an open scandal and caused Congress to put a provision in an appropriation bill forbidding the

payment of a salary to any territorial officer who absented himself from his job for a period of sixty days. Judge Cooper and Marshal Mitchell were notable offenders in this respect. At home Chief Justice Goodrich became embroiled with local gossips, failed to get along with Minnesota lawyers, and in Ramsey's judgment demonstrated "utter incapacity for his place."²⁶

Positions dealing with Indian matters were another source of irritation, and on one occasion Ramsey wrote wrathfully to Sibley: "You might . . . insinuate to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs . . . that the department has a damned strong proclivity to loco-focoism." Reviewing a record which he felt showed Democratic favoritism, he wondered "how they think I am to do anything for my party here, under this incessant action from Washington."²⁷

²⁴ Ames to Sibley, January 10, 1851, Sibley Papers.

²⁵ Goodhue to Sibley, February 6, 1851, Sibley Papers.

²⁶ Sibley to John H. Stevens, March 4, 1851, Stevens Papers; United States, *Statutes at Large*, 9:611; *Minnesota Pioneer*, January 16, 1851; Voight, "Defender of the Common Law," 41-43, 58-60; Ramsey Diary, April 9, 1850.

²⁷ Ramsey to Sibley, January 14, 1851, Sibley Papers.

In March, 1851, accusations against Ramsey were presented to the president by Mitchell. William Hollinshead, a St. Paul lawyer and partner of Rice's brother, had listed supposed wrongs perpetrated by Ramsey as governor which included destroying the Whig press, using the Indian office for his own profit, fearing the formation of a Whig party because this would interfere with his own schemes, playing up to his superiors and using people for his own benefit, and allying himself with persons of no political principles.²⁸

At the invitation of Luke Lea, the commissioner of Indian affairs, Ramsey went to Washington in early April, 1851, ostensibly to draft instructions for meeting with the Sioux and Chippewa Indians during the summer. This gave Ramsey an opportunity to see President Fillmore three times and Secretary of State Daniel Webster twice. These meetings were devoted to answering the accusations against him made by Hollinshead and Mitchell. Both the president and the secretary of state told Ramsey to pay no attention to the charges against him.²⁹

When Ramsey finally met Mitchell in Washington, the marshal withdrew his endorsement of the accusations. Ramsey was convinced that Smith, the territorial secretary, was the chief instigator of the trouble and stated this belief when questioned by the president. Fillmore removed Smith in

the fall of 1851 and at about the same time dismissed Chief Justice Goodrich.³⁰

HOLLINSHEAD'S accusation concerning the Whig press had its roots in the brief journalistic history of the territory. This had begun in April, 1849, with the appearance of two newspapers—the *Minnesota Pioneer* and the *Minnesota Register*. They were joined a month later by the *Minnesota Chronicle*, which in the following August merged with the *Register*. Goodhue, editor of the *Pioneer*, was a Democrat and a supporter of Sibley; the editor of the *Chronicle and Register* was a Whig. Both papers, however, disavowed party politics until the race for territorial delegate in 1850 began to take shape. Although the *Pioneer* had been officially named the Democratic party organ as early as October, 1849, Goodhue's devotion to Sibley precluded giving any support to the Rice wing. His paper, therefore, swung to the nonpartisan Territorial party in the spring of 1850 and remained staunchly behind Sibley through all the changes of the next two years.³¹

The *Chronicle and Register* was disposed to favor Mitchell, but he had scarcely been nominated when the paper changed hands. Its new editor, Lorenzo A. Babcock, owed Ramsey a political debt. He immediately attacked Mitchell and pushed for Olmsted's nomination. This shift was, to say the least, fortuitous from the governor's point of view, but whether he had any hand in the sudden change of ownership is difficult to say.³²

Less than four months later the paper was once more sold. Its new editor, Charles J. Hennis, apparently had Rice's financial backing, and again the *Chronicle and Register* supported Mitchell, although still flying the Whig banner. In December, 1850, yet another paper appeared on the scene. It was the *Minnesota Democrat*, also backed by Rice, and edited in his interests by Daniel A. Robertson.³³

The lifeblood of these early papers was the territorial printing contract, and when the second legislature convened in January,

²⁸ Mitchell to Fillmore, March 31, 1851; Hollinshead to Mitchell, March 10, 1851, copies in the Ramsey Papers.

²⁹ Ramsey Diary, April 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, May 1, 3, 8, 1851.

³⁰ Ramsey to Daniel Webster, May 1, 1851 (copy), Ramsey Papers; Ramsey to Sibley, May 15, 1851, Sibley Papers; Edward Duffield Neill, *The History of Minnesota from the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time*, 563 (Philadelphia, 1858).

³¹ Mary Wheelhouse Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 36-38, 43, 53-55 (St. Paul, 1948).

³² *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, August 12, 19, 1850. Ramsey had appointed Babcock attorney general of the territory. See Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 719 (St. Paul, 1886).

³³ Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 57; *Chronicle and Register*, December 2, 1850.

1851, the awarding of it became a prime issue. The Sibley forces, drawn from his own supporters in the Democratic ranks and from the followers of Ramsey in the Whig party, held an easy majority and awarded the printing to Goodhue's *Pioneer*. As the price of their support, however, the Whigs insisted that a share of the printing be reserved for a projected paper which would represent the "bona fide" interests of the Whig party.³⁴

Thus effectually shut off from even a trickle of patronage, the *Chronicle and Register* ceased publication in February, 1851, providing some basis for the charge that Ramsey had co-operated in killing off the only existing Whig organ. To answer the charge and justify themselves, the Whigs in the legislature drew up a circular in which they maintained that they "preferred to rebuke factious interests, diametrically opposed and deadly hostile to Whig policy, by the election of Col. Goodhue," and that they had "secured by an arrangement which they know will be satisfactory to the Whigs of the Territory, for some Whig press . . . a share of the public printing."³⁵

The extent to which Ramsey himself influenced their strategy is hard to determine. One Democrat, writing to Sibley, maintained that the governor had refused to support the Rice-controlled press but otherwise had stayed out of the legislative squabble. Nevertheless Ramsey endorsed the circular without question, saying, "The course of the Whigs and their circular is approved and that heartily by all the Whigs of Minnesota, save some half dozen who have ever belonged to adverse interest."³⁶

The launching of a new Whig newspaper was now a matter of first importance, and Ramsey showed himself much interested in finding an experienced editor and a first-rate politician to run it. In September, 1851, the *Minnesotian* appeared, edited by John P. Owens and George W. Moore. Under these men and their successors during the next decade it was to prove the sturdy organ that the Whigs had hoped for.³⁷

AS THE TIME drew near for the presidential election of 1852, events on the national scene were to further influence the actions of Ramsey and the Minnesota Whigs in their struggle for political independence. Congressional and state elections after 1848 showed that the Whigs had lost steadily in vote-getting power. The rather undistinguished Fillmore administration did little to recover prestige for the party, and the schism between southern and northern Whigs, although carefully ignored in the public aspects of party activity, became evident when the choice of a presidential candidate and a platform came up in 1852.

Northern Whigs found themselves running on a platform written by Georgia Whigs that committed the party to the doctrine of states' rights. The leading contenders for the presidential nomination reflected the regional differences. Three men, General Winfield Scott, hero of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, Daniel Webster, and Millard Fillmore were the leading Whig candidates. Northern Whigs, hoping for a repetition of their success in 1848, pushed hard for Scott, while Fillmore was firmly supported by the southerners, and Webster controlled the New England vote. After fifty-three ballots Scott finally secured the nomination.³⁸

Ramsey, who came out early for Scott, campaigned extensively in Wisconsin, appealing particularly to the German population. Because of his linguistic ability, a Wisconsin party member wrote to Whig

³⁴ Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 59-61; Ramsey to Sibley, January 14, 1851; Goodhue to Sibley, January 30, February 6, 1851, Sibley Papers.

³⁵ Quoted in Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 62. A copy of the circular, dated January 30, 1851, is in the Ramsey Papers.

³⁶ Dr. Thomas R. Potts to Sibley, January 14, 21, 1851; Ramsey to Sibley, February 11, 1851, Sibley Papers.

³⁷ Henry L. Tilden to John H. Stevens, March 9, 1851; David Loomis to Stevens, March 10, 1851, Stevens Papers; Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 71.

³⁸ Theodore Clarke Smith, *Parties and Slavery, 1850-1859*, 33-35 (New York, 1906); Thomas N. McKee, *The National Conventions and Platforms of All Political Parties, 1789-1905*, 77-80 (Baltimore, 1906).

leaders in Washington: "I wish Governor Ramsey of Minnesota could spend October in Wisconsin. He is a famous German speaker, and the best electioneer in the West."³⁹

It is doubtful whether the addition of more speakers in German or any other language could have helped the Whig party. The final electoral vote was 42 for Scott, against 254 for Franklin Pierce, the Democrat. The Whigs' overwhelming defeat and their difficulties in reconciling regional differences, plus the loss of Webster and Clay, the party's traditional leaders, both of whom died in 1853, meant that a national organization no longer existed. With the election of Pierce, the Whigs lost control over appointments to Minnesota Territory and Ramsey's governorship came to an end. His Democratic replacement, Willis A. Gorman, took office on May 30, 1853.

There remained one piece of unfinished business which was to have a significant effect upon Ramsey's future political career. This was an investigation into his conduct in the handling of treaties with the Sioux Indians, signed at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851. Under these treaties, the Sioux Indians gave up all their lands in the territory, except for a reservation ten miles on each side of the Minnesota River from Lake Traverse to a point a few miles above the mouth of the Cottonwood River. They also signed a document which obligated them to pay all outstanding traders' claims against the tribe from the money they would receive for their land. This paper stated that the Indians had decided "in open council" what sums were to be paid each trader, but

the document listing the specific amounts was attached to the paper after the chiefs had signed, which meant that the "meeting in open council" provision was in effect bypassed. When the time for payment came, the chiefs wanted the money turned over to them so that they could dispose of the claims as they saw fit. Ramsey, as the disbursing agent, held to the treaty provisions, including the traders' paper, and himself paid the traders the amounts listed. For this he was severely criticized, especially by certain traders who were not parties to the agreement but had hoped through persuasion or pressure to acquire some of the cash from the Indians. It was this direct settlement of traders' claims which formed the basis of the investigation of Ramsey by the United States Senate in 1853.⁴⁰

The governor had no need to worry about local criticism of his actions, since Minnesotans realized only too well that the future development of the territory depended on opening the Sioux lands for settlement. The treaties were politically popular and Ramsey had been hailed as a hero for negotiating them. That his stature in Indian affairs was recognized even in Washington can be seen in an act of Congress, approved on February 27, 1851, which separated the office of superintendent of Indian affairs from the office of territorial governor. Congress made an exception for Minnesota Territory, where Ramsey was allowed to retain both positions until the president should direct otherwise.⁴¹ He was concerned, nevertheless, about the whispers circulating, and he asked Sibley to "say to those at Washington that I would esteem it a favor, whenever the charge comes from a responsible source, for them to institute an investigation."⁴²

Accordingly, on January 4, 1853, Sibley offered a resolution in the House of Representatives to investigate the conduct of Ramsey in the Sioux payments. When no action was taken he went to the Senate, where the matter was referred to the committee on Indian affairs. On February 26 formal charges were at last filed with the

³⁹ The Wisconsin Whig was named F. Schmidt. His letter to Ramsey, dated September 14, 1852, is in the Ramsey Papers.

⁴⁰ For detailed accounts of this tangled affair, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:281-304; Lucile M. Kane, "The Sioux Treaties and the Traders," in *Minnesota History*, 32:65-80 (June, 1951).

⁴¹ Kane, in *Minnesota History*, 32:80; Sibley to Ramsey, February 20, 25, 1851, Ramsey Papers; United States, *Statutes at Large*, 9:586.

⁴² Ramsey Diary, December 30, 1852; Ramsey to Sibley, January 14, 1852, Sibley Papers.

committee by Madison Sweetser, one of the disappointed traders, and additional accusations were later made by Robertson, the editor of the *Minnesota Democrat*.⁴³

At the request of the Senate, President Pierce appointed an investigating committee to look into "the charges of fraud and misconduct in office alleged against Alexander Ramsey." Its two members were Willis Gorman, newly appointed governor of Minnesota, and Richard M. Young, who had been chief clerk of the House. Their investigation, held in St. Paul, lasted from July 6 to October 7, 1853. During its course Ramsey became discouraged because only two weeks were spent interrogating his witnesses. At times he felt the administration intended to persecute him to the "utmost." The results of the investigation were submitted to the next session of the Senate, but before the committee on Indian affairs could make a report Robertson withdrew his allegations, and the committee on February 24, 1854, recommended the withdrawal of all other charges. Its report concluded "that the conduct of Governor Ramsey was not only free from blame, but highly commendable and meritorious." The Senate accepted this verdict on the same day. Ramsey thus emerged not only unscathed, but with his political stature enhanced.⁴⁴

At this time, however, the future looked dark and uncertain. As governor he would have liked to build a strong organization for the Whigs in Minnesota, but neither the local scene nor the national one had been conducive to it. It had been apparent from the beginning that the only means of accomplishing anything in the territory was through co-operation with some of the local political leaders. In Washington he had been hampered by the poor appointments made there and by the lack of national party leadership. While administratively close to the national government, he had been physically separated, and it had been a constant struggle to remain in contact.

There had, in fact, been two Ramseys: a public official actively co-operating with the

Sibley group in the Territorial party, and a Whig leader quietly encouraging the growth of a press and a political organization which he hoped would eventually bring Minnesota into the Union as a Whig state. In Washington he had found it necessary to present the same two faces, but in a different order. To cabinet members, the president, and some Congressional leaders the governor had striven to prove that he was still a loyal and energetic Whig. To the Democratic majority in Congress, working through the Democratic Minnesota delegate, he had manifested co-operation and sought to secure maximum favors for his struggling new territory. He had on the whole maintained his prestige in Washington, although the Whig party in Minnesota — what little there was of it — had languished much as it was doing on the national scene.

At some point in his four years as governor Ramsey made another choice of great political significance for both himself and Minnesota. This was his decision to remain in his new home and link his future with that of the infant territory. Personal and business as well as political factors no doubt influenced him in this, but its importance can hardly be overestimated for the political history of Minnesota. He had successfully negotiated the difficult years as governor of the territory representing a minority party and had not only retained leadership of his own ragged forces but had gained influence and respect within the community as a whole. The foundation had been laid for a career which would make his name synonymous with Minnesota politics for the next quarter of a century.

⁴³ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:464.

⁴⁴ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:465-469; Ramsey Diary, September 23, October 7, 1853; January 11, 24, 25, 1854; Robertson to Ramsey, January 24, 1854, Ramsey Papers. The complete report of the investigating commission can be found in 33 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 61 (serial 699).

THE PORTRAITS of Ramsey and Rice are from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The broadside reproduced on page 44 is in the Sibley Papers.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).