

J. C. Wild and Fort Snelling

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OF THE MANY VIEWS of Fort Snelling painted during the years of its glory one of the most pleasing was done by John Caspar Wild in 1844.¹ The Swiss-born painter and lithographer, after working in St. Louis for half a decade, early in this year began to extend his activities up the Mississippi. In June he went to Davenport and painted a view of that place which now hangs in the Davenport Public Museum. He returned to St. Louis in July, but apparently had decided on doing views of all the upper Mississippi towns preparatory to publishing lithographs of them.

Probably late in September, 1844, he set out for Minnesota "to improve his health" and "to make some sketches of scenery &c in your romantic Country," as a letter of introduction he carried from Benjamin Clapp of St. Louis informed Henry H. Sibley at St. Peter's, or Mendota.² He may have traveled on the "Lynx" on one of its regular trips between St. Louis and St. Peter's; that steamboat, at least, found a place in his Fort Snelling painting.³ Nothing, however, is known of Wild's trip save that A. H. Sanders of Davenport later declared he had accompanied the artist on such an excursion.⁴

Sanders declared that Wild at this time "made a number of small sketches [of Minnesota scenery], but they were never reproduced on canvass." Whatever these drawings and whatever their fate, there are of record two paintings resulting from this trip—pictures of Fort Snelling and of the Falls of St. Anthony. The latter picture disappeared.

¹ A detailed and documented story of Wild's career in America, by the author of the present account, will appear under the title "J. C. Wild, Western Painter and Lithographer," in the *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* for April, 1951.

² The letter, dated at St. Louis, September 19, 1844, is reproduced herewith. The original is in the Sibley Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

³ The "Lynx," built at Cincinnati, owned at Prairie du Chien, and commanded by Captain W. H. Hooper, reached St. Louis on its maiden voyage on April 13, 1844. Although originally announced for the Galena-St. Peter's trade, it was running between St. Louis and St. Peter's later in the season; Thomas H. Griffith was then master. On one occasion it arrived at St. Louis from St. Peter's on October 8 and departed for the North on the thirteenth. *St. Louis Daily Evening Gazette*, April 16, 1844; *St. Louis New Era*, October 8, 1844; *Missouri Republican*, October 14, 1844.

⁴ Sanders, writing a dozen years later, gave the date of the trip as 1846, but the letter of introduction, plus the fact of Wild's death in August, 1846, provide practically conclusive evidence that the visit to Fort Snelling was made in the fall of 1844. See Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present*, 4, 308-310 (Davenport, 1858).

The former was happily "discovered" by Mr. Boyden Sparkes of Wrightsville Sound, North Carolina, and New York City about a year ago; it had been "lost" in his own home! For fifty years it had been in his family, but had never been identified because the signature was hidden under the frame.⁵ A pastel and gouache measuring nineteen and a fourth by twenty-nine and seven-eighths inches, it had been bequeathed to his mother about 1900 by a ninety-year-old widow of an army officer as a remembrance of her kindness in reading to the old lady. So far as can be determined, no lithograph was made of the Fort Snelling picture. Since it was Wild's habit to make both black and white and colored lithos of all his subjects, we may assume that it was only his death in August, 1846, that prevented the issuing of prints.

The two Minnesota views, oil paintings of Galena, Dubuque, Moline, Fort Armstrong, and Bloomington, and lithographs of most of the latter places, all done in the last two years of his life, demonstrated an ever-increasing skill in the artist's work, but they formed only a portion of his valuable contributions to the American pictorial record. Wild was born about 1804 in Zurich, Switzerland, and spent a number of years in Paris before he went to the United States in 1830 or 1831. In Philadelphia in the latter year he published four panoramic views in black and white of that city. Before long—possibly in 1833 and almost certainly by 1835—he had moved west to Cincinnati. No detail of his life there is available, but he painted a view of the city from the Kentucky side which is known in at least four versions, all different in size, including one in water color and two in gouache. Five Cincinnati street scenes in water color complete his known work there. He next returned to Philadelphia, where in 1838 he drew on stone "from his own sketches and paintings" twenty views of that city. He also reissued his panoramic pieces.

By the spring of 1839 he was settled in St. Louis, and his first lithographic view of the Mississippi River town was published by April 29 of that year. For the next year almost nothing is known of him, save that he was working for another lithographer, presumably on commercial jobs. In April, 1840, however, St. Louis newspapers announced that Wild was exhibiting in his own office eight paintings (probably water colors) which he intended to lithograph as a set of *Views of St. Louis*. The series proved popular enough for him to advertise in December that he was re-

⁵ The Minnesota Historical Society has been fortunate enough to acquire this fine view through the interest of its former president, Bergmann Richards, and the generosity of Frank A. Bean, James F. Bell, John Cowles, Thomas L. Daniels, Frank T. Heffelfinger, A. L. Searles, and Frederick B. Wells. They also provided the funds for the illustrations published herewith. In a letter to the society, dated March 27, 1950, Mr. Sparkes reports that when he took the picture out of the frame he "found the artist's signature had been concealed by rabbeting."

issuing the prints with four additions, so that a set of twelve could be had for six dollars uncolored and for twelve dollars colored.

Out of the publication of his *Views of St. Louis* grew the idea for a more extensive work, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated: In a Series of Views Embracing Pictures of the Principal Cities and Towns, Public Buildings and Remarkable and Picturesque Scenery, on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers*. The first announcement of this project appeared in the local St. Louis papers in March, 1841; the first part was off the press in July. Wild's plan was to issue twelve monthly numbers, to sell at one dollar each and to contain four plates each with appropriate letter-press by Lewis Foulk Thomas, then a lawyer and literary man of St. Louis. The parts, however, appeared at irregular intervals. By the end of May, 1842, the ninth and last issue was being offered for sale. No reasons for Wild's failure to complete the project are known; in all probability lack of financial support was responsible. Complete sets of the *Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated* are extremely rare.

Incomplete though it is, this work remains one of the most important sets of views of the Mississippi Valley produced in the nineteenth century. Thirty-four prints (not counting the pictorial lithos on the cover and title pages) record a hundred miles of Mississippi River scenes, many of which had not previously been pictured. The four plates in the last two numbers are attractive panoramic views of St. Louis from the cupola of the Planter's House. Only twelve of the other prints record scenes within the present limits of the city; some of these had previously been issued in larger form in the artist's *Views of St. Louis*. The others range from Cairo past the Grand Tower, Selma, Kaskaskia, Prairie du Rocher, and Cahokia to the Piasau Rock, the mouth of the Missouri, and Alton beyond St. Louis. One is a view of a prairie on fire. In spite of the promise of the title page, there are no views of Ohio River scenery.

The achievements of Wild's fifteen years in America are truly impressive. A catalogue of his known work would include nearly a hundred titles. More than eighty of these subjects were published as lithographs, many of which were colored by the artist. From what we know of his career, he almost certainly sketched on paper and most probably painted in water color or gouache, and sometimes in oil, every scene he drew on stone. Aside from the Cincinnati pictures already mentioned, only the Fort Snelling view, a water color of Carondelet, Missouri, and three pictures of Davenport seem to remain of all his many paintings. The historian and the collector of Americana have something to look for—and what rich feeling of reward will come to anyone who rediscovers another charming piece like the view of Fort Snelling!



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