

Preface

The Wilder Foundation—an organization more than a century old—has an identity and history linked to Minnesota’s past, along with many other organizations that have served our community. As we at Wilder seek to create the world we want to be part of, it is important to understand how the organization’s origins, history and our role in community inform our work and relationships today. The following report was commissioned to understand the critical influences of 19th century history upon the roots of our organization. This report documents key historical events in Minnesota’s history and overlays what we know about Amherst H. Wilder’s relationships with business leaders and Indigenous people.

This report assists us to understand and critically analyze Wilder’s founding and its role in community from an equity lens. At this time, we are sharing this report with Wilder staff with an intent to offer education and raise awareness. As we continue to reflect on and discuss this report, we are exploring more ways to use it. Despite an uncharted path forward, we share this now to practice behaviors that will build trust across our organization and community:

- Transparency: Many staff know we began this project and have expressed interest in it
- Sharing work in stages toward completion, rather than insisting on perfection
- Acknowledgement that the benefits we receive from our organization’s endowment derive, in part, from institutional racism
- Moving from trauma to healing—naming the historical experience as a first piece to deal with trauma and shift toward healing
- Accepting our responsibility to act as “one Wilder”

Readers of the report will have different experiences based on their history, culture, personal connections, and perspectives. You may experience a range of emotions and arrive at different interpretations of the history than others. We want to hold the complexities of diverse perspectives, while remaining supportive to staff and the communities we serve.

This is an opportunity to reflect on our past and collectively build an even stronger future. As Wilder leaders and staff, we must recognize and take responsibility for our organization’s history, and we must remember that we all are active participants in shaping the history of this organization. All of us jointly define Wilder in the here and now, and we all can co-create the evolving legacy of Wilder, as perceived internally and by the community.

Our Executive Leadership Team, our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Team, and our Board of Directors, all will play their parts to support an equity journey that is ongoing, iterative, and at times deeply personal. We hope that staff and our communities will continue to engage with us on this journey of discovery, reflection, healing and co-creation of our future.

As we distribute the report to our staff, we are encouraging them to think about the following:

- *What insights or lessons does reading this report provide for you?*
- *What might be the implications for this history for our collective work today?*

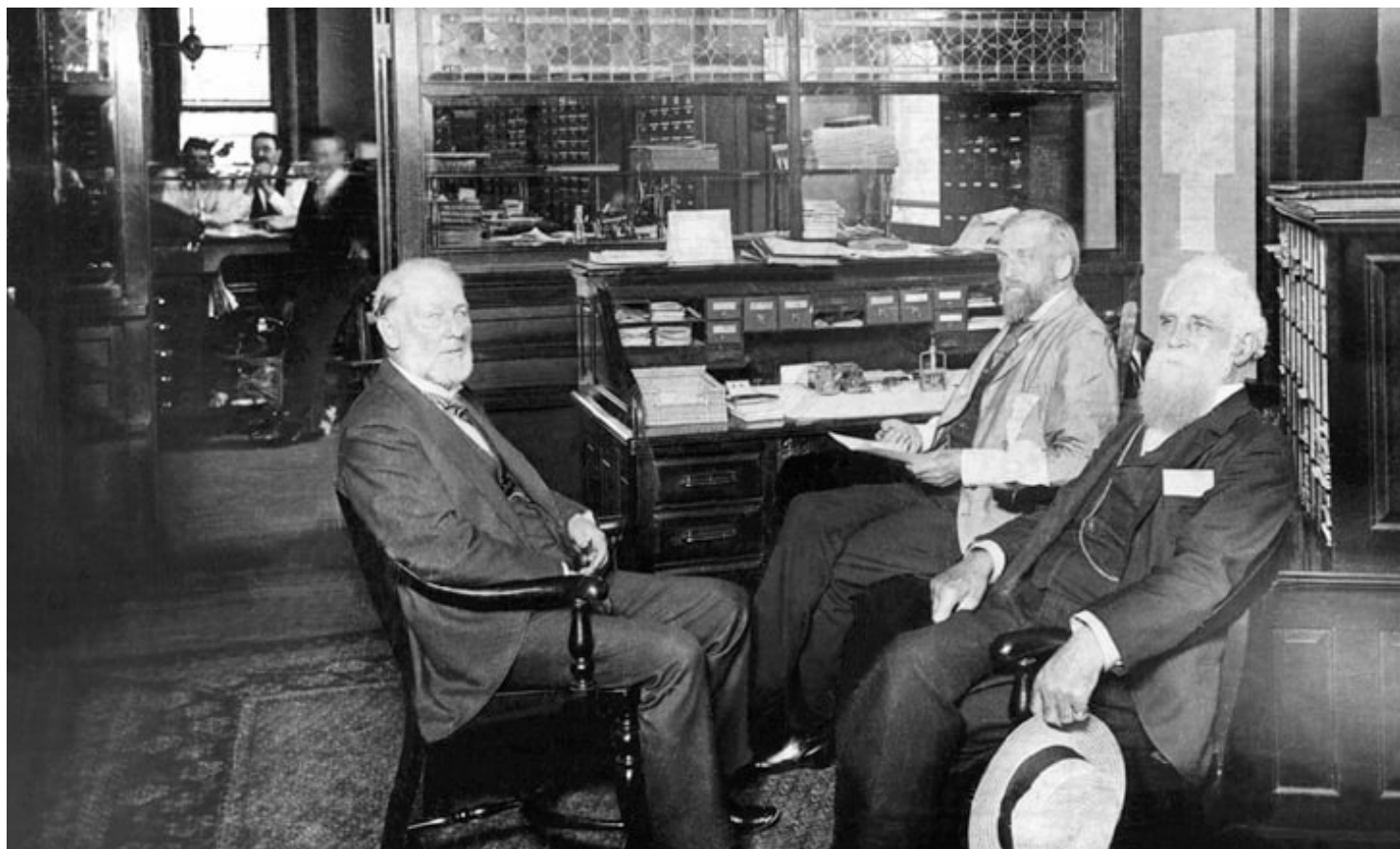
Toward a Critical History

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Introduction by Dr. Brenda Child

Research and Writing by Paige Mitchell

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Forward: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Critical History Project

The enclosed report, *Toward a Critical History: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation* represents the first phase of a project to examine the history of Amherst H. Wilder and the Foundation that bears his name through a racial equity lens. The intent of this project is to inform the Foundation's racial equity strategies by better understanding how Amherst H. Wilder accumulated his wealth, and by reflecting on the organization's interactions with communities in the East Metro throughout its history. The approach to this project is based on examples from organizations such as Brown University¹ and Ramsey County, Minnesota,² which have published critical histories to inform and advance equity initiatives.

Wilder's Racial Equity Workgroup received grant funding from the Minnesota Historical Society as well as funds from Wilder Foundation's catalyst fund to conduct this critical history and develop the enclosed report. The workgroup contracted with two historians to write the report: Paige Mitchell, a graduate student in Public History at the University of Minnesota, and Professor Brenda Child, Chair of the American Studies Department at the University of Minnesota.

Ms. Mitchell reviewed primary and secondary historical documents in order to respond to the guiding question for this phase of the project: How did Amherst H. Wilder accumulate his wealth, at what cost, and at whose expense? The research focused specifically on Wilder's business interests and the impact they had among Indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved peoples. In keeping with the terms of the grant funding, the resulting report is available to the public through the Minnesota Historical Society.

Equipped with a greater understanding of Amherst H. Wilder the historical figure, the Foundation's Race Equity Workgroup now turns its attention to a critical history of the organization itself. This second and final phase of the project will examine how the Foundation has interacted with communities — specifically immigrant communities and communities of color — in Saint Paul and the East Metro throughout its existence. Phase II is expected to be complete in early 2021. At that time, we will share a complete report that incorporates information from both phases of this historical analysis. The Foundation's Racial Equity Workgroup and Executive Team will use the full scope of the critical history project as a tool for reflection and learning that will inform our ongoing racial equity efforts.

Any questions about the enclosed report or the critical history project should be directed to Michelle Morehouse, vice president of advancement: michelle.morehouse@wilder.org, 651-280-2447.

¹ Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. *Slavery and justice*. (2006). Retrieved from http://brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf

² Ramsey County Anti-Racism Leadership Team. (2008). *Anti-racism institutional audit: Institutional history 1849-2006*. <https://www.ramseycounty.us/sites/default/files/Assistance%20and%20Support/Anti-racism%20institutional%20audit.pdf>

Introduction: A history of American settler colonialism

I often ask my students at the University of Minnesota, “What is history?” We eventually come to an understanding that history is what happened in the past, but history is also about how we remember. When we remember, we sometimes leave out things, important things, because there is too much to remember, or sometimes we want to forget parts that are unpleasant. History and memory are both a changing landscape. Yet, it is important to remember things, events, and people. We can celebrate the past, remember the important figures as well as the everyday people, but it is just as necessary to keep track of the parts of the past that are difficult and even painful to remember. Altogether, that is what it means to study history.

In recent years, scholars around the globe have been interested in ideas of settler colonialism. One important thinker in this area, Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe, wrote about “settler colonial theory,” which has been key to the fields of American Indian history and Indigenous Studies. It is also key to understanding Minnesota’s history, the people and places that were a part of our past, and to any interpretation of the world we live in today. Settler colonial theory is also useful for contextualizing the life and legacy of Amherst H. Wilder, a settler to the eastern part of the United States, and eventually Minnesota.

If anyone wonders why American Indians today are offended by the Washington Redskins or the former Fighting Sioux of the University of North Dakota, the nostalgia aspect of settler colonial theory offers an explanation—it is part of colonialism, and one might add, white supremacy. What could this have to do with Amherst H. Wilder, the New Englander of English heritage who pioneered his way to Minnesota in the middle of the 19th century? I suggest we apply ideas of settler colonial theory to Wilder’s life. Historian Nancy Shoemaker defines settler colonialism in the following way: “Large numbers of settlers claim land and become the majority. Employing a ‘logic of elimination,’ as Patrick Wolfe put it in the *American Historical Review*, ‘they attempt to engineer the disappearance of the original inhabitants everywhere except in nostalgia.’”³

In addition to settler colonialism, Shoemaker also defines “extractive colonialism,” another concept that is important to understanding the family story, career and legacy of Amherst H. Wilder. Shoemaker writes:

*“All the colonizers want is a raw material found in a particular locale: beaver fur, buffalo hides, gold, guano, sandalwood. The desire for natural history specimens and ethnographic artifacts could also be considered extractive colonialism. A slash-and-burn operation, extractive colonialism does not necessarily entail permanent occupation, but it often seems to follow. Extractive colonizers might destroy or push away Indigenous inhabitants to access resources but more typically depend upon Native diplomatic mediation, environmental knowledge and labor.”*³

³ Shoemaker, Nancy. (2015). A typology of Colonialism. *Perspectives on History: The Magazine of the American Historical Association*. Retrieved from <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2015/a-typology-of-colonialism>

Colonialism in Wilder's birthplace

This history of Amherst H. Wilder begins in the Adirondack Mountains of northeastern New York. Before the arrival of European settlers, this region was home to the Haudenosaunee people and their tribal neighbors. The arrival of European settlers, but particularly the populous and invasive English settlers, had a devastating effect on the lands and economies of the Haudenosaunee people, who had been the main agriculturalists of the northeast, where women tended vast gardens for miles around their settlements.

English settlers may have noticed that a division of labor existed among the Haudenosaunee peoples, which differed from their own societal practices in which men were the primary farmers. This is another aspect of settler colonialism, as settlers tend to view themselves and their ways as racially superior to the peoples or nations they are working to colonize. Patrick Wolfe once posed an interesting question: “But if the natives are already agriculturalists, then why not simply incorporate their productivity into the colonial economy?” By the time of Wilder’s birth in Lewis, New York, in 1828⁴, the formerly powerful and economically successful Haudenosaunee were living on reservations in the northeast, and white settlers were making a living through businesses like logging and mining on Haudenosaunee land. Alanson Wilder, Amherst’s father, “engaged in the mercantile business in connection with iron and lumber,” assisted by his son until the latter left for Minnesota in 1859.⁴

Minnesota Indigenous history and the experience of settler colonialism

In his 2006 article, *Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native*, Patrick Wolfe wrote “Contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life.”⁵

What contests, for land and life, did the original people of Minnesota, particularly Dakota and Ojibwe people, face during the early territorial and statehood years? For generations the Dakota and Ojibwe people lived and thrived in what became known from 1849-1858 as the “Minnesota Territory,” a vast region that included Minnesota and parts of what would become the states of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

It is important to remember that prior to the 1830s, there was not a tremendously strong European or American presence in the Great Lakes. In fact, the two big powers were the Ojibwe and the Dakota. Historian Michael Witgen described them as “the two largest political, social, and cultural formations in the Great Lakes.”⁶ Pretty much everyone in the northern regions of the Great Lakes spoke Ojibwe or a related Algonquian language, and in southern Minnesota, the Dakota language was spoken. French fur traders in the area married into Indigenous families and began speaking Ojibwe and Dakota, too.

Until 1850, most of the people in Minnesota were Indigenous people — Dakota, and the more numerous Ojibwe. The non-Indigenous population was quite small, with just 6,000 people in the nine counties that made up the Territory. The census did not record the Indians, who made up 84% of the total population. 1851 was the year of Dakota treaties, Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, which opened millions of acres of land to settler colonists and moved the Dakota

⁴ Jarchow, M. (1981). *Amherst H. Wilder and his enduring legacy to Saint Paul*. Saint Paul, MN: The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. p. 2

⁵ Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4).

⁶ Witgen, M. (2012). *An infinity of nations: How the Native new world shaped early North America*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

people into reservations. By 1854, however, the number of non-Indigenous residents had grown to 30,000, and by 1857, it was 150,000. In Minnesota, by the 1860s, non-Indian settlers were in the majority, meaning that Indigenous people were now outnumbered in their own homelands.

1862 was a defining year in the history of Minnesota and the United States. It was a time of terrible violence in Minnesota, and great losses for Dakota people, most of whom were exiled from the Minneapolis-St. Paul region and other homelands after the war. The two Dakota treaties negotiated in 1851 with lands reserved for them along the Minnesota River were utterly disregarded once the treaties were debated in the U.S. Senate. The Senate made a devastating political decision and removed the clause about permanent Dakota reservations in Minnesota. By the summer of 1862, the U.S. and the Dakota were at war.

Charged with murder for the deaths of white settlers during the war, Dakota men who had surrendered were summarily tried by biased military tribunals with little evidence and in which the defendants were unrepresented.⁷ The tribunals also ignored the fact that the Dakota were a sovereign nation at war with the United States, and sentenced 303 Dakota men for execution. This number was reduced, and 38 men were subsequently hanged in late December of 1862. This was not just a tragic event in Minnesota history; it was also the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. This was genocide, in today's vocabulary.

After the war, Minnesota settlers populated the cities and claimed land, employing a "logic of elimination" to the Dakota. To make the Dakota disappear from southern Minnesota, they were made exiles from their homelands — put into prison in Davenport, Iowa, while some Dakota families were sent to live on the Crow Creek Reservation. Other Dakota found it necessary to flee into Canada. There were bounties on Dakota scalps, a practice sanctioned by the Minnesota legislature.⁸ The violence settlers inflicted on the Dakota people did not end there. In the aftermath of the Dakota War, it just moved farther west. After 1862, warfare between Indian nations and the United States extended into a wide region of the northern and southern plains.

As Patrick Wolfe emphasizes, settler colonialism is about access to territory.⁹ This was why Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey went to Ojibwe Country, to a town now called Huot, Minnesota, in 1863, to negotiate with leaders from the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe with his military in full view. By that time, the Dakota War had ended in southern Minnesota, and the Ojibwe certainly feared for their own lives and livelihoods. In the resulting Treaty of 1863, the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe's only treaty with the United States, the tribe was compelled by the threat of military force to cede a large piece of territory that included some of Ojibwe Country's best land for hunting, agriculture, and harvesting wild rice within the new state of Minnesota and the Dakota Territory. Settlers to the Dakotas and Minnesota directly and permanently benefitted from Indian dispossession.

As Dakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. pointed out throughout his remarkable career, American Indians are different from other racial or ethnic groups in the United States, because they negotiated and signed treaties with the federal government of the United States. American Indian nations entered into treaties with European nations before there was a United States, and well before there was a Minnesota. The political sovereignty of Native nations is important to understanding Minnesota history and our contemporary politics, just as we must consider the history of settler colonialism in Minnesota's past, including Amherst H. Wilder's own life story.

⁷ For more information, see Minnesota Historical Society. *The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862: The trials and hanging*. <http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/aftermath/trials-hanging>

⁸ Routel, C. (2013). Minnesota bounties on Dakota men during the U.S.-Dakota war. *Faculty Scholarship*, paper 260. Retrieved from <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1261&context=facsch>

⁹ Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4).

Newcomers to Minnesota

Amherst Wilder arrived in Saint Paul in 1859, the first full year of Minnesota statehood. Within three years, the settlers to Minnesota were embroiled in full-scale war with the Dakota people of southern Minnesota, one that would come to define relations with Dakota people until the present day. Wilder gained a strong foothold in the region almost immediately when he joined in the Red River Trade between Mendota across from Fort Snelling and Winnipeg and became a business partner with his cousin, James Burbank, who was already well established in transportation and other operations throughout the region.¹⁰ In this business, they benefitted from the labor of the Métis (descendants of Indigenous North American people and European settlers, usually French), who drove the carts for the Red River Trade. Wilder, along with other settlers, was able to gain his economic foothold in the region by securing contracts from the U.S. Congress to supply goods, beef, and other food to relocated Indigenous people on reservations throughout the region.¹¹

Another of Wilder's business interests was in insurance. Alexander Ramsey was a founder, along with Henry M. Rice and other significant political and military figures in early Minnesota, of the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company (later part of the St. Paul Companies, Inc.). The real estate boom on the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers that led to the creation of St. Paul and Minneapolis also created wealth for settlers like Ramsey, Rice, and Wilder. Businesses and institutions they founded are still operating today.

Before the advent of settler colonial theory, and with older views of American history, events like the Dakota War of 1862 or the Treaty of 1863 were usually explained as an inevitable “clash of cultures,” where Indigenous hunters who lived in a “primitive” society predictably gave way to superior, agricultural lifeways, and American civilization. But Ojibwe people had a diverse economy. They farmed and had particularly bountiful gardens in western Minnesota and the Red River Valley, in addition to hunting and harvesting wild rice, maple sugar, and wild fruits. Like Indigenous nations in the east, Native people with a mixed economy that included agriculture were forced to cede land rather than having their productivity incorporated into the growing Minnesota economy. This was because settlers like Wilder tended to value European-American approaches to agriculture and domesticated farm animals over forested lands, wetlands, bison and wild rice. These “newcomers to Minnesota,” as Merrill Jar chow notes in his biography of Wilder, were settlers from other places in the east, such as New England, Pennsylvania, or, like Wilder, New York. The same political strategies for dealing with the Indigenous peoples in New England and New York, such as the Haudenosaunee, came to Minnesota with the new settlers—Ramsey, Rice, Wilder and their generation—in the form of settler colonialism.

Scholars writing about the history of settler colonialism have also defined it as more than a series of direct or indirect violent events (the Treaty of 1863, the Dakota War, the mass execution, etc.). They point out that settler colonialism is an ongoing belief system and structure, especially if we consider how settlers sought to control space, extract resources, or move land into a legal system defined as private property held by whites. Settler colonialism can help us view the past, and it is still present in Minnesota.

¹⁰ Jarchow, M. (1981). *Amherst H. Wilder and his enduring legacy to Saint Paul*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. p. 6.

¹¹ Jarchow, M. (1981). pp. 27-28.

Part 1: Minnesota – A new state



"The Falls of St. Anthony." Circa 1860.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



A General View of St. Paul. Circa 1857.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

As noted, up until the 1850s the majority of the people living in what is now Minnesota were Indians – Dakota and Ojibwe. The decade preceding Minnesota's official statehood in 1858 brought myriad changes to the territory. White settlement increased, and newly appointed officials established boundaries, formulated a governmental system with its own constitution, and decided on the territory's first governor, Alexander Ramsey.¹²

In 1859, the year that Amherst H. Wilder arrived in Minnesota at the age of 31, the new state was a vast

expanse of land with various trading outposts and small settlements along its rivers. The boom in settler population (over 150,000 in 1857) resulted in the hasty construction of wooden houses, new stage roads, and flour mills concentrated in the fledgling settlements of Saint Anthony, Minneapolis, and Saint Paul. Although newer settlers were mostly from the East Coast, immigrants from Germany, Norway, Sweden, and other European countries settled in the area as well.

Minnesota territory gained statehood during a time of intense political upheaval. Increased immigration, the expansion of slavery, and the question of Indigenous land holdings dominated conversations both locally in Minnesota, and at the country's capitol in Washington, D.C. Tensions over land were particularly prominent in Minnesota. Although French settlers had co-existed with Indigenous tribes in the area since the late 18th century, significant increases in the white settler population in the mid-to-late 19th century fueled the desire to expand colonial settlement throughout the state. Native American tribes recognized this furor and entered into a series of treaties which ultimately resulted in the relinquishment of their lands and pushed them further north and south. Indigenous peoples felt the increasing threat intimately, which caused rifts within their communities and increased the calls for war against white settlers.¹³

Amherst Wilder entered Minnesota at this pivotal time. The years following Wilder's arrival would redefine Minnesota and give birth to the industries that would determine its economic and social character for decades and centuries to come.¹⁴

¹² Atkins, A. (2007). *Creating Minnesota: A history from the inside out*. Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press: 34-36.

¹³ It is important to note here that the Indigenous communities in Minnesota were always diverse and politically varied. However, increased white settlement caused new tensions within Indigenous communities, as people were split on how to react to the increased settlement.

¹⁴ For a complete list of historical Minnesota events, see the timeline at the end of A. Atkins (2007). *Creating Minnesota: A history from the inside out*. Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Part II: Wilder, government contractor

Upon arriving in St. Paul, Amherst Wilder established himself in a variety of industries, including wholesale groceries and dry goods, insurance, railroads, lumber, banking, manufacturing, construction, military and government contracting, and land development. He was a board member for numerous companies, and was known for his acumen as a businessman. Although he had many business interests, he considered himself to be primarily a government contractor, listing it as his occupation in the 1870 United States census. Wilder's contracting engagements, when historicized, reveal his involvement in a complex network of finance and industry, many aspects of which relied on slave labor, cash crops, and the genocide of Native Americans across the Midwest.

Trade, slavery, and forced assimilation

Amherst Wilder first became involved in contracting through his job at J.C. & H.C. Burbank and Company, a wholesale grocery business which specialized in mercantile goods, such as meat, cloth, tea, and tobacco.¹⁵

James Crawford (J.C.) Burbank and Henry Clay (H.C.) Burbank were cousins of Wilder. In 1850 and 1853 respectively, they had settled in St. Paul, Minnesota. Together, the Burbanks established express mail lines, becoming highly successful. Wilder quickly became a partner at J.C. & H.C. Burbank and Company. John L. Merriam, Wilder's brother-in-law, also joined the company and became one of Wilder's closest friends and associates. Eventually, this partnership amicably dissolved in 1866, and the business was reconfigured under Wilder and his fellow associate, Channing Seabury.¹⁶ After assuming ownership of the company, Wilder renamed the business "A. H. Wilder and Company," and focused on trade along the Red River.

In 1860, the United States Army appointed Wilder as agent for the quartermaster department, securing him several profitable contracts transporting military supplies to U.S. forts in Minnesota. As relations with Native Americans became increasingly tense, Minnesota officials militarized trading posts throughout the Red River Valley, culminating in many new military forts throughout the region. An increasing number of forts meant an increasing amount of business for men like Wilder. One of Wilder's military fort contracts from 1863 lists supplies including pork, rice, grits, and Rio coffee.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jarchow, M. (1981). *Amherst H. Wilder and His Enduring Legacy to Saint Paul*. Saint Paul, MN: The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. p. 22.

¹⁶ Jarchow, M. pp. 32-33.

¹⁷ Jarchow, M. pp. 71-91.

The inclusion of Rio coffee on the list provides an indication of Wilder's involvement in international trade. In the mid-19th century, coffee became Brazil's leading export. To supply the increasing demand for coffee in the United States and Europe, colonizers created a plantation system in South America, using enslaved peoples as labor until as late as 1888, when slavery was formally abolished.¹⁸ Like his contemporaries, Wilder would have directly profited from his involvement in the coffee industry and the slave labor used to produce it.

Wilder's military contracts also precipitated his involvement in local trade economies. In the early 18th century, Native American tribes had begun forming relationships with French fur traders in Minnesota. Dakota and Ojibwe tribes became heavily involved in the industry. Throughout the 18th century, fur traders and early white, predominately French, settlers co-existed with Indigenous peoples in the region, even adopting Indigenous customs and creating blended families. However, increased numbers of Europeans in the region brought intentional colonizers and missionaries. Believing that cultural assimilation and religious conversion were necessary to ensure the survival of Indigenous peoples, European colonizers worked zealously to eliminate Indigenous cultures, languages, religions, and traditional ways of knowing.¹⁹ In 1824, the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs helped to institutionalize this process of forced assimilation. By the late 19th century, Indigenous children were being forcibly removed from their families and placed in boarding schools in order to separate them from their language, cultures, and tribes. In the words of Captain Richard H. Pratt, the

army officer who developed the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, the goal was to "kill the Indian, save the man."²⁰

By the 19th century, trade in Minnesota was well-established, and several treaties between tribes and the United States had decreased tribal land holding. The Treaties of Fort Laramie (1851 and 1868), established the Dakota Territory in 1861, and allowed for the creation of railroads, posts, and roads on what was previously Dakota land.²¹

Groceries.			
	WHOLESALE.		RETAIL.
Dried Apples $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.....	.11@	.14	.18
Dried Peaches, pared, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb	.20@	.25	.30
" " unpared.	.10@	.14	.20
Sugar, granulated $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.	.15 $\frac{1}{4}$ @	.16	.18
" crushed and powdered	.16 $\frac{1}{4}$ @	.16 $\frac{1}{2}$.18
" A.....	.15 @	.15 $\frac{1}{4}$.17 $\frac{1}{4}$
" C, extra.....		.15	.16 $\frac{1}{2}$
" C.....	.14 $\frac{1}{4}$ @	.14 $\frac{1}{2}$.16
" brown.....	.11@	.14 $\frac{1}{2}$.13@.14
Coffee, Mocha.....	.40@	.45	.55
" Java.....		.36	.40@.45
" Rio.....	.20@	.25	.30@.35
Tea, green.....	\$1.00@1.75		\$1.50@2.20
" black.....	.90@1.15		\$1.10@1.50
" Japan.....	\$1.10@1.25		\$1.25@1.50
Candies, tallow.....	.13@.13 $\frac{1}{2}$.18@.20
" star.....	.15@.16 $\frac{1}{2}$.25
Drips.....	.80@1.10		\$1.50
Golden Syrup.....	.65@.70		\$1.20
N. O. molasses.....	\$1.00@1.05		\$1.10@1.20
Common.....	.50 @.60		90c@1.00
Raisins.....	\$5.75@6.00 per box.		
Soap, German.....	.07@.09		.12 $\frac{1}{2}$
" Babbitt's.....		.12	.15
" Crampton Bros.'s		.11	.15
Salt, coarse $\frac{1}{2}$ bbl.....		\$3.00	\$3.25
" dairy $\frac{1}{2}$ bbl.....		\$8.25	
" " $\frac{1}{2}$ sack.....			.20@.40
Rice $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.....	.08@.10		.12 $\frac{1}{2}$ @.15
Saleratus.....		.10	.12 $\frac{1}{2}$
Powder, rifle $\frac{1}{2}$ lb....			.60
" " $\frac{1}{2}$ keg.....		\$6.75	
Shot $\frac{1}{2}$ lb.....			.15
" " $\frac{1}{2}$ bag.....		\$3.00	
Kerosene $\frac{1}{2}$ gallon....		.38	.50

Minneapolis markets and buying rates. Wilder probably checked these rates frequently. Minneapolis Daily Tribune, March 11, 1870.

- ¹⁸ For more information on this topic see: *The global coffee Economy in Africa, Asia and Latin America, 1500-1989*, edited by: W.G. Clarence Smith (2003, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), especially Hildete Periera de Melo's "Coffee and the Rio de Janeiro economy," pp. 360-385.
- ¹⁹ Minnesota Historical Society. (n.d.) *Federal acts & assimilation policies*. The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. <http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/newcomers-us-government-and-military/acts-policy>
- ²⁰ Lajimodiere, D. (2019). *Native American boarding schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.mnopedia.org/native-american-boarding-schools>. See also Carlisle Indian School Digital resource Center. "Kill the Indian, and save the man:" Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the education of Native Americans. Retrieved from <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teach/kill-indian-and-save-man-capt-richard-h-pratt-education-native-americans>
- ²¹ North Dakota State Government. (2019). *North Dakota: People living on the land. Section 3: The treaties of Fort Laramie, 1851 & 1868*. <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-4-alliances-and-conflicts/topic-2-sitting-bulls-people/section-3-treaties-fort-laramie-1851-1868>

In addition to his government contracts, Wilder was often commissioned to provide supplies to Minnesota Indian reservations and newly founded territories, delivering the government annuities stipulated in the treaties with Native American tribes in the region.

At first, the goods that Wilder transported to reservations, forts, and various other settlements in Northern Minnesota were transported by oxcart. The carts were usually driven by Métis, mixed-race descendants of Indigenous North American people and French European settlers.²²

Transportation by oxcart was used extensively in the region around the Red River, although it was time-consuming and dangerous. In his various letters, Wilder often lamented about weather conditions and frequently reported missing shipments.²³ Even so, supplying these goods was a lucrative business; one estimate suggests that by 1858, there were 6,000 carts delivering goods as part of the Red River trade.²⁴

Eventually, steamboats became readily available, and Wilder's company purchased a few, including the "Anson Northup" and the "International." However, while these steamboats could transport a large amount of goods, they proved difficult to navigate. Various skirmishes between Native American tribes and the U.S. Army often hindered the movement of these large vessels. In 1863, Wilder and his associates were forced to anchor the "International" at Fort Abercrombie for the entire year as a result of warfare in the region.



Métis at a rest stop with their Red River Carts. Circa 1860.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

²² The term Métis here refers to a specific community of people who lived in the Red River Valley region of Minnesota during the 19th century, but the term is also used in several other contexts, outlined in this MNopedia article: Margaret Vaughan. (2017). *Métis in Minnesota*. <https://www.mnopedia.org/group/m-tis-minnesota>

²³ Jarchow, M. pp. 22-25.

²⁴ Jarchow, M. p. 22.

Rising conflict

As white settlers increased trade in the Red River Valley, relationships between Native American tribes and the United States became tense. Limited resources, land cessions, and outright deception pushed tribes to take action. Skirmishes became more frequent, increasing the need for U.S. military forts and, consequently, Wilder's services to supply these forts.

In 1862, the United States government breached a treaty with the Dakota, resulting in the U.S.-Dakota War. For two months, Dakota Indians attacked military posts and demanded access to resources. However, as they began to recognize their eventual loss, thousands of Dakota people fled Minnesota.²⁵

Although the war ended with the Dakota's surrender, punishment was severe. Military trials which were hastily conducted and lacking in evidence resulted in death sentences for 303 Dakota warriors. After reviewing the trial transcripts, President Abraham Lincoln upheld the convictions of these men. Local bishops Henry Whipple and Edward P. Smith urged Lincoln to reconsider and demanded clemency. As a result, Lincoln redacted the death sentences of 264 Dakota prisoners, but reconfirmed the execution of the remaining 39 men (one of whom was eventually pardoned).

Minnesotans were split on the announcement. Many demanded further leniency, while others viewed Lincoln's clemency as peculiar. Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey questioned Lincoln's decision. He believed that if all the prisoners were not hanged, "private revenge" would ensue. Additionally, when Republicans did not fare well in the 1864 election, Ramsey reached out to President Lincoln again, insinuating that executing all the prisoners would have resulted in more votes.²⁶

Mass execution and continued genocide

In spite of continued protests, on December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota. This event remains the largest mass execution in American history and serves as a testament to the brutality and violence that supported the settler colonial system. In 1865, two Dakota war leaders, Little Six and Medicine Bottle, were captured and hanged at Fort Snelling. One-third of the 226 prisoners who had escaped execution eventually died of disease while imprisoned.²⁷

The genocide of the Dakota people continued when the U.S. Army forced remaining Dakota elders, women, and children to march to an internment camp on Pike Island, resulting in the deaths of over 300 more Dakota people. Formally, via the Dakota Expulsion Act of 1863, Minnesota made it illegal for Dakota people to reside within its borders, a law that has yet to be repealed. Today, Dakota communities remember and commemorate the lost lives through various ceremonies and memorials.

²⁵ An in-depth history of the Dakota in Minnesota can be found on the Dakota Wicohan tribal website, especially via the article *History on the Dakota of Minnesota*. <https://dakotawicohan.org/dakota-of-minnesota-history/>

²⁶ Donald, D.H. (1996). *Lincoln*. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster. pp. 394–95.

²⁷ For a comprehensive history and timeline of the U.S.-Dakota War, which features many of the events mentioned in this section, see *The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862*, Minnesota Historical Society. <http://www.usdakotawar.org/>

Post-war contracting

The end of the U.S.-Dakota War and the Civil War resulted in an economic depression and the Panic of 1873. Although this temporarily halted railroad construction, the delivery of goods via wagon and steamboat continued.

During this time Wilder was expanding his contracting business beyond Minnesota and, upon winning a bid for supplying goods to Indian agencies²⁸ along the Missouri River, he became the “principal government contractor on the Upper Missouri.”²⁹

Wilder’s success in contracting was often met with skepticism. Other bidders on the contracts decried Wilder’s success as favoritism. Although committees routinely sided with Wilder, his name often appeared in reference to scandalous behavior and the “Indian Ring,” an informal organization of traders and other businessmen involved in bribery with United States officials.”³⁰ Although there is no documentation proving that Wilder ever participated in the “Indian Ring,” his letters suggest that he was aware of his power and clout in Washington.³¹ The nature of power, both locally and nationally, created systems in which white men like Wilder benefitted from the disenfranchisement and forced labor of communities of color and Indigenous communities.

Part III: Railroading and pre-emption

In 1861, fractures between the northern and southern states precipitated full-blown warfare throughout the nation. While civilians took up arms, officials consulted behind the scenes. Northern states viewed the south’s secession as an opportunity to pass laws that southern representatives had previously blocked in court. Largely, these laws concerned the use of federal lands and the legality of transcontinental railroads. This provided the opportunity for men like Wilder to capitalize on railroad development, which necessitated stealing Indigenous land and employing a labor force largely consisting of poor immigrants.

Two acts, in particular, stand out as necessary tools in this endeavor. The first is the Homestead Act of 1862. The Homestead Act provided settlers, including women and new immigrants, with 160 acres of public land, provided they move west and live on the land continuously for five years.

Abraham Lincoln signed the second significant act, the Morrill Act, into law the same year. The Morrill Act supplied Union states with land grants which could be sold to establish agricultural and technical schools.³² Of course, land for settlers and new colleges came at the expense of Indian nations, and the Morrill Act, in particular, coincided with the 1862 Dakota War.

²⁸ The term “Indian agencies” here refers to small settlements with a government-appointed agent who would oversee trade and act as an intermediary between Native American tribes and the United States. More information about Indian Agencies can be found at *The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862*, Minnesota Historical Society. <http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/newcomers-us-government-military/indian-agencies>

²⁹ Jarchow M., p. 72.

³⁰ The term “Indian Ring” and its historical context is further explored later in this report.

³¹ Jarchow, M., pp. 50-51; 73-74.

³² There is information about the Homestead and Morrill Acts in *U.S. Statutes at Large 12 (1862): 503*, United States of America Embassy website, <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/democrac/27.html> and in the Library of Congress *Primary documents in American History*, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/morrill.html>

These two acts also resulted in wider availability of cheap public land for establishing railroads.³³ Additionally, railroad companies began to advertise opportunities for land settlement and work in an effort to encourage immigrant settlement in Minnesota.³⁴

Wilder joins the trade

Wilder's involvement with railroading was not as extensive as other Minnesota businessmen like James J. Hill. Still, Wilder was active in the industry. He contributed private loans to the Minnesota Valley Railroad Company in times of financial distress. In 1869, when the company's name changed to the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company, Wilder joined the board of directors and eventually became the vice president. As the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company expanded westward through "uninhabited" Indian lands, a need for stopping points along the way became evident. One such place was created near Windom, Minnesota; the fledgling township was named Wilder in honor of the company's vice president.³⁵

Wilder also organized the St. Croix Railway and Improvement Company in 1872 with several of his close business associates, and he served on the board of directors for the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railway Company ("the Omaha") in the 1880s.

In the 19th century, railroad companies generally employed immigrant laborers, including Irish, Chinese, and Mexican immigrants. Mainly, the job included track-laying and digging. It was arduous work, and there were often strikes. Contemporary media accounts often condemned railroad workers and the temporary towns they established along the tracks. They considered railroad laborers to be unskilled, menial, and even violent. In 1859, when Irish railroad workers protested in Jersey City over unpaid wages, newspapers responded, referring to the laborers as: "...animals...[a] mongrel mass of ignorance and crime and superstition...utterly unfit for...the common courtesies and decencies of civilized life."³⁶ The expansion of the railroad further devastated Indian lands, appropriating Indigenous resources and disrupting their way of life. Settlement also reduced the bison population, which many tribes depended on, to near extinction.

The "Grasshopper Syndicate"

From 1873 to 1877, an agricultural epidemic referred to as the "grasshopper plagues" devastated Midwestern farmland. Incoming swarms of grasshoppers were so dense that they resembled snowstorms. The destruction was nearly instantaneous as grasshoppers descended upon fields of wheat and grain and devoured them. Farmers were desperate, sending letters to administrators for state aid.³⁷

³³ Several smaller acts passed by Abraham Lincoln helped directly finance railroading with land grants.

³⁴ Lass, W.E. (1998). *Minnesota: A history*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.

³⁵ Jarchow, M., 99-100.

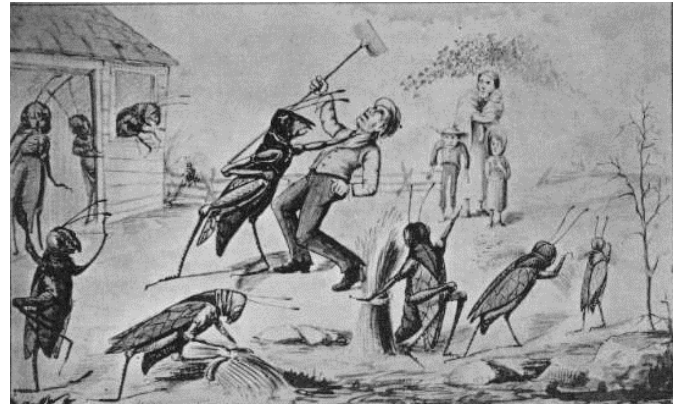
³⁶ Dearing, R. (2016). *The filth of progress: Immigrants, Americans, and the building of canals and railroads in the west*. Oakland: University of California Press, pp. 3-5.

³⁷ Many of these letters are available at the Minnesota Historical Society archives and Gale Library. An archival guide is available on the MNHS website under the heading *Disaster relief in Minnesota: Grasshopper plagues*.

<https://libguides.mnhs.org/disasterrelief/grasshopper>



"The grasshopper plague in Minnesota – Method of capturing the young grasshoppers," 1888, Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



"Grangers versus Grasshoppers or the irrepressible conflict," 1880, Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

In 1876, Minnesota Governor John S. Pillsbury refused to provide state-relief funding directly to farmers, claiming that poverty was unavoidable for an agricultural lifestyle.³⁸ In response, private individuals took up the charge, contemplating how to alleviate the crisis. Minnesota businessmen took an interest in ameliorating the impact of the grasshopper plague, as the crisis also heavily affected railroad lands. This group of men and business associates, including Wilder, eventually became known as the "Grasshopper Syndicate." In an address in 1902, General J. W. Bishop, civil war hero, general manager of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad (1871-1883) and, later, a trustee of Wilder's will, described the syndicate as follows:

"In early June of 1874 the fields that had been devastated by the grasshoppers in the previous summer had been generally cultivated and reseeded and were promising a generous return to the anxious owners. But now the eggs were hatching and in a few days the little hoppers outnumbered the wheat plants five to one. A few more days and the fields were eaten bare again. Whole counties in southwestern Minnesota and northwestern Iowa were in this condition and a panic ensued at once. I spent a day in personal inspection of the devastated fields and in interviewing the demoralized settlers and returning that night to St. Paul reported the situation next morning to our Directors at a special meeting. The outlook was very discouraging, but it would become a great deal worse if something were not done at once to check the impending stampede of the disheartened settlers, and to restore and establish confidence.

I suggested a plan and it was adopted, and the next day I was at the front again putting it into operation.

*I had proposed to join with five others in the purchase from the company at its regular published prices of all the railroad lands in two townships located in the heart of the grasshopper district, and to immediately commence breaking the sod, employing the settlers to do the work in small tracts. Messrs. Horace Thompson, A. H. Wilder and John L. Merriam of St. Paul and Adrian Iselin and Geo. I. Seney of New York who were consulted and approved by telegraph, formed, with myself, the party who were facetiously dubbed the 'Grasshopper Syndicate...' "*³⁹

³⁸ Cartwright, R. L. (2018). *Grasshopper Plagues, 1873-1877*. <https://www.mnopedia.org/event/grasshopper-plagues-1873-1877>. The article also states: "...the grasshopper plagues of the 1870s left a mark on Minnesota culture, inspiring fiction like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and Ole Edvart Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*."

³⁹ University of Minnesota (1902). *Tenth annual report of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Minnesota*. Delano, MN: Eagle Printing Company. p. 29.

Bishop's plan was adopted, and this group of six men bought 13,000 acres of railroad land in the afflicted area, then employing settlers to work the land. Although efforts such as these helped to keep rural economies afloat, farmers were aware of the benefits gained by local railroad collectives. They were skeptical of the railroad's influence, and worried that it might undermine local trade and production.⁴⁰ The large-scale farming operations established by groups like the "Grasshopper Syndicate" also infringed on rural farmers' operations, and created opportunities for intense land speculation.

Land speculation and government vouchers

In the 19th century, land speculation was ubiquitous among the upper class.⁴¹ Throughout his later life, Wilder was involved in a number of land development enterprises in St. Paul, Minnesota, and further afield. One major venture was the Minnesota Land and Investment Company, which Wilder started with several associates. At the time of his death in 1894, Wilder's real estate holdings were valued at more than \$928,000.⁴²

Native American tribal lands were particularly susceptible to intense land speculation, and investors would sometimes actively participate in efforts to remove Indigenous people so that lands would become available for settlement and railroad development.^{43, 44}

Excerpts from two letters that Wilder wrote to his business associate Dwight M. Sabin in 1876 illustrate this process. Wilder writes:

"...we conclude the best thing to be done is to have two men go on to the farm lands and make their pre-emptions, put up their Houses & act just as though they were there to stay for all time—let them make some improvements so that their papers will show well. I don't know just the legal steps to be taken by the pre-emptors, but these you will have to follow to the letter. When they have done certain things, then they go to the Land Office to file their applications or whatever it is called—of course the office will reject them—then the appeal will be taken to Washington & on this fight the whole question can be decided. Now it is important to have good reliable men for pre-emptors & then to have them act in the legal way from first to last. You want their accounts to show that they are, in fact, what they represent themselves to be...."

⁴⁰ Hofsommer, D. L. (2005). *Minneapolis and the age of railways*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 46.

⁴¹ "Land speculation" refers to a system in which speculators survey lands and buy those which they determine will increase in value. Sometimes, however, speculation included buying Indigenous land that had yet to be federally designated as public land. For more information on land speculation, see *Land speculation, town site development, and newspapers* <http://treatiesmatter.org/relationships/business/land-speculation-development-advertising>

⁴² Jarchow, M. pp. 160-166.

⁴³ For an in-depth overview of this process, and the history of Native American land loss, see: Stuart Banner (2005). *How the Indians lost their land: Law and power on the frontier*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁴⁴ Land grant maps provide a visual history of land speculation and railroad development. They were heavily used to advertise to the public the sale of railroad lands, prompting investors—like Wilder—to purchase the newly available lands. The Library of Congress has a vast online collection of railroad maps from 1828-1900 at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/about-this-collection/>

“...Of course they will locate on the farming lands on the so called Reservation.... I think the Indians with a little figuring might be induced to ask the Ind[ian] Dept. to remove them to their new Reservation.”^{45, 46}

Two Minneapolis Daily Tribune articles from February 1875 also refer to Wilder’s alleged involvement in the process of relocating Indigenous people off of Midwestern lands, as part of an accusation that Wilder overcharged the government for feeding Ho-Chunk Indians who were moving through Minnesota:

“The Minneapolis Tribune recently contained a sensational statement obtained from one Murrey, who formerly kept a restaurant in St. Paul, in which Murrey averred that he had, at the request of Wilder’s clerk, made up a series of false vouchers for feeding certain Winnebago Indians from Wisconsin, whom Wilder was removing to Nebraska a year or two ago, under contract with the Government. Col. Merriam, Wilder’s partner, pronounces these accusations wholly untrue, a purely malicious fabrication. It is certainly a very improbable story, to say the least, for it would imply that Wilder was a fool, which he has not the reputation of being.”⁴⁷

The same newspaper issue contains a letter from John Merriam rebutting the accusation of falsified vouchers, but not mentioning the issue of removal. There was some speculation that Murrey held a grudge against Wilder, due to the fact that Wilder had recently foreclosed a mortgage on Murrey’s property.

The truth of Murrey’s accusations of Wilder cannot be verified through existing documents. But Murrey’s statement illustrates the business of Indian removal:

“On or about December 1st, 1873, A. H. Wilder of St. Paul came to me and said that the Winnebago Indians are going through here en route to Nebraska, and we want you to feed them while here. He stated that all he wanted was a lunch, consisting of pork, bread and coffee furnished to them (the Indians, at or on the train) and ought not to cost over 25 cents per head, which proposition was accepted. The first party of Indians, covering two car loads, and numbers seventy-five in all...arrived here on Dec. 2, 1873. I fed them according to the contract and received therefore \$25.80, which was the first money I had ever received for feeding the Indians.”⁴⁸

Based on the newspaper article and Wilder’s letter to Sabin, it appears that Wilder was involved not only in land speculation but also in the relocation of Indigenous people to reservations further west and south, in order to make those lands available for purchase and settlement.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Wilder, Amherst, Letter to Dwight M. Sabin, March 18, 1876, Papers of W.H.C. Folsom and Family. Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.

⁴⁶ This letter probably refers to the removal of the Mille Lacs Tribe to the White Earth Reservation.

⁴⁷ Minneapolis Daily Tribune. (1875). *Feeding Indians* (February 24, 1875) and *Wilder’s Indian steal*. (February 27, 1875). Retrieved from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴⁸ It has not been possible to verify whether Wilder actively aided in the removal of Indigenous people from the Midwest. Wilder’s personal papers are sparse and contain no mention of this, other than the letters presented in this report.

⁴⁹ The United States government made multiple attempts to remove the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Indians from Wisconsin, including an effort to move them to Nebraska in 1873-74, which appears to be the actions referred to here. For more information on Ho-Chunk removal, see L. Onsager (1985). *The removal of the Winnebago Indians from Wisconsin to Nebraska in 1873-4*. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/library-pubs/81/>

Part IV: Timber sales and treaty rights

In 1872, Amherst H. Wilder attempted to purchase pine timber on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in Northern Minnesota. When Minnesota officially became a U.S. territory in 1849, the logging industry, particularly the harvesting and sale of pine timber, was already well established. As forests in the east were cleared, logging companies continued to move west in search of new resources. Wilder, like other European-American businessmen of the time, was keen to capitalize on this booming industry in Minnesota. By the 1870s, steam powered sawmills and the expansion of the railroad increased production capabilities and, due to increased settlement by European immigrants, demand for lumber also continued to increase throughout the 19th century.⁵⁰ Because good lumber was often located on Native American tribal lands, interested parties had to figure out how to obtain the land or negotiate with tribes and their representatives.

In the decade after Wilder's attempted purchase, the United States government would pass two acts which increased their power to appropriate and exploit Native lands. In 1887, the United States passed the General Allotment Act (sometimes referred to as the Dawes Act), despite the strong opposition of tribal nations. The policy was intended to break up the communal ownership of tribal lands in favor of individual property ownership. Any land leftover after allotting reservation lands was to enter the public domain, rather than to their Indigenous landowners.

Two years later, in 1889, the Nelson Act, Minnesota's version of the General Allotment Act, was passed. The act called for the allotment of reservations, but also allowed investors, mainly from lumber companies, to survey and appraise pinelands.⁵¹ Although the Act stipulated that lands should be appraised at an average of \$3.00 per 1,000 board feet, lumber companies often intentionally underestimated the value of timber stands. This resulted in the ability of lumber syndicates to purchase pinelands at an average of \$1.60 per 1,000 board feet, well below the average indicated in the Nelson Act.⁵²

Lumber syndicates negotiated directly with U.S. government-appointed Indian agents to purchase pineland, Indigenous homelands, and resources that were located on reservations. The Nelson Act and the plundering of Indian lands was a second wave of dispossession for Minnesota Ojibwe tribes. The pine ring and politicians in St. Paul, Minnesota, are often cited by historians as one of the most corrupt places in the nation for dispossessing Indigenous people in the aftermath of allotment.

Wilder's efforts to purchase timber from the Leech Lake Reservation predated the Allotment and Nelson Acts by about 15 years. However, efforts by colonial settlers to extract timber from Indian lands had been underway for much of the 19th century. Treaties throughout the earlier part of the century had resulted in massive land cessations by the Dakota and Ojibwe, and the creation of reservations. In return for millions of acres of land, the United States government had promised large cash payments, goods and services, and hunting and fishing rights to these tribes—promises which were not kept.⁵³ By 1872, when Wilder was attempting to purchase timber from Leech Lake, the Ojibwe people had entered into no fewer than 10 treaties with the U.S. government one of which, in 1855, had established the Leech Lake Reservation itself.

⁵⁰ Minnesota Historical Society, Forest History Center. (2019). *Logging industry*. Retrieved from <https://www.mnhs.org/foresthstory/learn/logging>

⁵¹ Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. (2013). *History*. Retrieved from <http://www.llojibwe.org/aboutUs/history.html>

⁵² Meyer, M.L. (1999). *The White Earth tragedy: Ethnicity and dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889–1920*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. p. 139

⁵³ Relations: Dakota and Ojibwe Treaties. (n.d). Retrieved from <http://treatiesmatter.org/treaties/land>

Edward P. Smith, the United States Indian Agent for the Chippewa (Ojibwe) in Minnesota and a congregational minister, was responsible for overseeing the timber that Wilder wished to purchase. He determined that the sale would provide much needed revenue for the Leech Lake tribe. This was a decision of the government, rather than the tribe. In later court testimony regarding the proposed sale, the Minnesota Senate Committee notes,

“...On the 8th day of November, 1872, the Rev. E. P. Smith, United States Indian agent of the Chippewas [Ojibwe] in Minnesota, acting for and in behalf of the United States, sold to Amherst H. Wilder of St. Paul, all the pine and cedar timber standing on the Leech Lake reservation.”⁵⁴

The details of the timber sale were arranged with General Francis A. Walker, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. Documents indicate that General Walker corresponded with both Wilder and Smith. At first, Walker attempted to initiate the sale without providing any of the money to the Indian tribes, inquiring to Smith whether or not the Indians would be “displeased” by this. When Smith answered in the affirmative, negotiations between Walker, Wilder, and Smith began, resulting in a final purchase price for Wilder of \$1.15/per acre.⁵⁵

“Mr. Wilder’s Agreement”

Wilder’s Leech Lake pine contract soon garnered the notice of both local and national newspapers. This was because in October, 1873, William Welsh, Chair of the Board of Indian Commissioners, made public charges of corruption against E.P. Smith.⁵⁶ One of the charges also accused Wilder:

“Agent Smith, wrongfully, and, as it is believed, fraudulently contract with A.H. Wilder, on November 8, 1872, for a large body of pine timber at a rate less than its value, say \$1.15 per thousand feet, without advertising it, and with the knowledge that the Indians had refused to assent to the sale of their pine timber.”

Heated debates immediately appeared in the Minneapolis Daily Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer, with each newspaper printing updates and opinion pieces as the story unfolded. Some reports were critical or outright disdainful, characterizing the sale as another example of government corruption in the sale of valuable land, at far below the market value, to wealthy individuals and placing Wilder in a group of white elites known as the “Indian Ring,” an informal organization of traders and other businessmen involved in bribery with United States officials. One article from the Minneapolis Daily Tribune on October 2, 1873, a “correspondence of the N.Y. World,” described the timber agreement:

⁵⁴ Minnesota State Legislature. (1874). *Journal of the Senate of the sixteenth session of the Legislature of the State of Minnesota*. St. Paul, Minnesota, p. 549.

⁵⁵ United States Department of the Interior, Indian Division: An Inventory of Selected Files Relating to Minnesota and Northern Plains Indian Affairs at the Minnesota Historical Society, Box 2, File No. 17. *Documents Concerning the Investigation of Charges Against E[dward] P. Smith, While Agent for Chippewa Indians in Minnesota*. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

⁵⁶ Welsh was known for accusing corruption. While serving on the Board of Indian Commissioners, he levelled similar charges at Ely S. Parker, Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1870-71. Parker had served as a lieutenant colonel under Grant in the civil war and was also member of the Seneca tribe (and the first Native person to hold the post of commissioner of Indian Affairs). Parker’s efforts to address corruption in the Bureau were undermined by Welsh, who allegedly resented Parker’s authority over the board. Welsh filed 13 counts of misconduct against Parker, who was exonerated of fraud or corruption but forced to resign. See *Ely Parker 1865-1879: Commissioner Parker on trial*. <http://www.pbs.org/warrior/content/timeline/hero/grace.html>

“One Amherst. H. Wilder, of this city, entered into a contract with Edward P. Smith, United States Indian Agent, whereby the said Wilder secured perhaps the most imposing and profitable land and timber grab that ever fell to the lot of one American....And the following are the things that the United States “grants, bargains and sells” (to use the contract’s term) to its favorite citizen, A.H. Wilder: ‘all the pine and cedar timber standing on the Indian reservation in Minnesota known as the Leech Lake Reservation.’

The pine and cedar timber as it now stands is estimated at rather more than 200,000,000 of feet, and Mr. Wilder is ‘not obliged to cut or pay for any unsound trees, nor for threes of less diameter at the top, twenty-five feet from the ground, than fourteen inches.’ This is the most delightful and most profitable piece of irony ever put into a contract. Observe that our country’s favorite citizen, A.H. Wilder, is not ‘obliged’ to cut or pay for trees less than fourteen inches in diameter at the specified height. Lumber men are very glad to get hold of timber twelve inches wide at twenty-four feet from the ground, and they consider fourteen inches at twenty-five feet high as a prize. All timber, therefore, of less measurement than the last named is a free gift. No constraint then? will be employed to compel Mr. Wilder to cut this timber, but if he should cut it, what The Indian ring knew what they were about when they had that clause inserted into the contract.”⁵⁷

Other writers sided with Wilder, or at least withheld judgement on whether he had been knowingly involved in fraudulent behavior. One article provided testimonies from Wilder’s contemporaries, including soon-to-be governor John S. Pillsbury, in which they stated their belief that Wilder’s contract was fair. The same article noted that Pillsbury “was at one time asked to enter into a contract for the Leech Lake Pine, but declined because it took two years to get it out.”⁵⁸

Resistance at Leech Lake

Although opinions in newspapers differed, the Ojibwe people at Leech Lake were united in their assertion that the pine sale was a further attempt by European-American settlers to diminish Ojibwe sovereignty and gain control over their resources. The Ojibwe people who testified were furious that their agent, Edward P. Smith, had neglected to consult them before the contract was officiated. Furthermore, Leech Lake chiefs claimed that they had only learned of the contract by happenstance upon attending Smith’s council meeting at the White Earth Reservation.⁵⁹

This circumstance, along with Smith’s continued refusal to “account for large sums of money,” heatedly turned Leech Lake members against him.⁶⁰ Outright protest erupted. Ojibwe leaders sent letters encouraging their white allies to help remove Smith from office.⁶¹ Smith quickly left his post to serve as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs under President Ulysses S. Grant. However, his temporary successor, Ebenezer Douglass, did little to ameliorate the situation. He condemned the actions of the Leech Lake Ojibwe, referring to them as “infants,” and asserting that the

⁵⁷ Minneapolis Daily Tribune. (October 2, 1873).

⁵⁸ Minneapolis Daily Tribune. (December 13, 1873). *Commissioner Smith: Progress of the investigation at St. Paul.*

⁵⁹ Minneapolis Daily Tribune. (December 13, 1873).

⁶⁰ Kugel, R. (1998). *To be the main leaders of our people: A history of Minnesota Ojibwe politics, 1825-1898.* Michigan State University Press, p. 120.

⁶¹ Emmegahbowh to Whipple (13 Feb 1873) Whipple Papers, Box 9: John Beaulieu to Whipple (7 July 1873) Whipple Papers, Box 10: Clement H. Beaulieu, Sr. to William Welsh (September 4, 1873), Whipple Papers, Box 10. All at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul MN.

United States government had “the absolute right...to do as it pleased about the Indians and their property, without in any way consulting them, or rendering any account to them of its actions.”⁶²

However, Leech Lake tribal citizens continued their protests; warriors butchered a government-owned ox, took stockpiled government supplies, and raided lumber camps. These continued protests led subagent Dr. Albion Barnard to request the presence of federal troops at Leech Lake in March of 1874. The actions of Leech Lake tribal citizens called national attention to the pine sale, motivating the Board of Indian Commissioners to initiate an investigation.

Wilder goes to court

Wilder’s accuser William Welsh assembled the original legal charges against E.P. Smith and Amherst Wilder.⁶³ Ultimately, the investigative committee appointed by the Secretary of the Interior compiled an investigative report, which sought to examine the motives and characters of both Smith and Wilder. The report included extensive witness testimonies, as well as pieces of evidence submitted by William Welsh.⁶⁴

Amherst H. Wilder’s testimony appears early in the document, and his recollection of the pine sale seems straightforward. Before the court, he testifies that he first learned of the sale in the newspaper, but noticed that the deadline had since passed. He says that at the time, he was on his way to Washington, D.C., and so visited General Walker with the intention of proposing a bid. According to Wilder, communication with Edward Smith proved difficult, but the three eventually met to negotiate the details.

When questioned about his low bid, Wilder explained the difficulty of harvesting timber on reservation land. He says that the size of the timber necessitated the use of a steamer over the course of two seasons, significantly increasing labor and transportation costs. He also states his belief that timber on Indian land is less profitable because it is more costly to acquire: “I don’t think timber on Indian reservations as valuable as that on free lands on account of their being a greater risk of trouble from the Indians.” Wilder points to the Leech Lake Ojibwe in particular, calling them “troublesome,” and recalling the “necessity of paying higher wages to men” on account of this trouble.⁶⁵

The investigative committee was seemingly satisfied with Wilder’s testimony, and conducted little cross-examination. They continued to hear the testimonies of many of Wilder’s acquaintances and business associates, but the committee moved on from the question of whether or not Wilder was guilty of fraudulent behavior. Rather, they refocused on larger questions surrounding timber on reservation land and the role of Native American tribes in the process of creating pine contracts and selling timber.

This questioning most clearly appears in the last section of the report, when the investigative committee calls forward Ojibwe leaders to testify. In a morning session on Wednesday, December 17, 1873, the Ojibwe chiefs

⁶² Kugel, R. (1998). *To be the main leaders of our people: A history of Minnesota Ojibwe politics, 1825-1898*. Michigan State University Press, p. 178.

⁶³ Some of E.P. Smith’s friends blamed Welsh’s charges for Smith’s declining health, with one claiming that, “It was hard for him to endure the unjust attacks of the Nation and the New York Tribune, of William Welsh and Prof. Marsh,” and another declaring that Smith was “tormented, pierced by the shafts of slander, vilified by his enemies, distrusted by his friends, and at last hounded to his death.” Obituary; Harry A. Stimson: ALS and clipping of speech, 1882, Edward Parmelee Smith Papers, 1849-1947, Reel 1 (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Libraries).

⁶⁴ United States Department of the Interior. (1874). *Report of commission appointed by the secretary of the interior to investigate certain charges against Hon. E.P. Smith, the commissioner of Indian affairs*. Library of Congress. https://archive.org/details/reportofcommissi00unit_17/page/n8.

⁶⁵ United States Department of the Interior. (1874). P. 46.

arrive, accompanied by their agent, an interpreter, and Reverend Emmegabo (John Johnson), an Ojibwe missionary. Emmegabo appears frequently in the historical record. He was born in Canada to a family of Ojibwe of Odawa descent. Although he tried to live in accordance with Ojibwe values, his “civilizing” and conversion programs in the 1850s and 60s were met with skepticism, especially from Ojibwe warrior leaders.⁶⁶

The committee intended to hear from Rev. Emmegabo first, but the Ojibwe leaders objected, agreeing that the Reverend’s “business is [was] different from ours [theirs].”⁶⁷ In response to the hesitancy of the Ojibwe chiefs, the investigative committee allowed them to speak before the Reverend Emmegabo.

There are several themes that appear across all of the testimonies. First, all of the Ojibwe chiefs agree that the sale was made without their consent, or the consent of the communities living at Leech Lake. Second, they question the benefit of the sale of pine land on Native American reservations. And last, they emphasize the economic and political variation among Native Americans in Minnesota.

While the investigative committee appears to believe that the sale was made without giving notice to the bands at Leech Lake, the committee heavily interrogates the last two claims.

Meshakageshig, a chief from White Earth, claims that the financial gain from the pine contract will do little good at the reservations. He states:

*“Knowing my fellow-Indians, maybe I might say what they think about it. They think that if a certain amount of money was paid on the sale for that pine, we would never get the money into our hands.”*⁶⁸

In response, the committee increases the amount of money offered, but Meshakageshig’s response remains the same.

Another witness from White Earth, Wahbonahquot, recognizes that there would have been some benefit to the Ojibwe people from the pine sale if the money was distributed correctly. However, he also relates the difficulty of doing this, explaining that:

*“The reason why I don’t think they [Leech Lake communities] would derive benefit was because they would have to have an understanding with all the bands that this sale was for their benefit...”*⁶⁹

Agos, from White Earth, also notes this in his testimony, stating:

*“There are a great many minds among the Indians, and I think it would be hard to get them to think one way.”*⁷⁰

In this way, both Wahbonahquot and Agos emphasize the distinctions among tribes at Leech Lake, countering the committee’s attempt to homogenize Native American communities in Minnesota.

⁶⁶ Kugel, R. (1998). *To be the main leaders of our people: A history of Minnesota Ojibwe politics, 1825-1898*. Michigan State University Press. 112.

⁶⁷ Kugel. (1998). 101

⁶⁸ United States Department of the Interior. (1874). *Report of commission appointed by the Secretary of the Interior to investigate certain charges against Hon. E.P. Smith, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*. p. 105.

⁶⁹ United States Department of the Interior. (1874). p. 108.

⁷⁰ United States Department of the Interior. (1874). p. 114.

After several days of testimonies, the investigative committee decided that the sale of the pine land was advantageous to Leech Lake tribes, and that Edward P. Smith was not guilty of collusion or fraud. Furthermore, the report emphasized Amherst Wilder's innocence, indicating that Wilder was proven "through abundant and satisfactory testimony to be a man of high character and responsibility."⁷¹

Based on the investigation, Wilder was found not guilty of illegal acts. However, the concept of legality in 19th-century America was informed by a system of settler colonialism which benefitted men like Wilder. Indigenous communities grew poorer and less independent, as the allotment of reservations and violations of treaties continued to privatize their lands and deprive them of their resources. The government allowed white contractors to cut down Ojibwe timber at an unprecedented rate as part of a larger "national trend in which Congress allowed local interests to determine Indian policy."⁷²

Although the specificity of Wilder's involvement is not always clear—for instance, whether he was or was not a member of the so-called "Indian Ring"—it is clear that he was an active participant in the system of settler colonialism, amassing wealth from the deliberate acquisition of Indigenous lands and resources through Indigenous disenfranchisement and genocide. He also benefitted from state and national legal systems which provided a mechanism by which Indigenous economic and political systems could be devalued and destroyed.

Conclusion and next steps

As noted, according to the law in the late 19th century, Wilder was not guilty of any crimes. But he, like his contemporaries, profited from a system of settler and extractive colonialism which by design generated wealth at the expense of marginalized populations. In an examination of Wilder's business dealings, familiar Minnesota names—like Sibley, Ramsey, Merriam, Rice, and Pillsbury—consistently appear. Men such as these helped to shape the laws and policies of the state, and in turn derived benefits from these laws. They operated within a government system designed to give them power.

In the case of the Leech Lake pine contract, Wilder was attempting to purchase timber from the United States government: “

On the 8th day of November, 1872, the Rev. E. P. Smith, United States Indian agent of the Chippewas [Ojibwe] in Minnesota, acting for and in behalf of the United States, sold to Amherst H. Wilder of St. Paul, all the pine and cedar timber standing on the Leech Lake reservation.”

⁷¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, p.11.

⁷² Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy*: p. 137.

Furthermore, government representatives initially wondered whether the Ojibwe would mind not receiving payment for the sale.

A justification for Smith's decision to sell the Leech Lake timber is described in the committee report, in a statement which exemplifies the main tenets of settler colonialism:

"The testimony of all the witnesses...shows that all the Indians above mentioned, except those residing at White Earth, were reduced to extreme destitution, and more especially those at White Oak Point, and the Pillagers at Leech Lake. The game was rapidly disappearing so that little else was available for food but fish and berries; these Indians knew nothing of agriculture, and had neither teams nor implements, nor the means for procuring them to derive a subsistence from the cultivation of their lands....They were deprived of the means of subsistence, to which they and their ancestors had always been accustomed. By the laws of the State of Minnesota these Indians had no right to be off their reservation, and here, as the game was nearly exhausted, it was obvious that there was no way of providing for their support... Under these circumstances, the agent conceived the idea of selling this timber, now wholly unproductive, that a fund might be realized to provide the means for the erection of houses, the purchase of stock and implements, and to establish schools, that these Indians might be placed in the way of civilization."

Colonizers had dispossessed the Ojibwe of their lands and resources, imposed a European-American approach to agriculture upon them, and deprived them of "the means of subsistence to which they and their ancestors had always been accustomed." They then determined that selling the reservation pine timber would be a way to support the now "destitute" Indigenous population.

This report is a first attempt to understand Amherst Wilder and his legacy in the frame of settler colonialism. There is undoubtedly more to uncover regarding the full extent of Wilder's business holdings and the complex details of specific events discussed in this report. However, such an examination is one way in which the current leaders, staff, and stakeholders of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation can understand and acknowledge that Amherst Wilder amassed wealth at the expense of others; most particularly from a system which legitimized the deliberate acquisition of Indigenous lands and resources in Minnesota.

It is our hope that the Wilder Foundation will use this report and ongoing research to frame and examine our current ways of doing work, recognizing factors that may facilitate and support, or create inequity and injustice, for Indigenous people, descendants of slaves, and others who are marginalized due to the long history of these systems and Amherst Wilder's role in it.

Annotated bibliography

Primary

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation and Family Records. Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul, MN.

These records are a miscellaneous compilation of files regarding Amherst H. Wilder (the Wilder Foundation's namesake) and his family. They contain business records, estate records, journals, and some personal papers of Fanny S. Wilder and Cornelia Day Wilder Appleby.

Early St. Paul, Minnesota. Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1849. Gale.

The Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette was an early Milwaukee-area newspaper that often reported on life and happenings in St. Paul, Minnesota during the 19th century. It included information about railroad construction and immigrant labor.

Edward Parmelee Smith Papers, 1849-1947, Reel 1. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Libraries.

This collection includes the personal papers, including letters, of Edward P. Smith, the United States Indian Agent for the Chippewa in Minnesota and a congregational minister. Smith was implicated, along with Amherst Wilder, in a timber scam in 1873. The letters collected are mostly from Smith's supporters, who claim he was an honest man and unworthy of the negative attention.

Henry B. Whipple Papers, 1833-1934. Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul, MN.

This collection includes the personal papers of Henry B. Whipple, the first Episcopal bishop of Minnesota. He was also a known business associate of Amherst H. Wilder. He was deeply involved in missionizing to both the Dakota and Ojibwe, and this collection contains many letters from Dakota and Ojibwe students. This collection also contains letters from Dakota and Ojibwe civil leaders requesting that Edward P. Smith be removed from his post.

James Boyd Hubbell Papers, 1865-1869. Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul, MN.

This collection includes the personal papers and diaries of James Boyd Hubbell, a licensed trader with Native American nations and a business associate for Amherst H. Wilder. Hubbell helped run Wilder's wagon train and transport goods for Wilder's government contracts.

Minneapolis Daily Tribune. Minneapolis, Minnesota. Miscellaneous newspapers collection, 1860-1989. Minnesota Historical Society.

This collection contains a miscellaneous assortment of issues from the Minneapolis Daily Tribune, a long-running Twin Cities newspaper. The Minneapolis Daily infrequently mentions Amherst H. Wilder, but extensively covers the story of his alleged timber sale fraud.

Saint Paul Daily News. (1892). St. Paul, Minnesota. Gale.

This collection contains issues of the St. Paul Daily News. This early Minnesota newspaper reports on Amherst Wilder several times, publishing information about his business affairs and alleged scandals.

Saint Paul Daily Pioneer. (1867-1875). St Paul, Minnesota. Minnesota Historical Society.

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“Documents Concerning the Investigation of Charges Against E[dward] P. Smith, While Agent for Chippewa Indians in Minnesota.” Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection. St. Paul, MN.

This collection contains extensive information regarding the investigation of Edward P. Smith and his timber contract with Amherst H. Wilder. It contains testimonies, pieces of evidence, and an extensive report by the investigative committee.

W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 1836-1988. Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts Collection, St. Paul, MN.

This collection contains the personal papers of W.H.C. Folsom and his family. W.H.C. Folsom was a dealer in real estate at Taylors Falls and a business associate of Amherst H. Wilder. There are several letters in the collection which detail Wilder’s involvement in pre-emption and land

Interviews with Acquaintances of the Wilder Family. Wilder Foundation Archive.

This collection contains a variety of oral interviews with two acquaintances of Amherst H. Wilder and his family, Mrs. Charles Spencer and Mrs. Edward R. Sanford. The interviews were conducted in 1948; information is taken from a manuscript typed by Katherine Gorman Boardman in 1951.

Secondary

Atkins, Annette. (2007). *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out*. Minnesota Historical Society Press.

In this monograph, Annette Atkin attempts to tell the history of Minnesota from a variety of perspectives. Told in a narrative style, Atkin’s book fills in critical details about Indigenous life in Minnesota.

Banner, Stuart. (2005). *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Stuart Banner’s book focuses heavily on legislation and power dynamics to highlight the meticulous practice of Native American removal from their homelands. He uses a variety of primary sources, including memoirs and diaries to construct an image of settler and Indigenous relationships on the frontier.

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This MNopedia article provides information on the grasshopper plagues that decimated Minnesota crops in the 1870s, including information on the state's failure to provide adequate relief to farmers.

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This website is run by the Dakota Wicohan of Minnesota. It contains important historical information on Dakota people in Minnesota, including pre-contact, treaty, and current historical episodes.

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In this book, Ryan Dearinger highlights the interconnectedness of immigrant labor, infrastructure, and the creation of an "American" identity. Particularly, he notes public reception toward immigrant labor, especially railroad workers, and the ways in which media sources dehumanized immigrants.

De Melo, Hildete Periera. (2003). "Coffee and the Rio de Janeiro Economy." In *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia and Latin America, 1500-1989*, edited by: W.G. Clarence Smith, 360-385. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hildete Periera De Melo's article is included in a large volume that analyzes and historicizes coffee economies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Periera's work, in particular, focuses on the economy of Rio de Janeiro and the ways in which slave labor and plantations fed a larger global economy and desire for coffee.

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In *Lincoln*, David Herbert Donald highlights Abraham Lincoln's life via meticulous research. Following the U.S.-Dakota War, President Lincoln ordered for the execution of 303 Dakota warriors, although he eventually redacted the sentences of 264.

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Merrill Jarchow's book is the only biography written about Amherst H. Wilder and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation's creation. It is a lengthy and meticulous work which highlights Wilder's life in early St. Paul, and his various business ventures. It extends past Wilder's death to include a history of the foundation through the 20th century.

Kugel, Rebecca. (1998). *To Be the Main Leaders of Our People: A History of Minnesota Ojibwe Politics, 1825-1898*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Rebecca Kugel's book is a critical look at the construction of hierarchy and leadership within Ojibwe politics during much of the 19th century. She highlights Indigenous understandings of leadership, combatting other scholars who emphasize non-Indigenous, and Western, epistemologies of politics.

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Claire Strom’s book is a critique of the Great Northern Railway and of white settlement and development of the West. She highlights the ways in which business and infrastructure culminated in a vicious cycle of simultaneous profit and desecration of the plains.

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[https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/War Secretarys Impeachment Trial.htm](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/War_Secretarys_Impeachment_Trial.htm)

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Wolfe, Patrick. “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): pp. 387–409. [doi:10.1080/14623520601056240](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240)

The fundamental article by Patrick Wolfe is one of the most cited pieces of Indigenous scholarship throughout academia. Arguably, Wolfe’s greatest contribution is his articulation of settler colonialism as a structure and not an event, allowing for a deeper, structural look at genocide and the removal of Native Americans to reservations in the United States.

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