

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: This somewhat romantic illustration, "The Beautiful Moonlight in Dakota Land," is from the equally romanticized, imaginative "history" of St. Paul by Col. Hankins described in the article beginning on page 16.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Pictures used with the St. Anthony Park article are from the Ramsey County Historical Society. Those with the stories on the old trolleys and John R. Irvine are from the Minnesota Historical Society. Pictures with the story on Col. Hankins' St. Paul history are from the book itself. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimstad of the Minnesota Historical Society's audiovisual library for their help, and also to Henry Hall, chairman of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Publications Committee, who reproduced the pictures from Hankins' book.



The stabbing of Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant. This was Col. Hankins' interesting, if fanciful resolution of the mystery surrounding the fate of St. Paul's first settler.

Murder Most Foul! Early 'Historian' Solves' Mystery of Whatever-happened-to 'Pig's Eye' Parrant

BY EDWARD J. LETTERMANN

IN the early days of June, 1838, St. Paul's first settler built a lonely hovel at the mouth of the creek which flowed out of Fountain Cave. He was a man of singular appearance, this Pierre Parrant. He had a "sinister-looking eye, blind, marble-hued, crooked, with a white ring glaring around the pupil, giving a kind of piggish expression to his features." Thus he was known as "Pig's Eye" and the young settlement early received the same name. Parrant was a whiskey seller. After making and losing a number of claims, he left the St. Paul area toward the end of 1844.

Most students of St. Paul history probably are satisfied with J. Fletcher Williams' rather enigmatic account of Pierre Parrant's departure: "He started for Lake Superior, designing to return to Sault Ste. Marie, but died on the journey of a disease resulting from

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Edward J. Lettermann is curator of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum. He is the author of Farming in Early Minnesota, published by the Ramsey County Historical Society, and From Whole Log to No Log, a history of the Indians of the Ramsey County area published this spring by Dillon Press, Minneapolis.

his own vices." But certainly a Col. Hankins, New York author and publisher, was not.

Although Williams' excellent history of St. Paul was presented to the public in 1876, he stated in its preface: "It is now fully ten years since I began collecting material and data for these chronicles." Co-incidentally, Col. Hankins' first visit to St. Paul, only twenty-four hours in duration, was made in September of 1867, at about the same time Williams had begun work on his history.

Col. Hankins, who listed himself as,

"Editor of The New York Home Gazette, also editor of the new illustrated Journal of Society, and author of Agnes Wilton, Maniac Father, The Apostate Quaker, The Idiot of the Mill, The Orphan's Dream, The Banker's Wife, The Mother's Prayer, The Beautiful Nun, Hearts That Are Cold, beside innumerable serial productions of Truth and Fiction,"

seems to have been suddenly inspired, during his visit to St. Paul, with the idea of publishing a "Dioristic and Statistical History of the bright new city." In November of 1867

DAKOTA LAND;
OR,
THE BEAUTY OF ST. PAUL.

AN ORIGINAL, ILLUSTRATED,
HISTORIC AND ROMANTIC WORK,
Presenting a Combination of Marvelous Dreams and Wandering Fancies, Singular
Events and Strange Fatalities, all Interwoven with Graphic
Descriptions of the Beautiful Scenery and
WONDERFUL ENCHANTMENT IN MINNESOTA.

TO WHICH IS ADDED
"A ROUND OF PLEASURE,"
With Interesting Notes of Travel, Maps, etc., and Forming a Comprehensive
Guide to the Great North-West.

BY COL. HANKINS,
Editor of "The New York Home Gazette."
ALSO, EDITOR OF THE NEW ILLUSTRATED "JOURNAL OF SOCIETY."
And Author of "Agnes Wilton," "Maniac Father," "The Apostate Quaker," "The Idiot
of the Mill," "The Orphan Dream," "The Banker's Wife," "The Mother's
Prayer," "The Beautiful Nun," "Hearts That Are Cold;" Beside
Innumerable Serial Productions of Truth and Fiction.

1868:
HANKINS & SON, PUBLISHERS,
"Journal of Society" Office, No. 1 Park Place,
NEW YORK CITY.

Title page for Col. Hankins' novelized version of the history of the early days of St. Paul. As was the custom 100 years ago, nothing, including hyperbole, was spared in an effort to entice the reader, and in the days before

sophisticated promotion campaigns by publishers, the title page was a book's best, sometimes most extravagant, foot forward — particularly when the author happened to be his own publisher.



Col. Hankins

he returned to St. Paul to gather information for his projected history. But, as he ruefully informs his readers, "similar individual purposes of several *native* 'brothers of the scissors and quill,'" deterred him. "I prudently declined any rivalry or contest with those who were so much better qualified to accomplish the proposed undertaking."

However, upon allegedly discovering "the *Key* to a Mystery that's been long concealed," he felt compelled to place upon the market his book, *Dakota Land, or the Beauty of St. Paul*, an altogether charming conglomeration of local history, fact and fancy, dreams and revelations, exquisite word pictures of the area, and a moving account of the vicissitudes of the "beautiful, golden-haired *Fleurette*."

Col. Hankins covers St. Paul history, from its earliest days to the aftermath of the Great Sioux Uprising. He takes the chief characters from the northwest settlements on the Red River to the shanties of the budding village destined to become Minnesota's capital, from a massacre upon the prairies, to the interiors of some of St. Paul's most sumptuous mansions. He weaves a colorful story, a mosaic of fact and fancy, in a romantic literary style of the middle Nineteenth Century which no longer is in vogue.

It is not difficult to distinguish historical fact from literary fancy. Hankins lists as his factual sources Neill's *History of Minnesota*,

Heard's *History of the Sioux Wars*, Harriet Bishop's, *Sioux War-Whoop*, and a number of lesser known histories and other published accounts. Their failings, of course, become his, but all in all, *Dakota Land*, . . . is a well-executed work, and interesting reading. Appearing as it did in 1868, eight years before Williams' *History of St. Paul*, it undoubtedly found avid readers, and did a creditable job of publicizing St. Paul and the young state of Minnesota.

The mystery to which Hankins declares he had discovered the "key" is enthusiastically presented for the first time on page 37 of his book:

"One night Parrant mysteriously disappeared, and none of his patrons could tell why he did not return . . . Many questions were asked which none could answer . . . It remains for me to disclose his singular fate.

"By merest chance one day I trod upon a *Lost Key* . . . that unlocked the mystery so long concealing Parrant's grave."

THROUGHOUT THE ensuing 350 pages Hankins develops his novel. On page 389, he returns to the "lost key" and how it was discovered.

"Nearly a quarter of a century had elapsed after the disappearance of the old whiskey-trader when . . . I made the acquaintance of an Overseer who was superintending a gang of laborers engaged in the work of opening the route for the upper division of the St. Paul and Chicago Railway, at that time just begun. The Overseer was a good-natured man, and kindly invited me to drive down and see how they got along . . .

"Just before our arrival at the scene of operation there had been quite an excitement among the men in consequence of discovering some portions of a human skeleton, which they unavoidably exhumed while delving at a point near the bank of the Mississippi River . . .

"After viewing the pieces of grim and frightful anatomy, we proceeded to inspect the locality where they had been found. And there I trod upon a curiously shaped object and stooped to pick it up. Upon examination, it proved to be a formidably large knife. With considerable hammering we removed the adhesive rust and saw an untelligible

inscription . . .

"Here's another!," said the Overseer, handing us what proved to be a very much neglected double-barreled pistol. I thought it was sadly out of repair. And engraved upon the upper stock-plate of that, we saw another alphabetical signum . . ."

Returning to town, Hankins and his companion "immediately began to scour the old pistol and the rusty knife."

"My scouring at the old knife was successful. 'It spells *Tashae*,' I cried. 'That was the name of a fur trader who lived at Selkirk Colony twenty-five years ago!'

"And here's the other name!," exclaimed [my companion]. 'P-a-r-r-a-n-t — Pig's Eye, sure as you live!'

"And there it was, engraved in plain English upon the upper stock-plate of the old pistol.

"You're a lucky fellow!" [my companion] remarked to me. 'Mr. Williams, Secretary of the Historical Society would have given anything for Parrant's old pistol.'

"Can't help that," was my reply. 'After I came here all the way from New York for the avowed purpose of compiling and writing up an illustrated history of St. Paul, he announced in the editorial columns of the *Pioneer* that he intended to do the same thing. And then another gentleman made a similar announcement in the *Daily Press*. Mr. McClung published a like intention.

And, as if to frighten me off entirely, a country editor added his name to the list of my rivals . . .

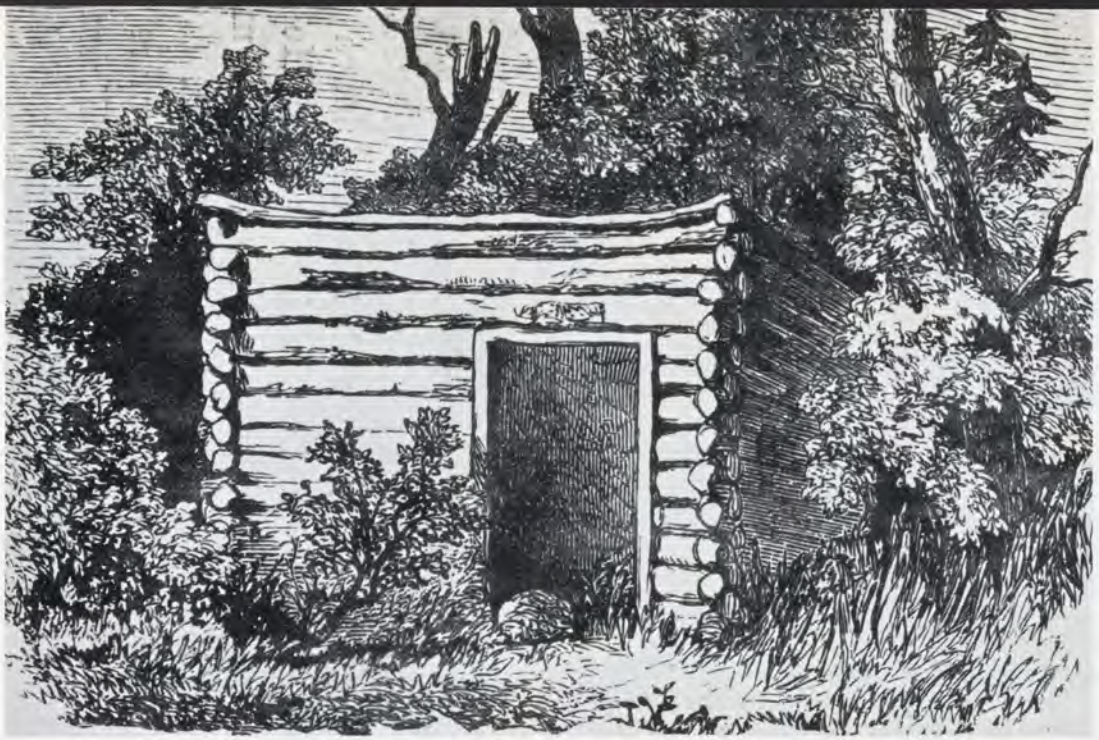
"Mr. Williams can send down and get what is left of old Parrant's bones. They'll do to place in the rooms of the Historical Society beside the bones of Tah-o-ah-ta-doo-ta, alias Little Crow, for the inspection of inquisitive people. But I shall retain the pistol and the knife.'

"I leave to him and his equally ambitious contemporaries the coveted and remunerative task of doing up St. Paul, in as many *histories* as they please . . . I will write a book! Nor shall the *subject matter* thereof even ever so slightly interfere with the grand project which the aforesaid gentlemen have in view. And *such* a book!"

In a rather complicated minor plot of *Dakota Land* . . . , Hankins already had traced Parrant to his death: Florinda, a woman of unsavory reputation who previously had murdered the mother of one of the primary characters of the novel, recognizes Pig's Eye Parrant as a voyageur who had blackmailed her years before at Montreal. She demands the return of the blackmail money. Parrant agrees to give it to her at a prearranged spot, a half-mile below Mendota

Fort Snelling, from the southeast, as it appeared before the Sioux War of 1862. Parrant settled in the shadow of the Fort until he and other civilian "squatters" were removed from the military reserve in 1838.





on the Mississippi. Kaskadino, an ox-cart driver who had fallen in love with Florinda, overhears the agreement, stabs Parrant with a knife he had stolen from Tashae, the fur trader whom Florinda loves. Kaskadino then accuses Tashae of the supposed murder.

However, Old Betz (yes, the famed Indian woman who wandered the streets of St. Paul begging money from the settlers long after most of the Dakota were removed from the area) had watched the intended murder. She retrieves the gold and gives it to Florinda, who leaves St. Paul with the other principals of the novel. Tashae and Kaskadino, having both lost Florinda, pass out of the story. Parrant was seen once more alive in his cabin, but then disappears from St. Paul, although his spirit was said to have haunted his cabin for some time.

NOT EVEN Col. Hankins could explain, he states, how the skeletal remains of Parrant were found twenty-five years later, in the cut being made for the railroad, but the colonel felt he had solved the mystery of the location of Parrant's grave.

He concludes the matter of the pistol and the stolen knife in a rather neat fashion:

"To avoid the inconvenience of answering anticipated applications for photograph pictures of Tashae's old knife or Parrant's old pistol, I will state that I deposited them in Barnum's Museum, on my return to New York. They were hung up near the collection of Indian Portraits, just at the top of the first flight of stairs — as I then thought, all nice and secure. But alas! a fire broke

In his book, Hankins describes this as "The 'First Shanty' erected by a white man on the romantic bluff of Im-in-i-jas-ka, that beautiful locality where the 'Bright New City' of St. Paul is so grandly flourishing now." Presumably, Parrant's shanty?

out during the coldest night in winter . . . So I am sorry to say that those singular relics are now unavoidably mixed up with the ashes of snakes and bears!"

To his own satisfaction, then, Col. Hankins thus disposes for all time of the mystery of the disappearance of Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, St. Paul's earliest settler, and who will doubt him? Hankins was *on the scene* one hundred years ago!

Considered in a less facetious vein, it must be conceded that *Dakota Land* . . . has value to the historian, not in its account of the early days of St. Paul, which are well covered by superior historical productions of a later date, but in its contemporary descriptions of the city and of Minnesota during the 1860's. Further enhancing its value to the modern historian is the appended "A Round of Pleasure," thirty descriptive pages of transportation notes and sightseeing data.

Stripped of its trappings of literary romanticism, its complicated plot, replete with mystery, intrigue, and touches of the supernatural, not to mention its seemingly endless editorializing, the book remains an acceptable source of local history. It helps to fill the gap in accurately picturing life in and around St. Paul a century ago.



Photo by Henry Hall

THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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 farm 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. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

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.