Joel Bassett's Settler Legacy

Reconsidering the career of an early Minneapolis lumberman and Indian Agent

Joel Bean Bassett

BY CRYSTAL BOYD

Joel Bean Bassett was an energetic capitalist. He arrived in Minneapolis in 1850 and began accumulating wealth on Dakota and Ojibwe homelands. For the next 50 years, he rode a wave of extraction and development that swept across Minnesota.

Like many settlers, Joel probably didn't consider his life through this lens. His story was largely forgotten until 2021, when a group of Dakota, Ojibwe, and Ho-Chunk people began working with settler descendants to better understand the namesake of Bassett Creek.

Joel was born in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire in 1817. He grew up on the family farm with his Quaker parents and five siblings. His father was openly anti-slavery. This may have impressed Joel, who later backed anti-slavery efforts during his political career.

As a young man, Joel moved to Bangor, Maine, to learn the lumber trade. He worked in pineries and sawmills for about twelve years. By the 1840s, New England's forests were so depleted farmers had to build fences from stone instead of wood. Perhaps recognizing the limitations of a denuded landscape for a lumberman, Joel moved West.

Author's note: This article refers to Joel Bassett by his first name. This approach minimizes repetition when discussing Joel, his relatives, and Bassett Creek. It also humanizes Joel as a real person whose complexities are open to exploration.

By 1850, Joel was living with the family of his younger brother, Phillip, in Washington County, Minnesota. While his brother gained foothold as a farmer, Joel returned to working with wood. He established a lumberyard in St. Paul and stocked it with lumber from the sawmills at St. Anthony.

The 1850s saw immense change along the Mississippi River. Owámniyomni (St. Anthony Falls) has been a sacred site for Dakota and other Indigenous people for generations. But on the river's east bank, settlers in the burgeoning city of St. Anthony regarded the falls as a source of waterpower. It wasn't long before Joel harnessed the falls for his own commercial enterprises.

On the west bank, the Fort Snelling Military Reservation stretched nine miles north of the military fort. The west side of the river was closed to settlers until 1851, when Dakota people signed the coercive Treaty of Mendota and the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. The west side became a nucleus for the budding city of Minneapolis.

Joel jumped at the chance to claim land west of the river. He considered a location near what later became Park Avenue and Tenth Street South in Minneapolis but decided the land was too sandy for farming.

Instead, Joel selected a spot along a creek that ran through a "deep and broad chasm" before connecting with the Mississippi River. The creek was known in Dakota as Ȟaȟá Wakpádaŋ and became part of the land that Joel claimed in fall 1851. He moved to the site in 1852 and, by some accounts, built the second house west of the river in Minneapolis.

But there was a problem. The land claims made by Joel and other settlers were illegal. The military reservation was restricted to use by the federal government, so settlers were squatting until the boundaries were redrawn in 1852. Even then, the former military lands were supposedly closed until a land survey was completed in 1853. Settlers ignored these limitations and began staking their claims.

Uncertainty about land ownership did not hamper Joel. Despite having no legal training or experience, he was elected the first probate judge in Hennepin County in 1852. Bassett Creek was named in his honor by Minneapolis schoolteacher Mary Augusta (Scofield) Kissell.

This hero worship was a new approach to naming landmarks. The original name, Ȟaȟá Wakpádaŋ, references the creek's proximity to the falls and demonstrates Dakota as a place-based language.

Joel and a tidal wave of settler immigrants were rapidly changing the land, language, and culture surrounding the

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creek. Within a generation, Minneapolis' immense growth degraded Bassett Creek from a clear, flowing waterway to a filthy open sewer.

Joel's own industriousness contributed to landscape-scale change. Yet again, he pivoted from agriculture to lumber. In 1854, Joel earned $5 a day working on a boom that handled logs being floated downstream from northern forests. In 1855, the Territorial Legislature incorporated the Lake Pepin Boom Company and named Joel as one of the corporators. He started selling stock in the company and made plans to build a sawmill.

It wasn't until 1855 that a solution was found for the illegal squatters on the former military reservation. Congress passed an act allowing them to purchase their pre-empted claims for $1.25 per acre. Joel wasted no time, and he secured his land patent in April 1855. In 1856, he sold his lands at an enormous markup of $250 per acre. Joel's claim was quickly subdivided into city plots.

Lands that supported Dakota communities for generations had become a one-time source of wealth for Joel. They also became the private property of many individual settlers, an ownership concept without a parallel in Dakota worldviews.

Joel did retain a connection to the mouth of the creek. With Pomeroy, Bates, and Co., he built the first large-scale commercial sawmill on the west bank in 1856. This steam-powered enterprise employed 15 people and could produce 5 to 10 million feet of lumber per year. When it burned down, Joel bought the Pioneer Mill and finished building it as the first water-powered sawmill on the west side platforms.

Joel's lumber career was perfectly timed. As one writer said, Joel "engaged in the business when it was in its infancy and has grown in fortune as it has grown in volume." Minnesota's pine forests, however, experienced a correspondingly swift decline.

There was seemingly no end to Joel's energies. In 1856, his anti-slavery convictions led him to help establish the Republican party in Minnesota. In 1857, he served in the Territorial Legislature. Ever a lumberman, he introduced a bill to incorporate the Mississippi and Rum River Boom Company.

Even a partial list of Joel's business and civic activities is staggering. He was involved with newspapers, woodenware manufacturing, hotels, real estate, flour milling, hydroelectric power, and railroads. He was a Mason and a charter member of Minneapolis Lodge No. 19. He served as the president of the Minneapolis Lumbermen's Exchange and as a director on the Minneapolis Board of Trade.

Until the 1860s, it seems Joel was largely disconnected from the Ojibwe people whose northern forests underpinned his wealth. In early 1866, *St. Cloud Democrat* briefly reports, "J. B. Bassett has been awarded the Chippewa Indian contracts." Joel was now facing a world of greed and corruption steeped in racism.

This "spoils system" was run largely by non-Indigenous traders, politicians, and federal Indian Agents. It was a wide-ranging effort to profit from government contracts and annuity payments at the expense of Indigenous people.

To thwart dishonest traders, Bishop Henry Whipple asked Secretary of the Interior Orville H. Browning to appoint Joel as the Indian Agent at the Chippewa Agency. Joel was appointed in November 1866 and confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March 1867.

From the beginning, Joel's term as an Indian Agent was plagued by accusations. Many of the people circulating rumors stood to gain from ousting Joel.

Construction of the main canal and gate house on the West Bank of Mississippi River, with Bassett Sawmill and Columbia Flour Mill in the background

Hennepin History Museum

Author's note: Chippewa is an outdated term that is used here in proper names and quotes. Many people today prefer to call themselves Ojibwe or Anishinaabe. In 1866, the Chippewa Agency was located along the Crow Wing River in Cass County, Minnesota. Joel Bassett was appointed to serve there as "Agent for the Chippewas of the Mississippi, Pillager, and Lake Winnebagoshish [sic] bands, and the Indians of Red Lake and Pembina."

The truth of their allegations is difficult to determine, but one question stands out: Did Joel hope to benefit his lumber business by working as an Indian Agent in northern pine forests?

The *State Atlas* questioned Joel's motives for becoming an Indian Agent. It noted that the "profitable business interests which he had been building up he sold out and abandoned to engage in Indian matters in which he had no experience whatsoever. ...Certainly he did not embark in the Indian trade for $125 per month. Neither did he hold any license for trading or dealing with the Indians. Mr. Bassett's only chance to make good the business projects he had abandoned to engage in Indian schemes was to secure a hand in the bid contracts which [former Indian Agent] Edwin Clark was expected to award him."

The *State Atlas* also accused Joel of scheming with U.S. Representative Ignatius Donnelly, who the newspaper said knew how to siphon "immense profits" from government contracts that would "be divided among the 'ring'" of conspirators.

The federal government conducted two investigations into the charges made against Joel. Charles Ruffee, a trader and competitor for Joel's position, was behind many of the complaints. When Ruffee's campaign failed to have Joel removed, Ruffee sought other strategies for gaining power.

Questions of self-interest aside, Joel's short career as an Indian Agent was marked by three complex events: negotiating the Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi 1867 (Treaty of 1867), establishing the White Earth Reservation, and investigating the murder of Bagone-giizhig (Hole in the Day the Younger).

In 1867, there were growing concerns about lumber and railroads encroaching on Leech Lake Reservation. This prompted Joel to travel to Washington D.C. with Bagone-giizhig and a group of Ojibwe men from the Mississippi and Pillager bands, where they negotiated the Treaty of 1867.

Portrait of Joel Bean Bassett and Captain John Tapper at Fort Snelling on September 23, 1906. Both were members of the Hennepin County Territorial Pioneers Association.

The treaty ceded about two million acres and established the White Earth Reservation. It encouraged farming through allotment of land to individual people. In practice, the treaty intended to remove Ojibwe people from their homes and concentrate them on a new reservation. It also allowed loggers to access the newly opened forests.

In spring 1868, Joel selected a site in northwestern Minnesota for the agency at the White Earth Reservation. He also determined locations for crop fields and a sawmill. In early June, the first group of about 200 Ojibwe people moved to the new reservation. Joel reflected the federal government's focus on assimilation when he said, "Never has the opportunity for weaning [Ojibwe people] from the habits and instincts of a savage life appeared so favorable."

Many Ojibwe people opposed being removed or changing their lifestyle. Joel recognized that, "the Indians seem to be very reluctant to move from their old homes and the graves of their fathers and their children." Faced with mounting pressure from settlers and the government, however, Joel pressed for removals.

Hennepin History Museum

Creating a new reservation destabilized relationships that were centered around the Chippewa Agency at Crow Wing. On June 27, 1868, Bagone-giizhig was murdered by a group of Ojibwe men who were hired hired by Ruffee and other traders. Joel conducted a limited investigation, but the full story wasn't documented until 1911. Neither the assassins nor the traders who hired them were ever prosecuted.

In August 1868, the *St. Cloud Journal* printed an overly idyllic description of the White Earth Reservation. By December, Bishop Whipple learned that traders were refusing to deliver supplies and Ojibwe people were starving. Bishop Whipple instructed Joel to resign. Julia A. Spears, a teacher at the Chippewa Agency, noted that Joel resigned in April 1869.

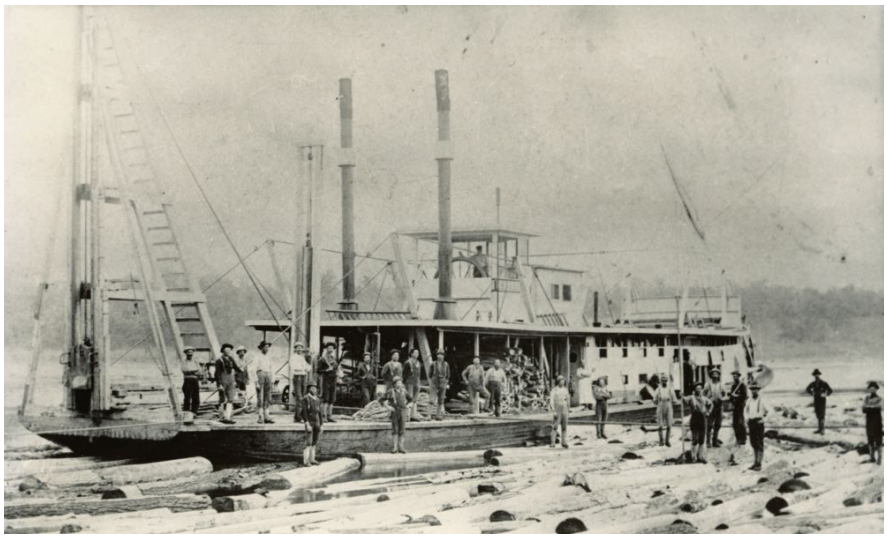
Still a prominent businessman, Joel moved to fashionable Nicollet Island in 1870. He partnered with Harrison Cobb to build the first sawmill in Brainerd. Together, they provided the Northern Pacific Railroad with all the lumber for constructing railway from Brainerd to Bismarck, North Dakota. They also supplied all the lumber for the initial development of the city of Brainerd.

Over the next twenty years, Joel remained busy with politics and business. In 1872, he was elected to the first Minneapolis city council following the merger with St. Anthony. In 1881, he co-founded what became the Minnesota Electric Brush Company, which provided the first centralized hydroelectric power in the United States. In 1882, he built the Columbia Flour Mill. He also became president of the Mississippi & Rum River Boom Company in 1888, which he had asked the Territorial Legislature to incorporate 31 years earlier.

By 1889, Joel's son, William, had become "managing man" of J. B. Bassett & Co. Joel's wife Aurelia (Carpenter) Bassett passed away in 1891. Joel would outlive her by more than two decades, but he spent half of that time in a legal battle with the federal government.

The trouble centered around the Pine River Logging & Improvement Company, which included Joel, his son William, ex-governor John Pillsbury, and Charles Smith. In 1891, the company secured contracts for Ojibwe men to cut "more or less" or "about" 2.75 million feet of timber on the Leech Lake and Winnibigoshish Reservations. Instead, they harvested 17 million feet.

Riverboat, the J.B. Bassett, during a log drive in Anoka County, Minnesota.



The case went to court three times and was appealed each time. In 1898, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Joel and his partners could not "plead ignorance of the law as an excuse for their misconduct." The case went before the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court's ruling. In short, Joel and his partners were "convicted of fraudulently harvesting 17,000,000 feet of timber" from Ojibwe reservations.

Joel moved to California, where he spent the last ten years of his life. He passed away in 1912 and was interred at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis. He has no known living direct descendants.

Joel's connections to Indigenous homelands and people have continued into the twenty-first century. As of this writing, the restaurant Owamni by The Sioux Chef is located along the Minneapolis riverfront in a reclaimed building that includes remnants of Joel's stone sawmill from 1870 and his Columbia Flour Mill from 1882.

The connections extend westward along Bassett Creek, as well. In 2021, a group of Indigenous people and settler descendants created the Ȟaȟá Wakpádaŋ / Bassett Creek Oral History Project. Their work has resulted in an oral history podcast, creek clean-ups, policy changes, and public education.

These efforts help to raise awareness of the West Metro as an Indigenous landscape. They also encourage people to reconsider the legacies of early settlers like Joel Bassett and placenames like Ȟaȟá Wakpádaŋ / Bassett Creek.

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Anoka County Historical Society; Other sources for this article: Minneapolis Weekly Times, October 17, 1854; The Hastings Conserver, 1866; Minneapolis Illustrated, 1889; Atwater's History of Minneapolis, 1893; Winchell's Aborigines of Minnesota, 1911; Scott F. Anfinson, 1989; Why Treaties Matter website; White and Benjamin's "They Would Not Be Moved" 2024.