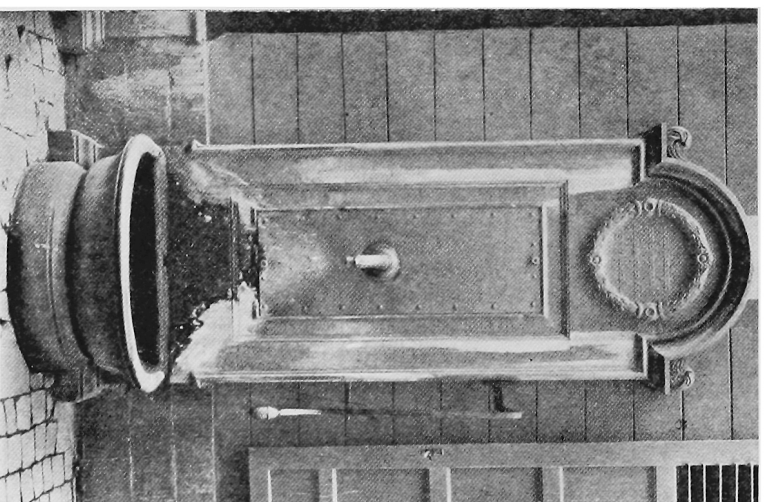


RUE HENNEPIN, ATH, BELGIUM



THE HENNEPIN PUMP, ATH

## ON THE HENNEPIN TRAIL<sup>1</sup>

Of the city of Ath, in the province of Hainault, Belgium, Baedeker says that it is an ancient town but that "it need not detain the tourist long." Baedeker, however, when he made this statement evidently did not have several days on his hands before the steamer sailed from Cherbourg, nor above all did he have the reverential attitude that all dwellers by the Falls of St. Anthony of Padua in the New World ought to have toward Ath as the birthplace of Father Louis Hennepin. In point of fact Baedeker does not mention Hennepin at all. And yet the famous missionary adventurer is not without honor in his own country, as will shortly be seen.

Ath has a population of about ten thousand and carries on some little commercial and manufacturing business with the outside world. It is one of those tightly built little towns of narrow streets that one sees everywhere in Belgium; withal a pleasant little city in an equally pleasant setting of gently rolling and carefully cultivated country. Like so many cities in the low countries it has its canal connecting it commercially with the outside world. Its little river, in this case the Dendre, flowing in stretches through walled banks, gives the city a decidedly picturesque air. An occasional pair of wooden shoes rattles along over the cobblestone pavement. There is an ancient church or two, a donjon tower constructed by a certain count of Hainault at some time in the remote past, and the usual market place or "cloth market" where on certain days you can bargain with tight-fisted old women for the produce of the country and relieve your ensuing exhaustion at some one of the numerous cafés which line the square.

<sup>1</sup> An address presented at the annual luncheon of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, January 13, 1930. *Ed.*

There is a modern note, however, in the tooting of automobile horns and rattle of motor cars tearing through the city, as Ath is on the main highway between Lille and Brussels. A Ford agency, "*le Singer*" Sewing Machine agency, and a small cinema advertising "Buddy Roosevelt Wild-west" are America's return to Ath for its gift of Hennepin. There is another recent note also in the war monument — well-designed as most of these monuments are — a tribute to the men of Ath who fell in the World War. *Mort pour patrie*. The city itself was occupied by the Germans for the entire period of the war and suffered but little material damage.

But let not the pilgrim from Minnesota be led astray by these irrelevant details. Let us stroll out from the cloth market into a little curving residential street, the Rue Hennepin. It is not a great boulevard nor a Hennepin Avenue of Minneapolis — but Ath has done something at least to honor the memory of its famous son. Furthermore, at the upper end of the street, the town has erected a rather graceful wall fountain or perhaps more accurately a *pompe*, meaning a sort of town pump where the residents of the street come with their pails and pitchers for water. The face of the *pompe* bears this inscription: "*A Louis Hennepin qui découvrit le Mississippi en 1680, né à Ath en 1640.*" The inscription obviously is not quite accurate. Hennepin has been accused of exaggeration and even worse, but I do not think he ever claimed to be the first discoverer of the Mississippi, even among his admiring fellow-townsmen. Let us rather believe that the good citizens of Ath in erecting this memorial to Hennepin after his death — and it apparently was erected at some time in the eighteenth century — were themselves a little hazy about just what Hennepin did.

After saying what I have it is a little embarrassing to record that Hennepin may not have been born at Ath after all; at least a doubt has been suggested. Shea, in the preface to his

translation of Hennepin's *Description de la Louisiane*, states that Margry cites documents which seem to prove that Hennepin's birth occurred at Roy in the province of Luxembourg, his parents having removed thither from Ath. Thwaites, in his reprint of Hennepin's *New Discovery*, refers to this statement of Shea, but adds "we have ourselves been unable to find such citation in Margry's works." Most of the facts about Hennepin's life have come down to us from his own account of himself, covering his life both before and after his great adventure, contained in his two later books, *Nouvelle decouverte* and *Nouveau voyage*, published at Utrecht in 1697 and 1698 respectively. In fact but little is known of Hennepin's life except what he himself has recorded. Nowhere does Hennepin make any explicit statement respecting the place of his birth. He does, however, use the expression in the "*Avis au lecteur*" of the *Nouvelle decouverte* (p. 10) "*notre ville d'Ath.*" And on the map published with the original edition of the *Nouveau voyage* Hennepin is described as "*natif d'Ath en Hainault.*"

The late Professor C. J. Bertrand, a well-known local historian and savant of Ath, published at Mons in 1906 a history of Ath which deserves some attention from the students of Hennepin. He gives some new and interesting information about Hennepin. The explorer, according to this writer, was born at Ath in 1640, his parents being Gaspart and Robertine Leleup Hennepin, who were married in Ath in 1625. Gaspart was the first of his line to establish himself at that place. On the other hand, it appears that the Leleup family was long settled at Ath, and descendants of this family are living in Ath and its vicinity to this day. In view of Bertrand's conclusion respecting the place of Hennepin's birth and the documentary evidence in Hennepin's books, supported by popular tradition as well, there would seem to be no reasonable doubt that Hennepin was actually born in Ath in the year 1640, just as the inscription on the *pompe* says. In this connection, how-

ever, Bertrand comments that Hennepin did not show much attachment for the city of his birth, and that if it were not for the one or two slight references to Ath quoted above, one "would have doubted that he was born at Ath." It appears also that Hennepin's given name may not have been Louis at all. According to Bertrand his name was "*Jean, en religion Louis Hennepin*," which I take to mean that his real name was Jean and that he adopted the name Louis upon entering the religious order of the Recollects.

Ath was then probably about half its present size. In common with most of present-day Belgium, it belonged to Spain. The manners and customs of the day were no doubt indescribably rough and crude. But Ath had its Church of St. Julien, then as now Gothic and aspiring, where Hennepin undoubtedly had his first communion and his early religious training; and its Latin school or *collegium*, also still in existence, where Hennepin early made his "humanities." Having determined to be a "religious," he left Ath for various convents in pursuit of his studies, probably at an early age, and never seems to have returned for anything approaching a residence. His passion for travel and adventure developed early. He had a sister living at Ghent, whom he states he loved "very tenderly" and with whom he says he went to reside for a period in order to learn the Flemish language.<sup>2</sup> This would indicate, what is undoubtedly a fact, that Hennepin's family were of Walloon

<sup>2</sup> Reuben G. Thwaites, in the introduction to his edition of Hennepin, *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, 1:x (Chicago, 1903), states that Hennepin went to Holland to learn the Dutch language. Apparently Thwaites was led into this error by a mistake in translation in the English edition of 1698 known as the Tonson edition, which he reprinted. In this edition the word "*Flamande*," used in the first French edition of Hennepin's *Nouvelle decouverte d'un tres grand pays*, 10 (Utrecht, 1697), is translated as "Dutch," which is not correct. There is no real evidence in Hennepin's writings or elsewhere that the friar went to Holland in the early years before his journeys to Italy and Germany.

or possibly French origin, certainly not Flemish. The region of Ath is on the border line of all these old nationalities. The sister at Ghent, Hennepin says, did not approve of his desire to visit foreign parts, and "did dissuade me from my Design as much as she could, and never ceas'd to redouble her Sollicitations to that purpose." But all to no purpose. To show how strong was his desire for adventure, Hennepin relates:

I was sent to *Calais*, to act the part of a *Medicant* there in time of Herring-salting.

Being there, I was passionately in love with hearing the Relations that Masters of Ships gave of their Voyages. Afterwards I return'd to our Convent at *Biez*, by the way of *Dunkirk*: But I us'd oft-times to skulk behind the Doors of Victualling-Houses, to hear the Sea-men give an Account of their Adventures. The Smoak of Tabacco was offensive to me, and created Pain in my Stomach, while I was thus intent upon giving ear to their Relations: But for all I was very attentive to the Accounts they gave of their Encounters by Sea, the Perils they had gone through, and all the Accidents which befell them in their long Voyages. This Occupation was so agreeable and engaging, that I have spent whole Days and Nights at it without eating; for hereby I always came to understand some new thing, concerning the Customs and Ways of Living in remote Places; and concerning the Pleasantness, Fertility, and Riches of the Countries where these Men had been.<sup>8</sup>

It was inevitable with such a passion as this that Hennepin would sooner or later find the means actually to visit these "remote places." And so in the summer of 1675 we find him at the age of thirty-five embarking at Rochelle for New France on that voyage of discovery which was to put the Falls of St. Anthony of Padua on the map and make its discoverer famous.

From that voyage, and it was his only voyage, Hennepin returned to Europe in 1681. In 1683 there was published in Paris his first book, memorable for the earliest description of the region that is now Minnesota to appear in print. The work was entitled *Description de la Louisiane*, and it was published

<sup>8</sup> Hennepin, *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, 1:6 (Tonson edition — London, 1698).

" *A Paris, chez la veuve Sebastien Huré, rue Saint Jacques, à l'image S. Jérôme, près S. Severin.*" A desire to pay due homage to so memorable an event led the writer to search for the publishing establishment of the widow Huré. The Rue St. Jacques and the old Church of St. Severin still exist in Paris, on the Left Bank just opposite Notre Dame; but, alas, neither the widow Huré nor her house nor the image of St. Jerome is there now.

It is remarkable what success the *Description de la Louisiane* had. The world was keen for accounts of travel to the unknown parts of the globe. Hennepin's book was one of the "best sellers" of the day; its success was perhaps beyond its just deserts. It was reissued in 1684 and new editions were published in 1688 and 1720. Translations followed rapidly in Italian, Dutch, and German. Singularly enough, however, the first English translation was published by our own American John G. Shea in 1880, and it is the only English translation.

Apparently intoxicated with the success of his book, Hennepin set to work to make hay while the sun shone and wrote or compiled or rehashed at least two other books bearing his name and containing accounts of his travels — the one entitled *Nouvelle decouverte d'un tres grand pays*, published in French at Utrecht in 1697, and the other *Nouveau voyage d'un pais plus grand que l'Europe*, published also in French at Utrecht in 1698. Both these works met with great success also and were translated into English, Dutch, German, and even Spanish during the following years. Two slightly varying editions, which combined the two works in English translation, were published in 1698; and it is one of these, known as the Tonson edition, that was reprinted by Thwaites in 1903, giving us our most accessible copy of Hennepin. If Hennepin had followed the old adage to let well enough alone and had been content with his first *Louisiane*, it had been better for his reputation. It is the additions and interpolations contained in the later books that have got him into trouble with the historians.

Hennepin is no exception to the rule that in the cases of most creative spirits in art or literature or high adventure monetary rewards for their achievements do not come until long after their own time. We do not know what prices these various books of Hennepin's brought at the time they were published or what, if any, financial benefit he received from them. Very likely the rules of the Recollect order did not permit him to receive or enjoy these private gains in any event. Somebody must have profited by them, however. Let us hope the widow Huré got her share, and we may suspect that she did, for in the 1684 reprint of the *Louisiane* the imprint shows the name of a new publisher whom Madam Huré had in the meantime married. But neither Hennepin nor his publishers would have been prepared for the prices the original editions of his books now bring. The first edition of the *Louisiane* sells at from two to three hundred dollars, depending on its condition; the *Nouvelle decouverte* and the *Nouveau voyage* at something less. Curiously enough, however, the 1698 English editions of the *New Discovery* sell for almost, if not quite as much as the original Utrecht issues or even the first edition of the *Louisiane*. These books, while not excessively rare, are on the other hand not common, and if you desire a copy the sooner you act the better. They will never be any cheaper, and on the authority of Mr. A. Edward Newton, the bibliophile, the return on an investment of this character will usually beat out interest, financially speaking.

Of Hennepin's life after his return to Europe from New France we know something, but not a great deal, from his own account in the *Nouvelle decouverte*. He seems to have led a restless sort of a life, wandering from city to city and from country to country, now in one clerical post and now in another. He spent considerable time in Utrecht and in Amsterdam, writing or editing his books. For one reason or another he seems to have been occupied during the several years immediately following his return from America in resist-

ing or avoiding a return to that country; and to have spent the years preceding his death in fruitlessly seeking the privilege or the backing for such return. Of his last years, where he lived or where he died, we know almost nothing. He is known to have been in a convent in Rome in 1701. Bertrand states that Hennepin in his last years retired to Utrecht, where he occupied himself with the editing of his memoirs and where he died about 1705. No authorities are cited for this statement. Where Hennepin is buried we do not know; nor do we need to know. His best memorial after all is in the valley of the upper Mississippi at the Falls of St. Anthony, which he of all white men first saw and first described two hundred and fifty years ago.

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MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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