

An apple a day — Minnesota's first apple

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

In the Territorial days of Minnesota, only crab apple trees grew here, providing small bitter fruit for Native Americans and early traders and settlers. The future of the modern apple orchard arrived with Peter M. Gideon (1818–1899) who in 1853 staked a 160-acre homestead near the shore of Lake Minnetonka, near present-day Excelsior. Truly, Gideon had an interest in apples and horticulture from an early age, and once settled in a house he built himself, he started planting apple trees from seeds he brought with him from his home state of Illinois.

U. P. Hedrick in his *History of Horticulture in America to 1860* remarked that “Peter Gideon was the only man in America to pay attention to apple breeding prior to 1860.”

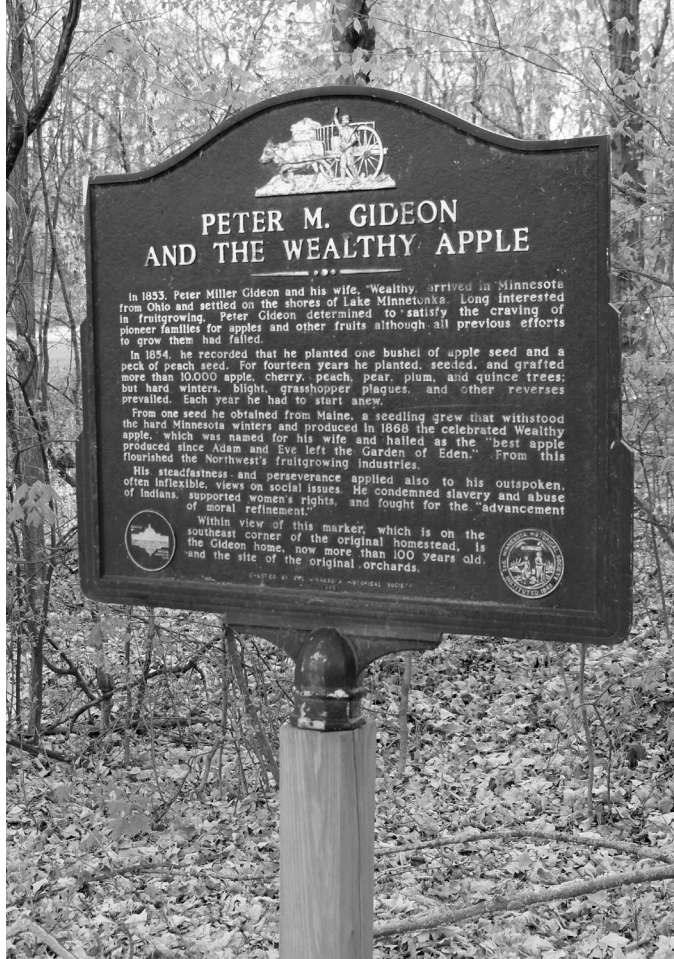
None of the trees from the Illinois variety of apple survived for very long, and although some blossomed, none bore sizable fruit beyond crab apple size and color, and by 1861 Gideon was down to just one hearty Siberian apple tree. Desperate but still unbowed, he sent a few dollars of scarce cash to an orchard grower in Maine, assuming that if apples could grow in the harsh climate of that New England state, they might thrive here. He was right. With a graft from his lone surviving tree and some say a single seed out of the whole bushel from the Maine grower, the Wealthy apple was born.

Named after Gideon's wife, Wealthy Hull Gideon (who was a niece of the captain of the US Frigate *Constitution* “Old Ironsides” in the War of 1812) the apples grew in plenty, and Gideon shared the seeds along with his knowledge and planting skill with anyone who asked. Gideon never cashed in on the apple named “Wealthy” and ended up dying poor. But by the early 1900s the Wealthy had become one of the top five apple varieties grown nationally, and it made the livelihood of fruit and orchard growing possible for many other farmers across Minnesota and the Midwest.

The Wealthy apple, developed on a struggling farm when Abraham Lincoln was president, spurred apple research at the University of Minnesota, which Gideon

also spearheaded for a time. For the love of a farm wife, a good apple, and selfless concern for personal gain, Gideon's apple prefigured further tasty developments of the present-day Honey Crisp and Sweetango.

Charlie Maguire is a traveling songwriter and musician who makes frequent stops in Hennepin County.



PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: The Peter M. Gideon and the Wealthy Apple marker erected by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1965 is located at the intersection of Gideon's Lane and Glen Road in Shorewood. Another stone and metal tablet dedicated by the Native Sons of Minnesota in 1912 to Gideon and the Wealthy Apple is approximately 100 meters away on State Highway 7.



“Wealthy Apple. New and valuable. Tree hardy and productive; flesh white, fine grained, tender;” From a salesman's sample at Andersen Horticultural Library, University of Minnesota.

Looking back at the Hennepin County Fair's roots

BY CAITLIN CROWLEY

In Minnesota, there is perhaps no more quintessential summer experience than going to fairs (local, county, and state), loading up on snacks and sweets, and visiting the many displays and shows throughout. One of the very oldest of these fairs is the Hennepin County Fair, which takes place in Corcoran, Minnesota, and continues the tradition of early Minnesota agricultural fairs that were an important part of our state and country's history.

The Hennepin County Fair is sponsored by the Hennepin County Agricultural Society. Agricultural fairs in Minnesota predate the state itself, the first one believed to be in 1854. This was a time when the Mexican-American War had recently ended. People were beginning to settle in Minnesota and farm the land, much of which had belonged to the Dakota people. In 1862, the Homestead Act was enacted by President Lincoln, giving white Americans and recent immigrants a chance to plant agricultural roots in Minnesota, while at the same time lands were being taken away from Native Americans during the US–Dakota War.

The roots of agricultural fairs in Minnesota came from the desire for these new Minnesotan farmers to help educate, instruct, and commiserate with other farmers. They were showing off the literal fruits of their labor, and the vegetables. In fact, the list of competition categories at the Hennepin County Fair included everything from amateur wine-making to basketry, and all kinds of other crafts, crops, cooking, and livestock. In that way, the fair guaranteed a place for the men of Hennepin County and their wives as well. For children, there were even competitions like the bicycle rodeo. Today, while much of the agricultural character of Minnesota has changed, the tradition of the Hennepin County Fair has grown to include other activities while still continuing the agricultural traditions of the past. In this way, the Hennepin County Fair is rooted in the state's rich and complicated history.

THE NEW HENNEPIN COUNTY OLDE TYME FAIR



Ladies wore long dresses and men sported suits and ties at the Hennepin County Fair in Hopkins in 1908. Tents were filled with competitions, exhibits, and dining halls — much as they are today. In 1986 the fair moved to Corcoran.

Caitlin Crowley graduated this spring with a BA in history and a minor in medieval studies from Augsburg College. This fall she will be attending the University of Minnesota for a master's in heritage studies and public history.



JUNE 16-18, 2017

7205 County Road 101
Corcoran, MN
\$4 ages six and up

Free parking, live entertainment, agricultural bingo, talent contest, craft demos, competitions in art, quilting, baking, floral, beer, and more. For more information, visit hennepin-countyfair.com.

SOURCES

- “67th county fair to start today,” *Sun Newspaper*, July 26, 1973, Fairs: Hennepin County Fair Folder at Hennepin History Museum.
- Brett Laidlaw, “County fair is showcase on way to the State Fair,” August 2, 1978, Fairs: Hennepin County Fair Folder at Hennepin History Museum.
- “County Fair seeks open class entries,” *North Hennepin Post*, July 7, 1986.
- “County's ‘Old Tyme’ fair combines best of old, new,” *Champlin Dayton Press*, July 24, 1986.
- “Harvest Festival becomes county fair: Hopkins’ market block started it in ‘07,” *Hopkins Review*, September 24, 1980.
- “Hennepin County Fair moves to new quarters and expands events,” *North Hennepin Post*, July 17, 1986.
- Jarchow, Merrill E. “Early Minnesota Agricultural Societies and Fairs,” *Minnesota History*, September 1941.
- K. A. Major, “Hennepin fair moves outdoors for old-time fun,” *Star Tribune*, July 18, 1986.
- “The Homestead Act of 1862,” National Archives, October 3, 2016, archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act.
- “Variety is name of Hennepin County Fair coming next week,” *Hopkins Minnetonka Post*, July 19, 1978.