

Civic Support: Minnesota Communities and their Involvement in the Civil War

During the American Civil War much of the fighting occurred in the southern United States. While many civilians in the south found themselves caught up in the fray, there was an equally enthusiastic civilian populace in the north. Many communities in Minnesota engaged in local efforts to support the war and union troops.

Northern contributions to the war were prevalent in areas like industry and politics, but also within local communities as well as privately between relatives and households.¹ Northern industrial superiority, although more well-known, was not the only contribution that union forces had in their favor.² Because Minnesota was a new state, many of its institutions at the state level were still being developed.³

Since Minnesota was not as established as other states, many aspects of daily life were determined and supported by local communities.⁴ When the war began, things like recruiting and supplying troops was most commonly done at the local level. As the war went on communities and individuals did what they could to make up for any shortcomings in federal or state support.⁵ This reflected the attitude of self-reliance that was necessary for many of the people living on the prairie.⁶

¹ Marilyn Mayer Culpepper. *Trials and Triumphs: Women of the American Civil War*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991), 123-127

² William L. Shea, and Terrance J. Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 5

³ Theodore Christian. Blegen, *Minnesota a History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 220-226

⁴ Jocelyn Wills. *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 13-14

⁵ Jocelyn Wills. *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 17

⁶ John Isch. *A Battle for Living: The Life and Experiences of Lavina Eastlick* (New Ulm, Minn: Brown County Historical Society, 2012), 43

Due to the rural nature of Minnesota and its frontier lifestyle, many individuals had learned or were learning how to rely on themselves and their immediate communities to sustain themselves.⁷ When Minnesota became involved in the war, these attitudes were put behind efforts to support loved ones and community members on the front lines.⁸

Women in particular experienced many changes in their roles and abilities to engage in activities that were traditionally reserved for men.⁹ This too was rooted in the harsh conditions of the Minnesota frontier where survival took priority over social mores. Women ran and maintained households, properties and businesses while the men were at war.¹⁰ This would not have likely been the case prior to the war but was a great opportunity to change these roles.

Minnesota's influx of settlers from Europe and the eastern United States created a surge in its population just prior to the war. The Homestead act also fueled this dramatic increase in population and establishment of communities.¹¹ While most communities were centered around things like agriculture or logging, Saint Paul was a hub for those arriving in the area. Aside from what is now the Twin Cities area, most towns were very localized and comprised of the families farming the area.¹²

This sense of community would later contribute to the drive for support of troops and the acceptance of women moving into different positions. At the onset of the war, Governor Alexander Ramsey felt the need to solidify Minnesota's standing within the union and pledged

⁷ John Isch. *A Battle for Living: The Life and Experiences of Lavina Eastlick* (New Ulm, Minn: Brown County Historical Society, 2012), 39

⁸ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

⁹ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

¹⁰ Marilyn Mayer, Culpepper. *Trials and Triumphs: Women of the American Civil War*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991), 60-62

¹¹ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), xvii

¹² John Isch. *A Battle for Living: The Life and Experiences of Lavina Eastlick* (New Ulm, Minn: Brown County Historical Society, 2012), 41

Minnesota troops for the cause.¹³ This also created a sense of loyalty amongst the new arrivals to the area in that they wanted to prove and feel the connection to their own state.¹⁴

Troops from Minnesota were sought after because of their grit and ability to survive in harsh conditions. Almost everyone living in Minnesota regardless of their occupation had to have an ability to adapt and overcome obstacles.¹⁵ The similarities in lifestyle between the Minnesota troops contributed to a sense of camaraderie and desire to protect what they believed to be their own culture.¹⁶

There were many economic changes that Minnesota experienced during the war including the need for its agriculture and industries.¹⁷ It's location on the Mississippi river was also important for transporting troops and goods necessary for the war to other areas. Aside from its enthusiasm for the war, the state stood to make gains from wartime demands.¹⁸ The federal government's push further west led to clashes with the Dakota but also opened vast expanses of land to agriculture.¹⁹

When combined, all of these conditions were ideal for creating a patriotic and well-motivated populace in Minnesota that was willing to support national issues at the local level.²⁰ While many Minnesota communities were centered on their relationship with neighbors, they did

¹³ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 4

¹⁴ James Madison Bowler, Elizabeth Caleff, Bowler, and Andrea R. Foroughi,. *Go If You Think It Your Duty: a Minnesota Couple's Civil War Letters* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 6-9

¹⁵ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 6

¹⁶ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 5-6

¹⁷ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

¹⁸ Aaron Sheehan-Dean. "The Long Civil War: A Historiography of the Consequences of the Civil War." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 119, no. 2 (2011): 106-53. www.jstor.org/stable/41310737.

¹⁹ Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars 1861-1865 St. Paul, Minn: Electrotyped and printed for the State by the Pioneer Press Company, 1891., iv

²⁰ Rhoda R. Gilman, "The History and Peopling of Minnesota: Its Culture." *Daedalus* 129, no. 3 (2000): 1-29. www.jstor.org/stable/20027645.

feel a need to contribute to the state and country.²¹ Since the north was largely removed from the fighting, support often came in the form of gifts and care packages to soldiers or units from a particular area.²²

Due to the relatively new infrastructure in Minnesota, some of these contributions were made out of necessity such as the uniforms provided to early troops by Minnesota based companies.²³ Many well-educated Minnesotans also filled the ranks such as teachers, shop owners, and farmers who wanted an opportunity to get away from the monotonous life of the prairie.²⁴ Because so many Minnesotans were new to the state, they were not so established that war would have caused a major disruption to their lives.²⁵

Those that stayed behind such as women and children either contributed on an individual basis or formed organizations to help. One such organization was the St. Paul Volunteer Aid Society which was formed by women from the St. Paul area.²⁶ The organization sewed items for soldiers and gathered food for hospitals. Another such organization was the Sanitary Commission which raised money to establish aid stations.²⁷

Both organizations provided basic necessities and reading materials for soldiers that would alleviate some of the hardships they faced. Organizations like these were able to provide camaraderie for those on the home front and combine resources in a manner that would have

²¹ Rhoda R. Gilman, "The History and Peopling of Minnesota: Its Culture." *Daedalus* 129, no. 3 (2000): 1-29. www.jstor.org/stable/20027645.

²² Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars 1861-1865 St. Paul, Minn: Electrotyped and printed for the State by the Pioneer Press Company, 1891., 163-168

²³ Kenneth, Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, 6

²⁴ Ibid. 5

²⁵ Ibid. 4-6

²⁶ Ibid. 181

²⁷ Ibid. 180

been difficult for individuals or smaller communities.²⁸ Their size also meant that a larger number of soldiers could be helped with each drive, event or fundraiser that was hosted.

Local newspapers were an important part of communicating information about the war and requesting help from citizens.²⁹ These combined with correspondence from soldiers helped and continue to help piece together the larger scale of the war with individual experiences.³⁰ Letters were the primary means of requesting goods and supplies from home and often kept friends and loved ones at home abreast of their situation.³¹

Soldiers often communicated the loss of comrades through writing and gave more detail about the circumstances than would have been communicated through government channels. Elijah E. Edwards was a chaplain with the 7th Minnesota infantry and wrote numerous entries in his journal. One such entry indicated that he received more autonomy as a chaplain than most military personnel. "The government gives him the rank of a captain of cavalry, and the pay of one, but he is not in the volunteer service required to wear the uniform of one to where it's insignia or carry a sword."³²

People like Elijah Edwards were able to convey the actual conditions of the battlefield and offer views on things that the government might not. Since there were a variety of opinions about the war and Minnesota's involvement in it, politicians at both the federal and state level

²⁸ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

²⁹ Kenneth, Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, 19

³⁰ "First Minnesota Regiment: Report of Reverend E.D. Neill," *The Pioneer and Democrat*, January 1, 1862 <http://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/lccn/sn83016745/1862-01-01/ed-1/seq-1>

³¹ James Madison, Bowler, Elizabeth Caleff, Bowler, and Andrea R. Foroughi, *Go If You Think It Your Duty: a Minnesota Couple's Civil War Letters* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 30-35

³² Civil War Journals, July 4th to August 16th, 1865, images 2-4, Elijah E. Edwards Civil War journals, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00803/pdf/00803-000001-1.pdf>

were privy to the impact of the war on their constituents. This also coincided with the beginning of the U.S.-Dakota War in 1862.³³

During the U.S.-Dakota War, many Minnesotans began experiencing clashes with the Dakota and this was presented to Governor Alexander Ramsey. After one of these incidents General Henry Sibley wrote to Governor Ramsey “Sir, representations have been made to me by the citizens of Belle Plaine and vicinity of annoyance to whites from Sioux Indians in the vicinity.”³⁴

This was an additional conflict that Minnesotans found themselves involved in. However, this one was much closer to home and involved more Minnesota civilians than the Civil War. In “Minnesota in the Civil War” Kenneth Carley mentions that Minnesota troops were sent to fight the Dakota including the “Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Infantry Regiments.”³⁵ Following the war with the Dakota, many of these troops were sent to the south to augment union forces there.³⁶

Minnesota felt the effects of both the Civil War and U.S.-Dakota War and this generated an active populace. While some may have felt that the Civil War was far from home they were concerned for their loved ones and visa-versa when the conflict with the Dakota began.³⁷ Larger

³³ Theodore Christian. Blegen, *Minnesota a History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 259

³⁴ Records of Governor Alexander Ramsey, 1860-1863, images 1-3, Minnesota. Governor (1860-1863: Ramsey), Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/gov016.xml?return=brand%3Dfindaids%26q%3DCivil%2520War%26startindex%3D151>

³⁵ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, 78

³⁶ Kenneth Carley. *Minnesota in the Civil War*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, 79

³⁷ "Minnesota Requests \$50,000 For Civil War-Sioux Uprising." *History News* 16, no. 4 (1961): 43. www.jstor.org/stable/42647311.

cities like St. Paul and even small towns like Chatfield had local newspapers that kept citizens apprised of both conflicts and served as a platform for various views about the war.^{38 39}

In Chatfield Minnesota, the Chatfield Democrat covered both conflicts on almost a daily basis. Although biased, it did express political views of those who wrote for it as well as letters to the editor.⁴⁰ In Saint Paul, The Pioneer and Democrat also offered information to citizens although this was to a larger and somewhat more diverse population than that in Chatfield.

While both of these newspapers had noticeable political biases, they are some of the more reliable primary sources that exist that chronicle the Civil War from the Minnesota perspective on almost a daily basis. They are also where a lot of advertisements and notifications were placed.^{41 42} When there were major developments in the war, these forms of media were what kept the public informed about the state of the war and Minnesota's involvement.⁴³

One such update on the conditions of the war was in The Pioneer and Democrat where Reverend E.D. Neill explained conditions. "Depending upon information from those who had never once visited our camp hospital, nor consulted with the regimental Surgeons, boxes of double sheets and other articles, have been forwarded, suitable only for a general hospital, and which cannot be transported from place to place, owing to their bulk and weight. It is therefore recommended that the resources of the philanthropic be more carefully husbanded."⁴⁴

³⁸ The Pioneer and Democrat (St. Paul) <https://newspapers.mnhs.org/jsp/browse.jsp>

³⁹ The Chatfield Democrat (Chatfield, MN) <https://newspapers.mnhs.org/jsp/browse.jsp>

⁴⁰ "The Voice of the People," *The Chatfield Democrat*, October 25, 1862.

<http://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/lccn/sn83016508/1862-10-25/ed-1/seq-2>

⁴¹ The Pioneer and Democrat (St. Paul) <https://newspapers.mnhs.org/jsp/browse.jsp>

⁴² The Chatfield Democrat (Chatfield, MN) <https://newspapers.mnhs.org/jsp/browse.jsp>

⁴³ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

⁴⁴ Reverend E.D. Niell, "First Minnesota Regiment," *The Pioneer and Democrat*, January 1, 1862. 1.

These calls for donations and ways to improve contributions was easily communicated with formats such as newspapers. Aside from the many calls for donations, newspapers were a political platform that both sides used to express their views.⁴⁵ While many were in favor of the war during this time, there were differing opinions about who was to blame and how the war should be conducted.⁴⁶

Because smaller communities tended to have fewer forms of media and the information in some areas was conveyed through a single, or at times, handful of newspapers.⁴⁷ There were naturally communal connections to certain units or groups of soldiers that could be shared amongst the entire community or between individuals.⁴⁸

Letters from soldiers to their communities often contained information about the whereabouts of other soldiers from their community.⁴⁹ This was helpful when newspapers or government forms of communication failed to provide enough detail for people to contact loved ones or be informed about their wellbeing.⁵⁰

Local efforts to contribute to particular individuals or units within the army were affected by requests or news of shortcomings in government rations.⁵¹ Often, this meant that a contribution to one particular soldier might be shared amongst others within their units. This was often reciprocated depending on who had the most to share with others.⁵²

⁴⁵ "The Holiday Season Over, Congress will Begin its Work" *The Pioneer and Democrat*, January 4, 1862, 1.

⁴⁶ J.S. McKenny & Co. "Stand by the Constitution," *The Chatfield Democrat*, April 5, 1862, 2.

⁴⁷ The Chatfield Democrat (Chatfield, MN) <https://newspapers.mnhs.org/jsp/browse.jsp>

⁴⁸ Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Frontier: A Neglected Sector of the Civil War." *Minnesota History* 38, no. 6 (1963): 274-86. www.jstor.org/stable/20176506.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, xiv, xxi

⁵⁰ Thomas Christie. Christie, William, and Smith, Hampton. *Brother of Mine: The Civil War Letters of Thomas and William Christie Saint Paul*: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011. 4-8, 15-18

⁵¹ Thomas Christie. Christie, William, and Smith, Hampton. *Brother of Mine: The Civil War Letters of Thomas and William Christie Saint Paul*: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011. 31-36

⁵² Thomas Christie. Christie, William, and Smith, Hampton. *Brother of Mine: The Civil War Letters of Thomas and William Christie Saint Paul*: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011. 46-48

Efforts at the community level were crucial to supplying troops and for supporting each other. The newness of Minnesota as a state required it and its citizens to make efforts that were not seen in some of the more established areas of the country. Additionally, the conditions in Minnesota produced a strong and persevering populace that proved to be very self-reliant.

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