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## *The POST OFFICE in EARLY MINNESOTA*

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THE FIRST permanent United States establishment in Minnesota was begun in August, 1819, when members of the Fifth United States Infantry arrived at the junction of the Mississippi with the St. Peter's (later named the Minnesota) River. They were charged with construction of an outpost that would extend United States authority over the northwestern wilderness which until then had been occupied only by Indian tribes and fur traders. The following spring, work was begun on the post that during its first five years was to be known as Fort St. Anthony. In 1824 it was rechristened "Fort Snelling" in honor of its second commander.

Hundreds of miles of wilderness separated the fort's occupants from friends, country, and civilization. Their only link with the outside world was through the mails, and the coming of letters from home was a precious and long-awaited event. One member of the little group observed years later that "those who enjoy daily mails know little of the excitement and tearful gratitude of those pioneers at Fort Snelling when the announcement was made, 'The mail has arrived.'"<sup>1</sup>

Prairie du Chien, more than two hundred miles down the Mississippi, was the nearest post office. Letters and papers from the states were routed via Louisville and St. Louis up the river to Prairie du Chien,

where they were included in the pouch of dispatches to the commandant of Fort St. Anthony.<sup>2</sup> Mail service was slow and infrequent because of the difficulties of transportation. According to J. Fletcher Williams, an early historian: "In the summer they made the trips two or three times during the season, with keel-boats or canoes, also bringing supplies. . . . In the winter the trip was one of hardship and danger, occupying many days. The whole distance to Prairie du Chien was generally traversed on the ice, in a sort of sledge drawn by dogs or a Canadian pony."<sup>3</sup>

Prairie du Chien, an old trading post even in 1819, had been taken over from the British, following the War of 1812. The United States Army built Fort Crawford there in

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte O. Van Cleve, *Three Score Years and Ten*, 33 (Minneapolis, 1888). The following works, not cited elsewhere, have been of value in the preparation of this article: James Taylor Dunn, "Mail for Pioneers," in *Minnesota History*, 36:206-215 (June, 1959); Murray Campbell, "The Postal History of Red River, British North America," in *Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Papers*, Series 3, Number 6, p. 7-19 (Winnipeg, 1951); Wilhelm Fern Hempel, "Postal Service in Minnesota to 1858," term paper, 1925, in the Minnesota Historical Society. The author is also indebted to Mr. Lorin C. Warg for many helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> *American State Papers: Post Office Department*, 219.

<sup>3</sup> J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, 44 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4, 1876).

1816 and opened a government Indian factory, or store. This was closed in 1822 and was succeeded by an important trading post of the American Fur Company. The keelboats transporting supplies and mail from St. Louis to these several agencies and to the new fort on the St. Peter's were slow freight craft, propelled with long poles by human brawn. Even in the summer, communication with the states was reckoned in a period of months.<sup>4</sup>

The year 1823 marked the beginning of steamboat navigation to the wilderness fort. Fulton had demonstrated his "Clermont" on the Hudson in 1807, and now, only sixteen years later, scores of steamboats were engaged in traffic on the Mississippi. The "Virginia" was the first to push upstream beyond Prairie du Chien, arriving at the fort in May, 1823. This new and speedier means of transportation helped to improve mail service, though the volume of steamboat traffic to the upper Mississippi increased but slowly over a period of years.<sup>5</sup>

Some idea of the service during the next few years is found in the journal kept by Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at the fort.<sup>6</sup> Taliaferro took a keen interest in keeping open the lines of communication and would often hire a runner for the commanding officer to make the trip with army dispatches and the mail. On January 28, 1826, he wrote: "Lieuts Russell & Baxley returned this afternoon from their trip to Prairie des Chens [*sic*]. A Mail was received by these gentlemen and is the first for Five months."

<sup>4</sup>Peter Lawrence Scanlan, *Prairie du Chien: French, British, American*, 95-99, 106, 123 (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1937); Van Cleve, *Three Score Years and Ten*, 16, 45.

<sup>5</sup>William J. Petersen, "The 'Virginia,' the 'Clermont' of the Upper Mississippi," in *Minnesota History*, 9:347-351, 361 (December, 1928); Frank H. Dixon, *A Traffic History of the Mississippi River System*, 20 (Washington, 1917).

<sup>6</sup>Taliaferro's journal, covering the years 1820-39, is in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup>John H. Lowe, "The Post Office on the Minnesota Frontier," 26, thesis, 1950, in the University of Minnesota Library; Mr. Ira Kapenstein, Special Assistant to the Postmaster General, to the author, June 14, 1965; Taliaferro Journal, December 3, 24, 27, 1827.

On February 2: "Dr. Harvey arrived this morning from Prairie des Chens—brought a Small Mail. Received a letter from Virginia dated 7 months since." A month later, on March 8, Taliaferro "employed John Seymor for the cmdg. officer as Express to the Prairie," and on May 4 he noted: "The Steam Boat Lawrence left for St. Louis 12 o'clock AM this day carrying our Express Mail & passengers."

THE FIRST POST OFFICE in the region that was to become Minnesota was established at Fort Snelling on August 25, 1827, with John Garland as postmaster. During that summer mail arrived as frequently as twice a month. After the freeze-up the following winter, Taliaferro hired an Indian runner, Okarpe, to go to Prairie du Chien for the mail. Leaving on December 3, he was back December 24 with many letters and newspapers. This timely Christmas present was enthusiastically received. As pay, Taliaferro gave Okarpe ten pounds of tobacco, ten pounds of lead, four pounds of gunpowder and other items, as well as an order on the American Fur Company store for trade goods worth \$9.25. The commandant made the Indian a gift of three and one-half gallons of whisky.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to runners hired by the army and soldiers who were sometimes detailed to the job, there were occasionally volunteer messengers—traders and others traveling north from Prairie du Chien or south from Fort Snelling—who would carry along the mail as a friendly deed in that wilderness country. In his journal for January 17, 1828, Taliaferro wrote: "The Post Mail left this morning for Fort Crawford, Praire du Chiens [*sic*] to the care of some Canadian Frenchmen—to return on the 8th of Februry."

For one year—in 1832—the Minnesota outpost had regular mail service. It was provided through a future president of the United States, Colonel Zachary Taylor, who was then in command at Fort Crawford. During his own tour of duty at Fort Snell-

ing, four years earlier, he had written, "We are here entirely out of the world, & very seldom hear from the civilized part of our country, as we have no regular mailers."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps recalling this sense of isolation, he detailed a soldier named James Halpin to carry the mail between the two forts. Traveling mostly on foot, Halpin's usual time for the round trip was fourteen days.<sup>9</sup>

The army continued to hire and pay the carriers who transported mail to Fort Snelling until the late 1830s. At the beginning of the year 1836 there still was no official mail route to the outpost. This is evident from a letter which Henry H. Sibley, head of the American Fur Company's post at Mendota, wrote on December 30, 1835, to Lucius Lyons, senator-elect from Michigan: "A petition has been forwarded to Washington, praying for the establishment of a mail route between this place and Prairie du Chien. Will you be kind enough to exert your influence in our favor? . . . how great a privilege it would be to us, to have a mail arrive semi-weekly from below."<sup>10</sup>

Another year was to pass before a sched-

uled route was established, but in the latter half of 1836 the Post Office Department was paying the hired runner. The Fort Snelling post office listed for September 30, 1836, an expenditure of \$48.21 $\frac{1}{2}$ , paid to John Short for transporting the mail to Prairie du Chien and back for the preceding three months. Short was a soldier at Fort Snelling who had made the same mail-carrying trip before in the employment of the army.<sup>11</sup>

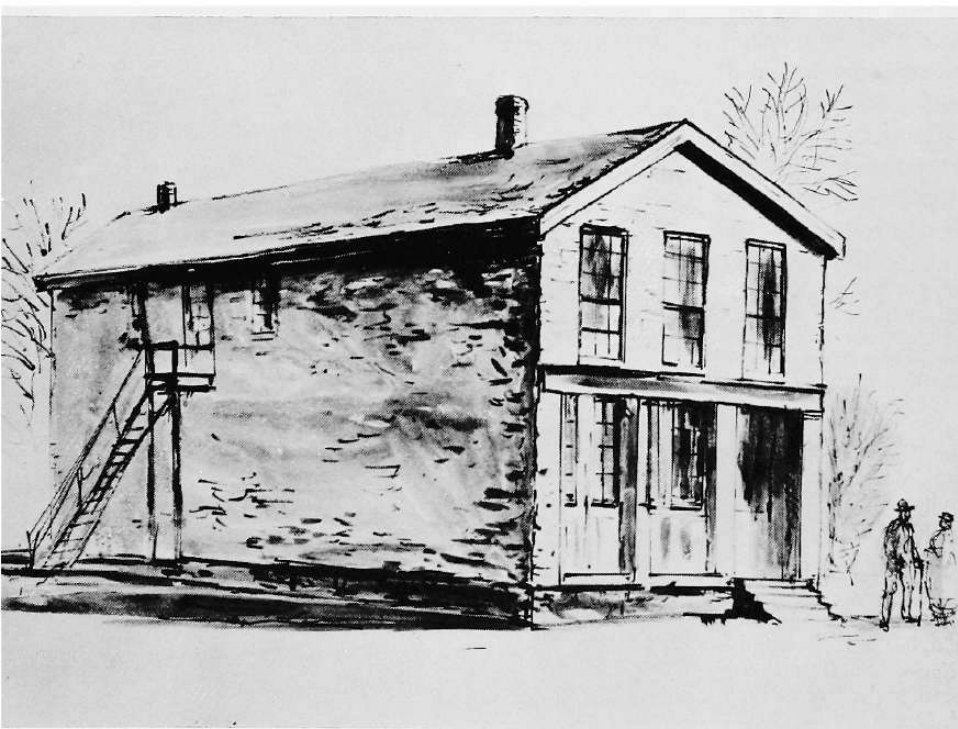
How was it determined that the carrier should be paid the odd amount of \$48.21 $\frac{1}{2}$  for his three months' stint of traveling? The answer is provided by the quarterly financial report of the local post office. For the period July 1 to September 30, 1836, total

<sup>8</sup> Zachary Taylor to Dr. Thomas Lawson, August 28, 1828. The original letter is in the Library of Congress; it is published in full in *Minnesota History*, 28:15-19 (March, 1947).

<sup>9</sup> William R. Smith, *History of Wisconsin*, 1:289 (Madison, 1854).

<sup>10</sup> Henry H. Sibley Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. Fort Snelling was in Michigan Territory from 1834 to 1836.

<sup>11</sup> Post office receipt dated September 30, 1836, in the Sibley Papers; Taliaferro Journal, June 27, 1831.



*Rolette's trading  
post in  
Prairie du Chien,  
about 1835*

receipts were \$73.39%. The postmaster was paid on a commission basis—30 per cent of letter postage receipts, 50 per cent of newspaper postage receipts, and two cents each for free or franked letters. The sum of these three items gave him \$25.18 pay for the quarter. When this \$25.18 was deducted from the total receipts of the office, it left only \$48.21% to pay the carrier.<sup>12</sup> One can only conjecture that Short at this time was still a soldier and that the sum paid him by the post office was supplementary to his army pay.

AT THIS PERIOD the Western Outfit of the American Fur Company, which was owned and operated by Hercules Dousman and Joseph Rolette at Prairie du Chien and Henry Sibley, agent at Mendota, controlled much of the fur trade of the upper Mississippi. Although the fur business was the partners' mainstay, they were open to other opportunities, including a contract to haul the mails. For the year 1837 the Post Office Department had contracted with Dr. Addison Philleo of Galena to transport the mail from Prairie du Chien to Fort Snelling. Evidently Philleo regretted his bargain, for in 1837 he arranged with Dousman to turn over the contract, provided permission was given by the department. Without waiting for approval from Washington, Dousman, in the name of the Western Outfit, immediately took over the route, beginning May 1. Writing to Sibley, who was on a business trip to the East, Dousman informed him of the project and instructed him to make sure personally while in Washington that the deal was cleared by the Post Office Department.<sup>13</sup>

For practical purposes Dousman split the route. One man, based at Prairie du Chien, was to go as far as the lower end of Lake

Pepin, to the house of Augustin Rock, a trader for the Western Outfit. The other man, based at Fort Snelling, was to carry the northern half of the route. The two were to meet and exchange mails at Rock's house, which was the only habitation within a hundred miles. Louis Massey was hired as the carrier from Fort Snelling to Lake Pepin and was to be paid by the Western Outfit \$275 a year for making the round trip at least once every two weeks. A lengthy contract was drawn up by Sibley's clerk at Mendota, and Massey was required to sign this—with his X, since he could neither read nor write.<sup>14</sup>

But the mere fact that this was now an established contract route (Number 2918) of the Post Office Department did not guarantee any better service. Copies of the monthly register of mail arrivals and departures at Fort Snelling post office for January and February, 1838, which are preserved in the Sibley Papers, show that three out of the four arrivals were delayed. The entry for January 6 has the notation: "This mail was due in Dec., 1837, on the old contract, it was delayed by the Ice bunge in the Mississippi which rendered it impossible to cross." The next arrival, on January 17, was "delayed by the E. mail not arriving at P du C." On February 5, the dispatch apparently arrived on time. But the succeeding one, February 28, was nine days late due to "Sickness of the Mail Carrier." Dousman had correctly sized up the situation when he wrote Sibley the previous fall, "get the time extended for delivery, as it is entirely too short to allow for any accident or delay on the way and a great part of the year it cannot be carried in the time specified."<sup>15</sup> As for the semiweekly mail which Sibley had suggested in his letter to Senator Lyons, it was to be many years before such frequency of service would become a fact. Ironically, some twelve years later Sibley himself as representative to Congress from Minnesota Territory was the recipient of many letters asking for better mail service.

<sup>12</sup> "Quarterly Report of the Fort Snelling Post Office," September 30, 1836, Sibley Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Dousman to Sibley, September 4, 1837, Sibley Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Agreement with Louis Massey, June 23, 1837, Sibley Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Dousman to Sibley, September 4, 1837, Sibley Papers.



UPON Major Garland's transfer to another post, Elias T. Langham was appointed postmaster at Fort Snelling on May 9, 1828. Succeeding him in 1833 was Alexander S. Mirer, to be followed by Samuel C. Stambaugh, and in 1841 by Franklin Steele. Mirer, Stambaugh, and Steele were all post sutlers. The positions of sutler and postmaster were often filled by the same man, because the sutler's store was a convenient place to locate the post office and because of the sutler's civilian status.<sup>16</sup>

Records of the Fort Snelling post office for the second quarter of 1837 show that of the total letter postage collected about 75 per cent was on unpaid letters mailed from other offices and addressed to Fort Snelling. About 25 per cent was on paid letters mailed from Snelling. The sender had the choice of prepaying or allowing the addressee to pay the postage. For April, May, and June of that year unpaid postage on letters sent from the office amounted to \$53.68¢, while paid postage was only \$17. During this quarter there were also seventy free letters mailed, the official correspondence of the Indian agent, the fort commandant, and the postmaster.<sup>17</sup>

Letter mail rates were based on distance and the number of sheets contained. Envelopes were not in use, the letter sheet itself being folded and sealed to form an envelope. Postage for each sheet was 6 cents to a distance of thirty miles; 10 cents to eighty miles; 12½ cents to 150 miles; 18¢ cents to four hundred miles; 25 cents for all greater distances.<sup>18</sup> Since the nearest post office was somewhat over two hundred miles away, the minimum rate from Fort Snelling was 18¢ cents at this time.

FOR A DOZEN years after the establishment of the post office at Fort Snelling, nothing occurred to warrant another one in the region. Except for a few squatters on lands near the fort, there were no settlers. In 1837, however, the government purchased from the Indians the area between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, and

the next year this land was thrown open for settlement. The second post office in the Minnesota country was established in 1840 at Lake St. Croix (later named Point Douglas) at the junction of the St. Croix and the Mississippi. In 1842 a post office was set up at Kaposia, a Methodist mission for the Indians near present South St. Paul, and in 1846 both Stillwater and St. Paul were named post offices.<sup>19</sup>

Minnesota Territory, organized in 1849, took in that part of Wisconsin Territory between the St. Croix and Mississippi and also the part of Iowa Territory from the Mississippi westward to the Missouri River, including much of the present states of North and South Dakota. Fort Snelling, which had been successively in Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa territories, now became a part of Minnesota Territory for the nine years before the state was admitted to the Union. In 1849 a person who had resided at Fort Snelling since 1821 would have lived during those twenty-eight years in five different territories without having moved from the spot. These frequent changes may account for the address on many of the letters received: "Fort Snelling, St. Peter's" or "Fort Snelling, Upper Mississippi."<sup>20</sup> Even the official post office quarterly reports of April to June, 1837, were headed "Fort Snelling, Upper Mississippi."

<sup>16</sup> Van Cleve, *Three Score Years and Ten*, 61; United States, *Official Register*, 1833, p. \*73; 1841, p. \*366; Lowe, "The Post Office on the Minnesota Frontier," 33, post office receipt, September 30, 1836, Sibley Papers. For a discussion of the fur traders' efforts to control the sutlership at Fort Snelling during part of this period, see Francis Paul Prucha, "Army Sutlers and the American Fur Company," in *Minnesota History*, 40:22-31 (Spring, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> "Account of Mails Sent from the Post Office at Fort Snelling, Upper Mississippi," June 30, 1837, Sibley Papers.

<sup>18</sup> United States, *Statutes at Large*, 4:105.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 154, 155; Doussman to William H. Forbes, October 13, 1840; B. W. Brisbois to, February 14, 1842; Levi Hertzell to Sibley, January 1, 1850, all in the Sibley Papers.

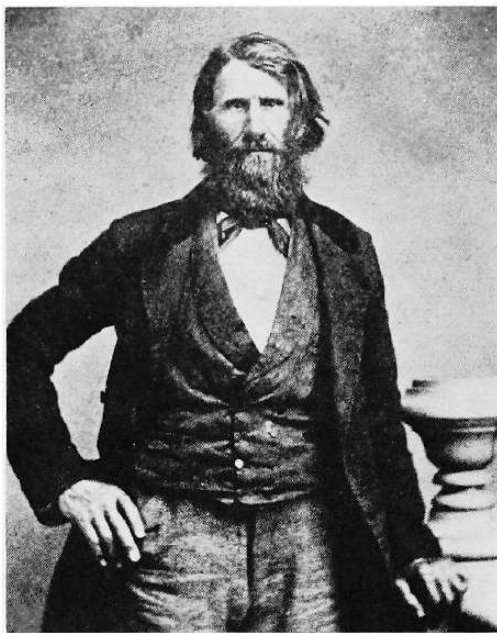
<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Ramsay Crooks to Sibley, April 27, 1836; Henry R. Schoolcraft to, May 14, 1835; Alexis Bailly to, June 27, 1836, all in the Sibley Papers.

Might it be said even of the postmaster that he didn't know the territory?

By June, 1851, the young Minnesota Territory contained eighteen post offices, reaching from Wabasha in the southeast to Pembina in the northwest. In St. Paul, Henry Jackson, proprietor of a store, became the first postmaster. His office had a net income of \$3.43 in its opening nine months of operation during 1846.<sup>21</sup> St. Anthony Falls had a post office October 1, 1849. Although Ard Godfrey was appointed postmaster on this date, he was not bonded until October 29, and his commission was signed the following April 10.<sup>22</sup> In addition to these five post offices — St. Anthony Falls, St. Paul, Pembina, Wabasha, and Fort Snelling — the 1851 list included Reads Landing, Red Wing, Point Douglas, Cottage Grove, Red Rock, Stillwater, Marine Mills, Taylors Falls, Lac qui Parle, Sauk Rapids, Fort Gaines, Swan River, and Long Prairie.

During the years when Fort Snelling was the only post office in what was to become Minnesota, a curious arrangement had grown up for carrying mail to and from the Red River Settlement. Lying northwest of the fort a straight-line distance of 390 miles, and about twice as far by river, was the British colony founded by Lord Selkirk. Cut off from the eastern colonies of Canada by an almost impassable wilderness, the settlement's route of communication with the world was via York Factory where once a year a ship arrived from England.<sup>23</sup>

South from the colony extended a continuous waterway to Fort Snelling, by way



Ard Godfrey

of the Red and Minnesota rivers. American fur traders in the border region sometimes relayed mail to Fort Snelling from British settlers and traders beyond the border. Letters thus conveyed by way of the United States often reached the outside world months ahead of those sent through York Factory. Therefore the practice expanded as time passed. As St. Paul began to grow, the mails from the British settlement and also from the vast fur trading empire of the Hudson's Bay Company were sent there. Lulu Cavalier, who as a child lived in Pembina where her father was postmaster, recalled that "the Hudson Bay Co. before the establishment of the Crow Wing route always sent special messengers or carriers every spring and fall to St. Paul with their mail from the outposts in the far north and west consisting of a thousand or more letters and packages, all mailed at the post office in St. Paul." The *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul) of March 6, 1850, headlined the "Arrival of an Express Mail from the Red River of the North, by Dogs!! Through in 18 Days!" The news item said that this "heavy mail" was from both Pembina and the Selkirk Settlement.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Table of Post Offices in the United States on the First Day of January, 1851*, Appendix, 135 (Washington, 1851); Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 154; David Day, *Annual Statement of the Business of the St. Paul Post Office, During the Year 1881* (St. Paul? n.d.).

<sup>22</sup> Godfrey's commission is in the collection of the Minneapolis Post Office Historical Society in the Main Post Office Building, Minneapolis.

<sup>23</sup> William Smith, *The History of the Post Office in British North America 1639-1870*, 317 (New York, 1920).

<sup>24</sup> Duncan Finlayson to William H. Forbes, January 18, 1841, Sibley Papers; Lulu Cavalier, *Some Postoffice Incidents of Early Days in North Dakota*, 4 (Pembina, 1956).

On May 18, 1850, a post office was established at Pembina with Norman W. Kittson as postmaster. Besides serving United States settlers of the region, it eventually replaced St. Paul as the American mailing office for the British colony. The mail required United States postage prepaid by the sender. The Red River Settlement postmaster stamped or wrote an indicia showing the amount of postage paid on each letter. This was before postage stamps came into general use. In the 1860s post offices of the British colony sold United States stamps exclusively. These were affixed by the senders in British territory. The letters, sent to the Pembina post office, were postmarked and dispatched in the United States mails.<sup>25</sup>

SERVICE provided by the pioneer post office was much simpler than that available today. There was no home or business delivery; all patrons had to pick up their mail at the post office. There were no such services as parcel post, special delivery, money orders, or registered mail. No postage stamps, post cards, nor stamped envelopes were sold. Although the United States first issued postage stamps as early as 1847, few were sold in frontier post offices until 1855, when prepayment of domestic postage was made compulsory.<sup>26</sup> Not until 1853 were the first stamped envelopes issued.

For equipment the postmaster had a few mailbags with locks and a key; he might also have a postmarking device, which he himself often carved out from a large cork.<sup>27</sup> A simple box served for storing patrons' mail. Henry Jackson, St. Paul's first postmaster, used a homemade box about two feet high divided into pigeonholes. It is now in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Although mail was of great importance on the frontier, it was handled much more casually there than in settled sections of the country. Fletcher Williams recalled the arrival of mail in St. Paul before the establishment of a post office there. Jackson's store "became a sort of post-office, too.

Nearly every boat that landed would have a handful of letters or papers directed to persons in Saint Paul, and these, by a sort of established custom, were handed to Jackson, because there was no one else to receive them, probably. Jackson used to keep them piled up on a shelf in his store. When any one asked for mail, the whole bundle was thrown down on a table or counter, and the party picked out what he wanted."<sup>28</sup>

In frontier post offices it was common practice for patrons to walk in and help themselves to their mail and perhaps to that of a neighbor, too, to deliver as a matter of convenience. William B. Mitchell wrote that in St. Cloud in 1855, the "mail was kept in a small box under the counter, and all persons helped themselves." The mail to St. Cloud was carried from St. Paul in a two-horse hack, and the driver "left the mail bag at a log hotel on the east bank of the river, and any person coming over brought the mail."<sup>29</sup>

A journalist, Ephraim S. Seymour, traveling through the region in 1850, witnessed the arrival of mail in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. "I was present at the arrival of the mail from the south," he wrote, "and was amused not only in witnessing the excitement which such arrival produced, but also by an exhibition of the genuine democracy of the citizens. The mail matter was emptied out upon a bed, about which all the citizens who were present gathered, and aided in assorting the mail, and selecting their own papers or letters. There seemed to be no distinction between the postmaster and others, as all seemed equally engaged in distributing the contents."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Lorin C. Warg, "Postal History of the Minnesota Frontier," in *Stamps*, 103:174 (May 3, 1958); Smith, *Post Office in British North America*, 316, 321.

<sup>26</sup> United States, *Statutes at Large*, 10:641.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Herst, Jr., *Fancy Cancellations on Nineteenth Century United States Postage Stamps*, 6 (Shrub Oak, New York, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> W[illiam] B. Mitchell, *History of Stearns County*, 2:1427 (Chicago, 1915).

<sup>30</sup> E[phraim] S. Seymour, *Sketches of Minnesota*, 204 (New York, 1850).



*Dog team arriving in St. Paul from Pembina, about 1859*

With the laying out of the first roads, stage lines were established, and many of the mail-hauling contracts were awarded to them. However, some of the proprietors were not impressed with the importance of the charge, and at times drivers would leave sacks of mail in order to accommodate another passenger or two. On one occasion Prairie du Chien reported that of five closed bags and one newspaper sack sent from St. Paul by stage only two bags had been received. A few days later, it was claimed, twelve bags of mail were thrown off at Prairie du Chien in order to take on passengers.<sup>31</sup>

PRICE AND TIMELINESS were the two aspects of postal service that most interested the public, and of these, timeliness was of prime importance. In the early years at Fort Snelling people patiently endured the lapse of months between one mail arrival and another. By 1850, however, the demands of settlers had resulted in schedules calling for weekly service from downriver settlements to St. Paul. As for rates, Congress in 1845 lowered the postage for each sheet to 5 cents for a distance up to three hundred miles

and 10 cents for more. Only six years later, in 1851, the low price of 3 cents per single sheet to a distance of three thousand miles was adopted.<sup>32</sup> Thus little fault could be found with the cost of mail service, but timeliness was not at all satisfactory in the opinion of the settlers.

This was true despite the fact that transportation from the East to the mid-continent was rapidly improving. With the building of railroads the old Louisville–St. Louis–Prairie du Chien routing of mails was superseded in part by a routing via Chicago and Galena. Even before the 1840s Galena had grown to be a business center because of lead mines in the area. So with much of the mail from the East going through Chicago rather than Louisville, Galena replaced St. Louis as the principal mail distributing and dispatching point for Minnesota.<sup>33</sup>

In 1854 the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad reached Rock Island on the Mississippi, and soon afterward it was extended into Iowa. But from Illinois and Iowa northward, vehicle travel was still nearly impossible. It was not until after 1849 that the first rough wagon trail was opened from St. Paul to Galena, and this was passable only during the months when the ground was frozen. There were no bridges over streams, and the roadway itself became a bottomless quagmire when not frozen. In

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), December 5, 8, 1857.

<sup>32</sup> United States, *Statutes at Large*, 5:733; 9:587.

<sup>33</sup> *Minnesota Pioneer*, July 13, 1854; *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 21, 1854.



the winter heavy snows or turbulent rivers often made travel difficult.<sup>34</sup> This lack of transportation was the greatest barrier to timely mail receipt in the northern settlements. In the summer, steamboats provided fair service, but when ice halted river traffic, mail arrivals became erratic.

THE PEOPLE were unhappy with their postal service, and they let it be known. Sibley's correspondence files for the years during which he was territorial delegate in Washington reflect the popular dissatisfaction on this issue. On December 19, 1848, a citizens' meeting in St. Paul sent a resolution asking for better postal services. Among many letters of complaint was one from David Lambert of St. Paul, who wrote: "a mail arrived last night . . . [with] the first news of the Presidential election. . . . I speak not only personally but as one of the Committee of Correspondence of Minnesota Territory when I earnestly ask your attention to a Post Office reform in this region."<sup>35</sup>

Editor James M. Goodhue made acidulous comment in the *Pioneer* of July 5, 1849, about the once-a-week mail schedule: "Our mail which has been but *weakly* thus far, has become so debilitated that last week it did not come at all." A month later Goodhue expanded his thoughts on mail service: "Would any one believe that in the nineteenth century, our Government would limit Minnesota . . . to one mail a week? We ought to have mails at least tri-weekly during the summer by steamboat. . . . In the winter, mails ought also to be tri-weekly and ought to be conveyed between Galena and St. Paul, in two days each trip. Are we to be blocked in here half the year, and is the rest of the world to be cut off . . . for the sake of saving a few hundred dollars of expense for mail service? . . . Does Congress expect us . . . to legislate, to hold elections, to promulgate laws, to print newspapers, to make speeches, to do all that an organized Territory of freemen may of right do, without furnishing us with mail facilities?"<sup>36</sup>

The first territorial legislature, meeting that fall, presented a memorial to Congress asking for additional mail service.<sup>37</sup> On December 26, 1849, a typical complaint was published by the *Pioneer*: "Another mail arrived on Monday evening, five days from Prairie du Chien. . . . the rest of the mail due, was detained beyond the Wisconsin river which was rendered impassable by the running ice."

The multitude of petitions, complaints, and published criticisms prompted Congress and the Post Office Department to initiate improvements. Route 4498, St. Paul to Stillwater, was set up on a weekly basis. In February, 1850, the department informed Sibley that the postmasters of St. Paul and Galena had been directed to make up and dispatch mails to all steamboats running to and from their respective offices rather than to only one a week. Five weekly contract routes were advertised for bids in 1850: St. Paul to Prairie du Chien; St. Paul to St. Croix Falls via Stillwater and Marine Mills; St. Paul to Stillwater only; St. Paul to Fort Snelling; and St. Paul to St. Anthony. These routes were supplementary to the summer steamboat service from Galena.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, on December 19, 1850, the *Pioneer* noted: "The conveyance of the mail, this winter, between St. Paul and Prairie du Chien . . . is shamefully abortive. Although we have been trying for 3 weeks past, to send the *Pioneer* by mail, and have sent it twice; the whole of our down river mail, has been returned twice to the St. Paul P.O., after being gone a few days each time. . . . its return every three or four days, having become the only *regularity*, or certainty, that there seems to be, in the con-

<sup>34</sup> *Pioneer*, January 15, March 11, 1852.

<sup>35</sup> David Lambert to Sibley, December 18, 1848; William Phillips to, December 20, 1848, Sibley Papers. See also in the Sibley Papers letters from Orange Walker, January 15, 1849, and William Holcombe, January 24, 1849.

<sup>36</sup> *Pioneer*, August 2, 1849.

<sup>37</sup> A copy, dated October 27, 1849, is in the Sibley Papers.

<sup>38</sup> *Pioneer*, April 3, 1850; *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), April 20, 1850.

veyance of the mail." In 1851 the department had up for bid the following additional contract mail routes: Mendota to Lac qui Parle, and Swan River to Pembina, once a month; St. Paul to Fort Gaines, once in two weeks; Wabasha to Fort Snelling, Point Douglas to St. Paul, and Point Douglas to Stillwater, all once a week. In 1853, fourteen routes were added to the list. Perhaps the most important of these were the route down the west side of the Mississippi from St. Paul to Lansing, Iowa; the cross-country route from Minnesota City on the Mississippi to Traverse des Sioux on the Minnesota River; and the several routes linking Decorah and Dubuque, Iowa, with St. Paul, Mankato, and Wabasha.<sup>39</sup>

There still was much cause for complaint. "The irregularity of our mail has become a matter of so frequent an occurrence that we can thank our stars that it is no worse." This odd sentiment was expressed by the *Saint Croix Union* of Stillwater, on November 3, 1854. The *Daily Minnesotian* of St. Paul hinted that poor service was not due entirely to poor transportation from Galena northward. It reported on July 21, 1854, that the editor of the *Galena Jeffersonian*, who had visited Chicago, "thinks the cause for the non-receipt of letters and papers . . . is traceable to the Chicago Post Office. He says the office in that city is the most outrageously managed of any in the United States." On March 20, 1855, an exasperated correspondent of the *Saint Croix Union* demanded to know "Who is to blame? Have they blind Postmasters somewhere on the route along the Mississippi? Postmasters ought to be required to know how to read plain writing, have good eyes, and subscribe for one or more newspapers, in order to remove temptation to detain and read other peoples."

CONSIDERING all the difficulties the Post Office Department had to combat in those

hectic years, the wonder was that it was able to provide the service it did. It was under the tremendous pressure not only of extending mail service in a rapidly expanding nation, but of continually revising and adapting that service to changing conditions. Minnesota was only one of many growing regions, all demanding new and additional service. Illinois had been doubling its population every few years. Wisconsin, Kansas, and Missouri were expanding at a great rate. Texas, annexed in 1845, demanded service. Settlers were pouring into the Oregon country, and following the discovery of gold California had an influx of many thousands each year. These far-traveling migrants also demanded mail service to their new settlements.

Thousands of post offices were established in the decade following 1850. It was no small task to instruct and oversee the new postmasters, to check and correct their handling of the mails and their accounting of funds. Continual changes in routing were called for by constant improvements made in transportation, and each year there were hundreds of new contract routes to be laid out, posted for bid, and awarded. Seeing that each contractor fulfilled the terms of his contract was an almost impossible job.

In addition to all the difficulties inherent in managing the postal system, the hand of the politician often added to the burden. This was true especially in the awarding of contract routes and in the appointment of postmasters. As has been indicated, a postmaster's pay in pioneer Minnesota was trifling. For example, Philander Prescott made \$15.47 for the year 1843 at Lake St. Croix, and Elam Greeley at Stillwater received \$47.52 for the year 1847.<sup>40</sup> For this reason the man who served as postmaster in a community was usually a storekeeper who would take over the job as a public service.

Nevertheless politics sometimes played a part in appointments. When Fort Gaines (later Fort Ripley) requested a post office in 1849, the commandant, John B. S. Todd,

<sup>39</sup> *Pioneer*, March 10, 1853.

<sup>40</sup> United States, *Official Register*, 1843, p. \*585; 1847, p. \*454.

## U. S. MAIL STAGES.

1853  1853

Spring and Summer Arrangement!

**WILLOUGHBY & POWERS** will continue their semi-weekly trips between St. Paul and Prairie du Chien until the opening of navigation, immediately after which they will commence running

### DAILY LINES

of Four-Horse Coaches between

**St. Paul and St. Anthony, and St. Paul and Stillwater.**

They have recently purchased at the East several new and elegant

### CONCORD COACHES,

which will be here to take their places in these lines immediately after the opening of navigation.

The public may rest assured that the proprietors have none but the best of teams, accompanied by careful drivers; and that they will devote their utmost energies to insure comfort and safety on all occasions.



**W** An extensive Livery Stable at the corner of Fourth and Roberts streets. Particular attention given to the accommodation of Pleasure Parties, upon liberal terms.

27-11

**WILLOUGHBY & POWERS.**

*An advertisement from the Weekly  
Minnesotian, March 19, 1853*

submitted the name of sutler John H. McKenny for appointment as postmaster. Approval was given by the Post Office Department, but shortly thereafter it was withdrawn for the stated reason that "Mr. McKenny is not a suitable person for the office." Captain Todd was requested to submit a nominee who was "suitable," under threat that otherwise the office would be discontinued.<sup>41</sup>

Crying "politics," McKenny dispatched a long and heated letter to the editor of the *Saint Croix Union*. He claimed that he had agreed to serve as postmaster only because the commandant requested it and that the action against him had been instigated by Fitz Henry Warren, second assistant postmaster general. He concluded, "we are to be deprived of an office, because . . . a *whig* cannot be found for the appointment of postmaster in an office worth about six-sixths less than nothing a year." The publicity apparently had its effect, for later McKenny received the appointment.<sup>42</sup>

Henry Jackson, St. Paul's pioneer postmaster, was also a victim of politics. On July 28, 1849, the *St. Paul Register* announced proudly: "Our postmaster, Mr. H. Jackson, has fitted up his new post-office building on Third street with great taste and convenience. Every citizen, whose business requires it, can now have a box to himself." Jackson had installed about two hundred glass boxes which he had bought. Ironically, had the mail service from Washington been reasonably prompt, he might have saved himself the expense, for unknown to him he had already lost his job. The new Whig administration headed by Zachary Taylor had commissioned Jacob W. Bass in his place.<sup>43</sup>

THE NUMBER of post offices kept pace with the growth of the territory. One of the first details arranged by the promoter of a new townsite was a post office. A request from a reliable citizen to the territory's congressional delegate or to the Post Office Department itself usually was all that was necessary to obtain a new post office. Many a town, however, was platted out on paper only to be stillborn or to survive for but a short period.

Harrisburgh, in Hennepin County, was one of these. In 1856 and 1857 a mill was built on the Mississippi River directly east of Osseo. An adjoining tract of 160 acres was platted into lots, and on December 22, the Harrisburgh post office was established. After an auspicious beginning the projected town withered away, and the post office was discontinued. Among other long forgotten offices established in Minnesota Territory were: Greenwood, Hassan Rapids, Leighton, Manominie, Northwood, Oak Grove, and Perkinsville. Some of these were of short duration; others flourished for several years before coming to an end. Greenwood, for instance, on the south bank of

<sup>41</sup> *Pioneer*, April 17, 1850.

<sup>42</sup> *Pioneer*, April 17, May 9, 1850.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 231.



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