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J. N. Nicollet Map Maker

When the people of Iowa were considering statehood in 1844 there was much discussion both here and at Washington as to the boundaries of the proposed new State. The constitutional convention adopted what came to be called the Lucas boundaries — the Mississippi River on the east, the northern boundary of Missouri on the south, the Missouri River on the west, and on the north a line running from the mouth of the Big Sioux River to the "middle of the main channel of the St. Peters river, where the Watonwan river (according to Nicollet's map) enters the same" and then down the St. Peters River to the Mississippi.

Sectionalism dominated the thinking of many Senators and Representatives at that time. More free States meant more Senators opposed to slavery; more slave States meant more Senators to support the South's "peculiar institution"; more western States meant greater influence for the West as against the original States.

Free-State Congressmen wanted as many States as possible carved out of the area north of the Missouri Compromise line. For the first State in this area they found boundaries to suit their plans in a report which had recently been submitted to J. J. Abert, Chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, by the French mathematician, scientist, and explorer, Joseph Nicolas Nicollet. Who was Nicollet? How did he happen to be listed as an authority on the boundaries of Iowa? His story illustrates the threads which have connected Europe with America.

There are conflicting statements as to the early life of the man who suggested the Nicollet boundaries for Iowa and many details needed by a biographer are missing. Most of the data come from the reminiscences of those who knew him and memory is unreliable for dates and names. Authorities record that Joseph Nicolas Nicollet was born in the Duchy of Savoy on July 24, 1786, although the date 1790 is also given. His parents were poor and the little boy herded cows on the mountainside. We are also told that he could play the flute and the violin and that he learned the trade of watchmaker.

But these activities were not to be the horizon of the future. A village priest discovered that this peasant lad had an unusual mind, taught him to

read at the age of twelve, and then secured a scholarship for him at the college at Cluses. There Nicollet became an expert mathematician and at the age of nineteen began teaching at Chambery. In 1817 he went to Paris, became a naturalized French citizen, and for over a decade carried on numerous scientific activities in the French capital. He served as secretary and librarian at the Paris Observatory. He prepared a statement concerning life expectations which was published in Paris in 1818. He had a part in the discovery of two comets. He served as astronomical assistant at the Bureau des Longitudes and later as professor of mathematics at the College of Louis-le-Grand. He wrote, or helped to write, a textbook on mathematics for men in the naval and marine service. That his work in science was recognized is indicated by the fact that in 1825 he received the Cross of the Legion of Honor. Somewhere along his busy life he learned English.

Misfortune seems to have sent Nicollet to America, as it has sent thousands of other men and women to these shores. Along with his reputation as a scientist, Nicollet accumulated some wealth. No doubt his position in society required money and he attempted to increase his savings by speculation on the Bourse, but the outbreak of the Revolution of 1830 brought the loss of all his own

investments and involved a number of his friends in the failure. There seem to have been no criminal charges against him, but the situation was unpleasant, conditions in France were tense, and Nicollet decided to spend some years in America studying the work of early French explorers.

No explanation has been found as to the source of funds for this work, but in 1832 Nicollet arrived at New Orleans. The handsome and cultured French scientist became a popular guest in the homes of French and American families, finding friends along the Mississippi as he moved northward. At St. Louis he became acquainted with the old French and Spanish families, among them the Chouteaus, and he found work in astronomical and geographical observations and surveys along the Red, Arkansas, and Missouri rivers.

But always the mighty Mississippi beckoned him to explore its source, and in the summer of 1836, perhaps financed by his friends, the Chouteaus, he arrived at Fort Snelling where he was made welcome by the officers stationed there, by Major Lawrence Taliaferro of the Indian agency, and by Henry H. Sibley, Indian trader at Mendota. He interviewed soldiers, traders, missionaries, Indians, and half-breeds concerning the country to the north and he sought information as to the Indians, their customs, languages, and way

of life. Could he visit the Selkirk settlement? Could he make a trip to the source of the Mississippi? The answer was always, "Yes". "Well", he replied, "you American beat the dev. Suppose I say can I go to h-ell, you say yes." But Nicollet compromised on an expedition to Lake Itasca.

On this expedition he was accompanied by a half-breed guide, a Chippewa Indian, and a French servant. In making the portage to Lake Itasca, Nicollet said, "I carried my sextant on my back, in a leather case, thrown over me as a knapsack; then my barometer slung over the left shoulder; my cloak, thrown over the same shoulder, confined the barometer closely against the sextant; a portfolio under the arm; a basket in hand, which contained my thermometer, chronometer, pocket-compass, artificial horizon, tape-line, &c., &c. On the right side, a spy-glass, powder-flask, and shot bag; and in my hand, a gun or an umbrella, according to circumstances." The umbrella must have been as strange to his associates as the sextant. Upon his return he produced with pen and ink a beautiful map of the area.

The winter of 1836-1837 was spent at Fort Snelling. Nicollet was a frequent visitor in the home of Major and Mrs. Taliaferro and in the trading house of H. H. Sibley. Intelligent, courteous, and widely traveled, he was a welcome

guest. During winter evenings he often played the violin, while Mrs. Taliaferro accompanied him on her piano, a rare luxury on the far frontier.

News of Nicollet's abilities and interest in frontier surveys had reached the War Department at Washington and he was invited to visit the American capital. Joel R. Poinsett, then Secretary of War, decided that Nicollet was just the man to make an official survey of the unexplored area along the course of the Mississippi north to the Canadian boundary and west to the headwaters of the Missouri and to prepare a much needed map of the region. Nicollet accepted, and from that time until his death on September 11, 1843, he spent his time in expeditions to secure data or in Washington at work on his map and report.

An expedition in 1838 took him up the Mississippi along somewhat familiar paths. A second, in the summer of 1839, was up the Missouri River on the steamboat *Antelope*. From Fort Pierre the party struck north and east to Devil's Lake in what is now North Dakota, and then across to the Mississippi. On both expeditions he was accompanied by Lieutenant John C. Fremont, assigned to this duty by the Secretary of War, by Charles Geyer, a German botanist whom Nicollet had employed at his own expense, by a few friends, and by the usual half-breed guides. How much these

expeditions cost seems to be lost in the archives of the War Department, but an item of $15,126.90 for "military and geographical surveys west of the Mississippi and north of the State of Missouri" from September 30, 1839, to September 30, 1840, may suggest the expense.

In Washington Nicollet and his assistants worked steadily on the map and compiled data for the report. During part of this time Nicollet and Fremont shared the home of Ferdinand R. Hassler, Chief of the United States Coast Survey. It was an interesting trio. Hassler, a native of Switzerland, had been separated from his wife for some years. Fremont, much younger than the other two, had not yet met his "Immortal Wife". There seems to be no record that Nicollet was ever married, although on one occasion, when an Indian chief offered his young daughter to the distinguished Frenchman as a wife, he explained that he already had one wife and that the Great Father did not permit him to have two. He added, however, that his young companion, Fremont, had no such alibi, and enjoyed the embarrassment of the young officer as he declined the proffered bride and gave her the proper presents. At any rate Nicollet had no family in America and the three men kept bachelors' hall with the aid of an expensive French chef.

That Nicollet had some of the French interest in cooking is indicated by a story related by Fremont. On one occasion during an expedition some Indian guests had been invited to dinner. The main dish was a stew made of fat buffalo meat and wild rice. The *pot-au-feu* was served and all began to eat. At the first bite the Indians laid down their spoons and expressed fears that the concoction was poisoned. The interpreter had to explain that the strange taste was due to some cheese which Nicollet had added to the other ingredients.

As the years passed Nicollet's health failed steadily. His physique had not been able to withstand the hardships his scientific mind had imposed on it. Many a night he had spent in astronomical observations after a day of travel or work. He occasionally relaxed at St. Mary's College, Baltimore, where his host was John M. J. Chauche, then president of the college, and at the home of a friend, Dr. J. T. Ducatel.

Always hoping for recovery, Nicollet continued his work on the huge map and on a report to accompany it which was published under the title *Report Intended to Illustrate A Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River*. It was dated February 16, 1841, but was not published until after his death in 1843.

It was this map and this report which were used

by those attempting to fix the boundaries of Iowa. Nicollet had made specific suggestions concerning the division of the upper Mississippi basin into States. He suggested that two States be formed west of Arkansas and Missouri. Although he does not mention the slavery question, these would have been slave States under the Missouri Compromise. The State of Iowa, according to Nicollet's report, should not extend to the Missouri. His boundaries were the parallel of latitude passing through the mouth of the Mankato or Blue Earth River on the north, the Mississippi River on the east, the northern boundary of Missouri on the south, and on the west "a certain meridian line running between the 17th and the 18th degrees of longitude". This longitude was based on Washington, not Greenwich. Nicollet also suggested that a State could be laid out west of Iowa along both sides of the Missouri River, and north of Iowa there was still enough land for a State.

The western boundary proposed by Nicollet for Iowa lay approximately along the watershed between the tributaries of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Nicollet explained it as follows: "As the population would be composed of emigrants from all parts of the civilized world, by not extending the boundary so as to estrange one portion of the people from the other, on account of a

difference of origin, or a different course of trade, they would be brought to live contentedly under the same laws and usages; whilst the uniform direction of the waters, together with the similarity of climate, soil, resources, and avenues to market, are well calculated to give to the inhabitants of this State a homogeneity of character and interest highly conducive to their well-being, both morally and politically."

Why Nicollet feared that the settlers on the Mississippi slope would differ from those along the Missouri River is not clear. He may have been influenced by the situation in St. Louis, where he had been impressed by the difference between the old settlers of French and Spanish extraction and the Americans who had come in after the transfer of Louisiana to the United States. The "Missourians", as he called the inhabitants left behind by the Spanish regime, were easy-going, honest, without education, and slow to act. The Americans were energetic and shrewd.

In this connection Nicollet told the story of a "Missourian" who wanted to purchase a slave. He consulted a Kentucky slave dealer and agreed to purchase one of the negroes. The dealer explained that the price of this slave was five hundred dollars but that the buyer had one year's credit on the purchase. The "Missourian", think-

ing of the danger of being in debt, replied, "I'd rather pay you six hundred dollars at once, and be done with it." The merchant, no doubt astonished, replied, "Very well, anything to accommodate you."

But the minds of the lawmakers in Washington were not concerned with the racial backgrounds and characteristics of possible Iowa settlers. Slavery and anti-slavery men watched jealously the shaping of States to come. When the Iowa constitution of 1844 was submitted to Congress in 1845 Representative Alexander Duncan of Ohio introduced an amendment to the act admitting Iowa and Florida, making the western boundary a line running due south from the mouth of the Blue Earth River. He presented as support of this line a copy of Nicollet's map and declared that Iowa would still have about 39,400 square miles and, he claimed, be larger than Ohio.

As finally fixed by the act of Congress adopted on March 3, 1845, the western boundary was to be a meridian line seventeen degrees and thirty minutes west of the meridian of Washington. This was slightly west of the Duncan line but it could be said to follow Nicollet's suggestion that the line run "between the 17th and the 18th degrees of longitude".

The amended boundaries found little favor in

Iowa; settlers had no fear of friction between those on the Mississippi and those along the Missouri. Nor were Iowans willing to accept a smaller area in order that more free States or more western States could be formed. They wanted a river-to-river State and they twice rejected the constitution of 1844 because they were determined not to accept the boundaries specified by Congress, even though they were told that they might have to remain out of the Union. This was no idle threat. Slave State Congressmen were not anxious for the admission of Iowa, another free State; anti-slavery men insisted on more States in the north; some Congressmen wished to strengthen the voting power of the West. But Congress had learned that the settlers knew what they wanted and would have it and in the end Iowa won the Missouri River as her western boundary.

In the meantime the man who had laid out the rejected boundaries was dead at the age of fifty-seven. Although he lived in the United States only eleven years Nicollet left his name in the history of the Upper Mississippi. There has, however, been confusion as to his given name. In many of the reminiscences concerning him, even those by his friends such as Lawrence Taliaferro and Henry H. Sibley, he is called Jean Nicolas Nicollet. Possibly he was confused with the

earlier French explorer, Jean Nicolet. He seems to have signed his name J. N. Nicollet, but even this was not proof against error, for the title page of his famous report bears the name I. N. Nicollet, no doubt the result of a typographical error.

Although Nicollet apparently did not become a citizen of the United States, he was punctilious in his loyalty to the country he served. On one of his expeditions he was invited to a council with some Chippewa Indians. Early that morning he was informed by one of his guides that the Indians had raised the flag of England beside that of the United States. Nicollet suspected that the Indians wished to praise the British and disparage the Americans. He immediately sent word that he was "not provided with a *forked tongue*" and that two flags could not protect the same country. He could attend the meeting under the American flag alone. The Indian chief removed the British flag and apologized.

One of Nicollet's cherished ambitions was to be elected a member of the French Academy of Science. His scientific work in France and in America made him eligible for this honor and his name was presented for election. But the debacle of 1830 was still fresh in the minds of some of his former associates and a black ball ended his hopes of recognition in this field.

But Joseph Nicolas Nicollet seems to have been a universal favorite among the Americans he met. Urbane, polished, brilliant, witty, musical, and affable, astronomer, mathematician, geologist, and cartographer, he was sought as a friend by many Americans of high rank. He was a Catholic and was welcomed by leaders of the church. Few men seem to have been less adapted to the rigors of frontier life. A portrait reveals that he had handsome almost femininely beautiful features. It is not surprising that he cared nothing for hunting and that he was not interested in horses or dogs. He accepted the hardships of life beyond the frontier because of his interest in science. A collection of his papers, lost for years after his death, was turned over to the Library of Congress in 1921; his map and report are buried in government documents of a hundred years ago. But the centennial of the State of Iowa recalls the story of the French scientist who mapped the Upper Mississippi and, except for the persistence of Iowa pioneers, might have prescribed the boundaries of Iowa.

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