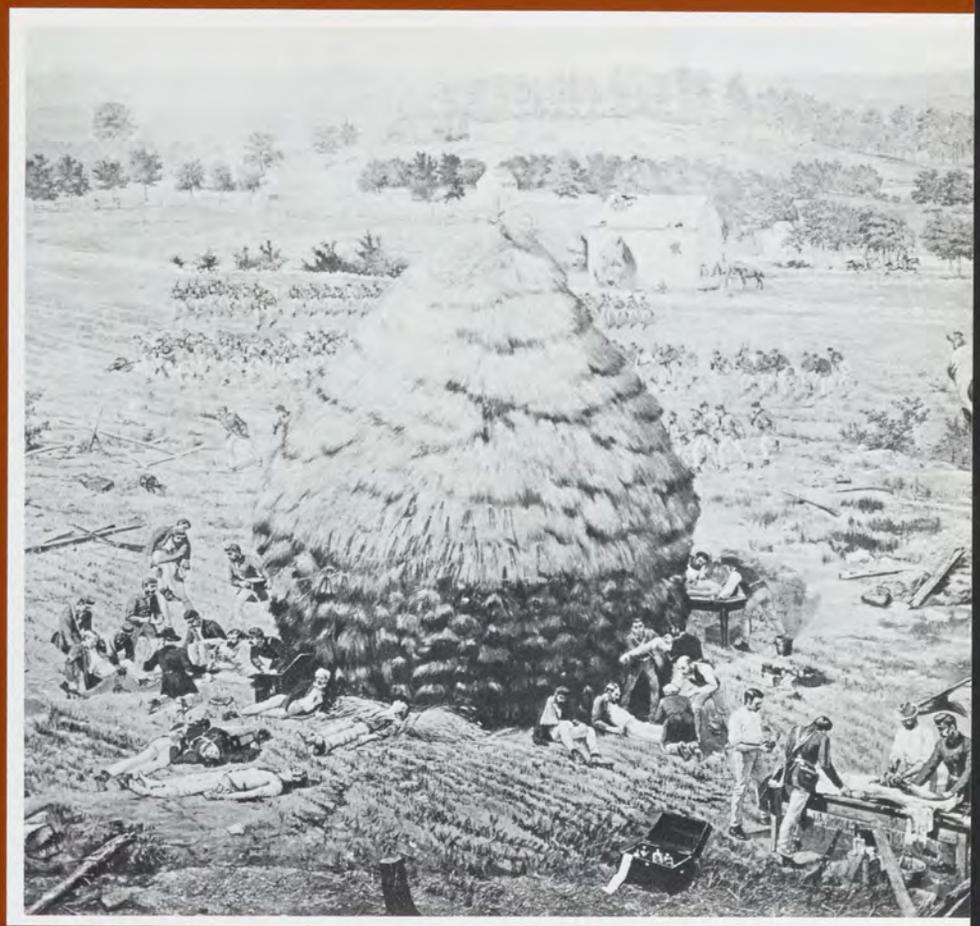


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Fall

1970

Volume 7

Number 2

Ramsey County History

Published by the RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

Fall	W. R. Brown's Civil War Diary The War Within a War	Page 3
1970		
Volume 7	Ramsey County Medical Society Survives Its First 100 Years	Page 14
Number 2	Forgotten Pioneers . . . X	Page 20
	Book Review: History of A Region And A People	Page 22

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted, 1970, by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to Ramsey County History. Single issues sell for \$1.00. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed but, since the Society is an eleemosynary institution, no payment can be made for contributions. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published, if accepted, as space permits.

ON THE COVER: A field hospital during the Civil War often was literally that, with the surgeons caring for the wounded behind whatever shelter they could find. In this painting by Heisser, from a panorama of the Battle of Gettysburg, surgeons are at work behind a haystack while the battle rages in the field behind them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Unless otherwise indicated, pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad, of the state historical society's audio-visual staff, for their help.

Forgotten Pioneers...X

RAMSEY COUNTY has had its share of famous pioneers whose names fill the pages of the history books. But there have been many more men and women who have been almost forgotten but who have left their names upon streets, parks, buildings, and in the official records. The following article is the tenth in a series of sketches of "forgotten pioneers," a special feature in Ramsey County History.

EDWARD PHELAN

IN April of 1839, Edward Phelan (or Phalen) was discharged from the army at Fort Snelling and few apparently were sorry to see him go. He has been described by one writer as an "unscrupulous, wicked"¹ character.

Phelan decided to settle in St. Paul and moved onto a claim bounded by Eagle and Third Streets, St. Peter Street and the river.

John Hays, a friend who was to be discharged some days later, gave Phelan the money to buy a portion of land adjoining his own. When Hays was discharged, he moved into a battered little shack with Phelan, and they began clearing the two sections of land.

About five months later, Hays mysteriously disappeared. Rumors drifted to Fort Snelling. In his journal, Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Sioux agent at the Fort, has this account:

"Sunday, 15th of September: a man, by name Hays, an Irishman, lost. Supposed killed — even reported to have been murdered by the chief Wa-kin-yan-ton-ka (Big Thunder, Little Crow's father). No such belief rests with me. I incline to the opinion that his neighbor, Phelan, knows something. Hays lived with him and had money.

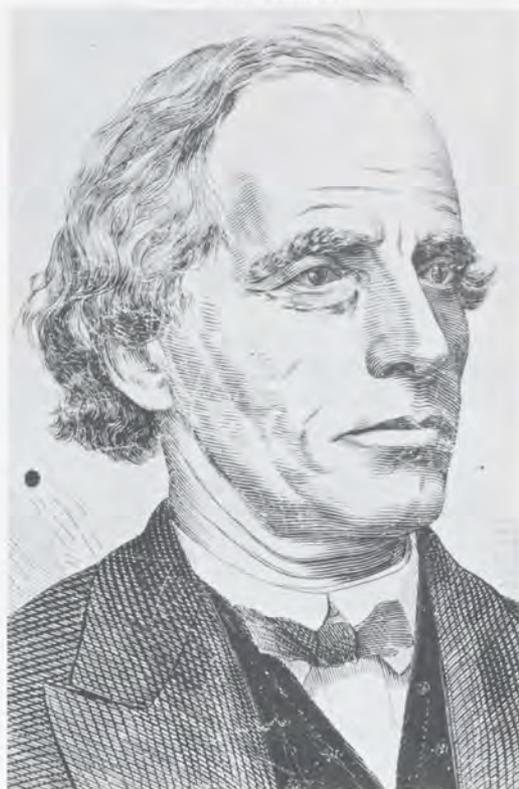
"Friday, 27th of September: Wabsheedah, or the Dancer, called at the office to say that his sons had found the body of Mr. Hays, lost some time ago, in the river near Carver's Cave.¹"

The condition of the body indicated a desperate struggle. The head, nose and jaws were badly battered.

Phelan was arrested by Henry H. Sibley and appeared before him on September 28th. Phelan was charged with murder and locked in the guardhouse at the Fort until a steamboat could take him to Prairie du Chien, site of the nearest federal court.

THE TRIAL took some time, but Phelan was acquitted and he returned to St. Paul.

Vetal Guerin





In the meantime, another pioneer settler, Vetal Guerin, had taken claim to the Phelan-Hays properties.

Phelan ordered Guerin off the property, but was driven away. That night, Guerin prepared for a renewed attack. He called some friends to his shanty, "where cards and whiskey made them contented."² Phelan arrived as expected, sleeves rolled up, ax in hand, and demanded possession, which was firmly refused. When Phelan continued his demands, Guerin's friends took him outside and made their position even clearer. They said that if Phelan ever bothered Guerin again, they would either "pitch him over the bluff" or "lynch him."³

Neither choice appealed to Phelan and he resorted to the law, taking the case before Joseph R. Brown, justice of the peace at Grey Cloud Island. Brown ruled against Phelan, declaring that Phelan had been absent for a period of more than six months and so had lost all claim to the land.

PHELAN TOOK UP his next claim near the creek which now bears his name, on the present site of Hamm's brewery.

In 1850, Phelan was indicted for perjury by the first grand jury of Ramsey County, but escaped arrest by heading for California. He reportedly "met with a violent death in crossing the plains."⁴

Was Phelan the accused murderer history has made of him? Certain facts are here, Major Taliaferro's statement is here. But two more statements are interesting.

A portion of the Fort Snelling Guardhouse, left, where Edward Phelan was held. The original guardhouse had long since disappeared. This photograph shows a portion of the Fort Snelling reconstruction.

Some years after Hays' death, an Indian, Do-Wau, "the singer," was shot and fatally wounded at the Battle of Kaposia. On his deathbed, he confessed to the murder of Hays, but few believed him.⁵

The other statement:

"The Indians have told me since that Hays was not killed by Phalen. They always spoke to me as though they knew who did kill him . . . Old Phalen was human. He took his toddy, too, but he would not injure a hair of your head, while I knew him." — A. L. Larpenteur

Sources

1. Castle, Henry A., *History of St. Paul and Vicinity*. Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1912, p. 12.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Blus, Frank C., *Past and Present of the Twin Cities*. St. Paul and Minneapolis: Frank C. Blus Publishing Company, St. Paul and Minneapolis, April, 1888, p. 243.
5. Minnesota Historical Collections, published by the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1901. — Vol. 9.

Also:

Hennessy, W. B., Chicago, 1906, *Past and Present of St. Paul, Minnesota*.



Photo by Henry Hall

THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.