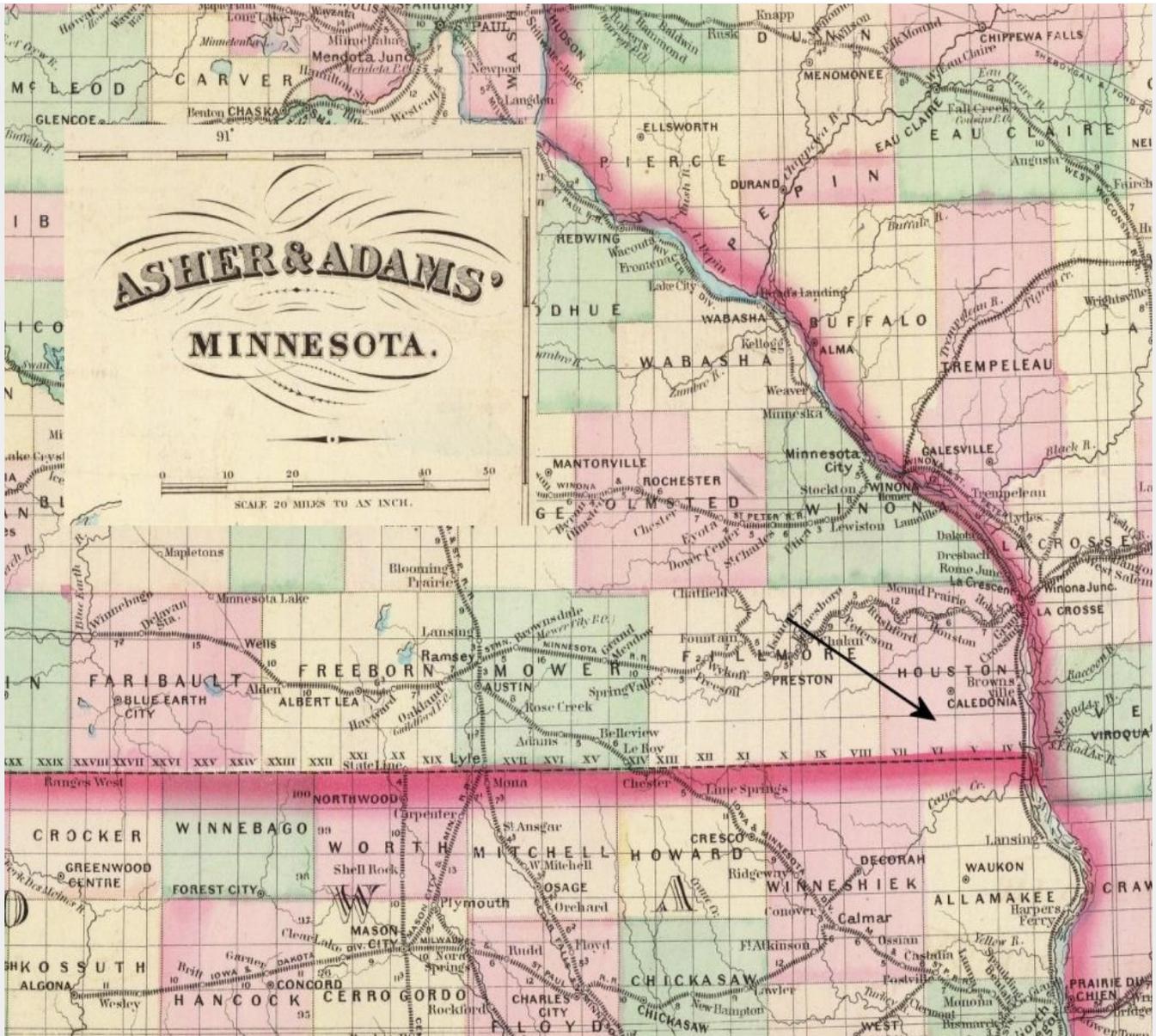


Portland Prairie – the Rhode Island Migration

[It was from the region of] Burrillville ...including a neighboring portion of Massachusetts, that quite a contingent of the early settlers of Portland Prairie came, and those from Rhode Island being more numerous than those from any other single state, the prairie colony was referred to by some in the early days as the “Rhode Island Settlement.” ... The first Rhode Island settlers to locate on Portland Prairie came in the spring of 1854. These were James M. and Duty S. Paine, Charles F. Albee and Jeremiah Shumway. They bought out John Edger and occupied his log cabin until they could establish themselves on places of their own. Edger next moved down on the Mississippi river bottom somewhere to the south of the state line. The four men named were still young and all married, but at first had left their wives in the east. The Paines were brothers and the other two had married sisters of the Paine brothers.

At the time they came to the west, Minnesota was attracting attention in the eastern states as a favorable section for emigrants. In 1854 no railroad line from any point on Lake Michigan had reached the Mississippi river west or northwest of Chicago. The trip from the east was then somewhat harder to make than in these times, and it took longer to accomplish it. Chicago could be reached by railroad; thence a local railroad but recently built took the traveler to Rockford, Ill., from whence he proceeded by stage to Galena. Here a line of boats ran up to St. Paul, making landings at all the market towns on the way. Times were not at their best in Rhode Island and so the party referred to decided to follow the example of others and emigrate to the west.



Area of Portland Prairie, from Asher & Adams' Minnesota ... 1874 ... David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

They left the boat at Lansing, Iowa, without any very definite idea where in southeastern Minnesota they would make a choice of a location. Learning of a prairie tract some twenty miles to the northwest of Lansing, as yet scarcely occupied by settlers, some of the party went out to view the land there and reported that there would be no need of looking for any other location.

James and Duty Paine came of a large family such as often grew up on the old farmsteads of New England and mainly furnished the recruits for an almost constant stream of western emigration.... two miles north of Pascoag. ... the Paine family were brought up. D.S. Paine was born February 1, 1830 and married Sarah Maria Cook. J.M. Paine was born

July 19, 1835 and married as a first wife Ruth E.A. Shumway, who was born August 4, 1835. Charles F. Albee was born on a farm in Burrillville, within two miles of Pascoag, February 1, 1822. Prior to coming west he had been engaged in carpentering and building. He married Sarah Paine April 22, 1847; she was born August 8, 1825. The Shumway family came to Burrillville from Oxford, Mass., and located on a farm adjacent to Pascoag. Jeremiah Shumway was born in Oxford October 15, 1827. He married Mary Paine July 24, 1852. Mary Paine was born July 28, 1832.

During the year others came on from the east. Among these were Asa Sherman, David Salisbury and Silas Perry, who, having the means, brought up government lands not as yet entered by any one and held them a while on speculation. After J. Shumway had been in the country a short time he went back to the east for his wife, and probably the wives of the Paine brothers came out at the same time. The Paines located on lands in Section 31, Wilmington, or on what is now the Schultze place. J. Shumway remained on the John Edger claim, having land on both sides of the state line. For the present C.F. Albee lived in the Edger cabin with the Shumway family and worked at building the few frame houses that were put up that year, the lumber being teamed from Lansing. It is said that at one time the log cabin sheltered sixteen inmates which included small children and infants. Mrs. Sarah Albee, wife of C.F. Albee, came out to Minnesota in the summer of 1854 with her two children that were born at the east. In her old age she wrote out her vivid recollections of those times, of which the following is a part:

Opening the door I saw Mary sick, lying on some straw in a corner. Our goods had not come; we had only what we brought in our trunks. The roof of the cabin was thatched with shakes and leaked; when it rained we used to raise an umbrella to keep off all the water we could. It was quite a while before we got our boxes of goods. Now it rained so much that it made the Iowa River raise so that it could not be crossed with a team, and Lansing was our trading point.

The boys had got two cows and those had calves, so it took one cow's milk, with string beans about as large as your little finger and potatoes as large as marbles, with a little flour for our first meals. Monday night Mary was so sick that she was unconscious; then, Charles really seemed to have the cholera and was really very sick, and from eating such stuff I felt bad and I did not know but that they were liable to die. On Wednesday they were both better.

Up north about a mile, Duty and wife and James and wife and my father [he had come out from Rhode Island for a visit] had their log cabin, and were just as hard up for food. They were trying to fix a

better roof. Well, news came that a neighbor's wife was so sick with the cholera that she died on her way home from Lansing, and what could be done? One of our neighbors asked if Jerry could not make a coffin if he brought some boards. He said he would try, and so went to work. Charles would raise up on his elbow and tell Jerry how and what to do. My two brothers and Jerry with Mr. J. Coil went along to bury her. They had not been gone long before a regular tornado swept in upon us. The floor boards of the cabin were not nailed down and began to fly up, and the shakes flew from the roof. I expected that the logs would tumble next and no one but myself able to do anything. So I got my babies' wraps on and Charles dressed and got Mary and her baby to the door ready to go if the logs tumbled. I never can forget how Charles looked, so much like a dead man with my white bed-spread over him. We had no bedding except what I brought in our trunks.

I looked up on the hill and what a sight! My poor old father trying to keep up with the ox-team in which the women and babies were loaded. The roof of their house was entirely gone, trunks blown open and clothing scattered to the winds. James' wife had a silk wedding-dress which was found in a hazel patch, and my father's black silk-velvet vest and neck handkerchief he never did find. This was Thursday and I had not been in Minnesota Territory a week.

The men soon came back and Jack Coil came riding up, saying that the cattle were in our cornfield, the fence having mostly blown down. Then they all took hold and fixed up the fence. Jack wanted me to take shelter at his house but I could not leave my sick ones. The men went and Grandma Coil found out how we suffered. The next Tuesday we heard that the Iowa river could be crossed and they got Jack's team and brought flour and eatables from Lansing. We did not suffer for food any further. The crops were soon ripe and we had both wheat and corn. We bought an improved place. It had twenty acres in corn, four or five acres in wheat, the old log cabin, and a log yard to herd our stock in, and some hogs that run wild. When we saw them we could tell ours by their marks.

It does not appear who Mrs. Albee came on from the east with, but a few others from Rhode Island were arriving about that time. The party got off the boat at Lansing about noon on a Saturday and were enabled to reach the prairie settlement by team by evening. The Iowa river was not bridged on the Lansing road at that time, but could easily be crossed by teams when the water was low, at a ford. In bringing on household goods from the east it was customary to pack them in large boxes made of pine boards an inch thick. Both the boxes or the pieces of boards when taken apart, even the nails, were useful about the cabins and small framed houses of the settlements. Probably many a temporary cupboard and like things were made of such materials. Mrs. Albee states in her record that a box which contained their winter clothing was lost on the way and was never recovered. Freight moved west

comparatively slow in those times and goods shipped as mentioned might be two or three weeks in reaching Minnesota.

In fixing up the old cabin some suitable logs were cut and with a cross-cut saw short lengths were made and split and shaved into shingles so that the roof was now put in better order than before. J. Shumway also began the erection of a framed house a few rods southeast of the log cabin.



This photo, taken in 1909, I believe shows the first Shumway house: note the little flumes which carried rainwater to a cistern.

A pond hole was dug to retain rain water and the water used to wash clothes until the hogs then running loose spoilt it for any such use. A sort of sled made from the crotch of a small tree was then used to haul water in a barrel or two up from Duck Creek with oxen. These were truly pioneer days when hardship and many inconveniences, not

known to the late generation of the same community, had to be patiently borne until they could be overcome. The first preacher Mrs. Albee remembered as coming to that section was a Campbellite who came about once a month for a while and preached to such assembly as could be gathered in those parts and in Mr. Coil's house.

... Some other settlers who came from Rhode Island in 1854 and '55 were Dr. Alex. Batchellor, John G. Cook, Tidemann Aldrich, John McNelly, James K. True, and probably Elisha Cook. The first Germans to settle in this part of Minnesota are said to have come in 1855 and located in the neighborhood of where Eitzen is now. Dr. Batchellor appears to have owned at one time the quarter-section (s.e. 1/4 25) now comprising the McNelly and Winkelman places. He built and resided in for some years the house on the Winkelman place. Such land as was cultivated on the quarter was rented by Tideman Aldrich who built a house where the McNelly residence now stands. Aldrich remained on the prairie for several years but never brought his family out from the east. John G. Cook also lived for some years in a small house that stood about fifteen rods west of Aldrich's location. He was a cooper by trade and was cousin to Elisha Cook.

John McNelly was born in County Down, Ireland, March 25, 1830. At the age of

eighteen he came to America and located first in Norwich, Conn. [*ed - in Nov 1850 he is enumerated in Norwich, CT*], and at some later date moved to Burrillville, R.I. Here he married February 15, 1852 Nancy Shumway, a sister of J. Shumway. He came to Portland Prairie with wife and two small children in 1855 and after living in the old log cabin with other occupants until he could build a dwelling, he located for the next ten years in Section 56, Wilmington township.

The earlier settlers did not find the country lacking in game. There were big fish in the Mississippi and trout and other kinds in the creeks. Of the bird kind, there were quail and prairie chickens and ducks and wild geese were birds of passage. Not to mention rabbits, always present, a few deer then abounded which C.F. Albee and others hunted with an old-time heavy rifle now in possession of Alfred Albee.

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