

When MINNESOTA Coveted CANADA

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THE PATTERN of settlement in the United States and Canada was predominantly from east to west. Yet, "annexation" of British North America — or parts of it bordering on the United States — was a recurring theme for decades after the American Revolution. A century or so ago, expansion fever raged in Minnesota as a result of a "north-south" manifest destiny scheme promoted by two of Minnesota's most prominent citizens, Alexander Ramsey and James Wickes Taylor. The culmination of that fever is shown in the legislative document of March 6, 1868, reproduced on the opposite page. The story behind it illumines a little-known facet of the state's history.

Although the idea of annexation was prevalent largely during the 1860s, it had its roots in the earlier economy of the region's fur trade. Despite the establishment of the forty-ninth parallel by Major Stephen Long's expedition of 1823 and the subsequent withdrawal of Hudson's Bay Company operations south of that line, rivalry between American and British traders continued. Henry H. Sibley, American Fur Company partner and later the head of Pierre Chouteau's Western Outfit, formed a business alliance with Norman W. Kittson in 1843 and "the smugglers' road between Red River and . . . Pembina became crowded."¹

In addition to the fur trade, other bonds transcending the political divisions imposed by the international boundary developed over a half century between the region north of the forty-ninth parallel and Minnesota. Prominent among the squatters around Fort

Snelling and later numbered among pioneer residents of St. Paul were refugees from Selkirk's ill-fated Red River Settlement and fur trade veterans, mostly Canadian. Also, there were men such as Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt, a missionary Catholic priest, headquartered at the border settlement. In 1849 he predicted that within three years, "if the Government of the United States . . . will extend its protecting hand to us, more than four thousand souls will soon embrace and enjoy the sweets of liberty."² Belcourt's wish for federal support was favored by Henry M. Rice and Sibley, long-time Minnesota fur traders and prominent political figures. Ramsey was probably infected with expansionist fever by Sibley who was, after all, an "old settler" by 1849.

Governor Ramsey's official efforts to extend the new territory's political influence as far north as possible began with his first message to the territorial legislature on September 3, 1849, when he requested federal aid for bettering transportation routes to Pembina. He followed this in November by signing the legislature's memorial to Congress urging a military post at Pembina. His keen interest in the area of the lower Red River continued and, after the financial collapse of 1857, intensified with the "discovery [in 1858] of gold on the Fraser and Thompson rivers in British Columbia which made our people wild." The discovery gave impetus to the movement in Minnesota for a railroad to Selkirk and Saskatchewan. Ram-

¹ Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest*, 50 (Toronto, 1965).

² Belcourt to Samuel Woods, August 20, 1849, in the Henry H. Sibley Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

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RESOLUTIONS
OF
THE LEGISLATURE OF MINNESOTA,
IN RELATION TO

The purchase of Alaska and the transfer of the territories between Minnesota and Alaska to the dominion of Canada.

MARCH 31, 1868.—Referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations and ordered to be printed.

RESOLUTIONS of the legislature of the State of Minnesota relative to the purchase of Alaska and the transfer of certain territory.

Resolved by the legislature of the State of Minnesota, 1. That the Congress of the United States is hereby requested to confirm, by requisite legislation, the annexation of Alaska to the United States.

2. That we regret to be informed of a purpose to transfer the territories between Minnesota and Alaska to the dominion of Canada by an order in council at London, without a vote of the people of Selkirk and the settlers upon the sources of the Saskatchewan river, who largely consist of emigrants from the United States; and we would respectfully urge that the President and Congress of the United States shall represent to the government of Great Britain that such action will be an unwarrantable interference with the principle of self-government, and cannot be regarded with indifference by the people of the United States.

3. That the legislature of Minnesota would rejoice to be assured that the cession of northwest British America to the United States, accompanied by the construction of a northern Pacific railroad, are regarded by Great Britain and Canada as satisfactory provisions of a treaty which shall remove all grounds of controversy between the respective countries.

THOMAS H. ARMSTRONG,
President of the Senate.

JOHN Q. FARMER,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Approved March 6, 1868.

WILLIAM R. MARSHALL,
Governor.

sey also moved rapidly to extinguish the Chippewa title to lands along the Red River south of the forty-ninth parallel. Not until 1863, after an abortive attempt in 1851, did he succeed in wresting the northwestern-most corner of the state from the control of the Red Lake and Pembina bands.³

Ramsey's ardent supporter and collaborator, Taylor, took up residence in St. Paul in 1856. He believed that a natural division of the land was the north-south line of the Red River which linked United States interests to those of British North America. And by 1861 he "confidently" expected from the latter "a popular movement looking to independence or annexation to the United States." Other Minnesota expansionists such as Oscar Malmros, George Becker, and Joseph A. Wheelock also worked "diligently and ardently to effect a policy designed to annex whatever could be annexed of British North America."⁴

Taylor went to considerable lengths to promote Ramsey's annexation effort—particularly after 1863 when "Bluff Alec" went to the United States Senate. Those efforts came into public view during the winter of 1867–68. The *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* for December 24, 1867, took note of them by reprinting "the following suggestive paragraph from the New York *Evening Post* of the 16th inst.: Senator Ramsey's resolution receives great attention in the Western press—and its author will soon be heard as its advocate. Meanwhile New England is disposed to reconsider its late hostility to a reciprocity treaty, and Mr. [Charles] Sumner . . . will probably move . . . in response to the resolution of the Minnesota Senator, that the whole subject shall be referred to a commission representing governments at Washington and Ottawa."

Commenting upon the New York editorial eight days later, the St. Paul newspaper observed that the "simultaneous appearance of paragraphs of this nature in various newspapers, marks the industry and zeal of Mr. James W. Taylor, the author of Senator Ramsey's Saskatchewan scheme. Some of his

articles he procures inserted as editorial, like the above; and in other papers he appears over his own proper signature." On December 27, the *Pioneer* asked in a more caustic tone: "We have not heard anything of the Taylor-Ramsey Saskatchewan scheme for a day or two. Is Taylor sick?" Caught between the winds of manifest destiny blowing from Ottawa and Washington, the *Winnipeg Nor'-Wester*, the newspaper of the Red River Settlement, complained about not being consulted by either capital, but it indicated more cordiality toward Ramsey's proposal. "If we may trust," it commented, "the appearance of the political horizon to the east and south it seems to be at last certain that before this year closes we are to have a change, and the change will make us either Americans or Canadians. At about the time when Mr. [William] McDougall is urging upon the Canadian House of Commons the necessity of at once acquiring possession of this country, the Honorable Mr. Ramsey is seriously proposing to the Senate of the United States a scheme which, if carried out, may make us a flourishing Territory of the great Federation. The curious fact in connection with the matter is that neither party say a word about our own feelings in this matter, and it may be, that just at this juncture, an expression of our wishes would carry with it a weight which would be felt at no other time, and we would advise those who have fallen into the lethargy which fruitless hope brings, to again arouse, for the time of redemption seems to be at hand."

In Minnesota, there was considerable sentiment for extending the Northern Pacific Railroad from Minnesota north of the border into a vast area claimed as St. Paul's commercial orbit. In the country at large, there

³ Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River of the North to Commerce and Civilization," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:47 (St. Paul, 1898); Minnesota, *Statutes at Large*, 13:667.

⁴ Theodore C. Blegen, "James Wickes Taylor: A Biographical Sketch," in *Minnesota History*, 1:174 (November, 1915); Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., "The Riel Rebellion and Canadian-American Relations," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 36:199n (September, 1955).

was a strong current of dissatisfaction with the purchase of Alaska, the funding of which had not yet been approved by Congress. Ramsey and Taylor seized upon both of these sentiments to further their annexation proposal. In an editorial of March 4, 1868, the *St. Paul Daily Press* stated that there was "rapidly growing" feeling in favor of annexation and that it was based on the fact that the British possessions to the north would soon be peopled by "emigrants from among the hardy population of our Northern States." Furthermore, the editor pointed out, "commercial relations are already almost wholly with the towns on the upper Mississippi—the trade of St. Paul with the Selkirk settlement amounting . . . to not less than half a million annually—and this connection must grow more intimate and important each year as our railroad and other facilities . . . extend in that direction." Finally, declared the paper, "*Nothing is more evident than that this region must ultimately constitute a component part of the United States.* There is no reason for the acquisition of Alaska which does not exist in tenfold stronger ratio in favor of the possession of the valleys of the Saskatchewan [*sic*] and the Red river. . . . The stream of emigration now steadily setting toward our northern and northwestern border . . . only needs the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad to render the solution perfect."

The following day, March 5, 1868, the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* took issue with its St. Paul rival, saying that "No valid reason at all exists for the acquisition of Alaska," and suggesting that while in twenty-five years British Columbia "may become useful and necessary to us," in the interim "we can well afford to let Johnny Bull incur the expense of governing."

Unrebuffed, the St. Paul paper returned the volley. "A newspaper concern up the river," it stated on March 6, "opposes the acquisition by the United States of the Val-

leys of the Saskatchewan and the Red Rivers, for the reason that we have got Alaska without needing it. According to the same principle, the writer would refuse to purchase a farm adjoining his own, simply because he does not want one under the Arctic Circle."

Despite the opposition of the Minneapolis newspaper, "grass roots" support in Minnesota gave rise to a legislative resolution relating to "The purchase of Alaska and the transfer of the territories between Minnesota and Alaska to the dominion of Canada." The resolution (written by Taylor) was introduced by Senator Warren Bristol of Goodhue County, approved on March 6, 1868, and signed by President of the Senate Thomas H. Armstrong, Speaker of the House John Q. Farmer, and Governor William R. Marshall.

In the end, the Saskatchewan scheme failed. On July 14, 1868, Congress approved the appropriation to purchase Alaska from Russia. Popular sentiment for "Seward's Folly" was lacking, and the secretary of state was excoriated in the press across the country for leading the country into a worthless and expensive investment.

In spite of Taylor's imaginative efforts, annexation of western Canada failed to capture any tolerable support outside of Minnesota. By 1873 Ramsey finally admitted to Taylor that there was "absolutely no interest at all here [*Washington, D.C.*] just now in Red River matters."⁵ The vast domain of the Hudson's Bay Company became a part of the Dominion of Canada, although its absorption received a temporary setback with Louis Riel's first rebellion in 1869. Out of this fur empire were carved the Canadian provinces of Manitoba in 1870 and Saskatchewan in 1905. The railroad sought by Taylor and Ramsey did develop, but it was the Canadian Pacific, completed in 1885. The Saskatchewan scheme provides an interesting episode in the story of north-south territorial ambitions in the interior of North America when Minnesota's federal and state legislators collaborated a century ago to promote the destiny of the Twin Cities area as they envisioned it.

⁵ Ramsey to Taylor, [February 15, 1873?], James W. Taylor Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.



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