

CARVER'S OLD FORTIFICATIONS

In the year 1766 Captain Jonathan Carver visited what is now Minnesota. Carver was plainly an adventurer, but he was also an interested observer of the natives of the vast unknown country west and north of the colonies. When, some twelve years after his visit, he published his *Travels*, he devoted over two-thirds of the volume to the Indian tribes he had visited and the natural history of the region they inhabited. Historians have pointed out that the information Carver gives on these subjects is not all strictly original. There is, however, an interesting exception to this criticism. At a date when practically nothing was known about such earthworks, Carver described what he believed were ancient fortifications near the foot of Lake Pepin.¹

Carver was one of the first explorers to draw the attention of antiquaries to the Mississippi River basin. He shares with John and William Bartram pioneer honors in the field of American archaeology. Mounds first attracted attention to American antiquities, and no descriptions of earthworks earlier than those of Carver and the Bartrams have been encountered.² Whether or not what Carver saw

¹ For Carver's description, see his *Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, 56-59 (London, 1778). This familiar account was briefly paraphrased by Samuel R. Brown, in the *Western Gazetteer*, 266 (Auburn, New York, 1817), and is quoted in Benjamin S. Barton's *Observations on Some Parts of Natural History*, 1: 12-14 (London, 1787); Henry R. Schoolcraft's *Narrative Journal of Travels*, 332 (Albany, 1821); George W. Featherstonhaugh's *Report of a Geological Reconnoissance Made in 1835*, 129 n., 130 n. (24 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 333 — serial 282), and *A Canoe Voyage Up the Minnay Sotor*, 1: 241 n., 242 n. (London, 1847); and elsewhere.

² See Samuel F. Haven's *Archaeology of the United States*, 20 (Smithsonian Institution, *Contributions to Knowledge*, vol. 8 — Washington, 1856); and Daniel S. Durrie's article on "Captain Jonathan Carver, and 'Carver's Grant,'" in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 6: 227

at the foot of Lake Pepin was actually artificial earthworks is beside the point, which is that Carver gave an initial impetus to American archaeology. The fact that he mentions the subject at so early a date supports the belief that he actually saw what he described, though he has been doubted on just this point.

But aside from Carver's historical position, what is the significance of the information itself? Were there ever any such earthworks as those he describes on Lake Pepin? There are, clearly, but two possible answers: either Carver described authentic earthworks, or he described what he believed were authentic earthworks. Now the ideal way to judge the correctness of the interpretations of an archaeologist, as of a historian, is to go back to original sources. But this is impossible in the present case; the site, no doubt, has long since been destroyed by the plow or by the river. If we can no longer consult the original sources, the earthworks, we must do the best we can with secondary sources, the documents. Any solution, if one can be found, of the problem whether Carver's fortifications were real or imagined will doubtless come by reason rather than by visible proof.

The important points in Carver's brief description follow. He found one day, apparently quite by chance, "some miles below Lake Pepin" and only a short distance from the river upon an otherwise level plain, a slight elevation which appeared to be an "intrenchment" or fortification. Though it was grass-covered, it appeared to have once been (Madison, 1872). It may be noted that a plan of the works at Circleville, Ohio, was published anonymously in the *Royal American Magazine*, edited by Isaiah Thomas at Boston, in January, 1775. Carver was at that time in London, but he may have seen the account, which is the earliest reference to Mississippi Valley earthworks known to the writer. The Reverend David Jones of Freehold, New Jersey, had visited the Old Chillicothe (now Frankfort), Ohio, works, and he may have sent the contribution to Thomas. See David Jones, *A Journal of Two Visits Made to Some Nations of Indians on the West Side of the River Ohio, in the Years 1772 and 1773*, 56 (New York, 1865).

a breastwork about four feet high and "extending the best part of a mile," probably in circumference. It was large enough to hold five thousand persons, was roughly circular in outline, and its "flanks," or sides, reached to the river. Though badly weathered, the "angles" were distinguishable, and Carver says that the work was as regular as if it had been planned by Vauban himself. The ditch was not plainly marked, but he believed that there had once been one; and, judging from the situation as well as from the shape of the work, Carver was convinced that it had been intended as a fortification. It fronted the country, the rear being protected by the river, and there was no higher ground in the vicinity to command it. Near at hand were some oak trees, and elk and deer had in several places worn paths across the embankments. The amount of earth accumulated upon the work indicated to Carver its great antiquity. He carefully examined the angles and every part of the fortification, he says, and he later regretted that he had not encamped at the site or made drawings of it.

After Carver returned to the colonies he learned that a M. St. Pierre—probably Jacques le Gardeur de St. Pierre, who was commandant at Lake Pepin and the ruins of whose fort Carver says he saw—and several traders had noticed similar works, and that their opinions generally agreed with his. He hoped that his mention of the work would induce others to make a more thorough examination, and to later explorers he left the problem whether it was of natural or artificial origin. He had difficulty in explaining such a work in the light of Indian knowledge of warfare, and he proposed the idea that this region had not always been inhabited by tribes of savages. Such is the information that was printed in Carver's *Travels* of 1778. His manuscript journal contains no mention of the site or of his examination of it. It has been suggested that there is no reason to doubt that Carver described what he saw at this place simply because he does not mention it in his journal; it is prob-

able that he added much from memory when he published the book.³

Carver does not state which bank of the river is concerned in his account, but there seems to be no reason to doubt that he is speaking of the right, or Minnesota bank. Neither does he give the exact location of the site, but he says only that the works were "some miles below Lake Pepin." Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, in his tour of 1805-06, stopped during his descent of the Mississippi at a prairie on the right bank about nine miles below Lake Pepin. There he saw some hills "which had the appearance of the old fortifications spoken of," according to his own statement, in which he undoubtedly refers to Carver's notes. Pike promised to describe the hills more fully at another time, but he does not appear to have done so. It may be noted that he mentions separately the "Grand Encampment," which he locates between the mouths of the Buffalo and Chippewa rivers. Henry R. Schoolcraft, although interested, did not visit the site during his voyage of 1820; he says, however, that the existence of the fortifications was confirmed by a trader, Harman V. Hart of Albany, who spent five years in the Sioux country and frequently visited the site described by Carver as well as others on the St. Peter's or Minnesota River which were reported to demonstrate "an intimate acquaintance with geometrical solids."⁴

Soon after Schoolcraft's visit, Stephen H. Long made his

³The Carver manuscripts which are now in the British Museum do not coincide with the printed volume of travels. Photostats of the manuscripts are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Oliver W. Holmes, in a manuscript account of "Jonathan Carver's Original Journals," owned by the society, on page 28 has made the suggestion concerning the absence of mention of the earthworks in the manuscript journal. The printed description reads very much as though it had been written in reminiscence.

⁴Zebulon M. Pike, *Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, 1: 205 (Coues edition, New York, 1895); Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal*, 312, 331-334. Harman V. Hart was alderman in Albany in 1825, and is listed in the city directories from 1816 to 1845, but no further information concerning him is known to the present writer.

second trip to the upper Mississippi, and his enthusiastic party endeavored to reinvestigate the matter. He was not so fortunate as Schoolcraft in finding someone who could speak of the works from personal knowledge. "We spoke with the oldest traders in the country; with those who had been all their lifetime in the habit of encamping in that vicinity, but met with none who had ever seen them or heard of them." Joseph Rolette, Sr., of the American Fur Company suggested that the most likely place was a well-known trading site called the Grand Encampment, a few miles south of Lake Pepin. Although he had frequently camped there, Rolette had never observed anything like fortifications. With this questionably useful suggestion, the party set out on its survey, Long and Colhoun, the astronomer, having gone from Fort Crawford to Fort Snelling by land. As the members of the river party neared the shore at the Grand Encampment they thought they saw Carver's works in a regular elevation paralleling the river bank, but closer examination showed this to be merely a natural elevation, in no way resembling an artificial earthwork.⁵

The travelers questioned whether or not they had seen what Carver had seen, and whether what Carver had described was actually artificial earthworks. Thomas Say, the distinguished naturalist of the party, and Lieutenant Martin Scott, commanding the military escort from Fort Crawford, thought that there could be no doubt that they were where Carver had been, and that since it would be impossible to overlook a work covering a mile on a prairie not more than two and a half miles wide, Carver must have mistaken a natural for an artificial elevation. In their opinion the strongest argument in favor of the existence of an artificial earthwork was the many mounds observed by Long and Colhoun between Wabasha's village, on the present site of Winona, and the St. Peter's, many of which were near the

⁵ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter's River*, 1: 276-278 (Philadelphia, 1824).

southern end of Lake Pepin. Although they did not see any earthworks with parapets, such as Carver's work was said to have, the works of this nature on the Wisconsin River appeared to corroborate his description. The conclusion of William H. Keating, the historiographer of the expedition, was that Carver had seen what he had described, artificial earthworks, but that they were not to be found at the Grand Encampment. At another place higher up the river, which also appeared to correspond with his description, the party again tried to locate the earthworks, once more without success.

Elliott Coues, in one of the lively footnotes to his edition of Pike's *Expeditions*, charges Keating with faulty logic. The upshot of Keating's examination, that Carver saw what he claimed to have seen but that the works were not at the Grand Encampment, is, Coues says, "clearly a non sequitur, or a *lucus a non*, or a *petitio principii*, or an *argumentum ad hominem*, or whatever may be the logical definition of an illogical syllogism. It misses the point. The question is not one of identifying Carver's locality; the question is whether what he saw there was an artificial work or a natural formation."⁶ One cannot help feeling that Coues himself somehow missed the point. Keating was certainly not in a position to say that Carver had seen what he described, since Keating could not be sure that he had examined what Carver previously had examined. Keating's statement is, however, sufficient authority for assuming that the earthworks were not at the Grand Encampment, where Coues supposed they must have been. At least Keating is sure that there were none there when he examined the site, and only river floods could have materially changed the appearance of the site between Carver's time and Keating's visit. It will be noted later that the earthworks may have been genuine. This possibility obviates Coues's objection that Keating did not say that Carver had seen genuine earth-

⁶ Coues, in Pike, *Expeditions*, 1: 59 n.

works. It does not, on the other hand, establish the authenticity of Carver's earthworks.

Notwithstanding Coues's statement, it is at the outset less important to determine Carver's ability as an archaeological observer than to identify, if possible, the locality in which he places his fortifications. If the formation to which Carver referred could be identified and examined afresh, its origin could undoubtedly be determined and Carver's ability as an observer could at the same time be checked. Since it is no longer possible to do this, one can only form an opinion as to whether the work Carver says he saw was artificial or natural. Keating has been of service in stating that in 1823 he saw no artificial earthworks on the site of the Grand Encampment. Coues believed that Carver's works were on "Teepeeota Point," a projecting tongue of sand drift, or a terrace, which forms the northern end of a kind of island extending some nine miles in the delta of the Zumbro River, and Coues was sure that the works could be located exactly. But "Teepeeota" means simply "many tipis," or Grand Encampment, and it has been noted above that Carver's site probably was not identical with the Grand Encampment.

Long's early reconnaissance of the area under discussion sheds some light here. He writes:

Opposite to the mouth of this river [*Au Boeuf, or Beef Slough*], on the west side of the Mississippi, is a large prairie, situated between the bluffs and the river, being about two miles in width; on a part of it is a scattering growth of timber. Should there be occasion to send troops into this quarter, they might be posted to advantage at this place, as the position would be secure, and at the same time, afford a tolerable command of the river. The elevation of the prairie above the river is about twenty-five feet. Upon the upper end of the prairie is the Grand Encampment, or place of general resort for the Indian traders, during the winter, for the purpose of trafficking with the Indians.⁷

⁷ Stephen H. Long, "Voyage in a Six-oared Skiff to the Falls of Saint Anthony in 1817," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2:22 (1889). See also Lafayette H. Bunnell, *Winona (We-no-nah) and Its Environs*, 62 (Winona, 1897).

It is clear from this passage that as early as 1817 Long had examined with some care, as a likely site for an army post, the whole of this area, including the Grand Encampment. It is hardly credible that he would have missed any old earthwork there. Coues believed that Carver had mistaken natural for artificial works, as, apparently, William Clark did some years later on the Missouri. This view may be correct, but one wishes that Coues had made a personal survey of the locality, which would doubtless have been thorough and final.

We come now to the year 1835, exactly a century ago, when there journeyed to Minnesota its first professional geologist, George W. Featherstonhaugh. As United States geologist, he was accompanied by a young officer of the army, Lieutenant William W. Mather, later state geologist of Ohio. These men also were very much interested in finding Carver's site. Featherstonhaugh found that an extensive prairie, about halfway between the site of Wabasha's village—that is, the upper village, said to be on the Grand Encampment—and Lake Pepin, was bordered with cedar trees. The prairie was "about eight miles S. E. of Roque's trading-house, near the entrance of Lake Pepin," and was, of course, in the general area mentioned in earlier accounts. On climbing the bank where he saw the trees, he found, according to his narrative, a broad, smooth prairie. Toward the south, not more than two miles away, he noticed some unusual elevations and immediately concluded that he had found Carver's work; on going closer he was sure that he had done so. It was, he felt, sufficiently remarkable to justify Carver's description.⁸

The elevation had, according to Featherstonhaugh, the appearance of an ancient military work in ruin. There ap-

⁸ Featherstonhaugh, *Report*, 129-132. The whereabouts of the papers of Featherstonhaugh and Mather is not known. Mather's own report was submitted directly to the war department, where it remained until 1851. In that year Mather was invited to become an honorary member of the Minnesota Historical Society, and in accepting the honor he re-

peared to have been a ditch outside the walls, filled in places with drifted sand; there was a slope of about twenty yards "from what might be supposed the walls of the work to the ditch." Within the walls was a great open space; there were irregular salient angles, and at three different places were the more regular remains of something like bastions. This enclosed area was seventy yards in diameter in a northwest-southeast direction, including the ruins of several "terraces," by which the writer may mean artificial mounds. The circumference of this work, including the angles, was four hundred and twenty-four yards. Seven hundred yards south-southeast of this work was another which resembled the first in form and size, and at a similar distance east-southeast from the last was a still larger work, eleven hundred yards in circumference, with similar remnants of bastions. Featherstonhaugh estimated that this enclosure would easily contain a thousand persons. Its walls, if they could be called such, were lofty, he says; on the south side of the work was a deep ditch. In the area to the south of these works he counted six more elevations, each rudely resembling the other, with what appeared to be a defense work connecting them. At the northern end of the group everything bore evidence of rude artificial work; at the southern end, and not far from the river, the works passed gradually into an irregular surface, a mere "confused intermixing of cavities and knolls, that might be satisfactorily attributed to the blowing of sand." The writer states that the prairie is a sand prairie, covered with a foot or two of vegetable matter, and he confirms Carver's statement that the southern end of the works was overgrown by oaks. All the angles and bastions were very much worn away by erosion, and some of the outer slopes consisted of wind-blown sand. Featherstonhaugh was, finally, not satisfied as to

ferred to the report and offered to recover the manuscript for the society. A short time later the war department did return the document to him, but he died soon thereafter and the subsequent history of his report is unknown.

whether the work was artificial or natural. If, when it became better known and studied, Indian artifacts should be found near the site, the question of whether the works were artificial would, he thought, be finally settled; if any artifacts were there, however, they would probably be buried too deep for the passing traveler to find them. He adds that he brought nothing away except a plan of the general appearance of the site and one or two of the principal elevations. If these are still in existence, search has failed to reveal their whereabouts.

Featherstonhaugh in his volume entitled *A Canoe Voyage Up the Minnay Sotor*, which was published in 1847, gives a few more data from his survey of the formation. He appears to have been directed to the place by Louis L'Amirant, one of his voyageurs. The explorer states here that the prairie was quite level from the river to the elevations, the surface "completely composed of dusty sand, covering a black alluvial mould." A ditch surrounded the first work, "whether made by men or the wind"; to the northeast was a terrace eight paces broad. Standing at the highest point, he could observe a line of elevations extending for at least four miles. The author seems to have had serious doubts about the origin of the work, just as did later geologists. It was possible, he thought, that the formation had been caused by the wind, but he was by no means certain. In one part all was an even prairie, in another were many structures resembling works of an artificial nature. But if the works were fortifications, what were they intended to defend? And Carver had certainly spoken somewhat extravagantly when he said that they were fashioned with the skill of a Vauban. In telling of his return trip from the upper Minnesota, Featherstonhaugh again mentions the earthworks. On October 24 his party landed at "Cedar Prairie, where Carver's fortifications are." He had previously visited them on September 8, and he now made a circuit of them—a distance of about four miles—"and

ascertained that they do not come to the river, some bottom land intercepting them." He again refers to the apparent artificiality of the northern end. "The high mounds are all hollow inside," he says, probably referring to the previously mentioned "terraces," which, from this description, resemble the remains of earth lodges. Again he leaves unsettled the question of the origin of the works.⁹

There is now a gap in the evidence from 1835 to 1884. In the course of mound surveys in the latter year, Theodore H. Lewis visited "Sand Prairie" and surveyed what had been reported to him as "Carver's Fort." The difficulties that he encountered are described in a letter to his patron, Alfred J. Hill, dated at Wabasha, August 8, 1884, in which Lewis mentions having thoroughly explored Sand Prairie without having discovered a single mound or artificial work. "Those who were hunting for Carver's fort," he writes, "ought to have known that sand ridges from 6 to 20 ft high was not a work 4 ft high and that Sand prairie is not a 'fine level open plain' but the greater portion of it is rolling & rough." He reports a conversation with Francis Talbot of Wabasha, who had furnished data to the compiler of a *History of Wabasha County* published in the same year. Lewis assured Talbot that what he called "Carver's Fort" was only a firebreak; "he said well he was on record as the discoverer of it & as next year it would be destroyed as it is being grubbed no one could dispute it." Lewis immediately took the cue and surveyed the site, an operation which, he remarked, "has taken the backbone" out of Talbot. Talbot probably was the source for the vague statement made on page 581 of the *History* that Carver's fortification "was undoubtedly below Wabasha, at what is now called Sand Prairie, also a part of the 'Grand Encampment,' where mounds and relics of the prehistoric age have been found, many of which are traceable and easily seen." When Professor Newton H. Winchell came to pub-

⁹ Featherstonhaugh, *Canoe Voyage*, 1: 241-245; 2: 19.

lish in the *Aborigines of Minnesota* the material gathered by Lewis, the data which he had preserved about the Sand Prairie site were omitted, undoubtedly because Lewis did not believe in the ancient origin of the work. Lewis' note in his field book for August 6 reads: "This is undoubtedly a fire brake. The furrow can be plainly traced as per cross section."¹⁰

It is only fair to local historians to note that Thomas E. Randall, in his *History of the Chippewa Valley*, 40 (Eau Claire, 1875), states that he had frequently examined the works "spoken of by Carver and Featherstonhaugh as vast, ancient fortifications, situated on the west bank of the Mississippi, between the village of Wabasha, and what used to be known as the grand Encampment, and must say that a great stretch of the imagination is required to make anything more of them, than the formations of nature's own handywork." Randall makes clear his position that until further excavation should "disclose more convincing evidence of human agency" in the construction of these works, he would be slow to accept the explorers' conclusions.

Professor Winchell and Dr. Warren Upham state that Carver's fortifications were not personally known to them, but that on the basis of what could be gathered from a general knowledge of the valley of the river, from the available descriptions, and from the absence of further descriptions

¹⁰ Lewis' letter is in the Northwestern Archaeological Survey Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. See also, in the same collection, his Field Books, no. 16, p. 7. It should here be noted that Dr. L. C. Estes, who is probably Dr. David C. Estes of Lake City, referred to Carver's notes on the earthworks in a communication to the Smithsonian Institution in 1866. He states that for several years he had given attention to the antiquities on the banks of the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin, but that the passing of eighty or ninety years since Carver's time had made great changes in their appearance. "We can very easily imagine that they were once used for fortifications, but they have now scarcely any resemblance to modern forts." Other earthworks at Lake City, Dr. Estes believed, also were fortifications and "turf houses" erected by a race superior to the Indian. Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Reports*, 1866, p. 366 (39 Congress, 2 session, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 83 — serial 1302).

by later travelers, they thought that the works were undoubtedly due to some "outliers" of the sandstone which forms the lower slopes of the bluffs in the valley at this point.¹¹ Such rocky formations were, they thought, probably the cause of the existence of this sand prairie, such remnants of once continuous formations being known at several places. The covering of sand could be explained by the supposition that the St. Croix sandstone had there been exposed to the action of sand and water, and thus disintegrated.

It is clear that the original site of Carver's fortifications is still in doubt, no one of the sources relating to them having accurately located them. Irrespective of the authenticity of the works, and Coues notwithstanding, it should be possible to determine the site. It may or may not have been identical with the Grand Encampment. Conflicting as it appears at certain points to be, what evidence is known to exist concerning Carver's works has here been presented. So far as Carver himself is concerned, there can be little question as to his sincerity in the matter. It should be borne in mind that Carver knew some military science—he appears, at least, to have been familiar with the works of Vauban, and he served as an officer in the French and Indian Wars—and he would scarcely have described a formation as a superb military work if it had had absolutely no resemblance to an artificial structure. Beyond this, his description, like that of the somewhat maligned Featherstonhaugh, is quite circumstantial, though it may have been written some time after his visit to the West. It is to be hoped that Featherstonhaugh's sketches of the site will some day be recovered, since an inspection of them would doubtless indicate whether or not the works were artificial or natural in origin. Even better than a discovery of these

¹¹ Newton H. Winchell and Warren Upham, *The Geology of Minnesota*, 57 n. (Geological and Natural History Survey of Minnesota, *Final Report*, vol. 2—St. Paul, 1888).

sketches would be a rediscovery of the original site, though this is, certainly, a very remote possibility. Such a rediscovery would make possible a definite settlement of the nature of these so-called fortifications.

Judging from analagous data from the same region of the upper Mississippi, which can here only be referred to, there is a possibility that Carver saw truly artificial earthworks. The evidence preserved by archaeological surveys establishes the fact that certain sites in the upper Mississippi Valley, doubtless the remains of house structures, were enclosed with walls of earth or palisades of timbers and earth. Such, Carver's earthworks may have been. If it is ever possible to trace the prehistoric migrations of peoples across the great Mississippi Valley, it may be possible also to establish the relationship between these village sites and the mounds, and this may in turn indicate to what groups the earthworks—if such they were—mentioned by Carver belonged. Carver's mention of earthworks is, after all, notable chiefly because it came at such an early date rather than because it is a permanent contribution to knowledge. There seems, however, to be no good reason to state categorically that in this matter, as in some others, Carver drew on his imagination or on the tales of other travelers, and that he saw at the foot of Lake Pepin nothing more than natural, broken, river country.

G. HUBERT SMITH

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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](#).