

# The Territorial Governors — Ramsey, Gorman and Medary

(1904)

By

Harlan P. Hall

Harlan Page Hall arrived in Minnesota in 1861, was admitted to the bar<sup>1</sup> and settled in St. Paul. He never practiced law, preferring journalism. For the next four decades he was a reporter, editor and owner of newspapers in St. Paul. He founded the St. Paul Globe in 1878 and sold it in 1903. The following year, he published his political reminiscences under the title *Observations*. It went through several editions. On April 9, 1907, he died at age seventy-four. On September 14, 1908, several Minnesota public figures spoke at a memorial service, later published by the Historical Society. Henry A. Castle, one of the eulogists and a former lawyer and newsman, referred briefly to Hall's memoirs:

About four years ago Mr. Hall published a book under the title of "Observations," which contained a series of disconnected reminiscences of his experiences with the leading men of Minnesota and the stirring events of her political history. It is a readable and valuable volume, throwing instructive side-lights on many spectacular occurrences, giving much previously unwritten history, yet necessarily omitting, as the writer naively confesses, much that would be still more interesting. This he does avowedly out of respect to the feelings of some who are living and the memory of many who are dead. He does not spare admissions of his party prejudices and inconsistencies; in fact, he is often unjust to himself in

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<sup>1</sup> He was admitted to the bar on January 8, 1861. 1 *Roll of Attorneys: Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970* 10 (State Law Library, 2011).

failing to give due explanation of some matters that seem to reflect on his own steadiness of purpose and sincerity. His success in this, his only venture in authorship, inspires a regret that he did not see fit to write more in book form, and to present what he did write more systematically. Of this production one of his eulogists says: "There has been no man in the Northwest, we doubt if there have been many men in this country, who had so abundantly the charming gossip quality of the old Chronicles of Froissart. The history of Minnesota would have been less interesting if Mr. Hall had not taken a hand in it; it certainly would have been less at hand if he had not written down his knowledge and his reflections."<sup>2</sup>

In the first chapter, Hall sketched the three territorial governors: Alexander Ramsey, who was nominated by President Zachery Taylor, served 1849-1853; he was replaced by Willis Gorman, who was nominated by President Franklin Pierce, and served 1853-1857; he was succeeded by Samuel Medary, a nominee of President James Buchanan, who served April 1857 to May 1858, when Minnesota became a state. Each was a political appointee. Ramsey was replaced by Gorman who was replaced by Medary under a presidential policy of administration known as "rotation in office."<sup>3</sup> Ramsey and Gorman were lawyers, who remained active in Minnesota politics after their terms ended. After Medary's stint in Minnesota, Buchanan appointed him Governor of Kansas Territory, where he served from December 1858 to December 1860.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Castle, "Memorial Address in Honor of H. P. Hall," 12 Collections, Minnesota Historical Society 731, 745 (1908). For Castle's political recollections, see his "Reminiscences of Minnesota Politics" (MLHP, 2014) (published first, 1915).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of how the territorial judiciary was effected by this policy, see Douglas A. Hedin, "'Rotation in Office' and the Territorial Supreme Court." (MLHP, 2010).

H. P. HALL'S  
OBSERVATIONS

BEING MORE OR LESS  
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FROM 1849 TO 1904.

FOURTH EDITION.

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ST. PAUL, MINN.  
1905.

## OBSERVATION ONE.

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The Territory of Minnesota was brought into being on March 3, 1849, the passage of an act in Congress organizing the territory. The boundaries were thus described in the organic act:

All that part of the territory of the United States which lies within the following limits, to wit: Beginning in the Mississippi river, at the point where the line of forty-three degrees and thirty minutes of north latitude crosses the same; thence running due west on said line, which is the northern boundary of the State of Iowa, to the northwest corner of the said State of Iowa; thence southerly along the western boundary of said state to the point where said boundary strikes the Missouri river; thence up the middle of the main channel of the Missouri river to the mouth of White Earth river; thence up the middle of the main channel of the White Earth river to the boundary line between the possessions of the United States and Great Britain; thence east and south of east along the boundary line between the possessions of the United States and Great Britain to Lake Superior; thence in a straight line to the northernmost point of the State of Wisconsin in Lake Superior; thence along the

western boundary line of said State of Wisconsin to the Mississippi river; thence down the main channel of said river to the place of beginning, be and the same is hereby, erected into a temporary government by the name of the Territory of Minnesota.

There had been a controversy between the Senate and the House, the Senate being Whig and the House Democratic, as to organizing any new territories. The slavery question was then dominant, and the Southern Whigs and Democrats, as well, were opposed to admitting any more free territory. The Northern Whigs were divided. The result was that all through that session of Congress the question was of organizing the territory or not. The Senate passed the bill early, but the House, in the controversy between the Democrats and the Whigs, held [8] it up; so that it was not until the last day of the session, and practically the last day of President Polk's administration, that the bill was finally passed.

President Polk was a Democrat, and his successor-to-be, General Taylor, was a Whig. Polk was strongly urged to organize the territory by appointing the new governor, but, with a fairness which almost seems abnormal in the present state of politics, he declined to take advantage of the last day of his administration to put a Democrat in office. It is almost impossible to imagine a president of the present day declining to secure a political advantage as a matter of sentiment. But the country had evidently not reached the stage of political "civilization" which exists to-day. The consequence was that it fell to General Taylor, the Whig president, to organize the territory of Minnesota; and in

doing that he selected Alexander Ramsey of Pennsylvania as the first governor. His commission bore date April 2, 1849, though his term of office in Minnesota did not actually begin until June 1, 1849, and continued to May 15, 1853.

It was early on the morning of May 27, 1849, that the steamer "Dr. Franklin" stuck her nose into the bank of the river about where the foot of Jackson street in St. Paul is now located. This steamer carried Alexander Ramsey and his family. His family then consisted of his wife, a son of three years, and a nurse. The governor was an early riser. Leaving his family sleeping on the boat, he concluded to reconnoiter the town. Leaving the boat and clambering up the steep hill, the first building he encountered was the Merchants Hotel, located where it still stands at the corner of Third and Jackson streets, and then kept by the late J. W. Bass. It was a combination of log and frame structure, and, while the hour was early, Mr. Bass was on hand, all attention to his visitor, though unaware of his identity. He explained to the visitor that the governor had just been appointed, and he expected the hotel business would soon be booming, as people would be coming to the capital, and he was accordingly making improvements, which he insisted on showing. Governor Ramsey says he found the improvements to consist of cutting up the rooms, already small, [9] into still smaller ones, evidently with the view of furnishing accommodations for a larger number of guests by reducing the space each one would occupy. Concluding that the accommodations would not be satisfactory to himself and family, Governor Ramsey strolled up Third street, and before he had gone half a block saw a building which bore evidence of reconstruction; and asking a boy,

who chanced to come along, what that building was, the boy replied, "The governor's residence." He returned to the boat with rather an unfavorable impression of the situation. The governor consulted with the clerk, who advised him to remain on the boat and take his breakfast and go up to Mendota, where they had to deliver a cargo of Indian supplies.

Gen. H. H. Sibley, then the delegate to Congress from Minnesota, resided at Mendota; and while the governor had no personal acquaintance with him, he concluded to accept his advice and return to St. Paul later in the day to locate. Arriving at Mendota, General Sibley came on board without knowing the governor was there, but upon meeting the new official greeted him with his characteristic hospitality and insisted on the whole family coming to his residence until accommodations could be secured in St. Paul. With some demurrer on the part of Mrs. Ramsey, who thought it would be trespassing on hospitality, the invitation was accepted, the governor assuring her that there was nothing else to be done, as he had unsuccessfully explored the capital earlier in the day.

Later in the day Ramsey and Sibley started on horseback for St. Paul, Sibley suggesting a call on the commandant of Fort Snelling en route. When the commandant was introduced and found he had a real, live governor on his hands, he told Governor Ramsey that, under the regulations of the War Department, when a governor visited a military post, he was entitled to a salute of seventeen guns, and proceeded to give orders for their firing. Governor Ramsey told the commandant that he was not very familiar with military customs, but if he would

supply him with a glass of good whiskey he would waive the guns.

When Ramsey told me this story he said, with a twinkle of his eye, I think that must have been pretty good whiskey, for we went down to St. Paul that day and laid the foundations for a good state. [10]

Crossing the Mississippi on a wheezy and primitive rope ferry, the shore opposite Fort Snelling was reached, where a hill almost as precipitous as the side of a house was encountered. The ride to St. Paul was not cheerful, there being no road and scarcely a trail. They encountered withal sloughs where their horses floundered up to their saddle-girths in mud and water; but the journey was finally made, and the small house, formerly a saloon, which the little boy had styled "the governor's residence," was actually selected as such as a dernier resort, there being nothing else vacant in the town.

It was three or four weeks before the "executive mansion" was sufficiently transformed for occupancy, and during that time the governor and his family remained at General Sibley's. The governor had in the meantime sent orders by the boats to St. Louis for furniture, and when he brought his family down they came in dug-out canoes, one canoe containing the family and another their trunks. This was the customary way of coming from Mendota to St. Paul in those days (there being no traveled road), except when the large boats chanced to be making a trip, though it was not a very safe method for inexperienced people.

The governor and his family landed at what was known in St. Paul as the Upper Levee at the foot of Chestnut street. The next serious trouble was the transportation of their effects from the landing to the "executive mansion;" such a thing as a truck or an express wagon was unknown, but at last a Frenchman with an ox cart was discovered. The trunks were loaded thereon, and with Mrs. Ramsey sitting upon one of the trunks, while the governor walked, the cavalcade proceeded up Eagle street and down Third street, from what is now the Seven Corners. The whole town turned out to witness the official arrival ; and it is within bounds to state that the governor of Minnesota, traveling on foot, with his family seated on trunks in an ox cart, landing at their "official residence" on Third street, between Robert and Jackson, is an instance of democratic simplicity which eclipses Jefferson's inauguration ride.

This was not a very encouraging advent for the new governor, but Ramsey was young and plucky in those days, and had undertaken the task of making a state even greater than he then [11] dreamed of, and he had not put his hand to the plow to look backward. What he accomplished during his lifetime, and the development which he saw, was in marked contrast with the early period of his arrival, and was most exceedingly gratifying to him, as he frequently recounted to his old friends his beginning in Minnesota.

At that time the governor was ex-officio Commissioner of Indian Affairs; and as there were more Indians in the territory than white people, a large portion of his official duties related to regulating the Indians; and in "regulating the Indians" I should explain that the term means crowding them off the earth so that the aggressive white man can

take his place. Of course, Governor Ramsey was only conforming to the customs of the country and discharging his plain duty. But he proved a great success, and was soon a great chieftain in the minds of the Indians. The most important treaties with the Indians, whereby they ceded their reservations and moved farther west, were made during Governor Ramsey's administration.

During his six years' term as territorial governor there was nothing of greater importance than these Indian treaties.

While President Polk had been very punctilious about seizing the control of Minnesota for his party, when President Pierce was elected by the Democrats, in 1852, he had no compunctions whatever in selecting a Democrat to succeed the Whig governor of Minnesota. General Willis A. Gorman, of Indiana, who had distinguished himself in the Mexican war, as well as served a term in Congress, was promptly appointed governor of Minnesota by President Pierce, in 1853, and Governor Ramsey was for the time relegated to private life; though he had made such a marked and so successful an administration in the new territory that he was later called to the governorship and other high positions, and was perhaps more potential than any one man who ever lived in laying the foundation for what is now the greatest state in the Union.

### GOVERNOR GORMAN.

It was in May, 1853, that Governor Gorman took charge of affairs in Minnesota. The territory was then crystallizing into formal shape preparatory to statehood and questions

were arising [12] which had not come up under Governor Ramsey's administration.

The germ of our railroad system was really laid during Governor Gorman's administration, though the system has since developed to such an extent that the plans of the early settlers would hardly be recognized, even as a rough survey of what is now in existence. Still the territorial legislature was passing land grants, and Governor Gorman was especially insistent on inserting the clause imposing a three per cent gross earnings tax in lieu of all other taxation upon the railroads then in embryo; it is not at all likely that he or anyone else then living in their wildest imagination dreamed of the vast sums which would accrue from this form of taxation.

Governor Gorman had an especially stormy time during his career with the Indian traders. He, too, was Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and the territory had become the mecca for Indian traders; in fact, in the sparsely settled condition of the territory Indian trade was the vital and essential business. On general principles it is probably fair to assume that Governor Gorman was justified in antagonizing the Indian traders, at all events he did so very vigorously; with the result that he retired from office in 1857, and President Buchanan (also a Democrat) appointed Samuel Medary, an editor of Columbus, Ohio, his successor.

### GOVERNOR MEDARY.

Medary had been, like nearly everyone else in Ohio, an active politician; had presided at the convention which

nominated Buchanan in Cincinnati in 1856, and was credited with being the author of the political shibboleth "Fifty-four forty or fight," which rang through the country during the period when the Oregon boundary was in dispute with England.

The territory was then approaching statehood. Governor Gorman's last message to the territorial legislature was largely devoted to showing that the territory had reached proportions in population, business, and in every other respect which would entitle it to admission as a state.

Medary's term of office was, accordingly, quite brief; for in less than a year after he came to Minnesota the territory was [13] admitted as a state, and the reign of the territorial governors ceased. They had left their impress, however, especially the work of Ramsey and Gorman — an impress which was lasting and will undoubtedly remain as long as Minnesota exists.

As a matter of fact, Congress had passed an act, on Feb. 26, 1857, authorizing a state government for Minnesota. This was prior to Medary's coming to the territory as governor. It authorized an election in June, 1857, to select delegates to meet and form a state constitution, which was to be in conformity to the federal constitution and to be submitted to the voters of the territory. Governor Gorman had already issued the official call for the election when Governor Medary arrived, and the anomaly was presented of one governor calling an election and another one seeing that the duties thus indicated were properly discharged. ■

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