Biography of Nathan Richardson

By Mary Warner

Nathan Richardson was articulate, opinionated, generous, honest, fair, and diplomatic. The November, 1892 issue of *The Northwest Magazine* continues the cascade of adjectives:

> Mr. Richardson is known as a gentleman of unimpeachable integrity, accompanied with intelligence of a high order . . . . Mr. Richardson is exceedingly popular as well as respected in the community. His kindly disposition manifests itself in many ways. Notwithstanding the numerous demands on his attention, he always manages to find time to devote to any meritorious matter. Mayor Richardson is sixty-three years of age, but his energy and activity are unabated, and the probabilities are that he will long continue to serve his fellow citizens with his characteristic zeal and ability.

Richardson's many good qualities earned him the nickname "Uncle Nate". They also garnered him the distinction of holding more public offices than any other person in the history of Morrison County, Minnesota. Rarely in the early history of the county is the force of one person's character so great that it is regularly commented upon in historical documents. Nathan Richardson is an exception to the rule. Taken together, these frequent, mostly positive comments assemble the portrait of a man who was instrumental in shaping Morrison County and the City of Little Falls. Of course, being a politician, Richardson had his share of adversaries, many of whom were quick to point out his shortcomings. Popular though Nate may have been, he didn't float through life with nary a problem.

The story of Nathan Richardson is thoroughly entwined with the beginnings of Morrison County and the City of Little Falls, such that it is impossible to relate one without the other. Detours into other historic county events are inevitable within his life story.

Nathan's Early Life (1829-1854)

Nathan Richardson was born to Martin Richardson and Candace (Comstock) Richardson on February 24, 1829, in Clyde, Wayne County, New York. Wayne County was formed in 1823, only a few years before Nathan's birth. Of several overarching patterns in Nathan's life, this was a harbinger of his tendency to be present at the outset of things. The Erie Canal, which runs through Wayne County and upon which the town of Clyde is situated, was finished in 1825-26.

Early Years

It is likely that Martin and Candace settled in Clyde during the rapid immigration brought on by the completion of the canal.[1]
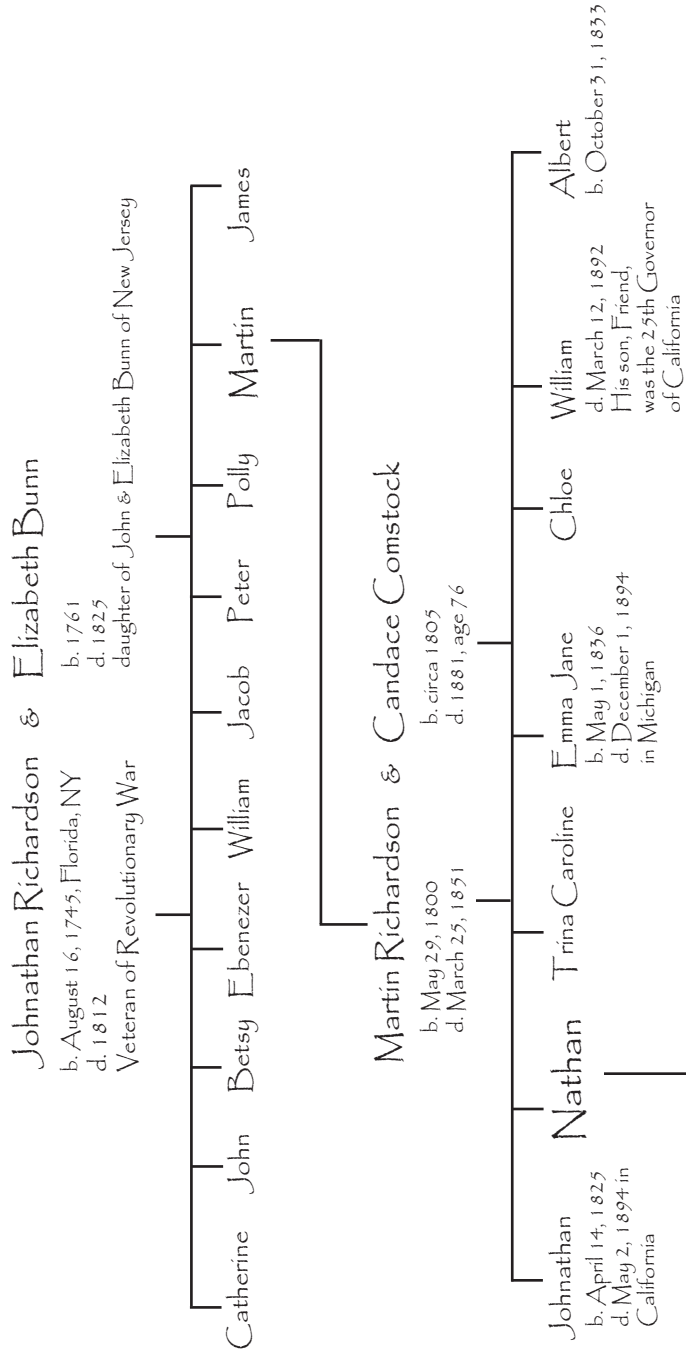
Martin and Candace lived in New York State until after the birth of their son Albert in 1833. There is some question as to how many children they had. Two sources report that Nathan "was the second son of a family of nine children."[2] Another source claims that Martin and Candace had "eight children, six of whom are now living."[3] Nathan's siblings included Jonathan, Trina Caroline, Emma, Chloe, William, and Albert. Trina Caroline died in infancy. No documentation was found for one or two extra children and Nathan wrote in an article dated 1904 that his "father settled twelve miles from Pontiac in 1834 and raised four boys and two girls."[4] *(See Richardson Pedigree, pg. 18-19)*

Nathan was five years old when his family moved to Commerce, Oakland County, Michigan, "twelve miles from Pontiac." The family's migration west was part of a larger movement of settlers from New York State to Michigan Territory with the Erie Canal providing a convenient route between the two.[5] Martin purchased 320 acres of land in Commerce Township in October 1835 and erected "one of the first frame houses ever put up in this township and brought on a span of horses, which was a great curiosity in those days."[6] Candace bought an additional 80 acres in Commerce in April 1837.[7] First in Clyde and now in Commerce, the Richardson family was again on the edge between wilderness and settlement. In Commerce, they broke land, helped found a Baptist church and watched as businesses, houses and towns sprang up around them.[8] Young Nathan grew up thinking that settling territories and starting communities were normal activities. He also got a lesson in holding political office from his father, who served as Assessor in Commerce Township.[9]

Nathan received his primary school education in Michigan and continued his studies for one summer at an academy in Milford, Michigan. Then, he attended the Romeo Branch of the University of Michigan in Macomb County.[10] He is listed, along with his brother Jonathan, as a student in the 1848-49 school catalogue of officers and students.[11]

His education at the Romeo Academy may have shaped his views concerning the equality of all human beings. According to a brief history of Romeo, Michigan, "Emphasis on education attracted a large number of professional people to the village. *(quote continues, pg. 20)*

Nathan Richardson's Pedigree Chart

Johnathan Richardson & Elizabeth Bunn
b. August 16, 1745, Florida, NY   b. 1761
d. 1812   d. 1825
Veteran of Revolutionary War   daughter of John & Elizabeth Bunn of New Jersey

Catherine   John   Betsy   Ebenezer   William   Jacob   Peter   Polly   Martin   James

Martin Richardson & Candace Comstock
b. May 29, 1800   b. circa 1805
d. March 25, 1851   d. 1881, age 76

Johnathan   Nathan   Trina Caroline   Emma Jane   Chloe   William   Albert

Johnathan
b. April 14, 1825
d. May 2, 1894 in
California

Emma Jane
b. May 1, 1836
d. December 1, 1894
in Michigan

William
d. March 12, 1892
His son, Friend,
was the 25th Governor
of California

Albert
b. October 31, 1833

Nathan Richardson & **Mary Anne Roof (Ruf/Ruff)**
b. February 24, 1829 in Clyde, New York   b. May 4, 1825 in Heckenging, Germany
d. January 9, 1908   d. April 13, 1899

married: June 1, 1857 in St. Cloud, MN

Clarrilla
also called Clara
b. May 21, 1858
m. Joseph Foisey on
October 22, 1884
d. November 9, 1893
No children

Martin Mathias
b. December 10, 1859
m. Mary A. Desautel
on December 28, 1886
d.

Martin and Mary had one child, Nathan Henry Richardson, who was born August 27, 1894. The family ended up in Spokane, Washington.

Raymond Jerome
b. April 28, 1861
m. Elma Edwina Hamilton on February 5, 1885
d. December 3, 1898 in Fallbrook, California

Raymond and Elma had two children. Clarence was born March 27, 1886 in Little Falls, Minnesota. He died in 1956 in Long Beach, California. Marion Helen Richardson was born August 19, 1889. When she was 2½ her family moved to Fallbrook, California. After Raymond died, Elma remarried Alfonso LeFevre. Marion Helen, a.k.a. Helen, married Fred Voigt.

Francis Albert
b. December 24, 1862
m. Florence Thornton on December 9, 1903
d.
Had a jewelry store in Parma, Idaho
Francis & Florence had 4 daughters

Mary Anne
b. August 16, 1864
m. William Harker on August 8, 1887
d. 1956 in Warroad, Minnesota

Mary Anne & William had one daughter, Clarrilla Elizabeth, born April 26, 1889 in Wyndmere, North Dakota. She died December 1, 1922.

The Account Book

"Romeo citizens were involved in the great reform movements of the nineteenth century including the abolishment of slavery (Romeo was an important station on the Underground Railway), prohibition and women's rights."[12] Nathan's attitude in this regard was certainly molded by his parents, as well. His mother was a Quaker and his father "was a strong anti-slave man, and cast the first ballot for that cause in [Commerce Township]."[13]

A glimpse of Nathan's early adult life in Commerce, Michigan, can be found in a record and account book he kept from 1851 to 1854. The book is full of the scrolling handwriting for which Nathan became known. Started after the death of Nathan's father, the first entry, dated June 1, 1851, is an account of the items he received from Martin's estate. They include a "yoke of catle, one cast iron bean plough, one log chain, one beggy mashine sower, one sheep skin, five bushels of oats, one ox yoke, one old wagon, one grindstone, brakingup plough and rigging, one old axe [and] one buck saw."[14] Nathan carefully recorded the value of each item.

Much of the rest of the book tracks Nathan's work for people and purchases he made on credit. Family members figured heavily in keeping Nathan employed. Those listed include John Richardson (Nathan's uncle or cousin), Abram Richardson, Lewis Richardson, William Richardson (Nathan's uncle or brother), Albert Richardson, and Candace Richardson. As a responsible son, Nathan paid Candace to board him at a cost of one dollar per week. In the summer of 1852, he also recorded a debt of three dollars to her "for the use of the barn and premises."[15]

Nathan's energy shines through the account book with the various types of labor he engaged in. A sampling of his work included gathering apples, digging potatoes, "ploughing", "picking up sprouts or grubbs", drawing wheat, harvesting, "rakeing & binding six acres of oats for Lewis Richardson", planting corn, cutting brush, "braking" and dragging farm soil, and "thrashing" [i.e. threshing].[16]

Nathan Arrives in Minnesota Territory

After teaching for five terms in Michigan, Nathan set out with his cousin, John Richardson, for Minnesota.[17] Nathan had decided to join another cousin, Lewis Richardson, in making a life in what European Americans considered untamed land. When Nathan arrived

Nathan Arrives on Foot

at St. Anthony in 1854, Minnesota was still a territory and included portions of what is now North and South Dakota.[18]

Early European American settlers who moved to areas still largely populated with American Indians were an ambitious and strong-willed lot. They had to be in order to build communities in areas that were wildly rural according to their standards. The adventurous nature of Nathan and other white settlers gave them the chutzpah to wear many hats, travel widely, and interact with both native people and various European immigrants throughout the territory. Nathan's past experience didn't hurt, either.

In studying the territorial history of Minnesota, the connections between the movers and shakers of distant locales is astounding. A relatively small group of individuals was responsible for organizing an entire state and many of the communities within. The first census was taken in 1849, just after the territory was formally organized. It shows 3,067 men and 1,713 women, for a total of 4,780 people, living in the territory. This compares with a population of 4,919,479 in Minnesota in 2000.[19] The 1849 census counted only Americans of European descent, plus a number of Métis, or mixed-blood European/American Indians.[20] To a student of Minnesota history, many of the names on the 1849 census are readily recognizable and include Alexander Ramsey, Henry Hastings Sibley, Franklin Steele, and Henry M. Rice.

Nathan's first employment in the territory was found with the company of Whipple & Tourtillotte, which was based in St. Anthony. His cousin, John, joined him in this endeavor.[21] The firm sent the men to Bogus Brook, a branch of the Rum River, with a logging crew. Nathan and John spent the winter felling logs. "On account of low water in the spring, the logs failed to come out, so the firm failed to pay their men."[22] With this setback, John returned to Michigan while Nathan walked to Little Falls.[23]

Why did Nathan go on foot? Probably because he had few choices in modes of transportation. When he set out in 1855, there were no railroads. Basic roads were little more than trails, with the most used European-made route being the Red River Oxcart Trail. One leg of this trading route, the Woods Trail, ran along the Mississippi River from the St. Anthony area through Little Falls and continued northwest to the Selkirk Colony in Canada.[24] By the mid-1850s, two to three hundred carts traveling train-style were typical on the trail.[25] Nathan, however, didn't have the luxury of hitching a ride on an oxcart

A Dubious Claim

because the trail didn't run through the Bogus Brook logging camp, which was located approximately thirty or so miles south of Lake Mille Lacs.

The Little Falls Settlement (1855)

It was fortuitous for Little Falls and Morrison County that Nathan, a physically and mentally vigorous man, chose to make Little Falls his home. When he arrived in May 1855, he met up with his cousin Lewis Richardson, who was in "charge of the lumbering operations of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company, then just organized" and apparently gained employment with the company, as well.[26]

According to the *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, there were only three families living in log cabins in Little Falls when Nathan arrived. The three families included John and Lydia Kidder; Elliot and Mathilda Kidder and children; and William Sturgis and his second wife, Rosanna, along with children from both of William's wives. Elliot Kidder was the son of John and Lydia. There was a direct relationship between the Kidders and William Sturgis in that John and Lydia's daughter, Dorothy or "Dolly", was William's first wife. Dolly had died in 1851.[27]

The claim of only three families in Little Falls in 1855 is a dubious one and is contradicted by both the *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* and Nathan Richardson. In studying the mini-biographies of early Morrison County settlers provided by *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, at least four additional families had moved to Little Falls by 1855. James R. Steele, who was nine at the time, came to Little Falls with his family in 1854.[28] James was Rosanna Sturgis' brother. Abner Wilson Camp, Samuel Lee, and William Pedley, along with their families, also called Little Falls home in 1855. Nathan Richardson, himself, as stated in the 1876 history, makes the claim that "Previous to 1855 the only two buildings in Little Falls were two log houses, a frame house in which E. J. Kidder now lives, and a small building called a school house, but a number of settlers came in that year and a start was made toward making a town."[29]

And, where was Lewis Richardson living when Nathan arrived? No known source, not even Nathan, discusses this. Because of the lack of dwellings, he could have stayed at James Warren's hotel (built by the late William Aitken) in Swan River, which was a settlement about five

Nate Builds a Hotel

miles south of Little Falls on the east side of the Mississippi River.[30]
The most likely possibility is that Lewis stayed with someone from the
Little Falls Manufacturing Company.

Little Falls Manufacturing Company & Nathan's Hotel

The Little Falls Manufacturing Company was owned and oper-
ated by James Fergus, William Sturgis, and Calvin Tuttle. Fergus and
Tuttle had met in St. Anthony and were interested in finding a new site
to develop along the Mississippi River. Little Falls was a perfect choice
because of its natural waterfall, which could provide water power for
a variety of business enterprises. When the two men made a scouting
expedition to Little Falls in 1854, they discovered that William Sturgis
owned the wing dam and mill built previously by James Green and
several co-partners. They convinced Sturgis to partner with them to
create the Little Falls Manufacturing Company.[31]

James Fergus and his wife, Pamelia, wasted no time in relocating
from St. Anthony to Little Falls.

> By spring 1855, the Fergus house was ready and Rosanna Stur-
> gis welcomed Pamelia, eight-year-old Mary Agnes, six-year-old Luella,
> and four-year-old Andrew. Pamelia could hardly have been prepared
> for the scene that met her gaze. Along the muddy streets was a scatter
> of houses in various stages of completion. The Fergus home, an eleven-
> room, two-story structure, was already occupied by a goodly number of
> company employees. . . .[32]

Could this have been where Lewis was staying when Nathan
sauntered into town?

It was not uncommon for start-up businesses in frontier towns to
provide living accommodations for their employees. Logging com-
panies had set this precedent with their temporary woodland camps.
According to the 1849 Territorial Census of Minnesota, the William
Sturgis dwelling housed twenty-seven people. It is unlikely that they
were all related to William. In a place that had few buildings, business
owners felt a responsibility toward caring for their employees.

The lack of housing created an opportunity for an entrepreneur
such as Nathan. He decided to build a hotel.

> He went to the mouth of the Little Elk River, camped in a log

Nathan Richardson's Hotel. When Nate sold this hotel to John and Margaretha Ault, they renamed it the Northern Hotel.

shanty, and working alone, got out the timber for the sills of a hotel and timber for a barn. He had the main part of the hotel and barn ready for business that winter. In company with Wm. B. Fairbanks he kept the house open that winter for the accommodation of the public, it being the first hotel at Little Falls.[33]

Many sources claim that Lewis Richardson assisted Nathan with his hotel project, but Nathan himself makes no such statement in his history.[34]

Building a Company Town

Like a dry sponge flung into water, 1855 was a year of sudden and great expansion for Little Falls, mostly due to the efforts of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. Much like the developers of today, the company had its fingers in many pots. It was officially incorporated as the "Little Falls manufacturing company" on March 1, 1856 by the Minnesota Territorial Legislature, but began business in 1854 with an Article of Agreement.[35] This document, drawn up on February 5, 1854 and filed the following year, formalized a legal bond between Fergus, Tuttle and Sturgis. It stated the company's purpose as "operating and improving said property at Little Falls, by making lumber, Grinding Grain, farming, cutting logs, making a Town, Selling goods, and doing any other thing or things, conducive to the benefit of said copartnership in the premises."[36] In addition, the company was to operate and improve the Sturgis dam and sawmill and deal in real estate. It had purchased some 2,000 acres at Little Falls, including the original John Kidder claim.[37] Thus, the company had land to sell to incoming settlers.

Little Falls east of the Mississippi River was part of Benton County in 1855 and a survey and plat of the east side of the town was done by R. B. Blake on June 28, 1855, at the behest of the Little Falls Manufacturing Company.[38] On December 5th of that year, Blake surveyed and platted forty-seven of 315 acres on the west side of the river. This portion of the town was called "Cob-ba-conse" according to the plat.[39] The company later referred to Cob-ba-conse as Little Falls West and was involved with constructing houses and a hotel in this area.

Other enterprises of the company included building bridges and roads. It worked on the Platte River bridge, the Rice Creek bridge, the ravine bridge, and a Mississippi River bridge.[40] The ravine bridge

was critical to crossing a deep creek bed that ran through the east side of Little Falls. In fact, the ravine had to be bridged in several areas of town. The Mississippi River bridge built by the company in 1857-58 was a Howe truss bridge.[41] Iron for the bridge was hauled in from St. Paul, Minnesota.[42] As for roads, the company worked on the Otter Tail Road, the Long Prairie Road, and the Mille Lacs Road.[43]

In order to accomplish its varied missions, the Little Falls Manufacturing Company employed men and paid them by the job. A Frenchman got five dollars for cutting brush on the streets and an Indian guide was paid fourteen dollars for work on the Mille Lacs road.[44] Samuel Putnam, who completed a new village plat in 1856, was a regular recipient of wages for his survey work. Along with housing, the company also showed concern for its employees in an unusual way. In August 1856, it "paid expenses of looking for sending team after, finding coffins and burying the two men that were drowned while in our employ on the team site."[45]

The company was basically the only game in town for a couple of years. If someone new to early Little Falls wanted to build a home or business, he or she went to the Little Falls Manufacturing Company for supplies. Nathan Richardson was a regular customer and purchased land from the company in 1856. In 1858, he bought lumber from the company in order to build an office.[46] Along with cutting timber near the Little Elk, surely he got some of his construction materials for his hotel from the Little Falls Manufacturing Company. While a logical supposition, it cannot be confirmed because the Manufacturing Company's Daybook doesn't include 1855 transactions. One source indicates that some of the supplies and furnishings for Richardson's hotel came from Michigan, where he went to finish settling his father's estate.[47]

Nathan Finds a Calling

With the Little Falls Manufacturing Company providing the ingredients to create a community, some form of government was bound to follow. It was in this realm that Nathan Richardson found a long-term talent and calling.

When Minnesota Territory was formed by the United States government in 1849, it was divided into nine large counties. Three of these counties, Benton, Ramsey and Washington, "were declared to be