

HISTORICAL TIMELINE 1856-1927

In 1927, a 19-foot timber believed to be from the 1862 scaffold in Mankato was given to the Blue Earth County Historical Society via the University of Minnesota which received it in 1881 from a Mankato businessman. That man, John F. Meagher, sent a note to the University when the object was shipped by rail stating “the last stick of the ‘Indian Gallows’...It is rather hard looking ‘relic’ and you may be disappointed when you see it, but I can assure you it did the business.”¹ The “business” was the execution of 38 Dakota men on December 26, 1862 for their alleged involvement in the U.S.-Dakota War.

Initial examination of the object in our collection triggered more questions than answers. The scaffold timbers were 24’ long, 12”x12” in diameter. The timber in our collection is 19’ long, 8”x10”. Also there are many notches ranging from 1” to 8”. There was definitely more than one use for this timber, but what is its story?

To verify Meagher’s story, we turned our focus away from the object and looked at primary sources to see how the “story” fit with the object. In the next section, we will take you through our journey of researching the primary sources of 1862-1881 to better understand this object and the authenticity of Meagher’s story. After reading the information we collected, you will see why we can confirm that the timber in our collection is the same one that was donated to the University of Minnesota in 1881 and then donated to BECHS in 1927, and why the story of what it was before 1881 and Meagher’s story is still surrounded by questions.

This timeline of events below was completed by using the Society’s archival holdings including local newspapers on microfilm and in our subject and biographical files, local and state history books written prior to 1915, census, land, and probate records.

1856 – “City Hall” Building Block 7, Lot 8, Mankato

Paxton & Kitchen General merchandise store built at 314-316 S. Front Street
25’x60’ frame building, 2 stories, 2nd floor – public hall – “City Hall”

Businesses to follow: 1858 – Shoemaker & Co.

1859 – Jones’ Brothers

1862 – Wickersham Drug Store

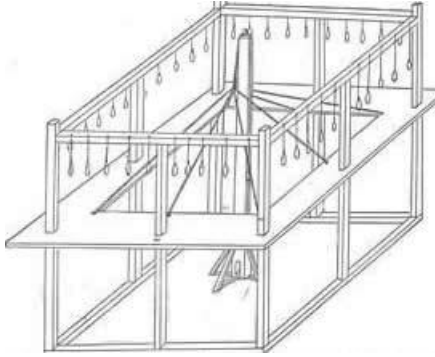
1865 – John F. Meagher Implement and Hardware

1881 – building razed

1862, December 21-22

Scaffold construction occurred over two days: December 21 and 22, 1862. Only one newspaper reported first-hand about the construction of the gallows in detail, *The Mankato Independent*. Here are details about the construction: the frame consists of eight upright posts a foot square and 14 feet high, they are set in sills and plates, the structure is four square, the length of the sills is about 24 feet, the upper edges of each plate timber is notched with a series of 10 notches. A strongly framed platform runs around the whole structure, is 4 feet wide and lying half within and half without the upright timbers, a plank of the covering being left out at the place where each of the eight posts project through it. The gallows is referenced as a barn frame without the rafters.

The Mankato Record, December 26, 1862



Minneapolis Sunday Times, February 11, 1900

1864, July – John Meagher purchases Lot 8, Block 7 (in 300 block S. Front) BEC Land Records

1864, August 26 – “Auction Sale-The government buildings were sold at public auction Wednesday [August 24] afternoon last, and were sold in lots to two or three parties, S.D. Brown bought the gallows for \$33.50 and the Indian prison for \$22.50.”

Mankato Weekly Union

1864, August 27 - “Sale of Government Property – On Wednesday last, the Indian gallows, prison, cook houses, sheds, etc., were disposed of at public auction. The gallows is badly racked, and sold for about \$33.50; the prison, built of logs and which rumbled in some time ago, sold for about the same price. Dr. Brown was the purchaser. The other property sold at about the same figures.”

Mankato Weekly Record [see April 3, 1881 for Brown biography]

1864, December 10 – “Mr. J.F. Meagher has in contemplation the erection of a three story business house on Front Street, opposite Walnut Street.”²

Mankato Record Weekly

1865, March 24 – “Upon complaint of S.D. Brown, Sheriff Middlebrook arrested Adail Gates, last week upon the charge of stealing timber from Mr. B’s timber in town 106, range 26. He was brought to town, had his trial, and fined \$5 and costs, amounting in all to \$15.”

Mankato Union

1865, May 13 – “Our friend John F. Meagher has just completed the removal of his extensive stock of stoves, hardware, iron, etc. to the City Hall building,³ the lower room has been remodeled, and is now one of the finest store rooms in town. The county treasurer’s office has also been removed to the same building, where our friend Porter presides.”

Mankato Weekly Record

1865, November 18 – “Meagher is erecting a large addition to his business house on Front Street.”

Mankato Record Weekly

1866, May 12 – “Meagher is preparing to erect a shed, just opposite our office (*Mankato Record*) on Front Street, 21 x 120 feet.”

Mankato Record Weekly

1866, May 19 – “Mr. James Shoemaker, last week, sold to Mr. John F. Meagher, the small building on Front Street, nearly opposite the *Record* office, and 20 ft. of ground upon which it stands for \$1,600. Mr. Meagher now owns 66 feet in block 7, Front Street.”

Mankato Record

1869, August 10 – “Meagher is about perfecting the purchase of Mr. J.S. Hinckley’s valuable lot on the corner of Front and Walnut streets, for which he is to pay \$4,000. It is purchased with the view of being improved at an early day.”

Mankato Review

1881, March 17 – “Meagher, having found his present store room too contracted, will, as soon as the weather permits, commence the erection of a handsome and commodious brick building, 45x100 feet, to take the place of his present quarters.”

Mankato Free Press

1881, April 03

Samuel D. Brown dies

Samuel D. Brown was born in Maine in 1809, moved to Jackson County, Minnesota, in 1859 and relocated to Blue Earth County in 1862. He was a physician by trade. In 1864 Brown is named as the purchaser of the gallows and prison from the Government auction, but there is no report what he did with the lumber. However, in March 1865, he has someone arrested for stealing timber from his rural property. In the U.S. and State Census, Brown alternates from being located in McPherson Township (1865, 1875) and the city of Mankato (1870, 1880); likely he had his home (in the 300 block of South Second Street) in Mankato and a farm in McPherson Township and it depended what time of the year the census taker visited (per his obituary). According to the 1870 census, Brown owned real estate worth \$5700 and personal property worth \$600. When Brown died on April 3, 1881, he left his personal effects and all of his real estate to his wife Amelia; a note in his will directs the executor to assist his wife in selling the real estate at the best time for the market; hinting there may have been substantial property. [Sources: census, obituaries, last will and testament]

1881, April 05 – “Last week, Mr. Meagher completed removing his hardware establishment to his new building, one door north of the Review office, where his many customers will find him until his new block is completed and he returns to his old location. Since vacating his old quarters, the temporary sheds have been torn down, and the main building is to be removed to grounds in the rear, to be used for warehouse purposes.”

Mankato Review

1881, April 7 – “In the removal of J.F. Meagher’s old hardware building last week there were a lot of timbers which should be preserved as mementos of the exciting days of 1862... They are the timbers of the scaffold upon which the 38 Indians were hanged on Front Street.”

Mankato Free Press Weekly

1881, April 12 – “Last week, Mr. Meagher moved the frame building occupied by him for many years to lots in the rear of his business site. This now venerable structure was built in 1856 or 1857, by the Kitchen brothers ...”

Mankato Review Weekly – history of building

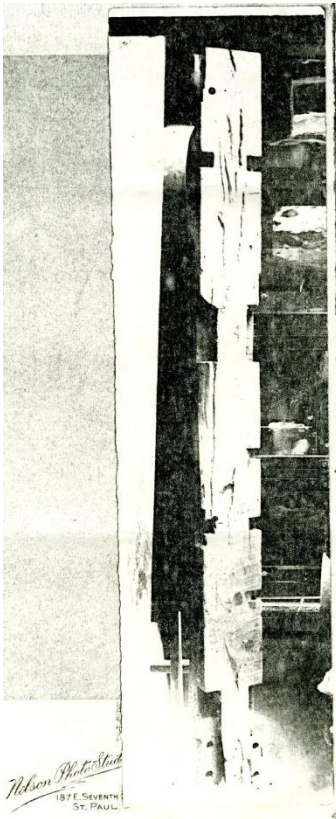
1881, April 14 – “Meagher’s New Block” – 102’ x 44’, elevator, cistern, cornice “John F. Meagher 1881”

Mankato Free Press Weekly

1881, April 19 – “Among the timbers taken out of Mr. Meagher’s old warehouse, torn down to give place to a new building, was one of the beams forming a part of the gallows on which the 38 Sioux Indians were hung in 1862. The notches cut in the timber where the ropes were placed are to be observed. This timber has been presented to the State University museum, and will soon be forwarded to Minneapolis.” *Mankato Review Weekly*

1881, Summer –The timber arrives at the University of Minnesota:

“During the past summer an interesting historical relic was presented to the general museum of the University. It was a stick of oak timber 16 or 18 feet long which Hon. J.F. Meagher, of Mankato, took out of an old building on Front Street in that city while removing the same to give place to an elegant business block. In his letter of presentation to Professor Hall,⁴ Mr. Meagher wrote: “Agreeable to promise I have sent the last stick of the ‘Indian Gallows’ this p.m. to the St. Paul & Sioux City depot to be forwarded to the University of Minnesota. It is rather a hard looking ‘relic’ and you may be disappointed when you see it, but I can assure you it did the business...The notches cut round on one side of this stick were cut to accommodate the ropes and keep them from slipping.”⁵ *The Ariel*, November 24, 1881



Photocopy found in files at the Minnesota Historical Society in 2012, original photograph destroyed at unknown date. Believed to be photograph of the timber at the University of Minnesota.

1881, November 1 – “Mr. J. F. Meagher is moving back to his new and elegant quarters on his old site”
Mankato Review Weekly

See **June 18, 1897** for Meagher Biographical Sketch for information on his business dealings during this time.

1896, July 23 – Fire at Meagher Warehouse

“The building was among the oldest in the city, the last purpose to which it was put being a cooper shop, blacksmith shop and paint shop. It has not been used for some time and was of no value. The burned structure was erected in the spring of 1865 by B.D. Pay, and was used by him until 1870 as a livery barn. It was strongly built of native lumber, oak, elm, and basswood. In 1870 Mr. Meagher purchased it and has since rented it for various purposes.”

Free Press

1896, July 28 –

July 28, 1896 From Thursday’s Daily – “Pieces of the Scaffold were in the old warehouse burned last night. The Indian Hanging Re-called. John F. Meagher Bought the Scaffold at Auction. And some of its uprights were put into the warehouse–relics worthy of the name-a vision of early days.”

Mankato Review Weekly

“The relic hunters who imagine they are getting a part of the old scaffolding on which the Indians were hung, in the remains of the old building burned last week, are way off. W.H. Pay, whose father built the barn, says that none of the scaffolding went into the building. The scaffolding must have been sufficient to build the state capitol, to judge of the reports of different buildings in which it was put. Like the rope used to hang Guiteau, there is no end to it.”

Free Press

1897, June 18 - John F. Meagher dies

John Ford Meagher was born 1836 in Ireland. Moved to LaSalle County, Illinois in 1847; learned the trade of tinner and worked there until removing in 1857 to Minnesota. Came to Mankato in June 1858; was employed at his trade until 1862 with the firm Taylor & Hotaling Hardware, then started in business for himself. The 1860 census lists his occupation as tinner and the 1870 census lists hardware with real estate value of \$17,000 and personal value of \$40,000 - significant growth in a decade.

At the time of the Dakota War, John served with the Defense of New Ulm and assisted in the organization of a company of volunteers in Mankato and was commissioned as First Lieutenant. Meagher has a personal connection to the 38 to be executed; he believes his friend George Gleason was killed by a man named “Chaska Don.”

“Years later, Meagher confessed how he avenged Gleason’s death: ‘After Supper on the Evening of the Execution a few well-known men of that day accompanied Dr. Bootilier [sic] with a team and Wagon wanted to make sure that all who were Executed were Good Indians took up some of them and among those resurrected [sic] was Chaska Don. We all felt keenly the injury he had don [sic] in murdering our old friend Gleason, in cold blood. I cut off the Rope that bound his hand and feet, and cut off one Brade [sic] of his hair with the intention of sending them to Gleasons [sic] relatives...’”⁶

John F. Meagher served as county treasurer two years (1864), county commissioner one year; was a member of the city council three years, has also been in the state senate and legislature two terms each, founder of the First National Bank (1868) and then National Citizens Bank (1882), incorporating member of the Central Railroad Company – railroad and telegraph line that connected Mankato to the South Dakota (1882), president of the Mankato Gas and Electric Light Co., held shares in two banks in St. Paul, and 2/5th interest in partnership and property of Mankato Packing Company.

John married Mary A. Battelle in 1866, she died unexpectedly in 1895. They had seven children. John died on June 18, 1897. His estate at the time of his death is valued at \$432,000 – real estate values \$337,000 and personal property \$95,000 (1898) (approximately \$11 million in 2010 value). Sources: Census, *History of the MN River Valley (1882)*, obituaries, newspapers, Carrie Zeman’s report (see endnote 6).

1927, December 21

W.H. Pay, Historical Society president and owner of the Ben Pay Hotel, was a young boy at the time of the execution. His father Ben Pay was the sheriff in 1862 and assisted with the construction of the scaffold.

“Indian Scaffold Timber Sent Here... In the basement of the Ben Pay Hotel today lies an ancient, weather-beaten timber about twenty-four feet long which formed part of the frame of the scaffold on which thirty-eight Indian criminals were hanged here December 26, 1862. The beam arrived here almost on the anniversary of the hanging from the University of Minnesota, where it has been kept for years. It was sent there by John F. Meagher, a Mankato hardware dealer who purchased the wood of the scaffold in the summer of 1863, six months after the executions, and there it remained until W.H. Pay secured it. It had been stored in the geological survey rooms of the University, and was about to be destroyed when the president of the Blue Earth County Historical Society heard of it and asked if it could be returned here. It was sent down sheathed in boards to prevent damage to it in shipment. The timber is about a foot square and shows signs of decomposition. Pay does not know whether it formed part of the top or bottom of the scaffold frame, but the presence of nine notches cut in one edge leads him to believe that it was part of the top. He points out that those notches may have been cut for the passage of ropes. When Meagher purchased the scaffold timber, which was virgin at the time, he used it for a building in back of his hardware store, about where the J.C. Penney company now stands. The building later burned and Meagher selected one timber for preservation at the University of Minnesota.”

Mankato Free Press

¹ *Ariel*, University of Minnesota, November 24, 1881.

² At this time Meagher’s business is located in roughly the 200 block of S. Front Street

³ The “City Hall” building was in the 300 block of S. Front Street

⁴ Professor Christopher Webber Hall was the principal of Mankato High School from 1872-1873, then on the faculty of the U of M beginning in 1878 possibly until his death in 1911. He was in the geology, biology and mineralogy department.

⁵ In answer to an email inquiry: “What is interesting on my side is that this newspaper article is the only reference I can find to the timber coming to the U. The General Museum at the time was basically the geology & archeology museum. The annual reports for the Regents and the Geological and Natural History Survey, which oversaw the museum, make no reference to acquiring it. I also cannot find a reference to it leaving in 1927.” Eric Moore, Acting Head University Archives, University of Minnesota, March 29, 2012.

⁶ Carrie Remer Zeman, “A Veiled Cabinet of Curiosities: A preliminary report on Minnesota’s 1862 gallows artifacts,” <http://athrillingnarrative.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/execution-artifacts-report.pdf>, April 26, 2012.