

ARTHUR L. RUSCH

Portrait of a River Town

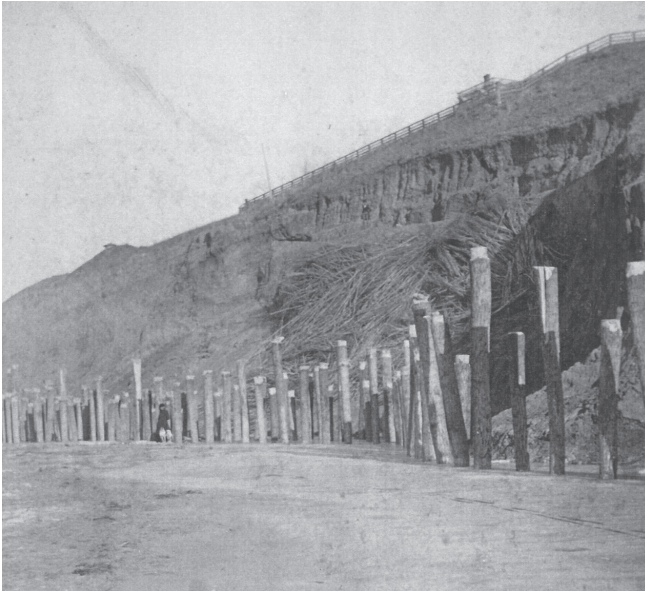
Vermillion before the Flood of 1881

In 1859, a handful of settlers who had spent months awaiting the opening of Yankton Indian lands established a town called Vermillion in what would later become the southeastern tip of South Dakota. The Vermillion of today, however, is different in every respect from the original settlement. That town was a steamboat stop, with the Missouri River running past its very doorstep. It no longer exists, having been destroyed in the great flood of 1881 and rebuilt atop the bluff, where it became the university town that South Dakotans now know. Although no one living remembers the original Vermillion, it thrived for nearly twenty-two years and still survives in the photographic record and newspaper accounts of the time.

Before 1881, the Missouri River did not flow smoothly past Vermillion at a distance, as it does today. It approached the original town-site from the southwest before running up against the bluff, where it formed a whirlpool in times of high water, and then heading southeast. The great bend in the river left a peninsula, like a finger pointing up from Nebraska, that was only one-half mile wide at its narrowest point. In 1881, the Missouri cut through that peninsula, shortening its channel substantially and becoming a distant presence on the far side of the valley.¹

The site for the original town of Vermillion, in the Missouri River bottom at the mouth of the Vermillion River, had long been a stopping point for travelers on the Missouri. The Lewis and Clark Expedition

1. E. Frank Peterson, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Clay County, South Dakota* ([Detroit, Mich.]: [R. M. Tackabury], 1901), p. 21; A. H. Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion before the 1881 Flood and Shortly After* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Clay County Historical Society, 1970), pp. 1–2, 44; Herbert S. Schell, *History of Clay County, South Dakota* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Clay County Historical Society, 1976), p. 63.



The whirlpool near Vermillion caused massive erosion to the bluff. These pilings slowed the process.

had paused there on 25 August 1804 in the course of fulfilling President Thomas Jefferson’s mandate to seek out “the most direct and practicable water-communication across the continent, for the purposes of commerce.”² From the mouth of the Vermillion River (which they called the “White Stone”) the men traveled overland to visit Spirit Mound, a mysterious formation that rose some seventy feet above the surrounding prairie. In his journal, Captain William Clark described this area above the bluffs as a “butifull landscape” with a plain that extended “without interruption as Far as Can be Seen.”³

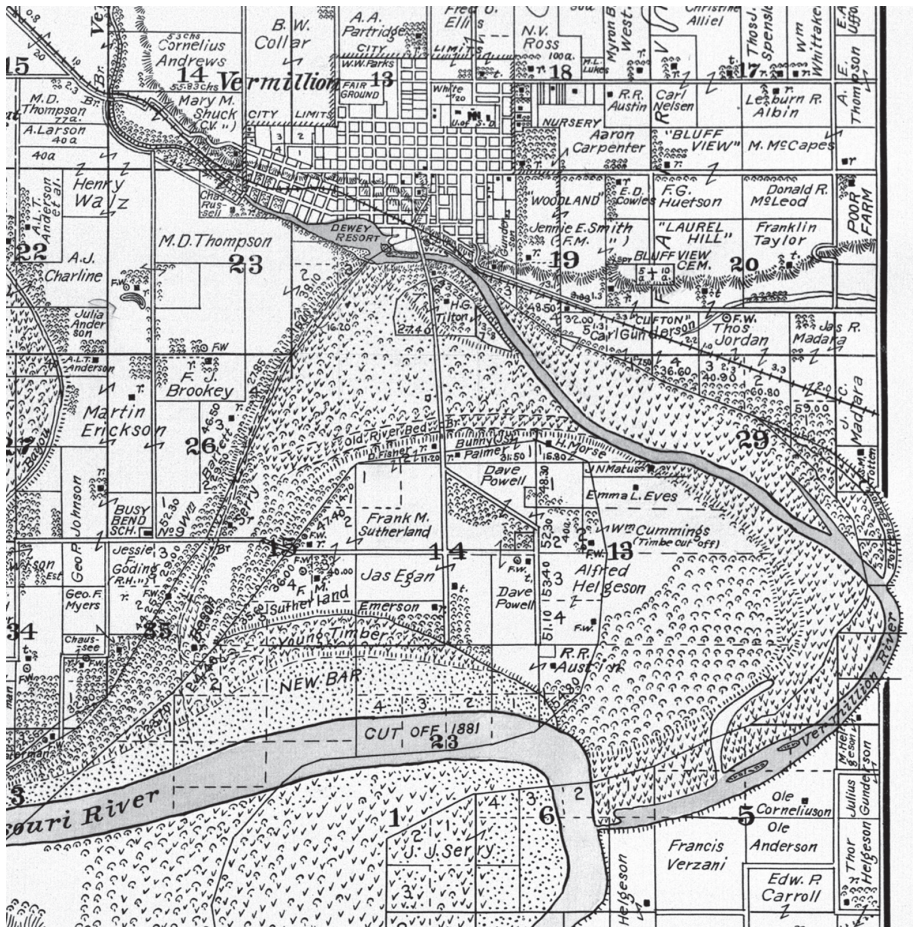
At the time of the explorers’ visit, the Upper Missouri region was already beginning to prove ideal for the commerce of the fur trade. Between 1815 and 1850, at least one hundred fur-trading posts operated in the area that became South Dakota, using the Missouri River as the main conduit for supplies and pelts. During the 1820s, the Columbia

2. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), p. 39.

3. Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Vol. 3: *August 25, 1804–April 6, 1805* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), pp. 10–11.

Fur Company built a post near the point where the Vermillion entered the Missouri. The American Fur Company operated Fort Vermillion, a post located two miles below present-day Burbank, just southeast of Vermillion, from 1835 to 1850.⁴

4. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 49–50; Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 12; George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, and George Martin Smith, ed., *South Dakota: Its History and Its People* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915), 1:46.



By the time the 1881 floodwaters receded, the Missouri (at bottom) had cut a new channel well to the south of Vermillion. The Vermillion River (entering at top left) appropriated the old Missouri riverbed for its own use.

In May 1839, Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, on one of his numerous mission trips up the Missouri, paused at the mouth of the Vermillion River to perform marriages and baptisms among the Indians encamped there. Four years later, the famed naturalist John James Audubon disembarked to do some hunting in the area as he ascended the Missouri in the course of his scientific studies. During the winter of 1845–1846, a group of Mormon emigrants camped near the mouth of the Vermillion River on their way to establish new settlements in Utah.⁵

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the region had begun to fill with non-Indian settlers, and the idea of a permanent frontier was disappearing. Congress created Minnesota Territory in 1849, followed in 1854 by Nebraska and Kansas territories. Sioux City, Iowa, was founded in 1855, and Minnesota achieved statehood three years later. With the establishment of an army post at Fort Pierre in 1855, the federal government began a more formal military presence on the Upper Missouri. The following year, the government established Fort Randall, situated one hundred miles upriver from Vermillion; this post would symbolize the military's control of the Northern Great Plains for the next thirty-six years.⁶

At the time of Fort Randall's construction, no non-Indian settlement was allowed in the lands lying west of the Big Sioux River, which today forms part of the boundary between Iowa and South Dakota. This arrangement changed, however, with the signing of the 1858 treaty with the Yankton Sioux, who relinquished more than twelve million acres in what is now southeastern South Dakota and settled in the vicinity of their new agency at Greenwood. During 1858, a number of prospective settlers gathered in Nebraska, opposite the mouth of the Vermillion River, to await ratification of the treaty. Among those who crossed the Missouri for an early look at the area was James McHenry. Once the

5. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 13–14. The park in the ravine below the Dakota Street hill in present-day Vermillion was named Audubon Park. Local lore holds that Audubon walked up the ravine to examine bird life there. *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 203; Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, pp. 3–4.

6. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 65–67; Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 14; Jerome A. Greene, *Fort Randall on the Missouri, 1856–1892* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2005), pp. 1–2.

Yanktons had departed and the land officially opened in the summer of 1859, McHenry settled at the site of the future town of Vermillion, where he built a store. By early 1860, approximately seventy-five settlers were living in the area that would become Clay County, making it the most populous non-Indian settlement on the Missouri River above Sioux City.⁷

According to various accounts, the new settlement took its name from either the Vermillion River or the American Fur Company post of Fort Vermillion. Among its first buildings were McHenry's store and Samuel Mulholland's log hotel, both located on the south side of Broadway Street near the steamboat landing. Nelson Miner, who arrived in Vermillion in 1860, later purchased Mulholland's hotel, tore it down, and constructed the three-story Saint Nicholas Hotel, which stood as a Vermillion landmark until the 1881 flood.⁸

McHenry's store had a meeting hall on the second floor that served as the center for community activities. On 9 November 1859, John Blair Smith Todd, a principal in the trading firm of Frost, Todd, and Com-

7. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 14–17; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:127.

8. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 14, 16–17, 59; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:128 and plate facing 1:586.



In 1868, Stanley J. Morrow stood in the middle of Broadway and took the earliest known picture of Vermillion. The Saint Nicholas Hotel is visible at center; McHenry's store is just to the right, and the Episcopal chapel is low on the bluff beyond.



Simple but elegant by early territorial standards, the Saint Nicholas Hotel was a distinctive feature on the south side of Broadway.

pany, called a meeting at McHenry's store, after which citizens signed petitions calling for the organization of a territory. Although this effort failed, a petition drive in 1860 was more successful, and on 2 March 1861, President James Buchanan signed the Organic Act creating Dakota Territory.⁹

Two days later, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president, thus gaining the power to appoint the first territorial officers. The new Republican administration was overwhelmed with the Civil War, however, and many territorial appointments were made with little regard for the abilities of the prospective officials. Nearly all of the first appointees were politically ambitious young men who obtained their positions through the help of influential Republican Party members and regarded their appointments as stepping stones to more important office.¹⁰ Although J. B. S. Todd would seem to have been a logical choice

9. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:166–68; Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 17.

10. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 17; Howard Roberts Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 67, 69.

for territorial governor, he was a Democrat. Moreover, he was a cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln, and his appointment would have opened the president to charges of nepotism. Instead, Lincoln appointed William Jayne, a friend, neighbor, and the Lincoln family physician from Springfield, Illinois, to serve as the first governor of Dakota Territory.¹¹

Vermillion residents had hoped to have their town selected as the temporary capital, but Governor Jayne stopped in Vermillion only briefly for a reception at Mulholland's hotel on 28 May 1861 before proceeding on to Yankton, twenty-seven miles to the west. His decision to place the seat of government in Yankton would prove financially advantageous for Todd, whose building lots in the town would gain value with its selection as capital. Todd had been stationed at Fort Randall but had left the army hoping to make money from the settlement of Dakota Territory; one of the main interests of Frost, Todd, and Company lay in land and townsite speculation. In fact, "booming," or speculating in building lots, was among the principal businesses conducted in early Dakota Territory. Many believed that Mary Todd Lincoln had pressured the governor in order to benefit her cousin.¹²

When the first territorial legislature met in Yankton on 17 March 1862, the primary issue to be decided was the location of the permanent capital. After much wrangling and threats of violence, lawmakers finally agreed to grant Yankton the capitol, Vermillion the territorial university, and the village of Bon Homme, located along the Missouri River about twenty miles west of Yankton, the territorial penitentiary. In dividing up this "pork," the three river towns managed to band together to shut out their rivals in the only other segments of the territory with substantial numbers of non-Indians: Sioux Falls and the Pembina area along the Red River in what is now North Dakota. Vermillion, with 477 residents, was the largest town in Dakota Territory. The first territorial census showed 152 men and 106 women living in Vermillion proper and another 131 men and 88 women living just west of town on the river bottom and in the Clay Creek district nearby.¹³

11. Lamar, *Dakota Territory*, pp. 67–68.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 71; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 17–18.

13. Lamar, *Dakota Territory*, pp. 36–37, 73; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 18–19; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 95. Bon Homme was located in present-day Bon

As a result of hard feelings arising from these maneuverings, some members of the Clay County delegation sought to prevent Vermillion from being named the county seat. Each of the bills needed to make that designation “mysteriously” disappeared, and the legislative session ended with seats being approved for every organized county in the territory except Clay County, which remained without a seat of government until the selection of Vermillion during the next session of the legislature.¹⁴

Among his first actions, Governor Jayne divided Dakota Territory into three judicial districts. The First Judicial District, headquartered at Vermillion, included the vast area from the territory’s eastern border to the Clay-Yankton county line and northward from the Missouri River to the Canadian border. Jayne assigned Lorenzo P. Williston of Pennsylvania, Lincoln’s appointee as one of three associate judges for the territory, to the First District at Vermillion. Judge Williston convened the first-ever session of court in Dakota Territory at Vermillion on 5 August 1861. During that session, J. B. S. Todd and William E. Gleason of Yankton and Henry D. Betts, John W. Boyle, A. J. Harlan, and Nelson Miner of Vermillion were admitted to the bar.¹⁵

Vermillion was also awarded the federal land office, which conducted business in a rented room in McHenry’s store. Henry Kennerly gained nomination as the land office register, but the Vermillion townspeople protested, suspicious that he would be too favorably inclined toward his former employer, J. B. S. Todd, who was involved in a dispute over ownership of the townsite. As a result, President Lincoln appointed J. M. Allen, and the land office finally opened for business on 6 October 1862. After six years of litigation, the courts rejected the

Homme County, six miles east of Springfield. Its population never grew as anticipated, and in 1881, the territorial legislature appropriated funds to build the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls. *Standard Atlas of Bon Homme County, South Dakota* (Chicago: George A. Ogle & Co., 1912), pp. 7, 51; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2:1172.

14. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 19.

15. Act of 2 Mar. 1861, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 12 (1863): 154–55; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:129, 175, 180; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 100; Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 21.

claims of Frost, Todd, and Company to ownership of the Vermillion townsite on the basis of having established a trading post there.¹⁶

In the spring of 1862, a company of cavalry, consisting of ninety-eight men, was raised in Dakota Territory. The members of Company A, First Regiment, Dakota Cavalry, enlisted for a three-year period, anticipating that the regiment would be sent east to fight in the Civil War. Instead, Company A briefly garrisoned Fort Randall and then served at the governor's discretion, protecting various Dakota Territory settlements. Many of the cavalry troopers were Vermillion men, and the group elected Nelson Miner of Vermillion as their commander. The Dakota Cavalry traveled such long distances and were so fleet of foot that they quickly earned the nickname "Coyotes."¹⁷

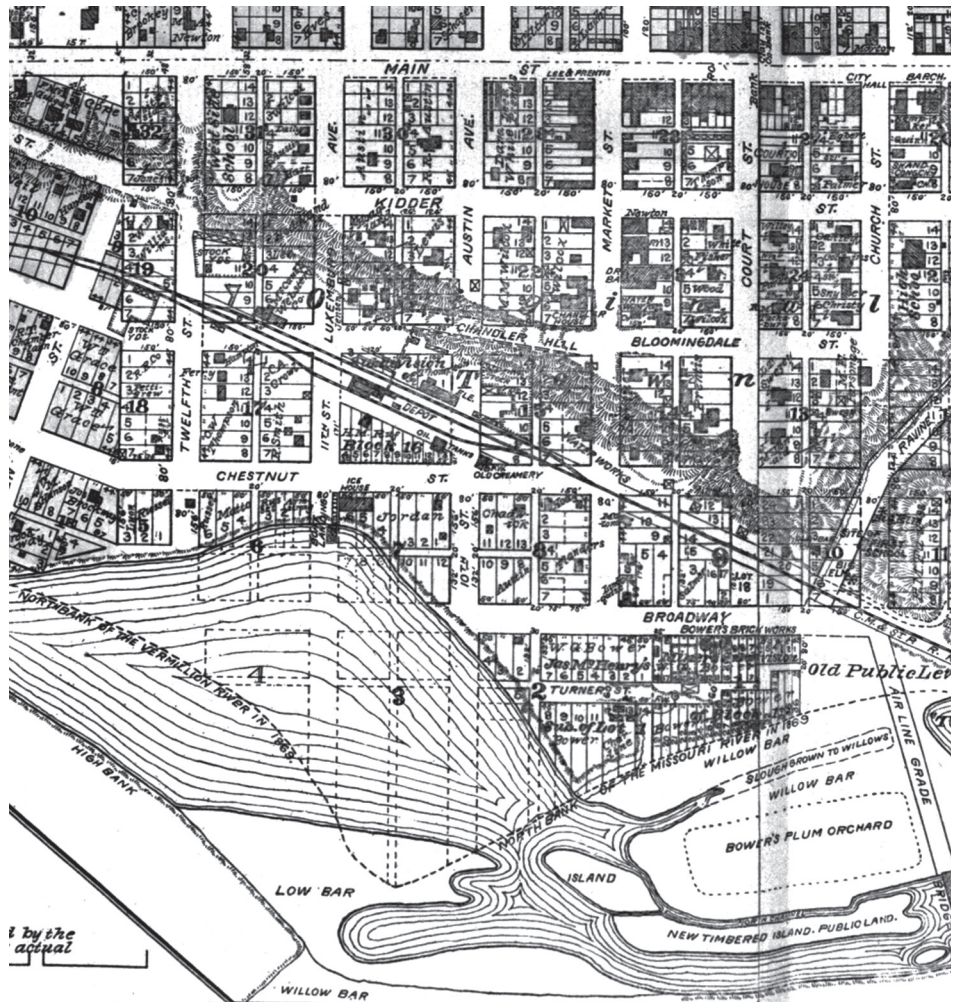
Later that summer, Dakota Indians killed several hundred white settlers in Minnesota in what has become known as the Dakota Conflict of 1862. After the murders of Judge Joseph B. Amidon and his son at Sioux Falls on 25 August, Vermillion formed its own militia of eighty-three men. Fortification was commenced above the town, east of present-day Forest Avenue near the intersection of Yale and Lewis streets. The location provided a natural spot for keeping watch to the northeast toward Sioux Falls and Minnesota, from which direction any danger was expected to come. Residents began constructing a protective ditch and appropriated logs from the Presbyterian church for a stockade.¹⁸

On 6 September, wild rumors of impending danger prompted the entire Vermillion community to flee, mostly to Sioux City, Iowa. Eight men remained behind to keep an eye on the town, withdrawing at night to an island in the river for protection. After two days in Sioux City, most of the citizens returned to Vermillion, although others nev-

16. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 14–15, 19–21; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 71, 99; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:216.

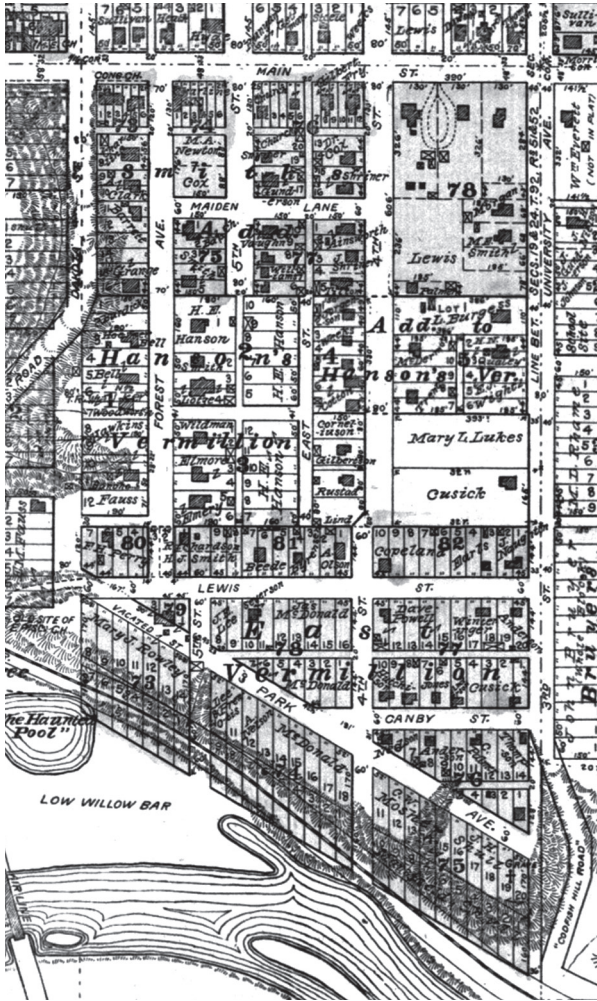
17. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 23; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:191–92, 2:1105. One of the regiment's two six-pounder brass cannon now belongs to the University of South Dakota ROTC Department and is on display at the W. H. Over Museum in Vermillion.

18. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 22–23, 122; Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota* ([Logansport, Ind.]: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1904), 1:204; "The Old Log School House," *South Dakota Alumni Quarterly* 2 (Oct. 1906): 97.



er went back, fearful of the wild and unsettled nature of the frontier. Upon returning, the settlers built a stockade on the side of the bluff near the ravine. The “rifle pits” or foxholes dug at the time were said to have remained visible for many years. Despite fears that the Dakota Conflict would spark violence among the local Indian population, the Yanktons remained peaceful as a result of the efforts of their leaders, Strike-the-Ree and Mad Bull.¹⁹

19. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 22–24.



E. Frank Peterson's 1901 map of Vermillion shows the bluff as a dark band running from top left to bottom right. The ravine road (now South Dakota Street) cuts through the bluff near the center. Peterson also shows the north bank of the Missouri before the 1881 flood, as well as the former location of the whirlpool, here labeled the "Haunted Pool."

One of the benefits that Vermillion derived from its connection to the military units organized in Dakota Territory and, in particular, Captain Nelson Miner's leadership, was the construction of a log schoolhouse by members of Company A during the winter of 1864–1865. Until sometime in 1860, school sessions convened in the meeting room above McHenry's store. Upon completion of the Presbyterian church, schoolchildren assembled there for classes. After the church was dismantled in 1862 to build the stockade, school was held in a vacant structure called



the Eckles house, as well as in another residence. The new schoolhouse occupied a site on the ravine road near Nelson Miner's Saint Nicholas Hotel. Soldiers under Miner's command cut the logs and assembled the structure using nails, hinges, and windows donated by the captain. In addition, Miner authorized the release of one of his soldiers, Amos Shaw, to serve as schoolmaster and paid his wages.²⁰

As important to the community as the education of its children was the influence of its churches, which established a presence in Vermillion soon after the town's settlement. The first church service took place in McHenry's building in the fall of 1860, and the first church structure in Dakota Territory was the Presbyterian church built below the bluff in Vermillion in August 1860. The Bruyer settlement east of Vermillion became the site for the territory's first Catholic church, also constructed in 1860. Episcopalians built a small chapel along the bluff east of the ravine in 1866, and in 1871 the Baptists placed their church at the foot of the ravine on land donated by Miner. Two years later, the Methodists built a church atop the bluff on what is now Bloomingdale Street. A Congregational church was organized in 1870 at a meeting held in the Episcopal chapel, and by 1873 the Congregationalists had their own church building. The first Lutheran church was constructed around 1878.²¹

20. "Old Log School House," pp. 97-100; Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, p. 5; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 122-23. When Vermillion outgrew the log schoolhouse in 1873, Miner also donated land on the bluff where a new brick school was built on Church Street.

21. Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, pp. 6-7; Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, 1:186-87; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 1:128-29; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 23, 136-38, 140, 142-44, 148.

Facing page, top. With the alarms of the Dakota Conflict in the past, Nelson Miner's soldiers took time to construct the rough log structure that became legendary as Dakota Territory's first permanent schoolhouse.

Bottom. Less than a decade after the construction of the log schoolhouse, a new school building on the bluff indicated Vermillion's growth and progress. It was later expanded to form the imposing structure shown here.

New connections between Vermillion and the world beyond Dakota Territory came with the telegraph line in 1870 and the arrival of the first train on 2 December 1872. Rail service, however, was disrupted from time to time during periods of high water when the Missouri River whirlpool cut into the bluff east of town and washed out the tracks. Even before the arrival of the railroad, Vermillion benefited from the military road between Sioux City and Fort Randall, which eventually included bridges across the Big Sioux, Vermillion, and James rivers. The presence of this road, which passed through both Vermillion and Yankton, provided a valuable economic stimulus to the area, and by 1870 the population of Clay County had grown to 2,618.²²

During the Montana and Black Hills gold rushes and subsequent military campaigns of the 1860s and 1870s, the Missouri River itself contributed greatly to the economic growth of southeastern Dakota Territory. The Missouri provided the shortest and most practical route for those traveling to the gold fields and military depots upstream. Together, the river and the military road transported cargo and passengers into the area and aided the shipment of goods to markets elsewhere, creating employment for farmers, businessmen, and teamsters. Steamboat traffic also meant work for an army of woodchoppers, who set up woodyards to supply fuel for the boats passing up and down the river. Traffic to Vermillion itself was sporadic until 1878, when the main channel of the Missouri River shifted to the Dakota side. After that, the public levee in Vermillion saw more frequent use.²³

Although Vermillion's destruction by flood in the spring of 1881 is widely known, less well known is the fact that much of the town was destroyed by fire on 13 January 1875. In the course of its report on the conflagration the following day, the *Vermillion Dakota Republican* provided a virtual tour of the town's business district:

At noon on Wednesday the 13th inst., the dread cry of fire was heard on our streets. The wind was blowing a gale from the north west and the thermometer sixteen degrees below zero. On going into the street

22. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 27, 30, 32; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 80–82; Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, pp. 9, 13–14.

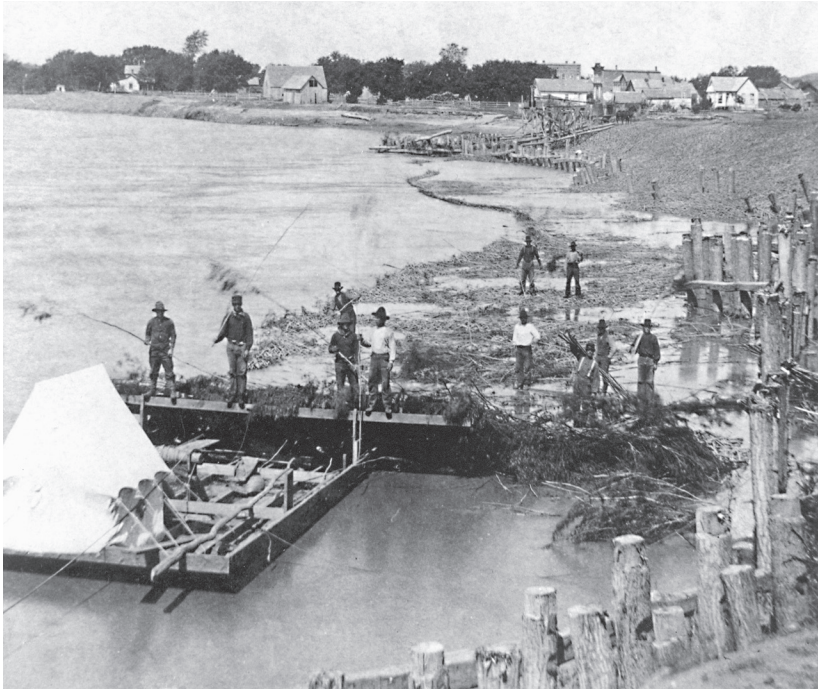
23. Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 53–54; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 80–82.



In 1871, Vermillion buildings clustered around Broadway Street. The Saint Nicholas hotel is the first building on the left, and the Vermillion River flows past at the end of the street.



After 1872, the railroad changed Vermillion's relationship to the outside world. Although this photograph was taken from a vantage point similar to the previous one, the tracks of the Dakota Southern Railroad now cut across the foreground.



For Missouri River steamboats operating in frontier conditions, primitive docking facilities like the public levee in Vermillion were not unusual. (Stanley J. Morrow photograph)

smoke was seen to be issuing from the south east corner of the second story of Lyon's Block—the room occupied by R. J. Simenson, Judge of Probate. A rush was made for the room by Jack Becket and others. Arriving at the top of the stairs on the north east corner of the block the outside door was found locked. It was broken in, passing across the empty room to the south, the door entering Simenson's office was also found locked, this also was broken in when the whole room was found to be in a sheet of flame. At the moment of breaking in the door the south window of the office gave way and a sheet of flame leaped out ten feet long. A rush was made to clean out the store of Grange Brothers immediately below, but before many goods were removed the fire began to fall through from above and the suffocating smoke drove every body out. In the mean time Hayward's boot store, next door, Hodgins' meat market next and the Adelphi Hotel were being cleared as fast as possible. But the flames made rapid work and in a few minutes the Bank,

across the road, Russell's meat market and dwelling immediately west occupied by G. W. Pratt were in flames; on the east of the Bank, Tyler's fruit store, Thompson & Lewis' office and the C. I. K. building occupied by Pratt & DeVay, the second story occupied by the Register Printing Office, Jolley's law office and W. K. Hollenbeck's Internal Revenue office was soon in a sheet of flame. Then came Ashards Bakery, Wheeler's barber shop, Steven's watch shop, Carr's store, Hansen's furniture store, Masonic and Odd Fellow's hall, Macomber's drug store, Republican Printing Office, Tubb's fruit store, the Post Office and the medical office of Drs. Dawson and Burdick.

By almost superhuman effort the main part of the Adelphi Hotel was saved, only burning the low wing between it and Lyons block. The same was true of Mrs. Dr. Lyons house and the building known as Cheap Jim's. The store between Lyons block and Mrs. Lyon's residence was burned. Had the Adelphi burned nothing could have saved every building on both sides of the street as far west as the street leading to



Vermillion was too young for paved streets when this view of the intersection of Broadway and Market was taken. After the 1875 fire, the view was vastly different: all three buildings facing the camera would burn. The building partly visible on the extreme right is Lyon's Block, where the fire started.



The Adelphi Hotel became a focus for firefighting efforts during the 1875 conflagration and suffered only partial damage.

the depot.—Had Cheap Jim’s building burned every thing would have burned east on that side, including the Court House and the St. Nicholas on the south. The conflagration was terrible; the wind sweeping down from the north west carried the flames from Lyons block almost across the street. So rapid was the destruction that it was impossible to clear the rooms under Union Hall entirely of their contents though the streets were full of men, women and children working with the greatest possible dispatch.²⁴

After the fire, downtown was quickly rebuilt. Dr. Lyon had a new brick building constructed on his corner, and the stretch along the south side of Broadway that had burned entirely was soon filled with new, smaller stores.

24. *Vermillion Dakota Republican*, 14 Jan. 1875.

Facing page, top. Between the time of the 1875 fire and the 1881 flood, Vermillion resumed its growth. This photograph shows the view looking southeast from the top of Market Street on the bluff. (Stanley J. Morrow photograph)

Bottom. This view, partly overlapping with the previous one, looks southwest and shows the new buildings at the intersection of Broadway and Market streets, including the large brick Lyon’s Block building.



The next disaster to hit Vermillion proved more difficult to overcome. Although the town's proximity to the Missouri River had helped to spur its development, the river also posed problems for residents in the form of periodic flooding and the erosion of the bluff near the whirlpool. In the spring of 1881, major flooding destroyed most of Vermillion, changing the course of its future and altering the course of the Missouri itself. The flood was the result of a particularly hard winter throughout the northern plains, the same winter that Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family endured near De Smet and that she later chronicled in *The Long Winter*. Beginning on 15 October 1880 and continuing



The action of the whirlpool near Vermillion was frequently a nuisance and occasionally a danger. Sometime before the 1881 flood, erosion or slumping near the whirlpool caused this train wreck.

for almost six months, blizzard after blizzard hit the region, resulting in heavy accumulations of snow. Heavy runoff the next spring combined with thick ice on the Missouri to create the ice jams and high water that destroyed Vermillion.²⁵

Historian George W. Kingsbury, a resident of Yankton at the time, was an eyewitness to the flood and its aftermath. “At Vermillion the destruction was most complete,” he later wrote in his *History of Dakota Territory*. Kingsbury described the town as having between six and seven hundred residents and approximately one hundred fifty homes, businesses, and other structures, all situated “on rather a narrow strip of the Missouri bottom land.”²⁶ He went on to detail the drama that unfolded as the water began to rise:

The flood with its moving ice attacked the city about midnight of March 27th. A grove of trees west of the city obstructed the ice for a time. The people were awakened by the alarm rung out by the bell of the Baptist Church, and not many minutes later the streets were thronged with many women and children, who had been hurriedly clad, all making their way to the road leading up the hill to the high land, some leading horses or driving cattle, with their arms full of clothing picked up in haste as best they could when leaving their homes. The alarm bell had been the agreed signal of imminent flood danger. Many of these refugees were unable to get ahead of the invading water and ice, and were compelled to wade through three feet of icy water in the darkness of midnight to reach the bluff road. The bluff was a steep one.²⁷

25. Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, pp. 33–34; William T. Anderson, “Pioneer Authors from South Dakota: Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane,” in *South Dakota Leaders: From Pierre Chouteau, Jr., to Oscar Howe*, ed. Herbert T. Hoover and Larry J. Zimmerman (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 1989), p. 404; Laura Bower Van Nuys, *The Family Band: From the Missouri to the Black Hills, 1881–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 4; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 57–59.

26. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2:1152–53. Other accounts of the flood of 1881 appear in Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, pp. 35–40; Schell, *History of Clay County*, pp. 58–63; and Paula M. Nelson, ed., *Sunshine Always: The Courtship Letters of Alice Bower and Joseph Gossage of Dakota Territory* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2006), pp. 16–17, 33–37.

27. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2:1153.

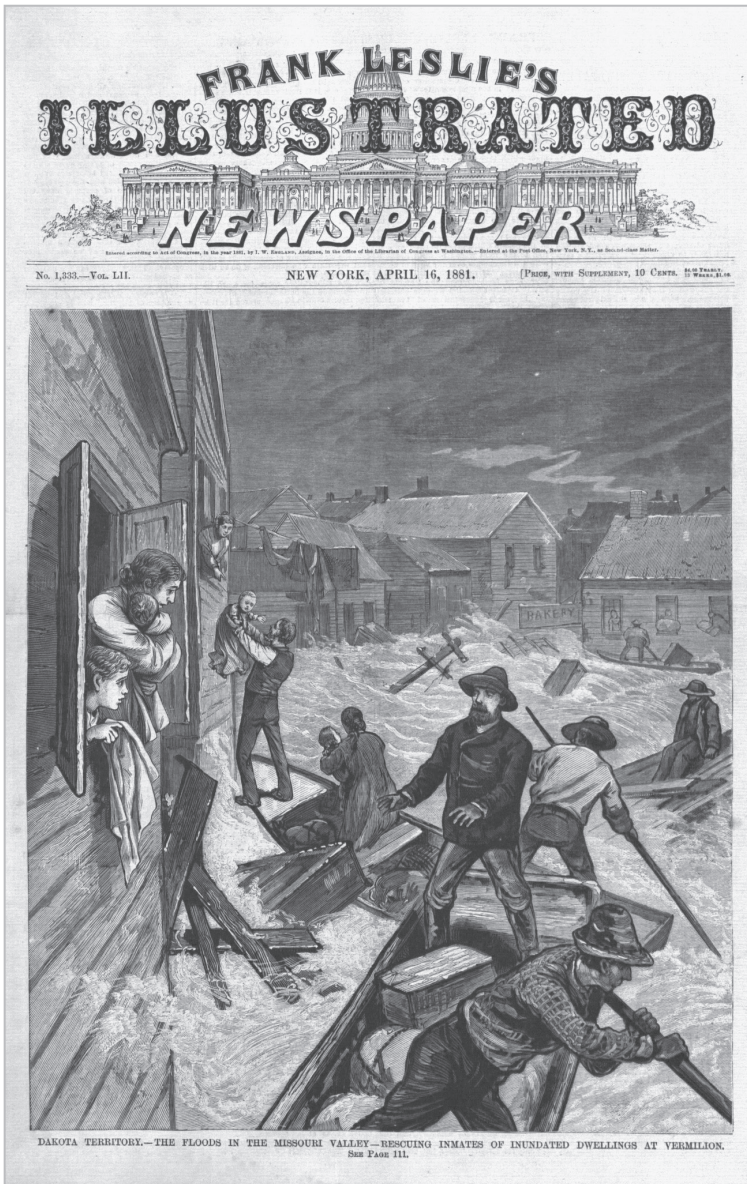


The bell of Vermillion's Baptist church was instrumental more than once in 1881 in warning the populace of rising waters. Situated on slightly higher ground, the church survived the flood.

Over the next several days, the water came up gradually, first submerging the railroad tracks and the depot platform. By 31 March, Kingsbury reported that the

water had reached nearly to the roof of many of the smaller structures, and in the morning they began to float off their foundations. The growing trees on the west had kept the ice, in large part, from entering the town up to this time. During the 31st of March and following night forty structures floated away and dashed against the ice packs lower down the valley. A few people had entrusted their safety to the second story of two brick buildings, but the next day they were taken out of the second-story windows by rescuers and carried ashore in skiffs. For six days following, the flood remained intact, raising and lowering alternately as the gorged ice below, extending now from two to ten miles in an icy sea, clogged up and then afford[ed] a temporary opening for a brief time, only to be again dammed up by the gorging ice floe.²⁸

28. *Ibid.*, 2:1152–53.



Just as today, floods made sensational news around the country in the 1880s. The 16 April 1881 issue of the New York-based *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* depicted the rescue efforts in Vermillion.

Meanwhile, Vermillion residents continued the work of moving what possessions they could salvage to higher ground, a task made more difficult by the limited number of boats. Kingsbury described the bizarre scene on 6 April as the water rose again, this time rapidly, and

ice entered the desolate town, which yet contained a hundred or more of its best buildings; the Baptist bell again rang out its ominous and frightful clangor announcing new danger, and just about midday the procession of the buildings started—some steadily and majestically facing their fate, others tottering, partly tipped over, and in the course of a couple of hours fifty-six buildings were floated off or wrecked near their foundations, among these the St. Nicholas Hotel, the railroad depot and the Congregational Church. The Chandler House was moved and badly injured, but lodged near the bluff and successfully resisted the further efforts of the destroyer. Twenty buildings in stately processions, like swan, were observed floating off in one fleet. The scene was an imposing and exciting one, but those whose homes were being wasted and property destroyed did not then appreciate the grandeur of the tragedy that was being enacted before their eyes, nor the stupendous stage upon which it was being enacted.²⁹

The flood completely destroyed 132 buildings and left many of the surviving structures badly damaged. Clay County suffered a total of \$450,000 in damages, with an estimated \$140,000 in property losses occurring in Vermillion alone.³⁰

On 14 April, even before the floodwaters had entirely receded, Vermillion residents held a public meeting and decided to rebuild the community on top of the bluff. Support for the move was nearly unanimous, wrote Herbert S. Schell in his *History of Clay County, South Dakota*. Only the grain elevators, five houses, and two businesses on the bottomland

29. *Ibid.*, 2:1153.

30. Lathrop, *Life in Vermillion*, p. 39; Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 61.

Facing page, top. A moving ice jam crushed these steamboats at the landing in Yankton, which also suffered severe flooding in 1881. (Stanley J. Morrow photograph)

Bottom. Debris litters the street in this post-flood view of the south side of Broadway in Vermillion, but the material for repair and rebuilding is also stacked neatly nearby. (Stanley J. Morrow photograph)



were deemed reparable, but a number of structures that stood on the hillside had survived unscathed. Thus, wrote Schell, “While a small residue of the old remained on the bottom, a new town emerged on top of the bluff in a matter of weeks.”³¹

Once the decision to move had been made, the price for lots on the bluff doubled almost overnight, fetching between one hundred and two hundred dollars apiece. The section line, called Vine Street, which had formed the town’s northern boundary on the original plat, became Main Street of the new Vermillion. Schell reported that the community was transformed into “a veritable beehive of activity” from mid-April through August 1881, as the business district was resurrected atop the bluff between Main and Kidder streets and from Market to Church streets.³²

Meanwhile, business owners made do in temporary quarters. “Lee and Prentis, for instance, were holding forth in the Methodist church with whatever stock they had salvaged or procured elsewhere,” noted Schell. The new schoolhouse on Church Street was “enlisted for the duration, with Reeve and King selling merchandise in the intermediate room, the Grange store in the primary room, and a harness shop doing business in the second-floor hallway.” Local men also came to the schoolhouse for haircuts until George Wheeler’s new barbershop on Main Street was finished in the middle of July.³³

Many of the new buildings were constructed using brick or other materials salvaged from old Vermillion. A few wooden structures were moved in their entirety, including the Baptist church that had stood on the ravine road. With the aid of carpenters, masons, and professional house movers from as far away as Sioux City and Des Moines, Iowa, the new town arose “as if by a miracle.” By mid-July, the *Dakota Republican* carried an impressive list of establishments again doing business.³⁴

“Below the hill,” writes Schell, “the landscape had materially changed. The Missouri had cut through the narrow half-mile neck south of the town to find a straighter course near the Nebraska bluffs, thus eliminat-

31. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 61.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 63. See also *Vermillion Dakota Republican*, 14 July 1881.

Following the flood, the Baptist church was moved up the ravine to a location both more secure and more accessible to the new Vermillion.

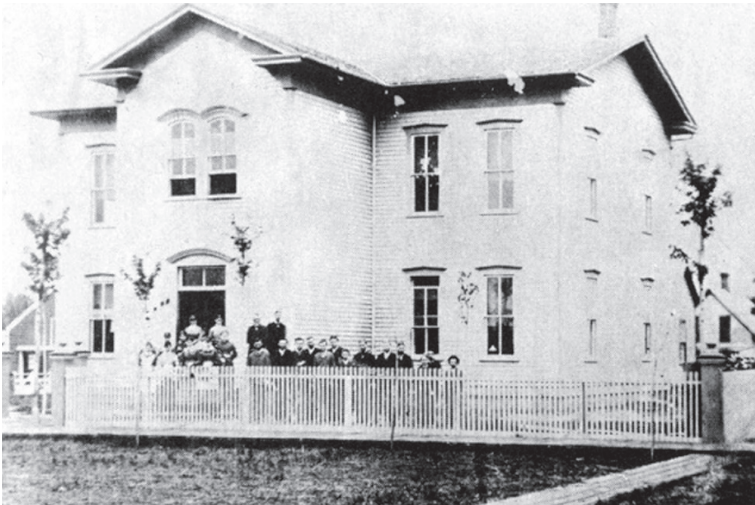


ing seventeen miles of steamboat traffic. The Vermillion, as a result, was flowing down the old bed to join the Missouri several miles southeast of the town. By early August the old river bed south of the Vermillion had sufficiently dried out to enable teams to make their way across.³⁵

Among the community improvements made after the flood was the construction of a new city hall and, finally, a county-owned courthouse. The new county courthouse on Court Street was erected during the winter of 1881–1882 after a grand jury reported to Judge Jefferson P. Kidder that the only existing building the county owned was “about as cheap as could have been built” and was completely unsuited to keeping funds and records safe.³⁶ The new city hall, which also served as an opera house, was constructed at the corner of Main and Church streets in 1885 after a contested bond-issue election and some litigation. Following the flood, the Congregational Church built a new structure on

35. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 63.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.



High Street that was ready in November 1881. A new Episcopal church appeared on Church Street in 1883, and a Catholic church, the first Saint Agnes, was constructed in 1885.³⁷

The economic devastation the community suffered finally spurred action to establish the University of Dakota, which had lain dormant since its authorization by the territorial legislature in 1862. Spearheading the drive to construct the university in Vermillion were Judge Kidder, attorney and future United States Congressman John Jolley, local banker D. M. Inman, and F. N. Burdick, editor of the *Dakota Republican*. Judge Kidder donated ten acres of land to make up half of the original campus. The parcel had been homesteaded by his son, Lyman, who was killed in the summer of 1867 while on active military duty. The taxpayers of Clay County approved ten thousand dollars in bonds to construct the first building on the campus. Because Old Main (then designated as University Hall) had not been completed when classes were scheduled to begin in the fall of 1882, the first classes were held in the newly constructed Clay County Courthouse.³⁸

As the new Vermillion with the university as its centerpiece took shape on the bluff, the Vermillion of early territorial days faded into memory. The new town quickly eclipsed the old river settlement, reaching a population of more than two thousand by 1900³⁹ and eventually becoming the city that residents and university students know today. Fortunately, the old Vermillion has not entirely vanished, thanks to the eyewitness accounts and photographs that have been preserved through the decades.

37. Ibid., pp. 139–40, 144.

38. Ibid., pp. 65–68; Randy Johnson and Nancy Allan, *A Dispatch to Custer: The Tragedy of Lieutenant Kidder* (Missoula, Mont.: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 30–38.

39. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 180.

Facing page, top. Clay County business was conducted in this new building erected on the corner of Court and Kidder streets after a grand jury reported on the general unsuitability of the only existing county building.

Bottom. The city hall and opera house built in the 1880s at the corner of Main and Church streets, shown here, was replaced in 1910 in response to concerns about its capacity and safety.