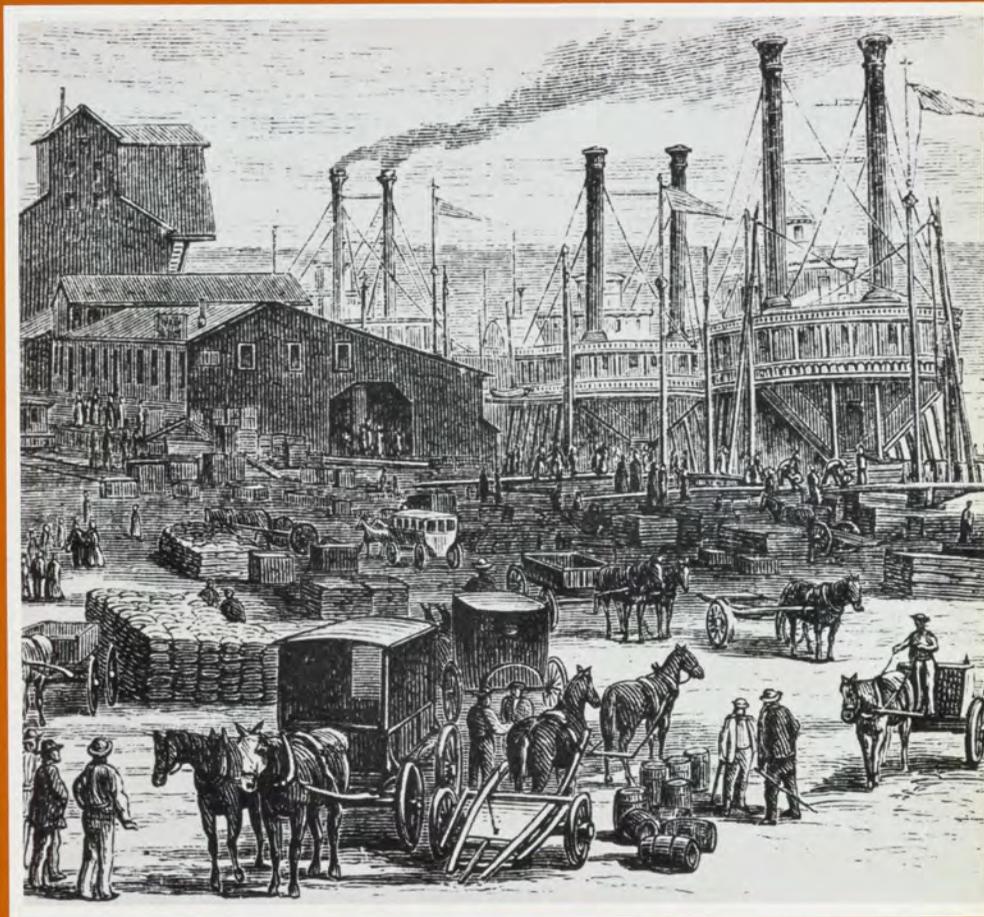
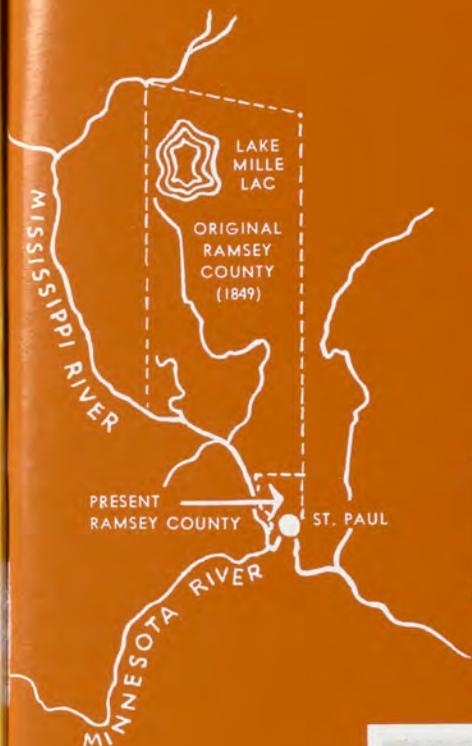


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: This steel engraving of St. Paul's Lower Landing as it looked in 1853 shows the bustling river front during the boom years of steamboat travel on the Upper Mississippi. See story beginning on page 15.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Pictures illustrating the story which begins on page 3 are from the author's scrapbook, except for the pictures of Battle Creek and the little railroad station. All other 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...XI



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

GEORGE LOOMIS BECKER

GEORGE L. BECKER, a former St. Paul alderman, its mayor in 1856, and a state senator from Ramsey County from 1868 to 1871, has left his name upon a Minnesota county, a township, and a town — for reasons which perhaps had less to do with his service to St. Paul and Ramsey County than with his untiring efforts in the development of Minnesota's early railroads.

Nevertheless, nearly 40 years before his death in 1904, Becker was being described as one of St. Paul's "foremost citizens in every good enterprise."¹

Born in Locke, Cayuga County, New York, on February 4, 1829, Becker obtained his early schooling in his native town. His father, Hiram Becker, a merchant, "able and disposed to educate his children and to properly prepare them for the duties of life,"² was a descendant of an old Dutch family that had come to America in the seventeenth century and settled in the Mohawk River valley. His mother, whose maiden name was Sophia Millard, was of Huguenot ancestry. The Millard family, driven from France into England by religious persecution, finally emigrated to America and landed in Boston in 1650.

In 1841, when his family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, George Becker entered

the freshman class of the University of Michigan. He graduated in 1846 when he was 17 — the youngest member of his class.

HE SPENT the next three years in the Ann Arbor law offices of George Sedgewick. In October, 1849, Becker moved to St. Paul. The following January, just a few weeks before his 21st birthday, he was admitted to the bar. Soon after, Becker, Edmund Rice and William Hollenshead formed a law firm which, until its dissolution in 1856, was "one of the most successful and best known law firms of the territorial era of Minnesota."³

But the advent of the railroad era, in which Becker was to play such a part, was at hand in Minnesota. Surveying and the beginning of grading of a 10-mile stretch of road between St. Paul and St. Anthony had begun as early as the summer of 1857, but the work had been halted by the financial panic of that fall. Finally, in the spring of 1862, a new contract was let for completion of this part of a line which eventually was to run from Stillwater to Breckenridge.

On September 9, 1861, the "William Crooks," first railroad locomotive to be put into service in the state, had arrived at the steamboat landing in St. Paul, where a crowd had gathered to welcome it. Ten months later, two small passenger cars arrived, again



by river steamer. On June 28, 1862, they were coupled to the "William Crooks" and the train's first run was made between St. Paul and St. Anthony.

"FOR A TIME there seemed to be some question as to whether or not the train would be able to make the grade leading out of St. Paul, but it was accomplished."⁴ Henry Sibley, Alexander Ramsey, James J. Hill, and many others made that first trip. Edmund Rice, president of the line, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, must have been aboard, also, as well as his good friend and former law partner, George L. Becker. That summer, Becker was named land commissioner for the railroad. When the line's first division was organized on February 6, 1864, he was elected division president.

In 1869, Becker selected and named the town site of Willmar, Minnesota, platted when the railroad went through. The following year when the township was established, it also was named Willmar in honor of Leon Willmar, a native of Belgium who was living in London and acting as agent for the European bondholders of the St. Paul and Pacific.⁵

"UNDER HIS able management, and largely by his efforts and influence, 317 miles of road have been constructed," J. Fletcher Williams wrote in 1873. "Foreign capital has been enlisted to the extent of millions, thus proving a source of wealth to our state, opening up a vast region hitherto a wilderness, now filled with prosperous towns and fertile farms. In the discharge of his duties, Mr. Becker has performed an immense amount of physical and mental labor, making frequent journeys east and to Europe, besides carrying on his large office

The "William Crooks," shortly after its arrival in Minnesota in 1861.

business at home, and filling responsible public offices at the same time."⁶

In March, 1885, Governor Lucius F. Hubbard appointed Becker to the newly-created State Board of Railroad Commissioners.⁷ He served on the commission until 1901, much of the time as senior member of the board, acting as its chairman.

George Loomis Becker died in St. Paul on January 6, 1904, in his seventy-fifth year.

T. M. Newson described him as "... popular with the masses ... a pleasantly spoken gentleman; domestic in his tastes, [who] moves along in his every-day duties quietly and methodically."⁸

In recognition of his services to the state, and "in honor of the man himself," Minnesota gave his name to one of its counties.⁹ Becker township in Sherburne County, and the town of Becker also are named for him.¹⁰

Footnotes

1. J. Fletcher Williams, *History of St. Paul and the County of Ramsey*. Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, Volume IV, 1876, page 252.
2. C. C. Andrews, *History of St. Paul, Minnesota*. Syracuse, New York, 1890, Part II, page 115.
3. *Ibid.*, page 116.
4. Merle Potter, *101 Best Stories of Minnesota*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1931, page 209.
5. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*. Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, Volume VII, 1920, page 272.
6. Williams, *op. cit.*, page 251.
7. Andrews, *op. cit.*, Part II, page 115.
8. T. M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 1886, page 156.
9. Upham, *op. cit.*, page 27.
10. *Ibid.*, page 514.



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.