

General Beadle

Focus!

The American Civil War was America's most traumatic conflict. Over 620,000 American soldiers and sailors died in the 4-year conflict, more than in any other of our country's wars. In fact, as many soldiers died in that war as have been killed in all the rest of our nation's wars put together.

More than 3 million fought in the war. That means a lot of soldiers and a lot of sailors, a lot of privates and a lot of officers, generals even. One of those generals was a man named William Henry Harrison Beadle. That General was not a native South Dakotan. He was born in a log cabin in Indiana. As a young man, he decided farming, his father's occupation, was not for him, and he graduated from the University of Michigan as a civil engineer in 1861. But at the same time, the Civil War had begun, and Beadle answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers. He was enrolled in the Union Army as a first lieutenant. Through military study, a fighting spirit, and gallantry, he was quickly promoted all the way to the rank of general. In modern times, when people speak of him, they always call him General Beadle.

After the war, he returned to his alma mater and earned a law degree. He practiced law for a while but another Civil War general, Ulysses S. Grant, now the president of the United States, appointed him surveyor-general of the Dakota Territory (which includes what is now North and South Dakota). His job was to map out the land in the territory and divide it into various plots that could be assigned to counties and sub-divided into townships and



W. H. H. Beadle, 1857

South Dakota State Historical Society, Archives

sections. A township is usually 6 miles on each side, or 36 square miles. A section is about 1 square mile. As part of that process, Beadle had to assign 1 section of land per township for the support of public schools. Thus, 1 square mile per township was reserved by the state for the public schools. Sometimes schools were built right on that land, but even then, no school needed a whole square mile and thus the sale or lease of that land would raise money to fund the schools.

As he did his work, General Beadle became alarmed about the school lands. Other states were in a hurry to bring settlers into their territory and the best way to do that was to give them land to homestead or sell them land at very low prices. When they were sold at very low prices, the schools received very little money for the sale and the land was gone, permanently. That land could no longer provide any benefit to the schools. The lands were being squandered and the support for the schools right along with it.

General Beadle began searching for a better way. He may have found it by reading some of the writings of Benjamin Franklin and his ideas on saving money and making *money by earning interest on those savings*. He may have found it from his observations of the people and lands of the Dakota Territory. However he did it, he found that better way. The land set aside for the schools should either not be sold, but leased to others willing to pay rent, or be sold at its true appraised value (what the land was actually worth) but never less than \$10 per acre. Then the money should be invested and only the interest, minus a little extra to grow the principle, given to the schools. He wanted the funds from the public-school lands to “be and remain a perpetual fund for the maintenance of public schools in the state.” In so doing, those funds would become a permanent “trust fund held by the state.”

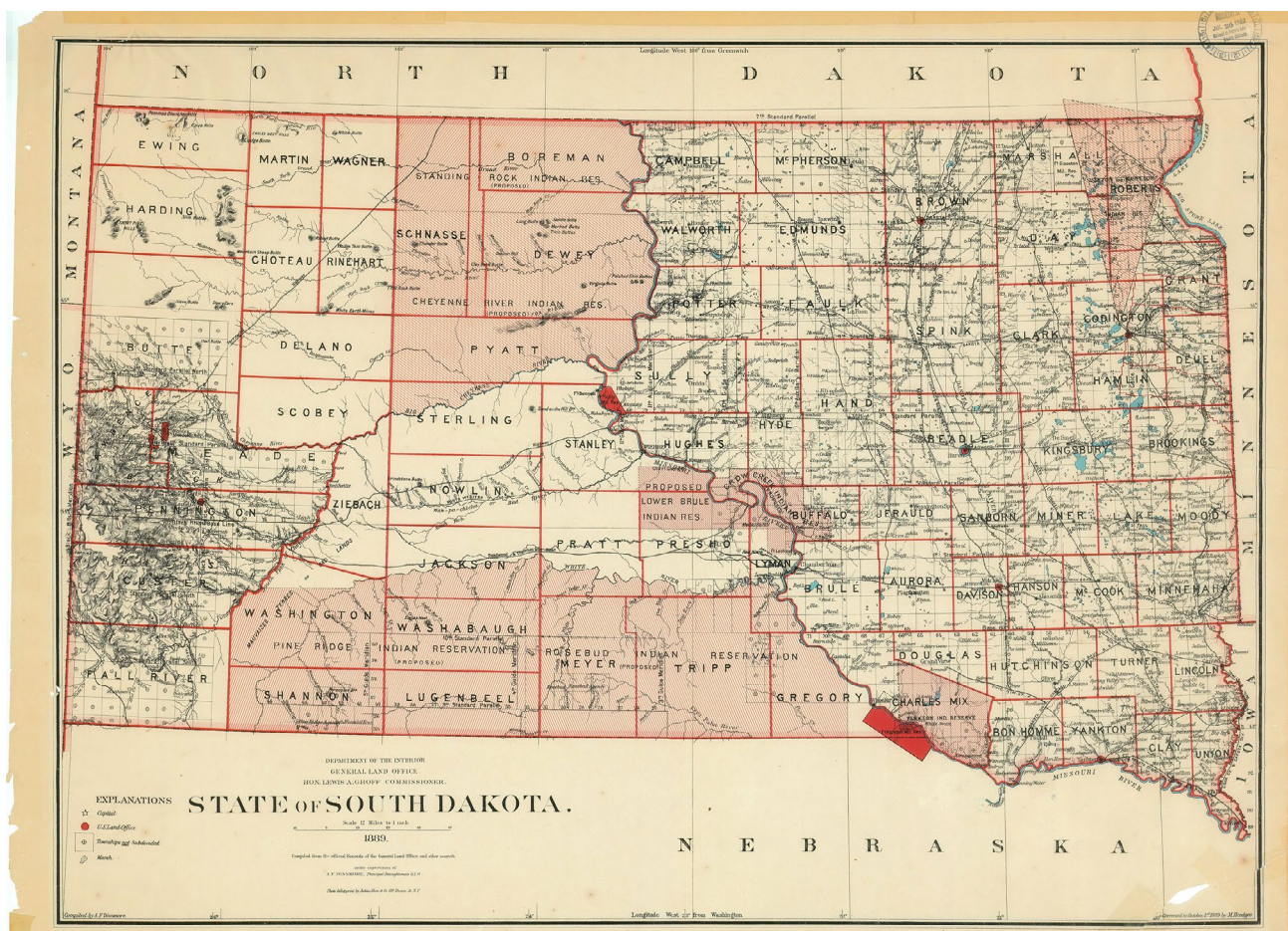
When people heard his idea, they yawned. After all, the Dakota Territory was a wild and wooly place, a land of prairie and hills, badlands and good land, where people had all they could handle just breaking the sod and planting crops, ranching and raising cattle. Even if there were schools, children were needed at



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home to help with the farm work and the housework. People pretty much ignored him on the issue of the school lands even as they respected him for his Civil War service and his surveying work.

It was that respect that earned him an appointment as the superintendent of public instruction in 1879; today, we would call that job the secretary of education. General Beadle took his new job very seriously. He joined the board of the state normal school in Madison, which was dedicated to educating new teachers. He joined the Board of Regents, which oversaw the public colleges in the territory. He began teaching education courses for Yankton College. He watched as huge numbers of new immigrants, homesteaders, moved into the territory, and he traveled from community to community to encourage them to begin building the one-room schoolhouses that served students on the frontier and prairie so well. He became involved in the movement for statehood of South Dakota. Whenever he came to a school or a community with several teachers, he provided them with training on how to be a better educator. He pushed hard for a statewide school system, not just an unrelated bunch of schools scattered across the prairie. As he had done when he surveyed the territory, he traveled all over the wide expanses, sometimes by train, sometimes by horse, and sometimes on foot. Everywhere he went he spoke with crowds of

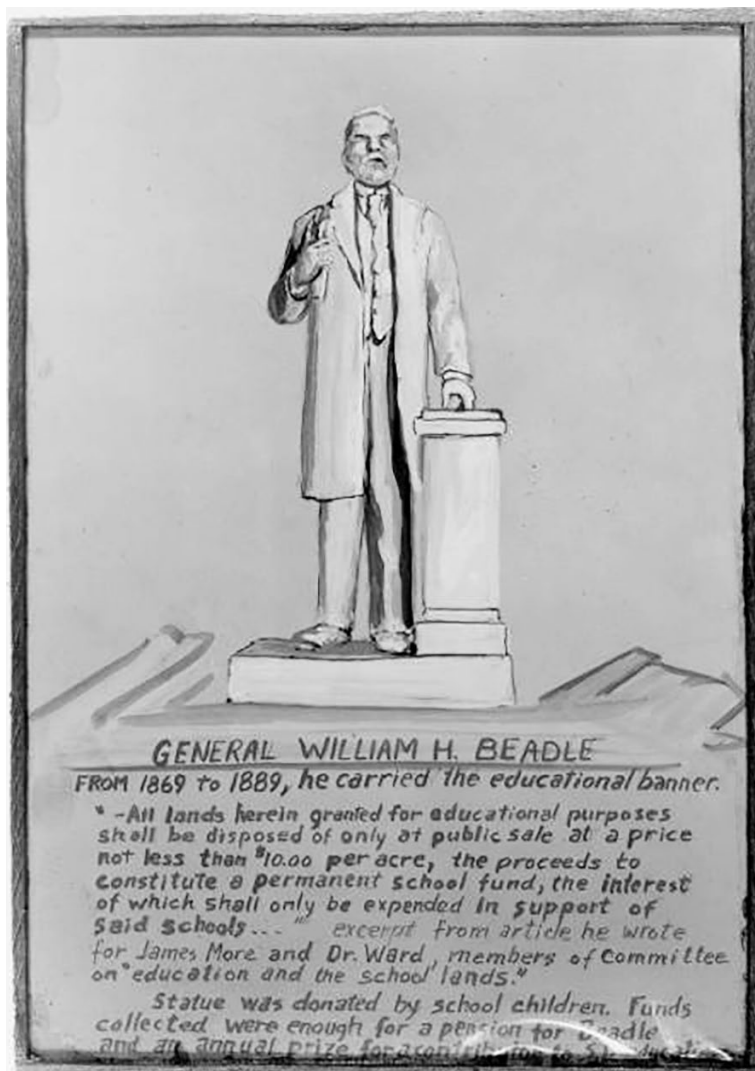


South Dakota School and Public Lands, historical map of 1889

people. They enthusiastically gathered to hear this Civil War general, this man who had surveyed the territory, this head of its schools. Depending on which crowd he was speaking to, he spoke about the importance of education, the necessity for training teachers, the vision for South Dakota as a state not just half of the Dakota Territory, and a myriad of other topics. He was an elegant and spirited orator. But one topic he always brought up, no matter who was in the crowd or the message they expected to receive, was the school lands and the need to protect and cultivate them so they weren't just frittered away, benefiting the current generation of students, perhaps, but leaving all future ones empty-handed. He spoke on the school lands to every community, every crowd gathered around a train depot or sitting in the public meeting house, every individual sitting by a pickle barrel in every general store in the land.

General Beadle believed deeply in education and in the school lands as a permanent treasure for South Dakota's children. And he pursued his belief by focusing on that issue over and above everything else.

Perhaps he learned his lesson from Cato the Elder, a Roman senator more than 2,100 years ago who wanted to remove the threat the City of Carthage posed to the Roman Republic. Whenever he spoke in the Roman Senate, no matter the topic, no matter who else was listening, he ended his speech by roaring "Carthago delenda est," which means "Carthage must be destroyed." Rome had already defeated Carthage in the first of the two Punic Wars, but Cato knew they would soon be seeking revenge. So,



no matter if he was speaking about Roman roads or Roman plumbing, about the public baths or gladiatorial battles, he would remind the other senators that they needed to destroy Carthage. Finally, after Carthage attacked another kingdom near their city, Rome took Cato's advice and destroyed Carthage. Just to be sure and definitely heeding Cato's advice, they salted the very fields around the city so no one could ever live or grow crops there again. Cato had a laser-like focus, and he wasn't afraid to pursue that focus relentlessly.

So did General Beadle. When South Dakota held its constitutional convention in 1885, his plans for the school lands were written right into the document and the school lands were saved. His focus was so strong, in fact, that the United States Congress required that General Beadle's plan be included in the constitutions of Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming.

Because of his hard work and focus on this single, important issue, today South Dakota school lands provide about \$12 million to its public schools each and every year. Because of it, educators are paid better, school libraries are better stocked with books, school buildings are better maintained, school textbooks are more up to date, and South Dakota students have more athletics and activities in which they can participate.

Had the general not focused so strongly on this issue, the school lands and the funds they provide would have long ago wasted away. General Beadle truly is the "savior of our school lands."

Want to learn more?

You can see the statue of General Beadle at the South Dakota State Capitol in Pierre. A sculpture is also in Statuary Hall in our nation's Capitol, one of just two South Dakotans deemed so heroic that they occupy a place in that public pantheon.

