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Race and Segregation in St. Paul's Public Schools, 1846-69

WILLIAM D. GREEN

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
PACIFIC

For early St. Paul residents,

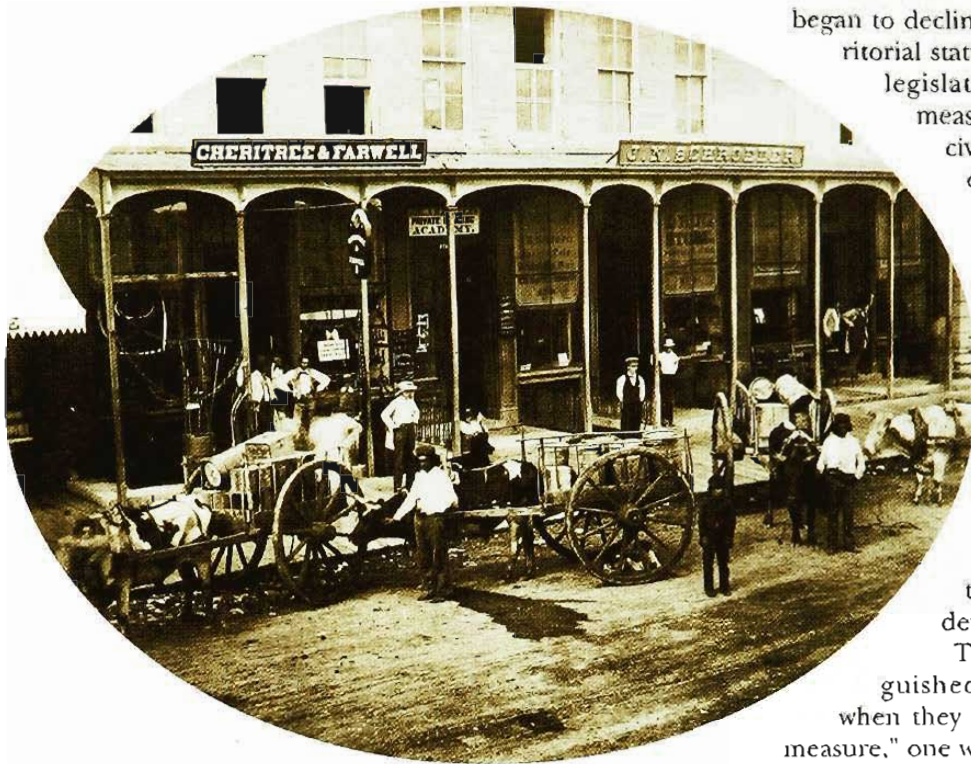
the city's venture into racially segregated schools was new. Before 1857, when the town's board of education first decided that black children should attend separate schools, it was not unusual to find them seated next to white, Indian, or racially mixed students. Thomas S. Williamson, a physician-missionary seeking a teacher for his St. Paul school, wrote in 1846 that the person "should be entirely free from prejudice on account of color, for among her scholars she might find not only English, French and Swiss, but Sioux and Chippewas, with some claiming kindred with the African stock." Unlike other places in the antebellum North where blacks lived in rigid segregation, territorial Minnesota was a virtually integrated community. In 1849, in fact, the newly seated legislature guaranteed funding for public education without reference to skin color. Antiblack sentiment was probably impractical in a place where bitter winters made mere survival a challenge, where one's success at farming and hunting was unpredictable, and where relationships with the native populations were uncertain.¹

Racial intermingling had been commonplace in pre-territorial Minnesota. In 1837 schoolmaster Peter Garrioch recorded in his diary that his school at St. Peter's (Mendota) opened "on the heterogeneous system" and included students of "Negro

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¹ Thomas S. Williamson to former Vermont Governor William Slade, Thomas Smith Williamson and Family papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul, quoted in J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: MHS, 1983), 162–63.



Multiracial early St. Paul, including oxcart drivers outside a supplies store on Third Street, 1859

extraction." Historian J. Fletcher Williams commented on St. Paul's "curious commingling of races, the old Scotch, English and French settlers having married with the Crees and Chippewas, and crossed and recrossed until every shade of complexion, and a babel of tongues, was the result." People of color clearly predominated in the community in 1845 when, Williams continued, "by far the largest proportion of the inhabitants were Canadian French, and Red River refugees, and their descendants. There were only three or four purely American (white) families in the settlement. . . . English was probably not spoken in more than three or four families."²

Racial mixing and acceptance, however,

began to decline after Minnesota attained territorial status. In the fall of 1849, the first legislature embarked on a series of measures that incrementally limited civic participation to white males only. First, the body restricted suffrage to white males. Subsequent enactments used suffrage rights as the basis for such activities as serving as jurors and referees in civil law cases and holding village office. Race thus became a determinative factor in public life, and in this way the territory came to resemble most of the northern states that chose to deny black residents their civil rights.³

The same legislators distinguished the new territory, however, when they enacted their "most important measure," one which declined to exclude black children from being educated with white students. The act to establish and maintain common schools provided for a fund "for the education of all of the children and youth of the Territory," ages 4 to 21 years, and authorized a state tax of one-fourth of one percent, to be supplemented when necessary by a tax voted in each school district. In other words, this law required taxpayers to finance education for all children, including those whose parents were in the process of being disenfranchised.⁴

The author of the common-school bill was Canadian-born Martin McLeod. McLeod had been raised in the Red River settlement, where the majority of residents were of Catholic and mixed white-Indian heritage. Growing up in that community had taught McLeod that race was not a standard by which to judge character, but this set him apart from his fellow legislators. Most were white, Protestant, and Anglo-American from the Midwest and East, where laws discriminated against blacks. McLeod

² George H. Gunn, "Peter Garioch at St. Peter's, 1837," *Minnesota History* 20 (June 1939): 127-28; Williams, *History*, 305, 149.

³ David V. Taylor, "The Blacks," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 74; Minnesota Territory, *Law*, 1849, p. 6, 1850, p. 53-54. The bills prohibiting blacks from being referees and from holding village offices are found in Minnesota Territory, *Revised Statutes*, 1851, p. 338-39, and 1854, p. 83, and Minnesota Territory, *House Journal*, 1854, p. 255. Section 5 of St. Paul's charter gave voting rights only to persons eligible "to vote for County or Territorial officers"; *St. Paul Weekly Minnesotian*, Mar. 11, 1854.

⁴ Minnesota Territory, *Law*, 1849, p. 41-43; Minnesota Territory, *House Journal*, 1849, p. 68-70.

nevertheless succeeded in persuading a majority of his colleagues to adopt inclusionary language for public education.⁵

One factor in McLeod's success was likely the miniscule size of the territory's black community compared to the rapidly growing white population. Between 1849 and 1850 St. Paul's population increased from 840 to 1,294 while the number of black residents remained at 40.⁶

A second factor in McLeod's success was probably the popular belief that Minnesota's black population was not likely to increase. The majority of new white Minnesotans had come from areas of the Midwest that shared borders with slaveholding states. Back home they may have felt threatened by the widespread influx of fugitive slaves and free blacks. Although whites vastly outnumbered blacks everywhere, the percentage of growth in the black population in some states was greater than in the white population. Responding to constituent concerns, public officials and legislative committees enacted laws to discourage further black settlement. For example, a very important piece of business facing legislators even in racially tolerant Iowa, according to historian Robert Dykstra, was "devising a set of statutes to protect white Iowans from a numerically important in-migration of free blacks" from Missouri. Dykstra concludes: "Frontier enthusiasm for such laws was by no means limited to the southern-born and bred."⁷

Minnesota, on the other hand, was geographically insulated. None of the territory's neighbors was slaveholding. In the late 1840s and early 1850s no indications appear in legislative records, newspapers, or legislators' correspondence to suggest residents feared fugitive slaves and free blacks streaming into the very far northwesternmost corner of the nation.⁸

A third factor in legislator McLeod's success at engineering race-blind schools may have

been the relatively positive opinion that Minnesotans—especially St. Paul's political and commercial elite—held of their black neighbors. Some feared more that St. Paul would acquire a "bad name" from the rowdy, single men that streamed into town in search of opportunity. In contrast, the tiny black population was stable. In the 1850 census a total of seven families—only one headed by a female—lived in St. Paul. Only one male household head was unemployed. The fifteen blacks not listed as heads appeared to have been servants in white households.⁹

Subsequent census data, which recorded the value of property, suggest that these early black residents reflected the economic diversity of a people who had not been excluded from mainstream society. Many black adults listed in the 1850 territorial census were literate. Living in every ward of St. Paul, they were relatively free of the stigma associated with being confined to racially identifiable neighborhoods. They were deemed, in short, a population "assimilable" into the culture of Anglo-American Minnesota. More like than unlike the native-born white population, they were "a useful class," observed St. Paul's *Minnesota Pioneer*, and good candidates for the sort of citizenship that public education promised to nurture. The paradox of treating black children as the educational equals of white children while denying their parents citizenship rights seems not yet to have bothered the city's Yankee elite.¹⁰



By January 1850, St. Paul had three schools, "now in full blast," that provided "ample means for the education of all the children in town." One school was located on Jackson Street below Sixth Street; another was in the basement of a Methodist church (constructed

⁵ John H. Stevens, *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People* (Minneapolis: Tribune Job Ptg. Co., 1890), 266.

⁶ Williams, *History*, 228, 266; Taylor, "Blacks," 73.

⁷ Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 31; Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 24.

⁸ *United States Census, 1850*, p. ix. See also Berwanger, *Frontier*, 30–59.

⁹ Williams, *History*, 364; Taylor, "Blacks," 73; Patricia C. Harpole and Mary D. Nagle, eds., *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850* (St. Paul: MHS, 1972), 37–70.

¹⁰ *United States Census, 1857*, Ramsey County entries, microfilm roll 4, MHS; Taylor, "Blacks," 73, 74; David V. Taylor, "Pilgrim's Progress: Black St. Paul and the Making of an Urban Ghetto, 1870–1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1977), 21; Joseph Alexander, "Blacks in Minnesota: 1850–1870," unpublished manuscript, 1970, box 375, p. 13–16, Minnesota Ethnic History Project papers, MHS; Earl Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Dennison, 1961), 26; *St. Paul Minnesota Pioneer*, Sept. 30, 1852. Taylor questions the reported level of black literacy, since a number of the states of origin prohibited teaching blacks to read.

with materials provided by Jim Thompson, an early African-American resident); and the third was in the lecture room of Rev. Edward D. Neill, chaplain of the legislature and future superintendent of St. Paul's public schools. In total, 150 children attended integrated schools in racially and socioeconomically diverse wards. In the ensuing months, however, as increasing numbers of settlers moved into town, housing patterns reflecting class and ethnicity began to appear.¹¹

Native-born easterners and midwesterners moved into wards across the town, but foreign-born settlers began concentrating in Lowertown, where Irish, Germans, Norwegians, Swedes, and Jews created what one historian has described as a "potpourri of merging ethnic boundaries and residential life." Lowertown was also where newly arrived blacks began settling, initiating a housing pattern that perhaps suggests white Minnesotans were defining them, too, as aliens. Residential enclaves grew as more poor immigrants arrived. Throughout the decade of the 1850s foreign-born laborers were less likely to achieve higher occupational status in St. Paul than native-born workers. Locked into this class structure, the new population found it increasingly difficult to secure employment and join the economic mainstream. On the bottom, groups competed for the available jobs.¹²

One manifestation of growing black economic distress may have been the marked increase in truancy among the school-age population, as well as the physical deterioration of schools. In 1852 the *St. Paul Pioneer* lambasted the town for allowing them to fall into disrepair:

Truth compels us to say, that there is not a building in all Saint Paul, fit to be called a District school house. The only building known as such, is hardly fit for a horse stable . . . All this in an opulent town, swarming with children, little untaught brats, swarming about the streets and along the levee, in utter idleness, like wharf rats.¹³

Concurrently, St. Paul's Catholics had formed their own schools, but their success was no more evident. One source noted in disgust,

"Ragged school children ran about the streets" on the lower landing, where they committed vices ranging from "lying and profane swearing" to the "high calendar of crimes."

In 1853 St. Paul's leaders attempted to revitalize formal public education by establishing Baldwin School, organized by Neill and named for Philadelphia philanthropist Mathew W. Baldwin, the principal donor to the building fund. Some 71 pupils reportedly attended by January 1854. While there is no record of how many students, if any, were black, it matters little, since St. Paul was entering a new phase of race relations, one much less tolerant of black-white comity.¹⁴

By the mid-1850s, as national tensions over slavery and its extension into new territories heightened, more free blacks and fugitive slaves began migrating to Minnesota, settling almost exclusively in St. Paul. Their numbers remained tiny compared to the white settlers streaming in during the same period, but white prejudice against recent black arrivals, compounded by the cooling reception offered by St. Paul's established black residents, made assimilation difficult. Many whites feared that the Mississippi River was becoming a conduit for blacks expelled or fleeing from the South who would become paupers or wards of the territory. In 1854 St. Paul legislators sponsored a bill intended to discourage black settlement. When the effort failed, John Day of St. Paul threatened a second bill that would have restricted black residency to St. Anthony and Minneapolis. Social customs and beliefs that had already segregated blacks elsewhere in the United States had now spread to Minnesota.¹⁵



Throughout the North,

discriminatory "black laws" or "codes" had been enacted as early as 1807, principally to discourage the immigration of free blacks. Although residents of the Old Northwest and the border states were opposed to slavery, by midcentury they were also adamantly opposed to the resi-

¹¹ *Minnesota Chronicle and Register*, Jan. 6, 1850; Williams, *History*, 244–45; "Early School History in St. Paul," St. Paul Dept. of Education Staff Planning Committee, Apr. 9, 1956, p. 2, St. Paul Public Library.

¹² Taylor, "Blacks" 76; *United States Census*, 1850, p. 1004–05; *United States Census*, 1857, Ramsey County entries; *United States Census*, 1860, Population, 262. See also Berwanger, *Frontier*, 34.

¹³ Here and below, *St. Paul Pioneer*, July 29, 1852.

¹⁴ Williams, *History*, 334, 347.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Blacks," 73, 75; *St. Paul Recorder*, Feb. 28, 1958, p. 3; James K. Benson, "New England of the West: The Emergence of the American Mind in Early St. Paul, Minnesota, 1849–1855" (master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1970), 45–46; Minnesota Territory, *House Journal*, 1854, p. 258–59.

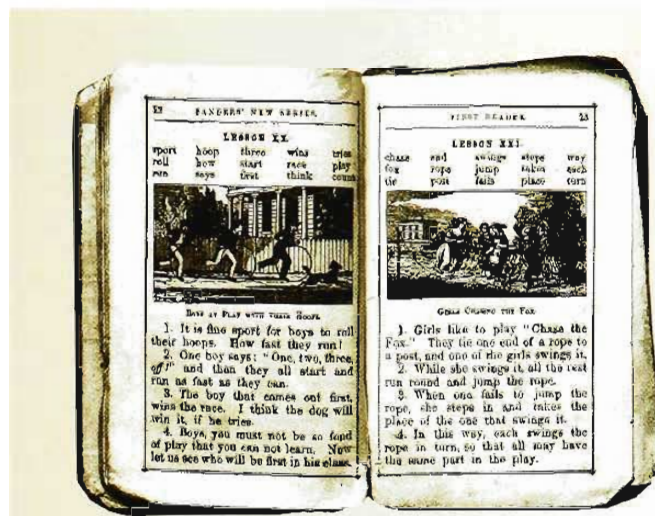
dence of free blacks. As a historian of the period, Eugene Berwanger, observed, "Antislavery settlers from the border slave states unjustly considered the Negro, and not the slavery system, responsible for the conditions from which they had fled."¹⁶

Although some northern white schools admitted black children, especially before 1820, most states either excluded them or established separate schools. While Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio extended public-school privileges to all, they required segregated facilities for black children whenever 20 or more could be accommodated. Even in New England, local school committees usually assigned black children to their own institutions. Newer states such as Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Iowa frequently excluded blacks from public education altogether. By 1850 nearly every northern community legally consigned black children to separate schools or denied them public education by custom and popular prejudice.¹⁷

Proposals to educate black children invariably aroused bitter controversy, particularly in the newer states. Admitting them into white schools, opponents maintained, would lead to violence and sabotage public education. Many whites asserted that blacks were incapable of learning, while others insisted that providing educational opportunities would further encourage black immigration and antagonize southern-born residents. Historian Leon Litwack observed, "The possibility that Negro children would be mixed with white children in the same classroom aroused even greater fears and prejudices than those which consigned the Negro to an inferior place in the church, the theater, and the railroad car." Berwanger concluded, "In whichever section they had previously lived, the midwestern concept of society held no place for free Negroes."¹⁸



By 1856 black children in St. Paul who sought formal instruction were being discouraged from attending public schools, and anti-black sentiments appeared in editorials in the city's papers. Finally, in November 1857 the St. Paul Board of Education resolved to formally



Pages from an 1853 beginning reader adopted by St. Paul's Board of Education

A Catholic seminarian arriving in St. Paul to teach in 1852 complained: "Every day, morning and afternoon, I practice patience with these wild little fellows—try to teach them who God is, and then to instruct them in the mysteries of A.B.C. I left N.Y. to go among the Indians and I was hoping for strength to undergo the hardships . . . or to meet a martyr's death. I felt the difficulty of the sacrifice more than anybody thought—but the greatest trial was one that I never dreamed of—and to take the charge of the impudent and insulting children of unthankful parents was the greatest mortification I ever underwent."

Daniel J. Fisher to Arthur J. Donnelly, 1852, in *Acta et Dicta* (St. Paul: St. Paul Catholic Historical Society, 1907), 1:45–46.

segregate St. Paul's black children. As reported in the *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, the new school policy read, "Whenever thirty pupils of African descent apply for instruction, the Secretary be authorized to employ a teacher for the same, with a salary of thirty-five dollars per month."¹⁹

Requiring a minimum of 30 black pupils to establish a segregated school meant that no school would be established for less. While ap-

¹⁶ Berwanger, *Frontier*, 22, 112.

¹⁷ Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 114–15.

¹⁸ Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 72, 114; Berwanger, *Frontier*, 112.

¹⁹ *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Nov. 5, 1857; Spangler, *Negro*, 33–34.



Washington School award given for "punctuality and good deportment" from April 31 to July 20, 1860

proximately 60 black school-age children lived in St. Paul, concentrated in the commercial area and Lowertown, less than 15 sought formal instruction with Moses Dixon, the appointed teacher, and St. Paul's first segregated school closed shortly after opening. By contrast, some 1,150 school-age children reportedly lived in St. Paul's three wards at this time. Although black children who sought formal instruction in predominantly white schools were not necessarily denied admission in the next two years, the few who sporadically attended public school caused much consternation among white town-folk. In response, the St. Paul Board of Education reestablished in early 1859 a separate school for black children, but this time designated 15 pupils as the requisite number. The *St. Paul Minnesotian* reported the board's decision this way:

The committee feel a deep interest in the education of children of African descent, and while they are sensible that the expense of educating so small a number of pupils of this description many seem large, they deem the subject of sufficient importance to require that some practical measures should be adopt-

ed for this purpose. . . . They would recommend that any school of children of African descent . . . that may be kept for three months with an average daily attendance of fifteen pupils between ages of five and twenty years, be received by this Board and its expenses defrayed as a public school.²⁰

The city's formal commitment to providing adequate resources for the education of black children proved to be hollow. The new blacks-only facility was allowed to deteriorate; a teacher could not be retained. Student attendance fell. Within months after opening, the second school was disbanded. And now, unlike before, black children were actively—and on occasion officially—prevented from attending white schools. When Benjamin Drew, hired to head the city's schools, discovered in 1859 that a "quadroon" boy was attending a white school, he told the teacher that "she had done wrong to receive him, as [the boy] would not be allowed to remain." The teacher responded, to no avail, that the mixed-race boy "is no darker than many Indians-mixed who are here."²¹

St. Paul's segregation efforts of 1857 and 1859 were paradoxes typical of the period: On one hand, racial mingling offended the sensibilities of white St. Paul. On the other, in accordance with the public-education credo "Teach youth, for men cannot be taught," St. Paulites believed it necessary to provide formal instruction to help black children become good members of society.²²



Between 1860 and 1869,

as more blacks moved into Minnesota, several efforts were made to organize schools for the children of "contraband," the term given to freed slaves who followed Union troops to the North. Anti-black sentiment in St. Paul reached a high point in 1863, when some 218 blacks, the largest single migration to the state, traveled upriver from St. Louis to St. Paul. White workers engaged in a labor dispute with the Galena Packet Company, believing that the men in the party had come to break their strike, harassed them at the dock until they departed for Fort Snelling.²³

²⁰ *St. Paul Recorder*, Feb. 28, 1958, p. 3; Spangler, *Negro*, 34; "Early School History," 3, 12; Taylor, "Blacks," 76; *St. Paul Daily Minnesotian*, Feb. 17, 1859.

²¹ "Early School History," 12; *St. Paul Recorder*, Feb. 28, 1958, p. 3; Spangler, *Negro*, 34; Benjamin Drew, "Journal," Apr. 18, 1859, microfilm copy, MHS.

²² *St. Paul Daily Minnesotian*, Feb. 17, Mar. 9, 1859.

²³ Taylor, "Blacks," 75.



Pupils and teacher at Washington School, Ninth and Olive Streets

Black adults may have represented threats to low-skilled or unskilled white laborers, but it was black children who seemed to pose the worst threat by personifying the future of blacks in St. Paul. Accordingly, in August 1865 the school board "almost unanimously" passed a resolution challenging the racial mingling which had been "to some extent permitted" in the schools and again instructed the superintendent to provide "a suitable teacher and accommodations" for black children. It further resolved that "no children of African descent be thereafter admitted to any other public school." In October official

notice was given that a "School for Colored Children" would open in Morrison's Building at Ninth and Jackson Streets (although furniture was not yet available). Classes would be led by a Miss Morrow, who would receive a monthly salary of \$35 for teaching some 40 or 50 black school-age youth who reportedly resided in St. Paul at the beginning of the academic year of 1865-66.²⁴

Soon after classes began, however, the board of education discovered "problems of maintaining and operating" the school. (No such problems apparently existed in the city's three

²⁴ *St. Paul Daily Press*, Aug. 10, Oct. 10, 1865; Spangler, *Negro*, 34.

established schools—Washington, Adams, and Jefferson—and one new German-English school, where a total of 1,241 students were enrolled.) In late 1867 the *St. Paul Daily Press* critically called attention to the “very dilapidated condition” of the building:

The colored children of this city are excluded from the free schools which are located in convenient and comfortable buildings, well-supplied with maps, charts, blackboards, and the usual equipments of such institutions. . . . Some of the windows have been broken out, the plastering is falling off and the keen air of winter will find entrance through many a crack and cranny. To keep out a part of the cold that would otherwise find entrance, the windows have been partly boarded up, so that while the benefit of increased warmth is attained, the disadvantage of a decrease in light has to be submitted to.²⁵

In essence, the newspaper observed, the structure was incapable of providing adequate shelter for ill-clothed children against the harsh Minnesota winter. The paper then urged that

funding and supplies “similar to that which is provided for the white schools” be made available. The plea fell on deaf ears, however, and the school limped on with windows filled in with pine boards, dim lighting, and decreasing attendance.²⁶

Apparently it was the school’s resilience that inspired the paper to observe in January 1868 that it was in “flourishing condition” and attended by an average of 20 students. By contrast, however, white students attended three elementary schools each valued at more than \$8,000, a respectable sum for that day, and in the same year Franklin Elementary School was constructed at a cost of \$16,969.65, including the site, furniture for 18 rooms, fence, and out-buildings. Although separate, Miss Morrow’s rickety facility was clearly not equal.²⁷



After the conclusion of the Civil War, national sentiment for extending suffrage to blacks began building slowly. In Minnesota statewide referenda failed in 1865 and 1867, but in November 1868 voters approved amending section one of article seven of the state constitution to extend full suffrage rights to black males and to Indians and mixed-bloods who “have adopted the customs and habits of civilization.” Votes for and against tallied along party lines, with Republican voters supporting and Democratic voters opposing. Predating by two years national ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Minnesota distinguished itself as the only northern state to approve black suffrage by popular vote. In Democratic St. Paul, however, the largest city with the largest black population in Minnesota, referendum voters solidly opposed granting suffrage to blacks.²⁸

Students and teachers in front of the new Franklin School on Broadway between Ninth and Tenth Streets, 1865



²⁵ *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, Oct. 10, 1865, Sept. 6, 1867; *St. Paul Daily Press*, Nov. 30, 1867.

²⁶ *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, Oct. 10, 15, 1865, Sept. 6, 1867; *St. Paul Daily Press*, May 8, 1865, Nov. 30, 1867, Jan. 30, 1868.

²⁷ *St. Paul Daily Press*, Jan. 30, 1868; “A Century of Service: St. Paul Public Schools,” 1956, p. 3, copy in author’s possession.

²⁸ Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1868, p. 149–50; Gary Libman, “Minnesota and the Struggle for Black Suffrage, 1849–1870” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 154–85; *United States Census, 1870, Population and Social Statistics*, 6–7, 40–41; *Legislative Manual*, 1869, p. 89.

In the face of the town's vote, Minnesota blacks converged on St. Paul for a victory convention on January 1, 1869, the sixth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Marching through the streets, they stopped to express their gratitude at the homes of key officials, including that of Republican Mayor Jacob H. Stewart. (This victory, and the militant public display, may have mobilized local antiblack forces, for in the city elections that spring Stewart lost to Democrat James H. Maxfield, and Democrats who opposed black suffrage regained control of city government.)²⁹

At the New Year's celebration, Republican Governor William R. Marshall proclaimed St. Paul's blacks to be legitimate Minnesota voters with these words: "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."³⁰ His words proved to be a rallying cry. Within a few months, Minnesota legislators took a logical next step.



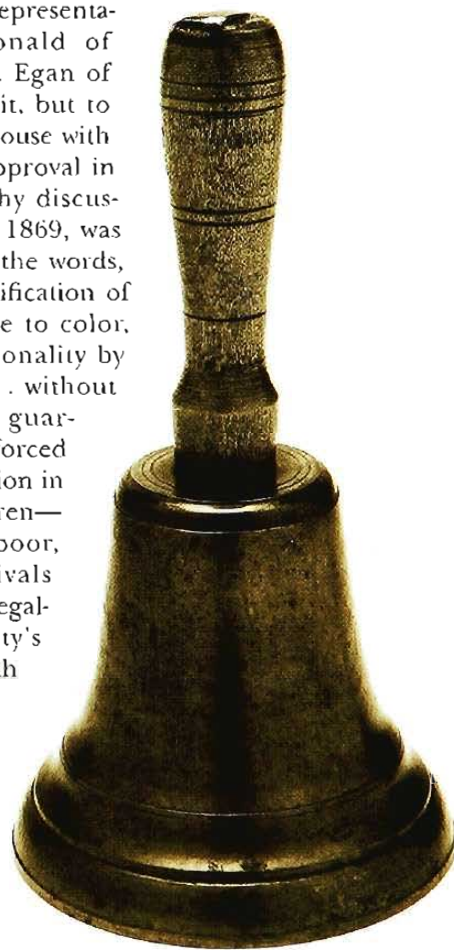
A dozen years after St. Paul first endorsed separate black and white schools, Minnesotans challenged St. Paul's system. On Saturday, February 27, 1869, Republican state representative William H. C. Folsom of Taylors Falls sponsored Bill No. 198 in the legislature to amend section 39, title 1 of chapter 36 of the general statutes, "regarding education." Despite its cunningly understated name, the bill held major implications. It proposed to deprive school districts in incorporated towns of state school funds if the districts denied black children admission because of their race. If made into law, the bill would end school segregation in St. Paul, incorporated since 1849.³¹

Desegregating Minnesota's schools had been an ongoing matter of concern for Republicans. On January 10, 1865, members of the Golden Key Club, a literary society of black men

in St. Paul, had filed a petition with the Republican-dominated house on behalf of black suffrage that stressed the need for better education to awaken in blacks "integrity and moral worth" as fine as in the most enlightened and intelligent whites. Legislators who supported the bill had also linked literacy and good citizenship. John Kellet, a persistent commentator in the *Mankato Union* who signed his articles with the initial "W," had challenged the legislature to extend civil rights to black Minnesotans, observing that blacks "never have had the advantages of an education. . . . They have for centuries been taught their inferiority and stupidity. But the day is dawning when they will show . . . that there is stamped upon their race the image of the same all wise God."³²

With suffrage a reality and Folsom's bill pending, representatives John L. MacDonald of Shakopee and James J. Egan of St. Paul spoke against it, but to no avail. It passed the house with a large margin, won approval in the senate after lengthy discussion, and on March 4, 1869, was enacted into law. With the words, there shall be "no classification of scholars with reference to color, social position or nationality by any school trustees . . . without consent of parent or guardian," the state finally forced St. Paul to end segregation in its schools. Black children—many of whom were poor, illiterate, recent arrivals from the South—were legally free to share the city's educational facilities with white children.³³

In St. Paul many voices expressed concern. The *St. Paul*



Hand-held teacher's school bell

²⁹ *Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Press Printing Co., 1869), 7-8. MHS; Williams, *History*, 433, 462.

³⁰ *Proceedings*, 9-10.

³¹ *Minnesota, House Journal*, 1869, p. 244; *Minnesota, Laws*, 1849, p. 99.

³² *St. Paul Press*, Jan. 20, 27, Feb. 22, 1865; *Owatonna Gazette*, reprinted in *Chatfield Democrat*, Aug. 12, 1865; *Mankato Union*, Mar. 17, 24, 1865.

³³ Taylor, "Blacks," 74; *St. Paul Weekly Press*, Mar. 1, 1869; *Minnesota, Laws*, 1869, p. 7.

SUFFRAGE PETITION PUBLISHED IN ST. PAUL PRESS, JANUARY 20, 1865

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 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. . . .

We are now called upon in this coming draft, as we have been heretofore in preceding drafts, to stand our chances in presenting our black bosoms as a rampart to shield our country's nationality from all harm, and from any and all enemies, whether foreign mercenaries or domestic foes; and while we have done this, and will continue to do it unto the end, we do feel that our white citizens have imposed a stigma upon us that dampens our ardor in pursuing everything that is eminently best for the exemplary citizen to follow. . . .

In behalf of your petitioners,

R. T. GREY,	ED. JAMES,
A. JACKSON,	M. JERNIGAN,
H. HAWKINS,	W. GRIFFIN

Committee

ST. PAUL, JANUARY 10TH, 1865.

Daily Press commented that black students "will have to take their chances in our already overcrowded schools." It continued, "The greatest difficulty will arise in classifying them, as even the full-grown colored boys will have to go into

the lowest primary classes, and in rooms where the desks are arranged for children from six to ten years old."³⁴

For white families with deeply held antiblack sentiments, the image of older black youth seated next to younger white children was profoundly unsettling. Perhaps because of the strength of these not-so-private prejudices, only 13 of St. Paul's black students enrolled in the spring of 1869. Prejudice, one historian has written, was surely "a strong deterrent in keeping many Negroes away from the schools they were legally entitled to enter." Six of these 13 attended Franklin Elementary, where they enjoyed the amenities that clearly did not exist at their former school.³⁵



Without state action, segregation in St. Paul schools would likely have continued for a long time. Many whites maintained that desegregation was bad for black children because more had been enrolled in the black school than attended white schools after the law passed. The *St. Paul Pioneer*, sharing the negative views of Superintendent of Schools John Mattocks and Mayor Maxfield, editorialized

The fact stares us in the face that nearly all of the colored pupils in this city are deprived of the means of obtaining an education, through the public schools, by this law. . . . It was impertinent and worse than unnecessary in its inception, and is wholly wrong and injurious in the operation. . . . That is sufficient cause to warrant its repeal.³⁶

The notion that desegregation deprived black children of an education is curious, although it is possible that some black parents agreed that their children would best be educated in all-black classrooms, removed from the hostility they anticipated in predominantly white schools. Moreover, the lowered enrollment may have been connected to some black parents' beliefs that education was pointless when they and their children would be kept on the lowest rungs of society. Whatever the reason, the low enrollment was taken as positive proof by opponents of the new desegregation policy.

In his address to the board of education on April 19, 1869, Maxfield expanded on this view

³⁴ *St. Paul Daily Press*, Mar. 14, 1869.

³⁵ Spangler, *Negro*, 35; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, Apr. 13, 1869.

³⁶ *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, Apr. 13, 1869.

when he insisted that black parents preferred separate school facilities and asked the legislature to cooperate. Calls by white citizens for separate schools persisted for years. As late as 1909, a committee of white parents appeared before the board of education to protest admission of black students to Mattocks School.³⁷



Despite its resistance, the city soon felt the positive impact of suffrage and school desegregation. Flowering into social and political maturity by the mid-1870s, blacks formed a literary society, the forerunner of other cultural-improvement efforts. Several black newspapers began publication in the city, further exhibiting the importance of literacy. By the end of the century, despite persistent vestiges of de facto segregation, the community had made great strides. Many blacks entered colleges. They increased their participation in politics. This potential for success in Minnesota attracted other professionals from across the country, who became respected leaders in Minnesota's black and white communities.³⁸

While full equality was still in the future, the school desegregation law of 1869 clearly set progress in motion. By 1896, when the concept

of "separate but equal" schools was adjudged constitutional in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, St. Paul would not see its utility. To opinion makers, the *Pioneer Press* observed in 1896, *Plessy* was simply a "Jim Crow (railroad) car law," a Supreme Court decision springing from a southern law whose purpose was to manifest the southern way of life. Jim Crow practices existed in St. Paul in other arenas—restrictive covenants denied black ownership of homes in white neighborhoods, for example—but integrated public education was a way of life. St. Paul had officially made peace with the idea of black and white children learning together.³⁹



³⁷ St. Paul Board of Education. "Minutes." Apr. 19, 1869, Sept. 1, 1909, quoted in Frank W. Cummings, "Segregated Education in St. Paul, Minnesota" (master's thesis, Macalester College, 1961), 36.

³⁸ Taylor, "Blacks," 78–80. See also Kevin J. Golden, "The Independent Development of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1849–1910," *William Mitchell Law Review* 17 (1991): 449, 456–60.

³⁹ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 19, 1896; Taylor, "Blacks," 81.

The engravings are from Charles Sander's The School Reader: First Book (1853). All the photographs and objects, including the slate board and stylus, are in the MHS collections and were photographed by Peter Latner.



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