

*VIEW of Fort Snelling*

## *FOUND (and Purchased):*

# SETH EASTMAN

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY recently acquired twenty-four small water-color sketches by soldier-artist Seth Eastman, who more than any other painter of his time “deserves the title of pictorial historian of the Indian.” These delicate works of art, some of which are reproduced with this article, include scenes of Fort Snelling and the surrounding area, the Upper Mississippi River Valley, and views of Indian life along the river. Painted more than 120 years ago, just before Minnesota Territory was established, the pictures were not accounted for until February, 1970.<sup>1</sup>

How these fragile but well-preserved works from Eastman’s fine hand ended up at the Minnesota Historical Society is a story still incomplete but with enough factual fragments to give the main outline and to make for interesting speculation about what is not known with certainty.

<sup>1</sup> John Francis McDermott, *Seth Eastman: Pictorial Historian of the Indian*, 112 (quote) (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961). Pages 228–255 list all the known works of Eastman. Mr. McDermott is used as the source for biographical information on Eastman unless otherwise noted.

*Miss Johnson is head of the Minnesota Historical Society’s audio-visual library, which contains the society’s art collection.*



*BUFFALO HUNT near mouth of Minnesota River*

# WATER COLORS

Lila M. Johnson

The water colors, most of which measure about 5 by 7 inches, were part of a collection of more than eighty that Eastman painted in the late 1840s. For a short time they were at Fort Snelling, where some visitors viewed them during steamboat excursions up the Mississippi from St. Louis. Sometime during the late 1840s or early 1850s, Eastman sold the paintings to his friend and fellow artist, Henry Lewis, and they possibly made the rounds of St. Louis, Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., and other eastern cities. Then they were taken to Düsseldorf, Germany, where Lewis utilized them in illustrating a book—published in German and entitled *Das illustrierte Mississippithal*—which described the river valley in the late 1840s. The water

colors remained in Düsseldorf for more than fifty years. After Lewis' death in 1904, they were returned to St. Louis and handed down through his heirs for another fifty years.

On February 4, 1970—"public day" at the St. Louis City Art Museum—James P. Duncan, a Presbyterian minister now of Perryville, Missouri, and a relative of Lewis, appeared with a package for museum art experts to examine. It turned out to be an album containing the long-lost Eastman water colors. On the cover was written in a neat hand: "Sketches on the Mississippi from the Falls of St. Anthony to St. Louis by Lt. Col. S. Eastman, U.S. Army." Although the album had been in the Lewis family for many years,

Mr. Duncan suspects that "the value of the paintings was not fully appreciated by members of the family."<sup>2</sup> When informed of the worth of the collection by the museum's delighted staff (which on "public day" was accustomed to examining household relics of little value), Mr. Duncan decided that the paintings should be preserved in two public institutions serving the locales sketched by Eastman — the Minnesota Historical Society and the St. Louis City Art Museum. Each paid \$12,000 for twenty-four of the artistically and historically significant water colors.<sup>3</sup>

SETH EASTMAN is generally considered one of the finest Indian painters of the nineteenth century. According to his biographer, John Francis McDermott, Eastman was "aware that the Indian was fast disappearing" and "took upon himself the task of preserving the northern tribes visually."<sup>4</sup> As a trained army topographical artist, Eastman painted realistically and honestly. Neither romanticizing nor editorializing Indian life, Eastman left a priceless historical record of the commonplace scenes of the West and of the customs of its Indian inhabitants.

Eastman was born in Brunswick, Maine, in 1808. Desiring a military career, he was appointed to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, and was graduated from there in 1829. His first tour of duty was at Fort Crawford in Wisconsin and then at Fort Snelling in 1830, but he soon was assigned to topographical work in the South. Having excelled in drawing at West Point, Eastman returned there in 1833 as assistant teacher of drawing under Robert W. Weir. This assignment gave the maturing artist the opportunity to study under the highly-regarded Weir as well as to write a textbook, *Treatise on Topographical Drawing*.

By the time he was promoted to a captain's rank in 1839 at the age of 31, Eastman was becoming well known as an artist. In 1838 he had been elected an "honorary member amateur" of the National Academy of Design in New York and exhibited works at several academy shows and elsewhere in New York. Nevertheless, Eastman always remained an "amateur," because he never gave up his military career in spite of indications that he could have been a successful professional artist. After brief service in Florida following his West Point assignment, Eastman was ordered back to Fort Snelling in 1841. While at the fort he was, on occasion, the highest ranking officer present and served as commander. Eastman remained at Snelling for seven years except for brief recruiting duty from July to November, 1846, which took him to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and Galena, Illinois.<sup>5</sup> It was sometime between his 1841 move to Fort Snelling and his 1848

transfer to Texas that Eastman painted the water colors now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. He probably produced many of them during his 1846 recruitment tour down the Mississippi.

Eastman first met Henry Lewis, to whom he eventually sold the water colors, in 1847. "I find Cap Eastman a gentleman of very fine taste," Lewis wrote his brother in September from Fort Snelling, "and also a splendid artist."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Eastman, English-born Lewis was entirely self-educated in art (he had been indentured to a carpenter at the age of fifteen). His artistic endeavors had been noted in the local St. Louis papers as early as 1845, when Lewis was in his mid-twenties.<sup>7</sup>

"Inspired by a desire to achieve something extraordinary,"<sup>8</sup> Lewis, by 1846, had decided to paint a panorama of the Mississippi River Valley. A popular form of entertainment in the middle of the nineteenth century, a panorama was a moving art show, newsreel, and travelogue. A long, continuous canvas, wound from one cylinder to another, displayed for the audience the painted scenes as the narrator described them. Some panoramas were advertised as miles long, the exaggeration being typical of the art form.<sup>9</sup>

In the summers of 1846, 1847, and 1848, Lewis traveled upriver in preparation for the Mississippi panorama. It was during the second trip that he became acquainted with Eastman. "He has the very sketches we want," Lewis wrote his brother in the 1847 letter quoted earlier, "and I have a first rate and highly important proposition from him which may render our affair of much more ease and importance than we thought. He has 150 highly finished water colour'd drawings between here [Fort Snelling] and the mouth of the Ohio."<sup>10</sup>

Lewis probably asked Eastman to join him in the panorama business. The captain no doubt considered

<sup>2</sup> James P. Duncan to author, March 12, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> George McCue, "Out of Obscurity," in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Pictures* section, June 13, 1971, p. 14-17. This article includes reproductions of some of the water colors purchased by the St. Louis museum.

<sup>4</sup> McDermott, *Seth Eastman*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> McDermott, *Seth Eastman*, 16-32.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Lewis to George Lewis, September 25, [1847], Lewis Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Lewis to Warren Upham, March 7, 1902, in Minnesota Historical Society archives; Editor's Introduction to Henry Lewis, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*, translated by A. Hermina Poatgieter, edited by Bertha L. Heilbron, 3 (St. Paul, 1967); John Francis McDermott, *The Lost Panoramas of the Mississippi*, 81 (Chicago, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> *St. Louis Republic*, December 18, 1910. Photocopy in Lewis Papers.

<sup>9</sup> McDermott, *Lost Panoramas*, 165-167.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Lewis to George Lewis, September 25, [1847], Lewis Papers.

HENRY LEWIS (left)

SETH EASTMAN (right)



the invitation but decided, as he always would, to remain in the army. Did Lewis also offer to buy the water colors from Eastman?

Another who saw Eastman's collection was Charles Lanman, an artist and a popular author of the day who visited Fort Snelling during the summer of 1847. Eastman is "an artist of ability," Lanman wrote. "When the extent and character of this Indian Gallery are considered, it must be acknowledged the most valuable in the country, not even excepting that of George Catlin." Eastman's collection, Lanman said, "numbers about four hundred pieces, comprising every variety of scenes, from the grand Medicine Dance to the singular and affecting Indian Grave." Although Lanman was given to exaggeration, we can be sure that Eastman at least had a substantial assemblage of paintings at the fort that summer of 1847.<sup>11</sup>

Before the summer was over, Eastman had offered to sell to a New York publishing firm "one hundred water coloured sketches of the Mississippi—for publication. They are views from the Falls [of St. Anthony] to the mouth of the Ohio."<sup>12</sup> The publishing company apparently turned him down, since nothing more was heard of the matter. John Francis McDermott concluded in his 1961 biography of Eastman that

"what became of these hundred water colors remains a mystery."<sup>13</sup>

Were the water colors now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society included in the set referred to by Lewis, Lanman, and Eastman? Because the society's set is dated in the late 1840s, because it contains views of the Mississippi down to the mouth of the Ohio River (the route Eastman took while recruiting in 1846), and because Indian and river scenes were documented as being at Fort Snelling in 1847, it is possible to conclude with reasonable certainty that the mystery is solved. The missing water colors are found.

BUT WHEN did Eastman sell them to Lewis? The two artists met again in 1848. Planning to journey downriver to gather information for his projected panorama, Lewis hired two boatmen in St. Paul and stayed at Fort Snelling a few days before leaving for St. Louis on July 10, 1848. For almost a month he floated down the Mississippi, sketching the scenic valley and writing a journal of the adventure.<sup>14</sup> Arriving in St. Louis on August 5, he immediately left for Cincinnati and by September 20 was at work on his panorama. Whether or not he had purchased the water colors from Eastman by then is not known. In letters to his brother from Fort Snelling and in his journal of the trip he does not mention procuring any paintings from Eastman, although he does mention visiting with him.

About the time Lewis left for Cincinnati, Eastman received orders transferring him to Texas. He set out from Fort Snelling on September 30, 1848, and traveled with his family by steamboat to St. Louis. There,

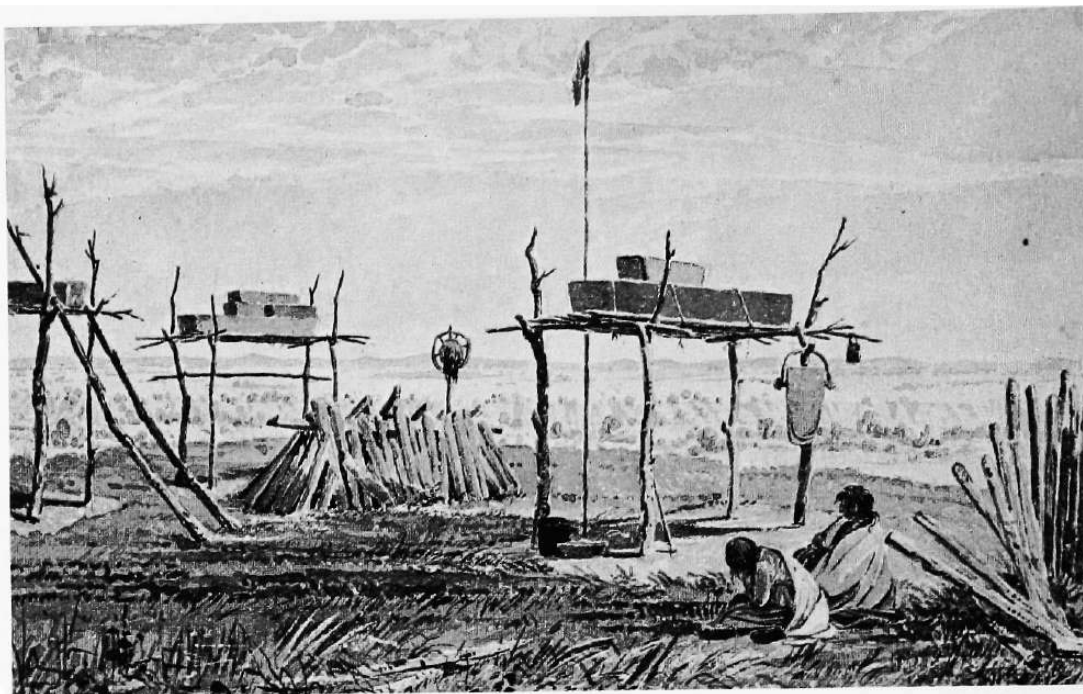
<sup>11</sup> Charles Lanman, *A Summer in the Wilderness; Embracing a Canoe Voyage Up the Mississippi and Around Lake Superior*, 59 (New York, 1847).

<sup>12</sup> Seth Eastman to Charles Lanman, November 1, 1847, Lanman Papers, in the Library of Congress. Quoted in McDermott, *Seth Eastman*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> McDermott, *Seth Eastman*, 42n.

<sup>14</sup> The journal is published in Bertha L. Heilbron, ed., *Making a Motion Picture in 1848: Henry Lewis' Journal of a Canoe Voyage from the Falls of St. Anthony to St. Louis* (St. Paul, 1936).

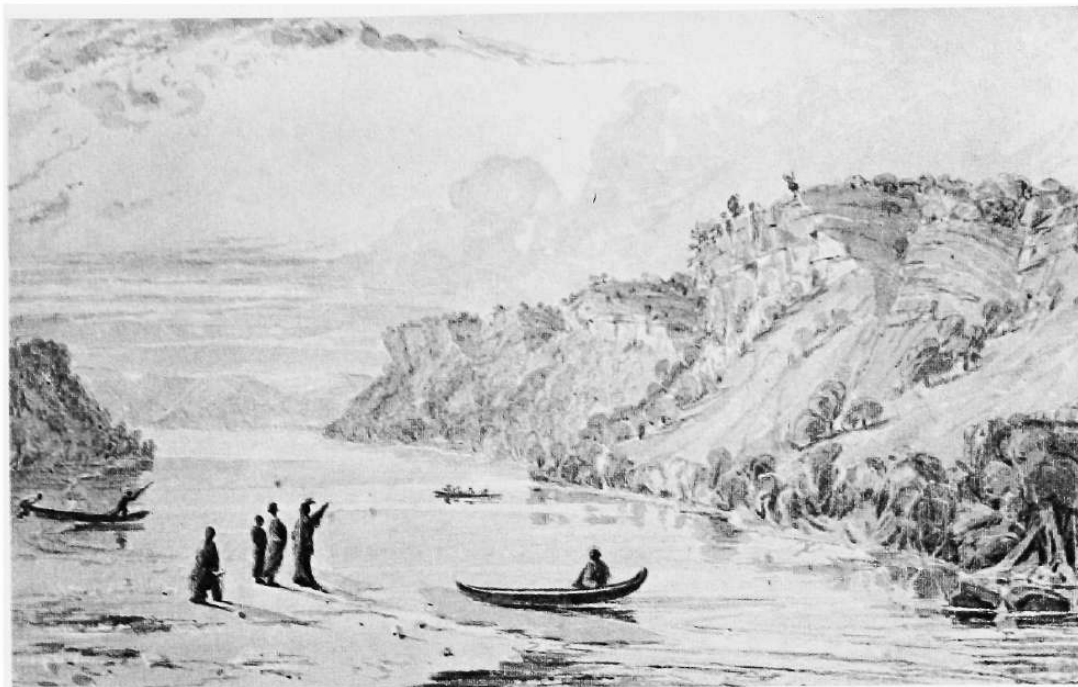




*INDIAN GRAVES at the mouth of the Minnesota River*



*SCENE thirty-seven miles below St. Anthony Falls*



*MAIDEN'S ROCK, Lake Pepin*



*"CURIOUS BLUFFS" at Wabasha Prairie*

he left his wife Mary and their five children and headed for Texas by way of New Orleans. Mrs. Eastman, meanwhile, went east with the children. On the way she stopped in Cincinnati to see Lewis. Did the latter prevail upon Mrs. Eastman, who often acted as her husband's agent, to sell the water colors at this time? It is known that Lewis was already trying to sell several of Eastman's oil paintings he had secured at an earlier time. Because the panorama has been lost since 1860, we cannot check as to whether or not Lewis bought the sketches on this occasion and used them for his panorama. A letter from Mrs. Eastman to Lewis the following winter made no mention of any transactions for the water colors.<sup>15</sup>

During his 1848 trip to Texas, the artist made still another set of sketches that "are among the lost works of Eastman which we may yet hope to find." Although the recently discovered collection may contain these missing sketches, it is unlikely. Eastman numbered the pages of the 1848 sketchbook, and from the numbers of known sketches one can ascertain that only fifteen or sixteen pictures of middle Mississippi subjects, rather than eighty of them, are lost. In addition, all of the other drawings of the 1848 trip were pencil sketches, not water colors. A "modest leather-bound sketchbook, the kind that fits neatly in the pocket of a soldier on the move," containing more than 150 pencil sketches of the lower Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, documents the remainder of Eastman's 1848 journey to his new station.<sup>16</sup>

Following his stay in Minnesota, Eastman produced some of his best work, much of which evidenced the material and knowledge he gathered while stationed at Fort Snelling. A request to be appointed illustrator of Henry R. Schoolcraft's important report on the American Indians was finally granted Eastman in 1850. Laboring on this project for five years while on leave in Washington, D.C., he prepared more than 200 plates of Indian activities and artifacts for the massive six-part work. Fifty-three of the original water colors Eastman produced for Schoolcraft's study are owned by the James Jerome Hill Reference Library in St. Paul.<sup>17</sup>

While in Washington, Eastman was asked by Henry Hastings Sibley, then delegate to Congress from Minnesota Territory and later the first governor of the state, to help with the design for the territorial seal for Minnesota. A modification of the picture that Eastman painted for the seal was eventually adopted.<sup>18</sup> During this period Eastman also prepared illustrations for articles and stories written by his wife Mary.<sup>19</sup>

A loyal army man until his death in 1875 at the age of 63, Eastman was promoted to the rank of major in 1856 and lieutenant colonel in 1861. He retired

in 1863 because of failing health but remained on the active list. He was brevetted colonel and then brigadier general in 1866.

In 1867 Congress passed a joint resolution authorizing Eastman to paint pictures to decorate the United States Capitol. During a period of two years he painted nine Indian scenes for the House Indian Affairs Committee, then lodged in the Capitol. As the result of a commission in 1870, Eastman also painted seventeen American forts, including Fort Snelling. These oil paintings may still be seen in the west corridor, first floor, central section of the Capitol in Washington.<sup>20</sup>

HENRY LEWIS' artistic career, highlighted by interesting but financially frustrating enterprises, proved less illustrious than that of Eastman. Lewis' Mississippi panorama, completed in 1849, enjoyed a certain vogue for a while. Divided into sections depicting the upper river and the lower river, it measured more than 1,200 yards in length, with twenty-two feet appearing at one time.<sup>21</sup> Lewis and his associates toured the country with it, playing to audiences in several major cities. During a private showing of the panorama in Washington in 1850, President Zachary Taylor, Henry H. Sibley, and Eastman were probably in the audience. They signed a testimonial praising the huge work's authenticity and artistic quality.<sup>22</sup> As far as is known, East-

<sup>15</sup> Mary Eastman to Henry Lewis, January 4, 1849, in Lewis Papers.

<sup>16</sup> McDermott, *Seth Eastman*, 67 (first quote); A *Seth Eastman Sketchbook, 1848-1849*. Introduction by Lois Burkhalter, xiii (Austin, Texas, 1961). The sketchbook of the lower Mississippi is owned by the Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. Illustrated by S. Eastman Capt U.S. Army (Philadelphia, 1851-1857); Frances Densmore, *The Collection of Water-Color Drawings of the North American Indian by Seth Eastman in the James Jerome Hill Reference Library Saint Paul* (St. Paul, 1954).

<sup>18</sup> See William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:459-462 (St. Paul, 1956 reprint edition) for the story of the territorial seal.

<sup>19</sup> Eastman illustrated most of his wife's books, including *Dahcotah; or Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling* (New York, 1849). A number of the original drawings used in Mrs. Eastman's works are in the Hill Library. See Densmore, *The Collection*, 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the United States Capitol*, 143-168 (Washington, D.C., 1965). In 1945 the Indian paintings were transferred to the Longworth House Office Building.

<sup>21</sup> McDermott, *Lost Panoramas*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> Author's Preface, Henry Lewis, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*, 36, 36n (St. Paul, 1967).



man and Lewis met for the last time on this occasion. Again the question arises as to whether Eastman tried to sell Lewis the water colors at this time. While Lewis wrote his brother that he met Eastman in Washington, he did not mention purchasing any sketches from him.

The panorama was never the financial success Lewis hoped it would be. He took it to Europe in 1851, hoping for more appreciative audiences, but was disappointed there, too. By 1853 Lewis settled in Düsseldorf, which was an art center, and he remained there until his death in 1904. He returned to the United States only once in the 1880s. The panorama was sold to a Dutch plantation owner from Java and reportedly was taken to the East Indies in 1860. Its fate since then is not known.

Even Lewis' impressive Mississippi reader, with its many color plates, was not the hoped-for financial success. According to a popular publication practice of the time, it was issued in parts in Germany by the famed German lithographic institute of Arnz and Company. The first three parts, published in German and in English, appeared in 1854. Another three came out — in German only — in 1855, and the last fourteen, also in German, appeared in 1857. (The now-rare book was reprinted in German in 1923. A complete English version was not printed until the Minnesota Historical Society published a new edition in 1967.) Unfortunately for Lewis, his publishers failed and fled Germany for Australia. Lewis not only was left without

pay for the book but he was able to secure only one copy of it for himself.<sup>23</sup>

Nor was Lewis successful in selling many of his own paintings either in Europe or America. In the 1880s and 1890s he supplemented his meager income by serving as American consular agent and then as vice and deputy commercial agent in Düsseldorf.<sup>24</sup> Possibly it was at this time that he attempted to sell the Eastman water colors, but he did not mention them in any correspondence with his family in Missouri.

An unresolved discrepancy in the story of the water colors should be mentioned. Accompanying the recently-found sketches is a Lewis letter in which he pointed out to a potential customer that they were painted by "Lt. Col. S. Eastman U.S.A. on the Mississippi — in the years 1846/7/8" (Lewis asked \$400 for the collection, "what I gave the Capt'n for them!").<sup>25</sup> However, a label on the cover of the album containing the sketches states they were "made in the years 1847/48/49." It is not known who wrote the label. The evidence seems conclusive that at least part of the set was painted in 1846 and that therefore the label, probably written long after the 1840s, is erroneous. Only three of the society's water colors are dated, two 1847 and one 1848.

One point is very clear: Lewis had the Eastman water colors in the early 1850s when he was preparing *Das illustrierte Mississippithal*. Although Lewis credited Eastman as the original artist of one of the pictures in the book and wrote that he was "indebted [to Eastman] for numerous sketches and much information," it is now more obvious than ever that Lewis relied very heavily upon his fellow painter's firsthand knowledge and artistic skill.<sup>26</sup> Five of Lewis' book illustrations — *The St. Peter's River Valley*, *Little Crow's Village*, *Medicine Bottle's Village*, *Red Wing's Village*, and *The Dog Dance* — are almost exact copies of Eastman water colors now owned by the society. Some of those

<sup>23</sup> See Miss Heilbron's introduction to *Valley of the Mississippi* for the story of the publisher's failure and for information on other Lewis subjects touched on here. See also Henry Lewis to Warren Upham, January 5, 1902, Lewis Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Editor's Introduction, *Valley of the Mississippi*, 28–30.

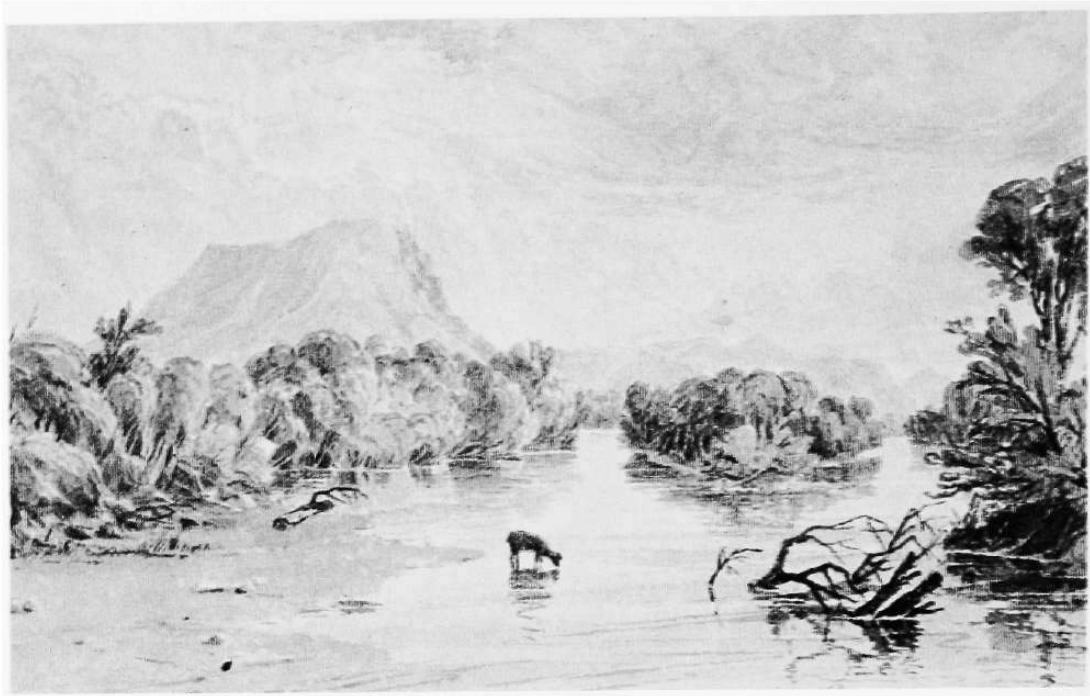
<sup>25</sup> [Henry Lewis] to [?], undated. Owned by James P. Duncan.

<sup>26</sup> *Valley of the Mississippi*, 53, 53n, 155 (quote).



PRAIRIE behind  
Fort Snelling





*VIEW of the Mississippi and bluffs*



*VIEW of Prairie du Chien*

owned by the St. Louis museum were also used by Lewis. There is no question that Lewis copied Eastman's sketches, just as he employed other written accounts for his narrative.

The fate of a number of Henry Lewis' possessions after his death is unknown, but many of his effects — sketchbooks, scrapbooks, manuscripts, prints, drawings, and other personal items — were sent to a nephew, Alexander Lewis of St. Louis, for distribution to members of the Lewis family.<sup>27</sup>

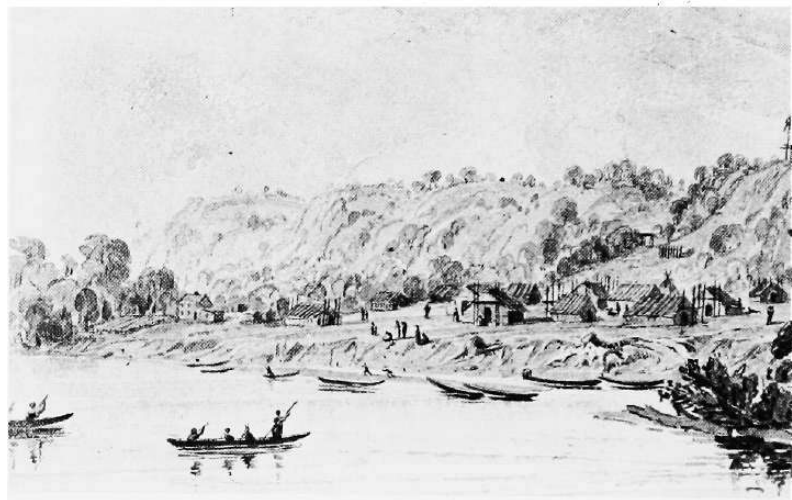
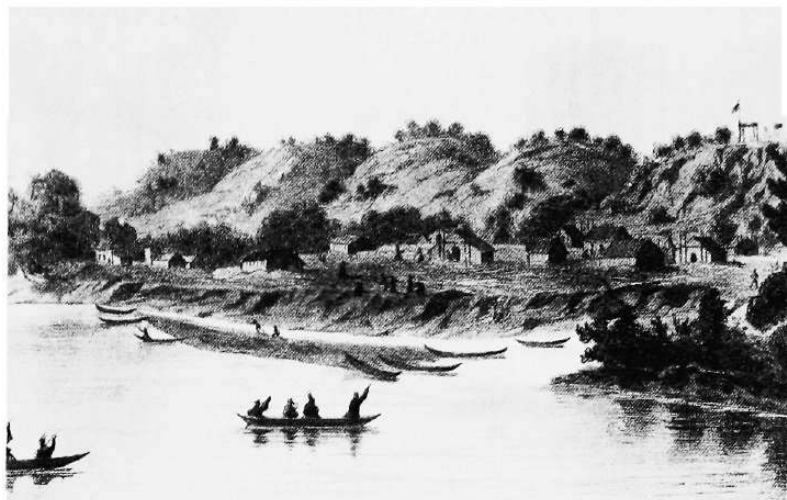
Tracing back the path of the Eastman water colors, we must assume that they were part of the Lewis estate sent to St. Louis. James Duncan, who brought them to the St. Louis museum, is the grandson of Emma Lewis Conzelman, the daughter of John Lewis, a half-brother of artist Henry Lewis. John Lewis lived in St. Louis, and it is probable that either he or his daughter Emma received at least some of Henry Lewis' effects after his death. Emma's brother Alexander may be the nephew already referred to.<sup>28</sup>

When the Minnesota Historical Society was offered the opportunity to purchase the Eastman water colors, this author went to St. Louis to choose the twenty-four that would be bought. The Minnesota selection represents mainly the Upper Mississippi, especially the Indian scenes near Fort Snelling. The City Art Museum chose twenty-four with subject matter nearest St. Louis. It is hoped that funds will be donated to the society to purchase more of the remaining water colors owned by Mr. Duncan, who feels that they should stay in the two institutions and not be split up among private collectors.

<sup>27</sup> *Valley of the Mississippi*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis genealogy in Lewis Papers.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS are from the society's picture collection. Eugene Becker made color transparencies from the original water colors.



HENRY LEWIS' lithograph (top) of Little Crow's village is an obvious copy of Seth Eastman's water-color sketch (bottom).



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