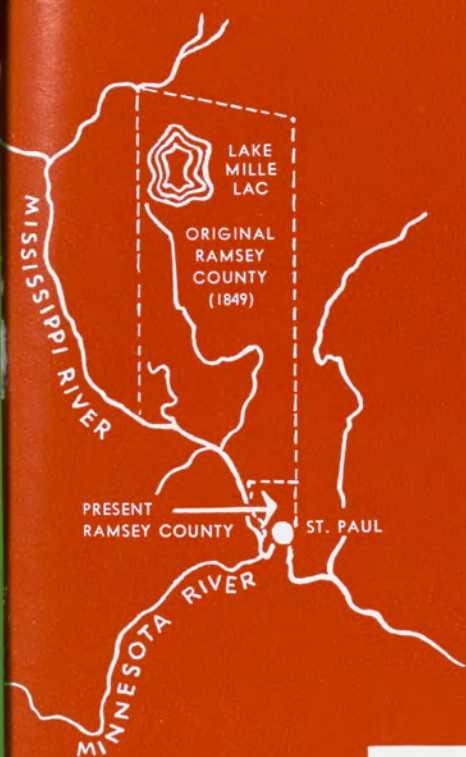


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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# Ramsey County History

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*ON THE COVER:* This picture of Fort Snelling, taken about 1870, is an example of the work of William H. Illingworth, pioneer St. Paul photographer whose career is described in the story beginning on Page 9. This is an appropriate cover picture because it also illustrates the story of the early explorers of the Ramsey County area, beginning on Page 3. It was from the Fort that expeditions of exploration set forth into the "howling wilderness" of the Minnesota area between the 1820's and the 1850's.

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:* All pictures in this issue, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Picture Department of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker, picture curator, and his assistant, Dorothy Gimme-stad, for their help.



# A Bridge, A Street, A Levee

## Louis Robert's Name Lingers In St. Paul

*"But then my town—remember that high  
bench  
With cabins scattered over it, of French?  
A man named HENRY JACKSON'S living  
there  
Also a man—why everyone knows L. RO-  
BAIR . . .  
. . . Pig's Eye, converted, thou shalt be,  
like SAUL:  
Thy name henceforth shall be ST. PAUL."*

BY PATRICIA CONDON

IN the dead of the winter of 1843, Louis Robert arrived in the tiny community that soon would be called St. Paul. With another Frenchman named Charles Bazille, Robert had crossed on foot the trackless wilderness which lay between the new village and Prairie du Chien, some 150 miles to the south.

In the years to come, Robert would leave his name upon a street, a levee and a bridge in what is now downtown St. Paul.

Robert's adventure concerned the possibility of establishing a new fur trading post among the Upper Sioux in the area around the village then called "Pig's Eye." Robert has been described as having a "tenacious business sense" which told him that the small cluster of cabins could grow into an important port on the Mississippi River. The village grew as Robert had predicted and his own contributions to it played an important role in its development.

LOUIS ROBERT was born in the old French village of Carondelet, Missouri, south of St. Louis, on January 21, 1811. His parents were of French ancestry, descendants of the first white settlers of St. Louis. His paternal grandfather was a resident of

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patricia Condon is a 1947 graduate of Miss Wood's Primary Training School in Minneapolis and currently is studying for her bachelor of arts degree at Macalester College, St. Paul. She shares an interest in Minnesota history with her husband, Douglas F. Condon, a St. Paul businessman, and their three sons. Her story on Louis Robert began as a sketch for the "Forgotten Pioneers" series but he proved so interesting that she decided to expand it. The Condons are members of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

St. Louis in 1769, five years after the town was laid out. Until he was nineteen years old, Louis Robert lived in St. Louis with his cousin, Joseph Guion, whose father, Amable, was the first white child born there.<sup>2</sup>

In 1830, Robert was sent first into the Rocky Mountains by Sarpy's and Company, a St. Louis fur-trading company, and then to Dubuque, Iowa. While there this son of a *bourgeois* decided to set out on his own. In 1837 he established a trading post in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He returned to St. Louis in 1838.<sup>3</sup>

The following spring Robert and Guion purchased a stock of goods and moved to Prairie du Chien. With them went Robert's bride, Mary Turpin. Their venture, which consisted of trading chiefly with the Winnebagos and the soldiers at Prairie du Chien, was so successful during the next four years that Robert was able to pay off his business debts in St. Louis as well as accumulate a considerable surplus.<sup>4</sup>

WHEN HE and Bazille tramped through the snow from Prairie du Chien to St. Paul in 1843, they carried with them a stock of goods purely as a speculative venture. The village and its possibilities so impressed the two men that in the spring of 1844 they settled down in St. Paul with their families and prepared to go into business.<sup>5</sup>

When Robert arrived in St. Paul, Benjamin Gervais owned all the land between Jackson, Wabasha and Valley streets. Gervais, who had been doing well in selling portions of his claim, was growing uneasy. Property prices were too high, he felt, and





he was afraid the boom would burst. So he accepted an offer of \$300 from Robert for the rest of his land. The tract seems to have included all the land east of Minnesota Street, west of Sixth Street, to Dayton's Bluff and as far north as Lake Como.<sup>6</sup>

Robert's first step was to purchase a site which could be developed into a landing for steamboats. Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, the settlement's somewhat disreputable saloon keeper . . . "had a piece of property on the water front that would be valuable in case there ever was a town on the site of St. Paul. Captain Robert saw this. Parrant did not have much of a claim but he held the property that later became the lower levee. Parrant had no stake in the town and by this time he had several competitors—for nearly all the storekeepers sold whiskey—so it was easy for the Captain to make a deal with him for this bit of ground. How much Robert gave him for his claim is not known, but it sufficed, and Parrant moved down and across the river."<sup>7</sup>

AT THAT TIME the settlement consisted of five stores, one tavern, one chapel and twenty or so log dwellings. Among the settlers were Gervais, John R. Irvine, James Clewett, Abraham Perry, Henry H. Sibley, and Henry Jackson. Mrs. Robert was one of the few women living in St. Paul at that early date.

In 1846, Robert built a frame dwelling of which Mrs. Robert was "very proud, it being the only one in St. Paul . . ." <sup>8</sup> It burned to the ground six months later and they built another. These houses stood on

Robert's trading post, shown in Henry Lewis' oil painting of St. Paul in 1848, stood at the foot of what is now Jackson Street. The post became known as Robert's Landing and Robert later developed the area into the steamboat landing also called the Lower Levee.

the bluff where Kellogg Boulevard and Robert Street now meet. Later, Robert bought some bricks and built the first brick house there. The address was 152 Robert Street.

Robert acquired property in other parts of town, but for some time after settling in St. Paul his business was trading for furs with the Indians. His store made of tamarack poles was located east of Jackson Street under the bluff which rose above the Mississippi and directly on the river bank. There was a good steamboat landing in front of the store.

"IN 1847 there were neither section nor township lines made as yet—the federal survey was not made until late that fall. It was necessary to have the most desirable property subdivided to the end that transfers could be handled with some accuracy. Captain Robert undertook to bring the French citizens to an understanding of the fact that there was something more at stake than the holding of farm lands. The good people had little of the commercial spirit. But Robert (with Sibley's help) brought them to his way of seeing it and it was decided that 90½ acres should be surveyed. The plan was carried out and the plat of St. Paul proper—as the townsite was known—was made three months before the federal survey, with Robert one of the owners of the original plat."<sup>9</sup>

In 1848, after Wisconsin's admission to





Louis Robert is every inch the successful businessman in this photograph of him, his wife and one of their daughters, Lillian.

the Union as a state, the towns of St. Paul and Stillwater petitioned Washington for a territorial convention. Robert and seventeen others signed the petition in St. Paul. A group gathered in front of Henry Jackson's store on July 4, 1848.

"There were 22 to 25 men present. Louis Robert presided—if the matter of making many speeches and asserting and reasserting in very forceful language the belief that it was time that something should be done, constituted leadership. Robert declared his abiding faith in St. Paul and urged others to do something that would bring about a general meeting of the people of the St. Croix county. The audience was neither demonstrative nor enthusiastic. But the oratory of Robert and the convincing argument of General Sibley was effective and a committee was appointed to call a general meeting."<sup>10</sup>

ROBERT SIGNED the petition on August 6, 1848. It called for the Stillwater convention which was held on August 26, 1848. Within six weeks after receiving the news of the creation of the Territory of Minnesota, about seventy more buildings were put up in St. Paul, and the village

began to expand along the lines of newly laid-out streets. Professional men, lawyers, politicians, and, of course, adventurers came to St. Paul with the hope of making fortunes in the new town. A real estate boom was on and Robert, along with Henry Rice, Irvine, Sibley and others, benefitted accordingly. The real estate market was active, but prices did not soar to great heights. In mid-summer of 1848, Robert sold to B. W. Bronson three lots on the northwest corner of Robert and Fifth Streets for \$10 a lot.

During those early years, Robert was a power in politics. The first Democratic convention was held in the new Minnesota Territory on October 20, 1849. Robert was the first county commissioner nominated.<sup>11</sup> From 1849 to 1854 he controlled the French vote in Ramsey County. He also shrewdly allied himself with another early settler, William P. Murray, who controlled the Irish vote. Working together, they usually emerged from the political wars with Democratic victories. William P. Murray was Robert's lawyer and confidential advisor, as well as his friend. When a political victory had been won they would sit down together to laugh over the means they had used to accomplish their ends.<sup>12</sup>

In 1851, under the First Capitol Act, Robert was one of four capitol commissioners named to select a site in St. Paul for a state capitol. Two sites were rejected in favor of the block bounded by Wabasha, Cedar, Exchange and Tenth Streets. It had been offered by his friend, Bazille, as a gift to the Minnesota government.<sup>13</sup> To repay him in part, Robert gave Bazille two lots near the corner of Minnesota and Eleventh Streets.

ROBERT'S TITLE of "captain" dates from his years as a steamboat captain. In the early days he noticed the great inconvenience caused to the settlers by the fact that steamboats left St. Paul early in the fall to head downstream for St. Louis before the close of the navigation season. They did not return to St. Paul until late in the spring.

In 1853 Robert went to St. Louis and bought a boat of his own named "The Greek Slave." The cost was \$20,000. He was captain of "The Greek Slave," for two or three seasons. He bought other steam-



ers, among them "The Time and Tide" and "The Globe". He had "Jeannette Roberts" built and named it for one of his daughters. At one time he owned five steamers.<sup>14</sup> He disposed of his little fleet in 1859 at a handsome profit. His prestige benefited considerably, too. Steamboat captains were held in high regard by the pioneers because it was through the skill of these men that supplies reached the frontier and furs and other cargo went back down the river for sale.

Contemporary accounts of Robert's life and career speak of his high sense of honor and his generosity of spirit as the "noblest attributes" of his character. His benefactions were said to have amounted to half a dozen comfortable fortunes. He helped relatives and friends and he gave liberally to his church. The bells of the old Cathedral of St. Paul and St. Louis Catholic Church, the French Catholic church, were gifts from him.

THE BELLS he gave to St. Louis Church first hung in the frame church the French-speaking Catholics built at Tenth and Cedar Streets in 1868. Today they still

Robert Street was lined with a few log cabins and frame buildings in 1851. This print is from an early daguerreotype and the lines across it are scratches on the metal. The first log house at right stood on the northeast corner of Third (now Kellogg Boulevard) and Robert Streets. It was a drug store. Next to it was a confectionery and tobacco shop and the frame building housed a book store. In the distance is the Baptist Church, standing on Baptist Hill, now Smith Park.

ring out the Angelus, at 6 a.m., 12 noon and 6 p.m., from the belfry of the "new" church the French parish built in 1909 on the same site. The inscription on the bells reads:

*"Presente a la Congregation Francaise de l'Eglise St. Louis par Capt. Louis Robert, Juillet, 1869."*<sup>o</sup>

"In the way of private charity his hand was ever open, and he never refused to render a friend any favor that lay in his powers," says one account.<sup>15</sup>

Robert often conducted trading expeditions far into the Indian country. He was a licensed trader, with posts at Redwood Falls, Yellow Medicine, Belle Plaine, Jenetville, and elsewhere and frequently accepted various government contracts. During the Sioux Uprising of 1862 he helped get supplies and ammunition to the Ren-ville Rangers at St. Peter and then accompanied the Rangers to Fort Ridgely to reinforce the embattled defenders. Caught by the Sioux outside of the Fort, he was encircled but escaped by crawling into a swamp. He submerged himself with only his nose above the water, and lay there for many hours until the Indians finally tired of searching for him. As soon as peace was restored in Minnesota, he again opened stores at Redwood, Madelia

<sup>o</sup>"Presented to the French congregation of St. Louis Church by Capt. Louis Robert, July, 1869." From the Rev. Robert Morin, a priest of the church and descendent of one of the old French families of St. Paul. His father was the contractor who built St. Louis Church in 1909 and the present Cathedral of St. Paul, completed in 1915.







and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS of his life are written in the typically florid, breathless prose of the Nineteenth Century. Nevertheless, Robert apparently was well-known throughout the state, and was widely respected by his contemporaries. He seems to have been the true embodiment of the pioneer—generous, brave, energetic, liberal to a fault. Unlike many of his fellow pioneers who allowed millions to slip through their fingers, Robert's business sense saved him an estate estimated at his death to be worth approximately \$500,000.<sup>17</sup> Most of the buildings on Robert Street he erected himself, and he owned many more in St. Paul. He also owned land in Stillwater and in Missouri.

"On Sunday evening at 6 o'clock, May 11, 1874, Captain Louis Robert died at his residence on Robert Street, at the age of 63, after a very severe and painful illness lasting through a period of 14 months, during most of which time the deceased was confined to his room."<sup>18</sup> The doctor's verdict was that Robert died of cancer.

At his funeral he was eulogized by Archbishop John Ireland who said that he "could say much concerning the generosity of the deceased, and what he had done

Two of Robert's small fleet of steamships are tied up at Robert's Landing in 1859. They are the "Time and Tide" and the "Jeannette Roberts," second from right. In anglicizing the French name, Robert, a final "s" was added to it.

towards the building up of the city, his endurance and the general kindness of his disposition."

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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.