

THE PAPERS OF WILLIAM VANDEVER (1817-1893)

Prologue

The Special Collections Section of the Charles C. Myers Library contains The Papers of William Vandever (1817-1893), comprising 1,550 items in 3,640 pages, documenting his tenure as U. S. Indian Inspector (1873-1878) and his intensive interest in mining (1878-1880). There are also personal and family letters which provide a glimpse into his personal life, political interests, and business ventures.

Biography

William Vandever's forebears emigrated from Holland. He was born on March 31, 1817 in Baltimore, Maryland; attended schools in Philadelphia; and moved to Rock Island, Illinois in 1839. Vandever was a surveyor for public lands in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa and became editor of the Rock Island Advertiser in 1846. He married Jane H. Williams on January 7, 1847 and, in 1851, they moved to Dubuque, Iowa where he was employed by the Surveyor-General. Incidentally, Special Collections contains a magnificent book, David Dale Owen [United States Geologist], Report of a Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota; and Incidentally of a Portion of Nebraska Territory. Made Under Instructions from the United States Treasury Department (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), bearing the signature, "Wm. Vandever," on the title page.

Vandever read law and, during the early 1850s, joined the law firm of Benjamin M. Samuels (Democrat). While practicing law, Vandever quickly became interested in politics. In 1856, he was a delegate to the convention which organized the Republican party in Iowa. In 1858, Vandever was nominated by the Republicans as the candidate for the U. S. Congress, and he won the election. He attended the convention which nominated Abraham Lincoln as the Republican candidate for President in 1860. He was re-elected for the U. S. Congress in 1860, defeating Benjamin M. Samuels.

When the Civil War began, he left the Congress and volunteered for the Army. Governor Kirkwood of Iowa appointed him, on September 24, 1861, as a Colonel in the Ninth Infantry which was formed in Dubuque. He was promoted to Brigadier General on November 29, 1862 and to Brevet Major General on June 7, 1865. He returned to Dubuque at the close of the war and considered running for the congressional seat he vacated to enter the Army, but decided to withdraw in favor of William B. Allison who won the election. Later, Allison would become a U. S. Senator.

During 1865-1872, Vandever practiced law, promoted the expansion of railroads, and supported Republican candidates for elected offices. President Grant appointed him as U. S. Indian Inspector in 1873, and he served until 1878. He pursued mining interests, particularly in the Southwest (1878-1880). His sons, Charles and William Jr., were in business ventures in the Southwest. Vandever and his wife, with their two daughters, Florence and Mary, moved to California in 1884. Vandever's interest in political life prompted him to run for the U. S. Congress. He was elected in 1886, re-elected in 1888, and announced, in 1890, that he would not seek re-election. William Vandever died on July 23, 1893.

In the early 1880s, William Vandever was a member of the Board of Trustees of the German Presbyterian Theological School of the Northwest which would become the University of Dubuque. It appears that he donated his papers (the latest date being 1881) and some of his pamphlets and books (the latest being 1883) to the institution before he moved to California.

Papers

The Papers of William Vandever, numbering 1,550 items in 3,640 pages, documents his tenure as U. S. Indian Inspector (1873-1878) and his intensive interest in mining, particularly in the Southwest (1878-1880). These papers include telegrams; letters; memoranda; reports; travel records; financial documents; printed reports and pamphlets; summaries of conversations with various Indians, including Red Cloud and Spotted Tail; draft articles on the American Indian; broadsides (2); newspapers (10 issues); newspaper clippings

(24); manuscript maps (28); printed maps (10); and—in connection with mining interests—assay reports. Other documents include stories by Indian children, a set of notes on 4" x 6" cards (30), and a receipt book.

These documents throw light on the condition and aspirations of Indians with whom Vandever was acquainted; Vandever as a man who was friendly with the Indians and critical of the U. S. Army; and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department of the Interior, and the War Department. There are remarkable passages in the documents in this collection. For example: In Vandever's letter of January 4, 1877, he laments, "It is a shame, for a great nation, to disregard the principles of equity . . . [in dealing with the Indians]." In letters and reports, Vandever addresses the issues of the "true causes of the Indian Wars" and of "the injustice practiced upon the Indians."

Vandever was not re-appointed as U. S. Indian Inspector in early 1878, the subject of an exchange of telegrams and letters between his friend, Senator William B. Allison, and himself in late 1877 and early 1878, throwing light upon the process of government appointments, particularly of one who was critical of government policy toward the Indians. After Vandever left the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he continued to be interested in the plight of the American Indian and drafted an article for the Moravian Missionary Society (August, 1881). Indeed, various letters and reports prepared during the years as U. S. Indian Inspector demonstrate a keen interest in Christian missions to the Indians.

Incidentally, Special Collections contains published reports of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1867 to 1879 and other government publications, some of which bear the signature, "Wm Vandever," on the title page and A Compilation from the Revised Statutes of the United States; . . . , relating to Indian Affairs (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), signed on the title page, "Wm Vandever U. S. Indian Inspector."

Postscript

The life of William Vandever is an interesting and instructive story which deserves to be told: Newspaper editor, land surveyor, lawyer, political figure, military officer, Indian Inspector, and businessman during his varied career, and, during much of his life, Whig/Republican and Presbyterian. Research into his life and papers would be a fascinating way of inquiring into the history of the nineteenth century American West: Westward migration; emergence of statehood; formation of the Republican party; nomination of Abraham Lincoln for the Presidency; the U. S. Congress; the Civil War; railroad expansion; the Bureau of Indian Affairs; and mining as well as investigating specific issues (for example, the "Grant Peace Policy") or specific themes (for example, the relationship between culture and Christian belief as illustrated in his attitude toward the American Indians).

We encourage interested persons to use The Papers of William Vandever and related resources in the Charles C. Myers Library to uncover the fascinating story of his varied career, to better understand the history of the American West, and to gain unique insights into the condition and aspirations of the American Indian. Detailed information is available in " 'Good Words . . . from One of Iowa's Best Men': Introducing the Papers of William Vandever, U. S. Indian Inspector (1873-1878)" and "It is a Shame. . . to Practice Injustice Upon the Indian?: Selected Papers of William Vandever, U.S. Indian Inspector (1873-1878)."