

# IN THE BEGINNING...

by Peg Meier

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*Article #1 in a special 150th anniversary series*

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What a difference 149 years can make.

When the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis was founded in 1859, Minneapolis was a new frontier town in a one-year-old state. In many respects, it still was a wild, untamed place.

Picture what the city looked like: Streets were grimy dirt roads, spotted with horse manure and tobacco spit. Pigs, dogs, chickens and even cows roamed the city, despite citizens' complaints. Women who ventured out on the filthy board-walk streets could hike up their ankle-length dresses (to a modest level), but their laced-up boots and layers of petticoats were caked with muck. (No fun to hand-wash, starch and iron.)

Not only were there no computers, I-pods, cars or televisions. Minnesota had no streetcars, indoor toilets, electricity, telephones, trains or telegraph service.

But the place was booming. Between 1849 and 1858, Minnesota was the fastest-growing place in the United States. Until 1850, most people living in Minnesota were Indians -- Dakota and Ojibwe. English was only the fourth most commonly spoken language; French and two Indian languages were used more frequently. In fact, Dakota people lived on the west side of what later was called Lake Calhoun, not so far from where our church is now, as late as 1857. But fewer and fewer Indians were to remain; treaties of 1851 and 1857 took their land and pushed them out.

By the 1860s, white settlers were in the majority. They came for the rich farmland, for business opportunities and -- don't laugh -- for the climate, always described as promoting health. A state publication bragged, *"The atmosphere in Minnesota in the winter is like wine, so exhilarating in its effects on the system . . . The extreme cold does not last but a few days."*



A Minneapolis real estate office in 1856. (source: Minnesota Historical Society)

Twin Cities buildings were primarily crude log huts and a few frame houses.

Early resident Ann North wrote: *"In the house we are coming on nicely. Have finally got a cupboard for dishes &c. It is a first-rate one -- one worth waiting for -- Mr. North has made a cupboard for our clothes, so that we can keep them down here where they will be more dry than in the chamber [bedroom]. I never knew anything about living in houses made of lumber so green that water would drip from it."*

*Believe this one? A New England woman who was so ill and weak that she couldn't even sweep her own room moved to Minnesota and in less than a year miracles happened. "She chased her husband a mile and a quarter with a pitchfork, and gave birth to a pair of twins the same afternoon," or so said the St. Paul Daily Pioneer.*

### **Minnesota Magnificence**

It was the Mississippi River, and particularly the Falls of St. Anthony, that brought settlement. First came St. Anthony, the town on the east side of the river, and then Minneapolis, on the west. The falls were beautiful, but more important, necessary for a source of power. In the 1850s, the two small towns grew impressively; in that one decade, their combined population grew by 10 times.

Most Twin Cities newcomers were Yankees from New England. Our church founders were among them. (Scandinavians and Germans didn't arrive in big numbers for another two decades.)

By the 1850s, Minnesota's reputation as a paradise was widely promoted by people in Minnesota -- especially by those wanting to sell land. A letter to the editor of a Connecticut newspaper urged, *"If the farmers of New England could but see this country once, they would soon bid adieu to the rocks and hills of their old homesteads, and with their wives and children would locate upon some of the broad prairies of the New England of the West."*

Transplanted Yankees brought the arts to the Twin Cities already in the 1850s. Bookstores opened. The University of Minnesota had been founded. Newspapers flourished. Churches of many denominations opened.

Then came trouble. Just two years before our church was founded, a financial crisis in the East caused nationwide bank failures, unemployment and bankruptcy. The Minnesota economy tanked with the Depression of 1857, putting a brake on settlement and business. Some wealthy Yankees who had leveraged everything to put their money into land speculation and real estate went broke. (Sound familiar?)

Our church founders, born in the East, had the energy and finances to start a new congregation, one that is still going strong 149 years later. The theology has changed, but not the vigor.

*Now if the Mississippi don't rise and the sun keeps coming up, stay tuned for the next installment, about some of the earliest movers and shakers of our congregation.*

*If you have story ideas to contribute on this topic, share them at the [firstuniv150.org](http://firstuniv150.org) website*

## **REFLECTING THE RAINBOW PATH AND OUR 7 UU PRINCIPLES**

### ***Yearn to Learn (yellow)***

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

#### **A discussion guide for youth and adults about this article**

Minnesota's earliest settlers were motivated to relocate halfway across the country, site unseen, in search of something better. What would compel you to do the same?

Better work or education? Improved climate? Building something from the ground up?  
Freedom? More space? Escaping limitations? Adventure?  
What would drive you to make a significant change in your life?