

# Portrayals of Hennepin

“Discoverer” of the  
Falls of St. Anthony,  
1680

Patricia Condon Johnston

IT HAS BEEN 300 years since Father Louis Hennepin, one of the most controversial of explorers, “discovered” the Falls of St. Anthony. The story is an oft-repeated one. Hennepin himself told it first when he published *Description of Louisiana* in Paris in 1683. Much to his discredit, though, he also told it a second time and more. These later editions of his travels were an incredible embroidery.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be no reason to doubt the piety of the stern-faced, straitlaced cleric. He evidently made a good missionary, with a main concern for saving heathen

<sup>1</sup>Concerning Father Hennepin in this paragraph and several following, the author consulted Father Louis Hennepin, *Description of Louisiana* (Minneapolis, 1938), translated by Marion E. Cross and with an introduction by Grace Lee Nute; Father Louis Hennepin (Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed.), *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America* (Chicago, 1903); “Louis Hennepin, the Franciscan: First Explorer of the Upper Mississippi River,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:247–256 (St. Paul, 1902); and Lucile M. Kane, *The Waterfall That Built a City*, 1–3 (St. Paul, 1966).

Patricia Condon Johnston is a free-lance writer living in Afton, Minnesota. Her profile of artist Edward Brewer, who painted for *Cream of Wheat* and did portraits, appeared in the Spring, 1980, issue of *Minnesota History*.

souls. To boot, he struggled with a seemingly insatiable appetite for adventure. Because of this last, and his flair as a publicist, but also owing to fortuitous circumstances — by chance, he happened to be in the right place first — he is one of the best-remembered personages of the seventeenth century. Artists have contributed minimally to his fame, too (of which more later), although there is no superabundance of depictions of him and his exploits.

Almost nothing is known of Hennepin’s early life. Most historians agree that he was probably born and baptized at Ath, Belgium, in 1640. At the age of about twenty, in France, he took the gray-cowled habit of the Recollect fathers, mendicant preachers who belonged to the Franciscan order. In 1675, in the company of four other Recollect priests, Hennepin arrived in America as an itinerant missionary to the Indians and French voyageurs around Quebec. After four years of such service, he was tapped to accompany Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, on his ambitious expedition to explore the valley of the Mississippi. (The work of the seventeenth-century church went hand in hand with that of the crown. While the latter pushed the boundaries of its fur trade empire

*THE PORTRAIT* at upper left, reputed to show Hennepin in 1694, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. An unknown artist painted it.

westward, the clergy meant to convert the pagan Indians whose lands were being invaded.)

In the course of this voyage, La Salle sent Hennepin and two companions, Michel Accault and Antoine Auguelle (also known as Picard du Gay), upriver on a reconnaissance mission. They were to report conditions on the Upper Mississippi above the mouth of the Illinois River. Though Hennepin makes no note of it in his writings, preferring to let the laurels fall where they may, Accault — not the friar — was in charge of the small party. While undertaking this assignment, in the spring of 1680, the trio was captured by a Dakota war party.

Traveling with their captors upriver to what is present-day Minnesota, Hennepin and his two French comrades enjoyed the uneasy hospitality of the Indians in camps near Mille Lacs Lake for more than two months. Hennepin learned something of their language so he might speak to them of the one true God. To win their confidence, he became a barber to their children, tonsuring them in the manner of European monks. (This fashion was in vogue with the Indians before Hennepin's visit. According to the priest, young Indians shaved the tops of their heads until they were eighteen or twenty.)

In midsummer, Hennepin secured permission from the Indians to travel down the Mississippi as far as the mouth of the Wisconsin River, where La Salle had agreed to drop supplies. Auguelle accompanied him; Accault remained behind as a hostage. Apparently it was during this voyage that the two men saw for the first time the waterfall which Hennepin named for his patron saint, Anthony of Padua.

Shortly thereafter, Hennepin and his comrades were rescued by soldier-explorer Daniel Greysolon, Sieur Du Luth, who had returned to trade with the Indians. Du Luth had first visited the Dakota at Mille Lacs, their principal center, a year earlier (when he had christened the whole of the Mississippi country "Louisiana" for his monarch.) Du Luth berated the Indians for detaining the priest, claiming Hennepin was his older brother. (Hennepin was forty, four years *younger* than Du Luth.) After Du Luth promised to return with more merchandise, the Indians released their three prisoners to return to Quebec with his party.

HENNEPIN hastened to France (never to return to America), where he oversaw the publication of his *Description of Louisiana*. Its boastful style offended many. But Hennepin had some right to brag. His book, an epic travel narrative, was the first detailed description of the Upper Mississippi Valley and its inhabitants. It was published at a time when all of Europe was interested in the discovery of new lands, new peoples, and new ideas. *Description of Louisiana* became immensely popular and raised Hennepin to celebrity status. On its own, it made his reputation as an explorer.

Subsequent editions of his travels told more than the truth, however. Hennepin rightly deserves recognition as one of the first Europeans to explore the Upper Mississippi above the Wisconsin and as the first to publicize the area in a popular book. But in 1697 he also took credit for having discovered the mouth of the Mississippi. By apparently excerpting (some say plagiarizing) descriptions of the scenery of the Lower Mississippi from recently published missionary letters, the imaginative priest glibly recounted the details of his supposed voyage of discovery, going so far as to contend that he had paddled from the Illinois to the Gulf of Mexico and back, a distance of 2,500 miles, in forty-nine days! The story was an obvious fabrication. Hennepin's pedestal was yanked out from under him. And the aging priest lived out his remaining years in disgrace.

Be that as it may (perhaps partly because of his stretching the truth), Louis Hennepin's fame (along with some notoriety) has survived 300 years. His writings, though they tend to maximize his own exploits and play down those of others, are an invaluable record of the habits and mores of seventeenth-century Minnesota Indians. More to the point, the Falls of St. Anthony, the only major waterfall on the entire Mississippi, was a monumental discovery. (Indians saw the waterfall long before Hennepin did, of course, but he usually is credited with being the first white man to view it [along with Auguelle] and write about it. He also doubtless named the falls.) Water from the cataract powered a sawmill and gristmill for the soldiers who built Fort Snelling in the 1820s. Minnesota's largest city, Minneapolis, grew up around it and became a great milling center in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Hennepin exaggerated the height of the falls. Its waters, he said, cascaded fifty or sixty feet (sixteen feet is a more accurate measure). But the importance of the falls to the development of Minnesota cannot be overestimated. An imperfect hero, Louis Hennepin nonetheless stands bigger than life against the panorama that is Minnesota history.

THE ORIGINAL THOUGHT behind this piece was to reproduce a gallery of artwork made in the missionary's memory. This has been done to the extent of including a hitherto little known painting (see cover), but it is obvious that only a relatively few artists have been inspired through the years to depict him and his exploits in the Upper Mississippi area. (Elsewhere, Thomas Hart Benton, for one, painted a mural in 1961 depicting Hennepin's first view of Niagara Falls for the Robert Moses Niagara Power Plant.)

The Minnesota Historical Society owns one painting, a portrait reputed to be that of Hennepin, by an unknown artist (see page 57). On its back, lettered in a seventeenth-century French script, is the legend: *Louis Hennepin 1694* (this date corresponds with the time of

Hennepin's greatest popularity abroad). It belonged to J. L. Muysier of The Hague, the Netherlands, a collector and connoisseur prominent in art circles in the early nineteenth century. Railroad magnate James J. Hill purchased it later and brought it to St. Paul. In 1921, his widow, Mary Hill, donated it to the historical society. Tradition suggests that it is a self-portrait. "If so," remarked Grace Lee Nute in her introduction to Marion Cross's translation of *Description of Louisiana*, "Father Hennepin's brush was wielded with masterly skill. The portrait is clearly by a pupil or disciple of Rembrandt."<sup>2</sup>

There is also a monumental canvas (74 by 125 inches), entitled "Father Hennepin Discovering the Falls of St. Anthony," in the governor's reception room of the Minnesota State Capitol. Painted by Douglas Volk at the turn of the century, it is an impressive, if somewhat melodramatic, affair. Father Hennepin, in a most priestly pose, raised crucifix in hand, blesses the falls. Picard du Gay (Aguelle) kneels reverently behind him. Several Indians, unaware that their children will be disinherited by intruding white men, observe the ceremony with nonchalance.

Volk was an artist of some renown in Minnesota. The son of a Massachusetts sculptor, he had had the advantage of studying painting and sculpture in Italy and Paris from the time he was fourteen. He is chiefly remem-

bered as the first director of the Minneapolis School of Art (now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design), organized in 1886, the state's first professional art school. Unfortunately, the Hennepin painting is not an example of Volk's best work. He painted to better advantage on a smaller scale. His artistic talent especially shines in the warmly intimate portraits he painted of Minneapolis' leisure class in the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>3</sup>

Two other depictions of Hennepin in Minnesota, the originals of which are outside the state at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, were done by George Catlin, best known for his paintings of American Indians. One shows Hennepin somewhere in a flotilla of canoes as he passed "Lover's Leap" on Lake Pepin, which he called "Lake of Tears." The other is another version of Hennepin and Auguelle viewing the Falls of St. Anthony. As Bertha L. Heilbron pointed out, Catlin painted the cataract "against a background he first saw in 1835, when it still looked much as it did in the Belgian friar's day." The two pictures are among twenty-six oils that Catlin painted to depict the adventures of La Salle and his followers. He did them for Louis Philippe of France and delivered them just before the Revolution of 1848. Since he never was paid for the pictures, he recovered them later.<sup>4</sup>

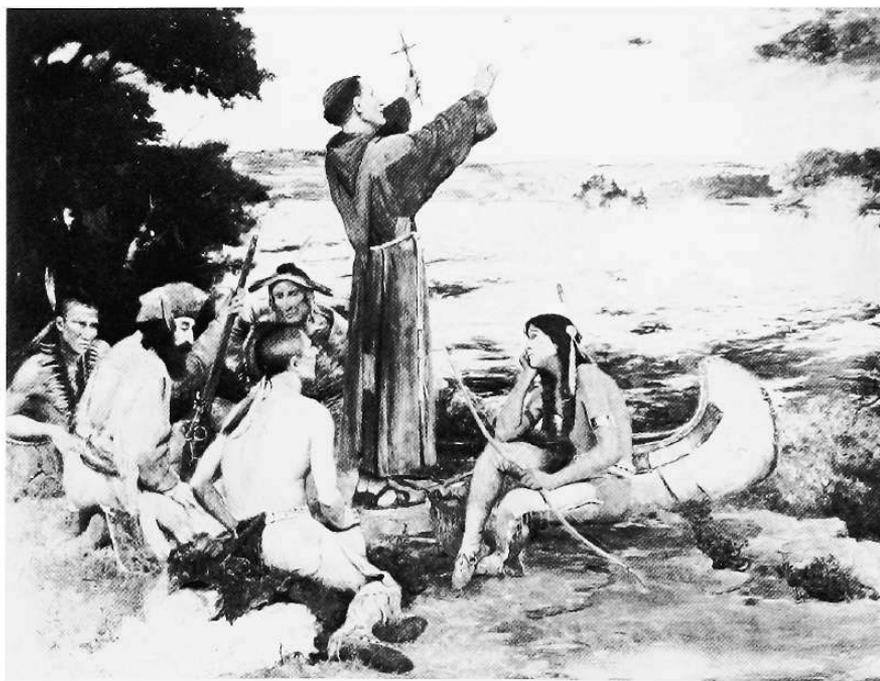
Besides these paintings and the cover picture we will still deal with, there is the heroic copper sculpture of Father Hennepin erected by Minnesota Knights of Columbus in 1930 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the discovery of the falls. Facing eastward in the direction of the waterfall, the sculpture stands atop a massive granite pedestal on a triangular plot of ground in front of

<sup>2</sup>Nute in her introduction to Hennepin, *Description of Louisiana*, xv.

<sup>3</sup>Rena Neumann Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota 1820-1914*, 106-107 (Minneapolis, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>Bertha L. Heilbron, *The Thirty-Second State: A Pictorial History of Minnesota*, 6-7 (St. Paul, 1958).

THIS HUGE CANVAS is artist Douglas Volk's version of "Father Hennepin Discovering the Falls of St. Anthony." It is in the Minnesota State Capitol.





GEORGE CATLIN painted these pictures of Hennepin — one in a flotilla of canoes on Lake Pepin and the other with Auguelle at the Falls of St. Anthony — as part of a



series of twenty-six oils depicting the adventures of La Salle and his followers. Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History, New York.

the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis at Seventeenth and Hennepin avenues. The name of the sculptor has been forgotten. The statue was cast in Geislengen, Germany, "from a design made in America." A copper relief, again by an unknown artist but modeled after Douglas Volk's painting of Hennepin in the State Capitol, is set in the front of the pedestal. Executed more than twenty years after the painting, it has one arresting difference from Volk's work. The bare-breasted Indian maiden in the right foreground of Volk's painting has been provided with a modest buckskin dress in the copper tablet. (The author mentioned this discrepancy to Father Alfred Wagner, current pastor of the Basilica. He had not been aware of it but laughingly commented that "we can't scandalize our people when they're going to church!")<sup>5</sup>

The Knights of Columbus have refurbished the Hennepin Memorial statue. The sculpture has been cleaned, and an addition to its granite pedestal elevates it another four feet. Rededication ceremonies celebrating the 300th Hennepin anniversary will be held at the statue on October 12, 1980, at 3:00 P.M.

Another picture of the explorer's great moment, "Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony, A.D. 1680," made for the Singer Manufacturing Company, New York, famed maker of sewing machines, in 1903, is portrayed on the front of an advertising card in the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is a piece of a puzzle as yet unsolved. The back of the card, which measures 7 by 4½ inches, describes "The Singer Tapestries":

This picture, from the original painted for the Singer Manufacturing Company, by Mr. J. N. Marchand, has been beautifully reproduced in silk stitching on bolting cloth, in size 4½ feet by 3½ feet, all the work being done on a Singer Sewing Machine, without special attachment of any kind.

It is a wonderful example of woman's work on a sewing machine and is one of five similar tapestries illustrating the discoveries by the Spanish and French in the Mississippi Valley during the 16th and 17th Centuries.

Other subjects in the Singer series included "La Salle at the Mouth of the Mississippi" in 1682; "La Salle Leaving Fort St. Louis of Texas," 1687; and "Discovery of the Mississippi by Marquette," 1673.

Singer representatives indicated in 1967 that the company had lost track of both the paintings and the tapestries.<sup>6</sup> Singer, however, provided 8-by-10-inch glossy prints of four of the tapestries, including the Hen-

<sup>5</sup>"Father Hennepin Memorial," a four-page leaflet concerning "Commemorative Ceremonies of Father Hennepin's Memorial at Basilica of St. Mary, Hennepin Ave. & Wayzata Blvd., in Minneapolis on October 12th, 1930," supplied by John J. Symanitz, Minneapolis, chairman of a current committee refurbishing the monument; author telephone interview with Father Alfred Wagner, June 13, 1980.

<sup>6</sup>This correspondence, too, appears no longer to be available. A file card on J. N. Marchand in the MHS audio-visual library, however, has the notation that a letter from company representatives in December, 1967, "indicates they do not know where original paintings or tapestries are."



A STATUE of Father Hennepin, near the Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis, has been newly refurbished and elevated another four feet by addition to its granite pedestal. A copper relief of Hennepin at the falls (above) is modeled after Douglas Volk's painting. — Photographs by Charles Johnston.

nepin. But the present whereabouts of the Hennepin painting remained a mystery. It seemed unlikely that it might turn up in Minnesota.

At any rate, the "discovery" of a *similar* Hennepin came quite by chance (reminiscent, in a way, of the manner in which Hennepin himself "discovered" the falls). Some months ago, Dr. James Trow, a Minneapolis

physician, mentioned casually to Kenneth Carley, a long-time acquaintance and editor of *Minnesota History*, that he owned a "copy" of a Hennepin painting. Carley, who was leaving on a Minnesota Historical Society tour of England, Wales, and Scotland when he assigned this article, suggested I have a look at the picture.

Trow's painting (see cover), which measures 27 by 21 inches, is an original oil, also by J. N. Marchand. It is amazingly similar, but not altogether identical, to the painting pictured on the Singer advertising card. The most readily apparent difference is that the water ex-



*SIMILAR VERSIONS* of "Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony, A.D. 1680" are on a Singer Manufacturing Company advertising card (below) and a tapestry (left) of the same subject. Both closely resemble the newly located painting on the cover.



tends farther on the right on the card than in Trow's painting.<sup>7</sup>

Unquestionably, the painting was also made for the Singer company. It belonged to Trow's grandfather, Jeremiah Callahan, who had a Singer store on Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis in the early years of this century. Trow was told by family members that artist Marchand painted a large oil of the same subject for the Singer offices in New York, then made smaller copies for branch stores. (Trow visited the Singer building in New York a few years ago, however, and was unable to find any trace of the larger painting.) After Callahan retired in the 1920s, the painting was consigned to his basement, where it was stored some twenty years. After that, Trow acquired it, and it languished in *his* basement for perhaps another five years. By the time it came to be cleaned — when Trow decided to hang it in his medical office — accumulated grime masked much of the canvas. The conifers in the left background, for instance, were no longer even visible.<sup>8</sup>

It is a good illustrative painting. As an artist, Marchand was no slouch. A Kansan by birth, John Norval Marchand grew up in Indian territory. The West flavored much of his professional work.

He traveled to Minnesota — to St. Paul — in 1891 when he was sixteen and attended a St. Paul high school. He also studied at the Harwood Art School in Minneapolis and belonged to the Harwood Summer School's art colony in Mendota. For a time he worked on the staff of the *Minneapolis Journal*.<sup>9</sup>

By 1895, eager to compete in the eastern market, he arrived in New York and promptly landed a job as staff artist for the *New York World*. Then, in 1897, with artist Albert Levering, he went to Germany where the two studied painting for two years in Munich. Returning to New York, he embarked on a highly successful commercial career.

*A major show of paintings, photographs, maps, and artifacts portraying the history of the Falls of St. Anthony — all drawn from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society — is planned for October in the society's west gallery.*

Marchand's illustrations appeared in thirty-five books, among them such best-sellers as *Girl of the Golden West*, by David Belasco, and *Arizona: A Romance of the Great Southwest*, by Augustus Thomas, and in countless magazines. He made frequent trips west to gather research material for his paintings. On one such visit in 1902, he met Charles M. Russell at the Wallace Coburn ranch in Montana. It was Marchand who persuaded Russell to make his first trip to New York and then introduced him to prominent art editors and publishers. And it was Marchand's studio that Russell shared on this and a subsequent visit to New York in 1905.

It is also now apparent that Marchand did considerable painting for the Singer Manufacturing Company. He made the five large paintings illustrating discoveries in the Mississippi Valley during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries described on the back of the advertising card. Then, as Dr. Trow has suggested, did he make smaller copies for branch offices? The difference between the painting pictured on the advertising card and Trow's oil would seem to suggest so.

For now, we have only three pieces of the puzzle — the advertising card, the glossy print of a tapestry, and Dr. Trow's painting. This is enough to tease. Where are the five original paintings? The tapestries? How many smaller paintings were made and where are they?

The known body of artwork featuring Father Hennepin is so far a relatively small collection. The Trow painting is a welcome addition. (There may also be several more like it.) And the story behind it is an intriguing one. Who would have thought that the image of Louis Hennepin would one day be appropriated to sell sewing machines? Then again, why not? Hennepin is an American institution. But so are Singer sewing machines.

<sup>7</sup>The author saw the Trow painting at his Minneapolis medical office, June 2, 1980, after which he loaned it to the Minnesota Historical Society to be photographed in color.

<sup>8</sup>Author interview with Dr. James E. Trow, Minneapolis, June 2, 1980.

<sup>9</sup>Concerning John Norval Marchand, see Dorothy Harmsen, *Harmsen's Western Americana*, 136 (Flagstaff, Ariz., 1971), and Peggy and Harold Samuels, *The Illustrated Biographical Encyclopedia of Artists of the American West*, 302 (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).