

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### THE STATUE OF CAPTAIN JOHN TAPPER, PIONEER FERRYMAN

ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE an old-time patron asks an assistant in the Minneapolis Public Library, "What has become of that statue of Captain Tapper which used to be out in the hall somewhere?" The older assistants remember that a plaster cast once stood in the third-floor lobby, but where it went and when, no one knew until quite recently. It represented an elderly man, Captain John Tapper, who in his youth operated a ferry across the Mississippi, between St. Anthony and Minneapolis. A search of the office records gave the information that on April 26, 1915, it was sent to the pioneer museum in the Godfrey House on Chute Square, at the request of Edwin Clark, secretary of the Hennepin County Territorial Pioneers' Association. The statue left the museum at some unknown time, and no one seemed to know what had happened to it.

Then Mrs. George J. Backus, the sculptor who made the statue, came back to visit in Minneapolis in the summer of 1937 after an absence of twenty-six years. She took up the search for her lost work of art, remembering that she had asked that it be taken to Venanzio Pierotti's statuary shop on Washington Avenue South for future packing and shipment to her home in Stuart, Florida. Living a very busy life, she had put off sending for it; indeed had almost forgotten about it at times. She now looked for the Pierotti shop, but found that it had been torn down, that its proprietor was dead, and that his sons had only vague recollections of an old plaster figure which used to be around. What had become of it they did not know, thinking that probably it went out with the wreckage of the building. Nothing

more about the whereabouts of the statue has been learned. Anyone who knows more about it is asked to communicate with the art department of the Minneapolis Public Library.

Mrs. Backus made several photographs of the statue while working on it in her Minneapolis studio. One of these shows the captain himself standing beside his likeness. Copies of these photographs can now be seen in the art department of the public library and at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. Very vivid are Mrs. Backus' recollections of the old man. "He talked all the time," she said, "and for a long time he was entirely unaware of what I was trying to do, and while he kept his pose perfectly, he never stopped talking. He told me a great deal of Franklin Steele and of his experiences while running the ferry, and said Steele told him that the time would come when they would see ten thousand people in Minneapolis."

"I conceived the idea of making a statue of Captain Tapper while talking with someone who casually mentioned the fact that the man who ran the ferry across the Mississippi was still living," Mrs. Backus recalled. "I could hardly believe it, and from that moment I was determined to find that man, fearing all the time that something might happen to him before I could find him. I was more than a week trying to locate him, and was finally told that he always attended the state fair, and that I would probably find him there; so I stationed myself at the pioneer log cabin every afternoon from the beginning of the week. At last I found him on Friday afternoon, and in two days we were at work in my studio. This statue was the crowning feature of Captain Tapper's life. He died not a great while after it was completed. He had sons living in or near Minneapolis who visited my studio to see the finished work."

The *Minneapolis Journal* of December 24, 1904, announces:

The friends of Mrs. George J. Backus of this city will soon have the pleasure — and the public will share it later — of admiring a life-

size statue of that sturdy pioneer, Captain John Tapper, which she has just completed. Several times in the past five years beautiful examples of the sculptor's art have come from Mrs. Backus' hands, but this last is the most ambitious and probably the most artistic.

Then follows an account of the captain's picturesque life. He was born in England, went to America on a cattle boat, was employed at Fort Snelling, fought in the Mexican War, ferried thousands across the Mississippi River on the route now marked by the steel-arch bridge in Minneapolis, collected toll for the first suspension bridge, and helped Colonel John H. Stevens build the first house on the west side of the river. The *Journal* goes on to say:

During those strenuous years Captain Tapper was known by and knew nearly all the settlers within a radius of 100 miles of Minneapolis. He has survived most of them, and is still in perfect health and retains his mental vigor. He represents the highest type of the sturdy pioneer, rugged, honest, truthful and aggressive.

The statue which Mrs. Backus has just completed embodies all these characteristics. It shows him with his coat off and evidently in a reminiscent mood suggestive of tales of long ago. The likeness is perfect; the lines of the figure are those of the virile old man who has stood the tempests of eighty years and who seems able to withstand those of the next twenty.

There is a project on foot among his friends to have the figure cast in bronze and later, if the city authorities are willing, to place it in one of the niches on the steel arch bridge. The statue is now in the hands of the men who are making the plaster cast and will soon be on exhibition.

There have been but two statues made by sculptors resident in Minnesota, the one of Ole Bull by Jacob Fjelde being the first, and that of Captain Tapper by Mrs. Backus, the other. Part of the statue of Governor Pillsbury, which now adorns the university campus, was made here, and the rest in New York. Mrs. Backus' new work is considered by connoisseurs who have seen it to be an achievement at least equal to either of the other two.

The mystery of what became of Captain John Tapper's statue seems cleared up, but those interested in Minneapolis history and art regret its probable loss. Mrs. Backus says: "I suppose the city was not quite large enough or old enough at the time I finished the plaster cast to think much about pioneer days; or perhaps it was not brought to the

notice of the right people. I was never very good at pushing my own work."

Those who wish further acquaintance with the captain will find an interesting account of his career in *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, written by his good friend, Colonel Stevens (Minneapolis, 1890). This book, appropriately called "the Bible of Minneapolis history," with its fascinating true stories of Captain John Tapper, may be consulted at the Minneapolis Public Library or the Minnesota Historical Society.

RUTH THOMPSON

MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC LIBRARY  
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](#).