Claiming the Land

Between 1830 and 1900, twenty-one United States entities joined the Union. It was a time of explosive territorial expansion, when middle-class Americans became increasingly interested in a variety of geographical information, from political units to property boundaries to the virtues of the landscape.

Commercial map publishers met this demand by mass-producing maps in guidebooks for new immigrants, and in atlases and schoolbooks, shaping the map users’ views of their home area. Publishers reassured readers of a tamed Minnesota Territory, open for settlement. States and territories, no matter their actual sizes, were depicted as major political units to encourage westward expansion.

By the treaty of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, conducted in the year 1851, the Dakota or Sioux Indians ceded all their lands to the United States lying in Minnesota and Iowa . . . . Area about 54,100 square miles or 35 million acres.

— Excerpt from the legend contained in the Map of Minnesota Territory by J. H. Young, 1854

1850
Map of the Organized Counties of Minnesota
Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait and Company

This wonderful territorial Minnesota map has an inset showing four Minnesota counties reaching westward from the current eastern boundary all the way to the Mississippi River. Washington, Ramsey, and Wabasha counties covered the entire area of the present-day state of Minnesota.

1853
J. H. Young
Map of Minnesota Territory
Philadelphia: Cowperthwait, Desilver & Butler

Note the printed red outlines, especially the rectangle along the Minnesota River, and the end of the Battle Creek of the map, titled “Lands of the Dakota or Sioux Indians.” The county boundaries are shown as they were in 1853. The inclusion of information about the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux may have been meant to reassure potential settlers that the area was resolving its Indian issues and safely making land available.

Francis Davis Millet, The Signing of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, about 1905, oil
The Andreas Illustrated Atlas

Months after the Panic of 1873—the start of a long and severe economic depression in the United States and elsewhere—Alfred Andreas completed a Minnesota atlas. You can almost hear Andreas’s sighs of relief coming through in the book’s introduction, where he thanked the “citizens of Minnesota” for their monetary “generosity,” interest, and research assistance, all exceeding his expectations. The building housing all of the production offices likely buzzed with euphoria as the first of 50,000 atlases were bound at the rate of 400 per day.

Consider the enormity of Andreas’s two-year undertaking: a 108-member production team; door-to-door salesmen visiting some 12,000 subscribers in a still-developing state with a spotty transportation system; 90 tons of paper, leather, and other material; and a full-scale mass-media campaign. Moreover, in case you are wondering, if only “one person had done all the coloring, it would have taken him forty five years.” This cartographer gave us something unique in its time and in ours: a remarkably detailed view of Minnesota’s cultural landscape in the early 1870s.

We cannot but congratulate ourselves on the sense of relief we feel from the responsibilities which have weighed up on us during the preparation of a work so unique and voluminous.

—Alfred Theodore Andreas, publisher of An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, 1874