The Rise and Fall of the Minnesota Middle Ground: Henry Hastings Sibley and the Ethnic Cleansing of Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MINNESOTA MIDDLE GROUND: HENRY HASTINGS SIBLEY
AND THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF MINNESOTA

by

Jordan Scott Bergstrom

May 2015

Henry Hastings Sibley (1811-1891), fur trader and eventual first governor of Minnesota, worked closely among the sub-division of “Sioux” Indians known as the Dakota. Sibley first aided in the development of what historian Richard White called a “Middle Ground,” a racially mixed and symbiotic society. Later in his life, however, he assisted in negotiating treaties that transformed that frontier society into a racially divided and oppressive one. The result was the outbreak of hostilities between Indians, Whites, and mixed-race people in the Great Sioux Uprising, and ultimately the ethnic cleansing of Minnesota. This study approaches Sibley’s involvement on a microhistorical level, exposing the larger ethnohistorical and cultural framework of a racially mixed society. Sibley’s experience shows that it was still an important lucrative feature of fur trading and frontier life fifty years after. The end of the fur trade meant the destruction of the “Middle Ground” in Minnesota.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many people for their assistance in writing this history:

To my parents, Jim and Cindy Bergstrom who showed me, by example, that there is no substitute for hard work and dedication.

To Dr. Roxanne Easley, Dr. Daniel Herman, Dr. Brian Carroll, and Professor Kenneth Munsell in the Central Washington University History Department who guided me, sometimes kicking and screaming, through the world of historical research.

To Paul, Josselyn, Adam, Kellie, and Preston. My fellow graduate students and teaching assistants who stood beside me through it all.

To Michaela Wait, who convinced me on a daily basis that I was capable of achieving my goals.

To Weston, Jason, Clint, Jake, Chase, Jimmy, Jill, and the rest of my friends and family who consistently and selflessly kept me going throughout this process.

A special thanks to the people at the Minnesota Historical Society who do a stunningly impressive job protecting and preserving our history.

Lastly, to the American soldiers, Dakota warriors, and civilians of all backgrounds who lost their lives in the 1862 Dakota Conflict. You are not forgotten.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Early one Sunday morning in 1862 four Wahpeton Sioux men emerged from the forests of the Big Woods in Minnesota. In years past the Big Woods had hosted a veritable cornucopia of Indian hunters. The area offered deer, beaver, otter, elk and the occasional buffalo roamed the clearings between patches of forest. The Big Woods were considered the best hunting ground east of the Missouri River. Only the buffalo-filled plains of the West may have offered a greater bounty for the Indians.¹ Those days had long since passed for the Sioux in Minnesota. Invading White settlers had poured onto former Indian lands in recent years, cutting down the majestic oak and maple trees and plowing up the soil for farming. Such activities had chased away much of the region’s wild game. Young Sioux men like the four that emerged from the woods that Sunday had grown accustomed to unsuccessful hunting trips; this Sunday was no different. The four men walked down the Pembina-Henderson trail that hugged the western edge of the woods, heading south toward Rice Creek, a journey of some forty miles, to their home. The men lived in a changing world, one of cultural blending and increasing conflict. They were Wahpetons, which technically made them Upper Sioux by birth but they had married women from the Lower Sioux Mdewakanton band. Rice Creek was an Mdewakanton village under the leadership of Chief Red Middle Voice. Both bands were

“annuity” Dakotas, bands that had moved onto reservations after the treaty of Traverse de Sioux in 1850. All four were related to one another as brothers or cousins; two were dressed as White men; they donned trousers and shirts while the other two wore more traditional dress, and so cloaked themselves in the trading blankets ubiquitous among frontier Indians. The four men, Brown Wing, Killing Ghost, Runs Against When Crawling, and Breaking Up, crossed by the cabin of a White man named Robinson Jones. He was no stranger to them; they had known him as an acquaintance as they did many of the settlers in this region.

In the American fashion the Jones property was demarcated by fences. Just on the other side of one of Jones’s fences lay a hen’s nest containing large eggs. One of the four took them. “Don’t take them!” bellowed his companion. “They belong to a White man and we may all get in trouble!” Enraged at the accusation, the egg-taker threw them to the ground and challenged the honor of his relative. “You are afraid of the White man.” He said, “You are afraid to take even an egg from him, though you are half starved. Yes, you are a coward, and I will tell everybody so.” After a moment the would-be egg thief replied by stepping on the eggs and pronouncing, “I am not a coward. I am not afraid of the White man. To show you that I am not, I will go to the house and shoot him. Are you brave enough to go with me?” The response came without a second of hesitation, “Yes, I will go with you and we will see who is the braver.”

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2 Oehler, The Great Sioux Uprising, 3-4.
These four young Sioux, all of whom were under thirty years of age, set in motion events that they could not have possibly foreseen. They were rebelling against the change all around them. A world that increasingly clashed with their traditional beliefs. The Middle Ground that they had helped to shape was eroding. Their unsuccessful hunting trip, their desire to steal from the Jones homestead, and their outrage toward the settlers were all indicative of this change that had been set in motion long before they were born. The United States policy of Americanizing Indian tribes, referred to as civilization in White parlance, entailed accommodation and dispossession (taking Indian land through treaties and payments). Westward expansion which began in 1607 had finally reached them in Minnesota. This was a world where Indians had come to depend more on the Office of Indian Affairs than on their own hunting prowess. A world where the American Fur Company and other trading entities held more power than tribal chiefs. A world where only small tracts of land could now be called home as opposed to the vast lakes and forests of Minnesota, and a world where White American culture and Indian culture merged, melded, and now competed against one another. The policy of accommodation required long standing relationships between Whites and Natives on the Frontier. After all, someone had to trade furs, someone had to make the treaties, enforce their terms, ensure the safety of Whites on the frontier, and of course live among the Indians to do so. The White and Indian men who staffed the fur trade were agents of accommodation, the first foot soldiers in the Americanization and “civilization” of the “Savage Indian.”
One of the most prominent and skilled culture brokers on the frontier was Henry Hastings Sibley. Born in frontier Detroit in 1811, Sibley played a key role in the history of Minnesota. Sibley cultivated and took part in a thriving Middle Ground in Minnesota. He helped negotiate major treaties that dispossessed the Sioux of their land in the 1850s. Before that, however, he was a fur trader for the American Fur Company. He had married into the Sioux tribe, had a mixed-race daughter with his Sioux wife, and carried out peaceable relations with the Sioux for more than thirty years. The textbook example of accommodation, it is tragic then that due to the shifting racial discourse and historical current of the times Sibley ultimately became the agent of ethnic cleansing. He would champion the destruction of the Minnesota Middle Ground he had helped build. In historian Rhoda R. Gilman’s _Henry Hastings Sibley: Divided Heart_, she sums up his life succinctly:

Rooted in the political and social establishment of the Old Northwest Territory, he witnessed the colonizing of a continent and its people, the closing of the frontier, the agony of civil war, and explosive birth of an urban, industrial society. He was keenly conscious of what he conceived to be the nation’s destiny, and identified closely with it. An heir to the Indian Policy of Lewis Cass, who had managed to dispossess the Great Lakes tribes without war, Sibley belonged to the generation that was left to pay the price of that betrayal in blood and shame. And unlike Cass, he had personal ties to the Dakota people that placed him in a deeply ambiguous position.⁵

It was his close ties to the Dakota people that made Sibley an effective intercultural broker. His familial ties and friendships among tribal elites made him a member of the

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Dakota people. As much as the four hunters, Sibley was a victim of the changing racial attitudes and westward expansion. The man owed his life, his status, and his wealth to the Dakota. By this time the fur trade had become enmeshed with the policies of dispossession that had been championed first by Jeffersonian Republicans then Jacksonian Democrats. He had learned the art of diplomatic dispossession from Lewis Cass, which forced him to change with new policy. He became the simultaneous victim of and champion of the changing frontier. The man that had helped create the Middle Ground that existed between White Americans and Indian peoples would prove to be its undoing.

Historians have produced countless volumes dissecting the relationship between Whites and Indians on the frontier. Two recent and influential examples include Richard White’s *The Middle Ground* and Peter Silver’s *Our Savage Neighbors*. They have taken distinctly different approaches to understanding this history. In order to understand the Middle Ground of Minnesota, from its beginnings in the fur trade and its ultimate destruction in the flames of war we must do a thorough reading of the prevailing scholarship on Indian-White relations. Due to differing views, distinguishing between their points of view is a necessity. Literature that focuses on race, savagery, and ethnic cleansing must be separated from literature that focuses on accommodation and diplomatic dispossession of Indian Land.
THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ACCOMMODATION AND DIPLOMATIC DISPOSSESSION

Historians have written extensively on the circumstances surrounding Indian-White relations on the frontier. Yet the frontier experience is not altogether the same across time and space. One of the most important works produced on the topic centers on the Great Lakes region. Richard White’s *The Middle Ground* published in 1991, has become a standard for how to analyze frontier interactions between Indians, Europeans, and Americans and how they accommodated one another in at least a somewhat symbiotic relationship. Richard White noted that “This accommodation took place because for long periods of time in large parts of the colonial world Whites could neither dictate to Indians nor ignore them. Whites needed Indians as allies, as partners in exchange, as sexual partners, as friendly neighbors.”6 This joining of cultures was elaborated on by historian Susan Sleeper-Smith who published her book *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*, in 2001.7 Influenced by Richard White’s work, Smith detailed the vitally important role played by Indian women in the Great Lakes fur trade from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Sleeper-Smith argues that the creation of kinship networks between French fur traders and Indian peoples centered on marriage. It was in this way that Indian women played a key role in forging the fundamental relationship of the early Middle

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Ground. Richard White’s book ends in 1815 with the defeat of Tecumseh’s rebellion. However, the story of Henry Sibley and his Middle Ground takes place decades later in the Great Lakes region. What held true in White’s timeframe for the Great Lakes region up to 1815 holds true in Minnesota half a century later. White’s Middle Ground thesis centers on the ideas of cultural exchange and mutually beneficial relationships between White and Indian society. However, White erroneously asserts that the Middle Ground was shattered after Tecumseh’s failed attempt at a Pan-Indian resistance centered on the Shawnee in Indiana. The death of Tecumseh, in White’s estimation, was the death of the Great Lakes Middle Ground. Only Tecumseh’s brother, Tenskatawa, the prophet whose vision stirred the resistance to begin with, was left to see and in many ways symbolize the death of the Middle Ground in the Great Lakes region:

Once there had been a complicated world that could be both dreamscape and landscape, that contained both masters of game and the fur trade, prophets and missionaries, villages like Detroit and villages like Tippecanoe. This world, pulled forward by Europeans and Indians in tandem, vanished from most of what had been the pays d’en haut. The Middle Ground itself withered and died. The Americans arrived and dictated. Tenskatawa was left to sit and relate jumbled and isolated facts in answer to a White man’s odd questions although, but a short time before, those facts had been a part of a common world shared with White men. The French Savant Volney, so unlike the French habitants and traders, had prefigured this world when he had compiled his vocabularies and collected his facts about Algonquin life. He had concluded: “These men are in the state of wild animals, which cannot be tamed after they have reached mature age.” Volney had announced the return of the savage.8

8 White, The Middle Ground, 523.
Despite White’s assertion, this was not the end of the Middle Ground in the Great Lakes region or the Pays d’en Haut as the French called it and as White referred to the region in his book. It was certainly the end of Pan-Indian resistance led by prophets of revitalization and reclamation in the region. But the Middle Ground was far from dead throughout the Great Lakes, and far from on its last legs in the years after Tecumseh’s fall and the demise of Tenskatawa’s prophetic messages of unity. The fur trade was not as profitable in the east, but it was still strong in the west. The Tribes were not unified under one banner, and they lost British support, but they were still standing on their own feet. The American government had not succeeded in taking away lands, nor had the onslaught of White settlers succeeded in that task. Were this the case, the life of Henry Hastings Sibley would have been much less interesting, much less important, and much less bloody. Although the Middle Ground of Tecumseh, Tenskatawa, William Henry Harrison and others had faded from the frontier. The Middle Ground of Henry Hasting Sibley, Little Crow, Red Blanket Woman and Lewis Cass remained.

The Middle Ground did not exist only in the Great Lakes region. Richard White and Susan-Sleeper Smith both analyze the Middle Grounds that rose in that region, but other historians have produced numerous works on Middle Grounds across the entirety of the North American Continent. One such work is Anne F. Hyde’s 2011 book Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860.9 Hyde’s work

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spans numerous regions controlled by various tribes, nations, and empires. Much like the Dakota kinship networks in Minnesota, Hyde argued that extended families were
the basic unit of loyalty in these racially mixed areas across the almost impossible to
define borders of the American West, as opposed to national, ethnic, or imperial loyalty.
Indians, Whites, and mixed-race people across the ever-fluid American West relied on
their extended families for support and survival. Just as White, Sleeper-Smith, and Hyde
analyze their respective areas of cultural integration and mixing, historian James F.
Brooks analyzed the American Southwest Middle Ground that included the Kiowa,
Apache, Navaho, Pueblo, and White settlers in his 2002 book Captives and Cousins:
Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands.\(^{10}\) Middle Grounds,
however, were not confined the modern contiguous United States, nor were they the
product of only western European people mixing with indigenous populations. Historian
Roxanne Easley’s 2008 article “Demographic Borderlands: People of Mixed Heritage in
the Russian American Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1670-1870” focuses on
not just British, but Russian fur traders.\(^{11}\) Despite the Russian-American Company’s
inability to bring the hostile Tlingit tribes into their fur trading network, a Middle
Ground rose in Alaska between Russian fur traders and Aleut peoples. Easley, like
Sleeper-Smith, focuses on the role of women in the construction of their respective

\(^{10}\) James F. Brooks, Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest

\(^{11}\) Roxanne Easley, “Demographic Borderlands: People of Mixed Heritage in the Russian American
Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1670-1870,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly 99, no. 2 (Spring
Middle Grounds and their roles as cultural intermediaries. Richard White and Susan Sleeper-Smith’s Middle Ground existed in the Great Lakes, but it was not the only one. As historians have shown time and again, Middle Grounds rose and fell across time and space. These Middle Grounds, regardless of where or when they existed, relied on intermediaries between cultures to bind them together.

Historians like Susan Sleeper-Smith and Roxanne Easley explained the roles of women in binding together different cultures. Historian Sylvia Van Kirk also detailed the important role of women as cultural brokers or intermediaries in her 1983 book Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870. While women played crucial roles by binding Euro-American and Indian cultures together through marriage and kinship, women were not the only culture brokers in these borderlands. Cultural brokers came in many different forms. Interpreters, fur traders, mixed-race peoples, and others all helped to bind together Euro-American and Indian society in different places across time. Henry Hastings Sibley was one such fur trader who served as a cultural broker, as did his friend and Dakota chief Little Crow. The various Middle Grounds were held together by these cultural brokers. Each respective Middle Ground rose and eventually fell. Often, when they fell, they were replaced by White settlers who had to build new communities on remnants of what had once been there.

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Creating communities on the Minnesota frontier was a necessity as well. In John Mack Faragher’s *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie*, Faragher details the process of settling Indiana for White American settlers. Of course Faragher’s study delves into the communal building of rural areas like Sugar Creek, Illinois, a place that a modern inhabitant of Sugar Creek comically described to Faragher by saying “this place is nowhere!” Of course Sugar Creek’s nowhereness provided the exact kind of place Faragher wanted to study. For our purposes it is the early encounters with the Kickapoo that take center stage. It was in Sugar Creek that White settlers remembered carving their communities from a “Howling Wilderness,” when, in fact they, had taken the land from the Algonquin-speaking Kickapoo. This was not a blood-stained crusade into the heartland of America or a slowly cultivated Middle Ground, it was instead an example of what became the familiar process of moving onto Indian land, forcing local natives to buy American goods at exorbitant prices, thus pushing them into a cycle of debt which, in turn, forced them to give up land as payment for their debts. Just as Faragher states about Indiana, the same can be said of Minnesota and the Great Lakes Region: “The operative word in this history is dispossession.” Just as it was true of the Illinois prairies, it was true of Minnesota. Lewis Cass and Democrats like him, heirs to the lineage of Jeffersonian Republicanism sought to dispossess Indian peoples of their land. Albeit peaceful, Cass and his method of dispossession in the Great Lakes seeped into the

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14 Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 35.
minds of Democrats like Henry Hastings Sibley. His treaties, much like Cass’ treaties, marginalized once powerful Sioux tribes and forced them onto reservations. Allotment, or the European tradition of dividing the land into square plots and converting it into farm land guaranteed the extinction of traditional hunting game for Native people in the region. While the dispossession of Indian land through peaceful means was, of course, preferable, the end goal, of course, was to remove the cultural “other,” in this case, the Sioux. However, the differences between the dispossession of Kickapoo land and the dispossession of Sioux land were quite different. When the time came to dispossess the Sioux in Minnesota of their beloved homeland, constant contact with Whites had seen the construction of a fully functional Middle Ground there. Therefore, it was not until the 1850s that treaties of mass land dispossession marginalized the Sioux.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF RACE, SAVAGERY, AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

Peter Silver’s book *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* was published in 2008 and centers on the creation of White identity in stark contrast to Indian identity. As opposed to Richard White’s world of mutual accommodation and beneficial relationships identified in *The Middle Ground*, Silver stresses that the forging of White identity in the flames of combat against Indians served a dual purpose. Of course it served to create a White identity that superseded factors that separated Whites from one another (religion, national origin, etc.) but it also created the necessity for exclusion of the cultural “other.” In the case of early Americans, Whiteness and otherness translated to Whiteness and Indianess, Civilization
and savagery. While Silver’s argument does not specifically refer to the areas of White and Indian co-existence as “Middle Grounds” explicitly, they are still areas in which the title applies. As opposed to Richard White, Silver views these areas as places of cultural competition and racial segregation rather than places of racial and cultural mixing. Though, suffice it to say, the two ideas are not mutually exclusive. Of course places like the Minnesota frontier had to, out of necessity, mix cultures (not just Indian culture and White culture, but also French, British, American and Indian culture) but that does not imply that the cultures did not compete for superiority. Men like Henry Hastings Sibley were agents of American culture mixing with and competing against other cultures as much as they were agents of cultural mixing and co-existence. But while Sibley was certainly a representative of American culture, he spoke fluent French, the language of the fur trade. He spoke several dialects of Dakota, after years among the Dakota he understood their cultures as well as he understood his own. It was not until 1851 that the Indians in Minnesota were introduced to Whites who were not interested in accommodating Indians. From 1851-1862 the Minnesota Middle Ground changed to resemble the culturally competitive frontier described by Silver instead of the culturally accommodating frontier described by White. After 1851 men like Sibley were a minority, as proximity to the Dakota in a racially balanced frontier necessitated adjustment and change. The flood of White settlers from the east arrived after 1851, upsetting that balance. The vast majority of those settlers saw race in simpler terms: Civilization vs. The Savage.
Roy Harvey Pearce’s *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and American Mind* studies the racial attitudes of Whites toward Native American peoples. Pearce details the changing attitudes of White Americans as they sought to deal with the “Indian Problem” from 1777-1851. The Indian Problem was the idea that Indians posed a threat not only to a “civilized” society, but they stood in the way of westward expansion. Americans then developed ways of negotiating westward expansion while developing an understanding of Indians. The understanding, according to Pearce, was that savagism was a simple way for Whites to frame Natives. Instead of recognizing Indians as a people who were complex; Whites boiled them down to “savages” for expedience sake if nothing else. Pearce argues that Whites framed Natives as people who were “out of history,” an underdeveloped people, a people who had no real place in the sedentary and steady White culture. Therefore the notion of Savagism explained the Indian people in simple terms, inferior, out of place, and ultimately a threat to civilized society. These attitudes developed an understanding of hierarchical structure of civilization in which White society was civilized and Indian society was savage. These attitudes are clearly present by 1862 in Minnesota. While men like Sibley had integrated themselves into Indian life earlier on and as such were more insulated from this thinking, settlers moving into the Minnesota frontier throughout the 1840s and 1850s certainly were not as insulated. The Sioux had been a nomadic culture prior to the arrival of Americans, they did not fit into the paradigm that White society created to define “civilized” culture. On the reservations created through the treaties negotiated
by Sibley, perhaps the Sioux would be put on the path to “progress” in the eyes of the settlers, removed from their natural savage state, and perhaps more importantly, removed from “Civilized” society. As Pearce argues, the construct of “civilization” could only be sustained by aggressive defense against non-civilized forces, or perhaps more appropriately that a society that wants to earn the right to call itself civilized needs to remove both theoretical and physical threats to its existence. To sum it up, if a society were to remain civilized it must put down all theoretical threats to civilization (the haunting specter of Savagism) and physical threats (The personification of savagism, in this case, the Sioux.) Of course the study of ideas like “Savagism” serve well when analyzing the destruction of a Middle Ground like this one. As the settlers that arrived in Minnesota after the treaties had dispossessed the Sioux of their land brought with them these ideas of civilization and savagery. But it is always dangerous to generalize, much like the Middle Ground’s erroneous proposition that the Middle Ground in the Great Lakes shattered with Tecumseh’s death and subsequent White superiority, Pearce’s work stops short as well when he claimed that Indians had been relegated to dime novels and legend by the 1850s.15

However, the notion of Savagery limped into the future after the 1850s. The threat of the Savage still existed for those on the frontier through the 1860s. While the realistic threat Natives posed to White society as a whole was minimal (if not

completely non-existent), the threat they posed to undermanned and in many cases undefended frontier communities in Minnesota was still very real. Living at the edge of “civilized” society meant that their civilized world was threatened. That very real threat meant that the end of the Minnesota Middle Ground was caused by racial rhetoric and public discourse that demanded the removal of Indian Specter from civilized society, first in Minnesota and then into the Dakotas. David Svaldi attempted to flesh out this rhetoric and discourse, to find a common threat or image of the Indian that permeated the minds of those living on the frontier in the 1860s in his book Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination: A Case Study in Indian White Relations.

The evolution of American Racism toward Native people is well documented. Svaldi attempts to flesh this out and discover how “an ideology . . . was created and used which brought about the intended or unintended destruction of another culture.”¹⁶ Svaldi’s broad argument examines of Indian-White relations in Pontiac’s Rebellion and how race fueled ludicrous conspiracy theories afterward. These aided in creating a mythic frontier Indian who plots, schemes, and waits for the opportune moment to slake their savage bloodlust by attacking White settlements. Svaldi attacks the inherent racism of historians writing about Pontiac’s Rebellion afterward who bought into the notions that Indians were inferior while Whites were naturally superior. Svaldi argues that it was this psychological creation by White Americans; they saw

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Indians as not only inferior and perpetually dangerous no matter how ‘civilized’ they seemed. Any interaction with Indian peoples was tainted by this understanding. His analysis ends with the Sand Creek massacre in 1864 in which hundreds of Cheyenne were butchered by the American military. Again, the focus of those present at Sand Creek was on the image of the “conspiring savage.” John Evans pushed this belief by characterizing Indians as dangerous and hostile “With the impression created that ‘hostile plotters’ were conspiring against innocent Whites . . . Evans’ statements reassured Whites that most Indians were hostile enemies of the state and that the destruction of such enemies was a legitimate action sanctioned by the government.”

This pervasive psychological construct also helps to explain the actions of Whites on the Minnesota frontier after the Sioux uprising. The Middle Ground that had been cultivated for so long was shattered, and while Whites on the frontier knew that it was not all Sioux, but rather focused on the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute bands of Sioux that had carried out the rebellion, they employed the image of the “plotting” savage, and they characterized the “civilized” Indian in this light as well throughout the conflict in many of the newspapers to justify the further ethnic cleansing of the whole state. Svaldi emphasizes this particular psychological factor that led toward the extermination of Indian people. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. analyzes the broader idea of “Indians” in general in the minds of Whites.

17 Svaldi, Sand Creek, 304.
Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to Present* has helped us to understand the White American view of Indian peoples. It is now accepted that Indian tribes were incredibly varied and separated by a myriad of distinctly different cultures and languages. Understanding of Native diversity was not always the case. The Whites who made initial contact with Indians understood these cultural differences, writing at length back to their superiors in Europe about the political and social differences between one tribe or another. This understanding was for those on the ground living up close and personal with Indians at the beginning. But this understanding gave way to the more expedient and convenient classification of the “Indian,” a catch-all term applied to incredibly diverse groups of people that attempted to paint all Indian people as the same, despite knowledge to the contrary. According to Berkhofer, Europeans and later Americans made the conscious decision to see all Indian people as the same while simultaneously defining Whites as different. Just as Peter Silver argued that the juxtaposition of multi-ethnic Europeans against Indians caused those Europeans to cast aside their own differences (i.e. national origin) and create the construct of Whiteness, Berkhofer elaborates on the characteristics they believed were prevalent among Indians. Having defined themselves as White and “civilized” the trend of defining Indians by their perceived shortcomings juxtaposed against Whites or “Description by deficiency” became a method of generalizing Indians not only as deficient; but as the polar opposite of everything good in European civilized culture.
They chose to see Indians as “Counter images of themselves.” Berkhofer’s work is invaluable to the study of the Sioux in the years leading up to, during, and after the 1862 rebellion. His description of the “Good Indian” image, an Indian that represented the positive characteristics of White society and muted his own assumed natural deficiencies, and the “Bad Indian” image, an Indian that embraced only the negative aspects and deficiencies of his own culture and shunned the positive characteristics of European or American culture played a role in the minds of Minnesotan settlers. “Good Indians” like John Otherday, and “Bad Indians” like Little Crow were the living personification of symbols that had been created and existed in the minds of White settlers long before the Sioux Uprising.

Lastly, Berkhofer describes the transition from cultural racism to scientific or biological racism. Founded on the pseudoscience of craniology and other such practices that rose in popularity in the first half of the nineteenth century, the American Indian was deemed to be naturally inferior, and Whites to be naturally superior. Scientists at the American School put forward the notion that the Indians that had civilized were ones that had mixed with White races, and thus their civilization was a result of their White parents, not their Indian ones. The biological “proof” of Indian racial inferiority of the nineteenth century was, in the minds of Whites, “scientific” proof that the

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18 Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*, 27.
20 Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*, 58.
cultural racism that characterized the eighteenth century reflected the natural order of the world.

In order to understand how Minnesota Middle Ground rose and fell an understanding the people that lived there before White contact is vital. While the Dakota were not the only inhabitants of the western Great Lakes they certainly became the most powerful tribe in that region after White contact. Initial contact formed connections between French and the indigenous populations of the Great Lakes, forming the original Middle Ground. However this Middle Ground changed over time, as such it is a necessity to separate the three different phases of the construction of the Minnesota Middle Ground. The first phase or French phase existed from the 1680s until 1763. The second phase, or the British phase, existed from 1763 to 1783 alone, before battling American interests in the region until 1816. The third phase, or the American phase, existed after the assault launched by John Jacob Astor and his American Fur Company in 1816 annihilated all competitors in the fur trade and remained dominant in the region’s fur trade until 1850 and the destruction of the Middle Ground in 1862. All three of these phases share one commonality; the fur trade. It is in the American phase that the different policy of Americans, as opposed to their European predecessors, threatened Indian ways of life and in a very real sense, Indian existence. Because of this, an understanding of American policy and racial attitudes regarding Indians must also be discussed. Before any of those phases of the Minnesota Middle Ground came to be, the
Native American inhabitants of what is now Minnesota controlled the region and battled with their neighbors for dominance.
CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF THE MINNESOTA MIDDLE GROUND

The inhabitants of Minnesota prior to European contact were Native Americans self-identified as the Dakota. The word Dakota literally translated means “friend” or “ally” in English. The singular name for the tribe did not fit a group like the Dakota. They were not a centralized tribe with a common leader but instead disparate groups of people that spoke Siouan languages. The relationship between the various bands of Dakota worked more like an alliance of foreign nations than a single tribe. The word “Dakota” referred to the alliances or friendships between the different bands of Siouan speaking peoples: the “Dakota,” or the “Friends.”

This disjointed tribal organization came with advantages and disadvantages. Because they were held together only through language, Siouan speaking peoples seldom operated as a single unit. This made imposing their combined will on neighboring tribes far more difficult. What they lacked in cohesion though, allowed them to avoid (at least more than their sedentary neighbors) the most horrific result of White contact: diseases. The nomadic and disparate Sioux’s rise to power on the plains was clearly aided by diseases which killed many of their sedentary enemies en masse. Diseases like smallpox spread much more quickly in dense sedentary populations. The sedentary enemies of the Dakota, the

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Arikara, were absolutely devastated by the disease. The Dakota lifestyle, by fortunate accident, saved them from utter destruction.

The Dakota bands had settled along different portions of the Great Lakes, forests, and the Prairies throughout the entirety of modern day Minnesota, with irregular forays into western Wisconsin. Living in teepees and small structures that suited their twice yearly migrations, the Dakota fished, hunted, engaged in minor agriculture (mostly rice and tobacco) and harvested maple syrup. After the arrival of the first French fur traders to the region the neighboring Ojibway (Chippewa), in what is now Wisconsin, armed with French weapons, pushed west into Dakota held territory in modern day Minnesota. This phenomenon of European contact and the subsequent trade relationships that were formed severely upset the power balance among local tribes, and this disruption was already visible in other areas of the Great Lakes. As Richard White points out, these French traders usually armed one tribe with modern weaponry making them vastly superior, at least militarily, to their surrounding tribes for a time. These non-stop conflicts in the Eastern Great Lakes left many groups shattered and sent refugees fleeing west. Already warlike relationships between particular tribes became even more bitter. Nicolas Perrot, a French Fur trader who lived the majority of his life with Algonquians in the Eastern Great Lakes, witnessed the shattered refugees wrecking havoc on the delicate balance of Indian relations, “He came to think of the refugees as uniformly treacherous, busily plotting one another’s destruction when they
were not contemplating killing the French.”³ This process of military expansion prompted by Indian access to modern weaponry, occurred in Minnesota as well: In Minnesota it led to the rise to regional power of both the Chippewa and the Sioux.

The arrival of the Chippewa in Sioux territory sometime in the early to mid-seventeenth century started bitter and constant conflicts between the Sioux and the Chippewa invaders; a blood feud that would last hundreds of years. Certainly the tribal relations changed over time and space. As Richard White noted “It is ironic that historians, far more than anthropologists, have been guilty of viewing intertribal history as essentially ahistorical and static . . . as if each group were doled out an allotted number of adversaries at creation with whom they battled mindlessly through eternity.”⁴ Tribes fought for economic opportunity, trade access, hunting grounds and horses; in other words, “plains tribes went to war because their survival as a people depended on securing and defending essential resources.”⁵

The Big Woods of Minnesota offered hunting grounds as well stocked as any on the continent, and particularly the massive herds of humpback bison living further inland. The Chippewa wanted the buffalo for themselves, and the Dakota defended this resource.⁶ The populous Chippewa were well-armed with French guns and as such had a

³ White, The Middle Ground, 15.
distinct advantage over their Dakota enemies who, at that time, still relied mainly on the bow-and-arrow to wage war. While Chippewa expansion into Dakota lands certainly forced migrations, it fell short of shattering the powerful Sioux bands and forcing mass exodus of helpless refugees. Instead the Sioux bands managed large scale removal of their own peoples, retreating west and away from their enemies. Though it may have appeared to be a simple retreat in the face of an advancing enemy, it was also a massive military conquest. It did not take long for the Sioux to arm themselves in the same way as the Chippewa, but instead of fighting the equally well armed and numerically superior invader, the Sioux turned their eyes on the bountiful plains of the west, and began battling the tribes that were in their way. As the Chippewa advanced through the Big Woods the different bands of Sioux advanced through Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara territory. Conquest that subjugated entire tribes and dispossessed them of their land.  

They set up their new homes in the lakes and forests of Southwestern Minnesota and the buffalo filled plains further west. Intertribal warfare was constant. The two major groups that arose from it were clearly the Chippewa and the Sioux, but those were names given to them by Europeans.

French traders asked the Chippewa who their enemies to the west were, when they received a quick answer they bastardized it to fit French tongues; the word “Sioux” was a French bastardization for the Chippewa word meaning “Snake” or “Enemy.” Thus a tribe that refers to itself as “Friend” was labeled with the name “Enemy” in the tongue

of the French. The name Sioux became the official designator for that tribe in colloquial speech and later in the American government. Much in the same way the Chippewa referred to themselves as the “Ojibway” meaning “Original Man” or “The People.” They, too, came to be called by the erroneous name of Chippewa, a French mispronunciation of Ojibway, in American government and politics. The Chippewa constituted the largest tribe in North America North of Mexico at the time of this expansion. The Smithsonian Institution calculated Chippewa population at 160,000 in 1970. Regardless of these mistranslations, most of the inappropriately named Sioux left Minnesota proper, but some bands did not.

The Sioux that battled against Chippewa expansion into their Minnesota territory were comprised of four bands that had, like their brethren, been pushed west but managed to conquer the tribes that had lived there and hold their ground against the Chippewa at the Mississippi River. They became the battle-hardened tribes of the Minnesota Southwest and acted as a buffer or protector of the more western bands against the Chippewa. The bands that made up this portion of the Sioux tribe retained the tribal name of “Dakota.” The bands that migrated further into the prairies, due to changing of dialect over time became known as the “Yankton” or “Nakota,” and those that migrated even further west into modern North and South Dakota and beyond

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became the “Tetons” or “Lakota.” Today we use these three names to distinguish between the three major sub-divisions of the Sioux Tribe. The Lakota and Nakota were larger groups than the Dakota and their culture transformed once they reached the plains, while the Dakota remained in the woods and lakes they called home.

The four bands of Dakota that made up the whole of Minnesota’s Sioux population and were, by the time Whites reached them, considered to be the eastern division of the Sioux nation, after the rest of the Sioux contingents were pushed even further west by the Chippewa and desire for more fertile hunting grounds. The Dakota who inhabited Southwestern Minnesota have been referred to as the “Eastern Sioux” or “Mississippi Sioux,” and the four bands were separated into two groups; the Upper Sioux and the Lower Sioux. The Lower Sioux that inhabited this area in Minnesota were the Mdewakanton (“The People of the Sacred or Spirit Lake”) and the Wahpekute (“The People Who Hunt in the Timber”) they were located along the Mississippi River, in the area around modern day St. Paul and at the lower end of the Minnesota River. The other two bands known as the Upper Sioux were the Sisseton (“People Who Live in the Swamp”) and Wahpeton (“People Who Live in the Timber”). They lived farther up the Minnesota River and around Lake Traverse on the present-day Minnesota-South Dakota border. Despite the many names ascribed to them, the most common name they went

by was the “Santee Sioux,” derived from the word *Isantee* which means “Knife Lake”; a reference to the focal point of their conquests into the region.\(^\text{14}\) The culture of the Santee Sioux was military, a byproduct of constant warfare with neighboring tribes and the necessity of violence to secure resources in such a tumultuous political climate.

If there was one obvious commonality among all the Sioux bands’ culture it was their focus on community, kinship ties, and tradition. Dakota community was defined by kin ties and reciprocity; family members were expected to produce and provide for the family with the guarantee that the rest of the family would provide for them as well. As ethno-historian Mary K. Whelan writes,

> An individual’s survival was dependent upon human-human interaction. As a member of an extended family, a village, a tribal sub-group (e.g., the Mdewakanton or Wahpeton), and ultimately as a member of the Dakota nation or *Oceti Sakowin*, each person was born with many rights and obligations that guaranteed his or her access to food, clothing, possessions, shelter, and aid. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dakota villages were essentially large extended families where economic production, distribution, and consumption were regulated by the rules of kinship. Village members were expected to share food, labor, and goods freely. Generosity was highly regarded and earned an individual considerable prestige.\(^\text{15}\)

In this way the Dakota linked gift-giving and reciprocity to familial relationships; to enter into friendly negotiations and reciprocal trade with the Dakota was to enter the family dynamic and community. But not all family members were held equally

\(^\text{14}\) Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 18.

accountable to one another. The closer the familial relation, the more was expected of an individual and thus the more he would receive; the more distant the familial relation, the less would be expected and less would be received. Marrying into a Sioux family would immediately put the new family member in a high-ranking position within the immediate family and also allow them access to the extended family. As such, they could ask a lot of their new in-laws, a practice that European traders took advantage of quickly. The Dakota also held deep respect for the elders in their tribes, as the holders of wisdom and guidance, few decisions were made without consulting the elder members of the tribe first. This reverence for familial ties and the elders was a crucial component of Dakota religion, in which “deities—particularly the four powerful deities spoken of as Wakan Tanka: the rock (Inyan), the earth (Maka), the sky (Taku Skan-skan), and the sun (Wi)—were addressed with kinship terms, usually of the grandparental generation.”

Reciprocity, kinship, and respect for elders influenced the Dakotan political structure too. The basic unit of Dakota society was the extended family, as such the Dakota were disunited. Political power within a tribe or band or clan was diffused among an alarmingly large number of petty chiefs. This could and did cause problems. A man’s worth was based on production and generosity within the kinship based system of the Dakota, as French explorer Pierre-Antoine Tebeau observed in 1802 “The Santee Dakota, like the southern Siouans, might be said to have possessed a ‘government by

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16 Whelan, “Dakota Indian Economics,” 258.
A chief was a man who fulfilled his familial obligations exceptionally well. Chiefs were selected because they were generous with gifts and hardworking and skilled hunters. They exhibited prowess on the battlefield (especially against the Chippewa). Such individuals were deemed fit by the clan, or village, to be placed in a role of leadership. Also due to the tribe’s emphasis on respect for the elders, an older chief was given more respect than a new or younger chief. Tebeau attempted to make sense of Dakota organization, while his observations were tainted with his own beliefs on effective organization and leadership he noted that this diffused system worked for the Sioux but it also produced large numbers of Chiefs who squabbled and jockeyed for position within the power structure of the tribe. “The spirit of unsociability and of discord which exists among the particular tribes; the ambition and the jealousy of the too numerous chiefs . . . cause particular enmities to arise which not only destroy the general harmony but especially that of the various units. . . . Insubordination and misuse of authority are a necessary result of this multiplicity of Chiefs.”

Each clan or large extended family would produce a chief of its own, complicating group decision-making, sometimes to the extreme detriment of the tribe. Tebeau noted that The petty chiefs would gather to make decisions at the home of the man who held the only position within the Santee Sioux that was hereditary; the Band Chief. “The principal governing body was the band council, each clan within the band furnished 20 wakiconse or


18 Hurt, Dakota Sioux Indians, 31.
councilors . . . the office of band chief was hereditary among the Santee, passing from a father to his eldest son.”19 Essentially, while individual units within a band selected their own leaders, the chief of an entire band (Wahpekute or Mdewekanton for instance) was chosen through heredity. Of course there were chiefs who were more powerful than others. Some chiefs could even transcend the diffused power structure and rally multiple bands to his side, but this was no small task, a fact that became painfully apparent in the 1862 war.

It was into this military and kin-based society that Whites first entered in the 1600s. Dakota intertribal relations, warfare with other tribes, concepts of ownership, notions of what was owed or expected, and beliefs about family and generosity had to be learned quickly by Whites entering Dakota lands. Those that mastered at least a tenuous understanding of intertribal relations quickly became very successful on the frontier. Those that did not often met rather unpleasant ends. The Whites that entered the Great Lakes armed the Chippewa and then the Sioux, an action that sent shockwaves throughout Indian society further inland, where European eyes could not yet see. They did not arm the tribes without reason. They had come for furs.

THE FUR TRADE: THE FRENCH

The Santee Sioux’s first contact with White society was brought about neither by direct contact with official government representatives of the expanding French or

19 Hurt, Dakota Sioux Indians, 32.
English on the continent, nor by military conflict and subsequent formal meetings of high ranking officials from Dakota and Europeans. Instead the Dakota’s first encounter with White society was their contact with guns wielded in the hands of Chippewa warriors. The Santee Sioux were far enough inland that their direct contact with Whites was brought about by the slow trickle of White fur traders and explorers into what is now Minnesota.

The first Frenchmen to contact the Dakota directly were French explorers led by Pierre Espirit Radisson, who made two trips to the upper Great Lakes area between 1658 and 1660. Radisson rendezvoused with Ottawa Indians near what is today Hayward, Wisconsin, the Ottowa spoke to Radisson of “a nation called Nadeouceronon which was very strong, and with whom they were in wars with.” After linking up with a Sioux hunting party, Radisson was escorted back to a Sioux village (which village it was is now difficult to deduce.) During his time as a guest he noticed the semi-nomadic nature of the Sioux and relayed the information back to Montreal as it pertained to the possibility of establishing a fur trade with them. In the summer the Dakota spent their time fishing the rivers and lakes and hunting in the prairies but “they retire in winter towards the woods of castors [beaver], and I say that there are not so good in the whole world, but not in such a store as Christinos [Cree], but far better.” Though contact had been made and potential fur trading possibilities whetted the appetites of the French,

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20 Hurt, Dakota Sioux Indians, 46.

the Dakota were too far inland and still quite a distance from French trading posts further east. But the contact with the Dakota showed promise to the French, as they appeared, even to the casual observer, to be the dominant tribe of that region to the west of French trading hubs. The French explorers estimated the Sioux to “consist of 4,000 families who could be attracted” to them for trade. The French worried that if they did not move closer to the Dakota, or convince the Dakota to move closer to them “they become useless as they are too far away from us and we could do no trade with them.” This problem was soon solved by the establishment of a trading post by Nicolas Perrot near Lake Peppin, much closer to Dakota hunting territory, in 1685. Though the fort was annihilated by the Dakota’s Algonquin enemies in 1691, contact was made and the French introduced themselves and began to ingratiate themselves into Dakota culture. Official French presence would slowly grow, but at first it was the fur trader who was left to handle business with the Dakota.

In the 1600s the trickle of fur traders roaming into the Great Lakes region with dreams of wealth were met with the harsh reality of the Great Lakes. Hunting and trapping fur bearing animals was not an easy task, and trapping enough fur bearing animals to make a substantial profit was almost impossible for a single fur trapper to accomplish. This left the early fur trappers and traders with a desperate need for aid in their hunting and trapping. Just as historian Susan Sleeper-Smith explained the

22 Hickerson, *Mdewakanton Band*, 44.

important roles Indian women and marriage played in the Great Lakes fur trade, tribes like the Dakota placed great emphasis on family and intermarriage as a form of adoption. Thus, fur trappers often married into the Sioux bands to gain access to their male family members as hunters. Marriage was not required to enter familial status. Kinship bonds were not limited to blood relations or direct family ties; instead, kinship was maintained through open exchange of everything from goods to labor to affection or protection and aid in warfare. Marriage was often an easier option to gain consistent access to Dakota assistance, as it brought the fur trader into direct familial relation with the Dakota. The life of a lonely fur trader in a strange land was short on simple pleasures. Marrying a woman and having a child or two made sense both as a shrewd business practice and as a method of coping with what could be a very unforgiving and lonely profession. It is due to these kinship exchanges and intermarriages that all White Euro-American men were often referred to as “brother” or, but less often, “father” in dealings with the Dakota. The French then had a virtual monopoly of the fur trade in the region. The French possession of Mackinac Island in modern Wisconsin served as a midway point between the traders in Minnesota and Wisconsin and the French city of Montreal. The furs flowed out of the western Great Lakes and into Montreal, where they could be sent to Paris and distributed to the fur-


hungry European markets. So long as the French relationships with the Dakota proved profitable and other European nations were kept out of the region, French monopoly of the fur industry was secure.

Of course the relationships benefited both the Dakota and the French economically. The French could bring highly valued trade goods such as iron tools, blankets, alcohol and guns, as long as the Sioux provided furs. The traders could turn profits quickly and the trade goods that individual Dakota hunters received could be used as gifts to garner more support within the reciprocity-based society. The early co-existence of French and Indian peoples was based primarily on economics, creating a mutually beneficial economic relationship that did not seek to exploit Indian people or culture. As historian Sylvia Van Kirk said “The Indian was neither subject nor slave . . . the fur trader did not seek to conquer the Indian, to take his land or to change his basic way of life or beliefs.” Instead the French sought to utilize Dakota connections to obtain furs. However, with long years of contact and intermarriage the two societies began to blend by the Mid-seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. From 1700 to 1763 the French and Dakota slowly developed closer ties to one another, while inter-tribal warfare raged, Forts and trading posts were established at Green Bay, Lake Pepin,

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28 White, *The Middle Ground*, 50.
and Detroit among others. Though the French tried to gain more of an official presence in the region in the form of military outposts, the western Great Lakes remained on the periphery of European holdings. As such, few Whites in this period settled there, unless they heard the siren call of the fur trade. The French goal was to maintain their monopoly on the fur trade and protect their interests from the expansionist-minded English. The French needed to establish a stronger military presence there, but were unable to do so. The perpetual vexation of the French, would-be settlers, and the fur trade itself in this region was the almost constant state of inter-tribal warfare. The French did not fully understand their role in exacerbating this warfare. Tribes sought furs to trade for European goods, especially guns; the need for more furs necessitated expanding hunting grounds for Indian tribes, and this brought tribes into conflict with one another. The struggle for European trade goods also occurred simultaneously with Chippewa and Sioux westward expansion. Constant warfare between some combination of the Sioux, Chippewa, Cree, Winnebago, Fox, Mandan, Illinois, and Hidatsa which slowed the fur trade drastically. Despite constant efforts by French officials to broker peace among the warring tribes, especially the Chippewa and Sioux, they were almost always unsuccessful in the short term, and always unsuccessful in establishing long term peace. Though the French military

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alliance and on again off again fur trade had done very well, everything changed in 1763. The French lost the Seven Years War (French and Indian War) to Great Britain and the American Colonies which forced them to cede all claims to land in the Great Lakes. The French monopoly that controlled the fur trade in the region for almost a century was ended. However, the early Middle Ground of White and Indian co-existence that centered on the fur trade had been established by the French.

Proximity and necessity gave rise to the economic Middle Ground for the French and the Dakota, leading to the eventual creation of a cultural Middle Ground just as it had with the French and the Algonquin tribes of the Great Lakes further East. Richard White describes the Middle Ground of the Algonquin tribes and traders as a place of compromise and intermixing. The same can be said of the early Middle Ground of the French fur trappers, traders, and the Dakota:

Because the French and Algonquins were trading partners and allies, the boundaries of the Algonquin and French worlds melted at the edges and merged. Although identifiable Frenchmen and identifiable Indians obviously continued to exist, whether a particular practice or way of doing things was French or Indian was, after a time, not so clear. This was not because individual Indians became “Frenchified” or because individual Frenchman went native, although both might occur. Rather, it was because Algonquins who were perfectly comfortable with their status and practices as Indians and Frenchman, confident in the rightness of French ways, nonetheless had to deal with people who shared neither their values nor their assumptions about the appropriate way of accomplishing tasks. They had to arrive at some common conception of suitable ways of acting; they had to create what I have already referred to as a middle ground.\footnote{White, The Middle Ground, 50.}
The Middle Ground that had been established by a century of contact and trade with the French was now to be hijacked by the British.

THE FUR TRADE: THE BRITISH

The British immediately sought to break up the way the French had run the fur trade in the Great Lakes. Technically though, after the defeat of the French in the Seven Years War the land in modern Minnesota and home to the four bands of Dakota was relinquished not to the British but to the Spanish. This was not of any real concern to the British, as the nearest Spanish holdings were hundreds of miles away and any concentration of Spanish forces was even further. The Spanish were powerless to make any sort of real impact on “their” distant Great Lakes. The British, then, took over the fur trade on what was considered Spanish territory, inhabited by four bands of Dakota Indians, and home to the remaining Frenchmen, French-Canadian, Franco-Dakota métis and others.

The British initial foray into the fur trade once controlled by the French was not an attempt to tear down everything the French had built and rebuild it in some self-proclaimed superior system. After all it was easier to simply inform the traders that came into the trading hubs that the area was under new management, than it is to tear it down and start from scratch. The British moved into the old French forts, depots, and trading hubs at Mackinac, Detroit, and Green Bay. The change came in the form of destroying the French monopoly, edging out merchants who had controlled the fur

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33 Hickerson, Mdewakanton Band, 70-83.
trade in the region, and implementing a new system in which all furs purchased would be sent back to Montreal, by way of Mackinac, and then to London. This led to the demise of French merchant houses, but the traders themselves operating on the ground simply had to buy their goods from British companies.\textsuperscript{34} The British granted the French and Franco-Dakota in the region rights as subjects and used the existing connections between them to enhance their trade. The goods used to trade for furs would be sent to the fur traders as they always had been, only now the flow of those trade goods went in the opposite direction. Goods were purchased from London based companies by merchants in Montreal on credit, traders would buy the goods in Montreal, again on credit, and then sell them to Indians in the Great Lakes for furs. If the furs sold back to the traders fell short of what was expected or owed, the traders accounted for their loss in debt owed by the Indians.\textsuperscript{35} The British needed their experience with Dakota to be as amiable as the French experience had been; luckily for the British, it was. The Dakota saw the British as new members of their extended kinship relations. After all, the British wanted to trade just the same as the French had. They did not seek to push their culture on the Indians and they did not seek to disenfranchise the French or Franco-Dakota traders. In fact, the British took part in extensive gift giving programs in an effort to ingratiate themselves to the Dakota. The programs were so extensive that some British officials were worried that the Dakota were becoming too dependent on British gifts, if

\textsuperscript{34} Stevens, "The British Fur Trade," 5.

\textsuperscript{35} Stevens, "The British Fur Trade," 10-11.
the British did not impress upon the Indians that the gifts were given as a form of payment for future work then they might become a “burden upon government.” The British operated with near impunity in the region. Even the American Revolution hardly disrupted their enterprise.

The Dakota thus allied themselves with their new British brethren in the American Revolution, most notable was an intensely powerful Mdewakanton Chief named Wabasha. Wabasha and his warriors arrived at Mackinac to support the British in 1779. The chief was given the rank of General in return for his military service; British lieutenant Charles F. Phillips reported that “General Wabasha was well contented with his commission & believe me his warriours are nothing inferior to regular troops in regard to discipline.” Others, such as Colonel Arent Schuyler de Peyster were even more impressed with the Chief’s arrival, wrote a tribute to Wabasha (or Wapashaw as he spelled it):

Hail to the Chief! Who his buffalo’s back straddles, when in his own country, far, far from this fort; whose brave young canoe-men, here hold up their paddles, in hopes, that the whizzing balls, may give them sport.
Hail to great Wapashaw! He comes, beat drums, the Scioux chief comes. as swift as the solen goose skims o’er the wave, while on the lake’s border, a guard is surrounding a space, where to land the Scioux so brave. Hail! to great Wapashaw! Soldiers your triggers draw!
Guard! Wave the colours, and give him the drum.
Choctaw and Chickasaw,
Whoop for great Wapashaw;
Raise the portcullis, the King’s friend is come.38

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The willingness of the Mdewakanton chief to march his warriors from Southwestern Minnesota to Mackinac in a show of solidarity with the British reveals the depth of British-Dakota ties. But the Dakota would only militarily support the British if they felt their White friends had lived up to their end of their reciprocal agreement, Wabasha’s willingness to aid the British reveals that the Dakota believed the British were holding up their end of the relationship. It was all for naught, though, as the Sioux lived far enough away from the main battlefields of the Revolution to play much of a role.

The defeat of the British in the Revolution, in theory, passed control of the Great Lakes into the hands of the new United States of America. Much like the Spanish, the fledgling new Republic could hardly exert any real political authority. From 1783 to 1789 the American Republic suffered from the same political problems the Dakota had suffered from for generations; too many chiefs. The United States under the Articles of Confederation could not even compel its own various states to pay respect to the federal government; such a nation was powerless to exert any semblance of official political authority over a region half the continent away. It was still a British monopoly in practice, and the great fur trading firms that grew out of the Great Lakes trade included the Northwest Company, the Michilimackinac Company, and the Southwest Company.39 Several attempts were made by Americans to exert political authority of some kind in


the region, most notably Lewis and Clark’s encounter with the Sioux and Zebulon Pike’s expedition in 1805. But it was not until after the war of 1812 and the rise of the American Fur Company under John Jacob Astor that the British relinquished their control of the trade in this region.

The Sioux again sided with the British in the war of 1812. The Dakota no doubt expected to be rewarded handsomely for their service. The news of the British defeat was relayed to the Dakota Chiefs Little Crow and Wabasha. They did not take it well:

After we have fought for you, endured many hardships, lost some of our people, and awakened the vengeance of our powerful neighbors, you make a peace for yourselves and leave us to obtain such terms as we can! You no longer need our services, and offer us these goods as compensation for having deserted us. But no! We will not take them; we hold them and yourselves in equal company.  

Thus the curtain closed on what had been a prosperous time for the Minnesota Middle Ground. The United States and the Sioux signed “peace and friendship” treaties on July 19, 1815 the names of Wabasha and Little Crow were conspicuously absent from the treaties and thus the British-Dakota Middle Ground began to dissolve. The British vacancy left a power vacuum in the Great Lakes fur trade. While the Dakota and the remaining Franco and Anglo traders continued to do small scale business, and the Middle Ground was still alive, a new power with a different view of the fur trade, of the Dakota, and of Indians in general soon arrived to meet them and fill the void.

40 Meyer, History of the Santee Sioux, 30.

41 Meyer, History of the Santee Sioux, 30.
The Euro-Dakota Middle Grounds of France and Britain were very different from the Middle Ground that arose under the American Fur Company and the government of the United States. Neither the British nor the French saw the Dakota as enemies. They had no overt desire to destroy Dakota culture, to “civilize” the Dakota, or to conquer them. The Middle Ground was a place where money could be made for the far-flung and powerful European empires to be sure, but only with cooperation of the Indians was that possible. While Dakota had been in contact with Europeans for a century and a half, their culture remained mostly intact, the only noticeable difference to the naked eye were the Franco-Dakota mixed-bloods and the presence of European trade goods and weapons in Dakota hands. The Americans, however, sought both to change the Dakota culture and to make money while doing so.42

THE POLICY: THE FACTORY SYSTEM AND “CIVILIZATION”

The American view of Indians by the time of the revolution was, by modern standards, a racist view. This is not to say it was characterized by nineteenth century understandings of racial superiority inherent in the White man and racial deficiency inherent in the Red man. As Roy Harvey Pearce eloquently described it, “In spite of the nationalism which forced its growth, the American understanding of Indian depended on an idea of Savagism whose main structure derived from European sources.”43 Euro-Americans had a view of their own history as a history in which the savage and warlike


43 Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 82.
people they once were had slowly progressed; this progress led to the rise of their civilization. In the minds of Europeans and the Americans who branched off from the European tradition, even White society had once been savage but with God’s help they had been “slowly but surely progressing to high civilization.” They believed that the European “had left behind him forever his savage, primitive state. This was the grand Christian, civilized idea of Progress.”44 If the savages of Europe had “progressed,” then the savages of America could be brought along the same evolutionary path through the word of God and his civilized White messengers. The racism was therefore less about skin color and more about a clash of cultures: the civilized Euro-American versus the savage American Indian. It was this American self-view as bringers of civilization to the savage that led to American policy toward Indians in the infancy of the Republic. To “civilize” the savage, Americans would attempt to force their self-proclaimed superior culture on the savage and guide him along the path to enlightened civilization. Thus, the United States took a paternalistic approach in regards to the Indians; The American “father” would educate his savage “children,” teach them the word of Christ, farming and sedentary culture, proper modes of dress, and language, and law. Through this education the American savage, like the savage ancestors of the Europeans, would in some distant future find civilization. Thus in the early years of Indian policy the

44 Pearce, Savagism and Civilization, 82.
paternalistic, and self-appointed duty of Americans to civilize the Indian would clash and ultimately fold into the American desire for land and westward expansion.

After the American victory over the British in the Revolution the new nation barely held itself together under the Articles of Confederation. After the passing of the constitution in 1789 and the election of George Washington the country began to get back on its feet. The constitution delegated clear powers regarding American diplomacy with Indians to the federal government: “exclusive rights and power of regulating trade and managing all affairs with Indians,” was given to Congress. As well as the power to “regulate commerce with foreign nations, and the several states, and with Indian tribes.” The constitution defined Indian nations as sovereign powers to be dealt with through official means on the federal level. George Washington and his first Secretary of War Henry Knox designed what one historian referred to as “the expansion with honor” policy. Knox believed the only way to save Indian society and prevent constant warfare with Indians was to “civilize” them. Warfare was the byproduct, to Knox, of a civilized society coming into contact with an uncivilized one. The United States had to treat the Indians as nations and deal with them through treaties, thus guaranteeing that expansion would be done through legal channels and give the Indians time to “civilize.” Diplomacy then would be the preferred method of dealing with Indian tribes; how the

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45 Constitution, Article IX.

46 Constitution, Article I.

United States would handle that diplomacy however, was up to the men who ran the government.

Due to disagreements on the correct interpretation of the constitution and the role of the federal government in developing national infrastructure, the first two-party system was born. This divide pitted “big government” Federalists under Washington and later John Adams against “states’ rights” Republicans under Thomas Jefferson. The woefully unsuccessful term of John Adams as President promised sweeping change in American government. The Federalists were pushed out of office, many retreating into the judicial branch, and Thomas Jefferson’s Republicans marched in with a new plan for funding the government and expanding the United States into the west.

When Jefferson took office in 1800, Indian nations were still viewed as legitimate foreign nations and as such they would be dealt with in the legal manner and customs that characterized foreign diplomacy at the time. Because of this legal arrangement there was already an established governmental body that dealt exclusively with Indians, the Administration of Indian Affairs. The Federalists under Washington and Adams had placed this agency under the auspices of the Secretary of War Henry Knox, who in turn ordered the building of forts along the western borders of the United States to guard against Indian attacks.48 From 1790 to 1799 the United States passed trade and intercourse acts that would establish government trading posts, or “factories” in Indian

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country. They would promote the “civilization” of Indian tribes, license traders who wished to engage in commerce with the Indians, and support Indian Agents operating in those factories with military support.49 This infrastructure would serve Jefferson’s Indian Policy well. Jefferson wished to obtain Indian land and expand westward, while at the same time engage in the American duty to civilize the Indians. The government would purchase Indian land and then sell it at a mark up to settlers willing to move onto the newly acquired territory, using the money they made from sale of Indian land to fund the government. Jefferson’s factory system would serve to make acquiring that land much cheaper and easier.

On December 29, 1802 Jefferson wrote a private letter to the Secretary of War outlining the principles of his Indian policy and how it would serve to hasten the dispossession of Indian land. He said that it was of paramount importance to acquire land up to the Mississippi river, offering the United States access to the trade on the river and a buffer to the Spanish and French in that area. He wanted to civilize the Indians in the west, force them into the farming practices of White American culture and abandoning their hunting cultures. Most important, he wanted the Indian agencies to do two things: first to make sure that the sale of alcohol to Indians was strictly prohibited as alcohol, in the minds of Americans, led Indians to embrace their savage nature: and second, to encourage Indians to buy American goods on credit, which in

49 Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians, 207.
turn would force the Indians into debt that only the sale of sizable chunks of Indian land could repay. In the letter Jefferson stated his intentions clearly:

Our proceedings with the Indians should tend systematically to that object, leaving the extinguishment of title in the interior country to fall in as occasion may rise. The Indians being once closed in between strong settled countries on the Mississippi & Atlantic, will, for want of game, be forced to agriculture, will find that small portions of land well improved, will be worth more to them than extensive forests unemployed, and will be continually parting with portions, for money to buy stock, utensils & necessities for their farms & families.

Thus it was through the use of government trading posts, supported by the military and backed by Indian Agents who reported directly to the Secretary of War, that the United States sought to dispossess Indians of their land and to introduce them, as they saw it, to superior White culture.

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 saw the transfer of 828,000 square miles of land that had belonged to Napoleonic France to the United States, almost overnight, the 20 year old nation had nearly doubled in size. The purchased land included Southwestern Minnesota and the ample fur trade within it. A trade dominated by the British at the time. In an effort to discover exactly what it was he had purchased, Thomas Jefferson commissioned the famous Corps of Discovery led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map out the territory. Lewis and Clark were the first Americans to contact any of the Sioux tribes in an official capacity. Clark did not have a

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50 Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians, 221.
51 Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians, 221.
particularly fond opinion of the masters of the plains, particularly the Western Sioux band known as the Brule, as he recorded in his journal:

These are the vilest miscreants of the savage race, and must ever remain the pirates of the Missouri, until such measures are pursued, by our government, as will make them feel a dependence on its will for their supply of merchandise.52

Clark was not entirely wrong. The Sioux certainly dominated the area and controlled that portion of the Missouri river. If the factory system was designed to weaken powerful nations and bend them to the will of the United States, they had better send a “factor” soon.

To this end the United States sent a young officer named Zebulon Pike to what is now Southwest Minnesota to accomplish two goals. First, he would buy a small tract of land from the Dakota through treaty. Second he would bring the Sioux and Chippewa together to try and negotiate a peace between the two tribes. It speaks to the paternalistic self-view of the United States to think a single American officer could, through a treaty on American paper, stop generations-long warfare between all bands of the Sioux and the Chippewa. His first objective, on the other hand, could be accomplished relatively easily. In 1805 Pike arrived in Dakota country and met Chief Wabasha before setting a meeting with Mdewakanton chiefs that took place a few days later. Pike described seven Mdewakanton “chiefs” present at his ceremony. Whether

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52 James P. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984)
they were recognized as chiefs by the Dakota is debatable. At least one was a chief, Little Crow. His presence offered at least some sort of legitimacy to the deal. Pike negotiated a treaty in which the Dakota agreed to sell a 100,000 acre piece of land (much larger than what he was supposed to negotiate for) that Pike estimated to be worth $200,000. Only two of the chiefs present signed the treaty, one being Little Crow. It is almost certain that something had been lost in translation during the meeting. The treaty designated no actual agreed-upon sum. Instead there was a blank space left where the sum should have been included. The United States Senate, years later, would fill in the blank space with $2,000. The dubious legality of this treaty aside, Pike negotiated the first treaty between the Sioux and the United States. He had purchased land that would later house a government trading post (factory) and Fort Snelling, for military support in the heart of Mdwakanton lands. It took ten years for the United States to actually build Fort Snelling or a factory outpost on the land, but the effort to allowed the American Government control of the fur trade in the western Great Lakes and their “civilizing” of the Sioux had begun. John Jacob Astor and his private enterprise, however, beat the federal government at their own game.

54 Meyer, History of the Santee Sioux, 24-25.
THE FUR TRADE: THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY

While the American government sought to win over the Dakota with lower prices at their factory system trading posts, they neglected to effectively utilize the fur traders living in the region, which would bring long-term problems with the effectiveness of government-run trading posts. After the war of 1812 the British traders and military retreated to posts on their side of the border, such as Amherstburg opposite Detroit on the American side and Drummond Island, near Mackinac on the Canadian side.\footnote{Royal B. Way, “The United States Factory System for Trading with the Indians 1796-1822,” The Mississippi Valley Historical Review 6, no. 2 (September 1919): 225.} While the United States factory trading posts fared well in the initial years after the retreat of the British, they neglected to utilize the long-tenured French and British fur trade network. These unfortunate traders soon found themselves in a state of legal limbo. The United States factories saw no need to ingratiate themselves to the remnants of the European controlled trade. After all, it was American soil now and foreigners (even if they had been born in the region) could be dangerous to American interests. Historian Royal B. Way described the treatment of these men after Americans moved into the trade:

> With an undefined status they found themselves neither British nor American citizens. Unable to obtain titles to the lands which they had inherited from their ancestors and had long cultivated, they were at the same time suspected and often harassed by officious American agents, their furs seized, their licenses revoked, and every possible obstacle placed in the path of the only method they had of earning a livelihood for their families.\footnote{Way, “The United States Factory System,” 226.}
The unfortunate traders needed a champion to pull them from the tightly closing grip of the American government, and in their moment of need, their champion arrived. What the Americans saw as dangerous, and the traders themselves saw as a grave injustice, John Jacob Astor and Ramsay Crooks saw as golden opportunity. Astor set out to use Congress’ distrust of the disgruntled traders to his advantage. On April 29, 1816 Astor and his ever faithful Lieutenant Ramsay Crooks lobbied Congress to pass an act that would exclude any foreign traders from operating in the Great Lakes unless they were operating under the direction of American traders. On the surface Congress loved the idea. It would officially force all British fur traders still filtering furs into British Canada out of the business and it would project American dominance over the fur trade. With his British opponents fully dealt with, Crooks and Astor launched their takeover of the fur trade from their headquarters in Mackinac. They quickly employed all the disgruntled Franco and Anglo traders still living in the region, who could now engage in the fur trade so long as they operated under American managers of the American Fur Company. This gave the American Fur Company a distinct advantage for a number of reasons.

The government-run trading posts in the Great Lakes at Fort Snelling, Prairie du Chien, Green Bay, and Fort Crawford were not as popular with the Dakota people. The

civilization policy of the United States forbade the sale of alcohol to the Dakota; it also forbade the time-honored tradition within the fur trade and within Dakota society of gift giving. The American Fur Company had no such restrictions. With the combined advantage of freedom from government restraint and its civilization policy and the employment of the fur traders who had spent years among the Dakota and had successfully worked their way into the Dakota kinship network, the American Fur Company was doing better business than the government-run factories. After forcing the Bernard Pratte & Company to merge with American Fur as well the merger with the Columbia Fur Company, American Fur had completed its monopolization of the trade in the Great Lakes. As Rhoda R. Gilman described this impressive company after finishing its business conquests in 1827, “from Detroit to the mouth of the Yellowstone and from the banks of the Wabash to the British boundary, the American Fur Company was not only the dominant, but almost the only large commercial enterprise.” In order to expand this business and keep it within the legal bounds of American trade law, Astor looked to Ramsay Crooks to find young American talent to oversee his trading posts and stores that were run by the formerly disenfranchised Franco-Dakota and Anglo-Dakota fur traders.

Very little is known about Ramsay Crooks’ early years, and considering the position he rose to later in life, relatively little about the man as an adult. He simply

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appears throughout fur trader letters, biographies, diaries, official records, and then
vanishes again. This mystery surrounding the second most powerful man in the most
powerful fur company in the United States at the time led Historian David Lavender to
dub him “The Fist in the Wilderness.” No one ever bothered to write down what
Crooks looked like, sounded like, or walked like, how he carried himself or his
temperament. No one bothered to write down his personal or political views. By
inference from the diaries and letters about him, it can be conjectured that Crooks, a
Scotsman who moved to the United States in 1803, possessed that undefinable quality;
that mysterious charisma and depth of character possessed by many of history’s great
leaders. It was this quality that led George Gillespie, a prominent figure in the fur trade
to notice the young Ramsay working in a warehouse in 1805 and hire him as a clerk. It
was in much the same way that an American Fur agent and third in command under
Astor and Crooks, Robert Stuart, discovered a young Henry Hastings Sibley and took him
under his wing. Ramsay was looking for good men to run his stores in Mackinac, Sibley,
too, evidently possessed those qualities so hard to define in great leaders; perhaps
Stuart saw something of Crooks in Sibley. While Astor, Stuart, and Crooks looked for
men like Sibley to man their outposts and help them sew up the Great Lakes fur trade in
the late 1820s, the country was changing. Indian Policy changed simultaneously to the
rise of the American Fur Company and Henry Sibley’s arrival at Mackinac.

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64 Lavender, The Fist in the Wilderness, 52-53.
THE POLICY: JACKSONIAN DEMOCRATS AND “REMOVAL”

Andrew Jackson’s reputation as a war hero and an Indian fighter vaulted him into the political arena. After Jackson lost the 1824 presidential election to John Quincy Adams, he set out to create a powerful political coalition to revive Jefferson’s Republican Party, which he believed had lost its way. Jackson stormed back into the political limelight with his re-energized political party, now dubbed the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party’s political strategist was Martin Van Buren, who had run a successful political machine in New York. He sculpted Jackson’s public image as one as a fearless leader, a man of the people, protector of the American farmer and land owner, an every-man politician who would do what the people, not the landed elites, demanded of him. His landslide victory in the election of 1828 showed the people’s love for an Indian fighter, known to the Creeks as “Sharp Knife,” and to his own soldiers as “Old Hickory.” Jackson represented a new Indian Policy, a new political platform and a voice for the common people.

Jackson’s takeover of the government with his new Democratic Party was a grassroots political movement that promoted a single idea: that the government had become overgrown and corrupt and it needed to be returned to the will of the people. As Jackson put it he wanted to “restore virtue in government” and to do so he would demand “obedience to the popular will.” The people, he said, were in charge, and as such “the majority is to govern.”65 If this was the case, and it was, Jackson had to listen

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to the will of the people, people who increasingly viewed Indians as obstacles to westward expansion in the last few decades. The rise of Andrew Jackson’s Democratic Party fundamentally changed American views of themselves and what it meant to be American. Words like Democracy replaced words like Republic, and the word Democracy itself was pulled from its sterile political context and became the catch-all word to define the fundamental ideals of social equality and political freedom common to all Americans. Jacksonian Americans prided themselves on individualism, the idea that government that represented the will of the people, coupled with individual work ethic and skill that provided the possibility of upward social mobility for those willing to rely on themselves, would lead America to glory. Robert Berkhofer noted that these changes in American thought spurred by the grassroots democratic fervor posed serious threats to White-Indian relations, he stated, “The changing intellectual currents of the nineteenth century made the Indian and the American more antithetic than ever in theory if not in actual practice.” Because the frontier represented, more than ever, a place where self-reliant Americans could climb the social ladder by acquiring cheap land, American emphasis on individualism made American society even more antithetical, in the minds of Americans, to Indian tribal society. Americans believed that Indian society

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did not prize the individual but the collective. Berkhofer explained the results of such a shift when he noted, “With the rise of racism . . . [Americans] found other nationalities deficient in or opposed to American values and customs.” The shifts in the American ideology regarding themselves and Indians altered drastically the Jeffersonian ideology of “civilizing” Indians, and therefore the policy of civilization needed to be modified accordingly.

Jeffersonian Indian policy was predicated on the idea that the problem with Indians was not their race but their civilization, or lack thereof. It was with this understanding of Indians that policy to “civilize” Indians made sense. If the problem was not inherent in their race but in their culture, it could be fixed with the help of White Americans showing them the “proper” path. People in Jacksonian America had modified this belief. The idea of removing Indians from the east to undesired land on the frontier technically began under Thomas Jefferson in 1803, but it was not until the 1820s under President Monroe that it gained real traction. When Jackson entered office the new American ideology toward Indians put forward removal as the preferential option of the people. Nowhere was the new ideology toward Indians more prevalent than in Georgia, but it existed throughout the United States. The signing of the Indian Removal act in May of 1830 triggered fierce debate over both the legality and morality of Indian

69 Berkhofer, The White Man’s Indian, 155.

70 Berkhofer, The White Man’s Indian, 155.

71 Berkhofer, The White Man’s Indian, 157-158.
removal. Those that sided with Jackson’s Democrats publicly denounced Jeffersonian civilization policy as a good idea gone wrong. Lewis Cass was a prime example of a man that changed his views on Indians and Civilization policy. Cass was the territorial Governor of Michigan Territory and, as all Territorial Governors were, he was de facto Commissioner of Indian affairs in Michigan.

Cass, early on, was a major proponent of civilization policy and endeavored to spread European civilization among the Winnebago, Chippewa, and others living in Michigan territory from 1813-1828. He had a reputation as a strong negotiator and expert at closing land treaties with the Winnebago. But, by 1830 he had become disenchanted with the idea of civilization and convinced of the necessity to remove Indians from White American society. Cass’s opinions on Indians were published in The North American Review, a popular and well-circulated literary journal. In one of his publications from January 1830, Cass said that the civilization programs had failed. White America was not to blame. The Indians were:
As civilization shed her light upon them, why were they blind to its beams? Hungry or naked, why did they disregard, or regarding, why did they neglect, those arts by which food and clothing could be procured? Existing for two centuries in contact with civilized people, they have resisted, and successfully too, every effort to meliorate their situation, or to introduce among them the most common arts of life. Their moral and their intellectual condition have been equally stationary. And in the whole circle of their existence, it would be difficult to point to a single advantage which they have derived from their acquaintance with the Europeans. All this is without parallel in the history of the world. That it is not to be attributed to the indifference or neglect of the Whites, we have already shown. There must then be an inherent difficulty, arising from the institutions, character, and condition of the Indians themselves.\(^{72}\)

While Cass was far from an average person in his time, his views on Indians reflect the slow change in the average person’s view and the national mood toward Indians. As historian Robert Berkhofer asserts, the early to mid-nineteenth century was characterized by the shift toward understandings of Indian people in terms of biological inferiority.\(^{73}\) This is not to say that there were no Americans or foreigners who hated Jackson, his Democrats, and their new policy, but Americans in general, like Cass, wondered that if the civilization programs were supposed to bring the Indians along the path to progress, why hadn’t it worked? They drew the same conclusion as Cass; it hadn’t worked because Indians were naturally deficient, naturally ignorant, and obstructing progress to both westward expansion and civilization. No one on either side of the removal debate or civilization debate put forward the idea that civilizing the Indians was a bad idea or that Americans were not capable of achieving that end.

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Instead they disagreed on when, or if, civilizing the Indians was even possible.\textsuperscript{74} Thus, it was not that this new attitude toward Indians eliminated or replaced the previous notions about Indian civilization programs. Instead, the new form of racism and ideology layered itself on top of those existing ideologies. By the 1830s the common American, like Cass, believed that the civilization policies had simply failed thus far, and that the problem with Indians was not just that Indian society was uncivilized, unenlightened, and savage, it was that both Indian society and Indians themselves were naturally, inherently, deficient, and new policies were needed.

Jackson himself claimed his intentions were not to destroy the Indians, but instead to remove them from within state boundaries in order to “perpetuate their race.”\textsuperscript{75} As historian Robert V. Remini said of Jackson’s views. “Like most Americans at the time, he was a racist (not that he had the faintest idea what that meant), and he held an assortment of wrongheaded prejudices about Native Americans. [But] He was not a madman intent on genocide. . . . Removal was meant to prevent annihilation, not cause it.”\textsuperscript{76} Jackson certainly believed that removal would allow Indians more time to civilize without being drawn into war with Whites. Whatever his reasons, Jackson and his Democratic Party passed a bill that would empower the federal and state governments to commence forcible removal of Indian tribes out of American land

\textsuperscript{74} Berkhofer, \textit{The White Man’s Indian}, 162.

\textsuperscript{75} Remini, \textit{Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars}, 226.

\textsuperscript{76} Remini, \textit{Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars}, 228.
(behind the frontier) and force them west of the Mississippi (in front of the frontier) and away from American society as a whole. Resistance to Jackson’s ultra-powerful Democrats was weak. Even famed thinkers and cultural critics like Alexis de Tocqueville chimed in with their opinions on removal policy.

The conduct of the Americans of the United States toward the aborigines is characterized . . . by a singular attachment to the formalities of law . . . [they do not take] their hunting-grounds without a treaty of purchase; and if [the tribes cannot subsist] . . . they kindly take them by the hand and transport them to a grave far from the land of their father. . . . Americans of the United States have accomplished this . . . with singular felicity, tranquility, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world. It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity.77

Of course the reasoning for American’s obsession with legality and dealing with Indians through treaty was necessitated by the Constitution. Dealing with Indians in this way gave the whole process a feeling of legal legitimacy. With Jackson in charge, even the Supreme Court’s ruling against Jackson and removal policy did not stop removal of the Southern tribes.78 Men like Alexis de Tocqueville were in the minority, however. As the new style of racism hit a fever pitch the forced mass migration from American-claimed lands by once-powerful tribes like the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek commenced. Although removal policy would later be employed in the Minnesota Middle Ground, first as a means to preserve it, and later, as a means to annihilate it, the


78 Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*, 163-165.
Minnesota Middle Ground and the American Fur Company that depended entirely on the Dakota was protected from it for the time being. Minnesota was still too far into the interior of the country to be affected by removal. White men were still few and far between in the Minnesota Middle Ground. The racially mixed society that staffed the fur trade there made it very profitable and protected it from the new ideologies born from Jacksonian America.

By the time the American Fur Company was a force in the Minnesota Middle Ground the Indian peoples of modern Minnesota had been in contact with European society of one type or another for almost 200 years. The Dakota expanded westward after an all-out assault on their lands by the Chippewa, they found their way into modern day North and South Dakota and became the masters of the plains. Those bands that did not migrate so far west remained in the Big Woods, around the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, and acted as a buffer against Chippewa expansion. The Dakota “government by kinship” allowed the first French fur traders to melt into Dakota society, enter and control the fur trade, produce mixed race children, and enjoy relative harmony with one another, producing the first phase of the Middle Ground.

After the French defeat in the Seven Years War forced them to surrender their rights to the Great Lakes and the rest of Canada, the British took over. The British had the foresight to employ the French still remaining in the region and used them to aid their fur trade. The Dakota grew much attached to the British as they set up their trading posts throughout the Great Lakes. Richard White posits that the Pays d’en Haut
(The area of New France that include the entirety of the Great Lakes region) and the Middle Ground that had been established died due to Tecumseh’s failed Pan-Indian resistance. However, this claim may have been true of the Eastern Pays d’en Haut or Great Lakes, it certainly wasn’t true in the west. Instead, in the west, the defeat of Tecumseh marked a transition in a Middle Ground that had already survived the transition from French to British control after the Seven Years War. The defeat of the British and Tecumseh marked a transition to an American-controlled Middle Ground in what is now Minnesota, a place where Americans would have to negotiate the Dakota world in order to survive and thrive economically, just as the French and British had done for over a century. But the nature of American racism and desire for land forced the destruction.

Zebulon Pike established the American factory system in Mdewakanton land with his treaty in 1805, something the Americans could not take advantage of for nearly ten years. Unfortunately for the American government, it lacked the foresight to employ the fur traders still in the region. The American Fur Company took advantage of this mistake.

As the American Fur Company established a monopoly on the fur trade, they came into economic confrontation with the American government’s trading posts. Due to the government’s desire to “civilize” Indians, the factories refused to sell them alcohol or take part in the time-honored tradition of gift giving. American Fur had no such reservations and thus the American Fur Company became the preferred trading
partner of the Dakota. The American fur company went looking for skilled and ambitious young men to run their various outfits for them.

The rise of the Jacksonian Democrats allowed the changing view of Indians a foothold in the politics of the United States. The Jeffersonian belief that the problem with Indians was to be found in their lack of sedentary, steady, “civilized” culture shifted into a view of Indians as culturally antithetical and biologically inferior. Because of this view, removal policy was championed by Andrew Jackson and Lewis Cass. The government could and did move tribes beyond the borders of the American states and west of the Mississippi River into the unorganized territories beyond. It was this view of Indians that became popular as Henry Sibley arrived in Dakota country. Henry Sibley came to symbolize the American Middle Ground. By the time Sibley made his first appearance in Minnesota the Great Lakes Middle Ground was, according to Richard White, ostensibly dead. Yet, as Henry Sibley learned on his arrival, it was far from over.
CHAPTER III

“I LONGED FOR A MORE ACTIVE AND STIRRING LIFE”

Any history of the Middle Ground in Minnesota is effectively a history of the fur trade. The Dakota were integral parts of that fur trade, since they Dakota controlled supply, any attempt to push them out of that trade would have been antithetical to good business. So long as the furs kept rolling in and money was being made, the Dakota remained an independent and autonomous. In essence, the Dakota remained politically and culturally sovereign and continued to merge their culture with Euro-American culture, the result of prolonged contact. Thus fur companies had to ingratiate themselves to the Dakota, not the other way around, Dakota culture was still largely intact until 1862. This was not due to lack of effort by various groups to alter and “civilize” the Dakota. Indian agents, as representatives of the government tried to induce them to farm. Missionaries did the same, with very little success until later. It was not until the fur trade waned in the late 1830s-1840 that the idea of removing the Dakota became a viable option. As the fur trade declined and new sources of fur arose elsewhere in the American empire, the economic power of Minnesota shifted to its boundless timber and fertile soil. The Dakota who had been protected from the racist and expansion-minded Americans their fur-trade bubble, now became expendable.

Before the Dakota became expendable though, men like Henry Hastings Sibley, Chief Little Crow, and others, fought to hold together their Middle Ground. Just as historians like Easley, Van Kirk and Sleeper-Smith have explained, Sibley became a
cultural broker in the Minnesota Middle Ground. After breaking free from the life his father had planned for him, he made his way to the frontier. He rose through the ranks of the American Fur Company, learned to speak French and Dakota, and became an extremely effective cultural intermediary. The fur trade was not what he expected it to be when he first arrived, but after marrying a Dakota woman and having a metis daughter, Sibley settled into his role as a cultural broker par excellent in Minnesota. He was aided by chiefs like Big Thunder and later Little Crow in binding those cultures. But, Sibley betrayed the Minnesota Middle Ground in 1850, and the Middle Ground paid the price for that treachery in 1862.

Sibley was still an infant when the British and their Indian allies arrived outside Detroit in 1812. The citizens of Detroit retreated into their Fort, including Sibley. The Confederated Tribes under the command of charismatic and brilliant Shawnee leader Tecumseh painted their faces, let out their famous war whoops, and danced around fires, striking fear into the hearts of the soldiers inside the fort. Henry Hastings Sibley was only a year old when his beloved Detroit fell, after a token defense, to the British and Tecumseh in the War of 1812. Sibley’s Father, Solomon, demanded permission to leave the city along with his wife, baby Henry, seven-year-old Sproat, and three-year-old Catherine. They fled as refugees to Marietta until news of the battle of the Thames reached them in 1813, Tecumseh was dead and the British were gone.¹

Solomon Sibley was a tall, bearded man that exuded confidence, his physique fit a man of the frontier, but the life of a frontiersman was not one Solomon wanted. He made his way to Detroit in June 1797 at the recommendation of colleagues who knew that Michigan Territory was in dire need of lawyers. Having been raised in New England, Solomon was an ardent Federalist, and despised the sweeping victory of Jeffersonian Republicans in 1800. In a letter to a friend he expressed bewilderment that the “cool investigating spirit” that defined New England should be caught up in “the wild and fashionable frenzy of modern Republican philosophy.”\(^2\) Despite his political and professional success, Solomon found that he hated the mixed and cosmopolitan society that was growing in Detroit.

The city was home to French, Chippewa, British, Scottish, American, and various other groups. Solomon had a very difficult time with this colorful society. He said he found “no pleasure in listening to their French nonsense—they speak no English & I speak no French.” The lonely Solomon hated this “country of savages and Frenchmen.”\(^3\) His inability to find a wife was no doubt tied to his views on the “savages and Frenchmen,” as White American women were in short supply so far out on the frontier. It wasn’t until 1802, on a visit to Marietta, that he fell in love with the daughter of a distinguished military officer and revolutionary war veteran, Colonel Ebenezer Sproat.


After gaining the trust of the good Colonel, he married Sally Sproat in October of that year. She gave birth to three children, Henry among them.

From an early age it was evident that following in his father’s footsteps was probably not going to suit Henry, who drove his mother to the brink of insanity. Something he looked back on with fondness when he wrote an autobiography in his later years; he recalled “My early youth was in no manner distinguished unless it was that I was more given to mischief than my fellows. So many were my exploits in that direction, that my dear mother often declared me incorrigible, and the black sheep of the family.”

While Henry and his siblings tortured their mother, Solomon Sibley had befriended Territorial Governor Lewis Cass, who by the early 1820s was busily negotiating treaties with the Chippewa and other Indian groups while running a political machine in Michigan territory. He became an immensely powerful territorial governor, and as such Cass was responsible for creating Indian policy in the Old Northwest. To Cass, the main job of the governor was to keep the line of White territorial holding in front of the line of White settlement, in other words, push the Indians out onto the frontier to make room for American settlement. It was his policy that would set the

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stage for land acquisition in Minnesota as well. Cass was a rather rotund individual, so much so that the Indian’s name for him translates to “Big Belly.” He had drooping jowls and wore a reddish brown wig. Though he was not imposing physically, he was an intelligent politician who was willing to work with anyone, regardless of political affiliation. Solomon eventually left active politics because his friend Lewis Cass helped him get appointed to the Territorial Supreme Court in 1823.

By 1827 the respectable Solomon Sibley’s middle son Henry was finishing his education. Unlike his father, he could not stand the thought of a sedentary, monotonous career like the law. The stability of that career was, in Henry’s eyes, boredom and tedium made manifest. He was looking at a life of books and tedious observance of the law while visions of the fur trade, of exploring, of navigating and adventure filled the young man’s mind; he could not allow himself to follow his father’s dream. Much like his father, Henry grew to be an imposing figure. He stood over six feet tall with dark black hair and broad shoulders, he looked like a man who could handle a frontier life. Henry, like Solomon, was quite an accomplished student,

I was educated in the Academy at Detroit, which was equivalent to the High School of the present day, supplemented by two years tuition in Latin, and Greek . . . and thereafter by the study of law for two years duration. My father intended me to follow his profession, but after the time indicated had elapsed, I frankly told him the study was irksome to me, and I longed for a more active and stirring life. 

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7 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 16-17.
Henry was nervous about telling his father of his intention to live a different life than the one Solomon had planned for him. He confided in old friend Charles Trowbridge, who had worked for Lewis Cass as an interpreter, Trowbridge had an interest in Indians and language before moving into banking in 1825. Trowbridge was friends with Henry Schoolcraft, an Indian agent in Michigan, who in turn offered Henry a chance to fulfill his dream of getting into the fur trade. Schoolcraft offered Henry a job as a clerk in his store in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Sibley recalled his jubilation at the prospect of taking the job in his autobiography, but he still needed to brave the storm of telling his father, who sought the council of his wife Sally on what to do with their son:

After long consultation with my mother, they wisely concluded to allow me to follow the bent of my own inclinations, and on the 20th day of June, 1828, being then in my eighteenth year, I left home never to return to it, except as a transient visitor.

After gaining the blessing of his parents, Sibley made his way to the rough and tumble fur trading post located near Fort Brady in Sault Ste. Marie. Though Sibley thought he had finally achieved his dream, the reality turned out to be much different.

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Sibley was immediately homesick, a problem that would plague him for quite some time on the frontier. But he found comradery with the soldiers stationed in the fort who introduced Sibley to the cruder aspects of frontier life. As one of Sibley’s acquaintances remarked that in the Sault “If the census were rightly taken, there is now 10 children in embryo whose legitimacy may be doubted.”

Despite his loneliness and his abrupt education on the way things worked in the rough and tumble frontier, he ran the trading post remarkably well by keeping on top of the tedious and numerous tasks that came with the job. The Sault was home to a sizable Chippewa population, along with traders for American Fur and the few independent companies that remained on the frontier. His primary job consisted of outfitting fur traders with the goods they would need to trade to Indian tribes for furs. Each trader buried the lawyer’s son in paperwork. Luckily for Sibley, his classical education and schooling for the law made him adept at this task.

But if avoiding a life of tedium and boredom had been his primary goals in leaving Detroit, he had merely escaped one brand of tedium to find himself in another. Later that year he thought his luck would change when he was ordered to go to Mackinac Island, where he arrived on the first of May.

Mackinac was far different from the Sault. He was still operating the post there for Schoolcraft, but Mackinac was home of the powerful American Fur Company. For generations the island served as the nerve center for the fur trade throughout the


western Great Lakes. Every trader for the American Fur Company in one way or another had to pass through Mackinac. The town contained a fort, an Indian agency, a Presbyterian mission, a Catholic church and a county government. Sibley had hoped moving there would bring him closer to the frontier life of adventure he had dreamed of, unfortunately it was more of the same. Sibley wrote to his friend Charles Trowbridge in the summer of 1829,

> All the Lake Superior & Fon du Lac traders have arrived, and you may well suppose that I am now much more pressed than ever, in making out Outfits &c. for the interior . . . yesterday I rose from bed at 4 o’clock and stopped writing at half past eight in the evening, not having left my desk except to go to my meals, & it is now 4 o’clock in the morning of the 21st. 

Sibley persistently applied to move to work for American Fur, but without success. Eventually, though, he met and befriended Robert Stuart, third in command of American Fur and in charge of the Mackinac post. In the fall of 1829 Sibley returned to Detroit and worked at the bank of Michigan with his friend Trowbridge. Though Stuart probably intended to promote Sibley and hire him into American Fur, a letter of recommendation from Trowbridge that described Sibley as a young man of “zeal and industry” probably didn’t hurt. He was hired by American Fur in September on a five year contract that would pay him $350 the first year, $450 for the second, and $550 per

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year for the remaining three. Again, Sibley hoped that his new position would bring him closer to the fur trade he had imagined as a boy, unfortunately it was again, not so. He summarized the long stay working for American Fur in Mackinac in a single sentence in his autobiography “I was domiciled in this sequestered spot for the most part of five years.” Despite his violent homesickness and hatred of his confinement, he was good at his job.

In 1830 Sibley was swept up in the wave of evangelical revivalism that rolled over the country and became a convert. It was not a “frontier conversion,” or, in other words, a conversion without conviction. Sibley remained devout his whole life, though he despised the rifts that both religion and politics created between people, he remained devout. He developed a reputation as a fair and upright businessman, a hard worker, and a man who was willing to compromise if it helped with a business deal. Sibley learned more about the inner-workings of a fur trade and a fur company that spanned almost the entire continent than nearly anyone else in those five years. He exhibited uncommon ability to negotiate, not just in the fur trade, but on his long rides to Ohio where he was often sent to negotiate for food and supplies to be brought to Mackinac. By 1834 however, Sibley’s contract still had a year left on it, but he was

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contemplating leaving the fur trade altogether. After five years in Mackinac he had not been able to live the life he wanted. His family begged him to return to Detroit, and he began to see his decision to enter the trade in the first place as a mistake. But just as Sibley’s hopes of an exciting life on the frontier began to wane, big changes were about to be made in American Fur.

John Jacob Astor and his son wanted out of the fur trade. From 1831-1832, Astor reorganized the company into a corporation under the laws of New York. In 1834 they went public with their intent to sell their stock in the American Fur Company, it retained this name though it was no longer a company but a corporation. A scramble ensued to buy up the majority of the company. Not surprisingly Ramsey Crooks came out on top. He, along with the help of eight investors, purchased fifty percent of American Fur. The other half was taken over by a company called Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company. Fortuitously for Ramsey Crooks, Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company was controlled by Bernard Pratt, who was Crooks’ father in law. Crooks and Pratt reorganized the structure of their separate yet conjoined companies to flow their trade goods and furs through New York and St. Louis respectively. They also organized the company into “departments” that further broke down into “outfits.” The outfit and department headquarters spanned the interior of the continent. The Western Outfit was centered at

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19 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 34.


Mackinac, the Northern Outfit was centered at Sault Ste. Marie, and the Detroit Department was conveniently located in Detroit. Other headquarters included Fond Du Lac (modern day Duluth), Chicago, Green Bay, Milwaukee, and most important for our purposes, the recently acquired mouth of the Minnesota River.\textsuperscript{22} Just as Crooks was putting the finishing touches on his new company, he needed to staff it with good men. He had always intended to bring Solomon Sibley’s son to a higher station in the company. Now he had a perfect job for Henry as he needed someone to run the Sioux Outfit. Unbeknownst to Sibley, Crooks had been keeping tabs on the promising young clerk while he was at Mackinac. It was Crooks who decided to send Sibley on trips to Ohio to test the clerk and expand his understanding of the fur trade. As Crooks prepared to tap Sibley for more responsibility in the company, the troubled Sibley found Crooks first, as described in his autobiography:

I sought him out and told him frankly, that my parents were strongly opposed to my longer sojourn in what was little better than a wild Indian country, that I had been offered a position of cashier in two banks, one in Detroit, Michigan, and the other in Huron, Ohio, with a liberal salary for so young a man as I was, and while I did not recognize the right of the new company to insist upon my remaining to fulfil the old contract, I preferred out of respect to him as an old friend of my father . . . that he would voluntarily release me from my engagement, in consideration thereof I would pay the new corporation $1,000.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Nute, “The Papers of American Fur,” 522.

Just as Sibley had made up his mind to leave the company, Crooks was going to promote him. Crooks knew how to convince Sibley not to leave. He enlisted the aid of one of Sibley’s good friends that he made during his time in Mackinac, Hercules Dousman, and together they presented the clerk with the offer he had been waiting for.

Crooks and Dousman offered Sibley a junior partnership to operate the Western Department of the fur trade alongside Dousman and a man named Joe Rolette. They offered him control of the entire Dakota fur trade, stretching from Lake Pepin throughout the Minnesota River valley. When Sibley balked, perhaps trying to figure out how he would explain this to his parents who were expecting him to be a banker in Detroit before the year was out. They offered him a six year contract. Rolette, Dousman, and Sibley would run the entire Western Department on a 5-3-2 split of profits, Sibley would receive base pay of $1,200 per year plus the profits.24 When Sibley said he would think about the idea, his good friend Dousman painted a portrait of what his new life would be like, it mirrored exactly the life Sibley had dreamt of as a boy: “I was eventually won over by his repeated and persistent appeals, and assented to the agreement, whereby I became for the remainder of my life, a denizen of what is now the magnificent state of Minnesota.”25 So Henry Hastings Sibley soon made his way to lead his piece of the Western Department of the American Fur Company, The Sioux Outfit. It was home to four bands of Dakota Indians, and a lively long-term mixed-race

24 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 36-38.

population. Sibley made his way from Detroit to Mackinac via Green Bay and arrived at Prairie du Chien (Prairie of the Dog) in the heart of the Minnesota Middle Ground by late 1834.

“I WANT MUCH TO GO HOME”

When Sibley arrived in the Minnesota Middle Ground he did not know that the skills he acquired while making a name for himself in Mackinac were insufficient to oversee the Sioux Outfit. Sibley would have to balance his own personal feelings, beliefs, and ambitions with the accepted rules of both White and Dakota society. The frontier life he pictured as a child did exist there, but it was far more complex. He had to make money for American Fur. In order to do that, he had to become a cultural broker. He needed to become a member of the Dakota kinship network and gain the trust of the various bands living there. He had to deal with the Indian agents working for the American government in Dakota country, men whose orders from the government often conflicted with the orders Sibley had been given by American Fur. He also had to deal with missionary groups that were coming to the area in an effort to Christianize the Dakota. These men also had goals that conflicted with Sibley’s and American Fur’s.

These struggles were not just professional for Sibley; they were also deeply personal. His patriotism, his religious beliefs, and his relationships with the Dakota would all make it incredibly difficult for Sibley to do what he had to do for the company. Though Richard White claimed that the Great Lakes Middle Ground had died with Tecumseh after the war of 1812, Sibley was living in the Great Lakes Middle Ground in 1834. In this way,
Henry Sibley symbolized the changing nature of the Middle Ground under American control and the struggles within it. He was a pragmatic White Christian man doing business with, and living among, the Dakota, in a time when Jacksonian American racism toward Indians was hitting an all-time high. Relationships and actions that had been acceptable on the frontier for centuries such as marrying Dakota women, and having mixed-race children, were no longer acceptable by the standards of White society back east. The stresses of being pulled in numerous different directions by the changing racial and political attitudes of the time made Sibley’s first years in the Minnesota Middle Ground very hard. He started by getting to know the traders operating under him, and the Indians working for those traders.

Upon his arrival Sibley stayed with Alexis Bailly while his house was being built on the mouth of the Minnesota River, opposite Fort Snelling. Bailly had been a trader for American fur since 1823. He made a failed attempt to break away from the company in 1831, a decision that drew the ire of Rolette and Ramsay Crooks. That anger only grew worse when Bailly refused to get along with an Indian Agent named Taliaferro.  

Because they could not fire Bailly, who was under contract, Crooks instead instructed Sibley to learn the ropes from Bailly until his contract ran out at the end of the year. “By observing closely his system of management,” Crooks wrote, “you may learn to adopt what is really useful, and avoid the errors of his practice.”  

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deal with Taliaferro, asking him to stand down on his feud with Bailly until the more pragmatic Sibley arrived. Rolette wrote Ramsey Crooks “Of this last arrangement between Mr. Taliaferro and myself I was satisfied as it will give us a chance of getting rid of Mr. Bailly.”28 Sibley met his tutor and immediately set out to get acquainted with the Indians and traders with whom would be dealing.

As Bailly and Sibley began their journey, they crested a hill known as Pilot Knob, and Sibley saw the Minnesota River valley in all its grandeur for the first time. He was taken with the scene:

When I reached the brink of the hill overlooking the surrounding country, I was struck with the picturesque beauty of the scene. From that outlook the course of the Mississippi river from the north, suddenly turned eastward to where St. Paul now stands, the Minnesota River from the west, the principal tributary of the main stream and at the junction, rose the military post of Fort Snelling perched upon a high and commanding point, with its stone walls, and blockhouses, bidding defiance to any attempt at capture.29

He rode down the hill and found the post of New Hope (more often called St. Peter) before continuing his journey. The Mdewekanton band called the area around Fort Snelling home. Directly across from Fort Snelling was Black Dog’s village, and some twenty-five miles up the river was a large village also named for its leader, Shakopee or “the Six.” A few miles away was a village called Kaposia, and a very large group was


headed by Chief Wabasha at Lake Pepin. Sibley was informed that a few important bands were about to change leadership. Nine-Mile-Village was about to be passed to Chief Good Road. The powerful and famous Chief Little Crow was dying and his son, Big Thunder, was about to succeed him at Kaposia. Sibley and Big Thunder became fast friends and trusted one another from the outset. Sibley saw him as a “progressive” Indian, meaning he was willing to deal with the traders and the Indian Agents. At Black Dog’s village, an aging chief known as Big Eagle would soon hand off power to his son, Grey Iron. Sibley’s eagerness to get down to business and meet with the chiefs and traders was met with approval of senior partners in the company, Ramsey Crooks said in a letter to a friend that “Mr. Sibley seems quite ‘au fait’ already and will prove daresay a first rate man for our business.”

Sibley then met with the traders, all of whom were in some way or another, leftovers from the French Middle Ground that ended 80 years before. The mixed race fur traders were cultural brokers in their own right, as they straddled White and Indian society. The Franco-Dakota traders had to negotiate their new contracts with the freshly reorganized corporation. The first trader Sibley met with was Jean Baptiste Faribault, the son of a former French official. He had been in the business for more than a decade

30 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 48-49.
31 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 50.
32 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 50.
33 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 46.
and they quickly signed him to a standard contract of five years. Faribault agreed he would sell his furs only to American Fur and to buy provisions only from them as well. At another trading post Sibley signed the trader known as Le Blanc, an illiterate Franco-Dakota who had created his own system of hieroglyphics to keep his affairs in order. Le Blanc was known to the Dakota as Skadan or “The Little White Man,” as his temper was famous among them. Next on Sibley’s list was a trip up the river to the post of Joseph Renville. Renville looked like an Indian, but carried a French last name. He was well respected among the Dakota and Sibley quickly signed him to a new contract.34

Over the course of his first three years in Dakota country Sibley continued to get to know his traders and his Indian allies. He and Big Thunder had the closest relationship, but he met other Indians and befriended them as well. Sibley took on the self-appointed status of a “paternal figure” to the Indians. Of course the paternalism was a construct of the White American mind, predicated on the ideology of Indians as children in need of a father figure to guide them. While the ideology was flawed, by fulfilling these paternal roles in his own eyes and in the eyes of White society, he was doing his job. His initial introduction to the prevailing Dakota lifeways was difficult, however. In a letter to his sister in 1835 he wrote “My house is filled with Indians, each one pestering me for articles which I will or will not give them as the case may be . . . of all savages I believe the Sioux have the least reason in their composition, otherwise they

34 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 55-57.
would not attempt to drive a man mad as I believe they sometimes intend to do to me.”

It was Sibley’s rude introduction to the Dakota kinship network. Of course the Dakota had to test the generosity and willingness to give gifts of their new trader. Sibley did not understand this in the beginning, but he eventually settled in to what he believed to be his role as the paternal figure who must look after and care for his Dakota family, he wrote that a man of his stature was “regarded by the savages among whom he was thrown, as their superior, their counselor, and their friend. When sickness prevailed in their families, he prescribed for them, when hungry he fed them, and in all things he identified himself with their interests and became virtually their leader.”

Sibley did do those things, in his mind those actions made him a paternal figure to his new “savage children.” While there is no way of knowing what the Dakota thought of it explicitly, through inference based on Dakota culture, Sibley’s paternalism, in the Dakota mind, most likely translated to the Dakota viewing Sibley as a worthy addition to their reciprocity-based society.

Whatever his status among the Dakota, the profits of the company began to soar. The success was hard won, however, as he had to compete with Indian agents and missionaries to keep the Indians on the task of hunting instead of farming. Taliaferro had been an Indian Agent in the territory since 1819. He believed whole-heartedly in

35 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 70.

Jeffersonian Republicanism and the inferiority of Indian culture. He was not corrupt and was described by contemporaries as “the most important and influential civil official on the upper Mississippi.”\textsuperscript{37} He had his orders to civilize the Dakota and induce them into farming. Farming would require the Dakota to take up less land and perhaps, over time, the government could convince the Dakota to sell their hunting grounds if the fur trade waned. By the mid-1820s Taliaferro noticed that the increasing numbers White settlers coming into the region (on what used to be Chippewa land) were changing the landscape. The influx of settlers was displacing the game in the eastern half of the Dakota Territory. Therefore he created a plan to induce the Dakota to farm, and to convince them to abandon their hunting, warring, and nomadic culture.\textsuperscript{38} His opportunity came in 1828 when a Chief of the Black Dog Village, Cloud Man, narrowly escaped death while seeing his band through a harsh winter in which they all nearly starved. Taliaferro sent army soldiers with oxen, seed, and hoes to encourage Cloud Man to take up farming. Cloud Man did so on a patch of land a few miles from his village. This small farming clan grew slightly over time and Taliaferro named their small farming community outside Black Dog Village “Eatonville,” in honor of Andrew Jackson’s Secretary of War and Taliaferro’s boss.\textsuperscript{39} Eatonville was eventually destroyed by


\textsuperscript{38} Meyer, \textit{History of the Santee Sioux}, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{39} Meyer, \textit{History of the Santee Sioux}, 50.
Chippewa raids and intermittent warfare between the Dakota and the Sac and Fox. But the experiment had been encouraging, and Taliaferro consistently petitioned the government to fund more experiments like it. The constant warfare and the introduction of whiskey into Dakota bands by the new settlers made life difficult for Taliaferro and other representatives of the government. Their attempts to “civilize” the Dakota could not work if the drunkenness and warfare did not cease. The desire to induce the Dakota into farming, of course, brought Taliaferro into conflict with American Fur. American Fur required the Dakota to maintain their hunting culture to deliver furs.

Government agents telling the Dakota not to hunt and supplying them with instruments to farm was a serious problem. This was the issue that brought Taliaferro and Alex Bailly into conflict to begin with. Taliaferro had no love for American Fur, and the company reciprocated with enmity. Sibley would have to deal this problem as well.

Beyond agricultural experiments, in the 1820s and 1830s the Second Great Awakening caused many faiths to send out missionaries to the Indians. One such missionary was Stephen Riggs, a Presbyterian who arrived in the Dakota country with his revivalist fervor in 1830. Riggs and other missionaries like the Pond brothers, men from Washington, Connecticut who made their way to Minnesota around the same time, deemed the Dakota to be “proper subjects for Christian effort.” These men saw

40 Meyer, History of the Santee Sioux, 52-54.

Christianizing the Dakota as the first step in “civilizing” Dakota culture. Inherent in their religious dogma was the same belief that characterized the early Republic’s view on Indians as an uncivilized and savage. The Christianization effort and the Civilization effort were one in the same. The missionaries got their funding from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and used it to build churches and day schools. They used the government “civilization fund” to bring in White farmers and school teachers. These attempts at converting the Dakota were almost entirely unsuccessful, however, for a multitude of reasons. Chief among these were Dakota concepts of masculinity. In Dakota culture manliness was equated with the “life sustaining killer,” the hunter and warrior. The idea of becoming a farmer was tantamount to asking a male Dakota to become a woman, as women, in Dakota culture, controlled agriculture. The few Dakota who did convert tended to be women or mixed-race Dakota as a result. Dakota men stayed loyal to their own religion, a form of animism in which they believed in “power that circulates everywhere that is visibly concentrated in transient form.” Sioux religion vested spiritual power into natural forms, causing hunters to partake in rituals before and after a hunt. “They bury the bones of the beaver and elk very carefully after eating their flesh” recorded Johnathan Carver in his journal “thinking that the spirits of these animals have influence on the

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42 Jennifer Gruber, “Mighty Upheaval,” 84.
44 Jennifer Gruber, “Mighty Upheaval,” 81.
living ones and will inform them how they have been treated.” 45 This combination of gender roles and religious belief was beneficial to fur traders like Sibley, so long as they undergirded the hunt and furs were secured. Unfortunately for the missionaries, Dakota people continued to flock to their shaman or Wicatse Wakan (the supernatural people) for spiritual guidance. 46 Attempts at religious conversion of the Dakota proved fruitless until after 1862 when, as historian Robert Berkhofer said “The connection between coercive power, conversion, and civilization is most dramatically demonstrated in the mass baptisms and huge reading classes conducted by missionaries in the prison camp of the captive Indians after the victorious White expedition of late 1862.” 47 The Indians were only successfully converted after the destruction of their own civilization had been finished.

For Henry Sibley, negotiating these complex politics and relationships in the Middle Ground was both part of his business and his personal life. As his biographer Rhoda Gilman put it “Sibley’s position . . . around Fort Snelling demanded different roles. . . . The world of class distinctions and gentility, and the paternalistic stance that went with it, were ever present.” 48 Sibley believed in the American expansionism


46 Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind, 9.


48 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 62.
espoused by men like Lewis Cass, but had to fight against Indian Agents like Taliaferro who espoused the same ideas. He was a converted evangelical Christian who believed in the power of Christianity as a civilizing and spiritual force, but had to oppose the missionaries in the Middle Ground who espoused those same beliefs to the Indians. He was a man who also believed that Indian peoples had a place in the world and should be respected as such, but he had to fight against his own nation’s growing racism and views of Indians as inferior and deserving of displacement. These tensions would grow over time, and though he was personally torn, he managed to play the forces off one another very well as the years passed. Sibley exemplified the mixing of cultures indicative of the Middle Ground. If, as Richard White argued, the Middle Ground is defined by the merging of Indian and Euro-American culture, then Sibley was a clear example. He was born and raised in American culture, worked for an American company, and prayed to the Christian God. He was also a member of the Dakota fictive kin network, had many Indian and métis friends, lived on the frontier and relied on the hunt for his living. Sibley’s place as a cultural broker put many stresses on him and made it incredibly difficult for Sibley in his first few years in the Middle Ground. In 1837, his job got more difficult as economic collapse threatened American Fur.

In 1837 an economic collapse, due to Andrew Jackson’s destruction of the Bank of the United States, shook the entire nation. Even a company as powerful as American Fur was not immune. By this time the Dakota were already in debt to the fur traders. Scarcity of game due to over-hunting had produced shortfalls in what the company was
expecting to bring in. With a banking crisis rocking American Fur to its foundation there was only one way to get the debts they were owed from the Indians: a treaty surrendering all Dakota lands east of the Mississippi. It was a desperate move but it was a desperate time. As Hercules Dousman said in a letter to Sibley, “The Sioux owe us a heavy debt and now is the time to get it, we have nothing else to depend on this year.”49 Sibley was intent on going to Washington to represent the fur traders at the negotiating table for the treaty. Taliaferro predicted the fur traders would make such a move and he cut them off by gathering up 21 Mdewekanton chiefs and taking them, by steamboat, to Washington for the treaty.50

The government desired the land east of the Mississippi for two primary reasons. The first Sibley had experienced himself. One June day Sibley looked up from his porch in Mendota to see a young Dakota boy on horseback speeding up to Sibley. “Ojibway!” the boy shouted before he turned his horse and headed in a line to Black Dog Village. The Chippewa were attacking Koposia and the battle was raging. Sibley grabbed his rifle and made a mad dash toward Koposia. The bullets were still flying as he exchanged his horse for a canoe and paddled across the river to the village. He was greeted by a grisly sight. The wife of a French-Canadian farmer, a Dakota woman, lay in a pool of her own blood; her head had been split open and her scalp removed.51 At the end of the fight the

49 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 25.
50 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 25.
51 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 85.
Dakota losses were tallied at twelve or thirteen warriors killed with another thirty seriously wounded.\textsuperscript{52} The Dakota had killed five Ojibway raiders, and unable to pursue, vented their anger and sadness on the corpses of the raiders they had managed to kill. Sibley said “[I] exhausted my limited surgical skill in aid of the injured.”\textsuperscript{53} Many of the dead were known to Sibley. Thoroughly sickened by what he had seen, he returned to his home in Mendota. The warfare between the Sioux, the Chippewa, and the Sac and Fox had plagued the Middle Ground since its beginnings. Each European group tried to mitigate the violence. The treaty in 1837 sought to do the same. The Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs laid out what happened:

Frequent advices were received in the spring, of hostile incursions of the Sioux, and of the Sacs and Foxes of the Mississippi, upon the lands of each other. The interposition of the Executive was earnestly invoked. . . . Deputations from these tribes were invited to this city. Deputations from the Winnebagoes . . . were called hither at the same time. In the two principal objects, the conciliation of the hostile Sioux and Sacs and Foxes . . . and the removal of the Winnebagoes to the neutral ground lying between these . . . tribes, effected in negotiations held with them while here, will contribute materially to prevent future collisions.\textsuperscript{54}

Thus removal policy would be employed in an effort to end the bloodshed of the Minnesota Middle Ground. Minnesota was not a state, and as such removing Indians from it was not an option, even if it had been, the fur trade was still viable enough to not seriously consider moving the Dakota. Instead the Sioux, the Chippewa, and the Sac

\textsuperscript{52} Gilman, \textit{Henry Hastings Sibley}, 85.

\textsuperscript{53} Gilman, \textit{Henry Hastings Sibley}, 85.

\textsuperscript{54} United States Office of Indian Affairs, \textit{Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1837} (Washington, D.C., 1837), 4-5.
and Fox would be separated from one another, and two bands of Winnebago would be removed from the state of Wisconsin and settled between them as a buffer.

The government’s second goal was obvious enough. The report stated that:

By the same treaties, and that with the Chippewas of the Mississippi, a vast region has been acquired, abounding in timber adequate to the wants of the settlers, who are thronging to Wisconsin, and those of the inhabitants on the borders of the Mississippi river in water power. . . . The Indian population will be removed further from the frontier of the states, and will no longer be subject to a contaminating intercourse, while our people will be secured from incursions and attacks upon their persons and property. The way will be open to the establishment of permanent boundaries, in a few years, that will give the Union a more regular form.55

With the acquisition of all Sioux, Winnebago, Chippewa, and Sac and Fox land east of the Mississippi, the United States had gained sizable portions of land. In the racist style of Jacksonian America, Whites could avoid “contaminating intercourse” with Indian society.

Dakota signers of the treaty included Big Thunder and Bad Hail. Big Thunder was already close with Sibley and Bad Hail would become very close with Sibley in the coming years. The treaty the Dakota agreed to promised them $1 million. Of that amount $90,000 was earmarked to be paid to the fur traders in settlement of debts, despite the objections of Taliaferro. Sibley and the other traders were absolutely livid about the terms of the treaty. They felt they were due much more than the treaty stipulated they were owed. The fur traders wanted more influence in the treaty making

process than Taliaferro had allowed them. In fact, Sibley had not even seen the final draft of the treaty before it was signed.\textsuperscript{56} He resolved then that if there was ever going to be another treaty between the government and the Dakota, that the fur traders would have a much bigger presence in the negotiations. In essence, the American Fur Company had essentially operated according to the factory system. Debts incurred to the fur company were one of the primary reasons the Dakota sold the land. Whether they meant to or not, Sibley and his company were actively destroying the Middle Ground. Settlers soon flocked onto the new land gained in the treaty. Many of them settled on the east bank of the Mississippi river. While the treaty prohibited settlers from crossing into Dakota land to sell goods, the Dakota came to the settlers, and often what they came for was whiskey.\textsuperscript{57}

By 1839 Sibley had grown weary of his life among the Dakota. Again the frontier seemed to fail in its promise of freedom and glory. Instead he was in personal turmoil, as he explained to the sister of his good friend Charles Trowbridge, Eliza, in a letter:

\begin{quote}
Our society here is limited, we have but five ladies . . . we cannot boast of any but copper-colored beauties. These however are in abundance and I have half a mind sometime to take one to wife . . . were it not that a certain Mrs. Sibley in your neighborhood might strenuously object to having a red daughter in law, be she never so pretty!\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} Kohn, \textit{Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter}, 25.

\textsuperscript{57} William Watts Folwell, \textit{A History of Minnesota}, vol. 1 (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1922), 211.

\textsuperscript{58} Kohn, \textit{Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter}, 28.
Despite his joking, Sibley was desperately lonely. The trader had made a name for himself among the Dakota, he was a well-respected member of their kinship network. The Dakota began to refer to him as *Wapetonhonska* meaning “The long trader” or “The Long Merchant,” a reference to his impressive height, physical constitution, and his profession.⁵⁹ He was also well respected in the business of the fur trade. He played his self-appointed paternal duties well, while fending off Indian agents and missionaries as best he could. It all took a toll on the man who began to symbolize so very much the Middle Ground in Minnesota. He lamented in the same letter:

> I have spent the flower of my life in the Indian country, in the hope of obtaining a competency. My hope has only been but partly realized, for the derangement and distress which operate so fearfully on the monetary affairs of our own state of Michigan, has not spared us . . . I want much to go home. I am fatigued almost to death by the vexations & trouble inseparable from the trade with the Indians, and a residence of nearly six years at this particular spot has quite weaned me of a desire longer to remain in the fur trade.⁶⁰

Despite his six years in Minnesota, Sibley still clearly felt that the place was not home to him. He asked to be released from his contract which still had a year left on it, but was refused. It was a blessing in disguise for Sibley as the next few years would change his outlook, solidify his position as the most important trader in the Middle Ground, and reinvigorate his self-esteem and his morale. He would launch his political career and finally be cured of the homesickness that so plagued him. The cure for Sibley, it turned

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⁵⁹ Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 50.
out, was fairly simple. All it required was, to use the term reserved for a White person becoming culturally Indian, “going native.”

“YOUR FRIEND HAL, A DACOTAH”

Sibley’s reputation among the Dakota was second to none when he decided to lead hunting expeditions of his own. His intent, it would seem, was to live out the life he had dreamed of as a child, if only for a while and in order to build connections further with the Dakota. Sibley had become fluent in Dakota by 1837. The fact that his status among the tribe had grown is visible in numerous ways. Perhaps most notable was the fact that he had been given twenty powers of attorney for metis families. As the treaty in 1837 set aside large sums for those “having not less than one quarter Sioux blood,”61 Sibley ensured those families would get their share of the $110,000 earmarked for them in the treaty. Ramsay Crooks greeted the news of Sibley’s intent to hunt with the Indians as an excellent business maneuver. He remarked “I am glad to learn your band of Sioux on the Red Cedar are likely to do well . . . and if you can next persuade a larger number to make a hunt in that country they will doubtless give you a large return of excellent and desirable skins.”62 Sibley was accompanied on the trip by 150 Dakota hunters, among them a famous Dakota named Bad Hail and fur trader Alex Faribault. The area they selected to hunt was in the middle of the neutral ground between the tribes that had been established in the 1837 treaty. The hunt was to take place in 1840, the same


year the United States was forcibly moving Ho-Chunk Winnebago into the neutral ground. Bad Hail was usually associated with Grey Iron’s band at Black Dog Village, but he was sometimes identified as a member of Good Road’s band. If hunting and soldiering defined masculinity among the Dakota, Bad Hail was masculinity incarnate. Tall and imposing, Bad Hail was considered to be the greatest warrior in all Dakota bands, or “principal soldier of the Nation,” as interpreter Philander Prescott described him. While Bad Hail was not a chief, his reputation in combat was unrivaled. As one woman described the warrior after learning his band had been attacked, “Bad Hail stood near, his eyes bloodshot with rage, his lips quivering, and every trembling limb telling of the tempest within.” Though terrifying, he had befriended Sibley as a similarly powerful man in the Dakota kinship network. He agreed to go on the hunting trip with Sibley. Also along on the trip, in the Dakota tradition, were many women, one of whom was Bad Hail’s daughter, known as She-nah Doota-win or “Red Blanket Woman.”

The hunting party proceeded to the neutral ground near Red Cedar. Sibley described the dynamics of the Dakota hunting excursions: “The man’s business is to furnish the tenants of the lodge with food and clothing, the women must do all the

63 Kohn, *Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter*, 20.
64 Kohn, *Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter*, 21.
65 Kohn, *Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter*, 21.
The lonely fur trader found escape with Red Blanket Woman in the wilderness. He was finally taking part in the version of the fur trade that made him feel alive, while simultaneously tending to his lonely heart. The hunt was exciting and Sibley wrote down many of his accounts feverishly. He recalled an incident in which the party had mortally wounded a large elk outside Red Cedar. Sibley walked up to the beast as it lay dying and examined it. The Elk rose to its feet and attempted to gore Sibley, who ran for his life. Eventually the elk fell to the ground dead. Sibley turned around to find Bad Hail, the Dakota, and Faribault roaring with laughter. “Why the devil did you not give that infernal beast a shot when you saw his huge horns within six feet of me?” he exclaimed. Faribault replied, “Why, to tell you the truth, I was so much taken up with the race, I would not for the world have interrupted the sport.” Sibley published stories like this one and many others two years later in the The Spirit of the Times, an periodical read avidly back east where tales of the frontier and Indians had become a token of the past. Sibley wrote under a pen name, and typically signed these editorials “Your friend Hal, a Dacotah.” Sibley was leading hunting parties of Indians on the frontier, living among them, speaking their language, and created an alter-ego in which he was “a Dacotah.” While Indians may have become novelties in the cosmopolitan centers back east, out on the frontier the Indians were very real. Sibley fell in love with one of them.

67 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 32.

68 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 32.
Sibley not so conspicuously left it out of his editorial writing, but Bad Hail’s daughter had pursued Sibley romantically. Sibley, who found many Dakota women attractive, did not exactly resist these advances. Though in his unfinished autobiography Sibley described a time when Bad Hail brought his daughter to Sibley in the middle of the night and offered her to the fur merchant as a wife. He was stunned and remained silent, “The poor girl meantime, stood there awaiting my reply, having covered her head with the blanket she wore.” Sibley claimed that he denied the offer, “I excused myself to the father, telling him it would be wrong in me to comply with his offer, that I had intention of taking to myself an Indian maiden for a wife, for many reasons I could not explain to him.” Sibley’s autobiography ended with the description of this event, perhaps he found it difficult to relive those moments, or to lie about them. He and Red Blanket Woman were married in the Dakota style, a ceremony Sibley described using the marriage of his “friend” to an Indian woman. Sibley paid a bride price and “when the price had been . . . paid, the ceremony of transferring the bride to her husband’s lodge” began. He explained that “her bosom is covered with silver broaches, and she is permitted to grace her head with the plumes of the war-eagle, borrowed from some successful warrior for the occasion.” It is doubtful that Hal, a

69 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 32-33.

Dacotah, would have had to look far for “some successful warrior” when he married Red Blanket Woman, her father had enough war-feathers to spare for several weddings. The bride would then “seat herself in her father’s lodge.” A short while later “At the appointed time four young warriors, in their weapons and feathers, who are the friends of the groom, bearing with them a blanket of scarlet cloth garnished with ribbon . . . spread the blanket on the floor . . . they seat her upon the blanket, when each one takes hold of a corner, and they march her tenderly to the lodge of her husband.” As historian Bruce Kohn described it, “As a bride came to a Dakota groom on a scarlet blanket, so may Henry Sibley’s Red Blanket Woman have come to him.” It was on this hunting trip that Sibley and Red Blanket Woman conceived their daughter, named in the Dakota language wah-ki-ye, meaning “The Bird.” In White society she would be known as Helen Hastings.

While relationships like the one between Sibley and Red Blanket woman were the standard on the frontier, by 1840, White society did not look fondly on them. It is in this way that Henry Sibley became a victim of American racism himself. He loved his daughter, but could not claim her as his own openly. His father’s feelings on Indian and métis people were quite clear, his mother’s feelings were similar. He also had political aspirations, a mixed-race daughter would not play well in the polls if White settlement increased in Minnesota. Because of this, Sibley could not give her his last name, and all documents in which she legally needed to be recorded as half-White referred to her as

71 Kohn, *Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter*, 32-34.
“Helen Hastings . . . the daughter of _____________ who is a White man.” Sibley initially allowed his daughter to be raised among her mother’s people. He relied on information about her from people closer to his daughter’s band. In 1842 a friend reported:

She is well . . . I went out there the other day. They are camped about 4 miles back from this place by the side of a lake out by Blk Dog’s band. She behaves well, only once she joined in the Scalp Dance, when I sent her word if she did so again I would act the soldier.

Helen remained among the Dakota until 1847 when Sibley removed her from her mother’s people and sent her to live among White society when she was around six or seven years old. Red Blanket Woman likely died a few years before that (possibly in 1844). Why Sibley moved Helen is unknown. Perhaps he wanted her to be raised as a Christian, and the utter failure of Christian missionaries to convert more than ten percent of Dakota before 1862 made this unlikely. Perhaps he wanted to make sure she was not killed in a clandestine raid by the Sac and Fox or Chippewa. In any case Helen was moved to White society, in the home of missionaries William and Martha Brown, who owned a farm near Red Rock. Sibley got married again on May 2, 1843 at Fort Snelling, to an upper class woman named Sarah Jane Steele. At 20 years old was 12 years his junior. Sibley and his new wife moved to his large stone house in Mendota to

72 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 15.

73 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 76.

74 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 41-43.
start a family of their own. Sarah had been born and raised in Detroit, and exhibited the American racism prevalent in the eastern Great Lakes. Sarah would forever despise her husband’s “half-breed” daughter.

Sibley finished his hunting exploits, completed two marriages and dealt with his daughter in a busy few years. Perhaps it was his enthrallment with the Dakota, in the natural beauty of Minnesota, his Indian bride, or the birth of his mixed-race daughter, but after 1841 Sibley never again mentioned desire to leave the Minnesota Middle Ground. The Minnesota Middle Ground had finally become home to him, and he would rise within it. Sibley had become an enduring symbol of the Middle Ground. If Richard White’s claims of the death of the Middle Ground in the *Pays d’en Haut* after the war of 1812 were true, men like Sibley would not have existed some 30 years later in that same region. If Indians had entirely retreated into the folklore of the past and no longer represented their peoples in the *Pays d’en Haut* with the power and strength they once had, then soldiers like Bad Hail and chiefs like Big Thunder would not have continued to exist. But the changing racial attitudes in America that characterized Jacksonian Democrats kept men like Sibley from embracing their mixed families openly as fur traders had done before, extolling the virtues of Dakota culture, or admitting to the public or perhaps even to himself that he never felt more comfortable in his own skin than when he was Hal, a Dacotah.

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75 Kohn, *Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter*, 41.

76 Gilman, *Henry Hastings Sibley*, 76.
The early 1840s were a time of drastic change for Sibley personally and for the rest of the Minnesota Middle Ground. The American Fur Company was beginning to lose money. Over-hunting and the loss of substantial hunting grounds in the treaty of 1837 made it more and more difficult for the Dakota hunters to provide pelts. Nevertheless, the Dakota remained on their usual hunting schedule based on season and custom. Mary K. Whelan, an ethno-historian, explained, “The Dakota economy was not founded on a principle of growth . . . Dakota consumption was culturally fixed and production levels were designed only to meet culturally determined consumption levels.”\(^{77}\) A Middle Ground, by definition, meant that White culture could not force or overpower Indian culture to fit its standards of production. Regardless of this, furs dwindled along with fur income. As the income dwindled, Indian debt mounted. The Mdewekanton and Wahpekute became more and more dependent on the annuity payments from the 1837 treaty to buy goods they needed for survival. As a result the records of the American Fur Company show losses across the board in 1841-1842.\(^{78}\) Were that not worrisome enough for American Fur, turbulent times in Europe based on trade wars and new Russian tariffs made it difficult to sell out of their distribution centers in Leipzig and London.\(^{79}\) 1842 turned into the worst year the company had seen to date. While

\(^{77}\) Whelan, “Dakota Indian Economics,” 269.


economics changed and it looked like the Minnesota Middle Ground was heading toward another land sale, legislation was pending in Washington.

In 1840 the Whigs won the Presidency based on a repudiation of Democratic economic philosophy that caused the collapse of 1837. John Tyler took the office. The Indian Commissioner, Thomas Hartley Crawford, was searching for a way to deal with Indians still living in the United States and Indians on the frontier when he came up with a grandiose plan. He wanted to buy a sizable chunk of land in between the Iowa and Minnesota borders which, in his words, would become “a region hemmed in by the laws of the United States, and guarded by virtuous agents, where abstinence from vice, and the practice of good morals, should find fit abode in comfortable dwellings and cleared farms, and be nourished and fostered by all the associations of the hearthstone.”

Crawford was joined by Secretary of War John Bell, also a proponent of Indian Removal, who wished to move some 50,000 Great Lakes Indians into a new territory. While there was little to suggest another Pan-Indian resistance movement, memories of Tecumseh must have haunted Crawford and Bell. Bell said this idea would “prevent the increase of said [Indian] population to the South, and to separate it and the settlement contemplated in the North from each other, by the dense White population which will occupy the intermediate land.”

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treaties with the Indian tribes and get the traders on the side of the treaty, they chose Governor James D. Doty of Wisconsin Territory.

Doty understood that the Dakota and other tribes would not be likely to listen to him alone. He needed to get the traders on his side to garner support from the Indians, and he had Henry Sibley of the American Fur Company in mind. With Sibley and the Company’s agents in tow, Doty negotiated a treaty with the Sisseton, Wahpeton, and Wahpekute bands of Dakota on July 31, 1841, and the Mdewakanton signed a few days later. Doty said that Sibley and his subordinates provided “indispensable aid” in securing the treaty.83 Sibley explained that “the provisions of this treaty, I consider to be better calculated for securing the interests of the Indians and of the people in the country than those of any treaty which has been made with the north-western Indians.”84 Doty was so impressed by Sibley’s sway among the Dakota, and of the man himself, when asked who would be the governor of this proposed new territory he responded “Mr. Henry H. Sibley of this place is the most competent gentleman in every respect with whom I am acquainted, for this station.”85 Sibley quickly departed for Washington to aid in rallying support for the treaty. It was all for naught, however, Democrats in the Senate had moved past the idea of an independent Indian state. Implicit in the creation of an all-

82 Satz, American Indian Policy, 225.
83 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 81.
84 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 81.
85 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 82.
Indian state was the idea that the state would one day join the union, giving Indians citizenship and parity with White American citizens. This was unthinkable for many in Jacksonian America. Members of the Democratic Party in the senate joined forces with Whigs who were furious with President Tyler over some policy decisions and struck down the bill. With it went the hope of a protected and legally recognized state for Indian and metis people. After word of the defeat reached Sibley in Washington he wrote “I am stuck fast in this abominable place.” Sibley took the defeat of the treaty very hard. His hopes of Governorship of the Territory had been destroyed. Perhaps he was also upset because a place like the one described in the Doty treaty would have been a good place for his daughter to live, an Indian and mixed-race community where he was Governor. In that same year (1842) Ramsey Crooks, now an old man, sold his shares in American Fur and transferred ownership of the company to Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company. The United States had declared war on Mexico. Settlement in the Oregon Territory had taken hold, and it was becoming the focal point of the fur trade rather than the western Great Lakes. Rhoda Gilman described, “Henceforth the economic destinies in the Upper Mississippi country lay beyond doubt with steamboats, lumber, and land values, not with the livelihood of Indian and mixed-blood people.”

86 Satz, American Indian Policy, 227.
87 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 84.
88 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 87.
Sibley’s duties for his new company were more in line with land speculation than fur trading.

“THE GREATEST AMONG THE CHIEFS”

As game declined and the Dakota grew increasingly dependent on annuity payments, their tribal leadership was shifting drastically. Cloud Man lost control of his village after his refusal to wage war against the Chippewa. His clan then merged with Good Road’s band. The famed Wabasha had died in 1835, and after a dispute his son took over his band, the largest of the Mdewakanton bands, he too was known as Wabasha but was often referred to as “Little Wabasha.”

Divisions also began to emerge between the small number of Dakota who were becoming farmers and traditional Dakota hunters. A derogatory term used by the Dakota to define these Indians was “Cut-hairs,” a reference to the farmer Indians cutting their hair in the way of the Whites. The struggle for the Dakota was to retain their identity and culture through a form of self-policing. The kin-based culture leant itself to shaming Indians into what were considered socially acceptable methods of dress and occupation, against the ever-present government agents and missionaries who pressed their culture to change.

The largest tribal shift was one for which Sibley was not prepared. In 1845 Sibley got word that tragedy had struck. His good friend, the influential Chief Big Thunder, had been severely wounded when his gun discharged during a hunting trip. Sibley

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immediately pulled the surgeon from his duties at Fort Snelling and, along with Alexis Faribault, rushed to Kaposia to aid his injured friend. Although there is some dispute about the events that transpired, the most plausible seems to be that at the same time Big Thunder’s eldest son, the rightful heir to the seat of Band Chief was a 25 year old man named Taoyateduta or “His Red Nation.” The young soon-to-be chief paddled furiously downriver, accompanied by some of his braves loyal to him, from his home among the Wahpekute to get to his father’s bedside. When Sibley and the surgeon arrived, His Red Nation was kneeling next to his father. The surgeon looked at Big Thunder’s wounds and determined there was nothing more that could be done for him. Big Thunder handed His Red Nation his medals, a symbolic passing of the title of Chief, and urged his son to accommodate the Whites as he had done, to accept the best parts of White culture and not to resist them without due cause. Sibley left, his heart heavy with the loss of his friend.

His Red Nation had been estranged from his father. As one man described, he was in “ill favor with his father’s band” because he was “a lothario in morals, a debauchee in habits, and of a haughty and overbearing disposition.” Big Thunder described his son as a man of “very little good sense.” In his youth he had slept with a


92 Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 36.

number of married Dakota women, while on one of his notorious alcohol binges. This had serious repercussions. “Because of threats against him by certain husbands he had wronged,” his father sent him to live among the Wahpekutes. Due to his sullied reputation and his estrangement from his father, once he inherited the title of Chief, he was immediately challenged. His half-brother, who was fourth in line for the chieftainship, and was aided by the extended families of the husbands His Red Nation had wronged as a young man. During the resistance, His Red Nation was threatened by the supporters of his half-brother, one of whom produced a rifle from his tipi and leveled it at His Red Nation. The young chief said, “Shoot then, where all can see.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest in defiance. The man pulled the trigger and the bullet struck His Red Nation in his folded arms. The bullet shattered both his wrists but did not enter his chest. His loyal followers quickly gathered him and rushed him to the surgeon at Fort Snelling. The surgeon claimed he would have to amputate His Red Nation’s hands. The severely wounded chief knew the Dakota would never follow a chief that had no hands, he refused White medicine and instead went back to Kaposia to consult his tribal medicine men. Miraculously enough, the wounds healed. Though he survived, the new chief’s hands and wrists were forever gnarled and disfigured. He had trouble gripping anything without considerable effort and his arms would forever hang

94 Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 35.

95 Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 35.

96 Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 36.
awkwardly when at rest. His Red Nation’s strength, courage, and trust of Indian medicine put him back in favor of his people. He had proven himself, the seat of Band Chief was his alone.97

Shortly after his accession, His Red Nation decided he would change his name. His primary motivation may have been to solidify his place by taking on a famous family name. Or perhaps he wanted to cast aside the reputation attached to the name of His Red Nation. He decided to take the name of his powerful and famous grandfather Čhetáŋ Wakhúwa Mán which translated means “The Bird That Hunts While Walking,” or, more simply, Little Crow.

Little Crow set about to honor his father’s dying wish, and the wild and untamed man he was in his youth disappeared. He became an upstanding and deeply respected chief. He endeavored “to stop whisky drinking, to encourage members of his band to become more industrious and thrifty, and to promote morality among them.”98 When the husbands he had wronged pointed out such seemingly blatant hypocrisy, Little Crow famously responded “I was only a brave then; I am a chief now.”99 If Henry Sibley was the embodiment of the Minnesota Middle Ground in the world of the Whites, Little Crow became so in the world of the Dakota. While he, like most Dakota men, did not convert to Christianity himself, he allowed Dr. Thomas Williamson to build a mission in

97 Schultz, Over the Earth I come, 36-37.
Kaposia. He became a skilled orator and powerful leader, causing a White man who knew him to call him “the greatest man among the chiefs of the Dakotas . . . bold, impassioned, and persuasive, and his arguments are nearly always forcible and logical.”

Little Crow sought to strengthen the bonds between the government agents and the Dakota, while also attempting to calm the growing discontent between “Farmer Indians” and “blanket wearers” (traditionalists who refused to accommodate White farming). Indian Agent Charles Flandreau said of Little Crow, “He was a man of greater parts than any Indian in the tribe. . . . I had used him on many trying occasions, as the captain of my bodyguard, and my ambassador to . . . other tribes. [I] always found him equal to any emergency.”

He attempted to calm the growing discontent between his own people when he cut his hair shoulder-length, a midway point between the cut-hairs and the traditionalists, and became the spokesman for his people in negotiations. Little Crow managed to find a balance between his world and the White world, a powerful force in the mixed Middle Ground. When dealing with the Whites, Little Crow wore a black coat with a velvet collar, sometimes donning a stovepipe hat. In important meetings with Dakota he wore a headdress made of weasel tails, buffalo horns, ribbons and “strings of buckskin tied in knots and colored gaily.”

He understood clearly the position the Dakota were in as the game grew scarcer, as divisions arose, and as White

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settlers kept streamed into the areas around Dakota lands. He and Sibley became friends as Little Crow believed Sibley to be a man of honor and integrity, just as his father had. Traders and the Dakota had formed bonds for hundreds of years that served them well, and there was no overt reason to change that relationship. By 1849 Little Crow become the most powerful chief of the Dakota, despite the fact that Wabasha’s band was bigger. But as the fur trade was in its death throes, Sibley and men like him would destroy what they had spent so long building.

“THINK YOU THEY WILL LIE DOWN AND DIE WITHOUT A STRUGGLE?”

Sibley had worked his way into the political arena by the late 1840s. He went to Washington several times between 1846 and 1848 to lobby for his causes. With the aid of Henry Douglas, Sibley helped to push legislation through Congress and on March 3, 1849 Minnesota officially became a territory.103 Sibley recalled that “I walked that day with the highest head and lightest heart and the freest step and best face of any man in the crowd.”104 The territorial governor was Alex “Bluff Alec” Ramsey, a veteran of partisan politics that had grown surrounding the issue of slavery. Sibley and Ramsey grew to become great friends, despite their political differences. Sibley said he was “a plain, unassuming man of popular manners and much good sense.”105 Sibley quickly got elected as congressional delegate from the new Minnesota Territory, running on a non-


partisan ballot. Much in the same way that Sibley hated the divisions religion created in people, he despised partisan politics. The congress of the 1850s could not have been a worse place for the pragmatist Sibley to be in the coming years, as partisan politics ground Washington to a halt during his tenure there. However, Sibley and Ramsey became a powerful team in Minnesota politics. Sibley represented the old Minnesota, a fur trader and frontiersman who spoke French and Dakota to the old inhabitants of Minnesota. Ramsey represented the new Minnesota, he was a new arrival to the territory himself, having lived in Pennsylvania before his appointment as governor, He spoke German to the giant crowds of western and northern European immigrants were moving to Great Lakes at the time.106

As the settlers poured in and finished off what little game remained in Minnesota, Sibley faced a dilemma. He had become a politician and believed Minnesota should become a state, but he fully understood that his fortune relied on the dying fur trade, and that the fortunes and futures of the people he had come to know as family, the Dakota, also relied on that trade. Sibley was the embodiment of the Middle Ground in many ways and as a result he was torn. On the one hand he knew that the Dakota must be guaranteed a place in Minnesota before settlers did something to provoke war. On the other hand, he knew the fur trade was dying and he would need to find a way out of the business and to settle his debts. Sibley fought in congress desperately to

guarantee Dakota hunting rights and lands as the hunting situation for the Dakota and thus the economic situation for his fur enterprise slumped miserably. In 1850 Sibley received word from his friend Martin McLeod that the hunting season had been the worst of any before. Sibley railed against the government’s refusal to offer aid to the Dakota. He tried to force people to listen when he explained that the treaty of 1837 had only been partially fulfilled. But he was shouting into a vacuum in a Congress that cared only about slavery.

On August 2, 1850 the delegate from the Minnesota Middle Ground waited his turn to speak in Congress. Perhaps he remembered his daughter, his late Indian wife, his hunting trips as Hal, a Dacotah, his good friends Big Thunder, Little Crow, Bad Hail, and others. Perhaps he felt that this would be his last chance to say anything of worth in Washington D.C. Finally his time came to speak and Sibley let fly with every irritation and grievance he could think of. He argued that the only choices the United States was willing to offer the Dakota was the destruction of their culture through “civilization” or “their utter extermination.” He said that in time, memory would “do justice to the heroic bands, who have struggled so fiercely to preserve their lands and the graves of their fathers from the grasping hand of the White man.” He then attacked the treaty making process, and the corruption of the government in failing to honor those treaties:

If the act of making a treaty is not to be looked upon as a mere mockery or a farce, every stipulation and every pledge made . . . should be scrupulously

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107 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 119.

fulfilled . . . on the contrary . . . the commissioners, by making promises which they know will never be performed, plume themselves upon having made a favorable treaty, leaving the poor victims to find out in due time that they have been betrayed and deceived. . . . I will venture the assertion that not one in ten of the treaties made will be found to have been carried out in good faith. ¹⁰⁹

He warned:

If anything is to be done, it must be done now . . . your pioneers are encircling the last home of the red man as with a wall of fire. Their encroachments are perceptible in the restlessness . . . of the powerful bands who inhabit your remote western plains. You must approach these with terms of conciliation and of real friendship or you must very soon suffer the consequences of a bloody and remorseless Indian war. . . . What is to become of [them] . . . when the buffalo and other game on which they now depend for subsistence are exhausted? Think you they will lie down and die without a struggle? ¹¹⁰

He said that there were two options for the Indian people, to give them rights and lands equal to that of the White man or to destroy them completely. The policy of the United States said Sibley was:

One of Injustice, cruelty, treachery, violation of treaties the most sacred, stipulations and promises being regarded as convenient means of public robbery and private fraud, the will of stronger over the rule of action. . . . The red man forced to surrender his possessory rights in immemorial tenures of country endeared by the traditions and graves of his tribe, or bayonetted, rifled, shot, or driven from one so-called “reservation” to another, until, at last, turning enraged on his foe, he sought vengeance and in massacre, crime, and deeds of brutality


for which the government itself, and its horde of vagabond “Indian agents,” worse than the Indians themselves, were alone responsible.\textsuperscript{111}

It was a strong and eloquent speech, but no one listened. Congress could not see past the issue of slavery, even if they were concerned about a race many deemed inferior. After Sibley’s speech in 1850 condemning corrupt treaty making, the government’s policy toward Indians, and the potential consequences of such policy, he nevertheless set in motion the creation of a treaty as corrupt and self-serving as any that came before.

While Sibley was away in Washington during his terms as a delegate, the fur company was collapsing. Officers in the Chouteau Company began withholding trade goods from the Sioux Outfit. To Sibley in a letter, the Company wrote, “The sums standing on the books to the debit of the several outfits up the Mississippi are really enormous—they exceed $400,000!!!”\textsuperscript{112} Sibley knew that the only way to recoup this kind of debt was through a treaty. The terms of the treaty of 1837 were hardly honored, and convincing the Dakota to trust the government might be difficult, he could do it with a little finesse. Sibley quickly began manipulating his relationship with the Dakota chiefs to bring them to the negotiating table. Through these relationships Sibley managed to bring chiefs from all bands to a treaty negotiation in a Sisseton village called \textit{Traverse de Sioux}, and the Mdewakanton village of Mendota. Sibley bragged to the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{111} Oehler, \textit{The Great Sioux Uprising}, 91.
\textsuperscript{112} Gilman, \textit{Henry Hastings Sibley}, 119.
\end{flushright}
Chouteau company that because of his efforts and long-standing ties with the Dakota, that the Chiefs would sign whenever “we tell them to do so” and that he, as a representative of company, would “dictate” the terms of the treaty to aid the traders. The table was set for a treaty to shatter the Minnesota Middle Ground, leaving it a shadow of its former self.

But the fur traders were not the only ones interested in forcing a treaty. Missionaries, much like the rest of America, had changed their tune in regards to civilizing the Dakota. Before this, men like Stephen Riggs believed that proselytizing to the Dakota on their own land would suffice and that the government would not need to be involved to bring the Dakota to Christianity. Riggs, who claimed to be a friend of the Dakota, suddenly backed the idea of this treaty. He no longer believed Indians could “long hold arable land in common” and that the government should “outline a plan for civilizing the Dakotas.” Such a plan, he believed, should “disintegrate them as far as possible” and “encourage them to become thrifty farmers rather than poor villagers.”

The more Jeffersonian version of “civilizing” the Indians had given way, even among the missionaries, to the Jacksonian “removal and civilization” version. Riggs was present at the treaty signing as a translator for the Upper Sioux.

Sibley arrived as a representative of the Fur Company at Traverse de Sioux. The government representative was a new Indian Commissioner named Luke Lea, and the

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Sisseton and Wahpeton were represented by their respective chiefs. The first few days of the treaty with the upper Sioux did not go well, especially when a chief named Sleepy Eyes stood up and walked out of negotiations to the cheers of dozens of young Dakota men. The cheers were interpreted by the American delegation as a bad sign; they planned to leave. The traders explained that the cheers were not because Sleepy Eyes stormed out, but because the young Dakota waiting outside were expecting to play a game of lacrosse when the treaty meeting was over. When Sleepy Eyes left it meant the festivities could begin. The delegation stayed and by the end of the next few days the Sisseton and Wahpeton allowed a Chief named Extended Tail Feathers from Lac qui Parle to represent their interests. The treaty offered the two bands $1.6 million for their lands. The money was to be put into an account with 5% interest and pay the Indians every year from that account the sum of about $68,000 per year for fifty years. The account was never created, nor was it filled with the promised money. Though everything appeared to be above board, after the treaty negotiations officially ended, the fur traders got involved. Traders jumped in and attempted to earmark as much money from the treaty as they could to be paid to the traders directly to make up the Indian’s debts and to give a portion of the money to mixed-race families, many of whom were the families of fur traders. By the time they were done they had convinced several of the chiefs present to sign the new document, which earmarked $210,000 of the

115 Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind, 186.

116 Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind, 186.
treaty money for the traders’ debt and $40,000 for mixed-race peoples.\textsuperscript{117} It was supposed that Riggs would inform the Indians of the treaty they were signing, and that he would explain to the Dakota their “obligation” to pay their debt to the fur traders. Dakota leaders later claimed they believed the “traders’ treaty” they signed was just a third copy of the original treaty, Riggs claimed they knew it wasn’t.\textsuperscript{118} The truth of the matter became a subject of intense debate after the Dakota moved to their reservations and were perpetually harassed about money they supposedly owed to the traders. The treaty created a reservation for the Sisseton and Wahpeton on the upper Minnesota River. Fed by Yellow Medicine Creek, the reservation spread ten miles on either side of the Minnesota River and included the important Dakota land surrounding Lake Traverse.\textsuperscript{119}

The delegation then moved down river to negotiate a treaty with the Mdewekanton and Wahpekute. The Mdewekanton appeared to be the biggest hurdle. While they had grown especially attached to the fur traders, they were also veterans of being duped in treaties. They were the primary recipients of annuities from the 1837 treaty and thus were aware of the government’s track record. This treaty is often overlooked in favor of the larger treaty signed with the upper Sioux bands, but it is just as important. The delegations arrived on the hills overlooking the town of Mendota and

\textsuperscript{117} Anderson, \textit{Kinsmen of Another Kind}, 187.

\textsuperscript{118} Meyer, \textit{History of the Santee Sioux}, 80.

\textsuperscript{119} Anderson, \textit{Kinsmen of Another Kind}, 186.
got negotiations underway. The first day saw little movement as Wabasha took the lead in negotiations, but on the second day Little Crow took over and demanded restitution for broken promises made in the 1837 treaty and money owed under it “We will talk of nothing else but the money, if it is until next Spring,” He said. The fourth day proved to be the last one. The treaty was translated by the missionary Gideon Pond, and Little Crow was invited up to sign the treaty. It was a frightening moment. Unbeknownst to men outside the tribe, many traditionalist Dakota threatened to kill any chief who dared to sign away their lands. Little Crow did not rise when he was invited to and remained deep in thought. A chief named Wacouta rose and said “If all prove true as you say, it will be very good indeed. But when we were at Washington [referring to the 1837 treaty] the chiefs were told many things; which when we came back here, and attempted to carry out, we found could not be done. At the end of three or four years,” he continued, “the Indians found out very different from what they had been told, and all were ashamed.” The back and forth went on for a while, as the traders and government made their points, Little Crow, Wabasha, and Wacouta offered counters. Eventually the room fell silent again and the Americans demanded Little Crow and the chiefs sign. Little Crow waited, perhaps remembering his father’s dying appeal to work with the Whites. He finally rose and said that if any of the men there wished to make good on their threat to kill a chief who signed the treaty, they had better do so now. No

120 Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 82.

one moved. The great chief walked to the table and signed the Treaty of Mendota. It was practically identical to the treaty signed by the upper bands, although the reservation was at a location east of the Yellow Medicine reservation and the sum was lower ($1,410,000). Soon, White settlers would carve up the Dakota homeland. The annual report from the commissioner of Indian affairs calculated the total land purchased in both treaties to be around 35,000,000 acres, and it cost the government a paltry $3,075,000 over the next 50 years to purchase. The report dubbed the treaty to be “most favorable to the United States, while, at the same time . . . just and liberal to the Indians.”

The history of the Minnesota Middle Ground is a history of the fur trade. The fur trade and money it generated protected the Middle Ground from encroaching White settlement. The Dakota maintained their culture and their multi-ethnic society in this protected bubble for 200 years, In essence, because of the fur trade, the advancing and increasingly racist policy of the United States was held at bay in favor of a world of mutual accommodation and economic gain. It is no surprise, then, that as the fur trade weakened, so too did the Middle Ground. As the furs became scarcer, Indian debt grew, and as Indian debt grew, the fur traders in the region helped push a treaty selling


Dakota land in return for payment of their debt. The fur companies acted as the factory system in the private sector. Becoming farmers was out of the question for most of the Dakota as their notions of masculinity forbade it. Converting to Christianity and its idea of “Grand Christian Civilization” was not an option for most either. But some did become farmers, some did become Christians, and the growing discontent among the tribes about these divisions between traditionalist “Blanket Indians” and accommodationist “Cut-Hairs” grew. Great chiefs like Little Crow sought to hold their people together by finding a balance in the middle of these divides and strengthening his connections to the fur traders, a relationship on which the Middle Ground was built. By 1850, the fur trade was nearly gone and along with it, the Minnesota Middle Ground. Sibley, the man who had done more than any other to build it, to nurture it, and to base his own life on it, was the man who set its eventual destruction in motion in 1851. He would have to deal with the repercussions of his treachery in 1862. The Jeffersonian ideal of “civilizing” the Indians was still strong, though it had taken on the tenor of racism inherent in Jacksonian Democrats. Civilizing the Indians was still deemed possible in Jacksonian America, but removal of Indians from White society either onto reservations or out into the unorganized territories was now seen as a necessity for that civilization to take place. The treaties of Traverse de Sioux and Mendota, bent on civilizing the Dakota even while they insisted the necessity of removal, signaled the first overt and devastating blow to that Middle Ground.
While Richard White claimed that the Middle Ground of the *Pays d’en Haut* died with Tecumseh in 1813, the vibrant and sprawling Middle Ground in the Minnesota Great Lakes region existed for forty years longer. It died not with Tecumseh in 1813, but instead with Little Crow in 1862. But the Minnesota Middle Ground was not the only casualty of the 1862 conflict, the idea of Indian “civilization,” in both its Jeffersonian and Jacksonian variants, would die entirely in the aftermath of the conflict.
CHAPTER IV

“SURROUND US WITH SOLDIERS AND SHOOT US DOWN”

The treaties signaled the end of an era. But while the Dakota still clung to the idea of the Middle Ground, they did not expect relations with Whites and traders to change so dramatically once they moved to the reservations. The Dakota were wrong in their assumption, their relationships with Whites and mixed-race people did change from 1851-1862. The most important relationship that collapsed was the relationship between the Dakota hunters and the White and mixed-race traders. For centuries that relationship held the two cultures together, on the reservation it fell apart. Without that relationship the Middle Ground was no more. After more than a decade of mistreatment on the reservation, the collapse of that fundamental relationship, and the internal divides it caused between bands, the Dakota lashed out. For more than a month in 1862 they attacked nearby White and mixed-race people in a war known as The Dakota Conflict. The uprising was put down by Henry Sibley. He quickly punished those that surrendered to him, and organized a kangaroo court to judge Dakota warriors for their involvement in the violence. The trials ended with death sentences for 303 Dakota warriors, thirty-eight of whom were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota in December of 1862. The Dakota were then forced out of Minnesota, onto reservations or prison camps in neighboring states. The collapse of the Great Lakes Middle Ground that had existed for decades longer than Richard White claimed it did, came with the brutal ethnic cleansing of Minnesota.
After the treaties were signed the four Dakota bands began their migration toward their new reservations. The two reservations were technically separated just south of the Yellow Medicine River, but it was in reality one contiguous landmass, stretching 140 miles along the Minnesota River and ending at Big Stone Lake. An Indian Agency was constructed on the Lower Sioux reservation next to the Redwood River, as such the agency was usually referred to as the Redwood Agency. The Upper Sioux Agency was built on the Yellow Medicine River and it was then referred to as the Yellow Medicine Agency.¹ The agencies were equipped with storehouses to hold the food and cash annuity payments when they arrived. It also housed the Indian agents and some soldiers who were charged with handing out the annuities when they arrived. While many Dakota knew they would have to move to the reservations, many of them had not supported the treaty and were emotionally devastated by it. Wabasha expressed to Stephen Riggs after learning that the treaty had been modified by the traders, “There is one thing more which our great father can do” he said, “gather us all together on the prairie and surround us with soldiers and shoot us down.”² Wabasha was not alone in his apprehension; Sibley had forewarned congress about such reckless treaties. He knew well what would become of the Dakota if such a treaty were forced upon them. But Sibley had worked for years in the fur trade only to find himself in insurmountable debt. He also had political aspirations separate from his life among the Dakota and the fur


² Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 131.
trade. His career and political aspirations were too much to throw away, in his mind, in favor of his Dakota friends. Hercules Dousman, too, understood what the true cost of the treaty would be, “The Sioux treaty will hang like a curse over our heads the balance of our lives.”

While Sibley continued to build his political career both in Minnesota and in Washington through the 1850s, the Dakota chiefs attempted to adjust. The Sisseton and Wahpeton settled their villages around the Yellow Medicine Agency. The most influential of the Sisseton Chiefs was Standing Buffalo. Sickened by the dubious dealings of the government, the role the traders played in the treaty, and the altogether unpleasantness of dealing with the Whites in recent years, Standing Buffalo moved his band to the very outskirts of the reservation and hunted buffalo in Dakota Territory, rather than relying on the annuities or whims of the Whites. As such, Standing Buffalo could afford to stay out of affairs with the Whites in the future. The Mdewekanton chiefs Big Eagle, Little Crow, Mankato, and Traveling Hail moved their bands close to the Redwood Agency. Villages sprouted up around these two agencies complete with sawyers, teachers, missionaries, traders and, of course, the Indian agents. A well-respected chief named Old Shakopee settled above the agency. A splinter group under a would-be chief and brother to Old Shakopee named Red Middle Voice moved his small

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band farther away from the agency at Rice Creek. Red Middle Voice was absolutely furious about the treaty and, despite his very limited status within the tribe, played a major role in the coming conflict. While the Dakota settled in, they found the reality of reservation life to be very difficult. The White men flooding onto their lands were not the same type as the ones who had usually moved to the Minnesota Middle Ground in the previous two centuries.

“It [the treaty] caused us all to move to the south side of the river, where there was but very little game, and many of our people, under the treaty, were induced to give up the old life and to work like White men, which was very distasteful to many,” explained Chief Big Eagle to the members of a hastily assembled kangaroo court in 1862. He continued, “Then the Whites were always trying to make the Indians give up their life and live like the White men—go to farming, work hard and do as they did—and the Indians did not know how to do that, and did not want to anyway.” He explained that the Middle Ground produced by the fur trade had been their way of life, the Dakota did not want their lives to change because of the treaty. “If the Indians had tried to make the Whites live like them, the Whites would have resisted, and it was the same way with


the Indians,” Big Eagle said. “The Indians wanted to live as they did before the treaty . . .
go where they pleased . . . hunt game . . . sell their furs to the traders and live as they could.” He explained that the White men moving into the area around the Redwood Agency “often abused the Indians and treated them unkindly. . . . Many of the Whites always seemed to say by their manner when they saw an Indian ‘I am much better than you,’ and the Indians did not like this.” The Dakota had not met many Whites in their old Middle Ground who looked at them as though they were animals, “The Dakotas” he said “did not believe there were better men in the world than they. Then some of the White men abused the Indian women . . . there was no excuse for that.” These were the Dakota’s first encounters with White men who were there not for the fur trade or as representatives of the government, nor to ingratiate themselves to the Dakota, as those that used to settle in the area had. The racism of these new Whites was clear and startling to the Dakota. Nevertheless, several chiefs tried to adjust to their new world by accommodating the Whites and vowing to live the White man’s way.

Chief Wabasha explained to the same 1862 kangaroo court that he had tried to do what the White men told him was best for his people, “I told the commandant at the fort [Fort Ridgely] that I wished him to write a nice letter for us.” The letter was

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intended for the Great Father back in Washington. Wabasha wanted the letter to explain that “I had always been brought up as an Indian” and that “[I] had worn a blanket and a feather, painted my face and carried a gun . . . I had determined to leave off these things.” He implored the soldier to tell the Great Father that “I am determined to leave the war path, and to leave off drinking whisky, and give up plundering and thieving, and I want you to give me your ways . . . your people obtain land and hold it . . . I wish to give my people land where they do the same.”¹⁰ Not long after dispatching the letter, one arrived back from Washington inviting Wabasha to speak to the President. He recalled that the President wrote that “he wished us to be well off, but that the Whites would endeavor to get this land from us, and that the traders were like rats, that they would use all their endeavors to steal our substance, and if we were wise, we would never sign a paper for anyone.”¹¹ Whether or not the President actually said this, Wabasha recalled it happening, and the description of the traders as “like rats” was not too far from the truth. Little Crow, too, announced his intent to give the White man’s way a try, much to the chagrin of many of his young military-age men. The Indian agents provided a two-story wood frame house for Little Crow to live in. As Big Eagle said, it was often the case that “the ‘farmers’ were favored by the government in every


way. They had houses built for them, some of them even had brick houses, and they were not allowed to suffer.” But Little Crow was always looking to strike a balance between White and Dakota ways. He perched his tepee on the front lawn of his new house. Chiefs like Big Eagle, Wabasha, and Little Crow took the farming path in an effort to help their people, but despite their efforts to accommodate their White neighbors, the traders were constantly pestering the Dakota about the debts they supposedly owed “My chief desire . . . was to have land. The traders were constantly following me for other purposes, and opposing me bitterly.” Wabasha testified. The “other purposes” were attempts by the traders to force the Dakota to sign more paperwork admitting their debt. Wabasha had taken the President’s advice and refused to sign them. “I always refused to sign papers for the traders, and they therefore hated me,” he recalled.

The fundamental relationship between Dakota and trader that had so long preserved the Middle Ground, was now one of the sources of its greatest troubles. These were not the fur traders of years past. All the traders now wanted was the bulk of


the Dakota’s annuity payments. This was more than a mere paradigm shift in the relationship between the Dakota and traders, though. The Dakota’s culture was based on acquiring larger and better kin networks, and so had the relationship between the Dakota and the traders for the previous 200 years been. The change in the relationship was the utter collapse of kinship networks that had combined White and Dakota society and held the Middle Ground together for centuries. Instead of the allies they had always been, the traders became bitter enemies of the Dakota, and accomplices to the corruption of government agents.

The government agents operating in the Northern Superintendency (which included the Dakota) reported back to Washington that their glorious cause was “to maintain a strict and exact fulfillment of its stipulated faith, and at the same time to observe a paternal care in promoting the permanent good and welfare of the Indians.”15 Through the payment of annuities the Dakota would be brought to “civilization.” Once the Dakota had been forced onto reservations, they would have no choice but to use the money they received in annuities to set up farms and live like Whites. Just as the Europeans’ savage ancestors had done, they, too, would progress toward civilization. The agents reported in 1858 that regrettably this plan of action had been unsuccessful because:

In closely observing the effect of payment of large amounts of money as annuities to Indians, the invariable conclusion will be attained that payments in

that form are not productive of a rapid advancement in civilization. The Indians, not understanding or appreciating any of the common principles of thrift or economy, scarcely ever look to the payment of annuities for the purpose of receiving money for their support and maintenance; though avariciously eager to receive their capita allowance, yet it is but a brief period of time before it has passed away; it is either consumed by the ‘past credits’ of the trader, or, should they refuse to pay their debts, their cupidity for baubles and useless articles is tempted. 16

The report echoed the wishes of Stephen Riggs, who argued that the Dakota governments should be dissolved because “the centralizing influence of tribal organization militates against the progress of Indians in civilization and the pursuits of agricultural life.” 17 The report made no mention of traders constantly harassing Dakota about money or debts owed. It also conspicuously left out the corruption of their own agents.

The first Indian agent sent to the Redwood Agency and thus in charge of both the Redwood and Yellow Medicine agencies was Robert G. Murphy. Like all agents, he was a political appointee hardly suited to take over an operation that required finesse and local knowledge in overseeing more than 5,000 Indians. The agencies were provided with federal money to help the Dakota along their path to “civilization,” earmarked to buy things like flour, seed, and tools. Bureaucrats conspired to milk the federal


government for all it was worth. They often selected the highest bidder instead of the lowest for flour contracts, taking a cut off the top for themselves.\textsuperscript{18} Agents like Murphy thus had few supplies to aid the Dakota in setting up their new farms. Even if Murphy had the funds and could somehow get around the corruption, he hardly applied himself to the task. He forgot to order seed for crops in 1854, causing the Dakota farmlands to remain fallow all through the summer.\textsuperscript{19} As if his ineptitude were not enough, Murphy was also rarely even at the Redwood or Yellow Medicine agencies, preferring to spend time on his farm in Illinois. He was gone so long that on several occasions the food annuity he was supposed to distribute to the Dakota spoiled. When the other annuity shipment arrived in October, it contained much less food than it was supposed to. Murphy decided to hand out the spoiled food to the Dakota instead of their expected annuity, causing dysentery to break out on the reservation. Murphy, then gathered his own beef and flour from his farm in Illinois and sold it to the Dakotas for 15 cents per pound.\textsuperscript{20} The Dakota’s resentment quickly grew towards agents like Murphy and the government in general for obviously failing to live up to their ends of the treaty. One official wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs “The commissioner will not fail to observe that these Indians have been told again and again the amount their Great Father was to give them for farms, schools, mills, &c., annually. They know it all, they

\textsuperscript{18} Anderson, \textit{Kinsmen of Another Kind}, 206.

\textsuperscript{19} Anderson, \textit{Kinsmen of Another Kind}, 207.

\textsuperscript{20} Anderson, \textit{Kinsmen of Another Kind}, 208.
can recapitulate almost every appropriation on the treaty.” The commissioner responded, “If the interests of the Indians have not been fully promoted . . . I am unable to perceive that any blame attaches to this office.”21 While corruption was rampant from top to bottom, from commissioner to lowly agent, the Dakota grew more and more furious with the Indian agents. The agents’ ineptitude and corruption prevented the very thing those agents were supposedly there to do, “civilize” the Dakota. The annuities that did show up were always less than they were supposed to be, and often rotten. The traders always managed to pilfer “their” portion of cash annuities before they reached the Indians, and the chiefs, despite their best efforts, were held responsible in the eyes of many Dakota for having signed the treaties and trusting the agents in the first place. Even when the annuities did arrive in full, the Dakota were usually the last to be considered when the agents handed out money. As historian C.M. Oehler explained, the delivery of annuity payments was often followed by chaos:

Whenever annuities or any other fund were to be paid, a yelling swarm of traders, fur company representatives, half-breeds, lobbyists, advisers, ex-agents, and petty opportunists appeared, demanding part or all of the money . . . and nobody, least of all the Indians, could produce any record to prove otherwise.22

The Dakota were assaulted on all fronts by a White society that at best no longer needed them, or at worst, vehemently hated them. They grew furious as more and more of their annuities were stripped away before their eyes by throngs of Whites. The

21 Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind, 212.

Dakotas’ fury was not directed at the Indian agents, traders, mixed-bloods, and other swindlers only, but also at one another. Pre-existing divisions within the bands began to grow in the 1850s.

The division among the Dakota was not simply a division between accommodationist farming Indians and traditional Indians. There were several facets to this division. Typically, older Dakota were more inclined to become farmer Indians. Many of the older Dakota, having grown up in the 1830s, had been afforded opportunity to achieve status in the tribe. They had reputations as great hunters and courageous warriors. They had, in other words, proven themselves in the kinship-based society that predicated masculinity on those two roles. The chiefs were members of this group for those reasons, but they had had another reason to accommodate Whites. Their knowledge of the strength of the United States. Chiefs like Wabasha, Little Crow, and Big Eagle had been to Washington, had passed over the thousands of miles of White America, had seen the major cities, and had viewed the military strength a nation of such grandiose size could muster. Even if the older Indians and Chiefs wanted to resist White encroachment and oppression, they knew what lay beyond their forests and lakes was a force too strong, a population too large, to be defeated. Younger Dakota on the other hand, coming of age in the 1850s, had only ever known their cowed status on the reservation. Much of the game was gone by the time they were of hunting age, and their traditional enemies in neighboring tribes like the Chippewa or the Sac and Fox were beyond their reach. It became more and more difficult to organize war parties
against them. The younger generation of Dakotas, in other words, did not have the same opportunities as the older generation to prove themselves, nor had they any real understanding of the size and power of the United States. This divide, then, was both cultural and generational. The young generation did not want to adapt to the White man’s ways. They wanted to maintain their own culture and prove themselves within it. The older generation had already done so, and knew what awaited them if they did not bend, at least somewhat, to the will of the Whites.

Unfortunately for the older generation and farming Indians, they were vastly outnumbered by the younger generation. Adding to the growing rift between the two groups was the preferential treatment the farmer Indians received from the agents. As Big Eagle illustrated, the farmer Indians were given houses and money funded not by annuity money from the separate civilization fund. The Dakota who refused to farm were not given those things.\(^{23}\) Despite the best efforts of the chiefs, missionaries, and others to promote the virtues of civilization and farming, only one in every ten Dakota families became a farmer. The traditional Dakota remained the vast majority. The chiefs drew the ire of their traditional children, and Big Eagle described the shift in power that resulted:

Some of the Indians took a sensible course and began to live like White men. The government built them houses, furnished them tools, seed, etc., and taught them to farm. . . . Others staid in their tepees. There was a White Man’s party and an Indian party. A new chief speaker for the tribe was to be elected. There were three candidates—Little Crow, myself, and . . . Traveling Hail. After an exciting contest Traveling Hail was elected. Little Crow felt sore over his defeat. Many of our tribe blamed him for the sale. . . . Many Whites think that Little Crow was the principal chief of the Dakotas at this time, but he was not. Wabasha was the principal chief, and was of the White man’s party; so was I; so was Old Shakopee, whose band was very large. 24

Little Crow returned to his home with his band near the Redwood agency after suffering a humiliating defeat in the election. Choosing the White man’s ways, it appeared, had not worked to his benefit. The majority of the tribe moved away from the idea of civilization, the kinship bonds that had tied White and Indian society together dissolved. The traders and agents conspired to rob the Dakota blind, and the wild game that the Dakota had subsisted on since time immemorial disappeared. The overwhelming majority of traditional Dakota were simmering, and they formed a soldiers’ lodge at Rice Creek.

Traditionally, soldiers’ lodges existed outside the authority of any chief. That is not to say that chiefs could not be members of particular lodges. Usually a soldiers’ lodge was formed after a chief was deposed or died. The lodge was home to the warriors of a tribe who governed until a new chief was selected from their midst or

inherited the title.\textsuperscript{25} The soldiers’ lodge formed at Rice Creek was peculiar in the sense that it formed without the usual prerequisite death or failure of a chief. Even chiefs as respected as Big Eagle were kept out of the loop: “I have heard that there was a secret organization of the Indians called the ‘Soldiers’ Lodge,’ whose object it was to declare war against the Whites, but I knew nothing of it.”\textsuperscript{26} The Rice Creek soldiers’ lodge was not initially a place to declare war on the Whites, but instead it was a venue for the traditional Dakota to air their grievances. They lamented the loss of their land in the treaties of \textit{Traverse de Sioux} and Mendota, cursed the traders and their mixed-blood middle men along with the soldiers at the forts and the Indian agents. While the Sisseton and Wahpeton on the upper reservation had their problems, they were not nearly as severe as those faced by the Wahpekute and Medekanton on the lower reservation. The upper reservation pushed up against Dakota Territory where hunting was still a viable option, and thus the reliance on annuity payments was less dire. The theft of those annuity payments by traders and agents and others was less of a concern. They also took to farming on a larger scale than their counterparts on the lower reservation. Those problems of little concern on the upper reservation were of paramount importance on the lower reservation. The Rice Creek soldiers’ lodge gave voice to the frustration those problems caused. It was initially a relatively small

\textsuperscript{25} Oehler, \textit{The Great Sioux Uprising}, 25.

movement until, in 1861 an even more incompetent Indian agent arrived. The soldiers
lodge Began to gather supporters from all corners of the Lower reservation.

“TAOYATEDUTA IS NOT A COWARD!”

“GLORIOUS NEWS! MINNESOTA A STATE!”27 Read the Winona Times In May of
1858 as the United States accepted its 32
nd daughter into the family. The state derived its name from the Dakota word for “clear blue water.” Forty-seven-year-old Henry
Hastings Sibley, a Democrat in name only, became its first governor, having defeated his former friend turned political rival Alex Ramsey for the position. Just as the name of the state was derived from the Dakota language, the people of Minnesota had elected a man who made a name for himself in the Minnesota Middle Ground to be their first governor. They then chose a state seal to go with their Dakota name and former fur
-merchant Governor, a seal that would further reflect the Minnesota Middle Ground. The state seal featured a White farmer in the foreground assiduously tending to his crops with hoe in hand. In the background sits a Dakota warrior on horseback, spear in hand. The two appear to be greeting one another in passing, as the sun rises behind the hills and a creek gurgles by the farmers land. The symbol could not be a more clear reference to the thriving Middle Ground that had existed there. But it also foreshadowed the trouble that was brewing between those cultures. The farmer in the foreground and Dakota in the background were clear images of the two distinct cultures that had once

27 Gilman, Henry Hastings Sibley, 156.
been held together by the fur trade. In 1858, that distinction was still present, though now lacking the fur trade to bind the two together.

On September 1, 1859, Sibley rode into the streets of the capital city of St. Paul, in a parade celebrating the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable. In front of Sibley was a carriage carrying young girls, one of whom was Helen Hastings, his mixed-race daughter. Though he could not openly claim her as his, it was common knowledge in the town that she was the governor’s daughter. Helen was a symbol of the changing of Minnesota. Whereas a relationship like the one she shared with her White father was once common in that area, the influx of White settlers after the treaties in 1851 meant that relationships like theirs were no longer common, now seen as relics of the past. In fact, many in this new Minnesota saw relationships like theirs as unnatural. Sibley was very conscious of this, and though he loved his daughter and went to great lengths to make sure she was taken care of, he was always careful not to be seen with her in public. The treaties he helped force through in 1851 caused an influx of White settlers who saw his relationship to the Dakota, the very relationship that made those treaties possible in the first place, as something to be despised.

In 1850 the Minnesota Territory had a population of around 6,000 White men. By 1857 the White population of Minnesota had rocketed to nearly 200,000 White inhabitants. Many of the settlers that swarmed onto what used to be Dakota land

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28 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 13-14.

29 Kohn, Dakota Child, Governor’s Daughter, 15.
proceeded to cut down the trees, rip up the soil, kill the animals, and build farms. Who were these people? The Dakota must have asked. Many of them did not speak the languages of the Whites the Dakota had come to know. The settlers, were in fact, primarily German or Scandinavian immigrants. The Dakota immediately loathed these newcomers and referred to them as *eyasica*, or “bad speakers,” a reference to their language. The differences between Swedish, Norwegian, or German were lost on the Dakota, who simply referred to them derisively as “Dutchmen.” The term was quickly applied not just to the Germans or Scandinavians, but also to the farmer Indians. The new immigrants were no kinder to the Dakota, as they refused to share food or learn the Dakota language. In the kinship based society of the Dakota, refusal to share wealth or become fictive kin was a great insult.

The immigrants shrugged off their Indian neighbors and quickly set up towns throughout the newly acquired land, the most impressive of which was an all-German town called New Ulm located just a few miles from Fort Ridgely and right outside the border of the Lower reservation. Among the influx of new settlers was an Episcopal bishop named Henry Benjamin Whipple. He arrived in Minnesota in 1859 and quickly took an interest in the Indians living on the reservations. He was thoroughly disgusted by the mistreatment of the Dakota and the almost shameless corruption of the agents,

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traders, and mixed-bloods. Historian William Watts Folwell described how Bishop Whipple “soon became satisfied that much of their [the Dakota] wretchedness was chargeable to the indifference, not to say rascality, of White men.” Bishop Whipple was in the minority, however, as the mistreatment of the Indians continued through to the early 1860s.

The situation had become dire for the Dakota. Settlers poured onto what had once been their land. The tribe itself was divided between farmers and traditionalists, between older and younger. The traders and Indian agents took advantage of their positions and abused their power to steal the Dakota’s already meager annuity and food payments. Soldiers’ lodges had been erected to voice discontent, and the relationships that had held the White and Indian society together had dissolved. The spark in the powder keg came in the form of an Indian agent named Thomas Galbraith and a trader at the Redwood Agency named Andrew Myrick.

My old Father, we have called upon you; we love you; we respect you. Our old chiefs are all gone. We don’t know what to do. They want us to divide our lands and live like White people. Since you left us, a dark cloud has hung over our nation. We have lost confidence in the promises of our Great Father and his people. Bad men have nearly destroyed us . . . I loved you from my youth . . . and my nation will never forget you. If ever we act foolish and do wrong, it is because you are not with us.34


34 Schultz, Over the Earth I come, 23.
This sad letter was written by Little Crow in 1861 to the former Indian Agent Taliaferro.

“Since you left we have had five agents,” he continued, “We failed to get a friend in any one like you; they all joined the traders. We know your heart. It feels for your children.”

Taliaferro had been a friend to them in the past, and compared to the agent they were cursed with in 1861, Taliaferro was a saint. Agent Thomas Galbraith lived with his family at the Yellow Medicine Agency. Men who knew him saw him as unstable, arrogant, and a drunk. When he arrived at the Agency in 1861, a rumor began circulating that the annuity payments would not be coming, and panic spread quickly among the Dakota. Galbraith brushed off the worry and insisted the rumors had been spread by “rebel emissaries” of the Civil War that had begun earlier that year. He clearly did not understand the complex political situation he found himself in.

He promised the Dakota their annuity payment would arrive on July 14, but then refused to release the payment because only provisions had come, not money. It was protocol to release the food only after the money arrived to pay the Dakotas debt to the traders. The Dakota were near starvation, as so few of them had become farmers and game was almost nonexistent for the hunters. “There were several of us [who] went over to the Yellow Medicine Agency because we had no food. . . . Our agent [Thomas J. Galbraith] was up there at the time . . . they had no food among the Indians,” recalled Robert Hawkewaste, a member of Little Crow’s band. When Galbraith and a few soldiers


refused to hand out the food until the cash payment arrived, the Indians charged the agency, pushing aside the soldiers. Galbraith hid in his house, and it was left to an army officer named Sheehan to promise the Dakota there was food at the Redwood Agency. Sheehan let the Dakota carry out just enough food to calm them. But when the Dakota returned to the Redwood Agency “they didn’t give us food as promised—the agent did not give us food as he promised.”37 Though this particular incident stopped short of bloodshed, Galbraith’s ineptitude and cowardice showed through. The next time he fell short of honor, the price was far more severe.

The incident at the Yellow Medicine Agency convinced Galbraith that he needed to call a council between the Dakota and the traders to attempt to settle their grievances. On August 14-15, 1862 the Dakota leaders sat down with the traders and explained their plight. The traders countered by saying the Indians owed them money and they would receive nothing from the stores on credit until the annuity payment arrived in full. When the Dakota insisted they were starving, Andrew Myrick, a trader at the Redwood Agency, rose and shouted a phrase that would resonate with the Dakota: “So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass.”38 After a moment of silence and disbelief the Dakota broke into war whoops before storming out of the meeting. The soldiers’ lodge gained many new followers that day in the wake of


38 Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind, 250.
Myrick’s statement. Many of the Dakota were beginning to feel it was time for war, not just because of the grievous mistreatment, but also because “the war with the South was going on then, and a great many men had left . . . and gone down to there to fight . . .

. Galbraith . . . recruited a company of soldiers to go South. His men were nearly all half-breeds. This was the company called the Renville Rangers . . . mostly from Renville County,”39 recalled Big Eagle. “It began to be whispered about that now would be a good time to go to war with the Whites and get back the lands.”40 By the evening of Sunday, August 17, the soldiers’ lodge was full of warriors shouting about Myrick’s statement, about the traders, Galbraith, their hunger, their mistreatment, the “cut-hairs” and “Dutchmen,” the lack of game, and the farmer Indians’ preferential treatment. But without the support of any of the powerful chiefs they could not hope to rally enough warriors to turn their complaints into actions. Little did they know that earlier that morning, four young Wahpeton men, two of whom were members of the lodge, had emerged from the Big Woods and crossed in front of Robinson Jones’ farm.

As the four walked toward Robinson Jones’ farm, their stomachs rumbled. It had been another unsuccessful hunting trip in a long string of the same. Not only were they hungry, but an unsuccessful hunting trip reflected poorly on their manliness, (certainly,


in their minds, real men would have brought something back to eat.) They were
humiliated and saw the settler’s fence, his farm, all perched on the land they so recently
called home. “They all went to the house of the White man . . . but he got alarmed and
went to another house [that of his son-in-law, Howard Baker], where there were some
other White men and women,” explained Big Eagle, who heard the story from the four
men themselves. “The four Indians followed them and killed three men and two women
[Jones, Baker, a Mr. Webster, Mrs. Jones, and a girl of fourteen].”41 The four then
soaked in the blood of their victims, stole some horses and raced as quickly as they
could back to Rice Creek, home of the lodge, Red Middle Voice, and Little Shakopee (son
of Old Shakopee, who died the previous year). “The tale told by the young men created
the greatest excitement. Everybody was waked up to hear it,”42 said Big Eagle. Red
Middle Voice and his nephew, Little Shakopee, listened to their story intently. Red
Middle Voice had wanted a war with the Whites for some time. Little Shakopee took
after his uncle more than his father and he, too, desired war. They knew they would not
be able to rally support themselves. Red Middle Voice was hardly considered a chief by
many Dakota, and Little Shakopee was young, barely a chief even for a year. No one
would follow him. Big Eagle and Wabasha had always been friends to the Whites. Little

Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society

42 Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., “Big Eagle’s Account,” in Through Dakota
Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society
Crow had recently lost the election as speaker to Travelling Hail, due to his support for the treaties. On the other hand, though he had supported the Whites, he never gave up his Dakota religion. Little Crow was certainly capable as a warrior and strategist, and well-respected. If they could pull Little Crow into their camp, the war was on. “Let us go see Little Crow,” insisted Shakopee. Red Middle Voice and Shakopee raced to Redwood, with Wabasha and Big Eagle close behind.

The chiefs and their hundred plus warriors arrived at Little Crow’s village in the middle of the night, awakening Little Crow as they walked through his door. The chiefs and the four Indians who killed the Whites explained their story. “Why do you come to me for advice?” asked Little Crow. “Little Crow is the Greatest among the Chiefs, where he leads all others will follow,” replied Red Middle Voice. Little Crow insisted that Red Middle Voice and Shakopee were fools for insisting on war. Shakopee responded “The traders put up signs saying they will sell nothing to Dakotas on credit. They say if the Dakotas are hungry they can eat grass. . . . The annuity does not come, some say it will never come . . . If it does, the White man will say it is his and take it away.” Red Middle Voice added “All the White soldiers are in the South fighting other White soldiers, the Americans are so hard pressed, the agent must take half-breeds . . . from the reservation to help them.” Big Eagle and Wabasha offered counter-points to their

43 Schultz, Over the Earth I come, 32.
44 Schultz, Over the Earth I come, 39.
45 Schultz, Over the Earth I come, 40.
arguments. Little Crow listened to the two sides argue as he blackened his face and covered his head, a traditional sign of mourning or sadness. On one side of the room stood Wabasha and Big Eagle insisting on peace, and on the other stood Red Middle Voice and Shakopee insisting the time for bloodshed had come. Little Crow must have weighed his options. He needed only to look at his own mangled hands to remember the price he had paid in blood and pain to achieve the status of Chief. He must have looked around his two-story house with the tepee out front, a symbol of how hard he had worked to maintain his people’s peace with the Whites. He must have thought about the more than one hundred warriors standing outside. A vexing decision lay before the “greatest among the chiefs.” Red Middle Voice turned and saw that Little Crow had covered his head, he called the great chief a coward. Little Crow’s eyes widened. Mustering all the strength in his crippled right hand, he struck Red Middle Voice, knocking the insolent man’s feathered headdress to the floor.46 “Taoyateduta is not a coward, and he is not a fool!” he cried.

When did he run from his enemies? When did he leave his braves behind him on the war path and turn back to his teepees? When he ran away from your enemies, he walked behind on your trail with his face to the Ojibways and covered your backs as a she-bear covers her cubs! Is Taoyateduta without scalps? Look at his war-feathers! Behold the scalp-locks of your enemies hanging there on his lodge poles! Do they call him a coward? . . . Braves, you are like little children; you know not what you are doing.47


The chief set about tearing apart Shakopee and Red Middle Voice’s arguments piece by piece. Little Crow of course, was aware of the power of the United States:

You are full of the White man’s devil water (rum). You are like dogs in the Hot Moon when they run mad and snap at their own shadows. We are only little herds of buffaloes left scattered; the great herds that once covered the prairies are no more. See—the White men are like the locusts when they fly so thick the whole sky is a snow-storm. . . . Kill one—two—ten, and ten times ten will come to kill you. Count your fingers all day long and White men with guns in their hands will come faster than you can count.48

As for the argument that the Civil War had drained the area of White soldiers:

Yes; they fight among themselves—away off. Do you hear the thunder of their big guns? No; it would take you two moons to run down to where they are fighting, and all the way your path would be among White soldiers as thick as tamaracks in the swamps of the Ojibways. Yes; they fight among themselves, but if you strike at them they will all turn on you and devour you and your women and little children.49

The chief knew that all this was true, but he also knew that White blood had been spilled. As Big Eagle said, “Blood had been shed, the payment would be stopped, and the Whites would take a dreadful vengeance because women had been killed.”50 Little Crow then ended his speech:


You are fools. You cannot see the face of your chief. . . . You cannot hear his voice. . . . Braves you are little children—you are fools. You will die like the rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the hard moon (January). [But] Taoyateduta is not a coward: he will die with you.\footnote{Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., “Big Eagle’s Account,” in \textit{Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862} (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 36.}

The declaration was met with cheers from the warriors outside, and Wabasha and Big Eagle had no choice but to go along with a course of action they clearly didn’t agree with. “Wabasha, Wacouta, myself and others still talked for peace, but nobody would listen to us, and soon the cry was ‘Kill the Whites and kill all these cut-hairs who will not join us.’ . . . Parties formed and dashed away in the darkness to kill settlers. The women began to run bullets and the men to clean their guns,” recalled Big Eagle.\footnote{Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., “Little Crow’s Speech,” in \textit{Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862} (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 42.}

As the sun set on August 17, 1862 everything seemed to be going as it always had at the Redwood Agency. The Whites and mixed-bloods at the Agency locked their stores, put their children to bed, and went about their business. Not one of them had the faintest idea that the Dakota were cleaning their rifles, readying their horses, and painting their faces in preparation for their assault. As the sun rose on August 18, 1862, what little may have still remained of the Minnesota Middle Ground was washed away in rivers of blood.

“MYRICK IS EATING GRASS HIMSELF”

While the Dakota Conflict of 1862 was a war with several large pitched battles between White American soldiers and Dakota warriors, the accounts of the battles and strategy are less important than the captivity narratives and remembrances of those who lived through the bloodshed. As brutal as the conflict was, it also showed that the Middle Ground that existed in Minnesota for so long forced the violence to be filtered through the existing kinship networks born from that Middle Ground. What this means is that even though the rallying cry was to kill all the Whites and mixed-bloods, along with the full-blood farmer Indians. The Dakota warriors did not kill all Whites they found, they did not kill all the mixed-bloods they found, and they did not kill all the cut-hairs they found. Instead the captivity narratives and first-hand accounts reveal a much more complicated method of deciding who lived and who died. Big Eagle described his role in the assault on the Redwood agency, “I did not lead my band, and I took no part in the killing. I went to save the lives of two particular friends if I could. I think others went for the same reason, for nearly every Indian had a friend that he did not want killed; of course he did not care about anybody else [sic] friend.”\textsuperscript{53} The friends he was referring to were often more than that: they were members of the extended kinship network that had been built and nurtured for centuries in the Middle Ground. The narratives give a firsthand view of the ways in which the Dakota filtered who deserved to live and who

deserved to die. They also show that the Dakota were in no way ever truly in agreement about the war. Even if particular Indians or entire bands had taken no part in the killing of Whites, however, they were not exempted from the wrath of a racist nation after the conflict ended. While there was rarely consensus on who deserved to die, there is an exception to every rule. That exception was Andrew Myrick.

Little Crow led his warriors in a long line into and around the Redwood Agency, a procession that a 14 year-old Celia Campbell Stay said resembled a boa constrictor. Celia’s father was a mixed-race man named Antoine Joseph who worked as a clerk in one of Andrew Myrick’s stores. Antoine was at the store waiting for him to wake up when the Dakota descended on the store looking for him. Celia recalled that a Dakota warrior leveled a gun at her father’s chest. But eight friendly Dakota rode up on horseback and ordered the threatening Dakota to put his rifle down. Among the eight were “Iron Elk and his nephew Chattan . . . and Chattan’s brother Chaska . . . these eight were related by blood to [my] Grandfather Scott Campbell,” recalled Celia Campbell Stay.54 The eight forced the threatening Dakota to release Celia’s father and marched Antoine back to his home, surrounding him on all sides to ensure he was protected. Antoine, Celia, and the rest of their family were taken captive that day and spent the rest of the conflict protected by Iron Elk and his friends. Andrew Myrick was not so lucky. The Dakota found him in his house. Terrified, he attempted to escape by jumping

out of a second-floor window. When he climbed back to his feet he made a run for the tree line before being shot in the back. The Dakota warriors dragged his corpse back to his store and stuffed his mouth full of grass. Big Eagle described the scene: “He said to them: ‘Go and eat grass.’ Now he was lying on the ground dead, with his mouth stuffed full of grass, and the Indians were saying tauntingly; ‘Myrick is eating grass himself.’”

The grass was an obvious symbol of revenge, but perhaps the more important symbol was the farming implements found sticking out of his chest when his body was discovered a few weeks later. This was a clear message from the Dakota warriors, that if the Whites loved farming so much they could take their tools with them in death.

With Myrick dead, the Dakota raged throughout the agency, kicking in doors, stealing provisions, and killing anyone who was not fortunate enough to have a friend among the warring group. Though the violence was everywhere, there were also stories of bravery and of Dakota willing to risk their own lives to save White and mixed-blood fictive kin. “I did save the life of George H. Spencer at the time of the massacre,” said Big Eagle, “I know that his friend, Chaska, has always had the credit for that [as well].” He continued “Once after that I kept a half-breed family from being murdered.”

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insisted he was not trying to gain leniency because he already assumed he would be executed, but that he was trying to explain the nature of the conflict as he saw it. The relationships that had been forged in the Middle Ground were now saving the lives of would-be victims. Because of this, by the end of the day the Dakota had a clutch of captives, some of whom were housed in Little Crow’s home for a time according to his half-brother White Spider.\textsuperscript{58} Stories like the brutality shown to Myrick, and the kindness shown to Celia Campbell Stay’s family, characterized a convoluted and chaotic outbreak of violence. Just as the Middle Ground had forged connections of friendship, the treaties forged bitter rivalries throughout the Southwest Minnesota, and just as Dakota rushed to save their fictive kin, others rushed to exact vengeance and settle new grudges.

As the captives sat in his house, Little Crow decided the next move would be an assault on Fort Ridgely, roughly 10 miles from the Redwood Agency. Taking the fort would give them the four cannons housed there and a fortified position from which to control the river. He also hoped that quick victories and seizing the fort might bring the Sisseton and Wahpeton into the fold, instead of the Mdewekanton and Wahpekute fighting alone. Little Crow gathered his warriors and announced his intention. Because Dakota leaders did not lead through force or European-style military discipline, but


rather through personality and reputation, Little Crow often had to lead by example if he wanted warriors to follow him. Many did, but others scattered throughout the countryside, killing settlers and attacking small groups as they found them. While Little Crow rounded up captives and organized a council to plan an assault on the fort, a woman named Sarah Wakefield, with her husband and four children, erroneously thought that the commotion was occurring at the upper agency. They unknowingly fled in the direction of the violence.

Sarah Wakefield’s captivity narrative is the most famous one to be produced regarding this conflict. She published her story in the form of a book called *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees* after her release. Sarah and her family were intercepted by a group of Dakota on their way to the Redwood Agency in a carriage. One of the Dakota, Hapa, fired a shot and hit her husband in the shoulder; he yelped and lurched forward and fell into Sarah. The Dakota shot a second time and struck Sarah’s husband in the stomach. He fell off the wagon backwards onto the ground. Hapa reloaded his rifle, walked up to Sarah and took aim at her head, but before he could pull the trigger, “Chaska . . . leaped towards him and struck the gun out of his hands . . . if it had not been for Chaska, my bones would now be bleaching on that prairie, and my children with Little Crow.” Chaska had saved her from Hapa and continued to do so. “Three or four times did this demon try to destroy me, when Chaska would draw him away with his arm, and I could

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60 Wakefield, *Six Weeks in Sioux Tepees*, 16.
hear him tell him of some little act of kindness my husband or myself had shown them in years gone by.”

Chaska argued with Hapa for the better part of the day before convincing him to spare the lives of Mrs. Wakefield and her children. Chaska spent the rest of the conflict protecting the Wakefields as the Dakota moved west. From these accounts it is apparent that Chaska saved the lives of George H. Spencer, Antoine Joseph and his family, and Sarah Wakefield. There are no existing accounts that show him taking part in any violence. But Chaska was not the only Dakota to save the lives of Whites and mixed race people that violent August.

News of the attack on the Redwood had spread to the Yellow Medicine Agency almost immediately. There the Sissetons, Wahpetons, and even a few Yankton that had been visiting their Dakota cousins met in a council. While they opposed the actions of the M’dewekanton and the Wahpekute in principle, they agreed that “the M’dewakanton’s had already gone so far that the worst the Whites could inflict would be sure to come upon them all—that the Whites would regard them all alike as enemies; and since matters could in no event be worse, the best plan was to kill them all and take their goods.”

An argument broke out among the two bands, between those in favor of looting, and those in favor of killing the Whites and looting. Upon hearing the plan, a mixed-blood farmer Indian named John Otherday rounded up 62 Whites at


Yellow Medicine and led an exodus. The Whites, protected by Otherday, reached St. Paul and safety a few days later. Among those Otherday saved were the wife and children of Indian Agent Thomas J. Galbraith. News spread quickly after the refugees from Yellow Medicine arrived in St. Paul, home of most Minnesota newspapers at the time.

By August 22, Little Crow and his men were launching attacks on Fort Ridgely, while others made smaller forays against New Ulm. All in all there were about 800 Dakota warriors who joined the assaults on the fort and the German hamlet. For all their battlefield prowess, the Dakota style of warfare was not meant for attacking entrenched positions, and though they launched several assaults on both locations, they were repelled with substantial losses. While Fort Ridgely relied on its heavy cannons to break the furious charges of Dakota warriors, the citizens of New Ulm formed a Parisian-style defense of their city. After hearing of the failed assault on Fort Ridgely, they knew the main body of Dakota would come for them next. The men locked their women and children in brick buildings, and set the outer buildings ablaze to offer better firing lines. They built massive roadblocks in the city square to repel cavalry charges. Jacob Nix and a

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judge named Flandreau led the defenses as Dakota cavalry poured over the hills. “Auf euer posten!” shouted Jacob Nix to the German defenders “Fertig zum Gefecht!” (To your posts! Get ready to fight!) The Dakota were greeted with walls of fire from behind the barricades. The cavalry lurched from the initial volleys and swirled in a circle around New Ulm, looking for any vulnerable point in the defenses. There were none, and the German defenders repelled wave after wave of Dakota attack.

Meanwhile the Sisseton and Wahpeton remained largely undecided on what to do. This did not stop newspapers that exaggerated the strength and breadth of the outbreak from employing many of the racial tropes and stereotypes that had permeated American culture when speaking of other tribes. The newspapers spread panic faster than a prairie fire. *The Independent* reported exaggerated claims of tribes involved and assaults on women, laying blame on the “civilized Indians”:

> The Sioux, Chippewas, Yankhonnas, Cutheads, and other wild tribes of Indians are committing horrible depredations on the frontier of Minnesota . . . the women suffered the worst indignities in many instances . . . the civilized Indians are represented as more ferocious than the others.

*The Big Blue Union* employed the “scheming Indian” trope and wildly inflated the number of Indians involved:

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67 *Oskaloosa (Kansas) Independent*, 30 August 1862.
An Indian rebellion and horrible massacre broke out in Minnesota. . . . The Siouxs seem to be the leaders, joined by other powerful tribes, and it is thought that a desperate and deeply-laid scheme is purposed to be carried out by them . . . it is thought that some four or five thousand warriors will . . . have to be contended with.

In reality Little Crow was leading closer to 800 warriors, and could not convince even the upper two bands of Dakota to side with him in earnest. While the people of Minnesota heard of the massacres and turned violently against all Indians, the state government had to decide how to handle the outbreak of hostilities. The Governor, Alex Ramsey, was informed of the outbreak by mid-day on the 19\textsuperscript{th} and had to decide who was going to lead a force to try and quell the uprising. There was only one man for the job; an old friend and current enemy of his. No one was more familiar with the geography of Southwest Minnesota than Henry Hastings Sibley, and nobody knew more about the Dakota and their tribal leaders than Hal, a Dacotah.

Henry Sibley, like most Democrats, was crushed in his bid for reelection in 1862 (Democrats being the party of the South). Alex Ramsey won the election and before he even gave his inauguration speech he had to contend with the Dakota uprising. Sibley was given a commission as a colonel and over four companies of inexperienced soldiers, totaling around 1,500 men. They marched for Dakota lands that day. More than 40,000 settlers streamed out of Southwest Minnesota, propelled by the horror stories

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68 \textit{Big Blue Union (Marysville, Kansas),} 30 August 1862.

69 \textit{Gilman,} \textit{Henry Hastings Sibley,} 175.
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that filled the newspapers. Though slowed by the mass exodus, Sibley and his men marched toward the fighting, intent on relieving the besieged soldiers at Fort Ridgely and encircled citizens at New Ulm. Passing over the destruction, Sibley was taken aback by the scenes of violence, “These Indians fight like devils; no one has seen anything like it,”\(^\text{70}\) he said. But if Governor Ramsey had hoped that Sibley would become William Tecumseh Sherman, instead he mirrored George McClellan; slow and sluggish and overly cautious Sibley drew the ire of many who wanted a speedy attack on the Dakota. The *St. Paul Press* called Sibley “a snail” that “falls back on his authority and dignity and refuses to march.” They also labeled Sibley and his men “the state undertaker with his company of gravediggers.”\(^\text{71}\) But the snail finally arrived, to the relief of the fort and the beleaguered defenders of New Ulm on August 25. Little Crow was forced to retreat west with his warriors and hundreds of White and mixed-blood captives into the lands of the Sisseton and Wahpeton. If Little Crow had hoped for a warm welcome from his Upper Dakota brethren, he was sorely disappointed.

Samuel J. Brown was the son of a White trader and Dakota woman, he had been taken captive earlier in the conflict by Upper Sioux, more for his protection than anything else. He described the hostility that arose between the upper and lower bands after Little Crow and the Lower Sioux arrived in Upper Sioux territory:


\(^{71}\) Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 55.
In the evening several hundred of Little Crow’s warriors came over to our camp on horseback, whooping and yelling and firing off their guns. They surrounded our camp and ordered the Upper Sioux to move at once to the camp of the Lower Sioux on the opposite side of the creek, saying that . . . unless we complied instanter our lodges would be cut up and destroyed. The Upper Sioux protested against this vigorously. They said plainly that the Lower Sioux, who inaugurated the outbreak and must assume all responsibilities connected with it, and who moved into the country of the Upper Sioux without invitation . . . [they] would take up arms against them and die on the spot rather than move into the camp of the insane followers of Little Crow.\footnote{Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., “Samuel J. Brown’s Recollections,” in \textit{Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862} (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 169-170.}

The division between Upper and Lower Sioux grew. As the Upper Sioux were trying to convince Little Crow to let the captives go and return them to Colonel Sibley, who was certainly on his way to rescue them. Little Crow knew Sibley was on his way and was laying plans to deal with his old friend. The Upper Sioux sent word to Colonel Sibley of the division among the tribes. Sibley responded with a letter, summed up by Thomas A. Robertson, a mixed-race Dakota who served as a letter runner for Little Crow. He secreted the Upper Sioux letter to Sibley while he was supposed to be delivering correspondence for Little Crow:

\begin{quote}
Our message from Colonel Sibley to the friendlies or peace party was, if possible, to get possession of all the prisoners and form a separate camp and hold the prisoners; that he was now thoroughly prepared and would be on the move against the hostiles the next day; that all those that had committed murders and other outrages against the Whites would be punished and all those that had been friendly and acted as such would be duly considered and protected as such.\footnote{Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., “Samuel J. Brown’s Recollections,” in \textit{Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862} (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 169-170.}
\end{quote}
The Upper Sioux then waited for an opportunity to take as many captives from the Lower Sioux camp as they could. That opportunity presented itself on September 21, when Lower Sioux scouts spotted Sibley with his 1,500 man army marching up the Minnesota River Valley. Sibley’s men encamped a few miles south of Yellow Medicine, next to small body of water known as Wood Lake. Little Crow rallied all the warriors left loyal to him and set a trap for his old fur-peddling friend, moving his 600 warriors under cover of darkness into positions around Wood Lake.74 Little Crow’s men sprang the trap the following morning and the battle of Wood Lake commenced. While the trap initially worked, Sibley managed to break through to his surrounded men and the Dakota were forced to flee.

While the Lower Sioux were fighting at Wood Lake, the Upper Sioux or Peace Party Indians raided the undefended Lower Sioux camp and made off with a good number of their captive Whites. They then “formed a separate camp; had secured all of the prisoners; had dug pits inside the tents for protection of prisoners; and were prepared to meet them [The Lower Sioux] on any grounds they wished to take.”75 Upon


losing the battle, Little Crow and his men returned to find what had happened. “Little Crow was despondent. He was almost heart broken,” recalled Samuel J. Brown. Little Crow also learned that some of his own men had defected to the Peace Party, Wabasha among them. Little Crow knew that it was all over. His only options were to run, or to stay and surrender; surrendering almost certainly meant he would be dangling from a rope before the week was out.

The following morning Little Crow called on some of the mixed-race people who had worked as letter runners to discuss his plans. Little Crow still had some White prisoners in his possession. When Celia Campbell Stay’s father entered Little Crow’s tepee, Little Crow’s warriors laid out a robe for Antoine to sit on. “Cousin,” he said, as he and Little Crow always called each other Cousin, “I heard you wanted to see me, so I have come.” Little Crow replied “Yes, cousin, I am going away, if there is a last favor you would like to ask of me I would like to grant it to you.” Antoine answered quickly, knowing what the reply would be “Yes, cousin, we are most safe now. Gen. Sibley will be here soon, and I would like that you and your warriors would give yourselves up.” Little Crow laughed and responded, “The long merchant Sibley would like to put a rope around my neck but he won’t get the chance.” Antoine replied that there had never been hangings before, and he didn’t think that would happen this time either. “No, cousin,” said Little Crow “anything else, but to give myself up to hang by the neck like a

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woman. If they would shoot me like a man I would, but otherwise they will never get my live body.” Antoine understood this and capitulated: “If you can’t do that, then I would like to get the prisoners.” Little Crow had probably counted on this question and said, “Yes, you shall have them.”

Little Crow released the prisoners into the care of Wabasha and the Peace Party. Little Crow gathered his most loyal followers, (including the four Dakota who started the conflict after their argument over eggs), and raced west to Devil’s Lake in Dakota Territory, where he hoped to find allies to continue the war. Some of the Lower Sioux stayed to surrender to Sibley when he arrived, and the rest fled. Some ran to Canada while most, like Little Crow, ran west into Dakota Territory, hoping to find safety among the Lakota and Nakota.

On September 25, 1862, Colonel Sibley and his men marched into view of the Peace Party camp. “All eyes watched eagerly toward those shining bayonets.” recalled Celia Campbell Stay. Relief washed over the 200 plus captives as their ordeal came to an end. The bloodletting had lasted for five weeks and four days. More than 100 Dakota warriors and nearly 1,000 White soldiers and civilians lay dead, and tens of thousands of

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78 Clodfelter, The Dakota War, 57.

Whites fled as refugees, leaving Southwest Minnesota nearly empty. Colonel Sibley decided he would establish a rallying point on the spot where he had liberated the captives; he dubbed it Camp Release. Over the course of the next few weeks more than 2,000 Dakota wandered to Camp Release and surrendered themselves to the victorious Colonel. The Dakota threw themselves on the mercy of a man who once called their people kin. Sibley had promised them fair treatment if they surrendered. Instead, he quickly set about punishing the Dakota for their war. While the battles may have ended, the ethnic cleansing of Minnesota was just beginning.

“EXTERMINATE THE WILD BEASTS”

In the aftermath of the conflict the entire state of Minnesota, save one man, was determined to annihilate the Dakota. The newspapers, government officials, the governor, and common people alike demanded the wholesale slaughter of all Indian people in Minnesota. Many demanded that no treaties even be attempted with the Dakota. The days of removal and civilization were too soft for the citizens of the western pays d’en Haut. Each entity crying for blood, in its own way, employed nearly every racist trope of Indian people typical of White Americans. Tropes detailed by historians like Robert Berkhofer, David Svaldi, Peter Silver, and others. The Dakota had been protected from this kind of vitriol up to 1850. After the treaties of Mendota and Traverse de Sioux, the Dakota were introduced to the racism of removal policy and the

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80 Clodfelter, The Dakota War, 57.
racism of the average American citizen who looked down his nose at Indian people.

After the outbreak in 1862, that kind of racism seemed nearly kindhearted in comparison to what followed. Dakota warriors, Dakota women, and Dakota children surrendered to the United States and were housed at Camp Release while a man who once referred to himself as Hal, a Dacotah, weighed his options.

There were many courses he could take with his imprisoned Dakota. Typical protocol for captured enemy soldiers dictated their release from imprisonment after hostilities were officially over. But Sibley knew that was not really an option for him, not with the mood of the people demanding blood. It is clear that the people of Minnesota, overwhelmingly, wanted the Dakota executed. Sibley met them in the middle, and on September 28, 1862 he appointed a five-man commission whose responsibility it was to “try summarily the Mulatto, and Indians, or mixed bloods, now prisoners, or who may be brought before them . . . and pass judgement upon them, if found guilty of murders or other outrages upon the Whites.”

He insisted in a letter to General Pope, a recently defeated Civil War general and newly appointed head of the recently created Military Department of the Northwest, that those found guilty must be put to death because “an example is . . . imperatively necessary.” He added, “I trust you will approve the act, should it happen that some real criminals have been seized and promptly disposed of.” Not only did Pope approve of the idea, but he took it a step further:

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82 Chomsky, “The United States-Dakota War Trials,” 23.
The horrible massacres of women and children and the outrageous abuse of female prisoners, still alive, call for punishment beyond human power to inflict. There will be no peace in this region by virtue of treaties and Indian faith. It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so and even if it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year. Destroy everything belonging to them and force them out to the plains, unless, as I suggest, you can capture them. They are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromises can be made.  

It was made painfully clear in Pope’s statement that the time of civilization or removal policies was finished, and that the time for extermination had come. He also employed several tropes about Indian people in his statement. He alluded the idea of uncontrolled sexuality supposedly inherent in a “savage” race. He portrayed them as irrational and unable to control themselves, an irrationality that would make treaties impossible. Sibley grew far harsher as well. In his speech to congress back in 1850, he had said there were two options for Indian peoples: assimilation or extermination. After the events of 1862, assimilation was certainly no longer an option, even in the mind of the man who had spent most of his adult life among the Dakota. Minnesota newspapers lined up behind the train of thought espoused by Pope. The Stillwater, *Minnesota Messenger* cried out for the destruction of all Indian people: “DEATH TO THE BARBARIANS! Is the sentiment of our people.”  

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84 Chomsky, “The United States-Dakota War Trials,” 29.
A lesson which shall ring in their [the Indians] ears to the latest generation of them all, that death, swift, relentless, and terrible is the inevitable punishment of murder, and that they had better have not been born than lift a hostile hand against a citizen of Minnesota, in all time to come.\(^85\)

The *St. Cloud Democrat* in Stearns County, Minnesota advised settlers to return to their homes in the Southwest and that “men in squads of eight, ten, or more should feel equal to exterminating any roving band that may possibly be left.” Insisting that “This country cannot be given up to the savages.”\(^86\) With the refugee women and children now safe in St. Cloud, they should “let the men return, as most of them are doing, gather their crops and hunt Sioux. . . . Exterminate the wild beasts.” The article finished with an appeal to the White race: “Never let it be said that whole settlements were given up, by Anglo-Saxons to a few thousand lousy, lazy savages. Every man . . . with an ounce of Anglo Saxon blood in his . . . veins ought to be a sufficient defense against ten of these biped tigers.”\(^87\) The references to Indians as wild beasts or biped tigers are renditions on the view of Indians not just as “savages” but as animals. The same newspaper on September 11 posted an ad suggesting a method for exterminating the Sioux on the cheap:


\(^{86}\) *St. Cloud* (Minnesota) *Democrat*, 4 September 1862.

\(^{87}\) *St. Cloud* (Minnesota) *Democrat*, 4 September 1862.
Scalps— It is all folly to fight Indians as we would European soldiers. Let our present legislature offer a bounty of $10 for every Sioux scalp, outlaw the tribe and so let the matter rest. It will cost five time that much to exterminate them by the regular modes of warfare and they should be got rid of in the cheapest and quickest manner.\footnote{St. Cloud (Minnesota) Democrat, 11 September 1862.}

Military officers like Pope and the newspapers were not alone in their racist outbursts and calls for Indian blood. Governor Ramsey called a special session of the legislature in response to the outbreak. The session met on September 9, 1862 and in it the governor, too, joined the chorus of the howling mob.

As he stood before the emergency session, Governor Ramsey said that the federal government had no way of helping the state of Minnesota, given the importance of the ongoing civil war. The state of Minnesota must handle the matter itself, and in light of that fact, “our course then is plain...The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the State.”\footnote{Gubernatorial Address to the Minnesota Legislature, \textit{Extra Session: Message of Governor Ramsey to the Legislature of Minnesota} (Saint Paul: William R. Marshall, State Printer, 1862), 12. The governor then made a longwinded statement in which he intentionally or unintentionally omitted facts:}
The public safety imperatively requires it. Justice calls for it. Humanity itself, outraged by their unutterable atrocities demands it. The blood of the murdered cries to heaven for vengeance on these assassins of women and children. They have themselves made their annihilation an imperative social necessity. Faithless to solemn treaty obligations, to old friendships, to the ties of blood, regardless even of self interest when it conflicts with their savage passions, incapable of honor, of truth or of gratitude; amenable to no law; bound by no moral or social constraints—they have already destroyed in one monstrous act of perfidy, every pledge on which it was possible to be found hope of ultimate reconciliation.  

The Governor employed tropes to characterize the Dakota as unmanly attackers of the defenseless. They were, to Ramsey, incapable of reason, unchristian, and cowardly. The Governor continued his bombastic oratory with commands on how the Dakota were to be treated. “They must be regarded and treated as outlaws,” he said. “If any shall escape extinction, the wretched remnant must be driven beyond our borders and our frontier garrisoned with a force sufficient to forever prevent their return.” There was no mention of the Whites breaking the treaties well before the outbreak or of how the Dakota starved as they were robbed by government officials and private parties alike for a decade. He clearly did not understand the nature of the outbreak and the treatment of prisoners and fictive kin in his rambling about the Dakotas’ supposed disregard for old friendships and blood relations. Sarah Wakefield and Celia Campbell Stay may have been able to correct the Governor were they there that day. While the Governor was

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wrong about the facts, he showed that he too was in support of the ethnic cleansing of the state. The desire to cleanse the state did not stop with the Dakota, however.

The Winnebago had taken no part in the conflict, but that did not save them from the hate directed at all Indians in Minnesota. The people of Minnesota, though they understood the difference between Winnebago and Dakota, decided they were all the same and targeted the Winnebago next. The Annual Report from the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, produced on November 14, 1862 shows this plainly. It said of the Sioux:

> There should be no restoring of the Sioux to their old status; their presence on our frontier would be a perpetual barrier to the growth of the state; they must disappear or be exterminated.\(^\text{92}\)

It said of the Winnebago:

> This tribe of Indians have remained peaceable during our Indian troubles, but they are surrounded by a White population who have become exasperated with all Indians, and are so anxious to get them out of the country that fears are entertained that difficulties may arise between them detrimental to the interest of the Winnebagoes. . . . It would be much better for the Winnebagoes if they could be induced to take a new tract of land further west or north, where they could have larger hunting ground and greater liberty to roam over the country.\(^\text{93}\)

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The report echoed what Governor Ramsey had already recommended during his special session of Congress in regards to the Winnebago. Though he was a little less violent in his stance on the Winnebago, he said:

So entirely have they destroyed all confidence among our people in the securities of life and property in the neighborhood of Indians, that much as many might regret it, it will doubtless be necessary sooner or later to remove the Winnebagoes, now dwelling in the heart of one of our most populous and beautiful agricultural districts, beyond the borders of the state.  

The Mantorville Express, a newspaper located in Dodge County, Minnesota, reprinted one of Governor Ramsey’s letters to President Lincoln from October 10, 1862:

The conduct of these savages has shown that they are most dangerous when least suspected, and they are far less dreaded as open enemies than as pretended friends. . . . Under these circumstances, nothing less than the removal of the whole body of Indians to remote districts far beyond our borders, under thorough military surveillance, can prevent the constant recurrence of sanguinary collisions.

In each of these sources, whether a newspaper, government report, or speech to the Minnesota legislature, the people of Minnesota employed, in one way or another, the racist tropes about Indian peoples that were not present in Minnesota prior to 1850; and were not so directly applied until 1862. One article referred to the Dakota as “lazy,” a rendition on Berkhofer’s “Degraded Indian” image. Governor Ramsey’s speech, the treatment of the Winnebago, and the articles employed numerous stereotypical images

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95 Mantorville (Minnesota) Express, 7 November 1862.
of Indian peoples. The Governor said that the Indians were more dangerous as pretended friends than as open enemies. The newspapers characterized the “civilized Indians” as more brutal and savage than their uncivilized counterparts. Both were clear renditions of David Svaldi’s “Plotting Indian” trope. Despite knowledge to the contrary, they chose to see the Dakota and Winnebago as the same, breaking them down to the core image of the “savage,” forcing complex and altogether different groups of people together into an easy-to-manage catch-all, just as Roy Harvey Pearce explained the concept of Savagism. In each of these sources we see the utilization of images that had been present further east for quite some time, but only arrived in force in Minnesota after 1862.

While these sources sought to fan the flames of genocide against the Indians of Minnesota, Henry Sibley continued with his impromptu trials of his Dakota prisoners. Reverend Stephen Riggs gathered all the surrendered Dakota at Camp Release and interviewed them about their individual roles in the conflicts. Using his findings, the commission compiled a list of those to be put on trial. In this way, Riggs acted as a sort of Supreme Court for the macabre proceedings.96 By the time Riggs was finished with his interviews, the kangaroo court had a list of 392 Dakota names, all supposedly directly involved in the conflict. The trials officially began on September 28. By the end of the day, sixteen trials had been conducted and ten Dakota sentenced to death by hanging.97


97 Chomsky, “The United States-Dakota War Trials,” 24-25.
By October 7, that number grew to 20 condemned to death. The trials ended on November 3. All 392 had been tried without a lawyer, without the ability to call witnesses, and often without specific charges presented against them. The court made no attempts to differentiate between killing in military combat and killing in cold blood outside the confines of war. 98 Many of the Dakota, in lieu of formal charges, were read a boilerplate statement of accusation. The statement read that the Dakota warrior in question “did, between the 19th of August and the 28th day of September, join and participate in various murders and outrages committed by the Sioux Indians on the Minnesota Frontier.” 99 The commission convicted 323 of the 392 Dakota. Of those 323, 303 were sentenced to death by hanging. The remaining 20 were sentenced to terms in prison. Big Eagle was among those sentenced to prison, and the other 69 were acquitted.

Unbeknownst to Sibley and Pope at the time, a federal statute required the President’s signature before executions could be carried out. On November 10, General Pope sent Lincoln the list of those condemned. 100 Lincoln was stunned at the number, at how quickly the trials had been carried out, and the manner in which they had been conducted. His apprehension was no doubt aided by Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple. In the fall of 1862, Bishop Whipple had a sit down meeting with the President.


100 Chomsky, “The United States-Dakota War Trials,” 29.
explained to the President the real reasons for the outbreak. He described the swindling of the Dakota at the hands of the traders, the corruption of the Indian agents and resulting starvation and resentment of the Dakota, inflamed by Andrew Myrick’s insistence that the Dakota eat grass if they were hungry. Whipple’s conversation clearly left an impact on President Lincoln. Shortly after their conversation Lincoln sent a letter to a friend asking if he knew Bishop Whipple. His friend did know Whipple and Lincoln replied “He came here the other day and talked with me about the rascality of this Indian business until I felt it down to my boots.”\textsuperscript{101} Perhaps those sentiments still filled the President’s boots when he received word that the commission intended to execute more than 300 Dakota. All they needed was his signature.

The President demanded that all the evidence and court records be forwarded to his staff for further examination. He instructed his staff to sift through the paperwork and find cases where Indians had in fact committed rape. For all the talk of wanton rape of women in captivity or on the frontier, Lincoln’s committee found that only two of those condemned to die had been “proved guilty of violating women.”\textsuperscript{102} The constant talk of rape that permeated letters and newspaper articles were utterly unfounded. Even the captivity literature rarely mentioned anything about the sexual violation of women. Sarah Wakefield backed up this fact in her captivity narrative when she said “I

\textsuperscript{101} William Watts Folwell, \textit{A History of Minnesota}, vol. 2 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1924), 208.

do not know of but two females that were abused by the Indians. I often asked the
prisoners when we met, for we were hearing all kinds of reports, but they all said they
were well treated.”¹⁰³ The lack of evidence stunned Lincoln. He directed his committee
to differentiate between Indians who had committed murder outside of combat from
Indians who killed people in combat. After his revisions, Lincoln sent Sibley a
handwritten letter on December 6 that listed the names of 39 Dakota he would permit
Sibley to execute on Friday, December 19.¹⁰⁴ The President’s leniency outraged the
people of Minnesota, who warned that “The outraged people of Minnesota will dispose
of the wretches without law”¹⁰⁵ if all 303 were not executed.

Sibley then moved the condemned along with their families from Camp Release
downriver to Mankato, Minnesota. The Indians had all been chained together and
packed onto carts. Altogether the caravan held some 1,600 Dakota.¹⁰⁶ It did not take
long for the people of Minnesota to make good on their promise of vigilante justice. As
the caravan passed by the town of New Ulm it was assaulted by an angry mob. Of
course the citizens of New Ulm had reason to be so enraged. George Crooks was among
the chained Indians in the back of a cart that tried to make it through New Ulm. His

¹⁰³ Dean, “Nameless Outrages,” 103.

¹⁰⁴ William Watts Folwell, A History of Minnesota, vol. 2 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society,
1924), 209.


¹⁰⁶ Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts
given name was *Wakanajaja*, or “Holy Lightning.” He and his brother crouched in the caravan as the mob assaulted it. “We were pounded to jelly,” he said, “my arms, feet and head resembled raw beef steak. How I escaped alive has always been a mystery to me. My brother was killed and when I realized he was dead I felt the only person in the world to look after me was gone and I wished . . . they had killed me.”\(^{107}\) The caravan pushed through the assaults at New Ulm only to be attacked again as they passed through the town of Henderson, a place that had not been involved in the outbreak in any way.

The caravan arrived at long last in Mankato. The vast majority of prisoners were sent to St. Paul or Fort Snelling. The now 38 condemned (one had been given a pardon) and a few dozen others were housed in Mankato to await their fate. On the day after Christmas, 1862, the names of the condemned were called, and the men were pulled from the crowd of Dakota one by one. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* recorded the scene. “At half past seven all persons were excluded from the room except those necessary to prepare the prisoners for their doom.”\(^ {108}\) Surprisingly, the Dakota that were being prepared for death were in seemingly high spirits. Many were smoking and shaking hands with soldiers and reporters in farewell. As time passed the reality set in, and

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There was no more singing, and but little conversation and smoking now. At ten o’clock they were lined up in procession and marched to the scaffold, singing their death songs. “It [the singing] had a wonderful effect in keeping up their courage . . . the scene at this juncture was one of awful interest. A painful and breathless suspense held the vast crowd, which had assembled from all quarters to witness the execution.” The executioner was a man by the name of William Duly, whose family had been killed in the conflict. “Three slow, measured, and distinct beats on the drum by Major Brown . . . and the rope was cut . . . the scaffold fell, and thirty-seven lifeless bodies were left dangling between heaven and earth.” The number was thirty-seven because one of the ropes had snapped. They dragged the man back onto the scaffold and finished their macabre work with a second drop. The crowd burst into cheers that quickly fell silent. The crowd had just witnessed what still stands today as the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. The bodies were wrapped in their blankets and thrown into a mass grave.

Reverend Riggs explained that reading the names of those to beexecuted that day in Mankato “was a difficult duty, because in several cases there were two or three of the same name in prison. It was a matter of regret that any mistakes were made, but

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I feel sure they were not made intentionally.” The mistake that Riggs was referring to dangled forever silent next to his Dakota brothers on December 26, 1862. Chaska had been erroneously pulled from the crowd and wrongfully executed because there were two men of the same name in the crowd. The man who saved Sarah Wakefield and others from certain death received the death penalty for his trouble.

Those who had not been condemned to death were shipped to a prison camp in Davenport, Iowa, while their families were shipped to the Crow Creek reservation in Dakota Territory (modern day South Dakota). Big Eagle was among those sent to the prison camp. Years later he told this portion of his story: “I was tried and served three years in the prison camp at Davenport and the penitentiary at Rock Island for taking part in the war. If I had known that I would be sent to the penitentiary I would not have surrendered.” He lamented, “I had not been a murderer . . . if I had killed or wounded a man it had been a fair, open fight. . . . But all feelings on my part about this has long since passed. For years I have been a Christian. . . . I am at peace with everyone. . . . I am getting to be an old man.” Many of the Dakota converted to Christianity like Big Eagle after leaving Minnesota. In 1869, different religious groups ran the various reservations


the Dakota had been sent to and finally their conversion efforts bore fruit. There were Quakers at the Santee reservation in Nebraska, Presbyterians in South Dakota, and Catholics at Devil’s Lake. They split Dakota souls like spoils of war.\textsuperscript{115} When the remnants of the Dakota and Winnebago were killed or pushed out of Minnesota and subsequently converted to Christianity, settlers returned.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{115} Graves and Ebbott, \textit{Indians in Minnesota}, 15.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Minnesota Middle Ground collapsed in 1862 and gave the impetus to American society to ethnically cleanse the state of all Indians. It was a brutal end for a Middle Ground that had existed in relative harmony for several centuries. Historians like Van Kirk, Easley, and Sleeper-Smith noted that the original Middle Ground was born through relationships between Indian women and European men. The cultural exchange that ensued bound together Indian hunters and White fur traders, and gave rise to a large mixed-race population in the Minnesota Middle Ground. That Middle Ground was then held together by culture brokers, people who straddled the line between Indian and Euro-American culture and acted as uniting forces between the two. But, the development of American racism and American foreign policy outlined by historians like Berkhofer, Svaldi, Peter Silver and others meant that when the fur trade collapsed, so did the reasons for the existence of the Middle Ground. In the end, though, the Minnesota Middle Ground existed long after Richard White declared it defunct. It continued to exist, for decades, bound together by culture brokers like Henry Sibley and Little Crow.

Throughout 1863 and 1864 now-General Henry Hastings Sibley with an army of 3,300 infantry and General Alfred Sully with an army of 4,000 cavalry launched campaigns into Dakota Territory. They were attempting to ensnare the Dakota who had fled into Sioux territory and bring further punishment to the Sisseton and Wahpeton
Dakota.¹ Red Middle Voice attempted to escape into Canada in advance of the armies, but he was killed in his attempted escape by a band of Chippewa warriors. While the Pincer movement of Sibley and Sully failed to annihilate the remnants of the Dakota, it succeeded in pushing them farther from the borders of Minnesota. Sully later wrote of their failure to trap the Dakota. Victory could be achieved if “a war of extermination is called for” and that “it will be necessary to shoot everything that wears a blanket.”²

With the army pushing the Dakota westward, settlers felt safe to begin hunting along the South Dakota Minnesota border again. On July 3, 1863 a settler named Nathan Lamson and his son Chauncey Lamson were on such a hunting trip. It was a beautiful day; the sun was bright and it bathed the trees in its glow as berries grew large and ripe in the bushes. Nathan and his son stumbled upon two Dakota who did not notice them because their backs were turned while gathering berries from the bushes. Nathan and his son fell to their bellies and crawled closer. Nathan Lamson took aim at what appeared to be the older of the two and fired. He struck the Indian in the side and he fell to the ground with a yelp. Quickly the Indian returned fire, striking Nathan in the left shoulder. The Indian reloaded his rifle and took aim again while the nervous boy Chauncey fired at the exact same time. The Indian’s shot failed to find its mark, but Chauncey’s ricocheted off the stock of the Indian’s rifle and struck him in the side again.

¹ Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 270.
² Brad Tennant, “The 1864 Sully Expedition and the Death of Captain John Feilner,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 9, no. 2 (June 2008): 188.
The mortally wounded Indian asked his son for a drink of water as he lay dying. He took a deep draw off the canteen and slipped away. The Lamsons retreated, not knowing how many more Indians were there; in reality, it was just the two. If the Lamsons had walked up to the body of the Indian they may not have recognized him at first, but a closer examination of the crippled and mangled hand that was still clutching his rifle would have given them unmistakable proof that Chauncey Lamson, a teenager, had killed the greatest among the chiefs on a sunny July day in 1863. Little Crow’s son, Wowinape, quickly gathered his and his father’s guns after nightfall and ran.

Wowinape was captured three weeks later, put on trial for his part in the rebellion at Fort Abercrombie and sentenced to death. He later had his sentence commuted and was shipped to the prison camp in Davenport. While incarcerated he explained that his father’s attempts to join forces with other bands in the Dakotas proved unsuccessful. Disheartened, Little Crow decided that if he was going to die, he was going to die in his homeland. “When we were coming back he said he could not fight the White men, but would go . . . and steal horses from them and give them to his children, so that they could be comfortable, and then he would go away off.”

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3 Schultz, *Over the Earth I come*, 272-273.


their long walk to raid for horses, the two had stopped to pick berries when the
Lamsons found them. Wowinape later converted to Christianity and was released from
custody in 1866 and shipped to the Santee reservation. He changed his name to Thomas
Wakeman and founded the Dakota Indian Y.M.C.A, to which he dedicated himself until
his death in 1886.\(^6\)

Henry Hastings Sibley retired from the military in 1865 and returned to
Minnesota. He was elected to the Minnesota legislature in 1871. He was elected
President of the University of Minnesota in 1876 and President of the Minnesota
Historical Society in 1879. He was awarded an honorary doctorate of law by Princeton
University in 1888. The little bend in a river that took his breath away when he first saw
it as a young man had become the location of the thriving city of St. Paul; he died there
of natural causes on February 18, 1891, just two days short of his 80\(^{th}\) birthday. He had
achieved his dream of a more exciting life on the frontier, a life that had been marked as
much by interracial friendship and accommodation as it was by interracial bloodshed
and destruction.

The conflict now goes by many different names. The same way the violence was
complicated and thus presented problems for those who tried to understand it, naming
the violence has presented those who try to understand it with similar difficulty. Some
call it The Dakota Conflict, some call it The Dakota War, while others refer to it as The

\(^6\) Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts
1862 Dakota Uprising or The Great Sioux Uprising. Regardless of the name it is given, the violence is often cited as the beginning of the Sioux Wars. This is beyond dispute, as the violent outbreak in 1862 began a nearly uninterrupted series of wars between the armies of the United States and all the Siouan speaking peoples of the plains. The violence did not stop until the Sioux fell silent at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1890. But this view often overlooks an important truth. Even though the violence of 1862 marked the beginning of 28 years of war, it also marked the end of two centuries of peace between White and Indian people in what is now Minnesota. Perhaps it is because this incident is viewed as a beginning of violence instead of the end of peace that names like Little Crow and Henry Hastings Sibley are not as well-known as names like George Armstrong Custer and Sitting Bull. When studying wars, violence normally marks the beginning, not the end. But the 1862 Dakota Conflict, as it is now most commonly called, took place because the world of interracial peace and cultural mixing that had existed there for so long fell apart after 1850. That world of peace was held together by the fundamental relationship of the fur trade, between Dakota hunter and White or mixed-race fur trader. The most prominent and important figure in that relationship was Henry Hastings Sibley, a man who balanced himself between Dakota and White society.

Because of the mutually beneficial relationship between the Dakota hunter and White fur traders, the changing racist views toward Indians that developed farther East did not reach the Dakota in an overt way. Missionaries and Indian agents alike did try to
induce Dakota to take on characteristics of sedentary White culture, but to little avail prior to 1850. The fur trade and the relationships born from it protected the Dakota from the ever-deepening racist hatred of Indians back east. The protection of the fur trade, coupled with the fact that Minnesota was so far away from most major White settlements, meant that Whites moving to Minnesota prior to 1850 did so in order to work with the Indians in the fur trade. There was no room for the racism that characterized Jacksonian America in the Minnesota Middle Ground. Henry Sibley and Big Thunder, Old Shakopee, Old Wabasha, and others created this Middle Ground of cultural blending and relative harmony. By the time chiefs like Little Crow, Wabasha, Big Eagle, and others came to power they had been raised in that Middle Ground and sought to keep it alive. But the very relationship that held the Middle Ground together led to its demise. The decline of the fur trade put men like Henry Sibley into such severe debt that he betrayed his Dakota friends and fictive kin with the treaties of Traverse de Sioux and Mendota. With the fur trade closed, and Dakota land opened to sale through treaties brokered by fur traders like Sibley, swarms of Whites flooded into Minnesota in 1851.

These settlers, the Dakota learned quickly, were not the Whites they had grown accustomed to. If they weren’t German or Scandinavian immigrants who had no need to ingratiate themselves with the Dakota, they were corrupt Indian agents, store owners, or racist farmers that looked at Indians with disdain. The firsthand accounts clearly show that the Dakota were stunned when these new Whites looked down their noses at
Indians just for being Indian. It was a sudden and rude introduction to the way most Americans felt about Indians. Despite this, chiefs like Little Crow, Big Eagle, and Wabasha tried desperately to navigate this new arrangement, adopting more characteristics of the Whites while trying to maintain legitimacy within their own tribes. The fur trade, and the Middle Ground that depended on it, was betrayed by the very traders who built their lives there. After more than a decade of mistreatment, starvation, neglect, and internal strife wrought by these White newcomers, Dakota resentment boiled over. It is tragic that a Chief like Little Crow was the one who led the Dakota into violence, just as it is that traders like Henry Sibley betrayed the Middle Ground.

But it is in this violence and mayhem that we see the best evidence of the success of the Minnesota Middle Ground. Throughout the gory uprising were stories of those rescued from death by Dakota. The kinship network that developed throughout the previous two centuries filtered the violence. The Dakota did not kill those they had come to know as kin, and instead saved them. The Kinship network also lead to dissension among the Dakota themselves, as many Dakota refused to join in the killing. Little Crow resisted the war himself in the beginning, as did Wabasha, Big Eagle, and others. The Sisseton and Wahpeton bands refused to aid the Mdewekanton and Wahpekute when they retreated into their territory and in fact risked their lives to save the White and mixed-race captives held by the Lower Sioux bands. Stories of people like Sarah Wakefield, Big Eagle, and Chaska show plainly that though the battlecry was one
of genocide against Whites, the reality was far different. The difference lay in the Middle Ground. But as complex as the war was, the feelings of the people of Minnesota were blunt and simple in its wake.

Within days of the outbreak of violence the people of Minnesota demanded the extermination of all Indians within their borders. The newspapers cried for annihilation and suggested cost-effective ways of carrying it out. The Governor called for the destruction of the Dakota. Even Henry Sibley conducted impromptu trials and condemned more than 300 Dakota to death. The Winnebago, a tribe that had already been forcibly moved to Minnesota and had absolutely nothing to do with the violence, was likewise targeted for removal or extermination. Only the President of the United States saved the lives of many of those who were condemned to death. This did not stop the people of Minnesota from violently attacking the caravan of chained Dakota as it moved to Mankato. The ethnic cleansing of the state was carried out by popular demand, as some Dakota hung from the gallows. Others were sent to prisons and others sent to reservations beyond the borders of Minnesota. Even that was not enough, as Henry Sibley continued to conduct attacks into Dakota Territory, trying to hunt down the few Sisseton and Wahpeton that managed to escape into the west. The Dakota, a people who had not known the vitriolic racism of the average American prior to 1850, was suddenly targeted with the same racist tropes about Indians that characterized Jacksonian American thought.
Though Richard White’s work on the Middle Ground is essential reading for any historian researching places where Indian and White culture came into contact with one another, he was wrong about the death of the Middle Ground in the Great Lakes after Tecumseh’s defeat in 1815. The story of Henry Sibley and Little Crow took place two generations later, and the two men spent the majority of their lives in a Great Lakes Middle Ground of their own. Perhaps it is because the Sioux are often remembered as “Plains Indians” that it is overlooked that the Dakota were not Plains Indians prior to 1862. They lived in the forests and lakes of the western Pays d’en Haut, just as the Algonquin tribes studied by White lived in the eastern portion of this same region. For whatever reason, the story of the Minnesota Middle Ground is relatively unknown. Their Middle Ground flourished for years under French, British, and the early portion of American occupancy. It rose with the fur trade and men like Henry Hastings Sibley and Little Crow who took part in it, and it fell at the hands of men like Henry Hastings Sibley and Little Crow who destroyed it with treaties and violence.


Chomsky, Carol. "The United States-Dakota War Trials: A Study in Military Injustice."


