FATHER LOUIS HENNEPIN, 1694 ~

[From an oil painting by an unknown artist in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.]
FATHER LOUIS HENNEPIN, BELGIAN¹

It is extremely gratifying to me and to every Belgian to find that the memory of our compatriot, Father Louis Hennepin, is revered and the history of his achievements commemorated here on the spot where he made the great discovery of the falls which he named in honor of St. Anthony of Padua. I want to thank you, not only on my own behalf, but also on behalf of the Belgian nation for this splendid tribute to the memory of our fellow countryman. And, although I have received no special message from the spirit world, I am confident that the good Father Hennepin himself must look down with satisfaction upon this scene and that he is gratified to know that his great exploit is not forgotten by those who followed in his footsteps and who have built a great metropolis where he found a primeval forest.

Although I have no direct communication from Father Hennepin, I have here a message, which I will now read to you, from his fellow townsmen and from the mayor of Ath, where he was born:

ADMINISTRATION OF THE COMMUNE OF ATH
ATH, September 20th, 1930

TO HIS HIGHNESS THE PRINCE ALBERT DE LIGNE, BELGIAN AMBASSADOR, WASHINGTON.

HIGHNESS:

The population of Ath has been deeply gratified to learn that the City of Minneapolis proposes to celebrate, on the 12th day of October next, the 250th Anniversary of the Discovery of the Falls of the Mississippi by a son of Ath, the Father Hennepin.

The people of our community beg you to be kind enough to

¹This address by His Highness, the Prince de Ligne, Belgian ambassador to the United States, was read in his absence by the Viscount de Lantsheere, first secretary of the Belgian embassy, at the program held in the Minneapolis Auditorium on October 12 in celebration of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Hennepin's discovery of the Falls of St. Anthony. Ed.
PRINCE ALBERT DE LIGNE

convey to the City of Minneapolis, and to the Committee which is organizing these ceremonies, their most sincere and grateful appreciation of this signal honor rendered to their illustrious fellow citizen.

The Town of Ath, on its part, has long since dedicated one of its streets to the great explorer Hennepin, and has given his name, which is ever held in honor here, to one of our public fountains, of which a photograph is annexed.²

Please accept, Highness, the assurance of our grateful appreciation and of our high respect.

THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCILLORS
THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMUNE

I may say that I, too, have a rather special personal interest in Father Hennepin, for, although I cannot claim to be one of his fellow townsmen, I may at least claim to be in a way one of his neighbors. I do not mean to say that I lived around there during the good friar's lifetime, but my ancestors then lived only a few miles from Ath at the Castle of Beloeil, which is still our family seat. Moreover, I believe that one of my ancestors may have been the indirect cause of Hennepin's entering the Franciscan order of Recollects, which in turn was the direct cause of his becoming a missionary and explorer in America. This ancestor of mine was Jean de Ligne, who seems to have contracted a habit of building churches and religious houses (either from extreme piety, or, as some historians hint, as expiation for his many sins) and among others he founded at Ath in 1445 a monastery for the order of Recollects. It was within the shadow of this friary that Louis Hennepin was born and spent his early youth, and it is said that his thoughts were turned toward a religious life, and especially toward the order of Recollects, by the proximity and influence of the monastery that Jean de Ligne had built. I am glad to think that one of my family had some part, even thus accidentally, in turning the mind of Father Hennepin toward that career which eventually brought him to the Falls of St.

² Pictures of the Rue Hennepin and the Hennepin pump in Ath appear ante, p. 3. Ed.
Anthony and which gives me the privilege and the pleasure of being here in Minneapolis today.

In the case of Father Hennepin, as in the case of Homer, Columbus, and other historic figures, several towns have claimed the honor of being his birthplace. But the records leave no doubt that Hennepin was a native of Ath in the Belgian province of Hainaut. It is clearly stated in his *Nouveau voyage* that he was born at Ath and that he was a fellow citizen of the Jesuit Father Pierson, a contemporary missionary among the Sioux Indians in what is now Wisconsin.

According to the old records of the seventeenth century, Hennepin's father, Gaspard Hennepin, owned two houses, numbers 38 and 39, in what was then known as the "Street behind the Recollects" and which is today the Impasse Camberfosse. The rear entrance to the Franciscan friary was next door at number 40—a site now occupied by a spinning mill. On the exterior wall of the neighboring church may be seen the memorial stone marking the burial place of Gaspard Hennepin and Robertine Leleup, his wife; while in the archives of that church will be found the record of baptism of their six children. He whose achievements we celebrate today was baptized on April 7, 1640, under the name of Johannes. It is supposed that he adopted the name of Louis at the time of his confirmation or on the occasion of his admission to the priesthood.

After studying at the Latin school at Ath, Hennepin went to the Recollect monastery at Bethune, where he studied under his compatriot, Father de la Ribourde, who also went as a missionary to America and who was there massacred by the Indians. It was at the friary of Bethune that Hennepin received the gray robe of a Franciscan friar. In going to Bethune, Hennepin did not expatriate himself, for at that period Bethune was still, as it had been for centuries, a town of the Belgian provinces, or, as they were then generally
called, the Spanish Netherlands. It was not until 1679 that the territory including Bethune was ceded to Louis XIV and became a town of France.

I have dwelt on Father Hennepin's nativity and early life not because it is anything new to you here in Minnesota who are already familiar with his history, but rather, as the lawyers say, "for the record," and because many historians, even those of the highest rank, have carelessly attributed his origin to countries other than his own. He has sometimes been mentioned as a "Flemish priest," which is not far wrong, as Flemings and Walloons are all one family; but, as a matter of fact, he was a Walloon — that is a native of our French-speaking provinces — and he only learned Flemish by going to study that language at Ghent, where his sister lived. I have also seen him mentioned as "a Dutch friar," which is still further from the mark. More frequently he is spoken of as a Frenchman, presumably because he went to America as a missionary with the great French explorer, La Salle. And that usually accurate authority, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, goes so far as to change not only his nationality but also his religious order in calling him a "French Jesuit."

Belgium is too proud of its great son to permit him to be adopted by our neighbors. At the same time we acknowledge with appreciation that it was under the protection of France that Father Hennepin was enabled to prosecute his work as a missionary and explorer in America. But in the great work of founding New France on the American continent, there is glory enough for the great French pioneers,— such as La Salle, Marquette, Jolliet, Du Luth, and others, to whose exploits I wish to pay tribute here today,— as well as for the Belgian Father Hennepin and other Belgian priests who shared in their great emprise.

From the little we know of Hennepin's early life, he seems to have been, in addition to a faithful and pious follower of St. Francis, a man zealous in good works, of strong physique,
and of energetic nature, with a love for "the great open spaces" and a spirit of adventure. For a while he served as army chaplain with the troops of his country against the invading forces of Louis XIV. We hear of him at the siege of Maastricht and at the battle of Seneffe. A year or two later he found opportunity to fulfill his long-cherished wish to go as a missionary to the New World.

The fame of Father Hennepin rests upon the comparatively short period of his life which he spent as a missionary and explorer in America and upon the description which he wrote of the upper Mississippi Valley and its inhabitants. His *Description de la Louisiane* was the first published description of this section of your country, and it is now a rare and expensive piece of Americana. It was one of the "best sellers" of its day, and Father Hennepin may be considered Minnesota's first "booster" and publicity man as well as its first historian. He was also your first missionary and first teacher, although it seems that he learned more from the Indians than they did from him and his efforts in the religious line bore no immediate fruit. Judging from the map which accompanied his book, it seems that he was also a rather good geographer, and he may be said to be the first man to "put you on the map."

Whether Hennepin ever explored — or ever claimed to have explored — the lower Mississippi, as indicated in later editions of his book, or whether that narrative was an unauthorized intercalation by the publisher is a question that has caused much discussion and much vituperation of the good friar by American historians. It is too intricate a subject for me to enter upon today, but I am glad to know that Father Hennepin's reputation has defenders and that his character was ably defended here fifty years ago at the celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of his discovery by that great prelate of the church, His Grace, Archbishop Ireland, whose memory we revere as a faithful friend to Belgium and as a great exemplar of the Christian faith.
Whatever be the truth of that matter, we know that in 1682, two years after Hennepin’s visit to the upper Mississippi, La Salle explored the lower Mississippi as far as the Gulf of Mexico and officially took possession of the whole valley—including the spot where we now stand—in the name of his sovereign, the king of France. By that action the ancestors of my friend, Dr. Eastman, became Frenchmen over night, although perhaps they did not know it. Although Father Hennepin was not on that voyage, La Salle was accompanied by another Belgian priest of the order of Recollects, Father Zenobe Membré, who was the chronicler of the expedition. And when La Salle met his untimely death in Louisiana a few years later, there was at his side in his last moments still another Belgian Franciscan friar, Father Anastasius Douay.

I seem to be wandering from the subject of the hero of the day, but being like Father Hennepin something of an advertiser myself, I could not resist the temptation to remind you that my fellow countrymen—and especially Hennepin’s brother friars of the order of Recollects—had a considerable part in the early history of this great waterway which connects Minneapolis with the sea. I may wander in my discourse as the Mississippi wanders in its course, but I can give you the comforting assurance that I shall not be so long.

Let us get back to Father Hennepin. When the good friar with his two companions paddled up what you now familiarly call “Ole Man River,” he was met at about the border of Minnesota by a reception committee of Sioux Indians, who made him their somewhat unwilling guest and took him on a journey that eventually led him to this spot. I want to express to Dr. Eastman my appreciation for this action on the part of his ancestors, for, if it had not been for them, Hennepin might never have discovered these falls which the Indians

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8 Dr. Charles Eastman, the noted Sioux author and lecturer, was also a speaker at the Hennepin exercises in Minneapolis. Ed.
called "Minihaha" and which Father Hennepin renamed in honor of St. Anthony of Padua, one of the early saints of the Franciscan order. Perhaps the Indians knew that he had been the first white man to make a sketch of Niagara and was a specialist on waterfalls; or perhaps, like patriotic Minnesotans, they thought it was about time to attract tourists to the country and to begin the good work that is now carried on by your Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association by less coercive means.

Hennepin was enthusiastic about the country, as he had every right to be, but he was rather pessimistic about the possibility of converting and civilizing the Sioux. He little foresaw that on the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his visit one of his compatriots would be here on the same spot, surrounded by all the refinements of civilization, and would have the pleasure of listening to an eloquent discourse from a Christian gentleman, a distinguished physician and scholar, a descendant of the Indian chief who made the friar captive.

Another thing that Hennepin could not foresee — and it is a thing that would have given him infinite pleasure — is that the falls which he discovered would one day supply the motive force to grind grain and furnish bread to the starving people of his own country. I allude to the spontaneous generosity of the people of Minneapolis in sending flour to feed the suffering women and children in Belgium during their captivity under the German occupation of our country. We shall always remember with gratitude your many activities for Belgian relief and we shall never forget the "Millers' Belgian Relief" organized by your fellow citizen, Mr. William C. Edgar, and supported by millers throughout the grain states. It was also Mr. Edgar who in the early days of the war organized throughout the Northwest the state-wide Belgian relief committees which served as a nucleus for that splendid relief commission
formed by Mr. Herbert Hoover. We well remember among your other bounties your millers' relief ship, the "South Point," with its cargo of half a million dollars' worth of flour which was distributed to the famishing in Belgium. You not only fed the hungry, but you clothed the naked, for, after the flour had been distributed, the sacks were made into shirts for the children and many of our youngsters were to be seen running about labeled "Pillsbury's Best," "Gold Medal," or "Millers' Relief." You may find some of those shirts in use today, as they seem to be of good quality like your flour; you will certainly still find some of the sacks embroidered and made into sofa cushions as souvenirs of your generosity; and you will find in our hearts everlasting gratitude to the people of your community.

We Belgians are proud to think that, through the explorations of our compatriot, Father Hennepin, we are, at least in some small way, connected with the early history of your great state of Minnesota. There is also a still earlier historic connection, although a somewhat shadowy one, which dates back to the century before Hennepin's visit. At that time all North America was claimed as the dominion of the king of Spain and the monarch who sat upon the throne of Spain was the sovereign of our Belgian provinces, the great Emperor Charles V. a Belgian born at Ghent. Consequently, in the first half of the sixteenth century America and Belgium were united under the scepter of the same monarch. In modern times one of my compatriots has had a more practical connection with the history of Minnesota and especially with the original inhabitants, the Sioux Indians. This is Father de Smet, a Jesuit priest who was born at Termonde in East Flanders in 1801 and who entered the priesthood at St. Louis in 1823. Father de Smet's "little parish" extended from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and even to the regions beyond. During the forty-seven years of his mission
in America, he was a great power for good in Christianizing, educating, and civilizing the Indian tribes. He won the respect and confidence both of the white men and the Indians, and in those troublous times frequently was called upon by the American government to act as intermediary and peacemaker. He acted in that capacity during the Sioux wars in the sixties at a moment when, as General Stanley remarked, "Father De Smedt alone of all the white race could penetrate to the midst of the Indians and return alive."

I must not dwell too long on the old family ties which bind Belgians and Minnesotans together, but I cannot refrain from mentioning the visit of our king, who came here in his youth as the guest of the late James J. Hill. I know that His Majesty has the most vivid recollection of this great agricultural and industrial region and of the hospitality he received in the Twin Cities. It was a source of great regret to him that he could not revisit these pleasant scenes during his trip to the United States in 1919, and I know that he will be deeply touched by your celebration in honor of this good Belgian, Father Hennepin, and by the many evidences of friendship to Belgium which you have manifested on this and on countless other occasions.

My friends, I have been deeply impressed by the solemn service at the Basilica of St. Mary this morning, by the sympathetic action of the Knights of Columbus in raising a statue to Father Hennepin, by the outpouring of your people to do honor to his memory, by your many evidences of friendship to my country, and your hospitality and kindness to myself. On behalf of all my fellow countrymen, as well as on my own behalf, I offer you most hearty thanks and the assurance of our most cordial and friendly wishes for the ever continuing prosperity and happiness of your community.

Prince Albert de Ligne

Belgian Embassy
Washington, D. C.