

R.R. NELSON, THE FIRST FEDERAL JUDGE IN MINNESOTA

“Cradled in the lap of luxury, reared in aristocratic surroundings”

Rensselaer Russell Nelson

was born on May 12, 1826, in Cooperstown, New York. He was the son of Samuel Nelson, an eminent New York jurist, and Catherine Russell Nelson. She was the daughter of a judge, and her family tree included a member of the Irish Parliament as well as a friend of Charles II of England. Her Dutch ancestors came from Holland to New Amsterdam in 1647.

Samuel Nelson, of Irish Scottish descent, was a judge of the New York courts and served on the United States Supreme Court from 1845-1872, during which time he participated in the infamous Dred Scott decision.



Samuel Nelson, ca 1837.
Family record.
Childhood home.
From the collections of the Fenimore Farm Museum, NY State Historical Association



In 1829, Samuel Nelson purchased the former home of James Fenimore Cooper, and Rensselaer Nelson spent much of his youth there. He was educated by tutors, and studied at the local military academy and Hartwick Seminary.

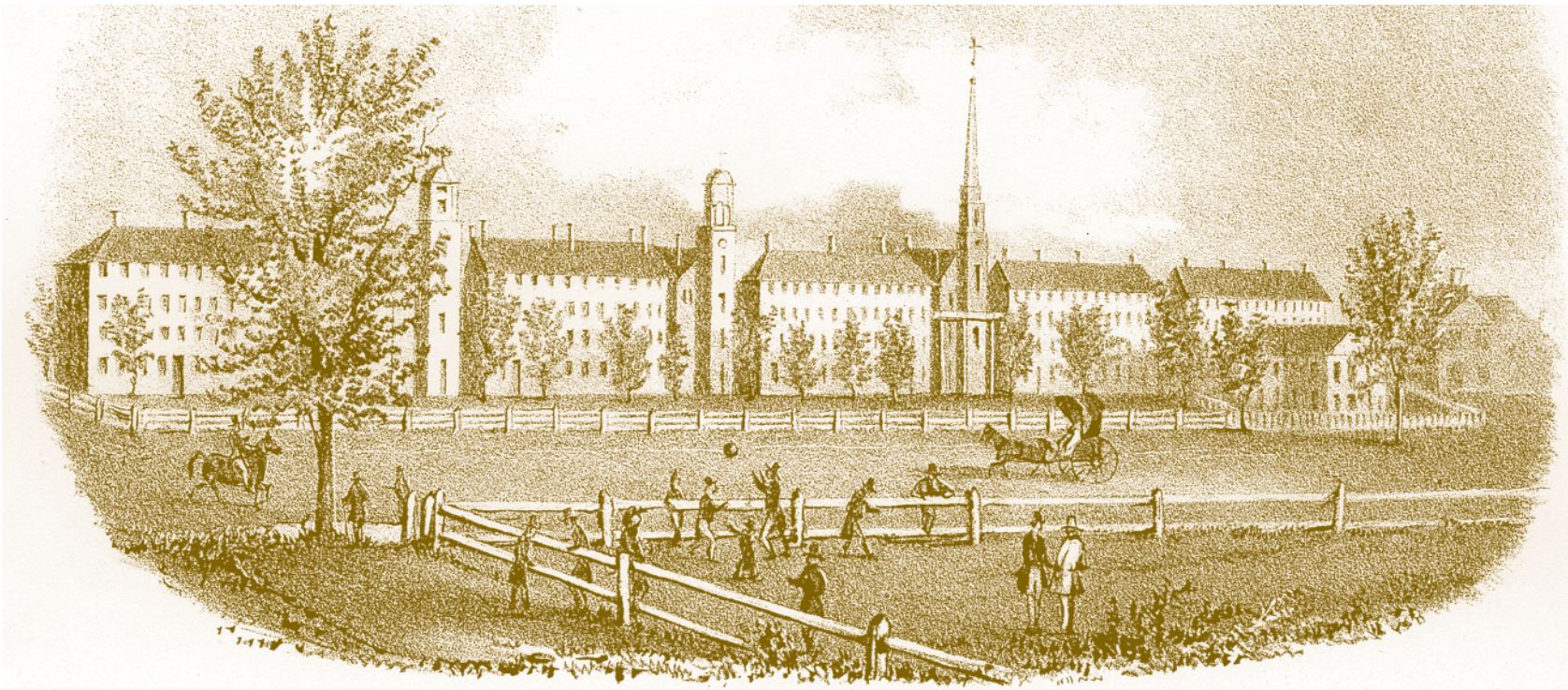


Central House, St. Paul - “First Capitol” of the Minnesota Territory.
From the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society

Rensselaer Nelson left for Yale College at sixteen. A college-mate, I. Atwater, who was two years ahead of him, described him this way:

“In scholarship he ranked above the average, though he never was ambitious for the highest honors in scholarship.”

When the young college men enjoyed football games, he participated “with peculiar zest, which no doubt helped to develop the physical vigor for which he is known today.”



CLASS OF 1846.

YALE COLLEGE.

R. R. Nelson graduated from Yale in 1846, at the age of twenty. Having decided to follow his father into law, he read law for three years with two prominent New York lawyers, Charles Starkweather and James R. Whiting (the New York District Attorney).



In an oft told tale, which must have come from Nelson himself, the first person he encountered in St. Paul, the postmaster, told him...

“My dear young friend, I sincerely pity you. There are fifty lawyers here, the most of them starving. I advise you to take the next boat east, because you have no chance here.”



SAINT PAUL, MINN., IN 1853.

From the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society

Rensselaer Nelson was planning to practice law in Buffalo, but he became acquainted with the Hon. Nathan K. Hall, who had recently voted in Congress for the formation of the Minnesota Territory. Inspired by Hall, Nelson set out for the Minnesota Territory. He arrived by riverboat in St. Paul in May of 1850, bearing the land warrant that his father, Samuel Nelson, had received for fighting in the War of 1812.

St. Paul population in 1850: 900