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## **Letter from Willis A. Gorman to James Ermatinger**

**Edited, with an introduction, notes, and historical contexts by John Rykhus**

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## I. Introduction

As people collect or preserve their family papers over the years, often certain considerations go into the selection of which documents, letters, scraps or other articles would be considered important enough for the family archives and which become kindling for the family stove. For the prominent Warren family of the Chippewa River valley in western Wisconsin, the decision to place in a box or desk drawer a letter from Willis Gorman to James Ermatinger, and to later save it as something considered important to the family papers, probably took little in the way of reflection on the part of the Ermatingers and their relations, by marriage, the Warrens. After all, how often does a close family member receive direct correspondence from the Governor of the Territory, let alone a letter asking assistance in some matters which involve some of the most pressing territorial issues of the time, at least as far as an ambitious politician like its author is concerned. So it was no small wonder that the Warrens, a family which Ermatinger had married into, would cling to such a keepsake as this type of letter, signed by Territorial Governor Willis A. Gorman.

But does this letter have value outside the purview of the Warren family papers? Is it more than just a vanity piece, through which Ermatinger's descendants can claim some quasi-historical self-importance? Through my research, I have found that the letter in and of itself is of little historical importance, as the events that it alludes to were never, by any known historical record, followed up with by the primary parties, Gorman or Ermatinger. But it does have some value in its ability to convey a glimpse into the mindsets of both the politician and the trader, and as a springboard into a discussion about the fate of Native Americans in western Wisconsin. It is also indicative of some of

the deception practiced, as well as the fervor with which white Americans on the frontier went about the profitable business of grabbing Indian lands.

## II. Background and Contexts

### Willis Gorman

(For a portrait of Willis Gorman see the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry website at <http://firstmn.phpwebhosting.com/SearchResults.php3?ID=1238>.)

From what can be gleaned from the information available on Willis Arnold Gorman, he was first and foremost a politician, then a military man, and finally a public prosecutor. As a politician, Gorman was of the new breed which sprang up in the American West of the mid-nineteenth century. Born in Kentucky in 1816, he became a political contemporary, albeit slightly younger, of that more famous native Kentuckian, Abraham Lincoln. (Lincoln was born seven years before Gorman in 1809.) While the early careers of the two men paralleled in some respects, the combination of fate, political fortune, and history would propel them down divergent paths. The Lincoln family moved to Illinois, while the Gormans settled in Indiana. Both men studied law and would serve in the United States Congress, facing each other on opposite sides of the aisle. Gorman was a Democrat, an allegiance which would treat his career more favorably at first. But the fickle finger of politics would lead the other, Republican, Kentucky native to the White House.

Gorman was certainly the epitome of the promising young “westerner” destined for political success. After studying law at Indiana University he was elected in 1836 to the Indiana State House at just 23 years of age, and then re-elected for four more

consecutive terms. The war with Mexico offered the smell of adventure and the opportunity for further advancement, and the young Gorman, at 30 years of age, enlisted in the Third Indiana Volunteers. He was soon promoted to major in June of 1846. That regiment returned home, but the ambitious Gorman organized a new regiment, the Fourth Indiana, and his efforts were rewarded after the war when he was appointed to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1849. He was only 37 years old when, after two terms in Congress, his party affiliation paid dividends as he was awarded an appointment as Governor of the Minnesota Territory and Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs by President Franklin Pierce in 1853. He was only the second man to serve in the office which controlled a vast expanse of territory, and he would hold the office for the next four years.

Despite Gorman's obvious interest in Indian affairs, as the letter to James Ermatinger suggests, in his four years as Governor of Minnesota he was actually never directly involved in the negotiations of any of the major treaties of the years 1853-1857, when he served as Governor of the Minnesota Territory. He did, on only his sixth day in office, negotiate a treaty with the Winnebagos in 1853, but this treaty was never ratified by the Senate. The 1853 treaty was mentioned in the later treaty with the Winnebagos of 1855, which explained that the Winnebagos refused to accept the amendments which the Senate attempted to make to the earlier treaty (Kappler 693).

During the Civil War, Gorman received a commission as Colonel commanding the famed First Minnesota Infantry Regiment, with whom he fought at the first battle at Bull Run. He was promoted to Brigadier General and served until 1864, when he resigned due to poor health.

After the war Gorman returned to St. Paul where he practiced law. He served as the City Attorney for St. Paul from 1869 until his death in 1876. Gorman married twice and had five children.

### **James R. Ermatinger**

Much less is known about a certain Mr. James Rough Ermatinger. His life is of certain local historical interest, as his trading post on the Chippewa River north of Chippewa Falls designated him as the founder of the contemporary community of Jim Falls, Wisconsin. He was also the first Justice of the Peace to be appointed in Chippewa County. The descendant of a line of American fur traders, he was the grandson of Lawrence Ermatinger II, a Swiss born merchant and trader who established himself in Montreal in 1760, and Jemima Oakes, who was most likely from London, as the couple was married there.

James Ermatinger was born in 1808. His parents were George Ermatinger of Montreal and Catherine McKee. James Ermatinger's grandparents, through his mother, were Thomas McKee of Pennsylvania and Teresa Askin of Detroit. Both were of Irish descent, but Thomas McKee was half Shawnee, which allowed certain treaty rights to his descendants (see section below). His wife, Teresa Askin, was from a powerful Detroit merchant family. Thomas McKee's connections helped him gain the post of Superintendent of the British Indian Department at Amherstburg, Ontario in 1801.

It was only natural, then, while possessing a trading tradition on both sides of the family, and with a Shawnee great-grandmother, that James Ermatinger would find himself also in the fur-trading business. He also married into two other trading families,

the Warrens and the Cadotte's, when he married Charlotte Cadotte. She was daughter of Michel Cadotte, who founded the trading post at Madeleine Island, and whose father Jean Baptiste founded the trading post at what is now Cadott, Wisconsin. Her mother was Madeleine Equaysayway, or "Traveling Woman," likely the daughter of an Ojibwa Chief. Charlotte Cadotte was also the widow of Truman Warren, a trader and interpreter who fell out of favor with some Ojibwa factions and was killed by some disaffected Indians at La Pointe in 1825 while serving as the U.S. Indian Agent. There was likely some correlation to the event of Warren's death and the negotiations of the Treaties between the U.S. and the Ojibwa in 1825 at Prairie Du Chien and again in 1826 at Fond Du Lac.

### **Ojibwa Treaties**

There were several major treaties between the Ojibwa or "Chippewa" of what is now western Wisconsin and the United States Government. References to the family of James Ermatinger or his wife Charlotte Cadotte or their forbears can be found in the treaty of 1825-1826, in the treaty of 1842, and again in the treaty of 1854, just months after the Gorman-Ermatinger correspondence.

There were two main thrusts to these treaties; the acquisition by the U.S. of Indian lands, as well as the resulting payments to both Indian tribes and what the treaties referred to as "half breeds," or people of mixed descent. It is in this latter vein that the Warren's and the Cadottes receive mention, and it is of little wonder then that they can be envisioned as being on the side of the proponents of these agreements. In the Treaty of 1826 the wife of Charles Oakes and her children each received a section of land. Charles was likely related to Jemima Oakes, James Ermatinger's grandmother, as one of James'

brothers was named Charles Oakes Ermatinger. Several nieces and nephews of Charlotte Cadotte's father Michel, her cousins, also received sections in this treaty, as did James Ermatinger and his siblings, simply by virtue of their father being of slight "Shawnee extraction" (Treaty of 1826, 274). William Warren, the son of Lyman Warren, who was James Ermatinger's brother-in-law, also received a section of land in this treaty. Like Jim Ermatinger's founding of Jim Falls, Wisconsin, Lyman Warren and a certain Jean Brunet are of local interest for their partnership in a sawmill at Brunet Falls on the Chippewa River, the site which was later to be called the City of Cornell.

This close association of traders, all interrelated by marriage and with marital ties to various Ojibwa bands, (whether the marriages were sanctioned or not, as the treaties mention several children of either the Warrens or Cadottes by Indian women to whom they were not married) can be seen over the years to have cashed in on any given treaty that the tribes were compelled to sign. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Treaty of 1842, which actually carries a ledger of payments to be made directly to Lyman Warren, Charles Oakes, Michael Cadott, and various other traders, presumably for monies owed to them by the Indian tribes. This put them on a list with such prominent Americans as John Jacob Astor, who received over \$23,000 in this treaty (Treaty of 1842, 545), getting him well on his way to amassing his fortune before he would sink with the Titanic sixty odd years later.

This practice of paying the traders and not the Indians would be disallowed in a stipulation of the treaty of 1854. The death of Truman Warren was probably not a factor, but a witness to the negotiations in the following year, Richard Morse, explains in his journals the bitterness felt by the tribes toward the U.S. and their broken treaty promises,

hinting at the complicity which they saw in their trading “cousins.” The great Lac Court Oreilles Chief Na-naw-ong-ga-be, or Dressing Bird, known for his excellent oratory, summed up the feelings of the Ojibwa at the treaty at La Pointe in 1855:

You say, my father, you are sorry to see us in our state of poverty. \* \* No wonder, father, you see us in poverty and showing so much nakedness. Five long winters have passed since I received as much as a blanket for one of my children.

My father, what has become of your promise? You probably have sent what you promised to us, but where it has gone is more than I am able to say. Perhaps it has sunk in the deep waters of the lake, or it may have evaporated in the heavens, like the rising of the mist—or perhaps it has blown over our heads, and gone towards the setting of the sun (Morse, 342).

Na-naw-ong-ga-be’s sardonic remarks could not possibly have been lost on Indian Commissioner Manypenny, or the traders, soldiers, and other government agents in attendance at his speech. We know from the correspondence by Governor Gorman to James Ermatinger that the Warren Family knew about the 1854 and 1855 treaties, and they were probably apprised that \$90,000 in payments “of their debts” (Morse, 339) were to be allowed for the traders as a stipulation of this treaty, so they probably did attend, or at least paid close attention to the proceedings.

At the treaty of 1855 Na-naw-ong-ga-be went on to relate the dire conditions of the Lac Court Oreilles with an equally recognizable hint at how the advancement of white

settlements have contributed to the Indian predicament. With shocking fatalism, he relates that “I left my home to come to this treaty to sell my lands—for we know that we must sell for what we can get—the whites must have them...I was here last year, when the treaty was made, and I swallowed the words of the treaty down my throat, and they have not yet had time to blister in my breast” (344).

Besides land cessions by the Ojibwas, issues in the treaties that were also prominent were the cession of Indian mineral rights, the acknowledgment of the United States as sovereign to the area (as opposed to the British or French, a possible allegiance that would make the U.S. very nervous), and the negotiations for peace with neighboring tribes; relations which are alluded to in the Gorman-Ermatinger letter and which are dealt with in the following section.

### **Ojibwa-Dakota relations**

The Treaty with the Sioux and Chippewa of 1825 was hailed as a firm negotiation to the end of the wars between the two tribes, which the treaty described as having “been so long carried on, to their mutual distress.” The treaty of 1826 opens by self-congratulation among the Government authors, claiming that the hostilities were “happily terminated by the intervention of the United States” (1826, 268). This was not necessarily accurate, as skirmishes were documented frequently over the next thirty years, including the one referred to in the 1854 letter, when Governor Gorman remarks about “the Sioux who killed the Chippewas in your vicinity.”

This act referred to by Gorman was by no means an isolated incident. Morse speaks of the Ojibwa being harried on their way to the proceedings of the treaty of 1855

(340). He also relates the exploits of the magnanimous Chief Buffalo of the Ojibwa, who declared in 1842 that he “never took a scalp.” Yet, when he sent a deputation to Saint Paul to return some captured Dakota prisoners, his emissaries were attacked by Dakota warriors and only rescued by the interference of some whites from the city (367).

Despite the claims of the 1826 treaty that the 1825 pact put a halt to hostilities between the Dakota and the Ojibwa, Rev. Boutwell wrote only six years later of reports from near Leech Lake in northern Minnesota in which seven Dakotas and one Ojibwa died when a group of Ojibwas met a Dakota war party (127-128). E.D. Neill described the Battle of Lake Pokegama in 1841, just north of where the Snake River flows into the St. Croix. Two sons of the Dakota Little Crow (of the Kaposia band, not the famous Mdewekanton) were killed and the Dakota took reprisals by attacking the Ojibwa settlement, which was also a Christian school, on the lake. One hundred eleven warriors attacked the village, killing two girls at first, but Neill is sketchy on the number of others who perished; although two of the Dakotas were known to have lost their lives. In 1842, the Ojibwas sent a war party in retaliation, and they killed two women and a child at Pig’s Eye settlement below St. Paul. Twelve Dakota warriors also were slain, and were reported to have been drunk at the time of the attacks, and thus unable to defend themselves. Neill remarked that this was all formerly Dakota territory, and he reported the common description of the area around Mille Lacs as a “Golgotha” due to the number that died there, such as in an 1839 attack at Rum River (141-145). One can easily deduce that the treaties themselves, which purported to be negotiations to end hostilities, actually perpetuated them, as they displaced the Ojibwas onto traditional lands previously held by the Dakota. Brunson noted that historians believed that this pattern began as early as

1600, citing a known battle in 1670 as recorded by John G. Shea (Brunson, 231). It is generally recognized that the Ojibwa were pushed west into Dakota territories at this early date due to the Iroquois, who were more strongly armed due to their trade with the early English colonials.

Instances of Ojibwa-Dakota conflicts are found throughout the chronicles. But rarely is it stated, except for claims made during the treaties, that there was any real intervention by whites in these wars. The government could be seen by some of the evidence as having more of a *lassaize faire* attitude regarding these conflicts.

According to Gorman's own papers, for instance, a letter to Gorman dated four days after his correspondence to Ermatinger contradicts his statement that he "shall punish them [the imprisoned Dakotas] severely by law." The letter of May 22 to Gorman was written by Colonel Francis Lee, the commander at Fort Snelling in St. Paul. While Lee's letter does not mention the specifics of their case, he informs Gorman that the four Sioux prisoners he has in custody are "no trouble," and Lee asks Gorman for permission *to release them*. Lee tells Gorman that the expense of holding them at the fort and keeping them there wasn't felt justified! (Gorman, Box 1, 1854). Throughout Gorman's papers there are no other records of these men, either of execution or for a pardon, so it is assumed that they were let go.

It becomes obvious, then, that Gorman's statement regarding the punishment of the Dakota warriors was really just lip service, and was made only to help lure the Indians of the territory into the treaty negotiations with more soothing talk. One can conclude, then, that the letter included in the Warren papers from Gorman to Ermatinger

is simply part and parcel to the overriding historical theme of their time; the manipulation and economic molestation of Native tribes.

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