

MHS COLLECTIONS

THE LIBRARY of the Minnesota Historical Society houses a constantly growing collection of nearly 300,000 volumes, making it the fourth largest library in the state. It has many scarce — even some unique — books on its shelves which help interpret Minnesota's history. Most of these were acquired either when published or prior to the post-World War II upward spiraling of book prices. We are constantly amazed and delighted at how carefully and well the society's librarians have chosen their books in the past.

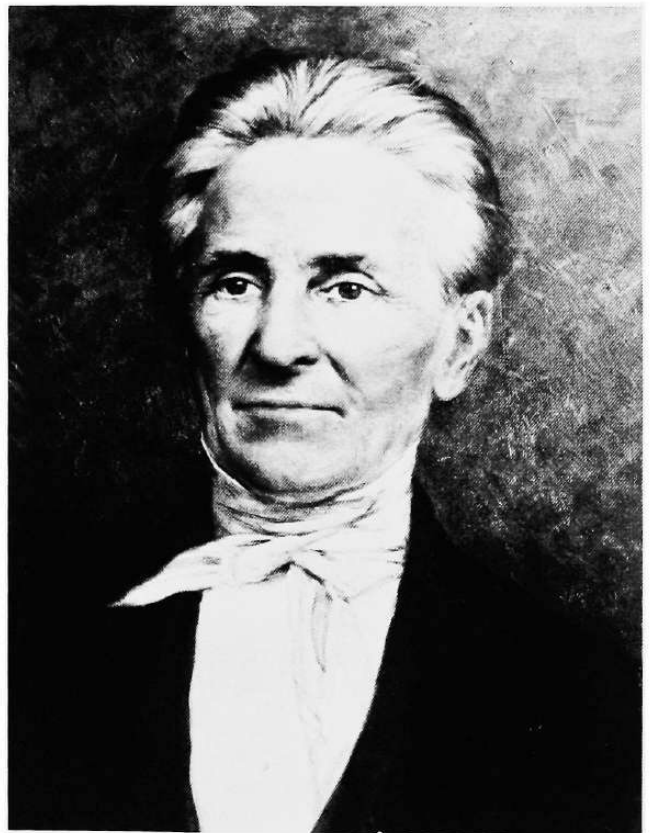
Occasionally, however, a needed volume is found which for some reason was never purchased. When such a work now appears on the antiquarian market, it is considerably more difficult, because of high cost and lack of available funds, to add it to the society's collection. The recent acquisition of a very scarce book written by Gabriel Franchère and published 150 years ago is a case in point. The story of these reminiscences and their author, who since 1863 has rested quietly and usually unnoted in St. Paul's Calvary Cemetery, bears repeating.

Montreal-born Gabriel Franchère *frls* (1786–1863), whose grandfather settled in Canada during the years of French ascendancy in the vast fur trade business, was also a fur trader by profession. At the age of twenty-four, Gabriel, fired by a desire to experience new adventure and make his fortune, joined the American Fur Company headed by financier John Jacob Astor. According to historian Constance Lindsay Skinner in *The Dictionary of American Biography*, Franchère thus “assisted in the founding of Astoria [1811] near the mouth of the Columbia [River], witnessed the sale of Astor's property to the Canadian North West Fur Company for \$40,000, and saw the capture of the fort by the British in 1813.” In 1834 Franchère became Astor's agent at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. He remained there for some five years, going on to employment in St. Louis, Missouri (again dealing in pelts), and finally establishing his own fur trading company in New York. From the time of his return to Montreal in 1814, via the Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, and

Fort William route from Astoria, to his death in 1863 at the St. Paul home of his stepson, John S. Prince, Franchère's life was almost continuously connected with the region now known as Minnesota.

In 1926 Miss Frances Prince of St. Paul presented a small, framed portrait of the fur trader to the audiovisual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The manuscripts department owns a few letters written by Franchère, as well as his original journal, “Remarks

FUR TRADER Gabriel Franchère was painted posthumously by his nephew, Joseph-Charles Franchère. The portrait is owned by the Antiquarian and Numismatic Society of Montreal and housed in the Chateau de Ramezay.



IN HONOR of his services for the American Fur Company, Franchère received this silver medal which pictures the firm's president, John Jacob Astor, on the face. The medallion was struck at Fort Union, part of the company's Upper Missouri Outfit (U.M.O.).



made on a visit from La Pointe to the Fishing Stations of Grand Portage, Isle Royal and Ancequiwinan — August 1839.” In the society’s museum is an example of the extremely rare silver Astor medal, which the American Fur Company struck for use during the early 1830s at Fort Union on the Upper Missouri River. Awarded for distinguished services and originally owned by Franchère, the medal was given to the society in 1926 by one of his great-grandsons, Dr. Frederick W. Franchère of Lake Crystal, Minnesota.

To round out this small collection of Franchèreiana, the society’s library has recently acquired an untrimmed, only lightly foxed, and handsomely rebound example of the scarce first edition of the fur trader’s reminiscences, *Relation d’un voyage à la côte du Nord-ouest de l’Amérique Septentrionale dans les années 1810, 11, 12, 13, et 14*, published in Montreal in 1820. The volume has been called the most important source on the Astor adventure and was a major reference for Washington Irving’s pro-John Jacob Astor narrative, *Astoria or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (1836). An interesting side light to Franchère’s book was its use by Missouri Senator Thomas H. Benton on May 25, 1846, to strengthen his fiery demands in Congress for American acquisition of Oregon.

Although considerably edited and occasionally rewritten by journalist Michel Bibaud, *Relation d’un voyage* remained the only edition until 1854 when Jedediah Vincent Huntington published an English translation with a New York imprint. In 1904 Reuben

Gold Thwaites edited the Huntington translation, and in 1954 the Lakeside Classics Series published a slightly amended text with an introduction by Milo Milton Quaife. A great-grandson of Franchère published a new translation — again from the first edition — in 1967. The original manuscript now in the Toronto Public Library was the basis for Wessie Tipping Lamb’s translation — *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814* — which the Champlain Society released in June, 1970. The French text of the reminiscences has been meticulously reproduced in this edition for the first time, according to W. Kaye Lamb’s informative introduction. “To do this,” the editor concludes, “and present a translation of the authentic text is the chief purpose of this volume.” Unfortunately, the edition is limited to 825 copies which were distributed to elected Champlain Society members and subscribing libraries, including the historical society’s. The volume should prove to be the definitive edition.

For many years the society’s library unsuccessfully sought the original edition of *Relation d’un voyage*. With envious eyes it saw the copy from the famed Americana collection of New Jersey lawyer Thomas W. Streeter auctioned in late 1969 to a California book-dealer. Fortunately, the present book appeared on the English antiquarian market shortly thereafter. Copies of the Franchère first edition are on record in the following United States libraries: the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois (where there is an espe-

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PAR G. FRANCHÈRE, FILS.
MONTREAL:
DE L'IMPRIMERIE DE C. B. PASTEUR.
1820.

*TITLE PAGE of the Franchère first edition
owned by the Minnesota Historical Society*

cially noteworthy second copy with the author's corrections and explanatory notes throughout the text), the New York and Spokane public libraries, and the Universities of Michigan, Minnesota (in the James Ford Bell collection), Washington, and Yale. To these known copies a tenth can now be added — the one in the reserve room of rare books in the Minnesota Historical Society library.

The society's copy was purchased at almost half the price (\$750) of the Streeter copy. The sale of part of the late Theodore C. Blegen's private collection to

the Mankato State College library provided the necessary funds. The volume is a suitable memorial to Dr. Blegen, whose long and fruitful life was devoted to Minnesota's history. We are sure that he would have approved its purchase.

James Taylor Dunn
Chief Librarian

GENE BECKER of the society's staff took the photographs of the Astor medal and the title page. The copy of the Franchère painting is in the society's picture collection.



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