



ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE MINNESOTA PLACE NAME

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John H. Sandy

Origin and History of the Minnesota Place Name

by John H. Sandy

In the decades after France claimed Louisiana and all the territory drained by the Mississippi River in 1682, French and other explorers arrived to learn about the region. Missionaries also came to spread Christianity and European culture among Native Americans. Other adventurers followed to search for natural riches and conduct trade with the Indians.

Since the region was unknown and wilderness, discovery depended on accurate maps. Among the more famous mapmakers were Guillaume de l'Isle with his *Carte de La Louisiane* (1718), and Joseph N. Nicollet and his *Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi* (1842).

Deciding on place names was a basic task of map making for the early explorers and cartographers. Place names already established by Native Americans decades earlier offered a starting point. The explorers often adopted names of rivers and streams and other features on the land following conversations and shared time with Native Americans with whom they met in the wilderness. Native American place names soon appeared on maps made by the French and others. Indian place names were very prominent in Minnesota's early history and still are today.

Historians agree that the word Minnesota is derived from a Dakota Indian word used to describe what is today the Minnesota River. In the early 1800s, the Minnesota River was called Minisotah or St. Peter's River.

Minisotah, in Dakota Indian language, means "Cloudy Waters" according to *MNOpedia*, The Minnesota Encyclopedia. A section in *MNOpedia* explains: "Cloudy waters identifies the mighty Minnesota River and is namesake to our state. One Dakota translation of the Minnesota River is within the word, pronounced *Mini-so-tah Wahk-pah*. It means "slightly cloudy river" due to its turbulence." In this interpretation, the Mini being the water, so-tah descriptive for the cloudy appearance, and Wahk-pah, the river.

Joseph Nicollet, in his report to Congress of February 16, 1841 (published in 1843), gives context to the "sotah" part of the Indian name. In his *Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrological Basin of the Upper Mississippi River* Nicollet writes:

The name which the Sioux give to the St. Peter's river is Minisotah; and to St. Peter's as a station, Mdoté mini sotah. The adjective sotah is of difficult translation. The Canadians translate it by a pretty equivalent French word, brouillé—perhaps most properly rendered into English by blear; as, for instance, mini-sotah, blear water, or the entrance of the blear water. I have entered upon this explanation, because the word sotah really means neither clear nor turbid, as

some authors have asserted; its true meaning being readily found in the Sioux expression ishta sotah, blear eyed.

By definition (Dictionary.com), blear in the adjective form means dim from tears; dim; indistinct. As a noun, blear means cloudiness; dimness. Hence, the interpretation of “sotah” as meaning “slightly cloudy” by historians is consistent with Nicollet’s understanding of the term in 1841.

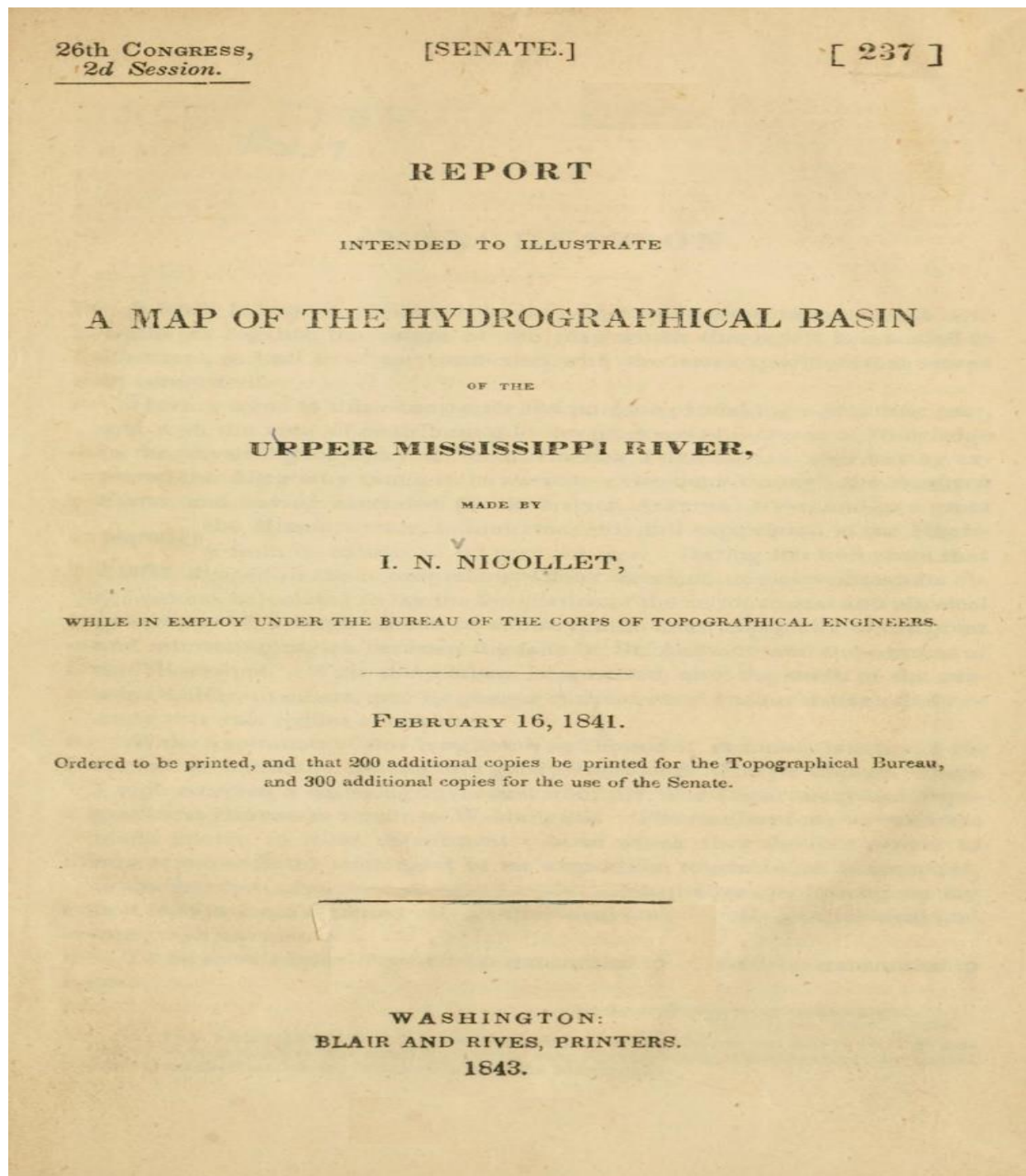


Figure 1 Report on Upper Mississippi River to U.S. Congress by Joseph N. Nicollet. Published in 1843.

Nicollet also prepared a physical map of the land and its waters to accompany his report to Congress: *Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrological Basin of the Upper Mississippi River*.



Figure 2 Map of Upper Mississippi River region by Joseph N. Nicollet. First published in 1842. Minisotah or St. Peter's River, later the Minnesota River, forms a "v" shape as it moves south, then turns north near the top-center of this map, before joining the Mississippi River.

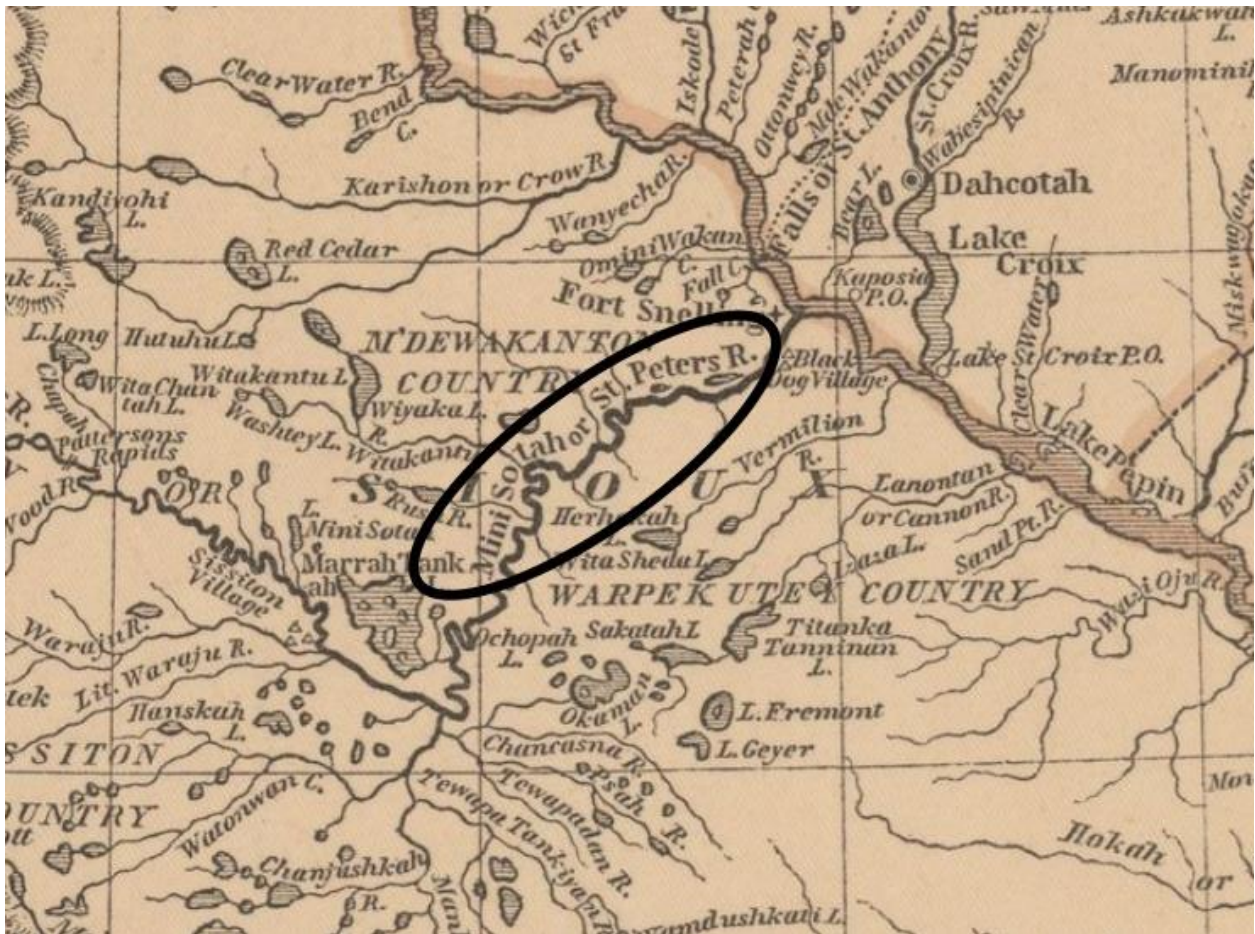


Figure 3 Excerpt from a map of the Upper Mississippi River region by Joseph N. Nicollet. Version published in 1843. On this map the current Minnesota River is called the Minisotah or St. Peter's River. Name of Minisotah on this map is derived from Dakota Indian language. The Mississippi River runs northwest to southeast across the upper right side of this map. Fort Snelling on this map is at the junction of St. Peter's River and Mississippi River and is in present day Minnesota.

On his journey up the Mississippi River in 1836, by canoe, Nicolett was accompanied by Chagobay, a Chippewa chief, the chief's 9-year-old son, a mixed race (French/Indian), man named Francis Brunet, and others. Due to his association with Chagobay and Brunet, and likely others, Nicollet was able to identify Indian names of the rivers and streams discovered on his journey.

Other earlier explorers also offered names for the Minnesota River. In his book on Minnesota geographical place names, Warren Upham mentions names used by Carver, Long and Keating, Beltrami, and Featherstonhaugh. In 1766, Johnathon Carver explored up the Mississippi River to St. Anthony Falls. He spelled the river Menesotor and Menesoter.

In 1823, Stephan Long and William Hypolitus Keating explored the St. Peter's (Minnesota) River. Long and Keating spelled the river as Menesota. In 1823, Giacomo Beltrami spelled the river Menisothe. In 1835, George Featherstonhaugh travelled up the Mississippi River to St. Anthony Falls. He spelled the river Minnay sotor.

When the time came for choosing a name for their new territory, leaders could not agree on a spelling. Language in an Act to the U.S. Congress on February 18, 1847, H. R. 568, used the spelling Minasota. In another piece of legislation, a Bill, S. 152, submitted to U.S. Congress on February 23, 1848, used the spelling Minesota. One group of leaders, in a Memorial submitted to the U. S. Congress on March 28, 1848, proposed Minnisota. The matter was finally settled at the Minnesota Territorial Convention in Stillwater, August 26, 1848. Leaders at the Stillwater meeting chose the name Minnesota.

In the Memorial to the U.S. Congress in 1848, the citizens lobbied for more generous borders for the soon to be formed new territory. The communication expressed their concerns and wishes. Among those signing this document were Henry H. Sibley, a prominent politician and leader, and many others living near St. Paul at the time.

In the Memorial, the name for the new territory under consideration was spelled Minnisota. This spelling adds a letter "n" to and drops the letter "h" from the Dakota Indian name as it was recorded on Nicollet's map of 1842, the spelling on the Nicollet's map being Minisotah.

The Memorial was published as U.S. Senate Miscellaneous document No. 98, with the title *Memorial of the Citizens of the United States Residing within the limits of the Territory of Minnisota as defined in the bill before Congress at the last session, in relation to the boundary of that territory* during the 30th Congress, 1st Session, on March 28, 1848.

The debate on a name for the new territory had started even earlier, however. In a Bill, H. R. 568, 29th Congress, 2nd Sess., on December 23, 1846, an entirely different name was submitted calling for "Establishing the territorial government of Itasca."

In 1849, by an act of Congress, Minnesota Territory was formed, and in 1858 Minnesota became a state.

MEMORIAL

OF

CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES,

Residing within the limits of the Territory of Minnisota as defined in the bill before Congress at the last session, in relation to the boundary of that Territory.

MARCH 28, 1848.

Referred to the Committee on Territories, and ordered to be printed.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States:

The memorial of the undersigned, citizens of the United States, residing within the limits of the Territory of Minnisota as defined in the bill brought before your honorable bodies at the last session of Congress,

REPRESENTS MOST RESPECTFULLY :

That they have learned with surprise and anxiety that the constitutional convention of Wisconsin have passed a resolution, urging upon your honorable bodies a change of the northern boundary of the State as fixed by Congress, so as to include a large portion of country lying north of that line, and in fact as far as the mouth of Rum river, a distance of nearly sixty miles above the St. Croix. Your petitioners being intimately concerned in the decision of this question, beg leave respectfully to protest against this contemplated change, and believe that the dimensions of the new State should rather be curtailed than enlarged, for the following reasons, to wit :

First. Wisconsin, according to the bill for its admission, will make one of the largest States of the Union. Your memorialists believe that your honorable bodies are committed against the policy of admitting new States into the confederacy which have more than a reasonable extent of territory. This was the case with Iowa, from whose northern limit, as proposed by the convention of that State, more than a degree and a half of latitude were cut off by Congress.

Secondly. Your memorialists conceive it to be the intention of your honorable bodies so to divide the present Territory of Wisconsin as to form two States nearly equal in size, as well as other respects. A line drawn due south from Shagwamigan bay, on lake Superior, to the inter-

Tippin & Streper, printers.

Figure 4 Communication to the U.S. Congress regarding boundary for the new Territory of Minnesota. Date 1848. Note spelling for territory: Minnisota. The letter "e" is not present in this version of the name. A long list of citizens endorsed this document on pages 2-5. Henry H. Sibley, the first person named in the list, became the first U.S. Congressional representative for Minnesota Territory, and later the first governor of the State of Minnesota in 1858.

Table 1 Variations of the name for the Minnesota River

Variations of Minnesota River Name: French, English, Dakota Indian	
Rivière St. Pierre	River named by Pierre Le Sueur, early French explorer, 1695. On Carte [map] de La Louisiane... by Guillaume De L'Isle, 1718
St. Peter's River	River name anglicized from French name shown on Mitchell map, 1755
Menesotor and Menesoter	River names by Johnathon Carver, 1766
Menesota	River name by Stephen Long and William Keating, 1823
Menisothe	River name by Giacomo Beltrami, 1823
Minnay sotor	River name by George Featherstonhaugh, 1835
Minisotah	River name by Joseph Nicollet shown on his map of 1842.
Minnesota	River name changed by Congress from St. Peter's to Minnesota River, 1852

Table 2 Variations for the name of Minnesota Territory

Variations of Minnesota Territory Names	
Minasota	H.R. 568 29 th Congress, 2 nd Sess., Feb. 18, 1847, an Act establishing the territorial government of Minasota
Minesota	A Bill S. 152, Senate, 30 th Congress, 1 st Sess., Feb. 23, 1848 to establish the territorial government of Minesota
Minnisota	Citizens Memorial to Senate, U.S. 30 th Congress, 1 st Sess., Misc. No. 98, about territory's border, March 28, 1848
Minnesota	Name and spelling for Minnesota Territory chosen at Minnesota Territorial Convention in Stillwater, August 26, 1848. Accepted in an Act to establish the Territorial Government of Minnesota, 30 th Congress, Sess. II, March 3, 1849

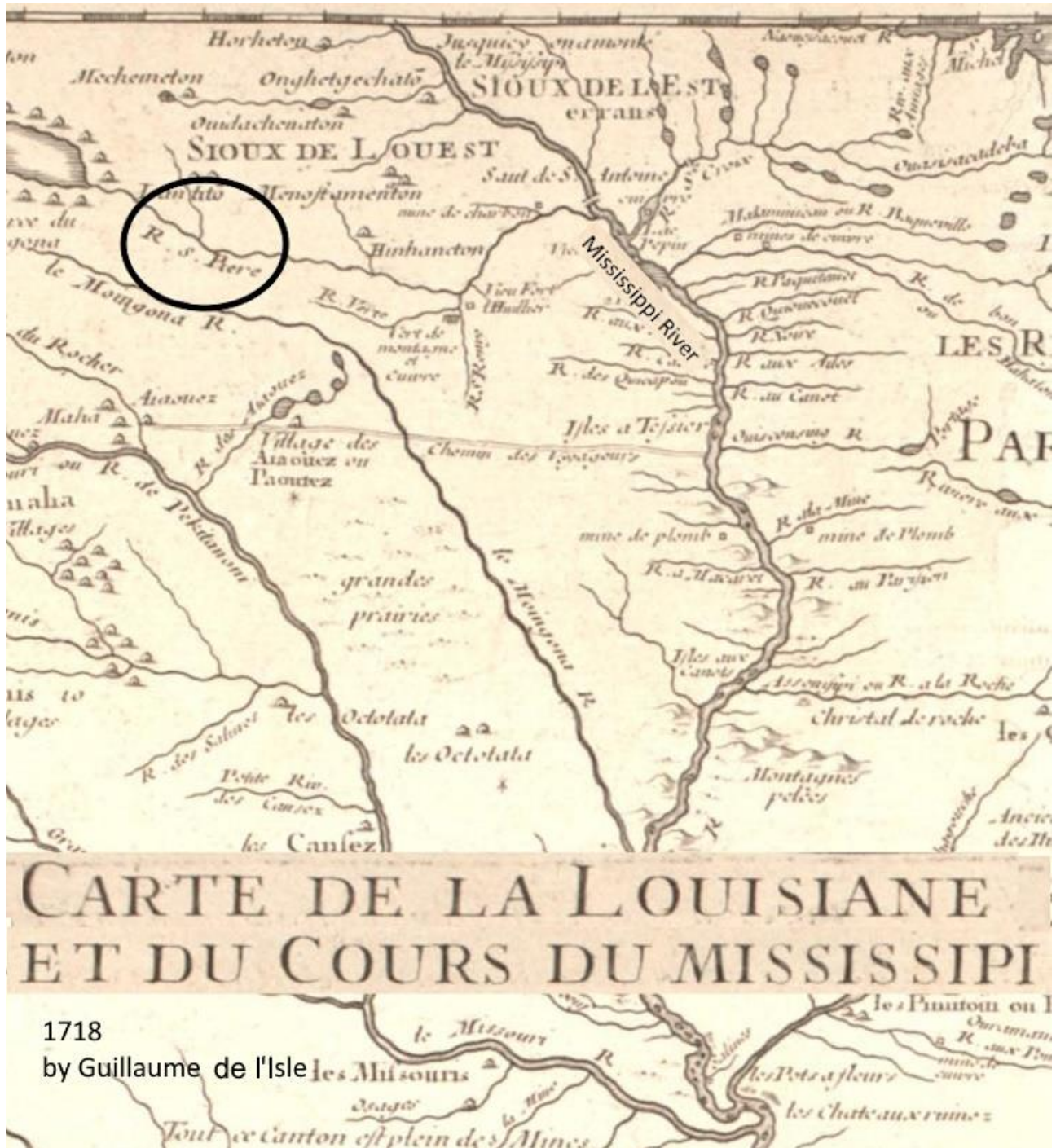


Figure 5 Excerpt from map of Louisiana and course of Mississippi River, by Guillaume de l'Isle, 1718. Rivière *S. Piere* (later *St. Peter's River* and *Minnesota River*) is shown by circle. The Mississippi River runs north-south near the right side of this map. Rivière *St. Piere* joins Mississippi River near *Saut de S. Antoine* (*St. Anthony Falls*). The *Missouri River* joins the Mississippi River lower-right on map.

Interpreting Native American place names is a complicated process. In the case of the Minnesota River, early explorers offered a few variations of the Dakota Indian word for Minnesota. The interpretation by Joseph Nicolett may be the most accurate and is widely accepted. According to Nicollet, the Minnesota River takes its name from *Minisotah*, from the Dakota Indian language.

Later, Minisotah became the foundation word for the names of Minnesota Territory and Minnesota. During the process of creating the new territorial government, four different ways to spell the word Minnesota were proposed, before settling on the final spelling, Minnesota.

Suggested Readings

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Schoolcraft, Henry R. *Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake, the Actual Source of This River; Embracing an Exploratory Trip Through the St. Croix and Burntwood (or Broule) Rivers, in 1832, Under the direction of Henry R. Schoolcraft*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1834.

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Red River
Institute for
Nature Research

Clotho, Minnesota