

# NEW LAND, NEW LIFE!

## Norwegian Immigration in Minnesota: 1825-1925

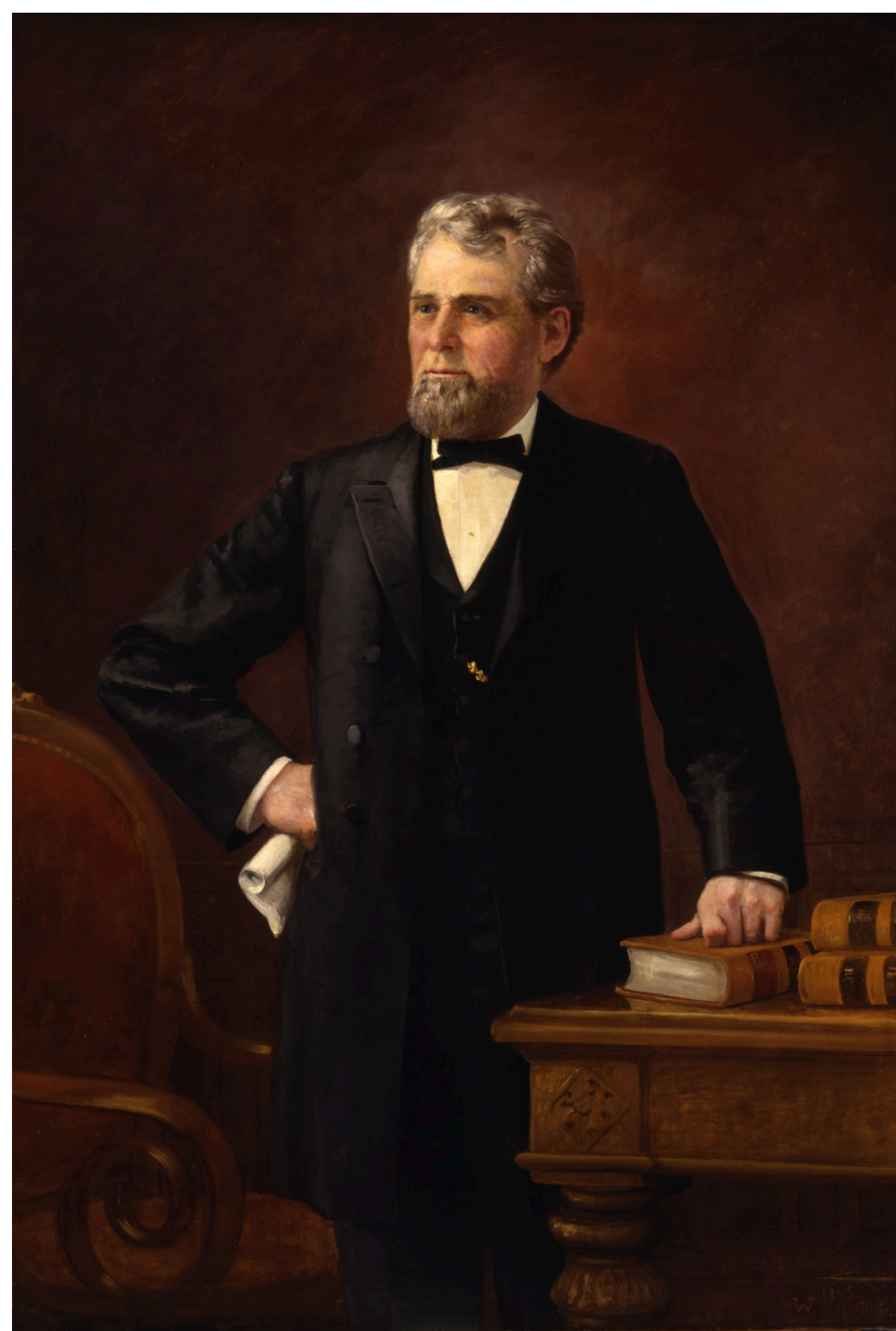


### Politics and Reformers

Before the Civil War erupted in 1861, federal bills concerning homesteaders were hotly contested. The South opposed “free labor”, gaining an upper hand over the slavery issue. The Preemption Act of 1841 and the Homestead Act of 1862 gave settlers the right to acquire farm land in Minnesota at little or no cost. Many Norwegians joined the Union Army during the Civil War. The U.S. Treaties with the Dakota Indian tribes in 1851 opened Minnesota land to settlement. Violence increased between the Dakota tribes and homesteaders during the Civil War as federal payments to the Dakota people were redirected to support the Union Army. The expulsion of the Dakota from Minnesota after the Dakota Uprising in 1862 provided a sense of security for homesteaders. In local government, Norwegians organized townships, built roads, and schools. After the Civil War, Norwegian veterans were admired for their patriotism and bravery, giving them an advantage in politics. Rapid population growth and increasing prosperity gave Norwegians greater political influence.

After 1870, Norwegians steadily gained seats in the Minnesota Legislature and held state and federal executive and administrative positions. The majority of Norwegian males tended to support the Republican Party. During bleak economic downturns, some farm support shifted to Populist Party reformers. During the 1920s, the Farmer Labor Party gained support from Minnesotans.

**KNUTE NELSON** (1843–1923) immigrated to Chicago at age six, later moving to Alexandria, Minnesota, where he homesteaded, practiced law, and operated a hardware store in the 1870s. As a Civil War veteran, he served in the MN Legislature to extend the railroad across the state. Nelson was elected the first Norwegian Governor, 3-term Congressman and U.S. Senator from Minnesota for 30 years. Senator Nelson served Minnesota, chairing the Commerce Committee, the Judiciary Committee, and on the Banking Committee during turbulent times. Knute Nelson advocated regulation of corporations and Wall Street, bankruptcy reform, and the creation of the U.S. Dept of Commerce and Labor. His “Nelson Amendment” to the Commerce bill established the first federal “child labor” laws in the U.S. He was the most famous Norwegian-American in his day.

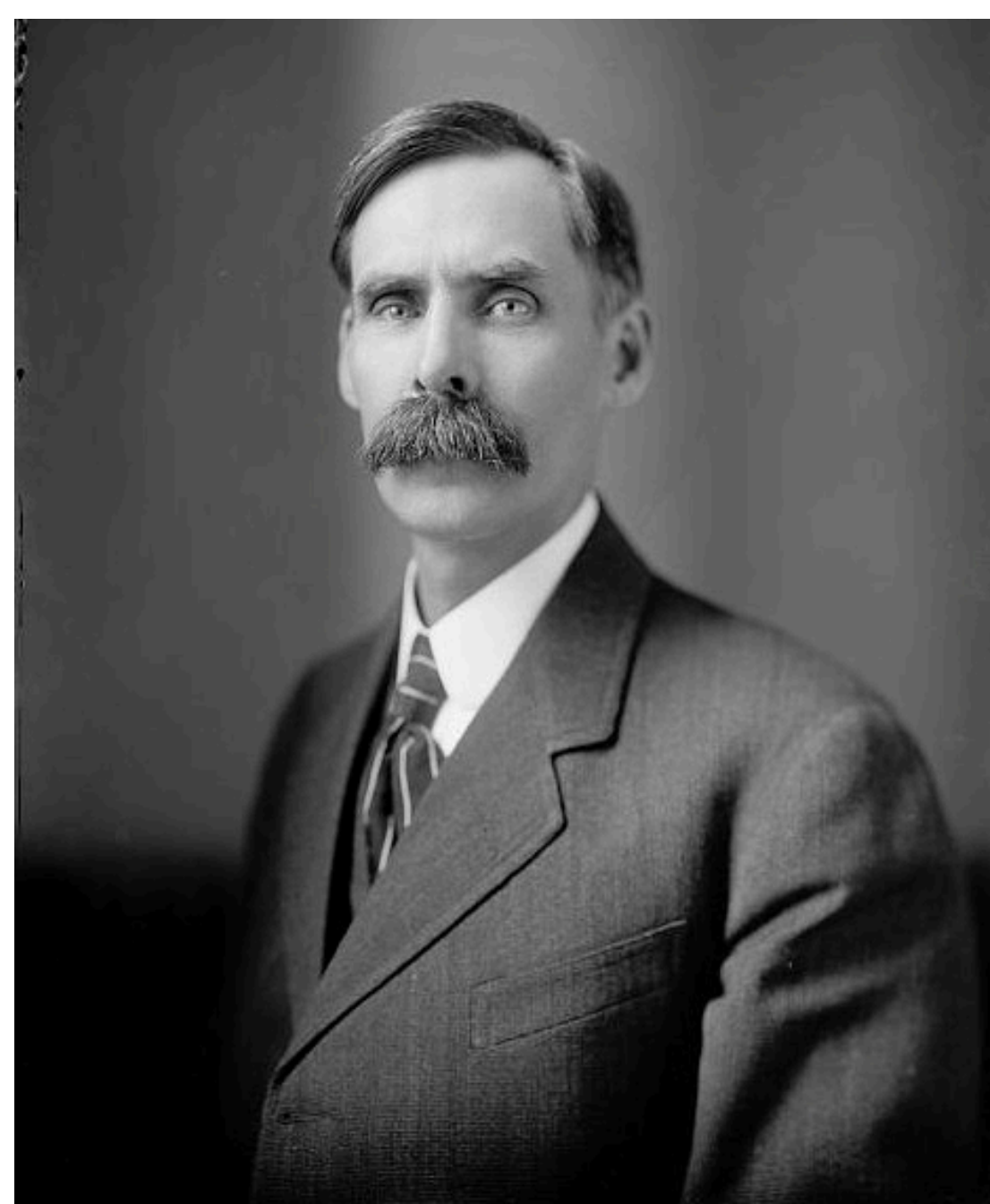


Gov. Knute Nelson official portrait  
by Carl Guthertz. 1895.  
Minnesota Historical Society



Suffrage Procession, Minneapolis; May 2, 1914.  
Minnesota Historical Society

**JENOVA MARTIN** was elected in 1907 the first President of the new Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association (SWSA) in Minnesota, serving five years. Born in Norway, Martin wrote scientific papers in Minneapolis. Martin’s political strategies energized ethnic pride into progress on expanding suffrage. She utilized cultural events as fundraisers. In 1907, Norway enfranchised women taxpayers (thirteen years before the U.S). In 1919, more Scandinavian men voted to enfranchise American women than did any other group in the Midwest. In 1920, American women gained the right to vote.



U.S. Rep. Andrew Volstead  
official portrait  
Library of Congress

**ANDREW VOLSTEAD** (1860-1947), the son of Norwegian immigrants, was prosecuting attorney in Yellow Medicine County, and Mayor of Granite Falls. Elected to 10 terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, Volstead had the courage to reform, supporting a federal anti-lynching bill and the National Prohibition Act of 1919, which banned intoxicating liquors in the U.S. for over 10 years. He spearheaded the Capper-Volstead Act, still in effect, which enabled farmers to form combinations of business organizations, without fear of prosecution under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. His loss in the 1922 election was tied to low farm prices.

