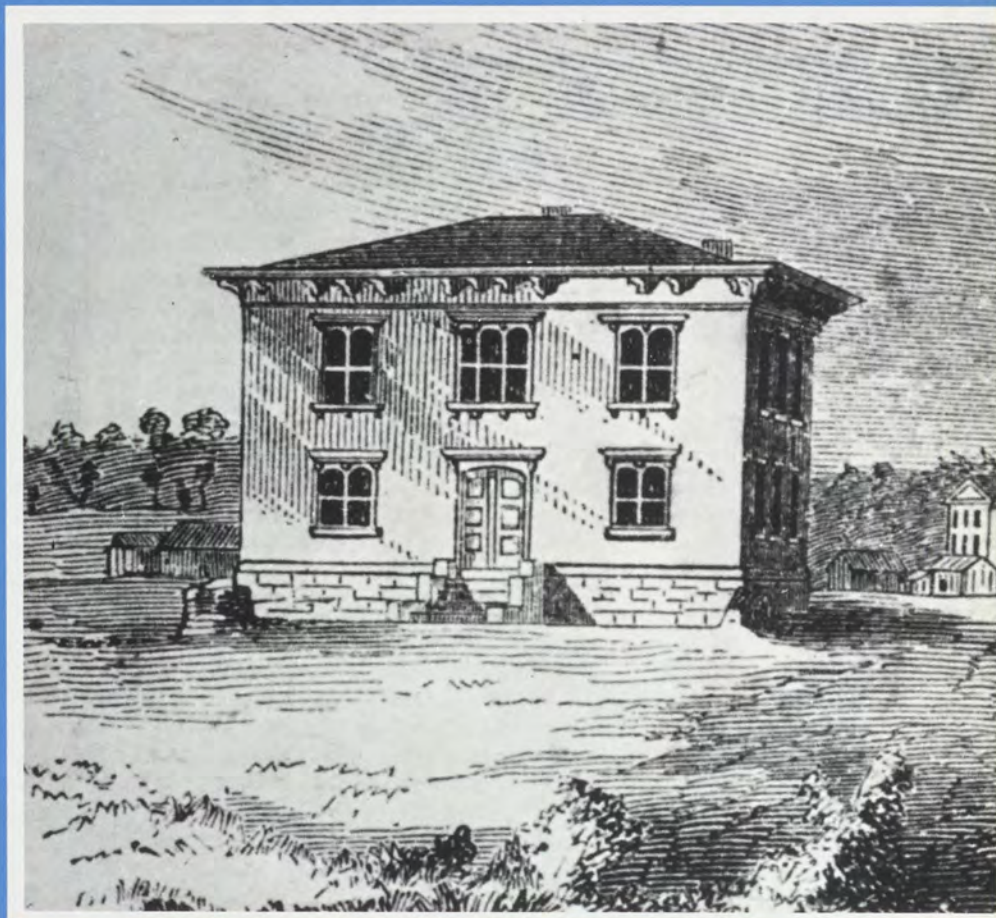


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring

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# Ramsey County History

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*ON THE COVER: The Baldwin School, founded by the Rev. Edward D. Neill, after he secured a charter for the school from the 1853 Territorial Legislature. It was named for a Philadelphia locomotive builder, M. W. Baldwin, who helped finance the school. This two-story brick building stood on West Fifth Street, across from Rice Park, the present site of the Old Federal Courts Building. The school building served as a post office from 1857 to 1862.*

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.*

# Explorers, Traders, Farmers -- *The Early History of St. Paul*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series on the history of St. Paul which will be published periodically in Ramsey County History. The following article describes St. Paul's earliest history, up to 1849 when Minnesota became a territory. It is based on research for the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Society's new program on St. Paul history, and it deals with the years covered in the Society's first St. Paul history display, now on exhibit in the Society's new headquarters in the Old Federal Courts Building at 75 West Fifth Street in downtown St. Paul.*

BY ANNE COWIE

Throughout the long history of cities, there usually has been a reason, or a combination of reasons, a certain city sprang up where it did — a good harbor, a junction of rivers, a crossing of trails.

For St. Paul, it was the river — the Upper Mississippi which became, for all practical purposes, unnavigable at the point where there was a convenient landing place, with gradual access to the bluffs above the river.

These foundations of St. Paul still can be seen. The great bluffs and the curve of the river are much as they were when the first explorers passed by, and when the early settlers later staked their claims near the landing. But it is the river that provides the key to the history of St. Paul; it was the reason for the founding of the city, and for its existence, and it has been a continuing life-line for its people.

Ancient geological forces, glaciers and rivers together, determined not only where St. Paul would be located, but what kind of a city it would be. The bluffs along the Mississippi were formed by oceans that covered the area millions of years ago. During the Pre-Cambrian and Cambrian periods, 3,500,000,000 to 400,000,000 years ago, rocks now below the earth's surface were formed from sediment in the ancient seas. The St. Peter sandstone and Platteville limestone visible today were formed during the later Ordovician period.

However, glaciers carved most of the fa-

miliar landscape in the St. Paul area from 17,000 to 20,000 years ago. As one glacier advanced south from Lake Superior, it began to melt and deposited tons of rocks and dirt, called terminal moraine, to form the hills of South and West St. Paul. Then, as the glacier retreated, it deposited till or drift over much of what is now St. Paul. Melting water carved valleys through this drift. One such valley carried Trout Creek (near present-day Phalen Creek) to the Mississippi River. Trout Creek changed course several times, creating a flat area of glacial deposits where it entered the Mississippi, and this area formed a natural landing site near the foot of today's Jackson Street. Erosion later created an easy slope down the valley.

MUCH LATER, the current of the river pushed steamboats toward this natural landing which came to be called the Lower Levee. From there, merchants could easily carry their goods from the landing up the sloping path to the business district. Still later, railroads and a freeway would run along portions of the same valley.

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The first European explorers were drawn to this area by the promise of furs and the hope of finding a Northwest Passage to the Orient. In 1680, Father Louis Hennepin, a Jesuit priest from Belgium, was sent to trade and explore in the area by Sieur de la Salle, the great French explorer of the Ohio Valley. Hennepin and his two companions were captured by the Dakotas, who took them up the Mississippi on the way to their village at Mille Lacs. They landed at the mouth of Phalen Creek, then crossed overland to the Rum River.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Anne Cowie, graduated in 1973 with a master's degree in American History from the University of Washington at Seattle, is research director of the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Societies.



**Mendota, as seen from Fort Snelling. From a painting by Seth Eastman.**

Later that year Hennepin was allowed to travel south, and on this trip he discovered and named St. Anthony Falls. He and his party finally were rescued by Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth, who had started from Montreal in 1678 to look for a Northwest Passage and to establish posts in the Lake Superior region. He met with the Dakota near present-day Duluth and proclaimed French dominion over the area. He located Hennepin near the mouth of the Wisconsin River and persuaded the Dakota to release him.

Another explorer associated with the St. Paul area was Pierre Charles Le Sueur who, in 1694, established a fur post on today's Prairie Island at the mouth of the St. Croix. In 1700 he ascended the Mississippi, passed the site of St. Paul, then ascended the Minnesota (St. Peter) River, to the area of present-day LeSueur where he built Fort L'Huiller. Le Sueur had a grant to mine what he thought was copper, but it turned out to be only the famous blue clay of that area. Fort Beauharnois, on Lake Pepin, was built in 1726 by Rene Boucher, Sieur de la Perriere, as one of France's last efforts to control the fur trade in central and western Minnesota, including the St. Paul area.

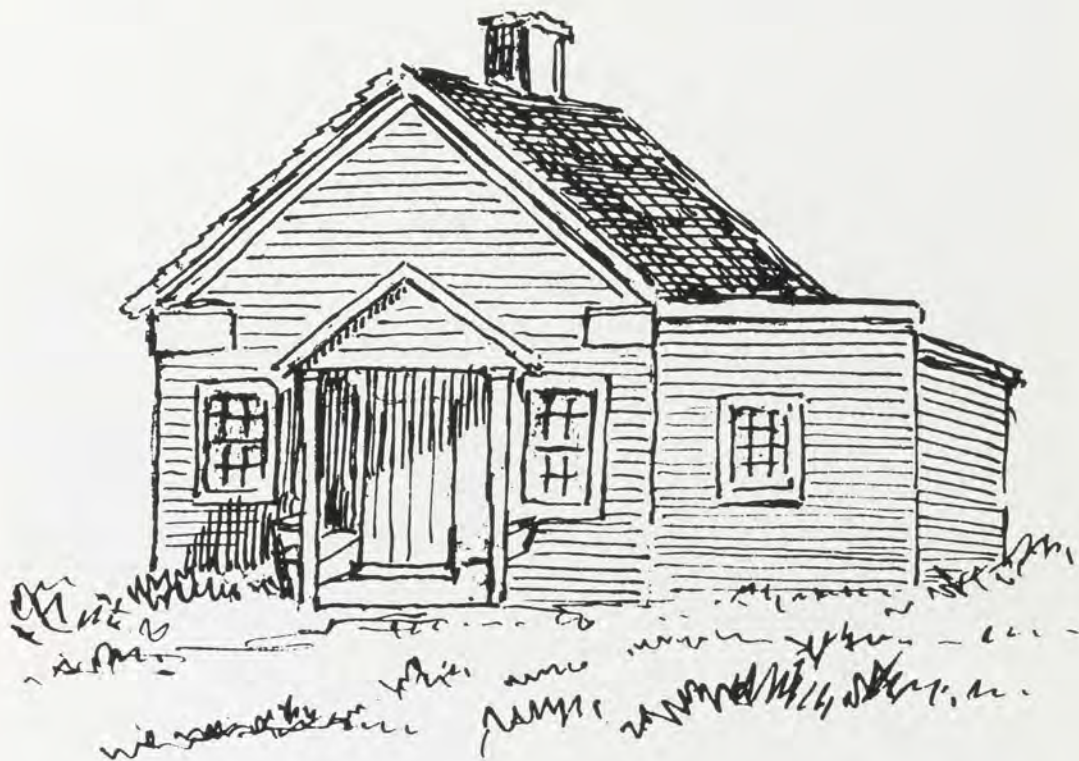
In 1765, at the end of the Seven Years War, control of the area passed from the French to the British and a year later, Jonathan

Carver undertook his famous expedition to the Upper Mississippi. Although Carver was primarily looking for a Northwest Passage, he also met with fur traders to encourage trade with the British and he claimed for himself a large tract of land, including present-day St. Paul. This claim, however, was never acknowledged.

**HE DID DISCOVER** Carver's Cave, a landmark in the river bluffs that now is within St. Paul. In his book, *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, Carver predicted a glowing future for the area:

"... there is no doubt that at some future period, mighty kingdoms will emerge from these wildernesses, and stately palaces and solemn temples with gilded spires reaching the skies, supplant the Indian huts . . ."

After the American Revolution, the land east of the Mississippi passed officially into American hands but, in reality, the British continued to control the area through their trade with the Indians. This was an important reason, General James Wilkinson, military governor of Upper Louisiana, sent Lieutenant Zebulon Pike to explore the Upper Mississippi in 1805. Pike's journey was ostensibly a corollary to the Lewis and Clark exploration of the Louisiana Purchase. Pike



was to ascend the Mississippi to its source, investigating topography along the way. But the expedition also was to be a power move to assert American dominance over the Upper Mississippi valley and frustrate the British trade with the Indians.

Wilkinson ordered Pike to select strategic sites for forts which could block the British trade routes between St. Louis and Prairie du Chien, and at the mouth of the Wisconsin River. Only as an afterthought did Wilkinson suggest buying land for another fort at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers.

In certain respects, Pike's expedition was a failure. Unprepared for winter weather, he struggled across the frozen Mississippi to Leech Lake, which he mistakenly believed to be the river's source. He shot down the Union Jack flying over the British post there. But this was a futile gesture — not until after the War of 1812 did America gain control over the area.

Pike did pave the way for the first permanent American military establishment in the

**Vetal Guerin's house on Wabasha, near the corner of Seventh Street. Drawing by R. O. Sweeney.**

Northwest. On September 22, 1805, he camped on present-day Pike's Island, where he treated with the Mdewakanton Sioux for land for a fort at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. For a payment of \$200 and 60 gallons of whiskey, Pike received about 100,000 acres of land — the site of the future Fort Snelling. (The Sioux later received an additional \$2,000 from the government.)

PIKE'S EXPEDITION did not establish American domination over the area. In fact, the British maintained the allegiance of the Indians, who were powerful allies against the Americans. In 1780, the British had recruited Chief Wabasha, then living in the St. Paul area, to attack the Spanish at St. Louis. (Spain was an ally of France, and France of the American colonies.) Although the attack was repulsed, the Indians continued to support the British, who supplied them with trade goods.

During the War of 1812, Robert Dickson, an influential British trader who controlled posts from St. Paul to the Red River, organized another Indian force which helped the British capture Fort Mackinac from the Americans. Not until 1816, when a new law required all fur traders working on American soil to become American citizens, did the British relinquish their hold on the area that became Minnesota.

The War of 1812 gave Americans the strength to enforce control over their frontiers. In 1819, they further strengthened their position by establishing Fort Snelling as the nation's northwestern outpost. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth and a detachment from the Fifth U. S. Infantry at Detroit, began construction of a fort at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. He was succeeded by Colonel Josiah Snelling, the fort's commander for the next seven years. Although Fort Snelling was built to withstand attack, it served instead as a transfer point for trade goods and to police the unceasing warfare between those hereditary enemies, the Dakota and the Ojibway.

The area around Fort Snelling proved to be a nucleus of settlement in the wilderness. In the early 1800's, Alexis Bailly had established an American Fur Company post at Mendota; Henry Hastings Sibley took over the post in 1834. In 1821, refugees from the Selkirk settlement near Winnipeg began to arrive and they were allowed to establish small farms on the Fort Snelling military reservation. The Scottish Earl of Selkirk had founded the colony in 1812 to provide homes for Scottish crofters, as well as a market for the goods of the Hudson's Bay Company. However, the cumulative effects of blizzards, grasshopper plagues, attacks by the rival Northwest Fur Company, and a disastrous flood proved to be too much for the colonists; in 1826, 250 of them moved south to Fort Snelling.

AT FIRST, they were allowed to settle peacefully on the reservation as "squatters." But by the 1830's, the relationship between soldiers and settlers had become strained. Civilian whiskey-sellers, such as Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant and Donald McDonald, conducted a thriving business that frequently disrupted military discipline. The settlers

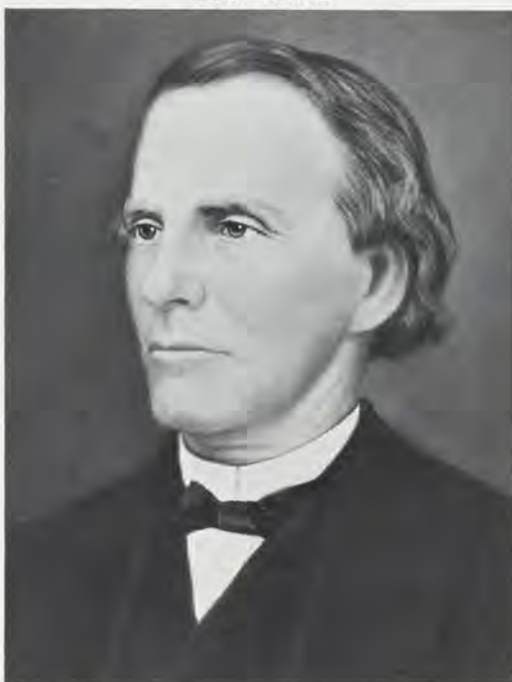
and their livestock also used valuable fuel and forage.

In 1837, when a treaty with the Ojibway, or Chippewa, opened the land east of the Mississippi to settlement, Major Joseph Plympton, commander of the fort, enlarged the military reservation and evicted the squatters from those lands. They moved downriver and settled around the Lower Landing, near what is now the foot of Jackson Street in downtown St. Paul.

The Fort Snelling refugees claimed land that is now valuable property within the city. The earliest settlers, such as Edward Phelan and Vetal Guerin, first staked claims along the river flats below the bluffs; later, they moved to the top of the bluffs. Phelan, an Irish soldier discharged from Fort Snelling, held land for another soldier, John Hays. When Hays was found mysteriously murdered, Phelan was charged with the crime, but he eventually was acquitted and St. Paul's first murder was never solved.

St. Paul's earliest settlers then, were chiefly French voyageurs and farmers. The Selkirk refugees, like Abraham Perry, began all over again as subsistence farmers. Perry and his seven children settled in what is now downtown St. Paul to raise cattle. Vetal Guerin, who had worked for the American

Vetal Guerin



Fur Company, built a small house near the present corner of Seventh and Wabasha. His vegetable garden stretched between St. Peter and Cedar, Bench and Sixth Streets.

Other fur trade veterans influenced the early history of the area. In 1838, Henry Hastings Sibley, partner in the American Fur Company at Mendota, became justice of the peace and the first civil officer in Minnesota. Later, as a delegate to Congress from Wisconsin Territory (which then included St. Paul), he worked for the creation of Minnesota Territory. In 1844, Louis Robert, for whom Robert Street was named, moved from St. Louis, Missouri, to St. Paul to trade with the Indians. He was largely responsible for the selection of St. Paul as the capital of the new Minnesota Territory.

DURING THE 1840's, a different breed of men began to arrive. They were the shrewd Yankee businessmen such as Norman Kittson, who once had worked in the sutler's store at Fort Snelling and who then organized the celebrated Red River trade between Pembina and St. Paul. From 1844 to 1867, hundreds of carts carried furs to St. Paul, a transfer point from which the furs were shipped down the Mississippi.

Henry Jackson came up from Galena in 1842 and established the town's first store, saloon and hotel near the Lower Landing. Because his hotel was a natural stopping-place, he also became the settlement's first postmaster. In 1847, he was succeeded by Jacob W. Bass, who also ran a hotel. John Irvine, an old friend of Jackson's, arrived and bought 300 acres in the new town. He operated a ferry at the Upper Landing, at the foot of present-day Chestnut Street; ran a sawmill, and donated land for Irvine Park, one of St. Paul's three oldest parks.

Although the settlers were living on the edge of the wilderness, they used their ingenuity to reconstruct a familiar way of life. They built their first houses of crossed logs, chinked with hay and mud; furniture was made from split logs. At first, most food was shipped upriver from Galena, but pioneer women also learned to use wild rice and honey. By 1849 local stores were stocking such delicacies as tapioca and peanuts.

In 1841, Father Lucian Galtier, a French priest, built the first church, the Chapel of



R. O. Sweeney's sketch of Father Galtier's Chapel of St. Paul.

St. Paul, near present-day Kellogg and Minnesota. He noted:

"Mr. B. (Benjamin) Gervais and Mr. Vetel Guerin, two good quiet farmers, had the only spot that appeared likely to answer the purpose. They consented to give me jointly the ground necessary for a church site, a garden, and a small graveyard." With the coming of the new chapel, the name of the town gradually changed from Pig's Eye to St. Paul. In 1844, the first Protestant service (Methodist) was held in Henry Jackson's house.

By 1845, Mrs. Matilda Rumsey was teaching the first school in the settlement. In 1847, Harriet Bishop organized a day school and a Sunday school in a "little log hovel covered with bark and chinked with mud," that had been a blacksmith shop. It stood on today's Kellogg Boulevard at St. Peter street.

Despite frontier hardships, the settlers entertained themselves at parties and weddings, where Denis Cherrier fiddled all night. The saloon was another focal point of pioneer social life, its importance perhaps undiminished somewhat when Harriet Bishop organized a temperance society.

By 1849, firm foundations had been laid for the development of a city. The next decade would see further growth, the incorporation of the area as a territory and finally its admission to the Union as a state.



#### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.*

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.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.