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History Note

William Henry Eustis

He gave money, land and his time

by Luther Granquist

In December 1860, when he was fifteen years old, William Henry Eustis fell at his home in northern New York State while carrying a pail of water. He hurt his hip, was kept at home for the next five years, and got no adequate medical care. Because one leg became shorter than the other, he used crutches and later a cane. Eustis went on to college, got a law degree from Columbia, and practiced law in upstate New York.

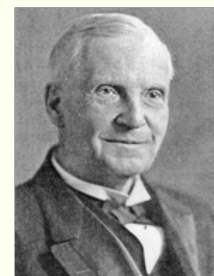
In his autobiography he says little about his physical disability, only that when he chose to move West he wanted a city both "on the level" and "alive." He chose Minneapolis, after rejecting St. Paul, Omaha, and Kansas City because of their hills. Eustis served as Mayor of Minneapolis from 1893-1895, ran unsuccessfully for Governor and Congress, and amassed a fortune as an entrepreneur and investor in various Twin Cities businesses. In 1923, he gave the Minneapolis School Board land for the Michael Dowling School, which is now an urban environmental magnet school. He also gave the University of Minnesota more than a million dollars for a "Minnesota Hospital for Crippled Children." This is now part of the University of Minnesota Hospitals complex.

At a dinner in his honor on his 80th birthday he praised Minneapolis and its founding fathers. He urged them to pass on to the next generation "the ardor and lofty purpose of these founders." Only in passing did he refer to the purpose of his gift. The city, he said, "abounds in works of humanity, not the least of which is to help those little folks, who without fault on their part, suffer from physical limitations."

Eustis praised the city fathers too much. The community he extolled failed to provide children with disabilities the opportunities for schooling and failed to provide them adequate medical care. He could have called these community leaders to task rather than smother them with fulsome praise. Nevertheless, Eustis should not be faulted for his decision to spend his accumulated fortune as he did. His actions spoke louder than his words. ■

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com

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