The Mount Vernon of Minnesota

THE SIBLEY HOUSE

Daughters of the American Revolution
One of Minnesota's earliest stone dwellings, Sibley House was the home of Henry Hastings Sibley, Minnesota's first state governor. Sibley was one of the state's most prominent 19th-century politicians and military leaders, and an occasional journalist who wrote about American Indian and Western topics for local and New York publications.
Located six miles from St. Paul in Mendota, the state’s oldest town, Sibley’s home served as temporary headquarters for the Minnesota Territory. His home was a social center for pioneer life in the region, entertaining guests like writer Henry R. Schoolcraft, whose book on Minnesota American Indians inspired Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Hiawatha.” During his stay at the home in the winter of 1836–1837, French astronomer Joseph N. Nicollet created the first extensive map of the region between Lake Superior and the Missouri River, awakening public interest in the area.

Sibley pushed for the adoption of the name Minnesota, which means “cloudy waters” in the Dakota Indian language. He also changed the motto on the state seal—depicting a white man plowing, an Indian on horseback, the setting sun and the Falls of St. Anthony in the background—to L’Etoile du Nord (the North Star) to honor the call of the North for explorers as well as the French-Canadian heritage of many early fur traders.

Both Sibley and his wife, Sarah Steele Sibley, came from families of Patriots. Sarah launched Minnesota’s first historic preservation campaign—not for a building in Minnesota, but for George Washington’s estate in Mount Vernon, Va. The Minnesota State Society DAR, which rescued Sibley House from decay and maintained it for nearly 90 years, dubbed the home the “Mount Vernon of Minnesota.”

**From Fur Trader’s Office to Gracious Home**

Sibley was born in 1811 to distinguished New England Puritans in Detroit, which was then in the Michigan Territory. Sibley’s mother, Sarah Whipple Sproat, was the granddaughter of Commodore Abraham Whipple, a Revolutionary War hero credited with what is sometimes called the first act of the Revolution: burning a British schooner, the HMS Gaspee, in 1772. His father, Solomon Sibley, was the first mayor of Detroit and a judge on the Michigan Territory Supreme Court.

But a life of adventure out West held more allure for him than following his father into the practice of law, so he became a fur trader. After working for the American Fur Company in Mackinac, Mich., for five years, he was made a partner in 1834. He headed up the company’s fur trade with the Dakota Indians in the Northwest, and his territory stretched from the British-owned Canadian border to the headwaters of the Missouri River.

When Sibley first arrived in 1834, he climbed up Pilot Knob, a sacred site for the Dakota, and looked out over the Mississippi River Valley, admiring the endless prairies that later developed into the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. “When I reached the brink of the hill overlooking the surrounding country I was struck by the picturesque beauty of the scene,” he recalled.

Because of the site’s strategic location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, the Dakota called the area Mendota, which means “meeting of the waters.” Sibley made Mendota (then called St. Peter’s) his headquarters—and chose it as the site where he would build his home.

Two years later, in 1836, Sibley moved into his two-story house made of large blocks of limestone. Wood beams, floors, braces and window sills were joined by wooden pegs; laths were made from willows; and rushes were woven with reeds and grasses. The house, which overlooked the Minnesota River, was insulated by a mixture of mud, clay and straw.

Before his marriage to Sarah Steele in 1843, the front room served as an office and supply store, selling blankets, gunpowder, lead, tobacco, beads and trinkets to fur traders and American Indians. Sibley’s bedroom and a guest room
were on the second floor, reached by an outdoor staircase, and the kitchen, where he probably dined, was in the basement. His dozen hunting dogs stayed in a storeroom.

After his marriage, the business office in the front room was converted to an elegant and cozy parlor with a piano, a stove from Quebec, a Brussels carpet, fine chairs and a sofa. Original Sibley furnishings on display in the house today include his walnut writing desk and music box in the parlor, as well as a stove and a mahogany dining table. Sarah's peach-colored wedding china, bed, wardrobe and sewing table are also on view. A birdcage is believed to be a gift from a Dakota woman.

A two-story addition includes a kitchen, dining room, two more second-floor rooms, and an office on the east side. The office served as the temporary quarters for the Minnesota Territory's first governor, Alexander Ramsey, when he was the Sibleys' guest in 1849. Sibley's beloved books, including histories of the French Revolution and Spain's Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, still line the office shelves. A digital reproduction of an original portrait of a favorite dog, Lion, hangs above the fireplace.

"The main thing to remember is that the changes to the house are all about retrofitting a commercial building into a residence," said David M. Grabitske, a tour guide at Sibley House from 1995–2004 and author of Six Miles from St. Paul, a book about Sarah Sibley and her role in frontier society. "Think about remodeling a Home Depot as your house, and then you will have a sense of what the Sibleys had to do."

Sibley's Political Rise

Nicknamed "tall trader," Sibley became a friend and advisor to the Dakota tribe. He learned their language and appealed to the federal government on their behalf. He also helped negotiate two treaties to acquire their land in 1837 and 1851.

According to the Minnesota Historical Society, "fur traders like Sibley often relied on kinship networks to maintain trade with particular Dakota communities." In the winter of 1839–1840 (three years before he married Sarah), Sibley entered into such a kinship relationship with some of the Mdewankanton Dakota and had a daughter with a Dakota woman named Red Blanket Woman. Their daughter, Helen Hastings, was raised in St. Paul by missionary William Brown and his wife and was educated in a missionary school.

The Dakota name for Helen was "Mysterious Metal Woman." The name referred to guns owned by her father, who penned stories on hunting and American Indian customs for a New York sports magazine, Spirit of the Times, under the pseudonym "Hal-a-Dacotah."

The first lawyer in the region, Sibley was appointed a justice of the peace in 1838, when Mendota was still part of Iowa Territory, and served as a delegate to Congress when Mendota became part of the Wisconsin Territory. He helped push through the act organizing the region as the Minnesota Territory in 1849 from the remnants of Iowa and Wisconsin, which were states by that point. As a delegate to Congress until 1853, Sibley won grants to build roads and public buildings and set aside land for schools in every township in Minnesota, which was growing rapidly.
“The country is so beautiful,” he wrote to encourage his sister, Sarah Augustine Sibley, to visit Minnesota in the summer of 1851. “Everything wears an air of so much freshness and novelty, that a residence of even a few months here, would set like a charm upon you, and add years to your life. Opportunities are constantly presenting themselves to come west,” he added, noting the new train connection from Chicago to Rock Island on the Mississippi River in 1854. The connection made the trip from New York possible in two days, spurring an economic boom in the Upper Midwest.

Elected the first state governor of Minnesota in 1858, Sibley administered a so-called “$5 million loan” to sell bonds to finance railroad construction and kept order by maintaining the militia during his single term. He became commanding officer of the military district of Minnesota, was appointed brigadier general by Congress during the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 and—despite their previously strong ties—ended up driving the Dakota from Minnesota. He and Sarah moved to St. Paul’s Lowertown neighborhood in December 1862.

After he retired from the military, Sibley served one term as a state legislator. He also wrote character sketches for the St. Paul Pioneer. Sibley died in 1891.

**Sarah Sibley and Her Two Mount Vernons**

Sarah Steele was born in 1823 in Steevesville, Pa., a small town northwest of Philadelphia. Her Patriot lineage was strong; Sarah’s uncle John Steele, a brigadier general and member of the Society of the Cincinnati, was wounded at Brandywine and was at Washington’s side at the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781. John’s brother Archibald was a colonel who served in Benedict Arnold’s 1775 Quebec campaign. Sarah’s father James Steele was an 18-year-old lieutenant when his unit in Baltimore heard of the surrender. He became inspector general of Pennsylvania troops in the War of 1812 and a state legislator. He and his brother, John, went on to build cotton and paper mills in Steevesville.

Sarah’s brother Franklin, the first Steele to move to Minnesota, ran a store at Fort Snelling, near Mendota. After traveling with Franklin and his wife to Mendota, Sarah, at age 20, married Sibley and began a new life in this remote frontier town basically run by her husband. They had nine children, four of whom lived until adulthood. Sarah also persuaded three sisters, her mother and an aunt to move to Minnesota.

In the decade before Minnesota became a state in 1858, its population experienced a meteoric rise of 3,300 percent. More than 5 million acres of land were sold from 1853–1857. Much of the land was sold to Easterners from New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio and immigrants from Germany and Ireland, who joined the original French-Canadian fur trade employees, discharged soldiers from Fort Snelling and Swiss immigrants.

Sarah was praised for her hospitality. “In the evening we chatted in the library, till about 9 o’clock, when two of the Govs friends, with whom I was acquainted came in, where we played whist. We had our cigars, & about 10 o’clock refreshments were served by Mrs. S. & her sister Mary,” wrote Minnesota Attorney General Charles Berry after his stay, noting that his bed sheets were heated by “warming pans,” that the fireplace in his room was lit before he awoke, and that his boots were polished. “I read whatever I chose of the hundreds of books at hand. The library is a good one.”

Still, Sarah complained of social isolation in Mendota, and she yearned to move to more cosmopolitan and much bigger St. Paul, across the river and six miles downstream.

After the Mount Vernon Ladies Association was formed in 1853 to save and restore Washington’s deteriorated estate and tomb in Mount Vernon, Sarah was appointed to lead fundraising in Minnesota. Originally formed for Southern women by a South Carolinian, Ann Pamela Cunningham, the organization later expanded to include women nationwide. After it was given a charter to hold title to the estate, the group set a fundraising goal equivalent to millions of dollars in today’s currency to buy and restore it.

Sarah started her campaign in 1858, but soon faced several obstacles—derisive remarks in local newspapers, worries about the potential for commercialization of Washington’s estate, and fundraising difficulties caused by
the lingering effects of the financial panic of 1857. These concerns, coupled with her chronic poor health, led her to resign her post the next year.

**DAR Rescue From Ruin**

After the Sibleys moved to St. Paul in 1862, their home was sold to St. Peter’s Catholic Parish, which Sibley, though a Protestant, helped establish in 1841. It became a Catholic girls’ school from 1867 to 1878. Artist Burt Harwood, later famed for his paintings of American Indians, rented Sibley House as an art studio and school for outdoor painting in the summers of 1897 to 1899. In 1905, a local merchant leased it to use as a warehouse. But soon it was abandoned, and homeless people used it as a shelter, ripping up floors and staircases for firewood.

After noticing the ruined house on a river trip in 1909, Minnesota DAR members decided to acquire and restore it. Sibley House was purchased for $1 from the archdiocese the next year through the efforts of the St. Paul DAR Chapter, which disbanded in 1970. Member Lucy Shepard McCourt led the effort. She was aided by Julia Johnson, dean of women at Macalester College in St. Paul. (Julia’s husband, Major General Richard Johnson, was first married to Sarah Sibley’s sister Rachel. After he married Julia, she acted as a step-aunt to Henry and Sarah Sibley’s children.)

After restoring the home and acquiring Sibley family possessions with help from DAR chapters statewide, the Minnesota State Society DAR, which assumed ownership of in 1910, opened Sibley House to the public, calling it the “Mount Vernon of Minnesota.” Members helped preserve the memory of Sarah Sibley, who died at age 46 in 1869, calling her “the most romantic, the most distinguished pioneer of early Minnesota ... she will be remembered, admired and loved best.” DAR members also ensured she was included in a 1924 “Who’s Who” of prominent Minnesota women, and the Sarah Steele Sibley DAR Chapter was formed in 2005 in St. Cloud.

“Until the 1980s when a manager and tour guides were hired, members of the Twin Cities DAR chapters were actively involved in caring for this site and keeping it open for the public,” says Dorothy Bennett, Honorary State Regent of Minnesota.

When the Sibley House Association was formed, all Minnesota DAR members automatically became members, and the State Regent became its president. In 1996 the association turned over ownership to the state and management to the Minnesota Historical Society.

A “Gems of the DAR” exhibit in Fairbault House, also on the grounds of the Sibley Historic Site, describes the time period after the Sibleys moved to St. Paul through DAR involvement. Other exhibits in this former house and hotel once owned by French-Canadian fur trader Jean-Baptiste Fairbault, a Sibley neighbor, display items owned by pioneers and American Indians, from women’s hair combs to Fairbault’s sword cane. Sibley’s general’s uniform coat also is on display in the house.

Sharon McDonnell explored the John Rutledge House for the November/December 2011 issue.