

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

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Frederick McGhee and his family on the porch of their home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1918. He was among the African-American business and professional men and women who helped nurture, within a gracious community, several generations of achievers. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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On the Cover: The first black criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi, Frederick McGhee, shown with his home and family, was a prominent Democrat and Catholic in St. Paul in the early 1900s.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Dan Hoisington, the Society's executive director, is fond of saying: "We're all historians." Nowhere is this more evident than when we go through family letters, diaries or old photos seeking to reconstruct some family history. The theme of the Society's current "Have Lunch With an Historian" weekly lecture series is "Memories, Diaries and Letters."

In conjunction with this, the Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* invites readers who would like to share an especially meaningful letter, diary, photo or artifact dealing with the history of Ramsey County to contact our office at 222-0701. We'll help you determine what bit of history your letter or photo contains.

We're also interested in your comments on articles we've published in *Ramsey County History*. We're inviting you to bring a bag lunch and participate in a new discussion series based on these articles. The first is set for 12-1 p.m. April 20 in Courtroom 408, Landmark Center. We'll invite some of our writers to attend.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

A Minnesotan Abroad

Alexander Wilkin and the 'Dumpy' Queen

Alexander Wilkin, a pioneer St. Paul business man, real estate entrepreneur, and popular bachelor who apparently enjoyed parties, was an inveterate traveler. Between 1855 and 1858, in an age when steam had barely overtaken sail, he managed to make three trips to Europe.

His letters home to family in Goshen, New York, and friends in St. Paul describe much of the glittering social life of Europe's now-vanished era of empire. They also reflect an occasionally jaundiced view, typical then and sometimes today, of some Americans abroad.

The letters, however, do not clear up one mystery surrounding his journeys: Did Wilkin, a captain in the Mexican War and a future Civil War colonel, actually visit the Crimea, as he apparently intended, and observe the troops in action? This was a two-year struggle between Russia, who was seeking access to the Mediterranean through Constantinople, and the forces of the Allies, Britain, France and Turkey.

In October of 1855, the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* reported that, "Captain Alex Wilkin, one of the oldest citizens of St. Paul, left yesterday on his way to Europe, in which he proposes to spend some time, taking in his tour a look at the field of war operations by the Allies."

The field of war operations was Sebastopol, the Crimean capital. Perhaps some of Wilkin's letters have been lost, but those that have survived don't say that he made it to the war zone, although historian J. Fletcher Williams seems convinced that he did.

"During the Crimean War," Williams wrote some years later, "Captain Wilkin, incited by his taste for military life and the study of military science, visited Europe and made quite a tour of inspection among the camps of the Allied army, and also of the Russians, as well as the fortifications of the latter in Sebastopol. The experience which he gained by his study of the organi-

zations and peculiarities of the finest armies in Europe, was subsequently of great use to him and of value to his country."

Be that as it may, Wilkin's first trip to Europe lasted about six months. He complained to his brother, Weck, from London:

"Everything I find is very expensive here and nothing scarcely as cheap as in New York. It is a dull season of the year in town and all the fashionable people are in the country or on the continent How long I shall remain [in Paris] or whether I shall go to Turkey or proceed to the Crimea, I have not determined."

He told his brother that, "I know you would enjoy a visit here exceedingly . . ." but he added a not unfamiliar complaint: "Traveling in Europe is by no means as pleasant as with us. You are constantly annoyed with your passport, meet with miserable accommodations, and are cheated and gouged every step you take. . . . Having no taste for seeing sights and knowing so few people, I feel lost and lonesome."

Still, there was no doubt as to what interested him:

"Opposite my room [in Paris] is the Louvre in which are miles of the finest pictures in the world but I have only been there once and that for an hour only. The most interesting sight I have witnessed was the review of 40,000 troops in the Champs de Mars, given to the King of Sardinia. He and the Emperor [Louis Napoleon] and Empress [Eugenie] were present, but I did not see them to advantage."

Wilkin also was unhappy about expenses. As he wrote from Paris, "Your ordinary expenses at a hotel are about \$4 a day and all extras are extravagant. . . . In England everything is still dearer . . . you cannot live for less than \$5 per day. . . ."

When Wilkin arrived in Rome, he was no happier but at least he had found something to appreciate. "Rome," he declared,

"is a dull, disagreeable and filthy place, with but few amusements and little society, but there is much in the remains of its ancient grandeur to interest and admire everywhere you turn."

Wilkin added that he attended receptions at the French embassy in Rome and at the Palace Borghesi. "A good many English, French and Italians were present and there was a grand display of uniforms and diamonds, but very little beauty present."

When he wrote from Florence in January, 1856, Wilkin apparently had found an environment he could enjoy.

"I arrived here yesterday from Naples, having remained there for two weeks, which was longer than I had intended," he wrote, "but a Royal Birthday Ball was to be given at the place, which I was anxious to attend, and am very glad that I did as it was the most brilliant affair of the kind I ever witnessed.

"About 1,500 people, the elite of Naples, and strangers in the place were present. The gentlemen all in uniform or court dresses and the ladies sparkling with diamonds. I wore my uniform which was much admired for its neat elegance as much as any in the saloons, although there were many of all countries which were more brilliant and gaudy.

"Nearly a dozen large apartments were thrown open to the guests. The King, Queen, their children and all the other members of the Royal family were present. We danced more Quadrilles and the plain Waltz; Polkas, Schottisches, etc., not being allowed. One would naturally expect among so many to find a good deal of beauty, but such was not the case and I did not see even one really beautiful woman. . . . Society is easy of access but very corrupt."

By February, 1856, he had left Florence for Vienna. Florence, he wrote, "is a delightful and beautiful city. It was carnival time and all was gaiety. I had delightful accommodations at a private house, the

palace Schneider. . . . I was presented at Court and attended two Royal Balls and several masquerades at the Opera, at which over 5,000 people in masques and dominoes were present."

Wilkin returned home to St. Paul in May of 1856 but by the following January he was back in London. Letters written during his first trip abroad in 1855 had declared rather stiffly that, "I don't like [the English] and turn the cold shoulder to them. They are, however, I must say generally disposed to meet you half way; but they are diffident and endeavor to conceal it by an air of hauteur. They have a wonderful respect for the United States and show it by abusing us. The reign of Nobility I think is pretty much over here and the Commercial and Manufacturing Class rule public opinion."

On his second trip, in 1857, he seems to have rediscovered the English: "I am very much pleased with England and English Society, and should like much to pass a year in the Country."

Wilkin's last trip to Europe began in October, 1857. By December he was again in Paris where he received a message from the United States legation:

"The Minister of the United States is informed that he will have the honor to present Captain Wilkin to their Majesties the Emperor and Empress on Wednesday evening next the 3rd [of] February. Mr. Mason will be obliged if you will be at his house, 13 Rue Beaujon at 7 1/2 o'clock on the day of presentation prepared to accompany him to the Palace & To Assist at the Ball."

As Wilkin was traveling on to England, the United States minister to France enlisted him as a courier to deliver dispatches to London. There Wilkin learned that he was to be presented to Queen Victoria. He described his experiences in a letter to his father:

"I have just returned from the presentation. . . . my name was sent in as Esqr. and not Captain & I therefore went in citizens dress with chapeau & dress sword & white vest, for which I had to expend \$40—more than the whole thing was worth. I was provoked.

"We went through the ceremony splendidly without any embarrassment as Americans generally do on such occa-



Alexander Wilkin's St. Paul in 1854. The frontier village was barely out of its shanty stage when Wilkin toured the glittering capitals of Europe.

sions, while the English are confused, get their swords between their legs, trip up and in fact don't seem to know whether they are on their heads or their heels.

"The Queen is short and dumpy with bad complexion & not in the least pretty, but Prince Albert is a fine looking & dignified man."

Summing it all up, in a letter written almost 140 years ago, he again complains that, "Traveling . . . is a great nuisance. . . . You cannot land at a place until your passport is examined. Your baggage is scanned whenever you go and you have to pay custom house officers, commissioners and everybody else. The greatest benefit to be derived from traveling here is that you become much more satisfied with your own country in every respect."

But did Wilkin make it to the Crimea? It's a moot point. The Paris correspondent of the *New York Times* reported in an 1855 dispatch that, "I saw yesterday an American, who resides in Minnesota, who had just arrived from St. Paul, on his way direct from Sebastopol—on business."

To this the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat* responded on January 15, 1856, that, "The Minnesotan referred to above, we presume is Captain Wilkin, who left last fall on a European tour." In a letter written as late as November 20, 1858, from London, Wilkin told his father that, "This evening I leave for Paris. . . . From there I shall proceed to Rome or the Crimea and return [to London] in March." The Crimean War, however, had ended in 1856.

Apparently, Wilkin did learn something of the war on a second-hand basis, although he might not have visited the battlefields. On February 15, 1856, he wrote to his brother from Vienna that, ". . . I met three of our American Surgeons in the Russian Army on their way home [from the Crimea]. They were much pleased with the manner [in which] they were treated and speak highly of the Russians.

"They [said] the Russians only desire an Armistice to prepare for another war when they shall be better prepared. They [said] that the Russian forces in the Crimea were greatly overrated and that they were poorly armed. They also said that on every occasion [the Russians] were more than a match for the English and always had the best of them until they were reinforced by the French and that the Russians had no respect whatever for [the English].

Wilkin had traveled to Europe for the last time. With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, he left St. Paul in command of Company A of the First Minnesota Volunteers, the first regiment to be tendered to President Lincoln for the defense of the Union. As colonel in command of a brigade, Wilkin lost his life at the Battle of Tupelo. He was Minnesota's highest ranking officer to be killed in the war.

—Ronald M. Hubbs

This article is based on Wilkins' letters in the archives of the St. Paul Companies.



Horse and buggy at the Minnesota State fairgrounds in 1903. Karal Ann Marling evokes once again the glories of the fair in her book, Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair, reviewed on page 26.

R.C.H.S.
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