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Minnesota History Vignettes

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These blog entries will give you little vignettes of Minnesota history along with some suggested places to research deeper or visit. Let us know your suggestions of additional resources.

1829 Revival on Mackinac Island Touches Minnesota

From the late 1600s through the 1830s, Mackinac Island in the Straits between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron played a key role in the exchange of commerce between the dispersed Native American tribes who had the cherished beaver pelts and the European traders with merchandise of wool, iron and copper needed to make life in the wilderness more tolerable. After the war of 1812, the new American Fur Trading Company made Mackinac their central trading post under the command of a sturdy Scot highlander by the name of Robert Stuart.

Stuart was a legendary figure within the fur trading industry. In 1812 he was part of an ill-fated effort to establish fur trading in Oregon territory. While on the voyage around South America, he actually held a gun to the head of the crusty tyrant of a sea captain to make him turn back to pick up his uncle who had been left behind on the Falkland Islands. The ship abandoned them at the mouth of the Columbia River, leaving them with supplies running desperately low. Stuart chose to make a daring journey across the Rocky Mountains. This was the first American passage over the mountains since that of Lewis and Clark and was the first time the route that would be later known as the Oregon Trail was traversed.

Stuart was a natural born leader who earned loyalty but also could be harsh. He was a single-minded business titan who kept a very orderly mercantile network stretching all the way from Ohio to the Rocky Mountains. He was also an ardent family man who adored his wife who was 7 years his junior. Elizabeth Stuart was affectionately referred to as Betsy and came from a fairly well off merchant from New York. She married Robert soon after he returned from Oregon.

Betsy's Christian faith was the fruit of the great revival movement at the end of the 18th and beginning of the early 19th century known as the 2nd Great Awakening in America. This faith gave her great compassion for the forgotten Métis children who resided on the island. Métis were the half-breed children of the temporary commerce marriages that occurred between the French and English fur traders and their Native American wives.

Through Betsy's efforts, Presbyterian missionaries William and Amanda Ferry arrived on the island in 1823 to establish a missionary school. Their ongoing efforts on the island saw significant fruit in 1829 when a revival swept through Mackinac Island. One of the converts who professed faith during this revival was none other than Robert Stuart. His conversion resulted in a deep and meaningful change in how he conducted his commerce. Following his conversion, one of his associates was surprised to observe this change when an employee dropped a pack of valuable furs into the water. Robert calmly encouraged the employee to retrieve the pack. The associate commented, “the old Stuart would have knocked the fellow in after it.” (1)

Stuart's exit from the fur trade was providential. In the early 1830s he was pressed out of the service by other partners and took up land speculation in Detroit and Chicago. It was soon after he left the fur trade that silk hats became the fashion rage amongst the European elite replacing the beaver felt hats. The North American fur trade soon collapsed and the westward agrarian migration soon hit full stride. Stuart, through his association with people like Charles Finney, was quick to promote missions on the Western frontier. It was through the efforts of the Stuarts that some of the first evangelical missionaries arrived in Minnesota.

Probably more important to Minnesota's history was one of Stuart's young clerks who arrived right in the midst of the revival in 1829. Young Henry Hastings Sibley would credit his time on Mackinac Island with being a significant influence on his life. Young Sibley made a profession of faith during the revival and was one of the listed contributors to the construction of the new protestant church on Mackinac Island. Sibley went on to become a central figure in the history of Minnesota most notably as the North Star state’s first governor. More on Sibley in the next history blog.

(1) This characterization is a quote by Rhonda R. Gilmore in her book *Henry Hastings Sibley, Divided Heart* 2004 Minnesota Historical Society Press, page 25. An excellent resource on Minnesota's early history.

Also an excellent source of information on the subject is the book *Battle for the Soul, Métis children encounter evangelical Protestants at Machinaw Mission 1823-1837* by Keith Wilder, Michigan State University Press. You can read portions of it on Google Books.

Finally if your family is up to a little vacation a September trip to Mackinac Island is a great experience.

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