



Joel Florida, pictured with Jessie, first married Lucinda Woodard in Illinois. She died after bearing him two children, Ellen (Nellie) and George. Florida remarried Lucinda's sister, Catherine, and had three more children—Minnie, Carrie, and Jessie. Florida would become the first postmaster in Rockford, as well as a County Board member. He spent considerable time and resources on the area's infrastructure, as well as setting up the milling business with his partner, and brother-in-law, George Ames. Photo courtesy of Rockford Area Historical Society.

Living on Edge in Wright County

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With one last look over his shoulder, Daniel R. Farnham nudged Kitty and set out for the ride of his life, the trust and faith of an entire town stuffed in his saddle bags.¹ August 20, 1862, and the settlers had chosen to take a stand.

Three days prior, the Dakota had risen against the new settlers in response to a number of injustices suffered by them at the hands of American politicians greedy for land and acclaim. These Dakota warriors began a bloody spree through the Lower Sioux Agency, Minnesota River and New Ulm, the ramifications of which would last for years.

“I wonder if you are reading *The Crossing* [*sic*],” wrote Nellie Florida to her brother, George, well after the event. “I was reminded of the Indian War, & oh how afraid I am still of Indians.”²

As word spread of the mayhem occurring to the south, Wright County residents again began to fear for their own lives. Living in the densely wooded area known as the Big Woods, they believed the Dakota could easily ambush them at any moment given the cover the trees afforded the warriors. Fear quickly propelled the situation into widespread panic.

“. . . to add fuel to the flame various persons with a very imaginative temperament were continually circulating the information that they had seen the savages at no great distance; that Waverly was burned and the people all butchered; that Buffalo was the scene of blood; and that the whole west part of the county was being over run with Indians; and that the only hope was to get to Minneapolis, St. Paul or Fort Snelling to escape the merciless tomahawk or scalping knife of the infuriated Sioux, until there was a clean sweep, and not a family left in the big woods between Fort [Forest City] City and Buffalo, or Monticello and Rockford.”³

Packing only their families and what they could easily carry, the settlers left their farms and began to run. Thinking the urban areas of their new state would provide greater protection, the Wright County citizens took to the bumpy roads they hastily carved through the forests a mere seven years before.

“The exodus hit the village [Rockford] . . . with people dashing through calling out that the west behind them was afire, that they would not stay one moment longer and other wild declarations which plainly showed the state that they were in,” said local historian Mouraine Baker Hubler.⁴

That August morning had dawned simple enough for Farnham and the village of Rockford. He attended to his chores of storekeeping, writing local history, and maintaining civic order in his little hamlet on the Crow River.

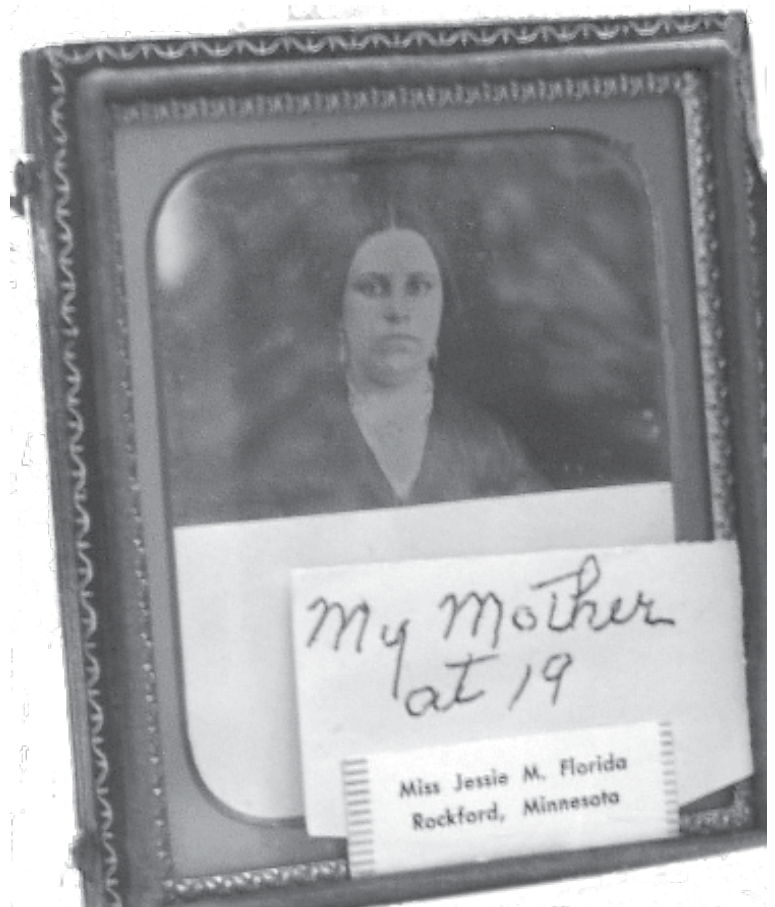
“Reason and common sense were entirely forgotten; in their [the settlers’] headlong flight they could not be stayed,” wrote Farnham. “Day and night the roads leading to Minneapolis were filled with hurrying multitudes only anxious to escape from the merciless savage, who in their opinion were but a short distance behind, killing, burning, and destroying everything within their reach.”⁵

Farnham rode hard on Kitty, the horse he borrowed from Guilford D. George, over these roads on his way to St. Paul. He himself had cut many a tree through the forest in 1856 when he first arrived at the rocky ford in the river. He dodged the wagons full of families, those on foot, those with heavy loads and those with nothing. He rode with the single goal of arriving at the State House to request additional munitions for his friends and the growing number of refugees waiting in Rockford, hoping to protect themselves from the rumors.

“At first he [Farnham] welcomed them as he passed as some sort of company and then it occurred to him that one of these nervous folk could easily take him for an Indian as he raced up behind them and welcome him with a charge of lead,”⁶ said Hubler.

The people waiting behind him in Rockford had given their trust years before. Together they made the trek from Minneapolis with wagons of supplies, dreams of new land, and a future of prosperous farming in their minds.

The core of this group consisted of the Woodard family—five sisters, their brother, parents, children, and husbands. With the friends and extended relatives who accompanied them, they lived the story of all pioneers searching for a new place to call home.





The Rockford Woolen Mills was one of three mills located along the Crow River in Rockford. The Ames and Florida families owned the land and building, but not the woolen business, unlike their complete ownership in the lumber and flour mills. George Florida, son and nephew of the original stakeholders, ceased operation of the mills at the turn of the century. Photo courtesy of the Rockford Area Historical Society

Catherine Woodard had married Joel Florida in Illinois and adopted his two children borne to his first wife, Catherine's sister, Lucinda. Catherine insisted on bringing her melodeon for their trip west. Her future daughters, Carrie and Jessie, would eventually make playing and singing music an integral part of their lives.

Sarah Woodard married George Ames, Joel Florida's best friend and business partner. Together they built the milling industry along the Crow River in Rockford, beginning with the lumber mill. They created building materials for the new town and built Ames' retirement home, now known as the Ames-Florida-Stork House, which still stands in downtown Rockford—the oldest building in the city.

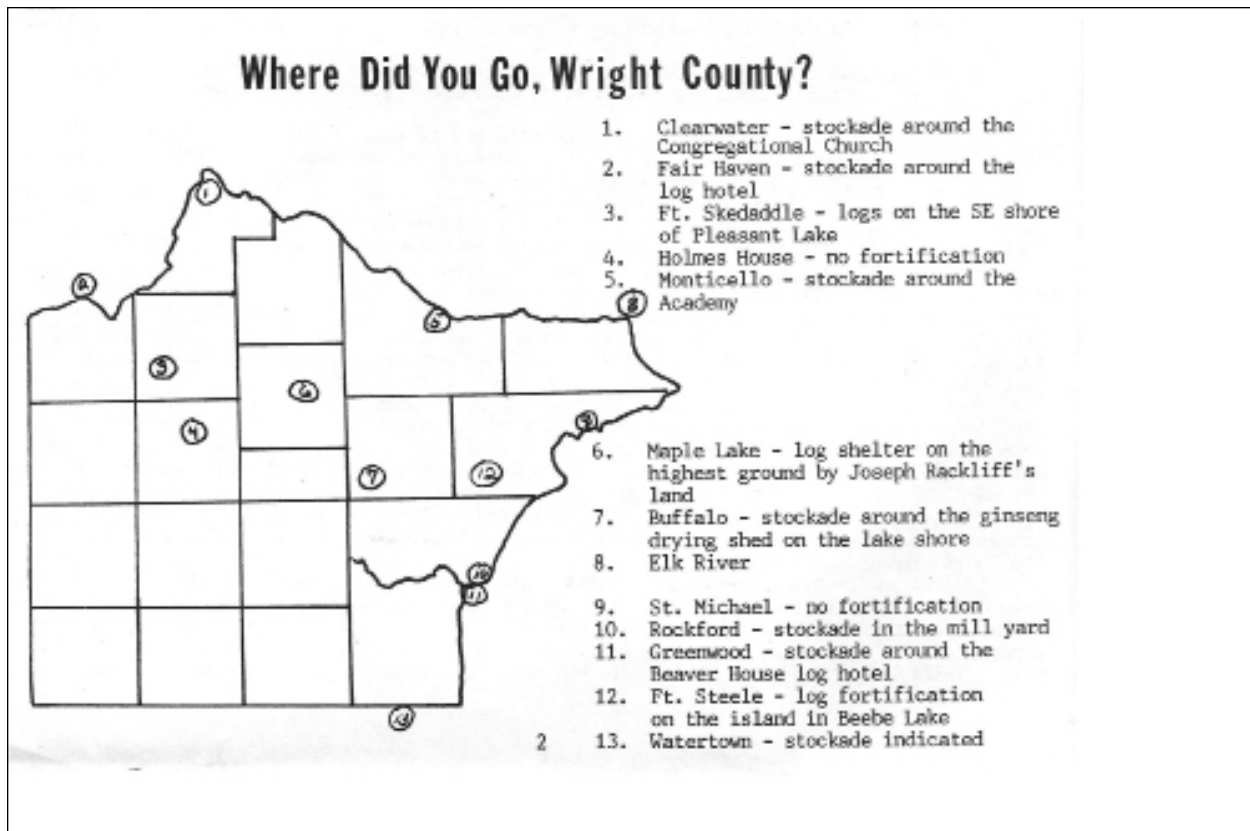
The lumber mill would expand to include butter, flour, and woolen goods as Ames and Florida took on partner Guilford D. George. George married another Woodard sister, Mary, after her first husband, William Ames, died. Mary also owned land in her own name. Agricultural leader William Sleight would be brought into the fold by marrying sister Lydia, who bore him five children.



Mill yard. On their way to Minnesota from Illinois, George Ames and his brother-in-law, Joel Florida, became friends with Guilford D. George. The trio decided to set up a lumber mill along the Crow River and it was this business that propelled them to financial stability in the coming years. Ames became sole owner of the mills during the next 20 years and expanded the Rockford milling industry to include butter and flour as well as a significant portion of the woolen business. Just before he died, Ames sold his mills to Florida's son, George. The Queen of the Pantry flour business did well under his guidance until the turn of the century. Photo courtesy of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

These people served on territorial committees, County Boards, and road committees. They served as postmasters, storekeepers, merchants, farmers, laborers, milliners, and railroad workers. They survived the grasshopper plague, financial crash, and ensuing depression of 1857. They suffered extreme temperatures in log homes they built by hand. They dug and sold hundreds of ginseng roots to ensure their survival by earning enough money to purchase supplies and pay off their farms.

These were the families that watched the hordes of Wright County settlers push into Rockford, fill their streets, and desperately try to cross the only available bridge over the Crow River for miles.⁷ These were the families that made a stand in Rockford and built a stockade fort in the mill yard, near the dam.



Map of Wright County

Rockford wasn't the only location in Wright County where settlers made a stand alongside their soldier friends. People also gathered in Clearwater, at the Beaver House hotel in Greenwood, and on the island in Beebe Lake. Located about six miles north of Rockford, the four-acre island housed an estimated 150 people for three nights in August of 1862. The people returned to the lake a year later, having received word of the Dustin family deaths, and built the fort for additional protection. Image courtesy of the Wright County Historical Society.

George Ames donated the logs and hired 150 workers to erect the structure. As it grew, so did the sense of calm the fleeing settlers felt. At this point, the residents of Rockford had opened their homes and store cupboards to the refugees so that every house and building fairly bulged at the seams with people.

"... [the stockade] made quite a respectable and safe place of retreat in case of an attack by the Indians; at least the people thought so and it gave them confidence,"⁸ reported Farnham.

As the fort neared completion, many people began to realize that the difficult economic years had left them with a less than useful stash of weapons and powder. Should they hope to make their stand successful, they would require more. They called a town meeting to offer solutions, but only one suggestion seemed sensible—send a representative to the Governor immediately and ask for more munitions.

According to Rockford history, G.D. George nominated Farnham for his connections with the Government officials. Accepting the challenging overnight ride,

Farnham packed quickly and mounted a borrowed horse to begin his ordeal. Upon arriving in St. Paul, Farnham achieved an audience with the Governor and put his proposal forward. He received 50 Belgian muskets and plenty of powder and lead for his efforts.

“. . . those celebrated Belgian muskets . . . the only thing they are good for, or ever were, is to remind us of the great Indian scare of 1862,”⁹ Farnham wrote.

Realizing the supply wagon could not travel as fast as he alone, Farnham fed and watered his horse then began the trip back home to spread the news. Cresting the hill, a town filled with people met his gaze and a tentative sense of safety and hope fell upon the area.

“When they appeared over Ames’ hill about 2:00 in the afternoon, the people were overjoyed,” said Hubler. “The sight of rifles and powder dispelled all the fear of Indian attack.”¹⁰

As the fall progressed, the refugees slowly returned to their cabins. Unfortunately, they found a failed crop in the fields, and in some cases, their cabins pillaged by other fleeing settlers searching for supplies. Roughly one third of the settlers who fled to Minneapolis and St. Paul never returned to Wright County. As Farnham surmised, “one Indian scare was enough.”

The Wright County War

From a modern perspective, the panicked actions of the settlers may seem far fetched, especially when, lacking automobiles and trains, the real danger may have well been on the other side of the world. However, given the tendency for people to exaggerate each time they retell a story, the lack of understanding between the Minnesota tribes and the new settlers, plus the daily stress of surviving pioneer life, the chaos seems reasonable.

The people of Rockford held an additional piece to the puzzle. Just two years prior, they had said goodbye to a prominent member of their society, Joel Florida, as a result of what became known as the Wright County War.

“Upheaval came about in Rockford village which might well have been the result of the Jackson killing,” reports Hubler in her book on the town.¹¹ “[Joel Florida] severing ties with the village so completely that it wasn’t until after his death that his children started spending time here.”

Florida sold his house in Rockford to his brother-in-law, William Sleight, on November 5, 1860, after nearly coming to blows with his other brother-in-law, G.D. George, regarding his involvement in the mob attack of Oscar Jackson.

The equation of one missing man, “popular and reputedly wealthy,”¹² combined with one suddenly wealthier man who was “not given to work,”¹³ mixed with a group of settlers quick to judge, results in mob justice. Unfortunately, the mob hung a man due to the case’s circumstantial evidence, despite the recent not guilty decision he received at his trial.

In 1858, Henry Wallace, a 28-year-old single man from New Hampshire, moved to Rockford in search of his fortune. He built a log cabin on the northern

portion of the township and was a “good mixer” according to Lamson, author of the *Condensed History of Wright County*. “One of the top-notchers in the crude society of that time.” Wallace soon assumed the job of Assessor.

His neighbors, Oscar and Elizabeth Jackson of Pennsylvania, didn’t appear so blessed. Despite his position as Supervisor and Justice of the Peace, Lamson said Jackson “didn’t seem to have the faculty of doing things for himself, lacking the initiative to the nth degree.”

Wallace, whom Farnham described as being “in every way a gentleman,” was also one of the few people with any legitimate currency, since the depression still held a tight grip on Minnesota. Wallace hired Jackson to help cut the hay in his field.

With his closest neighbors a mile and a half away, it wasn’t unusual for Wallace to go unseen for long periods of time. However, when the beginning of September arrived, A.W. Moore began to wonder. Rumors began to circulate as Moore organized search parties to scour the area, beginning at Wallace’s home.

Farnham recounts “a sickly stench coming from a bunch of small willows” that drew the group nearer to find the “ghastly remains” of Wallace in “an advanced state of decompose.” The group decided an ax or other blunt instrument had delivered the fatal blow.

As days passed, the settlers mulled over the situation. According to Farnham, “everyday new facts came to light until it became almost certain that Jackson was the guilty man.”

By September 16, 1858, the group had convinced themselves Jackson’s lack of knowledge and enthusiasm in searching for Wallace, in addition to his newly found money bearing the stamp of Wallace’s New Hampshire bank, proved him guilty. George presented the case to the Board of Supervisors at Monticello.

Edward Hartley, later the County Attorney and Captain of Company E, 8th Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, wrote the complaint.

It was put forth by Cyrus C. Jenks, Justice of the Peace, and stated that Jackson, with “malice and forethought,” killed Wallace.

Sheriff Bertram arrested Jackson on the charge of murder in the first degree, an offence punishable by hanging. The initial hearing, held on September 27 in Monticello, brought out several facts later used at his trial, including Jackson’s historical lack of money, inability to support his family, time spent working in the field where the body was found, his lack of enthusiasm for taking part in the search, and various items missing from Wallace.

The trial was held March 27, 1859, and the jury of nine deliberated several days. Their verdict returned as not guilty and the courts released Jackson with a warning to leave Wright County for his own safety.

Staying away only a couple of weeks, Jackson returned to Rockford and quickly found himself surrounded by a mob of his former neighbors. Sheriff Bertram arrested Jackson for stealing supplies from Wallace’s cabin and dispersed the mob. Later that night, the mob returned and stole Jackson with the intention of gaining a confession.

By noon the following day, the mob leaders had tortured Jackson nearly to death and when his wife, Elizabeth, approached with a group of rescuers, the mob broke his neck and ran away into the woods.

“The hanging of Jackson by a mob, after he had had an impartial trial, created quite a sensation throughout the State,” reported Farnham. “The press very generally condemned the act, and all lovers of law and order were anxious that the lynchers should be brought to justice.”

Governor Sibley offered a reward of \$500 for the arrest and conviction of those responsible. Elizabeth filed a complaint against A.W. Moore, which caused his arrest on April 25, 1859.

“It [the arrest] raised great excitement as it was known that Moore was easily frightened,” said Farnham. “It was supposed that he would, to save himself, expose the whole gang; there was running to and fro and a great commotion.”

Despite the military presence that followed, the arrests made, and attempts at those outside of Rockford to bring justice to the situation, the members of the mob walked away from the event unharmed. The Monticello newspapers from this time period are missing, though local memory still harbors its own stories.

Disgusted with the actions of his friends and extended family, Florida sold his shares of the milling business to Ames, his house to Sleight, and headed to Minneapolis in 1860. According to Franklyn Wedge, author of the 1915 *History of Wright County*, Governor Ramsey commissioned Florida to raise soldiers from Minneapolis to fight on the frontier. Florida also fought, suffering injury in the battle of Acton and carrying the resulting ball until his death in 1877. His wife, Catherine, and children, the youngest of which was seven, then moved back to Rockford and took an active role in society there once more.

G.D. George also sold his share of the businesses to George Ames after the Wright County War. With the citizens split in their opinions of the chaos they had just witnessed, a portion of Rockford seemed unwilling to do business with his ruined reputation. It is on these uncertain times that news of the Dakota pushing into the settlers' backyards fell, and did little to assuage the jittery group.

Building a legacy, 1860–1861

Despite this uncertainty, Ames optimistically decided to build his retirement home in 1861 on the Hennepin County side of Bridge Street in Rockford overlooking the Crow River and mill yards. Though his actions paint a stoic and brave family picture, the house does hint at an inner fear—or perhaps simply a pragmatic view of the current events.

Evidence exists alongside local legend of a tunnel from the house to the river where the family could hide, and even escape, an attack from the Dakota. The Rockford Area Historical Society (RAHS) intends to do further archeological research to gain more information on

this topic in the future, as little documentation is available.

Currently home to the RAHS, the Greek Revival style building is the oldest surviving structure in Rockford. The Society maintains a collection of 10,000 items used by the three families who owned the home, gives tours of the property, and hosts a wide selection of programs and events throughout the year with the help of local volunteers. Preservation of the structure is ongoing, though dependent on available funding.

National unrest, local repercussions

Lincoln's call for troops April 15, 1861, provided a way for the settlers to rectify any damaged reputations and persuaded many, including Cyrus H. Jenks, Asa W. Lucas, Ezra B. Ames, and Jackson Stewart to enlist for the Civil War.

“When the Civil War broke out, Rockford's response to the call for troops was in part an effort to dispel the continuing cloud which hung over the place . . . an aura of fear hung over the place for years,”¹⁴ said Hubler.

These soldiers would later correspond with Florida's daughter, Nellie, from the southern battlefield, giving a vivid picture of the trials suffered by them on behalf of the Union, but also as a testament to their sense of duty in the matter.

My friend Miss Nellie . . . am glad to hear that those Boys are better I hope they yet be able to lend A hand in the defence [sic] of their Cuntry [sic] give them my best wishes and tell them to hasten on to join their respective Company and if there is any more boys that you know, who talk of enlisting tell them to join the Infantry and not come here for we are sold our hands are tied and we are helpless . . . remaining still your faithful friend J Stewart¹⁵

Many soldiers who mustered in for duty with the intention of fighting in the Civil War first spent a year or two of their enlistment in Minnesota trying to maintain order between the settlers

and the Dakota, since the two wars occurred concurrently.

Just as in the modern era, the news media held a great deal of power to sway the general public to their way of thinking and call them to action. With newspapers throughout the state reporting similar events in 1861, people began to talk. The gossip grew as thick as the heavily forested land they built their cabins on, and soon idle chatter turned into fear strong enough to drive the people to organize in Monticello and Clearwater:

HOME GUARD—Every town and village in Minnesota should form a Home Guard, for the purpose of drilling and getting trained into some kind of war discipline, for every man ought to be a soldier now. We must look out for incursions by Indians on our borders.—Rumor says that several Missourians are out among the Indian tribes stirring them up to commit depredations.

But we here have nothing to fear from savages. We are in for a Home Guard here, 1st, to practice, and be ready for any emergency; 2d [sic], to go to war if necessary, and be PREPARED!

What if we have to furnish our own guns! Almost every man has a gun! Rifles, muskets, even shot-guns! Let us get up a company, and practice! Imbibe liberally of '76, and go it! Who will start a company of Home Guards! A noble pole will be raised in this town in two weeks, and the star spangled banner will be run up. Let a company of at least fifty men under arms and in the ranks see it go up! If no one else will start the paper we SHALL!!! Let us have a meeting at once. 'Why stand we here idle?'¹⁶

Across the county, people followed the advice of the Monticello newspaper and its publisher, George Gray. Silver Creek held a meeting the same day that issue of the paper was distributed, and Rockford quickly followed suit.

The fear and panic that pushed the citizens of Wright County to choose between fight or flight seemed for naught. The Dakota conflict did not actively arrive—no shots were fired toward the natives here. Their heightened sense of alertness, however, did create the perfect atmosphere for hysteria without first obtaining all the facts.

Unbeknownst to the people in the Rockford, a group of youth took a boat to Greenwood to occupy themselves one evening. Upon hearing a shot fired, the “people [of Rockford] clad only in their night clothes snatched at their children and made a mad dash for the fort.”¹⁷ When the youth returned from their excursion and admitted to firing the shot accidentally, they were “nearly lynched for the trouble.”

“Mr. Aldrich and Sinclair Wilkinson had an ___ with the ___ an ___ in regard to the changing of the Indians,” wrote a family friend. “Mr. Aldrich said that if the Government of the U.S. did not the people of Minnesota would. The President replied that it would be better for the people of Minnesota to take it in hand than a great Christian nation like this to do so, to which Mr. Aldrich said that it would be a disgrace to the state.”¹⁸

On August 23, 1862, the Monticello newspaper, having changed its name from the *Wright County Republican* to the *Northwestern Union* but not its management or political notions, reprinted the article run in the *St. Paul Press* just three days earlier.¹⁹ Gray added a short piece of his own that reported Indian “depredations” at Fort Ripley and that “Burbank’s line of stages above the Fort, were being hauled off until matters were quieted down.”

Thus began the reports of local fear rising and the unsettled feeling churning once more in the hearts of Wright County citizens. As was the case in the previous scare, the farmers began to pack up their belongings and move out of town toward the perceived safety of the Minneapolis and St. Paul area.

Gray reinforced what he knew as truth regarding the power of the press in these uncertain times for Wright County in the September 27, 1862, issue of the *Weekly Union*:

There is reason in all things—so says the adage—but we object to the old saying—there is no reason, or sense in some of the St. Paul Press editorials. In order to misrepresent Col. Aldrich, it resorts to the meanest subterfuge, and in order to crack up its favorite—Ramsey—it resorts to the same means. The Press will be responsible for another Indian Panic, yet.

Gray continued to construct his argument by pointing out “no hostilities to be anticipated from the Chippewas” and the timing of Ramsey’s arrival in relation to the signing of the treaty and how that tribe “did not wish to and would not make war on the whites.”²⁰

“Meantime do not let the Press effort to get up a panic, succeed, and believe it to be only what it is—merely a device for the purpose of puffing up Governor Ramsey,” Gray concluded.

Gray continued his attempt to stem the tide of panic locally as the Wright County company of soldiers arrived from Fort Snelling. Gray reported that the effect had been able to “considerably ‘discombobberate’ [*sic*] matters in this town” leaving only three stores and one hotel open.²¹

“Our School has been dried up for some time,” Gray continued. “Business indeed looks blue, at present. Excepting the store and hotel keepers, we have yet to hear of a solitary person who is making more than a very poor living.”

The newspapers continued to run stories of secession, depression, and warring politics on a regular basis. With a limited postal mail system and no telephones, people had to rely on their neighbors or newspapers as their main mode of communication. As many small town people have said over the years, “I’ve already heard it, but if it makes the newspaper, it’s got to be true.”

With the release of 250 captives taken by the Dakota, “the best news we have heard lately,”²² and additional soldiers found in paroled prisoners,²³ Gray felt comfortable declaring that “the Indian war is virtually over in the inhabited portions of this State. All that remains to be done is to keep a standing force along our borders until the Government selects some place for their removal.”²⁴

The people, having survived their heightened sense of fear and direct aggression by the Dakota, had calmed enough to begin feeling a sense of injustice. This quickly turned to anger and a growing need for revenge. A large contingency opposed this and saw no need for excessive punishment, due to the long string of abuses the Dakota had already suffered which pushed them to revolt in the first place. Naturally, the two groups clashed as time ticked away waiting for the Government carry out their decisions.

It is now generally known there was an attempt made lately, by part of the citizens living near the scene of the late Indian massacre, to wrest the condemned Indians from the soldiers and sacrifice them to their just wrath.

This shows the state of feeling, precisely, in this State, toward these bloodthirsty devils. Persons living abroad may not have the acute sense of the Minnesotian [*sic*] in regard to the amount of evil—the more than devilish barbarity that has marked the course of these red devils in human shape.

It may do for those who live in the eastern States who never saw a wild Indian to talk about ‘The stately American Indian,’ and write pretty verses about ‘Lo, the poor Indian!’ &c. &c. But they an ideal the most visionary.

Imagine a thousand painted and begrimed savages falling unawares upon peaceful settlements, and murdering men, women, and children, without regard to age or sex. Infants were torn from their mothers’ arms, and their brains dashed out; mothers and

fathers were slaughtered and scalped—whole families were butchered, and their bodies mutilated in the most horrible manner.

Now, after these monsters are made prisoners, adjudged guilty and condemned to death, is it a wonder that the people of that section, when they hear vague rumors that the government talks of letting the Indians go, with the exception of a few—is it strange that they should attempt to take justice into their own hands, and kill these infernal miscreants?

We object to mob law in the main—but WHO CAN BLAME THESE PEOPLE!—They see the murderers of their fathers, mothers and sisters, wives and children, and hear that the government designs letting them loose!

We are glad to see that our Congressional delegation have taken the matter in hand, and jointly addressed a petition to the president, praying for the speedy execution of these condemned Indians. We think the President will order that they be executed. If he does not, it is our firm conviction that an outraged people, maddened at this seeming lack of justice, will kill the Indians without his order.²⁵

Petitions began to circulate at the end of December 1862 that requested the removal of the Dakota to New England “where the ‘red brothers’ will be ‘appreciated’ and taken into the bosoms of their sympathizers.”²⁶ The people also turned to their statesmen, Windom and Aldrich, for “aid at once to the suffering thousands in this State”²⁷ by passing a bill based on what they called a “breach of faith on the part of the Indians” for full restitution. This would be passed early in 1863.²⁸

. . . they know he is working with might and main for the welfare of this State—for the indemnification of the refugees, and for the extermination of hostile Indians. No man has worked more faithfully for the public good than has Col. Aldrich. . . .²⁹

After the Dakota faced execution on December 26, the political climate continued to heat up as many felt unsatisfied with the results—whether too harsh or too lenient.

Gray reprinted an article from *The Anoka Republican* which reported 200 to 300 Chippewa were “committing numerous depredations on the settlers.” Gray went on to agree with the Republican’s opinion that if the Government would not remove the Dakota, then the people ought to, regardless. He wrote:

Self preservation is the first law of nature. We still hold to the opinion that the whites and these vagabond, thieving and murdering tribes of Indians can never live side by side in peace. The Chippewas have heard that only 38 of Sioux murderers were hung, and, Indian like, they firmly believe the Government DARE NOT hang any more—They are convinced that, for all robberies and thefts committed by them, they will, at most, only receive a mild reproof! We believe the best course would have been, last summer, to have opened on them with fire and sword, instead of the policy taken by the Governor of TEMPORISING. Our people living on the borders of the Chippewa country feel that they are upon the crest of a pent up volcano, which may burst forth at any moment and consume them all. We firmly believe, that if measures are not taken soon, to check these Chippewas, in their depredations, before another winter falls upon us the world will again ring with the news of another horrible massacre in Minnesota.

Ten thousand soldiers are at this time quartered in different parts of the State, and ten thousand people in the State, ready, at any time, to hunt these vagabonds out of existence. If nothing is done in regard to these robberies, they will be emboldened to do their worst when spring opens.³⁰

By May, Gray’s prophetic words began to ring true. The *Mankato Record* reported that Gardiner



The Ames-Florida-Stork House, a Greek Revival style home built in 1861 by George Ames, is the oldest building in Rockford. Currently, the Rockford Area Historical Society cares for the artifact collection, plans special event programming, gives tours, and maintains a research library for those interested in local history. Photo courtesy of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

Frost of Freeborn County had been killed by the Dakota while trapping in Cottonwood County. Sightings of the warriors and additional murders in the surrounding areas continued to mount,³¹ so that by the beginning of summer the reports now included Wright County and a “repeat of the same fright.”³²

“I have just heard of the depredation of the Indians near Mankato,” wrote Lizzie to Nellie Florida. “I wonder when they will be taken care of and our people will be safe.”³³

The Dustin Massacre

According to a variety of accounts³⁴ whose details of the event differ, the Dustin family came under attack by the Dakota on June 30, 1863. The Dustins were travelling by wagon from their old homestead to a new one in the western portion of the County.

In the *1915 History of Wright County*, Montrose resident D.C. Kriedler reported to Franklyn C. Wedge that Nathan Dustin led him to the scene. There they found Amos Dustin and his eldest son shot, though the youngest child remained hidden and unharmed under their bodies. The



Katherine Dustin

An early settler of Marysville, Kate lived with her husband, Amos, their three young children, and his mother, Jennette. On June 23, 1863, several Dakota ambushed the family as they traveled to a new homestead location. Shot through the chest and shoulder with arrows, Kate was dragged from the wagon, then beaten and left for dead in the woods. The next day a group of local men found her and the two surviving children and cared for them after Kate died on July 3. Photo courtesy of the Wright County Historical Society.

grandmother, Jennette Dustin, had suffered extensive mutilation and an arrow through her back. Kate Dustin, also shot in the back with an arrow, lay wounded at the home of A.E. Cochran. Cochran and his son had found the family after the incident and begun medical attention.

Farnham reported that a party of five Dakota with their skin painted black, had overtaken the Dustin family. He confirmed the extent of the mutilation with a graphic account he later printed

in the Delano newspaper and said that Kate spent “most of the night in a hopeless attempt to find the road” so simply laid down to die. In a correction letter to the editor printed in the newspaper later, the writer declared Chief Medicine Bottle to have been part of the attacking group.

Mrs. Kate Dustin was left with her two children, wounded in the shoulder by an arrow that could not be removed, her father’s blood and nearly dead from fright,” wrote Farnham. “What was to be done? With tottering steps, with her two children, she started to go back to Cochran’s covered with blood and suffering intense pain, with the mosquitoes so thick she could barely see.”³⁵

The next day Cochran, Lammers and Kingsley set out to find the missing family, as the team had found their way back home. Hearing moaning in the distance, Cochran made his way through the meadow to find a nearly unconscious Kate with two children. One man took the Dustins to the house; the others ran to sound the alarm and find a doctor.

Farnham reports the messenger arrived in Rockford at midnight to gather a party of residents, which included George Ames, John Woodard, and J.R. Ames, to go to Moore’s Prairie to gather the settlers safely back to Rockford. The two surviving Dustin children were adopted and the remaining family members received a rough burial in Waverly, where they still lie.

. . . the whole county was aroused, astonished and amazed at the report that a family had been murdered by the Indians. The whole population started at once, and it seemed for a time as if nothing could stop them . . . the fact the Indians were in the timber was enough; no reasoning or persuasion could stop the avalanche for a short time. But in a few days reason returned, and the efforts made at Rockford and Monticello again stopped the frightened settlers.³⁶ Despite a larger group of people arriving at

Rockford than in the previous scare, including refugees from Marysville and Middleville, the townsfolk again opened their homes, barns, and other buildings to shelter them. The town leaders again voted to build a stockade in the mill yard on Bridge Street, despite the financial loss the business owners still felt from erecting the first structure. Ames once more took the helm of planning and leading the building team, which consisted of any able-bodied men still living in town.

As expected, the mill owner and its renter saw a financial loss due to the stockade. The fort measured 40 feet by 40 feet with bastions at each corner and a trench dug three or four feet deep. Since the builders cut the lumber full of two-inch portals in which to shoot through, it was rendered unusable for future building.³⁷

The settlers erected several other forts in Wright County during these Indian scares, though they documented the Monticello and Rockford forts as the more effective structures. Beebe Lake lies not far from Rockford, and there an encampment of citizens built a stockade on the island both times.

“This time some of them had the foresight to provide themselves with axes and crosscut saws to cut trees for a fort [at Beebe],” reports Hubler. “Without oxen or horses, the men had to haul the logs themselves and in time the fort was finished.”³⁸

Clearwater housed soldiers for two years during the conflict, and other safe zones included the church in St. Michael, to which the citizens of Franklin, French Lake, and Maple Lake all fled.

Moving on, moving home

With the death of Chief Little Crow, leader of the local bands of Dakota, and the end of the Civil War, the citizens of Rockford and Wright County began to look at the upcoming decade with hope for a peaceful future. Rockford established various social groups and celebrations, including the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), photography club, and drama club. The founders also continued to build new roads and schools, expand the postal system, and fill their streets with a growing number of businesses.

The mills saw a boom after Ames sold the businesses and home to his nephew, George Florida, only days before he died. After he purchased the mills, G. Florida returned his family to Rockford, his father, Joel, having died. They resided together in the Ames-Florida-Stork House until Jessie, the youngest of the Florida family, decided to sell it to Meda and Clinton Stork in 1936.

Rockford survived the tumultuous times of its early years and the experience has created a legacy of strength that endures still today. The Historical Society enjoys unprecedented community support of its programs and local events, while the Ames-Florida-Stork House has become a repository for the family’s letters, diaries, photographs, and artifacts, giving life to the past, and hope for the future.

NOTES

1. Farnham's trip to the Governor is detailed in Mouraine Baker Hubler, *Rockford: The Way it Really Was* (Rockford: Leader Printing, 1985), but not by Farnham himself in his accounts printed in the *Wright County Eagle*.

2. Nellie Florida letter to George Florida dated Monday January 31, (illegible). From the collections of the Rockford Area Historical Society, Rockford, Minnesota.

3. Farnham, 73.

4. Mouraine Baker Hubler, *Rockford: The Way it Really Was* (Rockford: Leader Printing, 1985), 23.

5. Daniel R. Farnham, *History of Wright County* ed. George A. DuToit (Delano: *Delano Eagle*, n.d.), 73.

6. *Ibid.*, 24.

7. *Ibid.*, 23.

8. Farnham, 380.

9. Farnham, 74.

10. Hubler, 25.

11. *Ibid.*, 21.

12. Mouraine Baker Myers, *101 Best Stories of Wright County* (Buffalo: Wright County Historical Society, 1976), page 34.

13. Frank B. Lamson and C.A. French, *Condensed History of Wright County* (Delano: French and Lamson, 1935), page 12.

14. Hubler, 22.

15. J. Steward letter to Nellie Florida from Camp Instruction, Washington D.C. dated January 1, 1862. From the collections of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

16. *The Wright County Republican*, May 11, 1861.

17. Hubler, 25.

18. Letter to soldier Jackson Stewart in Washington to Nellie Florida in Rockford dated November 30, 1862. From the collections of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

19. *The Northwestern Weekly Union*, 23 August, 1862.

20. *The Weekly Union*, 27 September, 1862.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Weekly Union*, October 4, 1862

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Weekly Union*, December 6, 1862.

25. *Weekly Union*, December 13, 1862.

26. *Weekly Union*, December 27, 1862.

27. *Weekly Union*, January 10, 1863.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Courier*, May 9, 1863.

32. Hubler, 26.

33. Lizzie letter to Nellie Florida from Dear [*sic*] Lake, Minnesota dated April 20, (illegible). From the collections of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

34. Franklyn Curtiss Wedge. *History of Wright County*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, H.C. Cooper, Jr., & Co., 1915), 947; Farnham; Wright County Historical Society files.

35. Farnham, 76.

36. *Ibid.*, 79.

37. Hubler, 26.

38. *Ibid.*

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My Family's Flight from Wright County

Written by S.A. Putnam
Buffalo, Minnesota

Transcribed by Rebecca Mavencamp, April 8, 2010

[Transcriber's note: Portion of a document found in the collections of the Rockford Area Historical Society, typed on a typewriter, perhaps created for a speech to the Old Settlers Association. Spelling and punctuation, including the author's question marks, have been left unchanged, though without comparing them to the handwritten document, some could be the typist's mistakes instead.]

The lines of social distinction were very lightly drawn. From the time where the Lord God said "It is not good for man to be alone"— he has looked for companionship to those of his own kind, and common interests toward united effort to ease the burdens which a new country fall upon all alike.

Fashionable calls were unknown, all day visits were the custom and were too seldom made to suit the children who were always allowed to go with their elders.

In this quiet way time passed until the breaking out of the Civil War, and it was found that even way up here in the woods could be heard the call for volunteers to aid in preserving the union. The call was not unheeded, Wright County sent all and more than could be spared. Wives heroically bore the separation from those whom they justly regarded as their protectors and providers, and assumed alone the burden of caring for the home and little ones entrusted to their joint guardianship.

Noble women spoke encouraging words when parting from their loved ones and denied themselves the relief of tears until those tears could be shed alone. Nor had they time for idle sorrow, these women who plowed and sowed the fields and gathered such harvests as they might while the husband the father and the son were away in the Army. I was too young then to know what it all meant, but I well understand it now, and say with all my heart. All honor and praise, not only to the men who went, but to the women who stayed at home.

While the shadow of the civil war hung dark over all the land, events of the most alarming nature occurred at home. One pleasant evening in August, 1862 news came to us of the Indian outbreak. My uncle Samuel Patten (?) was desired(?) to carry the news to settlers farther up the river, and my father was to come at once with his family to Greenwood. We small people had company for the night, and were anticipating a glorious

frolic. Instead of that we were hastily bundled into a boat and hurried off to Greenwood where we stayed for some days spending the night in a log stockade which had been hastily constructed, and the days at a hotel kept by Mr. James Young.

Friends in Minneapolis sent for us to come there, and one bright morning at sunrise we left our home to seek a place of greater safety. The journey was made in an open boat in company with a minister by the name of Stevenson who was taking his family to Anoka. If this same minister, by the way was no more successful as a soul pilot than he was in guiding his boat, his crown of glory deserves a few stars, for he ran aground so often and so frequently needed my father's help to get afloat that we were glad to leave him at Anoka.

We reached Minneapolis about five o'clock in the evening, and before noon the next day we children were told that a little sister had come to us. Our joy was short lived, for in twelve days the little stranger left us for the heavenly land.

We remained six weeks in Minneapolis and then returned to our Wright County home, which my uncle had cared for during our absence and where had we but known it, we might all had remained with perfect safety.

During this time my father had enlisted and was in the army for the next three years, part of the time in the Mounted Rangers and afterward in the 3rd Minn. Battery. I doubt that there are many women here who know what my mothers hardships were during that time. We were, however, better off than many for my uncle who lived with us was too old to enlist, and we were fortunate enough to secure a hired man a part of the time.

In the Summer of 1863 my father, then stationed at St. Paul was returning there after a few days stint at home. Reaching Greenwood he was told of the awful fate which had befallen the Dustan [sic] family. He could not return back as he had allowed himself only sufficient time to reach his company before his leave of absence expired, but he made arrangements to have his family cared for and on reaching head-quarters succeeded in having a detachment of Mounted Rangers of which he was one sent in pursuit of the Indians.

In the meantime we had gone to Greenwood and when word came that the soldiers would pass through that place a dinner was prepared for them. I would be glad to meet anyone who was there or who assisted in preparing that spread.

Soon after the coming of the soldiers we returned to our home, but it was a long time before we felt safe. I remember my uncle would often caution my mother when she was leaving the house to keep a constant watch for Indians, and I had my plans all laid to take refuge in an old root-cellar in case of sudden attack.

I went alone to school, a part of the way through dense woods. I went without making any fuss about it, but I should be sorry now to endure the fear that maid [sic] my heart standstill at any sudden sound as I went as quietly as possible along that lonely road.

The news of the death of Little Crow was a great relief, as his name had carried fear to the hearts of all. We had no love for the red man and I think

there are few who lived here in those days who did not endorse the sentiment that the majority of the good Indians are the dead ones.

Some years ago there came as pastor of one of our city churches, a devout young minister who had recently graduated from Andover Seminary, and who held the Common Eastern belief that the Indian was the abused party. Among the members of this church was Mr. J.M. Hale, known to many of you as Jack Hale. Knowing that he had seen something of frontier life, the young minister assigned to Mr. Hale "The Indian" as his subject for one of the monthly missionary meetings. The remarks upon the subject were based upon the speakers personal knowledge and experience, and hardly in the line the minister had expected, and as Mr. Hale's belief in the efficacy of gunpowder in the conversation of Indians became more and more apparant [sic] he moved uneasily in his chair and finally called him down with the word "Time's up brother, Time's up".

The trouble of 1863 was the last from Indians in this section. Social affairs went on as before and after long waiting the dark cloud or war passed away. We all remember how soon joy was turned to sorrow at the death of our noble president. In this connection it occurs to me that the old residents of Minnesota must feel an especial pride in the fact that she has been the first state to make the birthday of Abraham Lincoln a legal holiday.

In the summer of 1866 white tents were to be seen from our log school house and strange men appeared on the road. They were not soldiers however, and their mission was the peaceful surveying for a line of railroad which should bring Wright County into more immediate relations with the busy world.

In the fall of that year my parents moved to Minneapolis which city has ever since been my home. I am more grateful that I can say for this opportunity of renewing old associations, for my interest in my early home will continue as long as my life.

Of many of you in this audience it can be said—
When the hill of toil was steepest
When the forest frown was deepest,
Poor but young you hastened here,
Came where solid hope was cheapest,
Came a pioneer.
Made in the western woodlands view
Civilizations charms
Snatched a home for you and yours
From the trees lean arm,
Well you paid for every blessing—
Bought with toil each day of cheer.”

These well earned days of cheer are more numerous than they once were. May they multiply to each and all of you as time goes on, and may you have the privelege [sic] for many years to come, of meeting with the Old Settlers Association of Wright County.