

A detailed historical map of the Mississippi River basin, showing various geographical features, rivers, and place names. The map is overlaid with a dark grey horizontal band containing white text. The text includes the journal title, issue information, and a URL. The map background shows the Mississippi River winding through the center, with numerous tributaries and lakes. Labels on the map include 'CHIPEWAY COUNTRY', 'MISSISSIPPI RIVER', 'M'DEWAKANTON COUNTRY', and 'WARTPEKUTEY'.

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PRIMARY SOURCES

# FAKE NEWS? TRACING THE FLOWS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN HISTORIC NEWSPAPER REPORTING

By Katherine Hayes

The assertion of “fake news” and the vilification of journalists are causes for concern (to say the least) in the contemporary moment, but as we reflect upon these concerns we might also remember that there is a reason why such accusations strike a chord with the public. Bias in media representation has impacts across the political spectrum. Activists in the Black Lives Matter movement have very effectively drawn

attention to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that people of color have been made to appear violent or dangerous, even when they are the victims of violence, let alone when they are accused of criminal activity. This is brought into relief when white perpetrators are portrayed as merely troubled, suffering from illness or disadvantage, and as isolated cases rather than representative of a group. These representations



*Field work at Fort Snelling. Image courtesy of Lisa Miller, University of Minnesota.*



then circulate as widely as the media reaches, and have impacts. As wise consumers of news media, then, we constantly read through that bias, or at least attempt to discern its effects. Bias, after all, is simply the product of standpoint which we cannot avoid – we can only seek to understand our blind spots, and address them.

Historic newspaper reporting can be an excellent first-hand view on how public perception is shaped from specific standpoints, and how those perceptions flow across broad distances to connect and shape partisan discourse. I'll offer up an example from the Saint Paul Pioneer reporting on two criminal cases which played out at Fort

Snelling, the military installation at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, in 1865.[1] I read these in the course of my research on how the constructed Fort Snelling and its place within the landscape have acted to enforce a carceral state on particular people. Though the cases are grounded in this place, I realized that the reporting carried their impacts far and wide. The cases are not fake news; the basic facts of the cases—charges, court rulings, appeals, and sentencing—may be easily corroborated. But the reporting demonstrates a striking parallel to some of the kinds of media bias we struggle with today: accusations of regional partisanship, and racialized representations of the accused.



*Detail from “Saint Paul Pioneer” on September 26th of 1865. Their cases were detailed in side-by-side columns. Headlines foregrounded how they would be painted: “Pryor, the Murderer... Strenuously Denies His Guilt” while Shakopee and Medicine Bottle “Receive the News With Stoical Composure.” All three were condemned to be hanged.  
Download the full page of the September 26, 1865, “Saint Paul Pioneer.”*



In the fall of 1865, the military prison at Fort Snelling held three men awaiting their sentences. Two of them are still referred to today, whenever we recall the Dakota 38+2 executed after the US-Dakota War of 1862. The "+2" were Sakpe and Wakanozanzan, called Shakopee or Little Six and Medicine Bottle in the newspapers, who were captured in 1864 in Canada and returned to Fort Snelling to be tried for their war participation. The third man was John Pryor, an Irish immigrant who had enlisted in the army to serve in the Civil War and who was found guilty of fatally shooting a fellow soldier. On September 26th of 1865, their cases were detailed in side-by-side columns of the Saint Paul Pioneer (SPP). Headlines foregrounded how they would be painted: "Pryor, the Murderer... Strenuously Denies His Guilt"

while Shakopee and Medicine Bottle "Receive the News With Stoical Composure." All three were condemned to be hanged.

The side-by-side reporting foreshadowed—or possibly contributed to—how their cases unfolded. As detailed through reprinted correspondence, Pryor appealed his case through a writ of habeas corpus and an argument that as his crime was not committed as part of wartime activity he should not have been tried by a military court martial. On October 8, the SPP reported that Pryor's appeal had been denied, and that the date of his execution was set for the following week. The unnamed reporter added that the scaffold was already under construction, and predicted that, when realizing his fate was sealed, Pryor's



Detail from "Saint Paul Pioneer" on October 11, reporting a telegram from the Secretary of War ordering that the executions of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle be suspended.

Download the full page of the October 11, 1865, "Saint Paul Pioneer."

“mental condition will be pitiable indeed.” In contrast, the writer noted that Shakopee and Medicine Bottle, who were supposed to be executed on the same scaffold during the same week, “view their approaching fate with great indifference and stoicism, either real or apparent.” The representation of this indifference, coupled with earlier descriptions denigrating their appearance, intelligence, and even humanity, helps to construct the settler colonial ideal of an inevitable Native disappearance. It rings familiar with contemporary representations of people of color as irredeemable and ungrievable.

And then the unthinkable happened. On October 11, the SPP reported a telegram from the Secretary of War ordering that the executions of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle be suspended. This was followed by an editorial diatribe: “We have no knowledge of the reasons which induced the President to suspend the execution of the Indian murderers, but it is presumed that the order was issued through the representations of their Eastern sympathizers who learned by the newspapers of the sentence of the Court and of the day appointed to carry it into effect. ...If the morbid sympathy of the people at [sic] the East for the red murderers of our citizens, can influence the Government to shield them from adequate punishment, the people of this State will find a remedy and fearlessly apply it.”[2] The circulation of information caused a flare of regional partisanship, no longer simply a matter of local politics, and especially engendering resentment towards the faraway federal seat of government.[3] Perhaps this resentment contributed to the representation in the same day’s reporting of a petition to commute Pryor’s sentence. While earlier reporting had cast doubt on his expressions of remorse, he was now painted with more sympathy – especially when held in comparison to the other case at hand. “There is much sympathy for John Pryor, who is sentenced to be hung at the Fort on Friday next for shooting a comrade, and it has greatly increased since the news was received that the execution of the

Indian murderers had been indefinitely postponed. Pryor killed one man, while he was under the influence of liquor and ungovernable passion, whilst each of the Indians were found guilty of murdering a score of frontier settlers.”

Download the full letter to the editor of the October 14, 1865, “Saint Paul Pioneer.”

This anti-Indian racism was not representative of all settlers; at least one citizen submitted a letter to the editor, printed on October 14th, which called attention to a number of “palliating” factors to the case against Shakopee and Medicine Bottle. The writer noted in their defense that evidence against them was weak, that Civil War rebels were being pardoned for their actions in war, that the Dakota people had been systematically disenfranchised for years, and that many reports of the two men were far more sympathetic than those appearing in the Saint Paul Pioneer. The editors responded with self-congratulations—for printing the letter—and a very back-handed acknowledgement of other perspectives: “Without endorsing the views of the writer... we are not unwilling to vary the monotony of abuse which has been poured upon these Indians, by ventilating whatever may be said in their favor, which is not much, although the Devil is not always as black as he is painted.” Despite the airing of dissenting opinion, the settler colonial order was shortly restored, as Pryor’s sentence was commuted while the execution of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle was rescheduled for November 11. Their hanging was public, and the Saint Paul Pioneer marked the occasion with a long write-up.

Was this all fake news, in the glaringly biased representations of the prisoners and their military interlocutors? “Fake news” is used, in the contemporary moment, either to accuse of bias or of outright misinformation. In the former sense, yes—and we can only hope that at least a reader today would easily identify those mischaracterizations. But the reporting gives great insight both



# Saint Paul Pioneer.

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ST. PAUL, SATURDAY, OCTOBER, 14.

## THE CONDEMNED INDIANS.

The Supposed Reasons which Induced President Johnson to Suspend their Execution.

The Evidence upon which they were Condemned--Palliating Circumstances &c.

To the Editor of the Pioneer:

What the influences were that procured a suspension of the execution of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle we do not know. Perhaps it was that it was thought their death would operate injuriously upon the consummation of the treaties which are now being attempted to be effected with the hostile tribes. Perhaps it was that the testimony was not entirely conclusive.

There is no witness who saw either Shakopee or Medicine Bottle kill a single person or fire at the whites in battle or otherwise. There is no evidence that Shakopee ever went to battle, or carried away any plunder. Four witnesses swear that Shakopee stated he had killed white people on the first day of the outbreak on the west side of the Minnesota, opposite the Agency. On such admissions, unsupported by other testimony, a conviction cannot legally be had in the civil courts. Two of these witnesses swear in effect that these admissions were made under the following circumstances. The massacre commenced in the morning--at night the warriors gathered in an immense crowd around Little Crow's house, and Shakopee came up, and Little Crow said "Shakopee where have you been all day? Why have you not been helping us kill these people?"

To which Shakopee replied, "I have been over the river."

"What have you been doing there?"

"Killing white people," he replied.

"Thirteen" in number one witness avers he said, and another witness that he said "six"--thus contradicting one another. The third witness says he spoke of the same thing the same day, and gave the number as seven.

When we reflect upon the motive that exist-

only three persons and had no Council present to cross examine the witnesses for although they desired one they had no money to pay, and strange to say the Government does not furnish Council when a prisoner is unable to supply one. As to Shakopee there is nothing to excite interest.

He was always rated by Indians and whites as a liar and a coward--nothing to excite interest, save what has been stated as to his saving the life of a white man and family, and the weakness of the testimony against him--and a certain native eloquence. For instance, when the first engine passed to the Fort, Shakopee broke from his guards and rushed to Colonel McLaren and said, "Look there--see that--that settles our fate--over these lands my father was once undisputed chief, and over these hills I once rode free upon my horse, and now," pointing to the chieftain about his waist, "look at this"--and pointing to the chain running from his waist to his foot, "and this"--and scanning himself all over, "and these rags."

As for Medicine Bottle, the evidence was sufficient to justify a conviction. But there is no one who has conversed with him,--unless with a heart of stone,--but has felt pity and admiration for him. Always the first, say they, at the Fort, among the prisoners, to dash to his feet when they were called to work--always cheerful and pleasant and making no complaint, saying when death stared him in the face, "I am a man and have always regarded myself as a man. God made me a man and I know I am going to die. I have been a warrior since I was eighteen. I have fought the Chippewas in twenty battles. I am not afraid to again face death."

"I would give my right arm," said an old man from Cleveland, "to save that man's life,"--and he started away the next night, although he was intending to remain several days longer. Perhaps he was the one who induced the President to suspend the execution. "Save Medicine Bottle," whispered the interpreter to another person talking with them, "I care nothing for Shakopee, but Medicine Bottle is too brave a fellow to suffer such a fate."

His sins are the sins of education and his nation.--he has a quality which has been deemed the noblest in man--ability to meet death without bravado and with a smile X.

## The Pacific Railroad.

Economic Difference in Favor of the Northern Route 745 Miles.

From the Chicago Republican.

The New York Times states, on the authority of the English capitalists who have been making a tour through the West, that these gentlemen are prepared to report favorably and without reservation on the immense resources of that portion of the country which they have visited.

It is now generally understood that the intention of these capitalists is to ultimately extend the Erie and other lines of eastern railroads to the Pacific, on the broad gauge plan. The questions then arise, are we to have two roads; if not, whether the northern, central or southern is the best.

During the past few weeks the commissioner of the northern line has been in Canada and is now in Boston, endeavoring to enlist the Canadian and New England people in that route. This route, as we have before stated, is to have a terminus at Paret's Sound, on the

## The Negro at the South.

A Lifelike Picture Drawn by the Loyal Governor Brownlow of Tennessee--Effect of Radical Teaching Portrayed--Negro Troops Must be Withdrawn.

From Brownlow's Whig of the 27th ult.

Thousands of free colored persons are congregating in and around the large towns in Tennessee, and thousands are coming in from other States, one third of whom cannot get employment. Indeed, less than one-third want employment, or feel willing to stoop to work. They entertain the erroneous idea that the government is bound to supply all their wants, and even to furnish them with houses, if, in order to do that, the white occupants must be turned out. There is a large demand for labor in every section of the State, but the colored people, with here and there a noble exception, scorn the idea of work. They fiddle and dance at night, and lie round the stores and street corners in the day time. And some of the indiscreet teachers of negroes from the North, who know nothing of the negro's character, have been known to tell them not to hire to white people! Having the single idea in their heads of abolition, they advise the simple and credulous negro to a life of precarious subsistence, of idleness and dancing, and of crowding into towns to be educated, in preference to good wages and comfortable homes in the country. If some great change is not made when winter comes on, and if the military force is withdrawn, as they will be, there will be great suffering and fearful mortality among them.

### SUFFRAGE AND SUFFERANCE.

There is a bad state of feeling now between them and the whites, and it is daily growing more bitter. Many of the negroes are insulting the white females who never owned any of their color and never did them any wrong. They frequently elbow unprotected white women off our narrow pavements and curse white women passing them, just to show their authority. Others are swearing on the streets, and we have heard them say that they will clear out the d--d town! And still another class will say that if they are not allowed their rights at the ballot-box they will resort to the cartridge-box! And they swear they will be backed up by the Government.

As one desiring the welfare of the colored people, they will permit me to say they can drive the legislature of Tennessee into conferring upon them the elective franchise. They can by the demonstrations they are making in this direction, deprive themselves of any such privilege, so far as Tennessee is concerned. The Federal Government has no right to control the suffrage question in Tennessee. And the great Union party of the nation will have more sense than to attempt to control the question by Congressional legislation.

### THE TOWNS TO BE CLEARED.

General Tilson, at Memphis, has determined that he will compel the free people of color to leave the city and surrounding towns, even if their removal requires military force. He has sent a patrol through the city to learn who have employment and who have not, and to notify them that no further supplies will be furnished to those that can support themselves and refuse to do so. At Memphis they have been contracting for wages and becoming dissatisfied, break their contracts and leave off abruptly. Gen. Tilson has notified them that this will not be allowed, that they must make good their contracts, and that he will compel them to work at the rates and places agreed upon.

I rank Gen. Tilson among the best men we ever had in command at Knoxville, and I am pleased to find that he is still showing his good sense and love of justice at Memphis. We lack such discipline among the colored people in this end of the State, and I hope it will not be long until more rigid regulations are adopted by the Commissioners of Freedmen, who, as I understand it, have control of this branch of affairs. There is no better man in the service

ing, preaching, praying, singing--as will take half of them to ruin in a

One half of all the colored soldi form in East Tennessee have no that uniform, and do not appreciate and importance. Two of them in some time since, upon a narrow this city, knocked the writer of into the gutter, throwing him up and knees. He was trying to get way and they saw it; but being leaning upon a staff, he moved to their ideas of progress. I made no but concluded these colored ruffian "learned to respect the uniform of and went my way, not rejoicing, but my left knee that I was worried in ter, which I had not brought about to prevent.

Soldiers and officers wearing the I form ought all to be gentlemen, no I their color, but the only two colort ever encountered did not, prove to style. I have no wish to try the might light upon others, less I would run me through with a be; ing denied a white man's choice, I negro's privilege, of getting out of

### THE NEGRO TROOPS TO BE WITH

The plain truth is, the colored ac not been properly instructed. Wh I am not able to say. Believing th continuance in East Tennessee will tive of no good, but of much ha written to President Johnson to re to those localities where they are where the people are a unit in brin rebellion. Indeed I have informed dent that no troops are needed in E see of any color, and that the loyal the civic authorities are fully able order and take care of the country.

The Bench, from the County Cou Supreme Court, is occupied by lo; the prosecuting attorneys are loyal; the sheriffs and justices, and we a in East Tennessee to preserve ord the aid of troops.

### What Miles O'Reilly Think Grant.

Miles O'Reilly was formerly on leek's staff, and hence may be tl prejudiced against that gentleman' rival. At least he bears down on what in a late number of the *Cit* says:

Can we take his refusal to speak I any evidence of excessive modesty, find him rushing frantically about tions to receive the cheers, banners umphal arches and compliments public have not yet grown weary of his nodding but silent image? Th man should not speak too often or views too cheap, is very true; but Gen. Grant's place, a man never s; and leaves us in doubt whether he r red view about him," the error is the side of excessive reticence. If painfully diffident that he cannot uti words to the crowds he sees kotooi labalooing about his carriage, hote car--why does he continue to hav eminent modesty toted all around f Beershaba, as if with a hunger nevefied for the shouts and ovations of citizens? Some people say that Sherman has done too much talkin haps this may be true. Is not G just a little mite too much of the s hand-shaking business?

### The sons of New England

A good joke is told of a judge in I shire. He always kept a demijoh Jamaica in his private office for hi friends. The Judge had noticed for that on Monday morning his Jamal sidersibly lighter than he left it o night. Another fact had establish his mind. His son Sam was misle parental new in church on Sunday

Detail from the October 14, "Saint Paul Pioneer." This anti-Indian racism was not representative of all settlers; at least one citizen submitted a letter to the editor, which called attention to a number of "palliating" factors to the case against Shakopee and Medicine Bottle. Download the full letter to the editor of the October 14, 1865, "Saint Paul Pioneer."



into the nature of public opinion and racialization working against Dakota people, and that such sentiment was not universally shared. Those opinions were (and are) also shaped by larger political debates, taking individual prisoners and making them the face of a much larger cause. Amidst the racialized and political rhetoric,

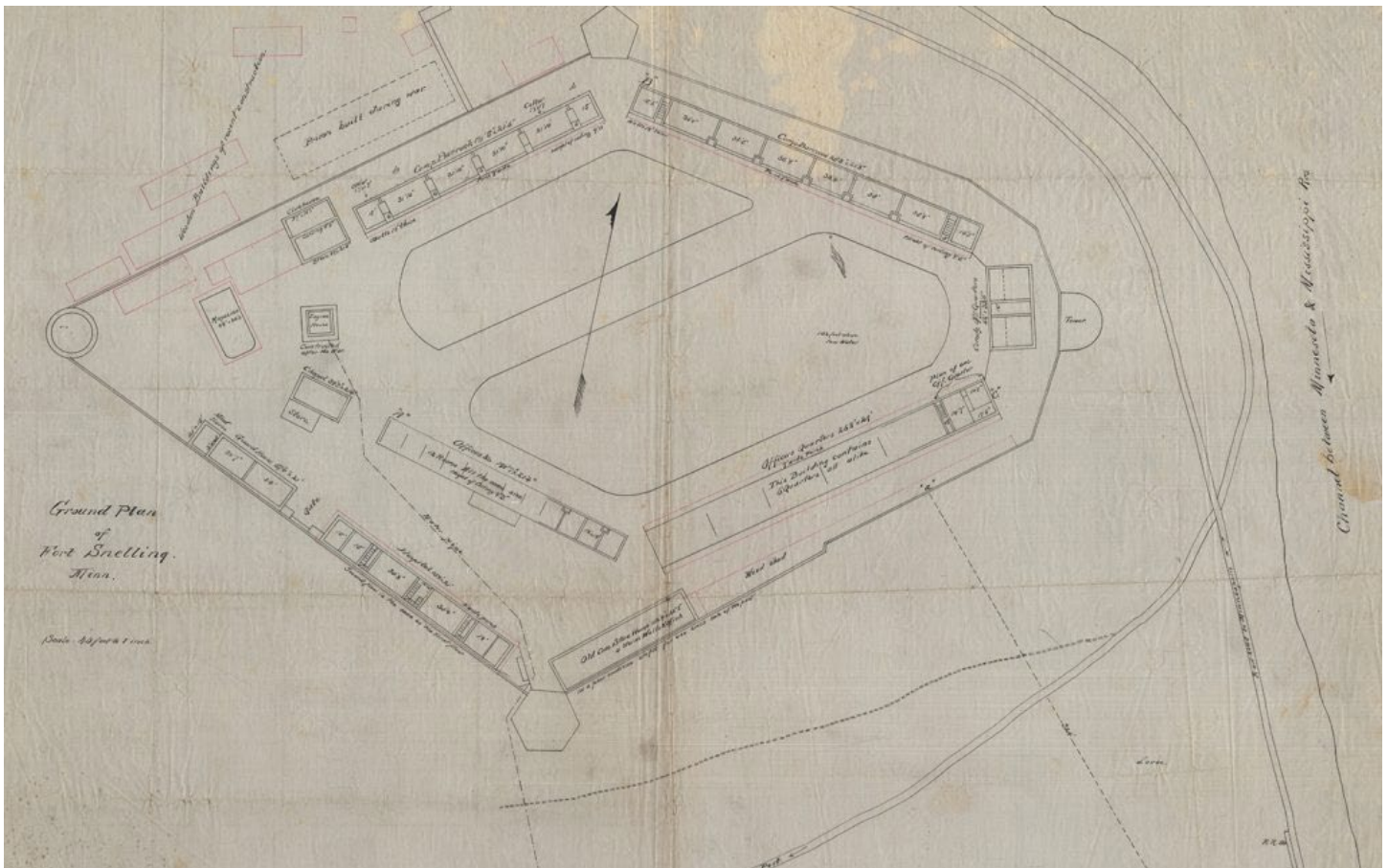
however, the basic events and places are evident, and from a social justice perspective it is important that we revisit the cases. Perhaps the stories of these three men should be told to visitors to Fort Snelling, the place which served as the source. Because, unfortunately, these stereotypes and prejudices are still with us today.[4]

## Footnotes

[1] For those interested in reading the reporting first-hand, I have found references to the cases in the *Saint Paul Pioneer* on September 26, October 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 26, and November 2, 10, 11, and 12. Issues were accessed on microfilm at the University of Minnesota (also available on microfilm at MNHS).

[2] The editorial comment also referred approvingly to a recent case in which a mixed-ancestry man was subjected to mob justice by townspeople; it is thus disturbing to consider how this editorial both condoned the act and encouraged further racial violence. This too has parallels to today.

[3] In fact, it had been a letter from Bishop Grace of St. Paul to the President which had prompted the



*Detail of a plan view of Fort Snelling, 1873.*



temporary suspension of Shakopee's and Medicine Bottle's executions. *Saint Paul Pioneer*, November 2, 1865.

[4] The contemporary issue of Native incarceration is the subject of several related exhibits in the Twin Cities. The "States of Incarceration" exhibit is in the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul November 20, 2018 to February 18, 2019. At the AIM Interpretive Center in Minneapolis, an exhibit titled "The Great Spirit Within the 'Hole': AIM and Culturally Focused Prison Education" opens December 1, 2018. A digital version can be found at <https://statesofincarceration.org/states/minnesota-carceral-colonialism-imprisonment-indian-country>.

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