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## DR. EDWIN JAMES

### *A Disappointed Explorer*

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THE EXPLORING physician, Dr. Edwin James, had reason to be disappointed when, in mid-June, 1823, he wrote the following letter from St. Louis. He had been led to believe that upon arriving there he would find awaiting him official instructions to join Major Stephen H. Long's expedition to the Minnesota country, but on June 19 the expected orders had not yet reached the Missouri city. By the time they arrived, it was too late to meet Long for an extensive journey of exploration into the Minnesota and Red River valleys and the Canadian border lake country.

Dr. James's interest in exploration had been stimulated three years earlier, in 1820, when he accompanied Long on an expedition westward to the Rocky Mountains. On that occasion, James served as botanist, geologist, and surgeon for the party, and during the course of his travels he and two companions scaled Pike's Peak, becoming the first white men to accomplish the feat.<sup>1</sup> He was destined also to serve as narrator of the expedition. At its close Long turned over to James the field notes accumulated on the trip, and on these sources he based the official report of the journey.<sup>2</sup> The re-

sulting narrative must have met with Long's approval, for he made a second effort to obtain James's services. It remained, however, for William H. Keating to record the story of the Minnesota journey.

James, who was born at Weybridge, Vermont, in 1797, was graduated from Middlebury College in 1816 and later studied botany under John Torrey and James Eaton, and medicine under his brother, Dr. John James. The younger man became an assistant surgeon in the United States Army in 1823, and for ten years thereafter he was stationed at Midwestern posts, including those at Prairie du Chien and Mackinac. It was during this decade that he became interested in Indian languages, especially that of the Chippewa, and his studies resulted in two spelling books and a transla-

<sup>1</sup> For biographical data on James, see Frank E. Ross in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 9:576 (New York, 1932); and Louis H. Pammel, "Dr. Edwin James," in the *Annals of Iowa*, 8:161-185, 277-295 (October, 1907, January, 1908).

<sup>2</sup> Published under the title *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1823). See also William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, 1:12 (Philadelphia, 1824).

tion of the New Testament. At this time, too, he met John Tanner, whose narrative of captivity among the Indians James prepared for publication. In the late 1830s he became subagent for the Potawatomi Indians at Council Bluffs, Nebraska. Eventually he settled on a farm at Rock Spring, near Burlington, Iowa, and there he spent the remainder of his life.

The letter here published gives evidence of James's profound and continuing interest in exploring. Like two later letters, dated August 14 and November 4, 1823, it was written to Major Isaac Roberdeau, then in charge of the corps of topographical engineers.<sup>3</sup> All relate to James's "favorite project" — an ambitious plan for the exploration of the West. Only the first of the letters, however, dated June 19, 1823, at St. Louis, throws additional light on Major Long's expedition of the same year into the Minnesota country. The text reads as follows:

"I was disappointed and chagrined on my arrival at this place, at failing to find some instructions directing me to join Major Long in his present Expedition to the St.

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<sup>3</sup> All three letters are among the records of the office of the Chief of Topographical Engineers, letters received, in the National Archives. The Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies.

<sup>4</sup> The results of these explorations are reported in Beltrami's *Pilgrimage in Europe and America Leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody Rivers* (London, 1828), an English translation of a work first published in French at New Orleans in 1824; Prince Paul's *Erste Reise nach dem nördlichen Amerika in den Jahren 1822 bis 1824* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1835); and Bigsby's *The Shoe and the Canoe, or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas* (London, 1850). Beltrami left Fort Snelling with Long in 1823, but soon went off on his own into what is now north-central Minnesota; Prince Paul ascended the Mississippi and Missouri rivers from New Orleans to Council Bluffs; and Dr. Bigsby was in the Great Lakes area from 1818 to 1827, serving as a British medical officer and as secretary for the Canadian boundary commission.

<sup>5</sup> Dougherty served as interpreter for Benjamin O'Fallon, a celebrated Indian agent, and he accompanied Long in 1819 on his expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Later Dougherty was agent for the Oto, Pawnee, and Omaha Indians. See Reuben G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, 14:126 n. (Cleveland, 1905).

Peters [*Minnesota River*]. Several letters I have received from him within a few weeks had induced me confidently to expect such instructions. I feel the greater regret at this disappointment as the unexplored and interesting parts of our country are rapidly yielding up their treasures to foreigners and to the enterprising among our own citizens. [Giacomo Constantino] Beltrami or an Italian Savan[t] of similar name is on the Upper Mississippi; the German Prince, Paul [Wilhelm Frederick, Duke of Württemberg] is penetrating towards that enticing region beyond the Rocky Mountains; Dr [John J.] Bigsby is about the upper Lakes sending off to Europe box after box and barrel after barrel of the minerals, plants and skins of the animals found in that country.<sup>4</sup> My anxiety to share in these interesting labors has prompted me to use the liberty of addressing you on the subject. It is my wish, if it should be thought consistent with the interest of the public service, and if leave of absence [from the army medical department] for a few years can be obtained, to ascend to the Rocky Mountains and to penetrate as far into the country beyond as may be in my power. I have been informed by Mr. John Dougherty who has a very extensive knowledge of the Western country, that there is no obstacle in the way of such a journey, and that the undertaking would be neither difficult nor hazardous.<sup>5</sup> If I can have the pleasure to hear from you an answer to this letter, I shall be glad to know your opinion respecting the propriety of my proposing to the Surgeon General, an undertaking like the one above mentioned, and of the probability of success in the event of such an application."

That Major Roberdeau answered James's letter on July 12 is indicated in the latter's letter of August 14. There are hints that Roberdeau looked favorably upon the army surgeon's plans, for James thanks him and suggests that he will soon submit to him a "sketch of the route I wish to follow." This he did in a letter of November 4, revealing

a desire to visit the Black Hills and the "country about the sources of the Big Horn and Yellowstone rivers, where according to the accounts of hunters is something like an active volcano called 'Coulter's Hell,'" to cross the Rockies and descend the Columbia to the Pacific, and to return by a southern route.

Before writing in August, however, James had been ordered to go to Prairie du Chien, "which journey will occupy the remainder of the present summer and afford me an opportunity to gain some acquaintance with that interesting country." At that time he was "highly gratified to learn that it is in accordance with the wishes of the Secretary of War, that I should spend whatever time can with propriety be spared from the duties of my station in examining the country with-in my reach." One reason why his ambition to explore far beyond that area was never realized is probably explained in the last of the three letters. In it he reports that "I have been kept down for near two months by a billious fever which has taken away my bodily strength and firmness and cured me at the same time of all desire to undertake long journies."

Although he recovered and lived until 1861, James was never again called upon to engage in exploring. His concern for the subject and his ability as a writer, however, were remembered by Major Long through the years. Eventually the leader of the expeditions of 1820 and 1823 placed his notes and sketches in Dr. James's hands, "with the understanding that he should be at liberty to make such use of them as he might deem proper." This move proved to be most fortunate for the Minnesota Historical Society, since before he died James

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<sup>6</sup>For Long's journal of 1817, see *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2:9-83 (1860). An introductory note signed by Edward D. Neill, the society's secretary, expresses its indebtedness to Dr. James "for the courtesy manifested in granting the manuscript for publication." Letters received by Neill from Long and James, in which they mention the journal of 1817 and the field notes of 1823, are in the society's archives for 1860 and 1861.

turned over to it some of the most important of these manuscripts. In 1860, for example, the society received from him Long's narrative of his "Voyage in a Six-oared Skiff to the Falls of Saint Anthony in 1817," which was promptly published. No attempt was made, however, to put into print three volumes of manuscript field notes recorded by Long during the course of the exploring expedition of 1823.<sup>6</sup> Now, almost a century after these important sources for Minnesota's history were added to the society's collections, plans for their publication are being made. Their appearance will give belated recognition to James's role in the history of an area he was never privileged to explore.

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