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# AN EVALUATION OF DOCUMENTS USEFUL TO THE ETHNOHISTORIAN: THE PAPERS OF JONATHAN CARVER.

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There is a continuing desire among Americans to learn more about the Indians who inhabited this area. The recorded observations of the white men who first came into contact with the Indians are a logical place to begin the study of this subject. The journals kept by Jonathan Carver constitute such a body of manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> They provide the searcher with a rich store of information

on the languages, customs, manners, institutions, and habitat of the Indian tribes encountered by Carver in 1766 and 1767 on his journey through the area that was destined to become Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The career of Carver, which has been much written about, is well known. He was a native of New England, and he served as a captain in the British army in the French and Indian War, emerging from the conflict with some distinction. After the war, the lure of westward exploration captured his imagination. In 1766 he traveled from Boston to Fort Michilimackinac, where he obtained a commission from the commandant, Major Robert Rogers, to search for the Northwest Passage. According to his own account, Carver pushed westward from Mackinac to Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, up the Mississippi to the Falls of St. Anthony, and then traveled some two hundred miles up the Minnesota River, where he wintered with the Sioux. Because fresh supplies failed to reach him, he returned to Mackinac the following summer by way of Grand Portage. Later he went to Boston, and after a brief stay there, sailed for England, where he attempted to capitalize on his travels by publishing a story of his quest for the Northwest Passage.

The journals which he kept were the rough notes on which his published book was based. Their importance to those seeking information on the Indians of the area is at least twofold. First, Carver's observations on Indian life are significant simply because of the date of his journey. He was the first British explorer to visit the Minnesota country after the French and Indian War, a conflict that resulted in the cession of the area to the British. At that time, white settlement was many decades away, and only a handful of accounts had been written on the territory. The mere fact that Carver recorded his observations on Indian life in the Minnesota country before the Revolutionary War enhances the value of the journals.

<sup>1</sup> The original Carver journals are in the British Museum in London. The Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies of them.

The second reason for the importance of the Carver journals is their content. They reflect the author's eagerness to learn about the strange new country and show his keen powers of observation. A great deal of information is compressed into relatively short passages, for Carver writes succinctly and he is easy to read. When he compiled his journal, he may have been looking ahead to publication. Whatever the explanation for his careful record, it is a valuable manuscript.

The Carver journals include a great variety of information on the various Indian tribes visited, for the author comments on their crops, language, housing, government, marriage and burial customs, religion, war, hunting, and many other topics. A few passages from these journals will indicate the type of material they contain and give something of their flavor.

Two weeks after his departure from Michilimackinac on September 3, 1766, Carver and his party came upon a Menominee village at Green Bay. He wrote that: "The Indians Who at present inhabit about the Green Bay are a Nation call<sup>d</sup> the Menomonies or Rice people; they have two Villages the one about an Hundred Rods West of the Fort up the River and another about 30 Miles from the Bottom of the Bay on the North Side; they have hardly 200 warriors and are Call<sup>d</sup> Very Brave. They are Governed by a Chief who is Hereditary: besides they have a Chief of the Warriors and a Number of other Chiefs. This Nation Like almost all other Nations of Indians pay but Little respect to any Authoritative Commands and are principally Governed by advice when it Best Sutes their inclination. Their Native Dialect is Very Different from all other Nations. But few Traders or Travellers that go among them take pains to Learn their tongue, it being a very uncouth Jargon, hard to Express, besides their is but Little Need for it, as almost all this Nation as they grow up Learn to Speake in the Chipeway tongue. This Nation is Very much attached to their former Masters the French."<sup>2</sup>

A week later Carver and his companions arrived at a Winnebago village on Lake Winnebago. Of these Indians he observed: "They raise plenty of Indian Corn Beans Squashes water Melons Indian tobacco Indian Rice &c. This Town serves as a fine Market for Traders as they pass this way, they are serv<sup>d</sup> in plenty with provisions., the Winebago Lake is about 30 Mile long and Seven or Eight mile wide and is stored with Fish and Fowl. this people was it not for their Excessive fondness for Spiritious Liquors which they purchase of Traders at a most Extravagant price with their provisions would Live with that Ease and plenty which would be almost Envyed—by many white people among us."

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished manuscript entitled "Journals of the Travels of Jonathan Carver in the Year 1766 and 1767." p. 36.

"The Winebagoes are Govern<sup>d</sup> by a Hereditary Chief who now is a Queen of about 80 years old."<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks later, in the middle of October, the Carver party entered the Wisconsin River and arrived at the largest Indian village they had thus far encountered, that of the Sauk. Carver describes the village as: "the greatest Indian Village I Ever saw Containing upwards of 300 warriors. The Town is Somthing Regularly Built Containing about 80 Large Buildings—besides a great Number of Farm Houses in their Fields for the Conveinance of the squaws while at Labour, for they only till the ground, the men here as well as all other Nations of Indians in these parts Disdain to Labour and think it beneath them to Employ themselves only in affairs of war and Hunting Even the Boys who are not of age Sufficient to accompany their Fathers in that Employ will hardly be persuaded to do anything Except Learning to shoot with the Bow & arrow and to Kill small animals, in which they are always indulged by their parents whose Fondness for their Children Exceeds by far that of any white people I ever saw."<sup>4</sup>

Three days later, the party had traveled down the Wisconsin to the upper town of the Ottigaumies or Fox Indians. Carver wrote that: "This Nation is Governed by a Hereditary Chief whose Name is Mackidocheek who appears like a sensible powerfull man and Carrys something more of Distinction among his people then is Common among Indians."<sup>5</sup>

The lower town of the Fox, located near Prairie du Chien, was reached two days later. After a brief stay there, Carver, with two guides, ventured into the Minnesota country, the land of the Sioux, where he remained for six months. Because of his extended visit with them, the Sioux receive thorough treatment in the journals. The following comment on the religion of the Sioux furnishes an excellent example of the prose sketches of Indian life in the heart of North America to be found in these journals. Carver wrote that these Indians: "hold that there is two superiour spirits in perpetual opposition to Each other the one being infinitely good and Kind, the other they hold to be a Composition of Evils from which all the Calamities that befalls Either whole Communities or individuals they imagine do proceed, and that all the Misfortunes in Life are in his sole power to Either inflict or prevent, for this Reason when any is sick or in any other Trouble they Pray and make up of such Customs as they are up to to divert the Evil Spirit and are fully of the opinion that offerings of Tobacco &c will Mittigate his anger. they give out as a reason

<sup>3</sup> "Journals," 39.

<sup>4</sup> "Journals," 42.

<sup>5</sup> "Journals," 43.

for this that the Good spirit being unalterable so never seeks to harm any one so that they Look upon it to be Labour in Vain to pray to a Being to do them good who they never thought would do them any hurt. however incoherent this principle may be yet I imagin twould not be an Easely matter to bring them from it."<sup>6</sup>

The passages quoted here indicate something of the quality and scope of the journals, which constitute far more than a mere recording of facts. Carver sought to interpret and analyze what he saw. Frequently, he compared tribes, noting their similarities and their differences. Thus he finds the customs of the Sauk similar to those of the Chippewa. He notes the friendship of the Menominee for the French and that of the Sioux for the British. He found hereditary chieftainship to be the established institution of government among the Indians he visited, but he was quick to discern differences in its operation among the Sioux, whose chiefs commanded less power than they did among other tribes, and whose many bands were organized into a confederacy. Carver was struck, too, by the independence of action available to the individual Indian. He speaks also of hostilities, including the perennial skirmishes of the Sauk and the Illinois and the bitter enmity between the Sioux and the Chippewa. Carver recorded differences in language, and, stated that he considered the Menominee and Winnebago dialects the most difficult to pronounce.

Carver dwelt at some length on the culture of the Sioux. The prominence of the pipe in their way of life interested him. He described their practice of grand medicine, their pantheistic religion, and their love of foretelling the future. Their dependence upon the buffalo receives brief mention in a note describing tents made of buffalo and elk skin. Their burial ceremonies, the elegies, ringing with vengeance, that the Sioux women pronounced over their dead warriors fascinated Carver. He records the interesting fact that these nomadic people cherished certain burial grounds and traveled long distances to bury their dead in a favorite place.

It is obvious that Carver enjoyed his experiences with the red men of interior North America, and he seems to have got along very well with them. His observations are sympathetic and his portrayal of the American Indian in the Minnesota country is a romantic one, as the following description illustrates. He wrote that: "These People pass their life without Prisons almost without trouble in a State of Sweetness and Tranquillity and I beleave Enjoy A happiness that the English are Strangers to, Living Quietly under the Laws of instinct that wise Nature has imprinted upon their Minds from their Cradles, in their sentiments they seem to observe an Exact Conformity, are Kind and Benevolent to Each other, the Aged the Criples Naturals and all indengents by

<sup>6</sup> "Journals," 64.

Natural Misfortune are well Taken Care of. those that are Idle and Lazy are not Taken Notice of but are dispised."<sup>7</sup>

Three sites mentioned by Carver in the Minnesota country are of particular interest to ethnologists and historians. Carver writes that near Lake Pepin he found what he believed to be the ruins of ancient earthworks. This passage in the journals has excited debate as to whether Carver saw a natural or a man-made formation. G. Hubert Smith has written an excellent analysis of the problem, pointing out that with this notation Carver gave initial impetus to American archaeology by calling attention, for the first time, to the possible existence of ancient monuments in the Mississippi Valley.<sup>8</sup>

The second site of interest is Carver's Cave, located below Dayton's Bluff in St. Paul. There the explorer attended a Sioux council in the spring of 1767, and there he is said to have received a grant of land. He found the cave in the banks of the Mississippi to be a gathering place for Sioux bands. Pictographs on its walls were preserved until late in the nineteenth century, when the cave was partially destroyed to make way for the railroad. J. Fletcher Williams, St. Paul's first historian, once referred to it as the "most interesting relic of antiquity in this region." Above the cave on the high bluff there was a large burial ground, part of which has been beautifully preserved as Indian Mounds Park.

A third site described by Carver is the Falls of St. Anthony. We would not know as much as we do about the early falls without Carver's journals. He not only left a valuable description of this landmark, but he also provided the first known sketch of the famous and historic cascade.

Carver's unpublished journals and his published book differ significantly, and these differences point up areas where Carver should be read with caution. In his book, he wrote of ascending the Minnesota River a distance of two hundred miles; in the journals, the extent of his ascent is given as a few miles. It is likely that Carver exaggerated other distances, a common practice among explorers. His statement that he learned the Sioux language in six weeks may also be open to question. A comparison of the unpublished and published versions clearly indicates that Carver greatly exaggerated his prominence in the expedition. In the former, he says he is the mapmaker and third in command; in the latter he gives the impression that he is the leader. Carver is also prone to repeat Indian legends and to mingle them freely with fact. These legends are sometimes stated as factual observations.<sup>7</sup> "Journals," 65.

<sup>8</sup> See G. Hubert Smith, "Carver's Old Fortifications," in *Minnesota History*, 16:152-165 (June, 1935).

tions rather than as stories. In spite of these shortcomings, however, the explorer's impressions of Indians as recorded in his unpublished journals are substantially the same as those set forth in his book.

Carver's published volume was entitled *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, and was first published in London in 1778. His journal comprises the first third of the volume, and the remainder is devoted to an account of the "origin, manners, customs, religion, and language of the Indians." It is evident that Carver freely plagiarized the works of Hennepin, Charlevoix, and La Hontan in writing the second section of the book, a practice not uncommon in his day. Thus it is the portion of this volume based on Carver's journals which is the more valuable for the ethno-historian.

Although Carver's search for the Northwest Passage was frustrated in the Minnesota country, the journal recording his quest provided raw material for one of the most amazing travel books in American history. A best seller by any standard, it has gone through thirty-nine known editions in five languages. The volume's influence has been far-reaching. Its significant contribution to the field of American archaeology and its valuable descriptions of historic sites in Minnesota have been noted. Carver's detailed map of the Northwest and his tales of the "Shining Mountains," as he termed the Rockies, and of the "River of the West," which he called the "Ouragon," added to the geographic knowledge of the continent. From Carver's *Travels* Schiller drew the thought and language for his "Naudowessiers Totenlied," familiar to English readers through Bulwer-Lytton's translation as "The Indian's Death Dirge." Chateaubriand drew heavily upon Carver's description of Indian customs in writing his *Voyage en Amerique*. Thousands of Europeans obtained their ideas of American Indians from Carver's volume. Its pleasing portrayal of the way of life of the red man was well suited to the intellectual climate of Europe in Carver's day. Such sentiments could not fail to appeal to many Europeans versed in the "return to nature" and "noble savage" doctrines, then very much in vogue.

In addition, it should be added that Carver's journals provide fresh and succinct observations on the Indians who inhabited this region at a time when white settlement in the United States was virtually confined to the region between the Appalachians and the Atlantic Coast. Ethnologists, historians, geologists, anthropologists, and sociologists will find them rewarding reading.