

ACTA ET DICTA

*A collection of historical data regarding
the origin and growth of
the Catholic Church in
the Northwest.*

"Colligite fragmenta ne pereant,"

(Joan. VI.12.)

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REPRINTS
FROM
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NECROLOGY
OR
OBITUARY NOTICES.

ISAAC LABISSONNIERE.

On Monday, June 20, 1910, there passed away at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Mary Martineau, 574 l'Orient street, St. Paul, Isaac Labissonniere, the last survivor of the original band of eight, who, under the direction of Father Galtier, built, in October, 1841, "St. Paul's Church,"¹ the first house of worship in what is now St. Paul, which gave to the city its Apostolic eponym.

Mr. Labissonniere was born July 7, 1823, at Pembina, in the extreme northeast corner of the present state of North Dakota. His father, Joseph Labissonniere, a Canadian by birth, had been a captain² in a regiment enlisted in Canada for English service during the war of 1812, who later went to the Red River valley and married a Moutinier woman. In 1836 the family, consisting of parents, two boys and six girls, with a party numbering about sixty in all, left the Red River colony. They came to Minnesota and settled on the Fort Snelling military reserve. Just about this time disturbances between the Red River refugees and the officers of the fort were growing serious, and when the Dodge Treaty with the Chippewas threw open for settlement the country east of the Mississippi (announcement of the senate's ratification of this treaty being made at the Fort, July 15, 1838), the Labissonniere family and a considerable number of Canadians, perhaps in the fall of 1838, moved to Grand Marais.³ The former staked their claim where the St. Paul Fish Hatcheries are now located.

¹As it is called in most of the early Catholic directories published immediately subsequent to this period.

²The father, it is claimed, won his command on account of his ability to read and write. These accomplishments, by sheer force of circumstances, were denied the son, who was able, however, even in ripe old age to declaim with gusto La Fontaine's fable, "Le chene et le Roseau," taught him in the early days by Father Ravoux.

³So named, on account of its low position, in the Journal of General Pike, who commanded an expedition to the Upper Mississippi in 1805. Father Galtier's letter (Acta et Dicta, Vol. 1, No. 2., p. 187) refers to it as La Pointe Basse (no doubt owing to its geographical relationship to the general settlement about Fort Snelling); and also as Pointe Leclair, Michael LeClaire being probably the first settler in this locality. Its later name, Pig's Eye, became attached to it when the notorious Pierre Parrant moved thither from his claim on the lower levee in 1843.

It was while the Labissonnieres were living at the Marais that Father Lucien Galtier appeared on his historic mission to the newly-forming settlements of the upper river (May, 1840). The missionary first held services in the home of Scott Campbell, the Indian interpreter, to whom he had been recommended by Bishop Loras. Mr. Campbell's house was located on the Fort Snelling side of the river,—a stone structure standing outside the enclosure of the Fort (cfr. Minnesota Historical Collections, Vol. III, p. 229). After the final expulsion of the settlers from the reserve Father Galtier decided to move across to St. Peter's, the present Mendota, where the elder Faribault gave him "a small house" that served as a chapel there until "the first church of St. Peter" was blessed October 2, 1842. These were the two places of worship in the earliest days of the mission.¹

The first building erected expressly for divine service in Father Galtier's time—with which the name of the Labissonnieres will be forever associated—was the now famous little chapel of St. Paul. The story of its founding has often been told. Soon after the expulsion (May 6, 1840), the settlers, nearly all of whom were parishioners of Father Galtier, set out new claims at various points on the east bank of the Mississippi extending from the present upper levee in St. Paul down to the lowlands of Pointe LeClaire. To minister the more conveniently to the spiritual wants of these scattered families it was decided to build a chapel on the left bank of the river at some suitable place within the area stated. The little community at LeClaire settlement offered a site for the purpose. It was the most thickly populated locality, and among its inhabitants the mason and the carpenter trades were represented. But the situation was considered to be too low and too extreme; and Father Galtier, "looking ahead to the future," and "after mature reflection," rejected both the La Pointe Basse site and the one offered by

¹Whether or not the "separate room" spoken of by Father Galtier was in a house distinct from the Campbell home does not appear from the missionary's letter.

Charles Mousseau on the present Dayton's Bluff. The Guerin-Gervais offer of ground now occupied by the Catholic block, St. Paul, was the spot finally chosen, and the years have made manifest the wisdom of the choice.

If the settlers at the Point were disappointed in this selection, the Labissonnieres at least did not show it in their attitude toward the new project.¹ Both father and son, the latter being then a lad of eighteen, were active in the undertaking. "Perhaps by general consent," says Isaac in a later account of the event, "rather than the appointment of Father Galtier, my father held the office of general superintendent of the building." For this reason, together with the fact that the most detailed narrative of the work, supplementing that of Father Galtier (*Acta et Dicta*, Vol. I, No. 2, p. 188), was furnished by Isaac (*Ibid.* Vol. I, No. I, p. 66), the Labissonnieres have been more closely identified than the others with the actual building of St. Paul's first chapel.

Soon after the construction of the chapel, and perhaps because of it, they moved in 1842 from "LeClaire's" to "St. Paul's" and took a new claim, embracing a part of the Robert and the Jackson street hill and extending down to about Twelfth street. This property, however, Joseph Labissonniere sold,—the purchase price being a horse, to James R. Clewett,—and withdrew farther back toward Lake Phalen. The movements of the family from this point are uncertain; the father died in the early seventies at Osseo, Hennepin county.

In 1848 Isaac married Theresa Therou of Little Canada. The marriage ceremony was performed by Father Ravoux at Mendota, and the young couple went to live on a claim near Lake Como. Four years afterward they, likewise, moved to Osseo, where they resided for half a century. In 1902 they returned to St. Paul and lived with their daughter until the time of Isaac's death.

¹Francois Morin, another of the sturdy builders, was probably also from LeClaire settlement.

He is survived by his widow (now 86 years of age) and six of his eight children: Mrs. A. Verboncœur, Mrs. Mary Martineau and Jerome Labissonniere of St. Paul; Gilbert Labissonniere of Minneapolis; Isaac Labissonniere, Jr., of Osseo, and Mrs. Ellen Demeules of Minneapolis.

The remains were taken to Osseo on Thursday morning, June 23, and the funeral held immediately after their arrival. Requiem Mass was celebrated in St. Vincent's Church by the pastor, the Reverend Francis Savey. Relatives and friends of the deceased pioneer filled the historic little structure. The burial was in the St. Vincent's cemetery, Osseo.

The passing of Isaac Labissonniere marks the close of an historic epoch. He is probably the last of the Red River refugees with whose coming to the present St. Paul and vicinity are bound up the earliest beginnings of city, state and church. The wave of emigration from the Red River Valley was soon engulfed in the tide that flowed from the East, and city and state presently outgrew the French influence. But it was different with the church. More closely related to the lives of these earliest settlers, its destinies in the hands of missionaries from the provinces of France were controlled by the movements of these Canadian exiles; from St. Peter's and St. Paul's to Lake St. Croix (Willow River, Bruce, and Prele Settlements), to Lake Pepin, to the Gervais' Settlement, to Osseo and elsewhere it followed their wandering steps. Nor did its French character even nominally depart until the little chapel—later somewhat enlarged—had become a cathedral, and the new diocese to which this chapel has given its name had been firmly founded and organized.

By a singular coincidence the chronicle of the year 1910 is called upon to record the deaths of Monsignor Oster (cfr. p. 202*ff*), and of Isaac Labissonniere, the last links in the twofold chain that bound the present with the old regime.