

## Comment by the Editor

JEAN NICHOLAS NICOLLET

Impelled by the ambition to write a "Physical History of the Valley of the Mississippi", Jean Nicholas Nicollet left his position in the French government bureau of longitudes and came to America in 1832 — almost two centuries after his predecessor, Jean Nicolet, had returned to Quebec from Green Bay with the amazing news that he had been within three days' journey of a great water which he thought was the China Sea. Meanwhile missionaries, traders, adventurers, and official explorers had traversed the length and breadth of the Mississippi Valley in quest of fortunes, glory, religious converts, or scientific data. Yet the geographical knowledge of the great valley, particularly the region west of the river, remained vague and inaccurate.

In the prime of his maturity, J. N. Nicollet was eminently qualified to perform the work he contemplated. Educated in his native province of Savoy, he had become assistant in mathematics at Chambéry when he was only nineteen. In 1817 he had been appointed secretary and librarian of the observatory in Paris, where he studied astronomy with Laplace.

For five years he conducted his explorations, which extended from the Alleghany Mountains to the Red River of Texas, and from the delta of the Mississippi to its source in Lake Itasca. Then in 1838 the Bureau of Topographical Engineers in the War Department selected him to make a thorough survey of the hydrographical basin of the upper Mississippi River and prepare a large-scale map based upon exact astronomical and barometrical observations. Assisted by Lieutenant John C. Frémont and a staff of scientists, he explored the Territory of Iowa during the years 1838, 1839, and 1840. It was by far the most thorough and scientific work that had been done in that region, and the map which he produced is still regarded as a masterpiece of cartography.

Ill health caused him to curtail his report in explanation of the map, but it is nevertheless one of the most substantial contributions to the early history and geography of the Iowa country. Death came to the distinguished geographer in Washington on September 11, 1843, just before his map and report were published.

J. E. B.