

CARTOUCHE from  
Carver's map

# The Writings of JONATHAN CARVER

RUSSELL W. FRIDLEY

AMONG THE prized possessions of the Minnesota Historical Society is its collection of books and manuscripts relating to the career of Jonathan Carver, the explorer who spent the winter and spring of 1766–67 in the Minnesota country. It includes seventeen of the thirty-nine known editions of Carver's *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, as well as copies of two other rare books bearing his name as author – the *New Universal Traveller* and a *Treatise on the Culture of the Tobacco Plant*, both published in London in 1779.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1778 and 1881 the *Travels* came

off European and American presses at an average rate of a new edition every thirty-two months.<sup>2</sup> They were printed in five languages in nine countries – England, Ireland, Germany, France, the United States, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, and Greece. Eighteen are in English, seven in German, twelve in French, one in Dutch, and one in Greek. In the third London edition – that of 1781 – there are changes in the text, chiefly in Chapter 19, which very likely were made before the author's death in 1780. A portrait of Carver and a biographical sketch of him by Dr. John Coakley Lettsom were added in the 1781 edition, which became the standard version.

The important collections of Carver's

MR. FRIDLEY here contributes to a series of articles describing some of the Minnesota Historical Society's treasured collections. He joined the society's staff as assistant director in 1953, and he is now serving as its acting director.

<sup>1</sup> Although the *New Universal Traveller* bears Carver's name, it is believed that he was not the author, but that he merely allowed his name to be used in return for some financial consideration.

*Travels* in the United States, in addition to that owned by the society, are in the New York Public Library, which has twenty-four editions; the Newberry Library of Chicago, with eighteen; the Library of Congress, with seventeen; the John Carter Brown Library of Providence, Rhode Island, with fourteen; and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, with eleven.<sup>3</sup>

The Minnesota Historical Society has the editions published in London in 1778, 1779, and 1781; in Dublin in 1779; in Hamburg in 1780; in Paris in 1784; in Yverdon, Switzerland, in 1784; in Philadelphia in 1789

<sup>3</sup> See John Thomas Lee, "A Bibliography of Carver's *Travels*," and the same writer's "Captain Jonathan Carver: Additional Data," in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings*, 1909, p. 143-183, and 1912, p. 121-123. Lee lists thirty-three editions of the *Travels*. Since he published his studies, six other editions have become known. They were published in Reutlingen, Germany, in 1788 and 1801; in Braunschweig, Germany, in 1807, 1829, and 1831; and in Galizao, Greece, in 1881. Information about them was supplied in letters to the writer from Stanley Pargellis of the Newberry Library, Chicago, November 16, 1954, and Rachel Raisin of the University of Cincinnati library, November 10, 1954.

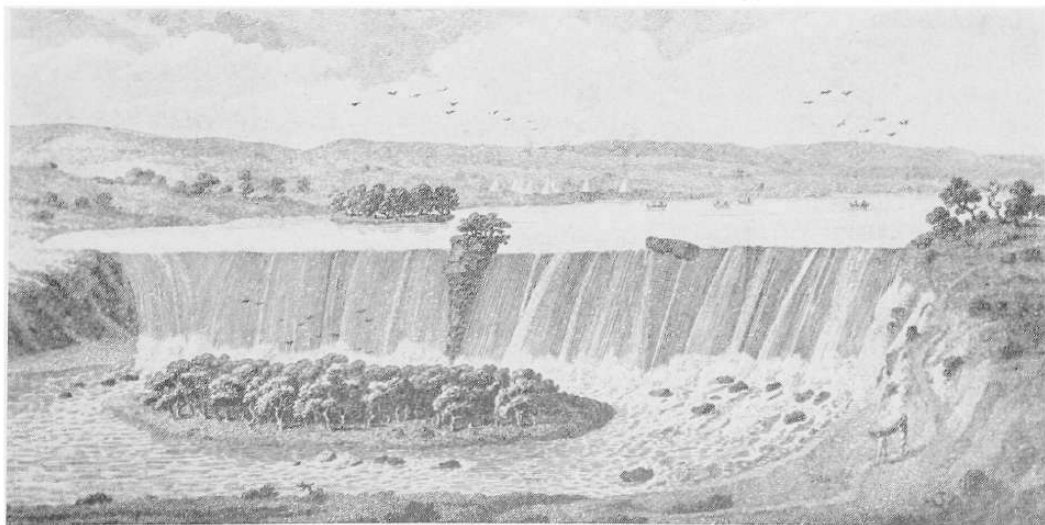
<sup>4</sup> This statement is based upon recent correspondence with these and other American libraries that own significant collections of the *Travels*.

<sup>5</sup> The nine editions published at Tours in French represent an abridged version of the text.

and 1796; in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1794; in Boston in 1797; in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1798; in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1802; in Walpole, New Hampshire, in 1813; in New York in 1838; and in Tours, France, in 1861 and 1870. It lacks editions published in Philadelphia in 1784, 1792, and 1794; in Reutlingen in 1788 and 1801; in Leyden in 1796; in Paris in 1802; in Glasgow in 1805; in Braunschweig in 1807, 1829, 1830, and 1831; in Edinburgh in 1807 and 1808; in Tours in 1845, 1846, 1849, 1850, 1852, 1858, and 1865; and in Galizao in 1881.<sup>4</sup> Since the society hopes eventually to own all thirty-nine editions of the *Travels*, it is continuing to search for copies of this rare work.

The book's remarkable history leads the reader to expect a compelling subject. The text easily fulfills this expectation, for a substantial part of its content is devoted to the explorer's account of his abortive attempt to discover the Northwest Passage, the vainly sought water route to the Western Sea. In 1766 Carver traveled from Boston to Fort Michilimackinac, where he obtained a commission from the commandant, Major Robert Rogers, to explore the territory to the west. According to his own statement, Carver pushed westward from Mack-

#### CARVER'S view of the Falls of St. Anthony





JONATHAN Carver

inac to Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, the Falls of St. Anthony, and thence to a point two hundred miles up the Minnesota River, where he wintered with the Sioux of the Plains. Because fresh supplies failed to reach him, he returned to Mackinac the following summer by way of Grand Portage. After a brief stay in Boston, he sailed for England, where he attempted to capitalize on his travels by publishing the story of his exploits.

That he succeeded is obvious, for the first edition of the *Travels* appeared in England in 1778. A third of the text is devoted to his journal, and the remaining two-thirds to an account of the "origin, manners, customs, religion, and language of the Indians." The book became a best seller, and for more than a century it remained a standard historical work on the American Indians. For Minnesotans, it has had perennial interest, since much of the journal recounts the author's adventures in their state's present area. There his journey took on its novel aspect, and there his hopes of finding the Northwest Passage were finally dashed.

It is an interest in Carver the man that is reflected in the Minnesota Historical So-

ciety's collection of Carver materials—a collection which includes far more than seventeen editions of the *Travels*. A search through printed works in its library discloses a published version of a letter that Carver wrote to his wife from Mackinac on September 24, 1767, in which he gave the first known account of his journey into the Northwest. Among other published Carver documents are a series of petitions, dating from 1756 to 1773, asking compensation from the king for injuries sustained during the French and Indian War and for services rendered in exploring the country west of the Great Lakes.<sup>5</sup> A *Short History and Description of Fort Niagara*, written in 1758, by "An English Prisoner," is credited to Carver by the editor, Paul Leicester Ford.<sup>6</sup> Those who wish to trace the explorer's descent from Governor John Carver of Plymouth colony will find his family history in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* and a number of other works in the society's extensive collection of materials on American genealogy.

IN ADDITION to published sources, the society has built up a rich store of manuscript material by and about Carver. Among the more significant items are photostatic copies of Carver's original journals, parts of which probably were written during the course of his travels. They were made for the society in 1924 from the originals in the British Museum in London.

Included are three versions of Carver's record of his journey. The first consists of day-by-day entries, beginning at Detroit on August 5, 1766, in which are noted distances, directions, and the like. These may well be notes for Carver's map of his travels. The second is a continuous narrative

<sup>5</sup> State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings*, 1909, p. 149–151; 1912, p. 107–120. The latter volume also includes a letter which Carver wrote to Major John Hawks during the French and Indian War.

<sup>6</sup> The society has a photostatic copy of this rare pamphlet (Brooklyn, 1890).

written in a large, bold hand, with frequent interlineations. Carver probably prepared this account of his travels at Mackinac, basing it on his field notes. The third manuscript appears to be in the same hand, but written with a finer pen. Apparently it was copied from the second, and possibly it was prepared at Boston during the winter of 1768-69. Accompanying these manuscripts is a copy of the map published with each edition of the *Travels*, several other maps of the Northwest, and an interesting Indian pictograph.

Each of these manuscript accounts of Carver's journey differs considerably from that printed in the *Travels*. They suggest that in the published work Carver intentionally left incomplete the story of his explorations. Moreover, they illuminate an important point which the published book leaves obscure—that of Roger's precise relation to Carver's journey. They also give new meaning to the entire story of Carver's exploits.<sup>7</sup>

Other materials in the society's manuscript collection relate to the so-called Carver grant—a claim to a huge grant of land made to Carver by the Sioux "at the great Cave, May the First," 1767. It was signed by two Sioux sachems, who made their marks and drew their symbols. The supposed deed granted to the explorer a tract of twelve million acres—an area larger than the state of Maryland. It was located north of Lake Pepin and embraced the present sites of Minneapolis and St. Paul and large areas of the present states of Minnesota and Wisconsin.

So far as can be ascertained, Carver never mentioned the grant during his lifetime. His

descendants, however, were fully aware of it, for his daughter sold her rights under the deed to a London mercantile firm, which dispatched an agent to the United States to try to validate it. The society has a copy of the purported deed dated May 1, 1767, and eleven other versions, the most recent of which is dated 1860. The deed naturally became a magnet for land speculators attempting to establish its validity.

The society's most significant group of manuscripts relating to the Carver deed was acquired as recently as October, 1953. At that time the society obtained from Mrs. Susan Harrison Cobb of Rutland, Vermont, some papers of her great-grandfather, Samuel Harrison, who shortly after 1800 acted as agent for the Carver heirs in litigation pertaining to the Carver grant. With the Reverend Samuel Peters, who had purchased a share in the grant and who led the fight to prove it genuine, Harrison appeared before a committee of the United States Senate in 1806 in an unsuccessful attempt to have the validity of the Carver deed confirmed.

Despite their failure to produce the original deed at that time, Peters, Harrison, Carver's son Rufus, and others succeeded in keeping the claim before Congress for more than twenty years. Speaking for the Supreme Court in the case of *Johnson v. McIntosh* in 1823, Chief Justice Marshall rendered a decision that stripped of any legal basis the Carver claim and similar claims derived from Indian grants. "The Indian inhabitants are to be considered merely as occupants," according to Marshall's decision, "to be protected . . . in the possession of their lands, but to be deemed incapable of transferring absolute title to others."<sup>8</sup> Advocates of the Carver claim, however, persisted in their efforts to validate it. For decades after Marshall's decision, maps of the Northwest denoting Carver's grant were widely circulated. In 1838 the proponents of the Carver deed appear to have had a hand in bringing out the last English edition of the *Travels*, which

<sup>7</sup> The society has photostats of some of the official Robert Rogers Papers in the Public Record Office in London. Bearing also on the relations of Carver and Rogers are an account of "The Northwest Passage Petitions" and the proceedings of the "Court martial of Major Robert Rogers, October, 1768," both in the *Appendix* published with the limited edition of Kenneth Roberts' popular historical novel, *Northwest Passage*, 2:61-159 (New York, 1937).

<sup>8</sup> Wheaton, 591.



VIGNETTE from the *Tours editions*

bears a unique title—*Carver's Travels in Wisconsin*.<sup>9</sup>

In 1896 a copy of the Carver deed was found registered in Ross County, Ohio. This gave new impetus to Carver claimants, including the explorer's heirs, who began to press new claims to the land in the upper Mississippi Valley. With the consent of Harrison's heirs they were allowed to search the latter's papers for evidence that would bolster their claims. The Harrison Papers were not heard of again until 1953, when Mrs. Cobb wrote the society about some family letters she had found in her home. As a result, the society acquired thirty-four items, thirteen of which are letters written to Harrison and Joshua Goss by Peters between 1804 and 1814. Most of them relate to Peters' plans for validating the Carver claim and for colonizing the area embraced by the Carver grant, once it was obtained. Some describe Peters' intention of establishing a village called "CarversPort" at the "Chippeway River's mouth" as the "capitol" of the supposed colony. The Harrison Papers also include a draft of a letter that Harrison wrote to President Jefferson in 1805, imploring him to assist in trying to find the Sioux who made the grant and to see "whether they are willing to ratify their engagement with Capt Carver." The full story of the ill-fated Carver deed can be told only by a scholar who makes a careful study of the Harrison material.

DURING ITS CENTURY and more of existence, the Minnesota Historical Society

has received hundreds of requests for information about the controversial Carver grant. Interest in the grant has kept alive the saga of Jonathan Carver virtually down to the present. His memory also has been commemorated in the name of the famous St. Paul cave below Dayton's Bluff, where he is said to have met with the Sioux to receive the controversial grant, and in the name of a Minnesota Valley county and village.

That Carver's name is widely known is fitting, for his *Travels* represents a substantial and lasting contribution to the literature of exploration. There he emerges as a courageous and intelligent traveler who knew how to take advantage of a unique opportunity. He was the first person to advertise the upper Northwest to the English-speaking world. He adapted his book to the intellectual climate of Europe by including a pleasing portrayal of the social state of the red man, and by expressing his admiration for the Indians' primitive virtues. Such sentiments could not fail to appeal to Europeans versed in the "return to nature doctrine," then very much in vogue. "The trip was destined to do much less, and much more, than was expected of it," wrote Allan Nevins of Carver's journey; "it was to discover no Northwest passage, and to map no vast extent of unknown territory; but it was to give birth to a book of travel which should arouse European curiosity for America as no other ever had, and to interest Schiller, Chateaubriand, and Byron."<sup>10</sup>

The influence of the *Travels* upon later generations can only be suggested here. Carver's detailed map of the Northwest and his tales of the "Shining Mountains," as he termed the Rockies, and of the "River of the West," which he also called the "Ouragon," greatly added to the geographic knowledge

<sup>9</sup> This volume is in the society's collection. Beginning with the 1784 Philadelphia edition, all other English editions are entitled *Three Years Travels, through the Interior Parts of North America, for More Than Five Thousand Miles*.

<sup>10</sup> Nevins, "The Life of Robert Rogers," in Robert Rogers, *Ponteach*, 123 (Chicago, 1914).



of the continent. The word "Oregon" was popularized in the *Travels*; there Bryant, who used it in "Thanatopsis," probably first saw it. Carver's picture of the Falls of St. Anthony is the earliest known.<sup>11</sup> His account of what he thought were ruins of ancient earthworks near Lake Pepin gave an initial impulse to American archaeology by calling attention for the first time to the possible existence of ancient monuments in the Mississippi Valley.<sup>12</sup> From the *Travels* Schiller drew the thought and language for his "Naudowessiers Totenlied," familiar to English readers through Bulwer-Lytton's translation, "The Indian's Death Dirge." Chateaubriand drew heavily upon Carver's description of Indian customs in writing his *Voyage en Amerique*. Thousands of Europeans obtained their ideas of American Indians from it.

Above all, Carver displayed a keen sense of the development of the future. An example is his suggestion of canals between great waterways and his recognition of the advantages of a possible water route for vessels from the Northwest to the Atlantic through the Great Lakes and the

St. Lawrence River. He predicted the westward movement in the following classic passage: "To what power or authority this new world will become dependent, after it has arisen from its present uncultivated state, time alone can discover. But as the seat of Empire from time immemorial has been gradually progressive towards the West, there is no doubt but that at some future period, mighty kingdoms will emerge from these wildernesses, and stately palaces and solemn temples, with gilded spires reaching the skies, supplant the Indian huts, whose only decorations are the barbarous trophies of their vanquished enemies."<sup>13</sup>

Thus Carver's search for the Northwest Passage—an exploration early frustrated and ending in disappointment—ironically provided the raw material for one of the most amazing travel books in American history.

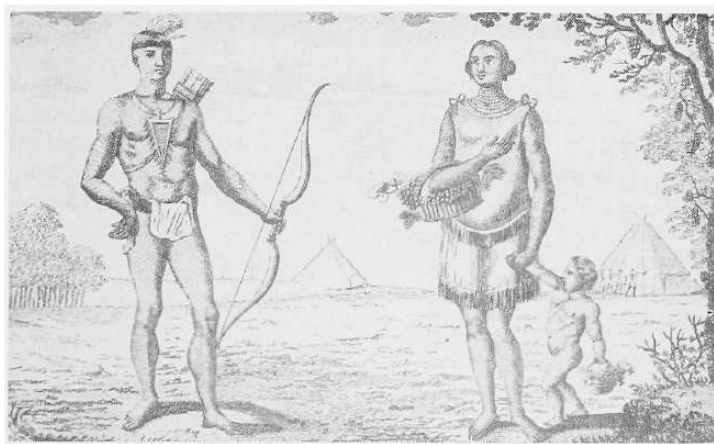
The journey of Jonathan Carver, as described in his own account, truly kindles the imagination. Ample materials await the scholar seeking to interpret anew the career of the controversial captain who embarked upon a search for the Northwest Passage in the Minnesota country. Interest in Carver today, as in his own era, is considerable. For a rich adventure in Northwest history, a few hours spent in examining the Carver materials at the Minnesota Historical Society—printed or manuscript—is highly recommended.

<sup>11</sup> This view and the pictures reproduced on pages 154, 156, and 159 are from the editions of Carver's *Travels* published at London in 1778 and 1781.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Hubert Smith, "Carver's Old Fortifications," in *Minnesota History*, 16:152-165 (June, 1935).

<sup>13</sup> Carver, *Travels*, vii (London, 1781).

A family  
of Sioux Indians  
as pictured  
in Carver's *Travels*





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](#).