

Southern New Hampshire University

Solomon and Sarah Comstock  
Prairie Pioneers and the Building of a Community

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

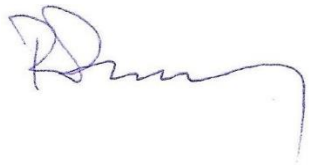
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Submitted August 2017

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September 6, 2017

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Date

## **Abstract**

Minnesota and higher education began to see a boom in the mid-1800s. When Solomon Comstock arrived in Moorhead in 1871, he saw nothing but muddy streets, dugouts, and tents. Throughout the late 1800s, Solomon and his wife, Sarah, focused on helping to develop Moorhead from a deplorable tent town with gambling house and saloons into a vibrant community through education. The creation of Minnesota's fourth normal school in Moorhead was one of the biggest educational opportunities for Moorhead then and now. Today, on the six-acre site donated by Solomon and Sarah Comstock, stands one of Minnesota's universities, Minnesota State University, Moorhead. Research at the Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives shows several contributions the Comstock's made to Moorhead through education and literacy.

This thesis not only focuses on the educational contributions of Solomon and Sarah Comstock but further expands into a PowerPoint presentation and lecture. This lecture, which will be presented at the Comstock House museum in Moorhead, Minnesota will summarize this thesis through the main educational contributions outlined in this thesis. The PowerPoint presentation will be outlined by providing Solomon Comstock's contributions, such as his support and donation of land for the Bishop Whipple School and Moorhead Teacher's College. The PowerPoint will then focus on Sarah Comstock's contributions to Moorhead, such as the creation of the Moorhead Women's Club and the dedication to developing the Moorhead Public Library. Without these educational and community developments, Moorhead, Minnesota would not hold the current educational opportunities such as Minnesota State University, Moorhead, Concordia College, or the Lake Agassiz Regional Library System.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my grandma, Genevieve Peterson, who always wanted to hear about my museum visits, including the Comstock House in Moorhead, Minnesota.

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## **Preface**

I was not one to focus on local history until I created an online exhibit featuring items from the Comstock House museum for a previous course at Southern New Hampshire University. Since that course and project, I knew I wanted to learn more about the Comstock family. I decided to focus my topic on the educational contributions Sarah and Solomon made to Moorhead while learning about all they did for the growth of the community of Moorhead. I further became interested in the educational contributions not only as an alumnus of Minnesota State University, Moorhead but also because of how successful their three children were in their lives, especially Ada, their oldest child, who became a pioneer in higher education.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives department, especially Cori Edgerton, for all research assistance. A special thank you to the Matt Eidem for his willingness to host this PowerPoint presentation at the Comstock House.



## Introduction

In the mid-1800s, the railroad westward expansion brought many settlers to the Midwest in hopes of finding work and a place to call home. Along with the growth of pioneers, came the growth and need of businesses and schools. While homeschooling was a popular choice for many pioneers with the population growth in areas, schools began to develop. For Minnesota, higher education began to take shape in the mid-1800s.<sup>1</sup> Solomon and Sarah (Ball) Comstock were two pioneers who not only settled in Moorhead, Minnesota, but also helped build Moorhead into a vibrant community through education.

When Solomon Comstock entered Moorhead as a laborer with the Northern Pacific Railroad, he had no idea the direction his life would take, he only dreamed of heading west to the Pacific coast where he would become a successful lawyer.<sup>2</sup> However, upon entering Moorhead, he stayed and set up a law practice. Due to the increase in crime and growth in Moorhead, Clay County commissioners appointed Solomon to become the first Clay County attorney on April 26, 1872.<sup>3</sup> A couple years later, Solomon married Sarah Ball and together they began promoting education and literacy through politics, clubs, and daily life.

This topic focuses on all of Solomon and Sarah's main educational contributions to Moorhead, Minnesota. The project to this thesis, which will be a PowerPoint lecture held at the Comstock House, which is now a museum and part of Minnesota Historical Society. This

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul: North Central Publishing Company, 1975), 414-415.

<sup>2</sup> Clarence A. Glasrud, *Moorhead Normal School* (Moorhead: Moorhead State University, 1987), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Morris P. Fredericks, *Early History of Moorhead in the 1870s and 1880s* (Moorhead: Concordia College, 1926), 8.

lecture will summarize this topic through a series of twelve slides, separated by the contributions made between Solomon and Sarah Comstock.

This topic will further focus on answering not only what educational contributions Solomon and Sarah contributed to the community of Moorhead but also how their beliefs on education influenced their personal lives, which also spread out into the community.

Chapter one describes the previous research about Sarah and Solomon Comstock through local historians and students. The chapter further discusses a review of the secondary and primary research which focus on the educational contributions made by Mr. and Mrs. Comstock.

Chapter two describes the methodologies used for this topic. This chapter specifically explains the academic and social lens, which was the focus of this thesis. The social lens focuses more on Sarah Comstock as her educational contributions for the Moorhead community were contributed through groups, such as the Moorhead Women's Club. Most of Solomon's contributions give us more of an educational lens as Solomon's two main educational contributions to Moorhead center around the building of two schools.

Chapter three discusses the target audience for this topic. The PowerPoint lecture for this thesis is part of an educational lecture series held at the Comstock House every year. Through previous PowerPoint lectures on the Comstock House, the target audience is college students, graduates, and members of the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County.

Chapter four discusses the plan for the PowerPoint presentation and each of the twelve PowerPoint slides will be part of this chapter. This topic further discusses the topic in detail, which is also the proposed lecture associated with the PowerPoint presentation.

Chapter five discusses the gaps in the Comstock research along with proposed future research topics. This chapter further discusses any ethical concerns with this thesis project.

Chapter six discusses the budget and staff for this project. The source for this chapter is data from previous PowerPoint lectures from the Comstock House.

## Chapter One: Historiography

Previous research on Solomon and Sarah Comstock has been a mix of biographies, college papers, projects, and thesis with most of the previous research focusing on Solomon Comstock. Beyond the biographical literature of Solomon is Gregory Harness' thesis, *Solomon Gilman Comstock: Prairie Lawyer, Legislator, and Businessman*, which focuses on Solomon's law, business, and political careers, along with the accomplishments through these careers.<sup>4</sup>

There are also two college papers in the Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives that go a bit beyond a biographical focus. Bob Courtney wrote one of these papers. While Courtney's paper is about Solomon's life at its core, Courtney does examine why Solomon worked so hard as a politician to bring Minnesota's forth normal school to Moorhead, analyzing whether it was to better Moorhead as a community or for Solomon's own interests.<sup>5</sup> Corrine Lemke is another student whose college paper analyzes whether Solomon truly got stranded in Moorhead as he told the Fargo Forum newspaper in 1930<sup>6</sup> or if he wanted to stay in Moorhead because he knew he could create a good life for himself in Moorhead.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of primary sources are newspaper clippings from the Comstock boxes at Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives department. While finding primary sources for Solomon and Sarah Comstock was easy, finding sources which discussed different information was the challenge. While finding multiple sources that discuss the same contribution, such as Solomon's bill for the normal school, helps confirm information this can also create roadblocks

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Harness, *Solomon Gilman Comstock: Prairie Lawyer, Legislature, and Businessman* (Moorhead: Moorhead State University, 1976)

<sup>5</sup> Bob Courtney, *Solomon G. Comstock: Contributions to the City of Moorhead, Minnesota, 5/15/2017*, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 65.

<sup>6</sup> Glasrud, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Corrine Lemke, *Solomon G. Comstock*, (Thesis, Moorhead State University, 1987) 5/15/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 65.

with research. Fortunately, through research, other contributions were found to not only help support this thesis but also help fill in research gaps.

At first, finding enough secondary sources was a challenge because of the lack of previous research on Solomon, and especially, Sarah Comstock. However, secondary research became less challenging with a focus of early Moorhead history and Moorhead Normal School. Clarence A. Glasrud, Terry Shoptaugh, Rolland Dille, and Morris P Fredericks all discuss Moorhead Normal School history. Many previous students of Minnesota State University, Moorhead, such as Brian D. Fores, Greg Harness, Bob Courtney, and Corrine Lemke all wrote about Solomon Comstock through a biographical setting or focusing on his contributions to the Moorhead community. The history of Clay County, in which Moorhead resides, is also included in the group of secondary sources by authors such as Edith S. Moll, John Turner, C.K. Smeling, and the Fargo-Moorhead Centennial Corporation.

Carroll L. Engelhardt is a local Red River Valley historian whose book *Gateway to the Northern Plains: Railroads and the Birth of Fargo and Moorhead* gave a plethora of information regarding Solomon and Sarah Comstock, early Moorhead history, and history of the railroad boom towns, which is how Moorhead began.<sup>8</sup> Theodore C. Blegen is another author who focused on the Northern Pacific Railroad and the development and growth of higher education through his book, *Minnesota: A History of the State*.<sup>9</sup>

For sources pertaining to Sarah Comstock, research focused on two of her larger educational contributions to Moorhead, the Moorhead Woman's Club and the Moorhead Public Library. Mrs. R.G. Price, who was at the time president of the Woman's Club, wrote the club

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<sup>8</sup> Carroll L. Engelhardt, *Gateway to the Northern Plains: Railroads and the Birth of Fargo and Moorhead* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)

<sup>9</sup> Blegen.

history.<sup>10</sup> Terry Shoptaugh, retired Minnesota State University, Moorhead history professor and Library Archivist wrote an article about Mrs. Comstock and the Moorhead Public Library.<sup>11</sup>

Other than a few secondary sources which discuss both Solomon and Sarah Comstock, the other sources for Sarah Comstock are various newspaper clippings.<sup>12</sup> Most newspaper clippings discuss Sarah's work with the Moorhead Woman's Club,<sup>13</sup> Moorhead Public Library,<sup>14</sup> or articles of her life and contributions after her death.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond any college papers and thesis, publish literature focuses on more of a biographical point of view or articles pertaining to a specific topic. Carroll Engelhardt wrote about Solomon and Sarah Comstock in his book, *Gateway to the Northern Plains: Railroads and the birth of Fargo and Moorhead*. Much of his book discusses Solomon Comstock's relationship and business ventures with the Northern Pacific Railroad.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the book briefly looks at educational contributions Solomon and Sarah Comstock made to Moorhead. Engelhardt mentions Solomon's support for the Bishop Whipple School and the Moorhead Normal School. The book further mentions the Moorhead Women's Club and Sarah's work towards securing the Moorhead Public Library.<sup>17</sup>

This capstone is not only meant to fill in gaps within the Comstock family, but also to fill in a gap within the audience of the Comstock House. For years, the Comstock House has

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<sup>10</sup> Mrs. R.G. Price, *History of the Moorhead Woman's Club*, 7/17/2017, MSUM Archives, Moorhead Federated Women's Club, Box 1.

<sup>11</sup> Terry Shoptaugh, "A Look at Women from our Past and the Moorhead Public Library." 7/17/2017, MSUM Archives, Moorhead Public Library, Box 1.

<sup>12</sup> Newspaper Clipping. 5/22/2017. MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 63.

<sup>13</sup> "Woman's Club of Moorhead Retains Customs Started by Charter Members." 7/17/2017, MSUM Archives, Moorhead Federated Women's Club, Box 1.

<sup>14</sup> Nellie A. Price, "The Public Library of Moorhead, Minnesota, and the Woman's Club," 7/17/2017, MSUM Archives, Moorhead Public Library, Box 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Medal Award is Honor to Late Mrs. Comstock." 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A.

<sup>16</sup> Engelhardt, 67-68.

<sup>17</sup> Engelhardt, 158-159, 167.

focused on the gaining the attention of the students in the area.<sup>18</sup> Recently, the Comstock House created an educational series, which takes place during the school years, which this presentation will be a part of. Recently, Jenny Hornby & Bryna Bobick did a study on educational programs and service to youth in museums.<sup>19</sup> In this study, they stated that museum need to work on dialog to help gain the attention of youth.<sup>20</sup> Solomon Comstock is well-known among the students of Minnesota State University, Moorhead and Concordia College. Developing programs with the Comstock family as a focus is not only helping in the dialog but also in creating more awareness in the community's youth.

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<sup>18</sup> Sally Steiner, "Getting to Know our Neighbors: The Comstock House," *The Concordian*. (accessed August 26, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Jenny Hornby and Bryna Bobick, "A Survey of Teen Museum Education Participants and their Parents." *Clearing House* 89, no. 4/5 (July 2016): 153. (accessed August 27, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

## Chapter Two: Methodology

This thesis was researched mainly through archival finding aids and analyzed with academic and social lenses. This topic is a local history topic, therefore, over half of the sources were found through research at the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, which is housed at the Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives.

The thesis of this topic pertains to how Solomon and Sarah Comstock helped develop Moorhead from a “wild west” gambling and saloon town into a vibrant community through education. Therefore, much of this project and sources look at the academic and literary contributions Solomon and Sarah Comstock brought to Moorhead. Solomon Comstock collection contains 73 archival boxes of information about Solomon and Sarah Comstock.<sup>21</sup> The project further examines Solomon and Sarah’s personal beliefs towards education through their educational background and support for the higher education with their children and members of the Moorhead community, through the building of the Moorhead Normal School, Bishop Whipple School, and the Moorhead Public Library.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis fills in a gap within the Comstock research not only by taking a different look into the life of Solomon Comstock but also by including his wife, Sarah Comstock. Previous research of Solomon Comstock looks more into all his contributions to Moorhead through a biographical topic.<sup>23</sup> However, there has been previous research on Solomon Comstock with more of a focus into his real estate business, career as a lawyer, and as a politician. But, there has not been a topic discussing just Solomon Comstock’s contributions to the Moorhead

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<sup>21</sup> Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, “Solomon Gilman Comstock Papers (S248) 1872-1998,” [mnstate.edu https://www.mnstate.edu/northwest-mn/guide/s248.aspx](https://www.mnstate.edu/northwest-mn/guide/s248.aspx) (accessed August 14, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Engelhardt, 158-159.

<sup>23</sup> Greg Harness, “The Life of Solomon Comstock,” 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 65.



community through education. Furthermore, there was no past research found the discussed Sarah Comstock directly, especially her contributions to the Moorhead community through education. There is no current research discussing both Solomon and Sarah Comstock and their educational contributions to Moorhead, Minnesota.

The social lens for this thesis comes forth through the history of Moorhead, Clay County, and Minnesota. The way Solomon and Sarah Comstock lived and conducted themselves in order to help the Moorhead community grow is also viewed through a social lens. Furthermore, Solomon and Sarah Comstock were a very prominent social couple in Moorhead, Minnesota.

The second half of this thesis will be a PowerPoint lecture at the Comstock House in Moorhead, Minnesota. Museums, such as the Comstock House, focus on lecture series events which are educational for their audience in support of an educational leadership role. Leslie Bedford discusses this new educational leadership role museums are taking on in her article, *A Conversation about Educational Leadership in Museums*.<sup>24</sup> This article talks about the different skills museum staff hold when they focus more on a leadership role and how this role often has a ongoing effect into the community.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the article discusses how an educational role in museums can help look outside the box and at different areas within the community.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Leslie Bedford, "A Conversation about Educational Leadership in Museums," *The Journal of Museum Education*, 34 no.2 (2009) 139-147.

<sup>25</sup> Bedford, 141-142.

<sup>26</sup> Bedford, 142-143.

### Chapter Three: Target Audience

The Comstock House is a historical museum and landmark in Moorhead, Minnesota, which was once the home of one of the most recognized pioneers of the area. The Comstock House is a place for anyone who is interested in different topics of history or anyone looking for a weekend activity. The Comstock House not only holds history on the Comstock family but also life in the Victorian Era.<sup>27</sup>

The intended audience for this thesis will be graduates of Minnesota State University Moorhead and members of the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County. Matt Eidem, Director of Museum Operations at the Comstock House says, past events at the Comstock House has shown that college graduates and members are the primary audience. Matt states the Comstock House is trying to focus on getting more college students in the door. Betty, a member of the Friends of the Comstock House, is also on the same side as Matt, as the Comstock House has been working on expanding its audience for years, focusing on students.<sup>28</sup> With this thesis project's focus on education and a founding member of two of Moorhead's main colleges, the thesis connects to college students.

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<sup>27</sup> Minnesota Historical Society, "Comstock House" mnhs.org. (accessed August 25, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Sally Steiner, "Getting to Know our Neighbors: The Comstock House," *The Concordian*. (accessed August 26, 2017).

## **Chapter Four: Project Plan and Topic Description**

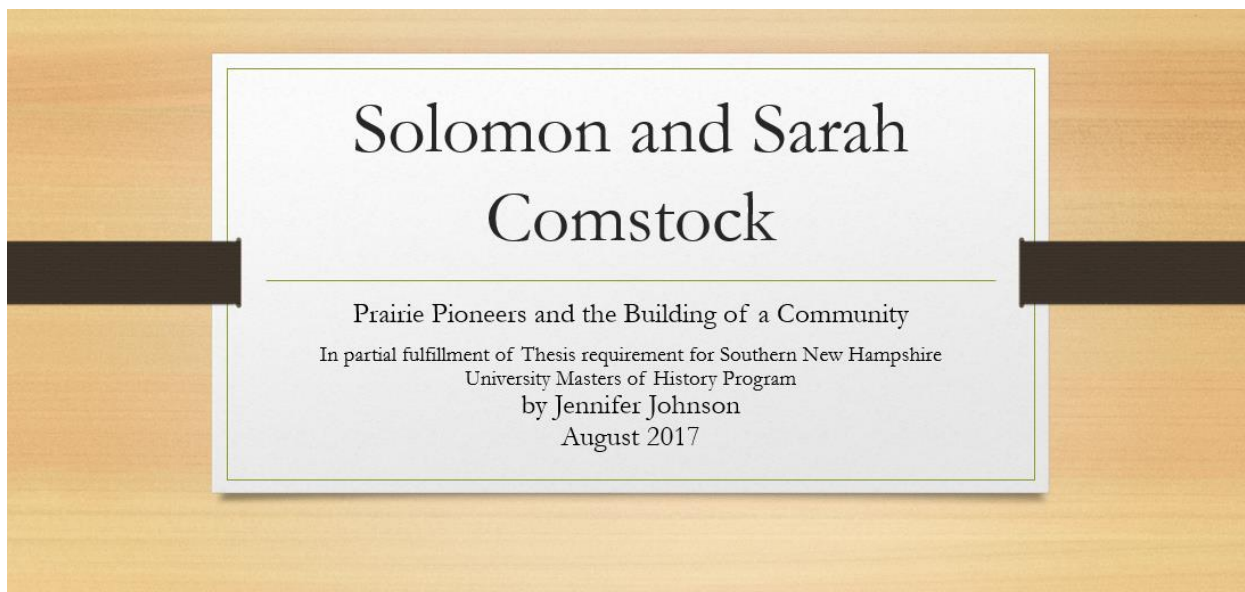
Many citizens of Moorhead, Minnesota, have a lot of pride for the Comstock family. The Comstock House is a museum which holds successful events and weekend tours year-round. When a visitor steps inside the Comstock House, they not only see artifacts the Comstock family used and how they lived but they also hear about a few of the contributions they gave to the Moorhead community. However, Solomon and Sarah Comstock contributed so much to the community, it is hard to discuss all of their contributions in one walking tour. Therefore, my project plan is to focus on Solomon and Sarah Comstock's educational and literary contributions while helping to build a community through a walk and PowerPoint.

Most information from the research will be read to the audience and not on the PowerPoint slides. Because the PowerPoint slides will have little research on them, the research will become connected through the talk I will give during the PowerPoint presentation.

The plan for my PowerPoint is for each slide to focus on an area in which Solomon and Sarah Comstock helped develop the Moorhead community through education. The outline of the PowerPoint is as follows:

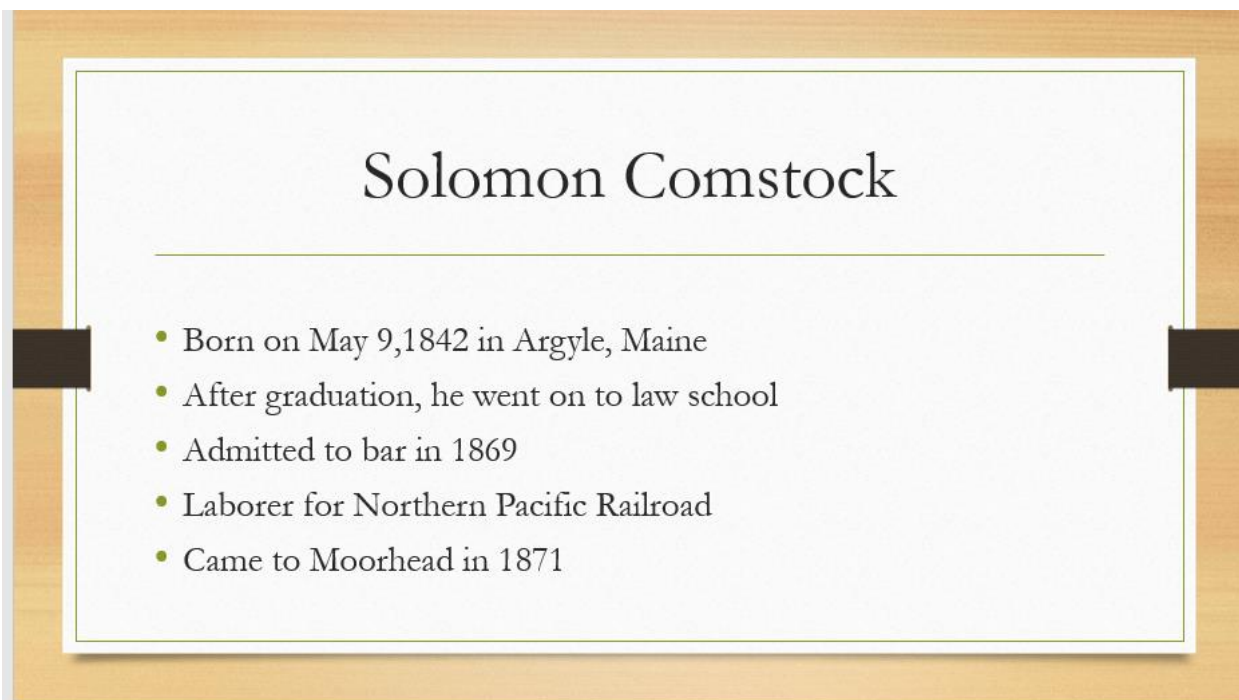
## 1.) Introduction

- a. For this slide I will introduce myself as a graduate of Southern New Hampshire State University, explain that this PowerPoint presentation is a part of my overall thesis completed as a requirement for graduation, and give a description to what the thesis is about. I will let the target audience know that this PowerPoint lecture will discuss Solomon and Sarah Comstock and their main educational and literary contributions to Moorhead, Minnesota.
- b. The introductory slide will look as follows:



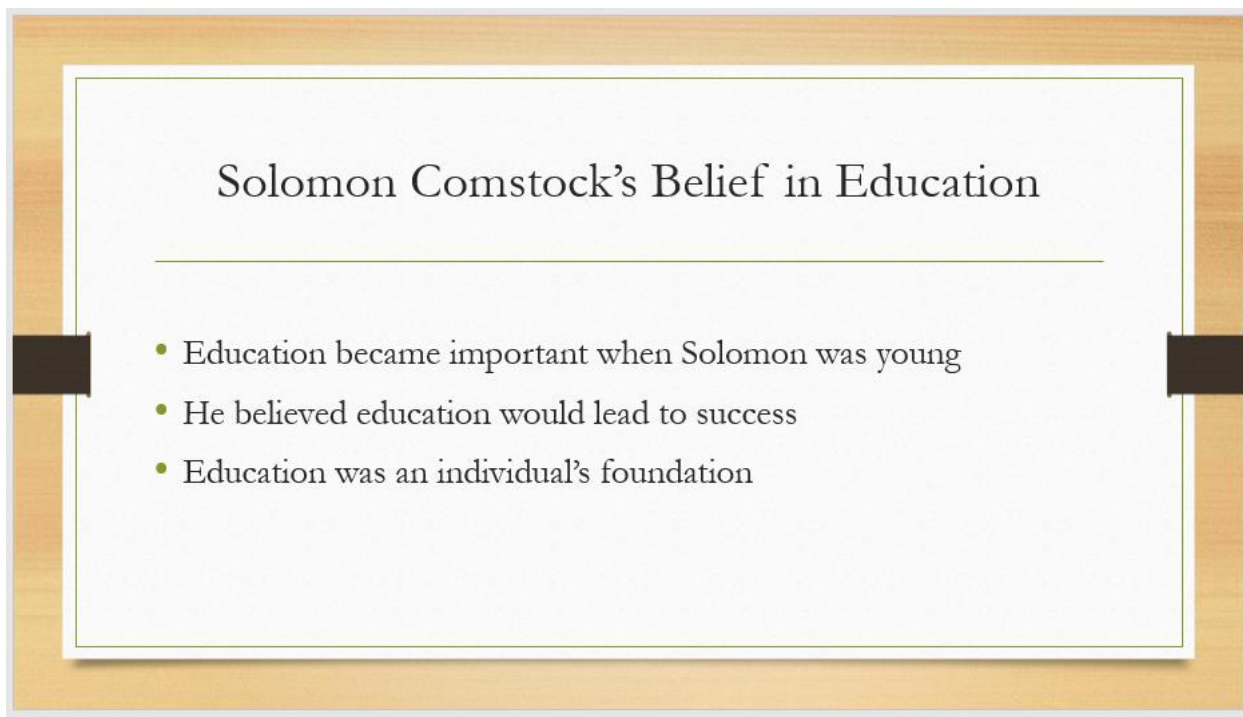
## 2.) Solomon Comstock

- a. This second slide will have a picture of Solomon Comstock with a brief discussion of his early life, including his education completions from youth, how he successfully went on to law school, and then how he came to Moorhead.
- b. The second slide will look as follows:



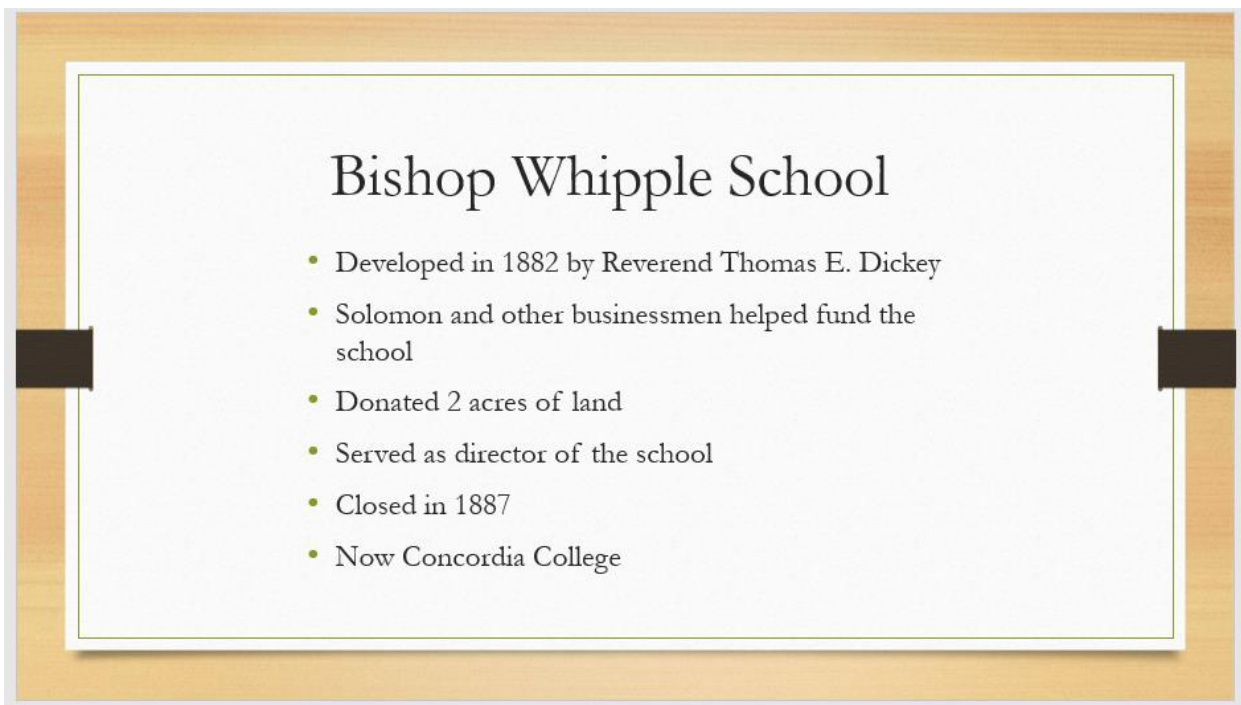
### 3.) Solomon's belief in education

- a. Solomon's belief and thoughts on education forms as a basis to why he contributed so much to Moorhead.
- b. the third slide will look as follows:



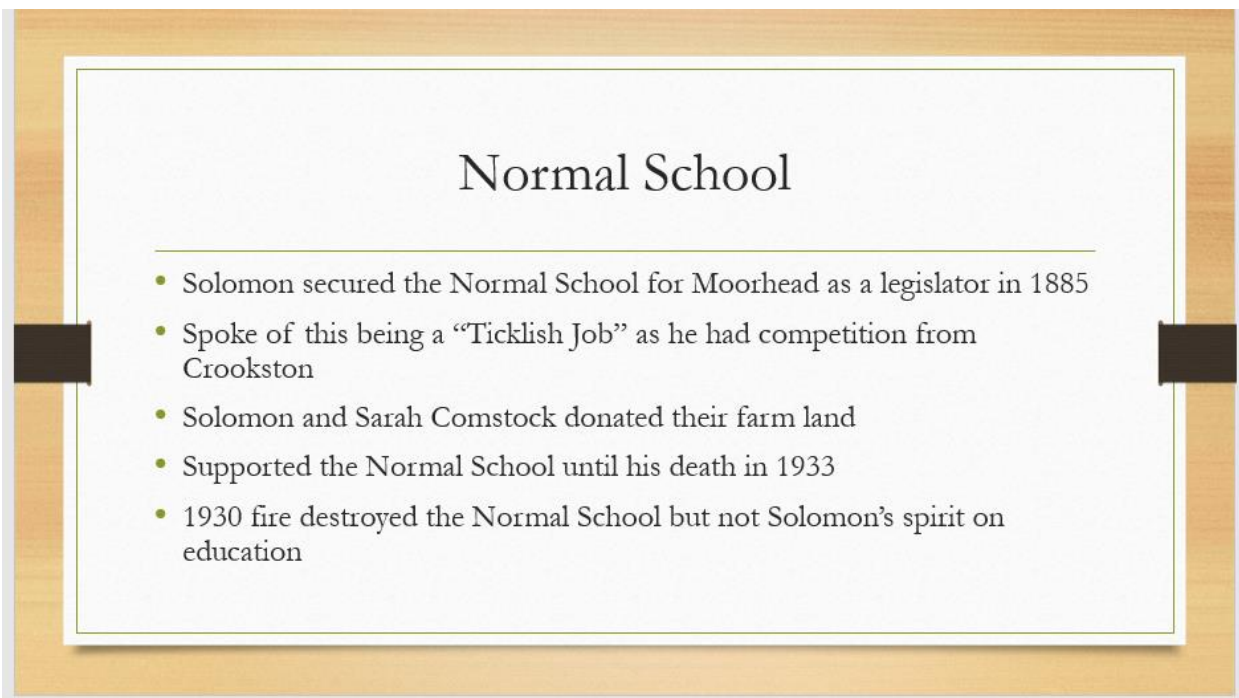
#### 4.) Bishop Whipple School

- a. This slide will discuss Solomon's involvement with the Bishop Whipple School.
- b. the fourth slide will look as follows:



## 5.) Moorhead Normal School

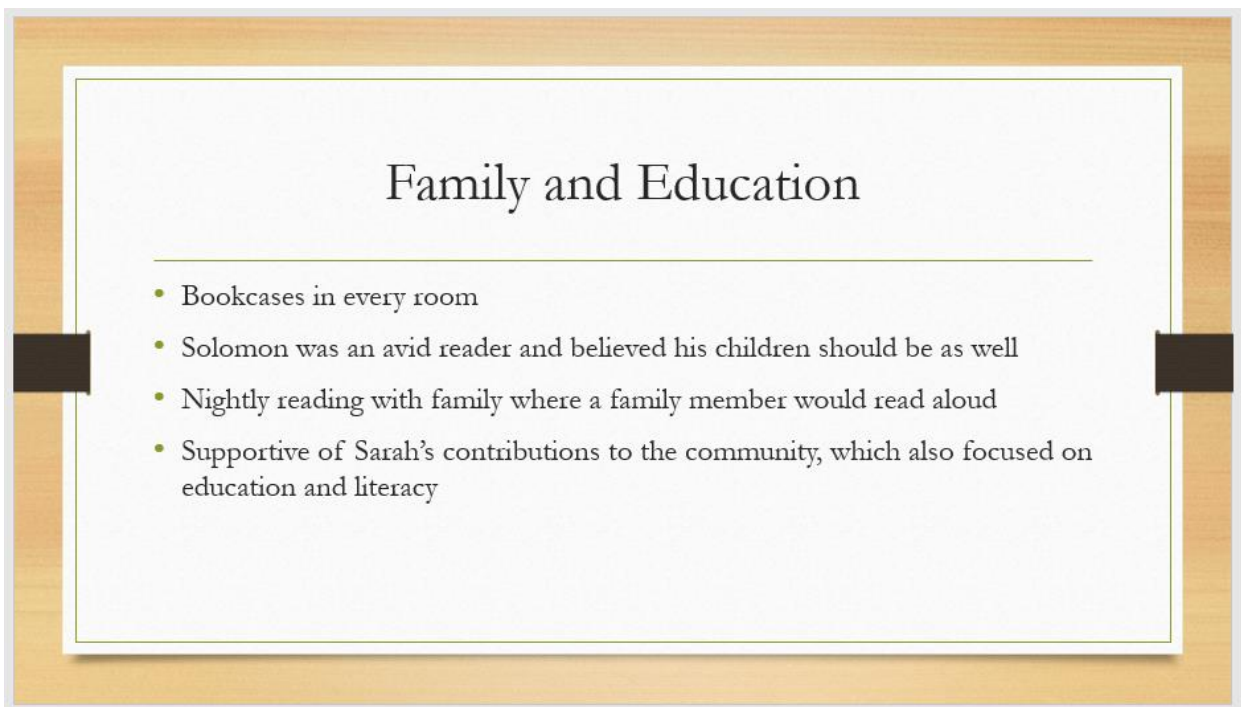
- a. This slide will discuss Solomon's involvement with the Moorhead Normal School
- b. Because of the amount of information for the Moorhead Normal School, this supportive point may cover more than one slide.
- c. Sarah Comstock will also be mentioned in this slide as they both donated land for the Moorhead Normal School.
- d. the fifth slide will look as follows:





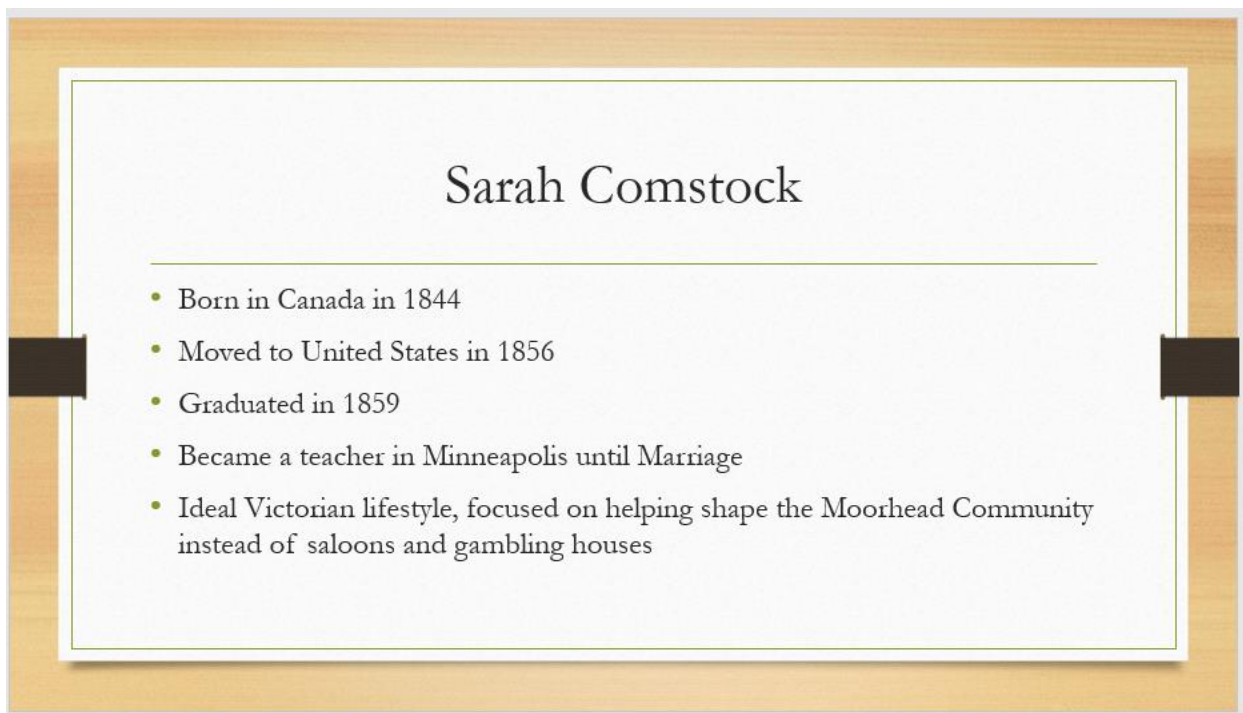
6.) Various points

- a. This slide will discuss other supportive points, inside and outside Solomon's home to show that education was important, such as nightly readings with his family, supporting Sarah on her contributions, and supporting other educational opportunities in the area.
- b. the sixth slide will look as follows:



## 7.) Sarah Comstock

- a. Like Solomon's slide, this slide will have a picture of Sarah and focus on her early years and her teaching before marriage.
- b. the seventh slide will look as follows:



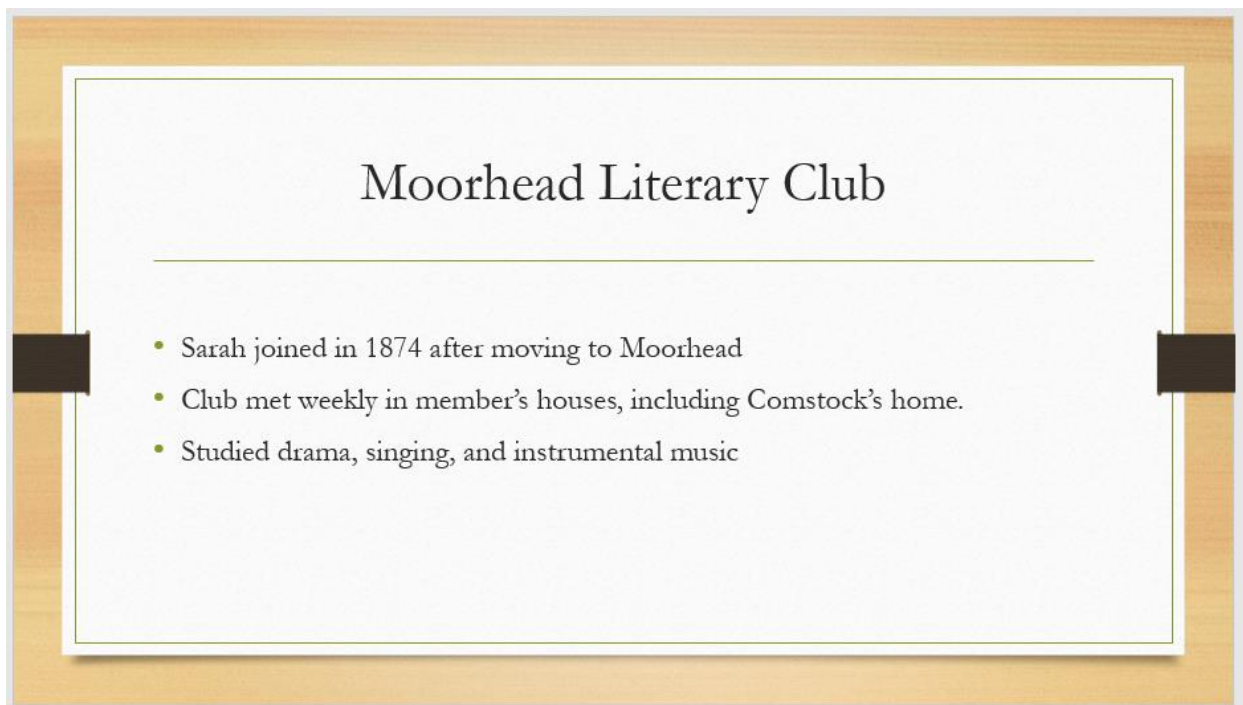
**Sarah Comstock**

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- Born in Canada in 1844
- Moved to United States in 1856
- Graduated in 1859
- Became a teacher in Minneapolis until Marriage
- Ideal Victorian lifestyle, focused on helping shape the Moorhead Community instead of saloons and gambling houses

## 8.) Moorhead Clubs

- a. Sarah Comstock was heavily involved in clubs within Moorhead, two of which focused on literacy and education.
- b. the eight slide will look as follows:



## 9.) Moorhead Women's Club

- a. Sarah and several other women from the area formed the Moorhead Women's group
- b. This slide will focus on the Moorhead Women's Club and all the influential contributions they gave to Moorhead and other women, through travel and educational meetings, including securing the Moorhead Public Library
- c. the ninth slide will look as follows:

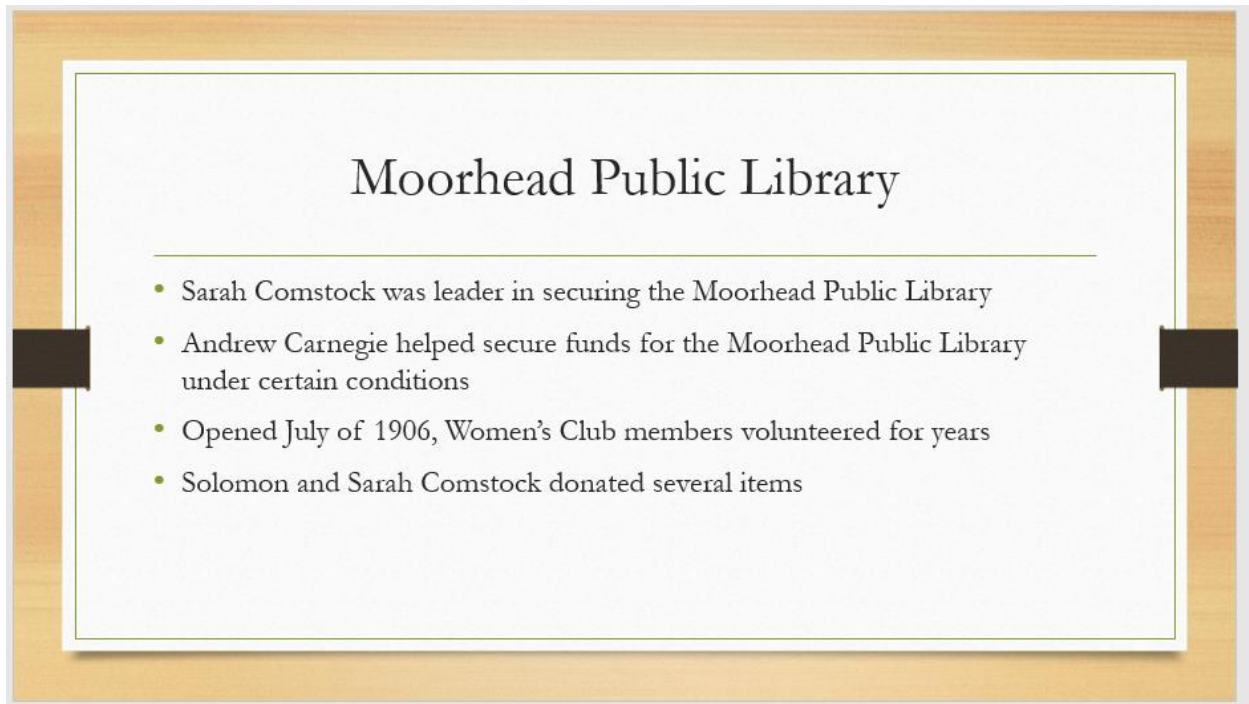
**Moorhead Women's Club**

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- Founded in 1893 by Sarah and several other women.
- Sarah remained a charter member until her death
- Influence and address community needs
- Can be housewives and have other interests outside of home
- Focused on travel, literature, and history
- Members would take turns writing an essay, which the group would then discuss
- Biggest accomplishment: Moorhead Public Library

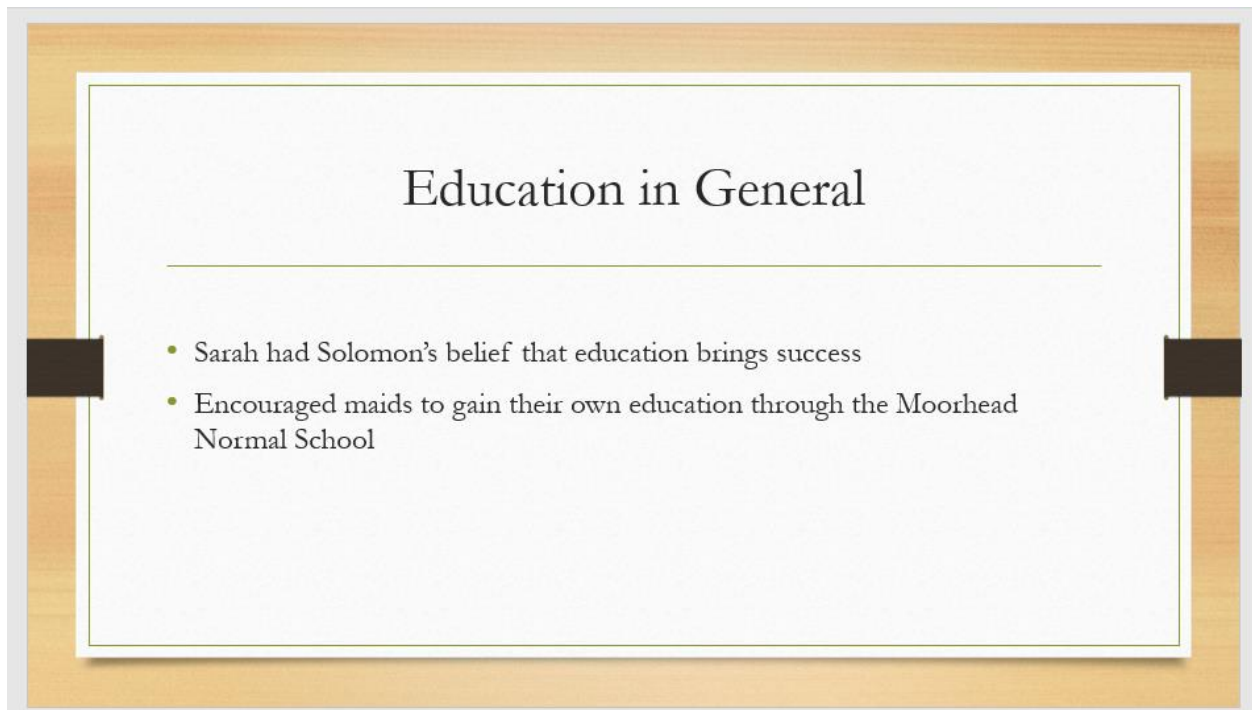
10.) Moorhead Public Library

- a. This slide will discuss the Moorhead Public Library, the work Sarah and other members of the Moorhead Women's Club did to secure the library, and the donations the Comstock's gave to the library.
- b. This slide will look as follows:



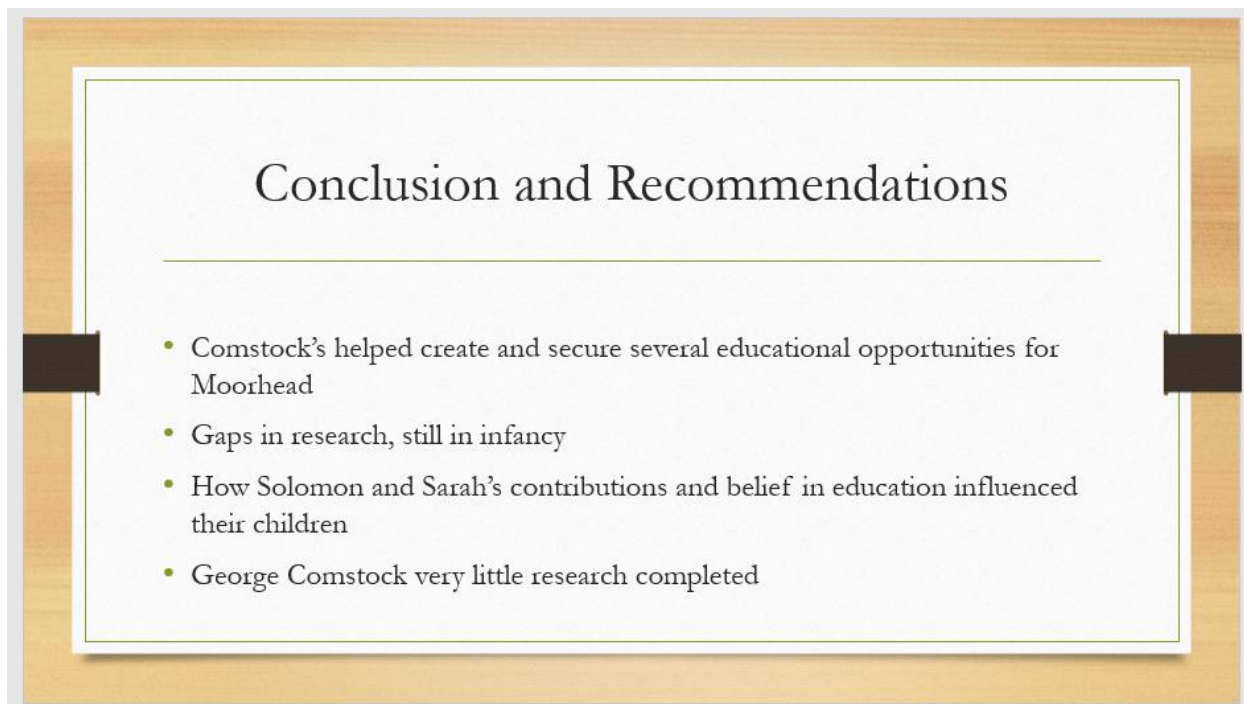
11.) Sarah and Education

- a. This slide will discuss tidbits of Sarah Comstock, how she felt about education, and how her passion for education did not just focus around the members of her family in the Comstock House.
- b. This slide will look as follows:



12.) The final slide will focus on the conclusion, gaps, and future research for the Comstock family.

a. The final slide will look as follows:



- Comstock's helped create and secure several educational opportunities for Moorhead
- Gaps in research, still in infancy
- How Solomon and Sarah's contributions and belief in education influenced their children
- George Comstock very little research completed

Solomon Comstock was born in Argyle, Maine, on May 9, 1842.<sup>29</sup> Solomon decided at a young age he wanted to obtain an education for himself.<sup>30</sup> This education began with attending rural schools, East Corinth Academy and Wesleyan Academy.<sup>31</sup> Solomon then went on to practice law, first in Bangor, Maine, then at the University of Michigan, and finally, in 1869, he was admitted to the bar and started his career as a lawyer in Nebraska.<sup>32</sup> Within a year, Solomon

<sup>29</sup> *Red River Scene*, 5/15/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock.

<sup>30</sup> "Comstock House: Living Page from the Past," 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>31</sup> Engelhardt, 157.

<sup>32</sup> *The Record*, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, no.3 (1898), 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A.

moved onto Minneapolis, Minnesota, and later decided to join the Northern Pacific Railroad as a laborer with plans to set up his law practice along the west coast.<sup>33</sup>

Right before Christmas in 1871, the Northern Pacific Railroad came to a forced stop in Moorhead, Minnesota, due to the inability of building the railroad bridge across the Red River in winter. Solomon Comstock became stranded in Moorhead, as he recalled several years later, “There was no road going west...I had no money to go East. So I stayed.”<sup>34</sup> Unknowing to Solomon and the other residents of the small Moorhead tent town, Solomon would become one of the most affluent and well-known Moorhead and Clay County pioneers.

Within months after first hanging up his shingle in Moorhead, Solomon Comstock was appointed Clay County’s first attorney in April 1872.<sup>35</sup> From 1872 until his death in 1933, Solomon Comstock was a vital member of the Moorhead community, focusing his time and energy on a real estate business, politician, role model of the Victorian middle-class way of life, and supporter of education.

Throughout Solomon Comstock’s life, education held a special place as he believed it was an individual’s education that would bring them success.<sup>36</sup> And when a person looks at Solomon’s educational path and his contributions to Moorhead, it becomes obvious what Solomon believed was truth for him.

One of the first public steps Solomon took to bringing more educational opportunities to Moorhead, was his support in the Bishop Whipple School, which is now Concordia College.

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<sup>33</sup> Glasrud, 64.

<sup>34</sup> Greg Harness, “The Life of Solomon Comstock,” 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 65.

<sup>35</sup> “Comstock’s Life Story Shows Valley Progress” 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>36</sup> Lemke, 15.



The Bishop Whipple school was established in 1882 because Reverend Thomas E. Dickey's four boys needed an education.<sup>37</sup> Solomon Comstock, along with W.H. Davy and B.F. Mackall supported the Bishop Whipple School.<sup>38</sup> Solomon donated the land for the school and served as director in 1882.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, due to low enrollment and financial reasons, the school closed in 1887.<sup>40</sup> In 1891, the Lutheran College Association bought the school and established Concordia College.<sup>41</sup>

However, this downfall with the Bishop Whipple School did not stop Solomon in his quest to build a community with educational opportunities, as it is because of Solomon that Minnesota State University, Moorhead exists today. In 1885, Solomon made his biggest educational contribution to Moorhead when his bill for securing Minnesota's fourth normal school in Moorhead was adopted.<sup>42</sup> Years later, Solomon recounted his story on securing the normal school:

While a member of the state senate, about 1885, it struck me that a normal school would be a fine thing for the Red River Country and especially for Moorhead. To the end, I introduced a bill in the senate establishing such a school here if the city would provide a site of six acres...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *A Century Together: A History of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota*, compiled by Fargo-Moorhead Centennial Corporation (1975), 175.

<sup>38</sup> "The Moccasin" 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>39</sup> Brian D. Fors, "Solomon Comstock and the Settlement of the Upper Midwest" (Tutorial: Moorhead State University, 1986), 10, 5/22/2017 MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 65.

<sup>40</sup> Fors, 10.

<sup>41</sup> "Comstock on his 89<sup>th</sup> Birthday Recounts Hill's Generosity." 7/3/2017. MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 62.

<sup>42</sup> *The Western Mystic*, vol. LXXII, issue V (1945), 1. 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>43</sup> *A Century Together*, 180.

Solomon was open about how securing the normal school for Moorhead was a “ticklish job” because Crookston’s senator sent in a bill offering a site and \$5,000. Solomon knew Minnesota would not be able to get two normal school but luckily, for Comstock and Moorhead, Crookston’s bill “fell by the wayside” and the city of Moorhead was granted the normal school after Solomon and Sarah donated the six acres of a farm land they purchased in 1876.<sup>44</sup> Solomon served two terms as Resident Director, from 1893-1899,<sup>45</sup> and then again from 1903-1907.<sup>46</sup> Solomon Comstock was also appointed to the Board of Regents<sup>47</sup> and became a member of the State Normal School Board for five years.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, in 1930, the Moorhead Normal School met the same fate many buildings did and burned. But even in his old age, Solomon was still “a warm friend of education.”<sup>49</sup> With the same determination he had in 1885, Comstock went to legislations to obtain rebuilding funds for the school.<sup>50</sup> Now, thanks to all of Solomon Comstock’s dedication and efforts, a college still exists on that six acres of land.

Solomon Comstock’s dedication to education was not only a public appearance but also a private one. Solomon Comstock believed learning was a huge part of life and reading was a central event in the Comstock household. Solomon loved to read and thoroughly believed his three children should also be passionate readers.<sup>51</sup> Every room in the Comstock household featured book cases which were full of history books, classic literature, and biographies, which

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<sup>44</sup> Glenn E. Johnson, *Here—There—Everywhere in Clay County, Minnesota* (Hawley: The Hawley Herald, 1972), 95.

<sup>45</sup> Glasrud, 62.

<sup>46</sup> *The Hawley Herald*, 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A.

<sup>47</sup> *Pioneer Press*, 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A

<sup>48</sup> “Hon. S.G. Comstock,” 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock Box 61A.

<sup>49</sup> Courtney, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *MSUM Memories: Reflections of the College and University 1888-2013*, edited by Rolland Dille and Terry Shoptaugh (Moorhead: Office of Marketing and Communications, 2013),9.

<sup>51</sup> “Comstock House,”

were often chosen for a member of the family to read aloud in the evenings.<sup>52</sup> Of course, Solomon also supported education and literacy through supporting his wife's contributions.

Solomon met Sarah Ball while she was visiting family in Moorhead and on May 27, 1874, they began their life and commitment to building a community through education together.<sup>53</sup> Sarah (Ball) Comstock was born in Canada on January 16, 1844 and moved to the United States in 1856, graduating in 1869 and then teaching school until she married Solomon.<sup>54</sup>

Sarah and Solomon Comstock led the ideal Victorian lifestyle. They did not take part in the saloon and gambling lifestyle, in fact Solomon did not smoke or drink because he saw it as a waste of money<sup>55</sup> and believed respect came "along the straight and narrow path."<sup>56</sup> Because of their conduct, Solomon and Sarah became a family the community looked up to and a way Sarah could help spread her commitment to education outside of the home.

Not too long after her marriage, Sarah Comstock joined the new Moorhead Literary Society. This society included a group of women who met weekly in each other's homes, including Mrs. Comstock's. The Literary Society focused on singing, drama, and instrumental music.<sup>57</sup>

In 1893, Sarah Comstock, along with eighteen other women formed the Moorhead Woman's club.<sup>58</sup> Sarah wanted to influence the Moorhead community through education and by addressing the community needs, which she accomplished through this club.<sup>59</sup> Sarah also

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<sup>52</sup> Engelhardt, 159.

<sup>53</sup> *Red River Star*, 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>54</sup> "Mrs. Comstock, Early Resident, Dies Thursday." 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A.

<sup>55</sup> "Comstock on his 89<sup>th</sup> Birthday"

<sup>56</sup> "S.G.Comstock," 6/27/2017, MSUM Archives, Comstock House, Box 1.

<sup>57</sup> Glasrud, 166.

<sup>58</sup> Shoptaugh, 1.

<sup>59</sup> "Must Good Housekeepers"

wanted women to know they could be good housewives and mothers while having their own interests outside of the home.<sup>60</sup> The woman's club became one of the most popular clubs and discussed travel, literature, history, and many other topics.<sup>61</sup> Each member would take turns writing an essay, which the member would read and then they would discuss as a group. Sarah wrote on such topics as, "New Orleans" and "New England Life."<sup>62</sup>

One of the biggest accomplishments of the Moorhead Women's Club and for Sarah Comstock was the Moorhead Public Library. In 1903, The women's club received notice that Andrew Carnegie wanted to build a library in Moorhead under certain conditions, such as the city took care of the location for the building.<sup>63</sup> Because Sarah Comstock talked about a public library beginning in 1901,<sup>64</sup> she was appointed a member of the first library board in 1904, which held several early meetings at the Comstock House. Furthermore, Sarah was president of the library board from 1904-1913 and served on the by-laws committee.<sup>65</sup>

Sarah Comstock was a leader in getting the funding, location, and the city of Moorhead to agree in covering maintenance for the library.<sup>66</sup> The Moorhead Public Library opened its doors July of 1906 with the continued volunteer help of club members.<sup>67</sup> In the records, it shows that Solomon and Sarah Comstock donated hundreds of books, with the total number of books

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<sup>60</sup> "Moorhead Women Pioneers in Club Activities" 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 63.

<sup>61</sup> "Mrs. Comstock, 97, Long Prominent in Moorhead, Dies," 5/22/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 61A.

<sup>62</sup> Moorhead Federated Women's Club folders of essays, 7/17/2017, MSUM Archives, Moorhead Federated Women's Club, Box 1.

<sup>63</sup> Glasrud, 167.

<sup>64</sup> Mrs. R.G. Price, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Nellie A. Price, 1-4.

<sup>66</sup> "Mrs. Comstock, Early Resident."

<sup>67</sup> "Mrs. S.G. Comstock will be Honored for 40 Years in Moorhead Woman's Club." 7/3/2017, MSUM Archives, Solomon Comstock, Box 62.

donated by citizens of Moorhead to be 1,000.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the books, Solomon and Sarah donated a clock and magazines.<sup>69</sup>

Like her husband, Sarah Comstock did not just support education outside of the home no did she just encourage her own children inside the home. Sarah's commitment to education extended to the maids of the Comstock household. Sarah, who was known to be a kind employer, would encourage the maids to finish their high school education, if they previously did not, and attend the Moorhead Normal School.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Newspaper clipping. 7/17/2017. MSUM Archives, Moorhead Federated Woman's Club, Box 1.

<sup>69</sup> Nellie A. Price, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Glasrud, 159.

## **Chapter 5: Gaps and Ethical Considerations**

As stated before, there are a lot of gaps within the research of the Comstock family due to lack of research. However, with continued research of historians and students, gaps in the research are narrowing and helping to create new topics and directions of research. A good amount of research has been complete on Solomon Comstock and his daughter, Ada Comstock-Notestein. Sarah and Jessie have had research complete but there was little research found on George. One recommended topic, to expand on this topic, would be to examine how Solomon and Sarah's beliefs, contributions, and higher education influenced their children's commitment to education.

One of the biggest ethical concerns for this thesis and project is that everything is correct. There were documents in the archives and secondary source books that contradicted each other with dates and other events or statements. This concern was managed by finding more than one primary source document which did not contradict. Furthermore, it was managed by analyzing the most reliable sources.

Another ethical concern, specifically for the PowerPoint presentation is to make sure all the copyright of the material is correct. This will be managed by working with professionals who know the rules and regulations about copyright and using images in a PowerPoint discussion.

## **Chapter 6: Budget and Staffing**

There is no cost or budget for this thesis and there is no budget for the PowerPoint lecture at the Comstock House. There was no cost for any research at the Minnesota State University, Moorhead Archives because I did not request staff assistance. All the advertisement is free for the lecture as the advertising is done through social media and newsletters.

The Comstock House is part of the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County Museum, both of which is part of the Minnesota Historical Society. Matt Eidem, Director of Museum Operations, is the staff at the Comstock House and will be the only staff, unless a lot of tickets are sold for this event. In which case, another staff member from the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County will also be involved.

## Conclusion

It is said that when Solomon Comstock arrived in Moorhead in 1871, he only had “a few law books, a sound mind, genial disposition, a great capacity for work, and an incorruptible character.”<sup>71</sup> It was this character which won the hand of Sarah Ball and together they helped develop a deplorable tent town with several saloons and gambling houses into a vibrant community through their passion for education.

Solomon Comstock is the strongest when analyzing previous research on the Comstock family. Previous students and historians have looked at how Solomon Comstock came to Moorhead, established himself as a politician and businessman, focusing on selling real estate during the railroad boom in the Midwest.<sup>72</sup> Sources revealed little previous research had been done on Sarah Comstock. Sarah Comstock had only been written about in various newspaper articles and the history of the Moorhead Women’s Club. This thesis looks beyond all previous research by narrowing down the contributions Solomon and Sarah Comstock made to Moorhead, Minnesota through education. Furthermore, this thesis examines Solomon and Sarah’s educational contributions in a more private setting. Ada Comstock, Solomon and Sarah’s eldest daughter, went on to become Radcliffe College’s first full-time female president<sup>73</sup> their son, George became a businessman, and daughter Jessie, a schoolteacher. The success of their three and an analysis of sources proves that Solomon and Sarah Comstock not only contributed to Moorhead through developing educational institutions, such as Moorhead Normal School and the

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<sup>71</sup> Glasrud, 68.

<sup>72</sup> Harness, 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> Smith College, “Ada Comstock Scholar’s Program” smith.edu. (accessed August 27, 2017).



Moorhead Public Library, but also believed in education in their home. As both Solomon and Sarah Comstock believed, education would bring success.

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