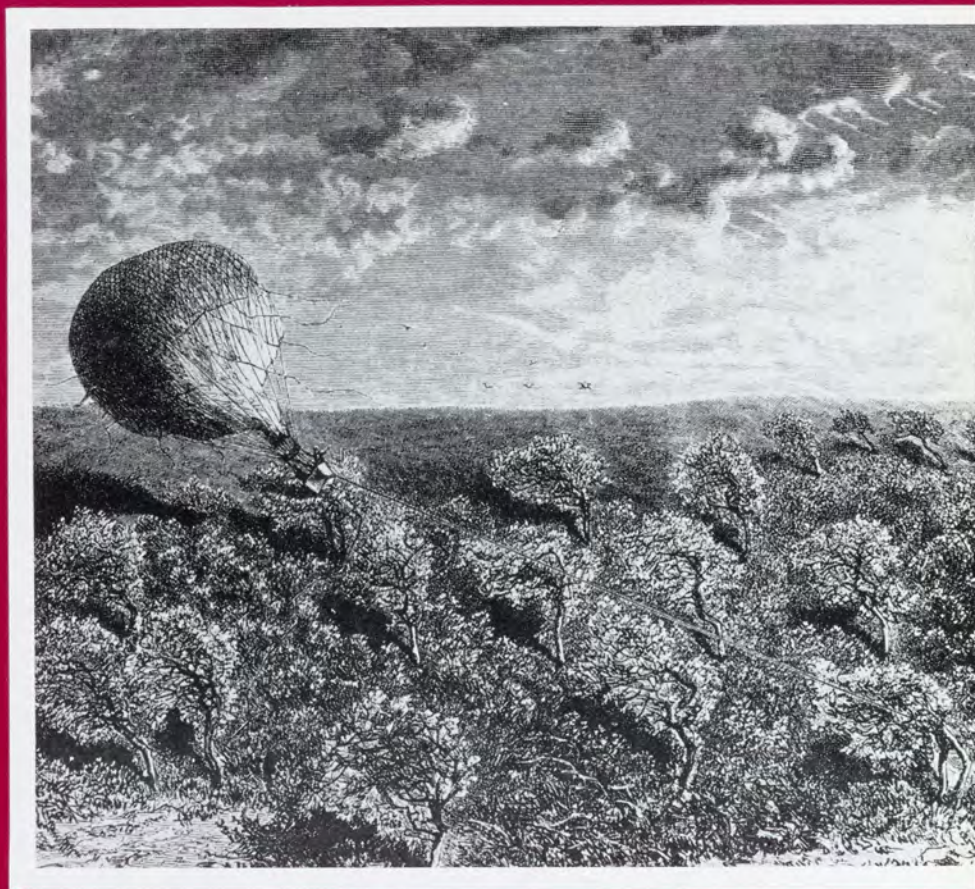


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: "The branches of the trees bend beneath the car," said the caption under this picture of a balloon ascension which ran into a bit of difficulty. From *Travels in the Air* by J. Glaisher and published in 1871, the picture shows the hazards balloonists encountered, particularly in forested areas, such as those around White Bear Lake. This and all other pictures on the following pages are, unless otherwise credited, from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

*Floating Down the River . . .*<sup>1</sup>

## Today's Boaters See Landmarks As Pioneers Once Viewed Them

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The Mississippi River was the great waterway which for more than 300 years led explorers, trappers, soldiers and, finally, settlers into the wilderness of Minnesota. Today, most of us see the river from bridges, or bluffs. Few of us see it from the river itself and, thus, through the eyes of the pioneers. Those few are boating enthusiasts, such as Mrs. Shepherd,*

*who in this article takes us on a trip down a portion of the Mississippi, which figured largely in the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul. Mrs. Shepherd points out landmarks that still exist and weaves in some of the history of the area. The mile markings in the margins of her story indicate the number of miles from the entrance of the Ohio River into the Mississippi.*

By Frances Bruce Shepherd

It is at the Falls of St. Anthony, 853 miles above the mouth of the Ohio River, that the story of the Mississippi begins for those who cruise its historic waters in an assortment of crafts and for a variety of reasons.

For 10,000 years, St. Anthony Falls has been working its way up the Mississippi River to its present location. As waterfalls go, its progress has been rapid because of the relatively soft material through which the river runs. Over a deeply buried core of granite and basalt is a 3,000 foot layer of sedimentary sandstone and limestone deposited by a succession of seas which covered this area in early geologic times.<sup>1</sup> The glaciers left mounds of terminal moraine which form the hills that characterize St. Paul and parts of Minneapolis. At the Falls, layers of limestone still can be seen. Great slabs overlie a soft sandstone which is easily eroded. When Father Hen-

nepin first saw the Falls, they probably were a thousand feet downstream from where they are today.<sup>2</sup>

THE SOFT sandstone caused a catastrophe and the near destruction of the Falls in 1868. Plans were made to build a tunnel to run under Nicollet Island and a "Tunnel Company" was organized. As work progressed, the sandstone began to wash out and the limestone layers to collapse. Working feverishly for several days, the men succeeded in shoring up the river bed and the Falls were saved, but the ill-fated tunnel project was abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

The old stone railroad bridge just below the Falls is the oldest existing bridge across the river, though it was not the first to be built. A bridge crossing the two branches of the river surrounding Nicollet Island first was built in 1855, and has been replaced several times. But James J. Hill's durable railroad bridge, with its sturdy stone arches, still carries train traffic as it did in the 1880's when it was built.

Navigation of the river between St. Paul and the Falls of St. Anthony always was more hazardous than below St. Paul. This fact accounted for St. Paul's importance as a port, although steamboats regularly did make trips to the Falls and barges now go as far as north Minneapolis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Frances Bruce Shepherd is a graduate of Durham Hall at the College of St. Catherine and the University of Minnesota. This article is excerpted from a longer paper written by Mrs. Shepherd for a seminar which was a part of the University's Minnesota Plan for the Continuing Education of Women. She and her husband, William Gerald Shepherd, vice president for academic administration at the University, have been enthusiastic boaters, plying their cabin cruiser up and down the Mississippi River from their base at Prescott, Wisconsin.

Mile  
853



The Keel Boat, one of the early crafts used for transportation on the Mississippi River.

There were no settlements along the river in the days before Fort Snelling except for trading posts and Indian villages but those were fairly numerous. One of the best known fur trading centers was the post called New Hope, later St. Peters, and finally Mendota. The little town of Mendota is the oldest in the state.

Mile  
845

However, the capricious and uncertain channel of the Mississippi above St. Paul before the government began clearing the channel during the Civil War years made steamboating hazardous. The river was filled with snags and rocks, bars formed almost overnight, and the only aids to navigation were the natural landmarks along the banks. River travel in the exploration period, of course, was by canoe. Rafts and keelboats also were used before steamboats. The first steamboat to attempt the upper Mississippi, according to an early riverman, Herbert Quick, managed to make three and a half miles an hour up-stream. Named the "Zebulon M. Pike," it was built like a keelboat but had a one-boiler engine and an uncovered side-wheel. It did not go as far as Fort Snelling, although Quick does not state its destination.<sup>4</sup>

THE FIRST STEAMBOAT which did successfully negotiate the treacherous upper Mississippi from St. Paul as far as Fort Snelling was "The Virginia," whose captain brought her into the landing at the Fort on May 10, 1823. Her arrival was a gala occasion and she carried a number of important passengers. Steamboat traffic burgeoned after the country was opened to settlers in the late 1840's and 1850's, but

its heyday ended with the establishment of the railroads after the Civil War.

Between 1866 and 1876, \$5,200,707 was spent on the river between Cairo, Illinois, and St. Paul. Writing of the channel improvements and the changes that he saw in steamboat travel with the coming of the railroads, George Merrick, famous river pilot from Prescott, Wisconsin, was aghast at the enormous sum of \$59,098 which it cost to remove the rocks and snags between St. Paul and St. Anthony Falls. He wrote:

"It would seem that with the expenditure of \$5,909 per year for ten years, over only eleven miles of river, every rock . . . might have been pulled ashore, and a perfect canal built up. Possibly that is the result of all this work; I haven't been over that piece of river since the work was completed—for one reason among others, that no steamboats ever go to St. Anthony Falls, now that the river is put in order."<sup>5</sup>

Nor do many power boats go beyond Dam No. 1, just above Fort Snelling, even today, possibly because this dam is one of the highest on the river, making the trip through the locks a tedious one. Some pleasure boats do cruise the upper pool, but the busy boating area begins below the dam, where marinas are taking over the river banks like nesting birds and the water-skier is an all too frequent hazard.

Minnehaha Creek flows into the Mississippi at a point just below the dam, around

a promontory dominated by the buildings of the old Soldiers' Home. The reputation of Minnehaha Falls as a picnic spot and tourist attraction has been continuous since the establishment of Fort Snelling. William Joseph Snelling, son of the Fort's commandant, and his friend, Joseph Renshaw Brown, explored Minnehaha Creek to its source in Lake Minnetonka, and the waterfall originally was known as Brown's Falls.

There is a distinct contrast in the appearance of the Mississippi valley above and below Dam No 1. The 100-foot high sandstone and limestone cliffs close down on the river above the dam, while below the mouth of the Minnesota River, the river fills only a narrow part of its valley and is bordered by magnificent bluffs which have a space of a mile or more between them.

**Mile  
846**

Civilization came to the wilderness with the building of Fort Snelling, which still commands the Mississippi on the jutting bluff formed by the entrance of the Minnesota River.

VOYAGEURS, traders, Indians, settlers from what is now the province of Manitoba, Canada, and former soldiers settled near the Fort and made up the early population of Mendota. They were good customers for Pierre ("Pig's Eye") Parrant, who took advantage of the proximity of Fort Snelling and Mendota to sell whiskey. He established himself across the river from Pickerel Lake, just south of Pike Island, near a cave in the river bank that was known as Fountain Cave because of a stream of water running out of it. In 1837 he and other squatters who had settled on the reservation were forced to move to what is now downtown St. Paul.

**Mile  
842**

However, the cave that distinguished "Pig's Eye's" first claim still can be seen, though its mouth has been filled with gravel. Its cool, damp interior was used as a storehouse for many years by the early settlers. An historical plaque on Shepard Road now marks its location.

Modern boaters who follow the course of the river traffic that once plied between Mendota and St. Paul find a concentration of boating activity around Harriet and Navy Islands. Harriet Island now is a part of the mainland because the channel on the mainland side has been filled in, but it was a real island until 1950. Its name honors

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Harriet Bishop, the young woman who came to St. Paul in 1847 to establish the first school in Minnesota.

WHERE BOATS tie up today, a bathing beach and picnic ground were popular gathering spots fifty years ago. Harriet Island's popularity began to wane as beaches were established on city lakes and as the unsanitary condition of the river increased. Navy Island, just below Harriet Island, once was called Raspberry Island. Only fifteen years ago it was the colorful if somewhat squalid home of squatters who lived in houseboats and shanties along one side. On the river side, the Minnesota Boat Club still operates as a rowing club, as it did when it was organized in 1870. St. Paul's Naval Reserve training center on the island was established in 1948.

The steamboat landing—Lambert's Landing or the Lower Levee—at the foot of Sibley Street seldom is used now. Even the excursion boats that tied up there only a few years ago are gone. But it once was the heart of the rough, noisy frontier town. High-wheeled, squeaking ox carts from the Red River valley waited at the landing. Brawling lumbermen and Indians added color to the scene and pigs roamed freely in the streets. By the late 1840's, settlers were arriving daily on the steamboats which were coming upriver regularly to St. Paul.

A FAMILIAR SIGHT to these new settlers is one still seen by today's boaters as they head downstream. The white sandstone bluff which stands out so sharply as the river completes its turn southward through St. Paul marks a site long known to the Indians. Their ancestors' bones lay in the mounds above the bluff and they were burying their dead there when the French explorers and their English and American successors passed by. There was a great cave in the bluff. From the water, it looks as though the remnants still can be seen at the foot of Cherry Street, opposite Holman airfield.

The Indian burial mounds above the bluff have been preserved in a city park. Digging in the mounds was a favorite Sunday pastime of picnickers at the end of the past century and the archeological remains suffered from their depredations. Artifacts found there are of Hopewell culture origin, dating back to about 1500 to 1000 A.D.<sup>6</sup>

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839**

**Mile  
838**

Mile  
837

Kaposia, an Indian village, occupied the land below Carver's Cave and the Indian Mounds, near Grand Marais, or the great swamp, which now bears the name of "Pig's Eye." He moved there after selling his claim in St. Paul.

It was at Kaposia that two of the first missionaries to the area spent a week trying to teach the Indians to plow. Samuel and Gideon Pond came from Connecticut in 1834. Both were handsome men, over six feet tall. Their efforts at Kaposia didn't last long. They soon moved to Lake Calhoun to work with the Indians there.

OTHER MISSIONARIES were attracted to Kaposia. In 1837, the Reverend Alfred Brunson of the Methodist Episcopal church, with David King, built a mission and a school there. The Reverend B. T. Kavanaugh succeeded Brunson and soon met with hostility from the Chief, Little Crow, who thought the school was spoiling the young Indians as warriors. In 1841 the mission moved across the river to Red Rock, where a school for both white and Indian children was opened.

Red Rock long had been a place of worship for the Indians. Close to the bank of the river was a boulder, some five feet long, painted with vermillion stripes and Indian symbols.<sup>7</sup> Later, the Methodist mission became a summer camp meeting ground which was maintained for many years. The sacred boulder of the Indians was moved from the river bank to the railroad station and finally to Medicine Lake.

As settlers poured into the Minnesota territory in the late 1840's and early 1850's, small towns began to displace the Indian villages and trading posts along the river. The little town of Inver Grove, down the river from Red Rock, reflects the Old World in its name, which comes from a place of the same name in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> It first was settled in 1852 by an Irish linen peddler called John Groarty. What a pity that he didn't name it after himself—Groarty, Minnesota.

The impatient settlers who had been waiting to claim land on the west side of the river finally were satisfied in 1851 when the Sioux ceded these lands in the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. Towns were platted in profusion, many of them never to develop beyond the planning stage. Merrimac Island was one of these. It was platted

Mile  
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Mile  
830



The mouth of Fountain Cave, in the days before its entrance became filled with gravel.

and a few lots sold in 1857, but by 1865 it had vanished. A sawmill was built on the island but abandoned a few months later.

BEFORE SETTLEMENT, trading posts often occupied sites that were frequented by the Indians and this was the case on Grey Cloud Island. A grove of trees known as Medicine Wood was believed by the Indians to be inhabited by a genie sent by the Great Spirit to watch over them. In the 1830's it was occupied by a trading post run first by a trader named Anderson and later by Hasen P. Mooers. Mooers succeeded Anderson and took over not only the trading post but also Anderson's Indian wife, Grey Cloud.<sup>9</sup>

The story of Nininger is the most famous of the numerous stories of boom towns on the upper Mississippi. Until 1856, only a few trader's cabins existed there. Boulanger Island and Slough commemorate the first white settler, a French Canadian who had a cabin on the shore of Spring Lake. He came to an unhappy end in a St. Paul jail, where he hanged himself while awaiting trial.<sup>10</sup>

IN 1856 a young man named John Nininger, a brother-in-law of Alexander Ramsey, bought up the claims of the early settlers and platted the town of Nininger. He was joined in the venture by young Ignatius Donnelly. A man of many talents and great enthusiasm, Donnelly quickly became the prime genius in the promotion of Nininger. He built himself a fine house there but the scheme was based on a shaky financial foundation and the business panic

Mile  
823-21

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818



of 1857 undermined the promoters' efforts. By 1859, Nininger was a dying village.

**Mile  
814**

Hastings was platted in 1857 and business there not only survived the panic but thrived on the steamboat trade. One early settler floated a raft of lumber down from St. Paul, with his wife, children, a cooking stove, a cow and a cat installed on the raft. He used the lumber to build a house on the Vermillion river. Every stick had to be carried on his back more than a mile to the construction site.

The spiral bridge that once crossed the river at Hastings was built in 1895 by John C. Meloy. From fifty-five feet above the high water mark on the west bank, it spiraled down to Sibley Street, solving the problem of how to build a bridge between two greatly varying levels of river banks.<sup>11</sup>

**Mile  
812**

At Hastings the Mississippi is narrowed by the extension of Point Douglas, a bar across the mouth of the St. Croix river which forms Lake St. Croix. From the bluff above Point Douglas, three mounds are visible on the west side of the river, on the flat land high above river level. In the steamboat days, these were landmarks for miles.<sup>12</sup> It is approximately there that Vermillion Slough forms Prairie Island, a stretch of land running about ten miles between the Vermillion River and the Mississippi River and ending just above Dam No. 3 at Red Wing. Captain Merrick tells about being chased by wolves on Prairie Island. The wolves have vanished, along with the rest of the wildlife of a century ago, but occasionally the sight of a dozen or so bald eagles flying over the open water

Harriet Island's bathing beach, popular for swimming 50 years ago, but boats tie up there now.

at the mouth of the St. Croix on a winter day provides a bit of excitement for the modern visitor to the deserted boat yards at Prescott.

As the Mississippi winds south, past Red Wing, through Lake Pepin, past Winona and La Crosse and finally flows on out of Minnesota, the boater will glide past dozens of other historic sites and landmarks, many of them still visible. But those are another story.

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**Mile  
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### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.*

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.