

An Act to prescribe  
the qualification of voters,  
and of holding office.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Territory of Minnesota: §1. That all free white male inhabitants over the age of twenty one year, who shall have resided within this Territory for six months next preceding an Election shall be entitled to vote at any Election for Delegate to Congress and for Territorial and County officers. Provided that they shall be citizens of the United States, or shall have resided within the United States for a period of two years next preceding such Election and declared on oath before any Court of record having a Seal and Clerk, or in time of vacation (of said Court) before the Clerk thereof his intention to become such; and shall have taken an oath to support the Constitution of the United States, and the provisions of an act of Congress entitled "an act to establish the Territorial government of Minnesota" approved March the third one thousand eight hundred and forty nine.

§2. That all persons of a mixture of white and Indian blood, and who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men are hereby declared to be entitled to all the rights and privileges granted by the provisions of this Act.

Wm. A. Phelps

Secretary

Speaker of the  
House of Representatives  
President of the  
Council

Approved  
Thompson



Minnesota Territory's original suffrage act, 1849, granting voting rights to "free white males" and "persons of a mixture of white and Indian blood . . . who shall have adopted the habits and customs of civilized men"; (inset) Central House, St. Paul, where the legislative assembly met.

# Minnesota's Long Road to **BLACK SUFFRAGE** 1849-1868

WILLIAM D. GREEN

**O**n the morning of September 24, 1849, Representative Benjamin Wetherell Brunson, a 26-year-old lawyer and surveyor, left his St. Paul home for the Central House, a clapboarded log building at the corner of Minnesota and Bench Streets, where the business of the newly created Territory of Minnesota was being conducted. Living in the house next to his was James Thompson, a man whom Brunson had known for half of his life, a former slave who had been purchased and freed by Brunson's missionary father and who had worked with the elder Brunson to proselytize among the Dakota at nearby Kaposia. Thompson had amassed enough personal property to provide lumber, shingles, and cash to help the Brunsons build St. Paul's first Methodist church. Thompson's economic standing in early St. Paul and his long relationship to the legislator's family, however, did not prevent Benjamin Brunson from helping to create Minnesota's own "peculiar institution" that would relegate blacks in the territory to second-class citizenship. Bill No. 11, which Brunson introduced, decreed that only 21-year-old white males should have the right to vote.<sup>1</sup>

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The legislator did not argue on behalf of the bill or participate in the debate, the most involved of any during that first legislative session. In fact, his bill merely replicated provisions in the congressional act that had created Minnesota Territory a few months earlier. This organic act, "framed in the form already traditional" according to historian William Watts Folwell, authorized residents to establish a legislature and limited the voting rights needed to do so to free white males. The act, however, left it to the new legislature to determine whether suffrage would be extended to any other Minnesota residents.<sup>2</sup>

When the time came, Brunson voted against Gideon Pond's motion to broaden suffrage by deleting the word "white" from the bill. Likewise, he helped defeat Pond's motion to add the phrase "and all free male colored persons over 21 years of age." A series of amendments that followed sought to extend suffrage rights to persons of mixed blood. Representative Morton S. Wilkinson, who later represented Minnesota in the U.S. Senate, moved that "all civilized persons of Indian descent" should have voting rights. Henry

<sup>1</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (rev. ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1956), 1:253; J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1983), 46, 228; Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: MHS, 1972), 44; Chauncey Hobart, *History of Methodism in Minnesota* (Red Wing: Red Wing Printing Co., 1887), 19; Earl Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison and Co., 1961), 19-20; *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), Sept. 29, 1849, p. 2, Oct. 13, 1849, p. 1; Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the House*, 1849, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Here and below, *Journal of the House*, 1849, p. 62. For the organic act, see any issue of the *Minnesota Legislative Manual*; see also Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:247-48.

Jackson approved of suffrage for mixed-race men provided that they did not have African blood. In the end, however, all motions seeking to include Minnesota's people of color—black, Indian, or mixed—failed. By a vote of nine to seven, the territorial House of Representatives adopted Bill No. 11.

Deliberations in the legislature's upper chamber, the Territorial Council, were less contentious. Although its members extended suffrage rights to "persons of a mixture of white and Indian blood" who "adopted the habits and customs of civilized men," no one moved to consider black Minnesotans. On November 1, 1849, the amended Bill No. 11 became law.<sup>3</sup>

Its effect was exponential. By denying black men the right to vote, the law barred them from serving on county juries, since jurors were selected from voting lists. By 1851 blacks were further

barred from serving as referees in civil cases because such candidates had to be qualified as jurors and from running in village elections because any person elected to office had to be "entitled to vote at the election at which he shall be elected." An 1853 territorial law prohibited black participation in town meetings. Although these subsequent laws were not necessarily intentional expressions of antiblack sentiment but, rather, logical increments of citizenship, their cumulative effect increasingly restricted the rights of Minnesota's free

black inhabitants. While they numbered only 39 in 1850 (21 males, 14 of them over the age of 20), by the end of the decade the territory's African American population had increased to 259. And by 1868, when the state finally approved black suffrage after a protracted

struggle, there were approximately 700 blacks living in Minnesota.<sup>4</sup>

In the antebellum North, free African Americans were, in effect, walking paradoxes. Their place in northern society was ever marginal. Their sense of security—at all times tenuous—rested in their ability to remain innocuous. Like James Thompson, they could associate with white people, perhaps enjoy their friendships, even gain their respect, but they could never expect to share in the decision-making process of their community, in the brokerage of power. Although their neighbors were prepared—indeed, ever vigilant—against the spread of slavery, blacks had none of the civil rights that came with citizenship. Their paradoxical existence was firmly grounded in the very nature of things; they were free, yet never fully free, frozen in a state of civic ambiguity. They would be included in the census as residents but nothing more.

The white men who defined and governed society were very much men of their times. They represented a white constituency, the majority of whom, at least before the Civil War, did not believe in giving free blacks full civil rights. Federal law itself was oblivious to citizenship for free black Americans. In 1857 Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, sealed the fate of free blacks in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* when he wrote that, to the framers of the Constitution, blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," were not intended to be included under the word "citizens," and could not claim "any of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides." Moreover, Taney added that no state or territory could, by its own action, introduce into the political community created by the Constitution any new members or any persons "who were not intended to be embraced in this new political family, which the Constitution brought into existence, but were intended to be excluded from it." Taney's decision, eight years after Brunson's Bill No. 11 had become law, codified



Benjamin W. Brunson, a first lieutenant in the Civil War, photographed by Joel Whitney

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Journal of the Council*, 1849, p. 123, 146, 149; Minnesota Territory, *Acts, Joint Resolutions, and Memorials*, 1849, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Acts*, 1849, p. 53–54. For the laws prohibiting blacks from being referees and from holding office in villages, see Minnesota Territory, *Revised Statutes*, 1851, p. 358–59, and 1854, p. 83; Minnesota Territory, *House Journal*, 1854, p. 255. See also see Gary Libman, "Minnesota and the Struggle for Black Suffrage, 1849–1870: A Study in Party Motivation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 11–13; United States, *1850 Census: Statistical View of the States and Territories*, 1853, p. 990–93; David V. Taylor, "The Blacks," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981), 74.



what citizens had long determined: the United States was a white man's country.<sup>5</sup>

In 1787, at the time of the federal constitutional convention, property ownership determined voting rights, thereby excluding the vast majority of Americans. In New York in 1790, for example, only 1,209 of 30,000 residents qualified. In the Jacksonian era, as the continent was carved into territories and then states, political democracy expanded to include white settlers regardless of whether they were American born or foreign. Free blacks, however, did not benefit. By 1840, some 93 percent of the northern free black population lived in states that completely or practically denied them the right to vote. In New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, the adoption of white male suffrage regardless of property ownership had led directly to the political disenfranchisement of black residents.<sup>6</sup>

Although the U.S. Constitution did not extend citizenship to free blacks, Congress seemed to view them as useful in expanding the western borders of the burgeoning nation. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, whose jurisdiction extended to the Mississippi River and thus included part of what would become Minnesota, prescribed in race-neutral terms that regions qualified for territorial status when the population numbered 5,000 free male inhabitants. But when Alexander Ramsey arrived from Pennsylvania to become Minnesota's first territorial governor, he found that the population fell short of the 5,000 mark—even when counting soldiers at Fort Snelling, French Canadians, mixed bloods, mulattos, and blacks. (Only Indians were excluded from the tally.) The territory, now a *fait accompli*, had been created through political dealing in Washington, D.C., championed by Illinois's powerful Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who had claimed that the area had 8,000 to 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

Counted as residents and publicly, though paternalistically, deemed "attentive to their busi-

ness" and "a useful class" by St. Paul's *Minnesota Pioneer* in 1852, blacks remained frozen out of civil rights for nearly two more decades. Not until 1855, with the founding of the Minnesota Republican Party, would black suffrage again be addressed.<sup>8</sup>

**B**y the mid-1850s the increasing strain of slavery weighed heavily on America, sparking isolated disputes between sympathizers and critics of the peculiar institution. The North and South were on a collision course. As settlement moved westward, a growing number of northerners viewed Congress and the dominant Democratic and Whig parties as being far too inclined to placate slave interests. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, permitting slavery to extend into territories previously designated nonslave, further inflamed northerners. The editor of St. Paul's *Weekly Minnesotian* characterized the mood when he wrote,



Dred Scott, from an 1857 issue of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

The removal of that great landmark of freedom, the Missouri Compromise line, when it had been sacredly observed until slavery had acquired every inch of soil south of it, had presented the aggressive character of that system broadly before the country. It has shown that all compromises with slavery that were designed to favor freedom, are mere ropes of sand to be broken by the first wave of passion or interest that may roll from the south. It has forced upon the country an issue between free labor, political equality and manhood on one hand, and on the other slave labor, polit-

<sup>5</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 19 Howard 403–10, 419–22; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Slavery, Law, and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 194–95; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 31, 60–61.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 30; Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 74–75. Blacks were allowed the vote unrestricted in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine; in New York, they had to meet property and residence requirements.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (rev. ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 159, 164; William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History* (2d ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 106–07. The Northwest Ordinance is printed in all volumes of *Minnesota Statutes*.

<sup>8</sup> *Minnesota Pioneer*, Sept. 30, 1852, p. 2.

ical degradation and wrong. It becomes the people of the Free States (and Territories) to meet that issue resolutely, calmly, and with a sense of the momentous consequences that will flow from its decision.

As the new *Minnesota Republican* proclaimed a year later, "The present corrupt state of our National and Territorial politics, loudly calls for reform." Such sentiment had contributed greatly to founding the national Republican Party in 1854 and to Minnesota's party the next year.<sup>9</sup>

On March 29 and 30, 1855, a mass meeting, presided over by William R. Marshall of St. Paul, convened at the Methodist Church of St. Anthony. Some 200 men attended the sessions founding Minnesota's Republican Party. The resolutions that were adopted were as disparate as prohibiting the import and sale of liquor, abolishing needless political offices, promoting homestead legislation, and paying legislators only for services performed. The delegates resolved to limit taxation of revenues to only the amount needed to pay for the necessary expenses of government, to extinguish the public debt, and to support immigration policies that welcomed foreign settlers. Essentially, though, three issues drew the delegates together: the abolition of slavery, temperance, and the commitment to stand up to southern hegemony. Included in the platform was Item 9 of Resolution 10: "No civil disabilities on account of color or religious opinion." For the first time in Minnesota history, a major political gathering had endorsed extending civil rights to the territory's black men.<sup>10</sup>

The Republican delegates set to organizing a territory-wide convention held in St. Paul on July 25. They selected candidates to run in the fall elections. More importantly, they reaffirmed the purpose of the Republican Party—"to array the moral and political power of Minnesota on the side of freedom"—and recommitted themselves to the resolutions of the March meeting. Although the Democrats defeated them that

fall, the Republicans in the following year carried the territorial House of Representatives which was to sit in 1857.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1856 and 1857, as the territory was moving toward statehood, Democratic and Republican newspapers pilloried their opponents with vitriolic caricatures. The stakes were high. In 1857 Congress passed the enabling legislation that was the territory's first step toward statehood. Next, Minnesota had to elect convention delegates who would craft a constitution to be submitted to popular vote. A federal census and congressional and presidential approval of the constitution were the final hurdles. As the June 1 election of delegates neared, Democratic editors held the "Black Republicans" up to scorn as rank abolitionists and "nigger worshippers," exponents of black equality and black suffrage. In a territory that had an increasing foreign population largely affiliated with the Democratic Party, Democrats referred to Republicans as "Know-Nothings" after a minor political party that was best known for anti-immigrant sentiments. (Numbers of Know-Nothings had joined the newly formed Republican Party.) Despite these attacks, voters elected a slim majority of Republican delegates to the territory's 1857 constitutional convention—59 to the Democrat's 55.<sup>12</sup>

Their majority status at the convention, however, was not secure. Republicans attracted a wide assortment of groups, including old-line Whigs, most notably former Governor Ramsey, members of the Know-Nothing Party, opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and antislavery Democrats. Despite the taint of Know-Nothingism, many Scandinavian immigrants were drawn to the party; for example, in the delegate election the large Swedish settlement in Chisago County had voted solidly Republican. (Germans, on the other hand, though antislavery, strongly opposed the prohibition plank and voted Democratic.) Keeping the groups together was a difficult task as members fought over such issues as federal homestead

<sup>9</sup> Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 144, 145; Fehrenbacher, *Slavery, Law, and Politics*, 89–90, 93–97; *Weekly Minnesotian*, Feb. 25, 1854, p. 1; *Minnesota Republican* (St. Anthony), Mar. 29, 1855, p. 3. The latter paper was established in October 1854—almost a year before the state's Republican Party; Blegen, *Minnesota*, 216. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had restricted slavery to those areas within the Louisiana Territory below the southern border of Missouri. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed residents in territories created north of the Missouri line to vote on the issue.

<sup>10</sup> *Minnesota Republican*, Apr. 5, 1855, p. 2; William Anderson, *A History of the Constitution of Minnesota*, Studies in the Social Sciences, no. 15 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1921), 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Minnesota Republican*, July 26, 1855, p. 2; Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 38–39.

<sup>12</sup> Blegen, *Minnesota*, 220–22; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 16.

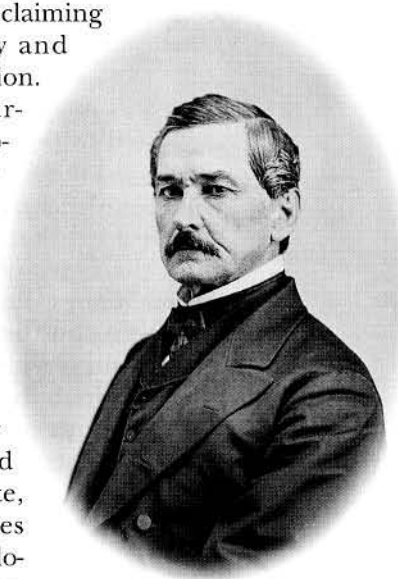
legislation, granting full rights of citizenship to foreigners, prohibition, and above all, black suffrage.<sup>13</sup> While opposition to slavery held the party together, the hold remained tentative. In order to pass a constitution that best reflected the Republican vision and to maintain its majority status, the party needed to discard some divisive issues. Political expediency dictated that the black-suffrage plank be reconsidered.

**R**epublican editors in Minnesota Territory generally supported black suffrage but for different reasons. Some advocated that universal enfranchisement be written into the constitution. Others argued that suffrage based on race was arbitrary and offered no real relationship to qualification for voting. The *Winona Republican* asserted that the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the party's tenets required Republicans to "give every man the chance to become the equal of his fellow." St. Paul's *Minnesota Weekly Times* contended that it was inconsistent to allow "ignorant Irishmen and ignorant Americans, and half-breeds and whole breeds" to vote, as the convention planned to do, while excluding "those who were born upon our soil—who are worthy citizens and intelligent men." The *Minnesota Free Press* of St. Peter urged that literacy, not race, be the basis for suffrage on the grounds that successful self-government was dependent upon an informed citizenry.<sup>14</sup>

Other Republican newspapers that supported the cause, such as the *Faribault Herald*, were more cautious, recommending that black suffrage be submitted to a separate vote. They felt that the issue had little support among the electorate—including rank-and-file Republicans. The *Minnesota Weekly Times* asserted that the issue would raise a "hue and cry" from "dough-face" Republicans, and the *Faribault Herald* feared that prejudice against black suffrage would endanger the constitution if a proposal was included in the document. Failure to approve the constitution, in turn, would delay—or jeopardize—statehood.<sup>15</sup>

As historian Gary Libman found, "The opposition to 'nigger voters' among many Republicans and virtually all Democrats was duly noted by Democratic newspapers, which used the issue against Republicans throughout the campaign for election of delegates and throughout the convention." Opponents argued that black suffrage would induce a flood of African Americans to Minnesota, that democracy was intended by the nation's forefathers to be for white men only, and that such rights would dangerously instill within blacks a sense of equality with whites. The *Valley Herald* of Shakopee went a step further, attempting to stir up antiblack sentiment among foreign-born voters by asserting that Republicans, if granted black suffrage, would use that voting bloc to counterbalance the votes of immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

**W**hen the Republicans and Democrats met on July 13, 1857, to convene the constitutional convention, they showed little regard for working in genuine collaboration. In quick order, the parties separated to hold their own conventions, each claiming to represent the territory and drawing up its own constitution. Each group received assurances from partisans to support it to the bitter end. By early August the delegates in their separate conventions were ready to debate black suffrage, once and for all. For the Democrats, the issue was incontrovertible: blacks must not be able to vote. Former Governor Willis A. Gorman reminded delegates that, with the vote, blacks could become judges and legislators; "with lurid eloquence," according to historian Folwell, he mockingly pictured the black man "in the jury box, on the witness stand



Willis A. Gorman, outspoken Democrat and a former governor, about 1866

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 39–40.

<sup>14</sup> *Winona Republican*, July 14, 1857, p. 2; *Minnesota Weekly Times*, May 23, 1857, p. 1; *Minnesota Free Press*, July 22, 1857, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Faribault Herald*, Aug. 6, 1857, p. 2 and prosuffrage letter to the editor taking the newspaper to task, Aug. 13, 1857, p. 2; *Minnesota Weekly Times*, May 23, 1857, p. 1. St. Paul's *Weekly Minnesotian*, among the few Republican newspapers that opposed black suffrage, also thought it prudent to let the people decide in a separate vote; see July 11, 1857, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 18; *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), May 21, 1857, p. 2; *Valley Herald*, June 10, 1857, p. 2; Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 92.



and everywhere; side by side with the Anglo-Saxon."<sup>17</sup>

The Democrats, without opposition, approved a proposal that extended the franchise to "white [male] citizens of the United States, and white persons of foreign birth," as well as mixed-bloods and Indians "who have adopted the customs and habits of civilization." Mixed bloods and "civilized" Indians had long been allied with the Democratic Party, which was controlled by old fur traders who euphemistically referred to the mixed bloods as the "French vote" and wanted to continue to count on them. The party also sought to attract the growing immigrant population, arguing that a foreigner directly from his native country was as competent to vote in Minnesota as a settler just arriving from Massachusetts. Indeed, delegate Daniel A. J. Baker of Ramsey County argued for making "no distinction between white men from whatever part of the world they come."<sup>18</sup>

The only objection had come from delegate Henry H. Sibley, who initially argued that the word "white" was unnecessary since the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that spring in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that citizenship could only be for whites. The delegates did not find comfort in Sibley's interpretation of *Dred Scott*. Although motivated to bring Minnesota into the Union, as men on the frontier they placed preemptive weight on local rule. True, the Supreme Court had decided that the black man could never enjoy the rights of citizenship. But federal law was one thing; Minnesota's affairs were another. The Democrats simply did not want to leave an opening for black men to qualify to vote.<sup>19</sup>

The Republicans, too, had come to realize that they must control their own fate. The federal government had not only proven reluctant to abolish slavery but, with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, had betrayed the tradition of freedom by allowing slavery to spread north and westward. Like the Democrats, they understood *Dred Scott*. They had gone into an uproar when the decision was delivered. And yet, with full knowledge

that the nation's highest court held that blacks could not be citizens and thus had no civil rights—including suffrage—the delegates nonetheless debated contentiously as if they had, in fact, retained the constitutional authority to enfranchise black Minnesotans.<sup>20</sup>

While Republicans across the North fought against the spread of slavery, few leaders actually viewed blacks as equal to whites. Most perceived African Americans as innately lazy, stupid, immoral, and incapable of contributing to the welfare of the community. Especially during the months before the presidential election of 1860, when Democrats portrayed their adversaries as soft on the race issue, national Republican leaders often sought to outdo their critics in professing allegiance to the principles of white supremacy. "We, the Republican Party, are the white man's party," declared Lyman Trumbull, a Republican senator from Illinois and a close associate of Lincoln, who would later be one of the architects of Reconstruction. "We are for free white men, and for making white labor respectable and honorable, which it can never be when negro slave labor is brought into competition with it." Party members throughout the nation repeatedly stressed this, insisting that their stance against slavery better qualified them to be "the only white man's party in this country." As conceived by an Ohio Republican, "The 'negro question' is . . . the question of the right of free white laborers to the soil of the territories. It is not to be crushed or retarded by shouting 'Sambo' at us. We have no Sambo in our platform. . . . We object to Sambo. We don't want him about. We insist that he shall not be forced upon us."<sup>21</sup>

The Republican delegates of Minnesota took a different tack in 1857. They did not attempt to outdo their Democratic critics in denigrating blacks or embracing white supremacy. It is evident from the convention debates that they generally approved of black suffrage. Even when they elected to bow to pragmatism, a large number nonetheless expressed the desire

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<sup>17</sup> *Debates and Proceedings*, 1857 (Democratic), 54; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:396; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Democratic), 426–29; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:412. There were further qualifiers for the foreign born and Indians; see Minn. Const., Art. VII, Sec. 1 (1857).

<sup>19</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Democratic), 427; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 30.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *Minnesota Republican*, Apr. 30, 1857, p. 2; *Debates and Proceedings*, 1857 (Republican), 360–66.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 269–70. See also Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 40–41, 137.

to do more for the cause of equality. Voting to separate the black-suffrage question from the constitution was not easy. Delegate Thomas Foster, a 39-year-old miller from Hastings, best characterized the mood.

Complexion has nothing to do with a man's . . . political efficiency; and nothing to do with his ability to serve the State. . . . [Nevertheless] I am in favor of inserting the word "white" [into the suffrage provision] purely on the ground of expediency. . . . A great contest is going on between the antagonistic powers of slavery and freedom, for the plains of the West; and going on, not only for that purpose, but to wrest the national government from its proper purposes, and to establish the principle that the Constitution of the United States is a Slave Constitution, and that its adoption was solely and simply to protect the institution of slavery. . . . It is important that Minnesota come in, so that her voice and influence may be cast in the scale of freedom. . . . If we go to Congress with two Senators, and our members in the House, all on the side of freedom, we accomplish more for the cause of freedom—freedom for the white and freedom for the black—than we should by engaging here in a vain contest upon an abstraction, and thereby fail in all these great objects we have in view.<sup>22</sup>

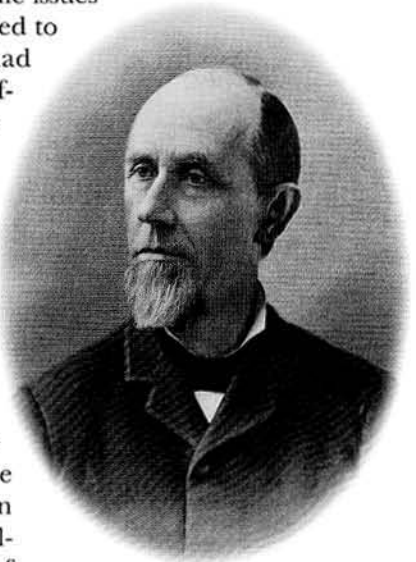
The delegates simply did not believe that they could keep the divergent members of their party together and lead Minnesotans to an affirmative vote. The fear of seeing power slip through their hands, as well as hope for Minnesota's role in stemming the spread of slavery westward, compelled them to sacrifice black suffrage for a greater, more immediate good—statehood.

While the delegates debated, news of the two conventions had reached the East. There, leaders of both parties criticized the separatists and pressured them to reconcile, for they saw in Minnesota the same circumstances that had led to bloodshed in Kansas. Some delegates agreed. Gorman, for example, feared that

the split could injure credit and affect "the Capitalists of the Territory disadvantageously." By early August delegates began talking about structuring a compromise committee to bring the two sides together and create one constitution to be submitted to the voters. On August 18, a committee of 10—five men from each party—convened to iron out their considerable differences.<sup>23</sup>

Partisanship blocked progress, with black suffrage one of the most volatile issues on which a compromise needed to be struck. The committee had to decide whether black suffrage should be submitted to the voters as a separate question along with the constitution, as the Republicans proposed. Passions reached such a pitch that a growing number of delegates began to doubt that an accord was possible. On August 24 Democratic delegate Gorman and Republican Thomas Wilson actually fought in the committee room, Gorman breaking his cane over Wilson's head. The specter of Bloody Kansas was suddenly never more real. Cooler heads viewed the outburst, however painful, as "a thunderstorm in clearing the air." As historian William Anderson wrote, "It was unquestionably with a sense of shame and renewed determination that the committee . . . returned to its arduous labors."<sup>24</sup>

The stumbling blocks to compromise were the amending clauses proposed by both conventions that made adding new provisions to the constitution extremely difficult. To break the log jam, Republican delegate Charles McClure on August 28 proposed that new amendments be submitted to the voters as referendums "and be approved by a majority



*Thomas Wilson, who later practiced law, served as chief justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, and won several stints in the state legislature and U.S. Senate*

<sup>22</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Republican), 6, 341, 360–66. For an excellent discussion of the arguments, see Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 23.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 92; *Debates and Proceedings* (Democratic), 357; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:415–17. The Democratic members were Gorman, Joseph R. Brown, William Holcombe, Moses Sherburne, and William W. Kingsbury; for the Republicans, it was Thomas J. Galbraith, Cyrus Aldrich, Charles McClure, Lucas K. Stannard, and Thomas Wilson.

<sup>24</sup> Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:417; Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 99.



# THE REPUBLICAN.

C. G. AMES, . . . . . EDITOR

St. Anthony and Minneapolis.  
THURSDAY, AUGUST 12, 1857.

**To Town Subscribers.**—In default of a suitable carrier, we are compelled for the present to send your papers to the P. O.—both for St. Anthony and Minneapolis. Should any fail to receive it, will they please call, either at the printing office, or at the book-store of Theo. H. Williams.

## The Suffrage Question.

We commend to general attention the manly speech of Hon. J. W. North, made before the Constitutional Convention, on the propriety of inserting the word "white" in our State Constitution, as a qualification for legal voters.

We are mortified and alarmed at the policy which has been adopted by the Convention. Composed as it is, wholly of Republicans, there was no *creditable* reason why the Convention should not have furnished the people a clear, straight-forward and consistent Constitution, leaving them at liberty to tarnish and distort it, if they please to do so. Nearly every member of that Convention honestly believes that no man should be excluded from the ballot-box on account of his *color*; and they must therefore admit that the very excuse of pro-slavery despotism is involved in such an exclusion. The Philadelphia Convention asserted outright, the principle of "equal rights for all men;" and the whole land has trembled with a moral earthquake ever since Judge Taney proclaimed the atheistic and piratical doctrine that, under our National Constitution, "black men have no rights which white men are bound to respect." Especially has the Republican

*Editorial expressing outrage at the Republican convention's failure to fight for black suffrage*

of the votes cast." Seconded by Democrat Joseph R. Brown, McClure's proposal cleared the way for agreement on one constitution.<sup>25</sup>

The Democratic support for McClure's proposal is curious on its face, since it opened the way to asking voters to enfranchise black men. This acquiescence seemed either extremely magnanimous or counterproductive to the Democrats' agenda. Neither, on closer view, was the case. The Democrats, who had more parliamentary experience, simply outmaneuvered the Republicans. The Democratic delegation included many of the territory's political leaders who had virtually controlled the executive, judicial, and legislative branches for most of the 1850s. The Republican delegates, on the other hand, were largely newcomers to the region, and they evidently overestimated their electoral strength. When the compromise committee addressed the second controversy—apportionment—the Democrats won a substantial victory over their opponents with minimal concessions. The boundaries of the judicial, senatorial, and representative districts clearly favored the Democrats in the election of congressmen, the new state legislature, and judges of district courts.<sup>26</sup>

Republicans, both within the delegation and throughout the territory, were outraged when the compromise committee presented its final report on August 28, viewing it as a betrayal of the spirit of their party. Delegate Lewis McKune, a farmer from Waseca, characterized the report as a "sacrifice of almost everything" for which he had worked. Newspapers from around the territory, such as the *Minnesota Republican*, excoriated the Republican committeemen as having shared the "base prejudice, born of slavery, which sneers at the black man's manhood." Declaring itself "mortified and alarmed" at the committee's action, it called upon Republican voters to uphold the party's 1855 resolutions: "No civil disabilities on account of color, birth-place or religious belief." The *Lake City Tribune* viewed the suffrage provision as "time-serving expediency and obeisance to the Slavocracy." The *Winona Republican* called the provision unjust because it subjected the black man to taxation without representation and thus deprived him of an "inalienable privilege, without which no

<sup>25</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Republican), 573–74; Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 99–100; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:414–19.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Constitution of Minnesota*, 87–88, 103, 106; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:417–19.

man could be free and consequently really happy."<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, however, even the most strident critics recognized the need to present a single constitution to the voters. Republican Amos Coggsell, a lawyer and future speaker of the House from Steele County, conceded, "This is a dose that has got to go down, and we might as well shut our eyes and open our mouth and take it." (Coggsell, however, voted nay.) Nevertheless, the delegation approved the report (as had the Democrats' convention), 42 to eight. On August 29, the Democrats and Republicans ratified the document without debate. The new constitution squarely preserved what the Democrats had wanted. As the *Pioneer and Democrat* exulted, it was indeed a document free of any "fanatical dogmas of the Black Republican party."<sup>28</sup> When Minnesota became a state on May 11, 1858, the work of the black-suffrage forces remained clearly before them.

Not until 1859, more than a year after statehood, did efforts to achieve voting rights for blacks resume. On December 2, the day on which John Brown was hanged, a small group of abolitionists first gathered at Woodman's Hall in St. Anthony; by the end of the month, they had formed the Hennepin County Antislavery Society. The group sought, first, to lobby the legislature to pass a personal liberty bill that would fine or imprison any slaveholder who brought his slave to the state. Secondly, it urged legislators "to take the necessary steps" to amend the constitution with a black-suffrage law. Neither effort was successful. As society member James F. Bradley reported, "There was no prospect of getting [*sic*] anything done by the present legislature as they seemed more interested in other matters and to care but verry [*sic*] little about the poor 'Nigger.'" The group then decided to circulate petitions among voters to urge "the same subject" upon the legislature.<sup>29</sup>

On March 6, 1860, members reported that community response throughout St. Anthony and Minneapolis was good. More than half of those approached favored the cause; "some

5

Constitution Preamble

We whose names are appended hereto, believing that all mankind are created Free and Equal, and that no human power can make one man the property of another, and that Slavery is the sum of all villainies; Therefore associate ourselves together under the name of the Hennepin County Antislavery Society and agree to abide by the following Constitution

Art 1<sup>st</sup> The officers of this Society shall be a Pres. Sec. (who shall also act as Treas) three or more Vice Pres and an Executive Com. of seven

*Preamble to the Hennepin County Antislavery Society's constitution, 1859, proclaiming "Slavery is the sum of all villainies"*

Democrats signed and some Republicans refused." The next day, a House committee introduced a resolution "earnestly" supporting a black-suffrage amendment, declaring that it was

<sup>27</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Republican), 580; *Minnesota Republican*, Aug. 13, 1857, p. 2; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 32-35; *Lake City Tribune* and *Winona Republican*, both quoted in *Minnesota Republican*, Aug. 20, 1857, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Debates and Proceedings* (Republican), 581-82; Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:420; *Pioneer and Democrat*, Aug. 30, 1857, p. 1. Technically, there were two final constitutions: each convention's was amended to reflect the changes of the compromise committee. The two documents were not identical, and it was the Democratic version that the newly elected Democratic officeholders sent to Congress for approval; see Lass, *Minnesota*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> "History," in Mortimer Robinson and Family Papers, microfilm copy, MHS, St. Paul, 1-3, 5, 8-9, 12-13, 17.

acting upon a petition from 207 Hennepin County residents headed by Preston Cooper. The committee's majority report emphasized that it was contrary to the principles of humanity, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution "for the white men of Minnesota to disenfranchise its colored inhabitants, who help pay its taxes, and submit to its government." Rather, "inspiration" and the Declaration of Independence taught that the Constitution was "the charter of universal suffrage" because it "disenfranchises no man on account of color."<sup>30</sup>

After a brief debate, the legislators tabled the motion by an unrecorded vote. With only four days left in the session, they felt that there was not time to push it through the House. David A. Secombe, a St. Anthony Republican lawyer, said that while he supported equal suffrage, he "deemed the submission of such an amendment at this time would be inexpedient. It would be voted down by the people; the Democratic party would vote in mass against it, and it would fail to obtain the votes of many Republicans." His colleague, House Speaker Coggsell, according to a local newspaper, simply "hoped the bill would be indefinitely postponed. It was too late in the session to occupy the time of the members with the nigger question."<sup>31</sup>

Antislavery forces were outraged. They believed that the need for moderation had been met. The time was right. The constitution had been adopted. Minnesota had achieved statehood. The Republicans dominated the legislature. The legislators' action was nothing short of betrayal. At its next meeting, the abolition society passed a resolution condemning the Republicans for disgracing the state with their hypocritical stand against black suffrage. The resolution declared, in part:

That odious distinction in our State Constitution, making the right of suffrage to depend upon the complexion, and the additional distinction between Indians and Negroes, invidious to the latter, is a disgrace to our statute. That our Republican Legislature have proved false to their profes-

sions of their abhorrence to the Dred Scott decision, in refusing to make provision for so amending the constitution as to extend the right of suffrage to all persons irrespective of color.<sup>32</sup>

The society prepared further legislative initiatives. On December 16, 1860, it appointed a committee to draft new petitions to the 1861 legislature urging the body to strike the word "white" from the state constitution. During the first week of that legislative session, Bradley reported that the petitions were ready for signatures. What happened next is unclear, but no petitions were formally received in St. Paul.<sup>33</sup> In any event, by then all Minnesota eyes were cast southward as civil war loomed imminent.

**D**uring the wartime years the state saw no campaign for suffrage for free blacks. The majority of Minnesotans, like most northerners, simply did not support it, and even the prosuffrage Republicans wanted to avoid creating internal schisms and alienating Democrats. Winning the war was the top priority. Instead, abolition was hotly contested in Minnesota as across the North. Partisan newspapers kept the issue before readers in their usual inflammatory prose. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, elicited praise from Minnesota Republicans and vitriol from most Democrats. But as the Civil War dragged on, suffrage was tabled.<sup>34</sup>

Not until 1865 did the Republicans bring the issue before the state again. This time, they were of one mind. Charles Griswold, a clergyman who represented Winona County in the state House, was the prime mover and defender of the bill that proposed to submit to the voters a referendum to strike "white" from the suffrage provision. He led an extensive campaign and introduced three petitions from Cannon City, Hastings, and Rochester favoring black suffrage. F. M. Stowell submitted a petition of 150 residents from Anoka, and Charles Taylor presented a petition from Rice County. Most notably, the House and Senate received a memorial dated January 10 and signed by six members of

<sup>30</sup> "History," Robinson papers, [19–20]; Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1860, p. 677–78.

<sup>31</sup> *Falls Evening News* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), Mar. 8, 1860, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Minnesota State News* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), Mar. 24, 1860, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> "History," Robinson papers, [24–28], the last page of the document.

<sup>34</sup> James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 270, 276–77; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 49; Frank Klement, "The Abolition Movement in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 32 (Mar. 1951): 15–33.



the Golden Key Club, a literary organization for black men in St. Paul, stating, in part, that the word "white" in the suffrage clause was "not only superfluous, but proscriptive . . . a mark of degradation [*sic*] and *the* great auxiliary in supporting the unnatural prejudice against us." The memorial also pointed out that blacks not only were taxed but also were included in the draft to "present our black bosoms as a rampart to shield our country's nationality from all harm." This action marked the first concerted effort by Minnesota blacks to secure their voting rights. Griswold believed that the electorate was ready to pass a referendum for black suffrage during the November elections. In a speech delivered on the floor of the House, he asserted, "The fortunate moment had arrived. If we do not improve it now, it may never come again."<sup>35</sup>

The Democrats then tried a new ploy: joining women's suffrage with black suffrage, knowing that Democrats and Republicans alike would be opposed. John M. Gilman of St. Paul proposed to eliminate the word "male" from the constitution, arguing that, like blacks, women paid taxes, obeyed laws, were intelligent, and had fought for the Union by performing various services during the war. Supporters of black suffrage objected, insisting that the two questions should be submitted separately to the voters. They knew that women's suffrage was unpopular. The amendment was decisively defeated, 21 to 10, along party lines. Gilman then returned with a new amendment that limited suffrage to those who could read and write, insisting that "ignorant voters" were becoming "the prey of politicians" and debasing the ballot. Once again, Republicans defeated the measure.<sup>36</sup>

On February 7 the Republican-dominated House passed the bill, 31 to 8. Two weeks later, under the leadership of Levi Nutting of Rice County, the Senate approved the measure, 16 to 4, along party lines. It was settled: the voters would decide on black suffrage in November. With 411 blacks among more than 250,000 people residing in Minnesota, the issue was one of principle, not political expediency. After the bill passed both houses, a delegation of about a dozen black men representing the "colored citi-

## NEGRO SUFFRAGE.

### Memorial of Colored Citizens of Minnesota to the Legislature.

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives:

We the undersigned, colored residents of the State of Minnesota, respectfully petition your honorable bodies to amend the Constitution of this State, by striking out the word "*white*," believing it not only superfluous, but proscriptive in its technicality—a mark of degradation, and *the* great auxiliary in supporting the unnatural prejudice against us who have committed no crime save the wearing complacently the dark skin our Creator has seen fit in his all-wise providence to clothe us with.

It is needless to tell your intelligent and respectable bodies, that we are not enemies to the true development of American civilization; that we believe Industry, Intelligence, Sobriety and Religion, the cardinal elements upon which we can erect good citizenship; and that a better education is only needed to awaken in us integrity and moral worth not inferior to that of more intelligent and highly enlightened white citizens.

It does seem to us incompatible with the spirit and genius of American institutions, when we reflect we are taxed to support the State exchequer and its territorial subdivisions, without any recognition of identity—our citizenship. Our property is "taxed without representation"—a diversion of the great moral principle that should more properly underlie the fabric of our glorious Government.

And, in this fiery ordeal through which our happy country is being forced, we will, as we have, yield it all the aid and sympathy of which we are capable. We

*Prosuffrage petition from "the colored residents of the State of Minnesota," signed by R. T. Grey, A. Jackson, H. Hawkins, Ed. James, M. Jernigan, and W. Griffin, from the St. Paul Press, January 20, 1865*

<sup>35</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1865, p. 66–67, 101, 109, 122, 139; *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 20, p. 3, Jan. 21, p. 1; Jan. 22, p. 1—all 1865; *St. Paul Pioneer*, Jan. 31, p. 4, Feb. 2, p. 4, Feb. 7, p. 4—all 1865. On the Golden Key Club, see *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 8, 1865, p. 4. R. T. Grey, A. Jackson, H. Hawkins, E. James, M. Jernigan, and W. Griffin signed the memorial.

<sup>36</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1865, p. 141–42.

zens of St. Paul," led by R. T. Grey, called on Griswold at his hotel to present him with a gold-headed cane in appreciation for his work and to thank other legislators for their support.<sup>37</sup>

The debate across the state immediately grew heated. In March, some prosuffrage Republican newspapers were linking voting rights to literacy, thus joining the significance of a good education with citizenship. One month later, the Civil War was over and Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was dead. By the time of the Republican state convention in early September, however, most party newspapers had joined their brethren in supporting black suffrage.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, the Democratic press, already strident, waxed ugly, at first turning the campaign into a personal attack on Griswold. The *Mankato Weekly Record* called him a "Negro at heart" and contended that because he devoted "his exclusive time and talents to legislating for the negro. . . . we shall not be surprised to learn . . . that he has painted himself black and become a negro—as a change of color is all that is necessary to complete the transformation." The *Chatfield Democrat*, reporting that the delegation of black men had given Griswold a cane, distorted the style and substance of his remarks of gratitude.

Udder states will, I doubt not, foller de scent of Minnesota, and 'stend to all de po'r white folks de same pribilege dat yo'a is goin' to 'stend to de peoples of Minnesota at de nex' 'lection, and we will lib to see de day when da will be neiber white nor black, but de beautiful yaller . . . cas da know how improbin' it am to misseminate wid de culleded folks.<sup>39</sup>

It was all-out war as the Democrats exploited the deepest prejudices and fears—civil equality meant social equality, and this meant miscegenation. Three days after the Democratic state convention in August, the *Chatfield Democrat* drew the connection.

The people of this country should not deceive themselves in one most important issue

now before them. Negro suffrage . . . means much more than the simple fact of conferring the right of voting upon the released slaves of the south, and their little less enlightened brethren of the north. Their intention is to place them with you in the jury box, beside you at the table, along with you in bed—to make them your father-in-law, your brother-in-law, your son-in-law, your uncle, your aunt, your niece, your nephew—your equal in everything and your superior in patriotism, blackness and flavor. It don't mean that the privileges of Sambo are to cease when he shall march to the polls and offset your vote with his, but you must take him to your home, have your wife wait on him, let him kiss your sister, set up with your daughter—marry her if he wants her, and raise any number of tan-colored grandchildren. You will be called on by the congo as a candidate for congress, the legislature, and all other offices of honor and profit. Negro suffrage is but a steping [*sic*] stone to universal equality in everything, even to the detestable and God-forbidden principle of miscegenation. In it is covered up all the hideousness of amalgamation. It is loaded with the foeted breath of mongeralism, and carries with it the putridity that will blot from earth the white race of this continent.

Other papers published similar views, suggesting that miscegenation was the logical product of black suffrage.<sup>40</sup>

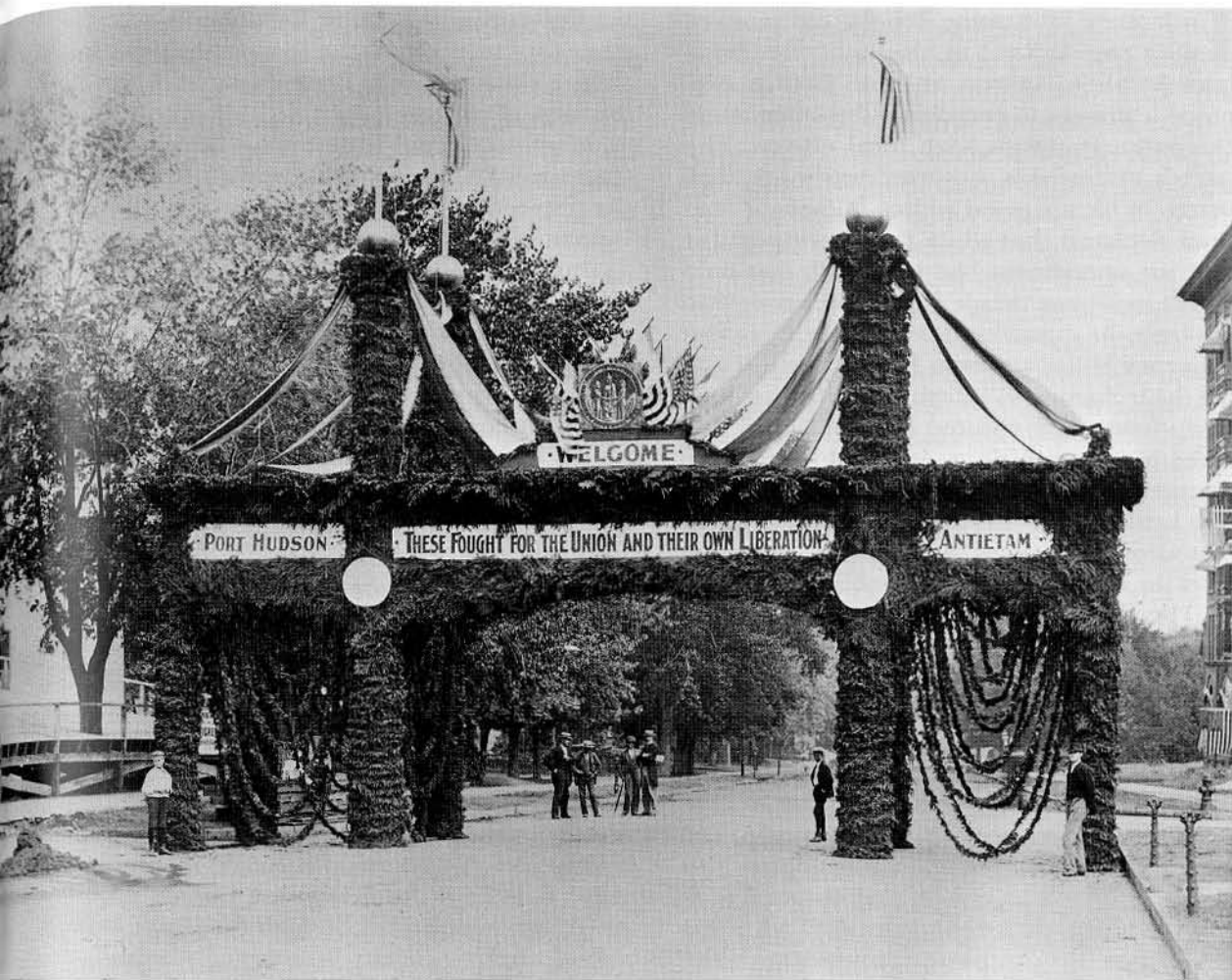
Democratic editors brought forth other arguments from their arsenal. Performance during the war, some argued, by no means earned African Americans the ballot. Blacks had become soldiers "through compulsion . . . and could never be relied upon to 'bare their bosoms to the enemy's shot and shell,' without being under the protection of gallant white men." Newspapers argued dubiously that the heroic Civil War veterans were "almost unanimously opposed to negro suffrage." Furthermore, in rejecting black suffrage Minnesotans

<sup>37</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1865, p. 154; Minnesota, *Journal of the Senate*, 1865, p. 165; Secretary of State, "Census of the State of Minnesota . . . 1865," in *Annual Report*, 1865, p. 417, 445; *St. Paul Press*, Mar. 1, 1865, p. 4. On black suffrage as a matter of principle, see *Preston Republican*, Feb. 17, 1865, p. 2; *Mantorville Express*, Nov. 3, 1865, p. 2; *St. Paul Press*, Sept. 21, 1865, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, *Mankato Union*, Mar. 17, 1865, p. 2; *Hastings Conserver*, quoted in *Winona Democrat*, Aug. 26, 1865, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Mankato Weekly Record*, Feb. 4, 1865, p. 2; *Chatfield Democrat*, Mar. 18, 1865, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Chatfield Democrat*, Feb. 18, Aug. 5, Aug. 19, Sept. 9—all 1865, p. 2; *Shakopee Weekly Argus*, Sept. 12, 1865, p. 1; *St. Paul Pioneer*, Nov. 5, 7, 1865, both p. 1; *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Sept. 29, 1865, p. 2.



*Arch honoring black Civil War troops, erected by St. Paul's African American community as part of a huge, national Grand Army of the Republic encampment, 1896. The monument stood at Summit Avenue and Sixth Street in St. Paul, a pivotal point for the parade route and other festivities of the week-long gathering.*

were backing President Andrew Johnson, a fellow Democrat who was then enjoying sentimental support in the wake of the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln, and were protecting the employment of white laborers. Foreign-born voters would lose their influence on state government, journalists also warned.<sup>41</sup>

The assault only strengthened the resolve of such leading Republicans as Christopher C. Andrews, a major general in the Civil War, Congressman Ignatius Donnelly, outgoing Governor Stephen Miller, and gubernatorial candidate William Marshall, who had been a leader at the

first gathering of Republicans in St. Anthony 10 years earlier. Notably absent in outward support were Senator Alexander Ramsey and Congressman William Windom.<sup>42</sup>

It was at last time for the people to decide. On election day, November 7, 1865, Minnesota's suffrage amendment failed by a vote of 14,651 to 12,138. Prosuffrage William Marshall easily won the governorship, and the entire Republican slate was swept into office, but the people simply were not ready for the black men of Minnesota to enjoy what other male Minnesota citizens enjoyed.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *Chatfield Democrat*, May 20, 1865, p. 2; *St. Paul Pioneer*, Oct. 10, p. 1, Oct. 12, p. 1, 2, Oct. 14, p. 1, Oct. 22, p. 1—all 1865; *Shakopee Weekly Argus*, Sept. 2, 1865, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 76–86.

<sup>43</sup> Secretary of State, "Census," 453.



In January 1866, some Republicans renewed their commitment to black suffrage. Legislator Stephen Hewson of Isanti County proposed a strategy to coordinate the amendment campaign statewide with local efforts. The party's enthusiasm, however, was more tempered. In his inaugural address, Governor Marshall declared that while public support for such an amendment had increased, he would let the legislature decide if the time was right to resubmit the question to the people. Outgoing Governor Miller was even less supportive, urging the legislature to submit a qualified suffrage amendment that covered three "classes": "all males of Indian, African, or mixed blood" over the age of 21 who could read and write; citizens who held property worth at least \$300; and anyone who had received an honorable discharge from the United States Army or Navy.<sup>44</sup>

The House, including most Republicans, voted 24 to 8 to kill the qualified suffrage amendment. According to one reporter, the defeat of the 1865 referendum had dampened Republican resolve; support of any form of universal suffrage might mean political suicide. The events in Washington also concerned them. President Johnson, who was having troubles with the Radical Republicans, was forming the Conservative Party, a coalition of northern Democrats and conservative Republicans who strongly opposed black suffrage. Minnesota Republicans watched anxiously as some of their leaders—men like Senator Daniel S. Norton and state Attorney General William Colvill—left the ranks to join



Governor William R. Marshall, 1867

the new party. Many other Republicans accepted endorsements from the Democratic party in 1866.<sup>45</sup> The Republican Party appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

Minnesota Republican support for black suffrage was at its lowest in 1866, revitalized only by the results of that fall's congressional elections. Despite Johnson's strongest efforts to campaign against the Radical Republicans, the voters nationwide returned overwhelming majorities to Congress in a clear repudiation of the president's policies; in Minnesota, Republicans experienced a splendid victory when they decisively won both congressional districts against Johnsonian candidates. As a result, many moderate Republicans across the nation began supporting radical efforts to enfranchise blacks. In January 1867 Congress granted suffrage to blacks residing in the District of Columbia and all federal territories and insisted that black suffrage be a requirement of statehood for Nebraska. In March, Congress required black suffrage as a condition of readmission to the union for former Confederate states.<sup>46</sup>

That year the Minnesota Republican Party acted with renewed vigor when Governor Marshall called for the legislature to submit a suffrage referendum to the people. Representative B. F. Perry from Olmsted County sponsored and guided a bill through the House that also cleared the Senate with virtually no resistance. Democratic opposition was weak and demoralized until October when candidates and journalists began to attack. As before, they appealed to the racial prejudices of foreign-born Minnesotans and laborers, shocking supporters with stories of miscegenation and reminding true Democrats that America belonged to the white man.<sup>47</sup>

The Republicans, too, stepped up their campaign. They strategically decided not to identify the amendment on the referendum ballot as black suffrage but cryptically as "an amendment

<sup>44</sup> *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 10, 1866, p. 4; Stephen Miller and William R. Marshall, *Annual Message of Governor Miller and Inaugural Address of Governor Marshall to the Legislature of Minnesota*, 1866, p. 21, 22, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1866, p. 150; *Stillwater Messenger*, Feb. 13, 1866, p. 2; Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 123–24. On Johnson and the Conservative Party, see LaWanda Cox and John H. Cox, *Politics, Principles and Prejudice, 1865–1866: Dilemma of Reconstruction America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

<sup>46</sup> McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 364; William Gillette, *The Right To Vote: Politics and the Passage of the Fifteenth Amendment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 28–31; Bruce M. White, Jean A. Brookins, et al., comps., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors, 1857–1977* (St. Paul: MHS, 1977), 68.

<sup>47</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1867, p. 114–15; Minnesota, *Journal of the Senate*, 1867, p. 154; *St. Paul Pioneer*, Oct. 15, 1867, p. 1, 2, Nov. 5, 1867, p. 1; *Chatfield Democrat*, Oct. 26, 1867, p. 2; *Mankato Weekly Record*, Oct. 19, 1867, p. 2.

to section one, article seven of the Constitution," evidently to avoid repelling unknowing antisuffrage Republicans. The referendum once again failed, but this time by a smaller margin. After losing by 2,513 votes—9 percent of the 26,789 cast in 1865—the proposal was defeated in 1867 by 1,298 votes, just 2 percent of the 56,220 cast.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps more significant in this defeat than the "weak-kneed Republicans" was the state central committee's failure until late into the campaign to direct county committees to place the question on the general Republican ballot. Consequently, the committees in key Republican counties, because of timidity, indifference, or "very general misunderstandings," printed the amendment on a separate ballot which was then either overlooked or ignored by voters who otherwise supported the Republican ticket. The *Rochester Post* reported almost 32,000 votes for Republican candidates compared to about 27,500 prosuffrage votes; the 4,500-vote difference would have secured the amendment.<sup>49</sup> It was a painful lesson. The Republicans set their sights on 1868.

The opening salvo for the amendment was fired by Governor Marshall in his January 1868 annual message to the state legislature. Appealing heavily to Republican values, he argued that Minnesota was ready to support black suffrage and insisted that public opposition had declined. The black man, who had served his country well, was being taxed without representation. Republicans had a duty to protect the rights of oppressed people, he argued. His comments were warmly received.<sup>50</sup>

Three weeks later, state Senator Hanford L. Gordon of Wright County, insisting that the denial of rights would lead to tyranny of the majority and class warfare, sponsored a bill to place black suffrage on the November ballot. He recommended that the amendment again be identified in arcane parliamentary language to garner unsuspecting antisuffrage votes. More-

over, he proposed that the question be placed on the general Republican ticket rather than on a separate ballot. Gordon and his colleagues believed that the large Republican turnout expected for the presidential election pitting the popular Ulysses S. Grant against Democrat Horatio Seymour would draw enough votes to guarantee the amendment's success.<sup>51</sup>

Principled stances came from endorsed Republican congressional candidates Morton S. Wilkinson and C. C. Andrews, who insisted that black suffrage was more important than personal political gain. Wilkinson, who triumphed in the First District, said that it was the duty of Minnesota Republicans "to work for it and talk for it, and urge your neighbors to vote for it." Andrews, who lost the Second District to Democrat Eugene M. Wilson, had agreed, insisting, "I would rather be defeated a dozen times over than have the suffrage amendment lost." These leaders interwove their campaigns with the amendment so that to vote for one was to vote for the other. In late 1868 the amendment passed with a wide margin—more than 9,000 votes. Not surprisingly, the tally followed party lines. According to Libman, 40 of the state's 41 counties voting for the Republican presidential candidate also supported the referendum, while 9 of the 10 counties supporting the Democratic candidate voted antisuffrage.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike Minnesota politicians, leaders in most northern states had retreated from advocating black suffrage during 1868, choosing in most cases to refrain from mentioning the issue. Instead, this was the year that the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, punitively aimed at reconstructing the southern states before readmitting them to the Union. Among its radical provisions were civil rights for southern blacks, rights that federal law did not extend to African Americans in the North. But Minnesota politicians and their constituents had taken that step. They had, according to the *St. Paul Press*, released black Minnesotans from the "odious political disabilities so long

<sup>48</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 137, 156, and, for a breakdown of voting patterns and causes for the defeat, 135–46.

<sup>49</sup> *Central Republican* (Faribault), Nov. 20, 1867, p. 2; *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 31, 1868, p. 1; *Rochester Post*, Nov. 23, 1867, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 156.

<sup>51</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 156–57; *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 31, 1868, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> *St. Paul Press*, Oct. 23, 1868, p. 1; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 23, 1868, p. 4; *Stillwater Republican*, Oct. 13, 1868, p. 1; White, Brookins, et al., *Minnesota Votes*, 68–69. Republican Ignatius Donnelly ran unendorsed and finished ahead of Andrews. Three counties did not submit returns. For a thorough interpretation, see Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 169–84, especially 178, 181–82.

**The St. Paul Daily Press.**

SAINT PAUL, JANUARY 3, 1869

## **Grand Mass Meeting.**

**CONVENTION OF COLORED CITIZENS OF MINNESOTA.**

**Celebration of the Anniversary of Emancipation and the Bestowal of the Elective Franchise.**

**Eloquent and Pointed Speeches.**

**Great Earnestness and Enthusiasm.**

**HARMONY, SOBRIETY AND GOOD ORDER.**

**Straightforward and Unequivocal Resolutions.**

**Endorsement of the Republican Party.**

**Festival in the Evening.**

*A Republican newspaper detailed the suffrage celebration: decorations, speakers and speeches, and the establishment and naming of officers of a new black organization, the Sons of Freedom.*

imposed upon them." In his keynote address delivered on January 1, 1869, to the celebratory Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of Minnesota, Governor Marshall proclaimed: "In the name of forty thousand of the free electors of this commonwealth, I welcome you to liberty and equality before the law. In the name of the State of Minnesota, which has relieved itself of the reproach of unjust discrimination against a class of its people, I welcome you to your political enfranchisement."<sup>53</sup>

Minnesota's accomplishment preceded by two years ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged . . . on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The state was one of only two in the postbellum North whose voters had approved black suffrage. (An 1868 referendum in neighboring Iowa was also successful; Wisconsin had enfranchised blacks in 1866, but through a state supreme court decision.) Nineteen of the nation's 37 states now extended voting rights to black men, including 10 reconstructed southern states and Nebraska, where suffrage had been a condition for obtaining statehood.<sup>54</sup>

In 1869 Congress debated and finally passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which was then sent to the states for the lengthy ratification process. On January 4, 1870, before his annual address to the state legislature, Governor Marshall sent a special message to the president of the senate urging prompt and unanimous ratification: "Minnesota, which has the proud pre-eminence of being among the first of the States to triumph over the unjust prejudice of caste and to have reformed her constitution . . . should not be the last to adopt this great measure of national regeneration." On January 13, the legislature complied, and later that year the Fifteenth Amendment became the law of the land.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *St. Paul Press*, Nov. 13, 1868, p. 1; *Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Press Printing Co., 1869), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Libman, "Struggle for Black Suffrage," 155, 186n2; *St. Paul Press*, Nov. 12, 1868, p. 2; Act of May 31, 1870, ch. 114, 16 Stat. 140.

<sup>55</sup> Minnesota, *Journal of the Senate*, 1870, p. 9, 21-25; Minnesota, *Journal of the House*, 1870, p. 29.

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