

Joseph Nicholas Nicollet (1786 – 11 Sep 1843)

National Intelligencer, September 12, 1843

Yesterday morning, 11th of September, at a quarter past 6 o'clock, after a lingering illness, Mr. J.N. Nicollet, the eminent mathematician and astronomer.



Mr. Nicollet was a native of Savoy and a citizen of France, but had passed the last ten years of his life in this country engaged in important researches, chiefly under the auspices and in the employment of the Government of the United States.

A more extended notice of this distinguished man, and one more commensurate with his fame, will doubtless appear hereafter. At present we can do no more than give hasty expression to our admiration, our friendship, and our regret. When this light is extinguished who measured the distance from star to star, who traced the secular path of the comet, and surveyed the majestic works of God so profusely scattered through the infinite heavens, who does not feel in the eloquent words of the poet so applicable to such an eclipse,

"A glorious sympathy with suns that set!"

The friends and acquaintances of the deceased are invited to attend his funeral from Galabrun's European Hotel, on Wednesday, at 12 o'clock a.m.

*Yours forever
J. N. Nicollet*

National Intelligencer, Friday, Sept. 15, 1843

Our readers are indebted to an intelligent friend of the late Mr. Nicollet for the following appropriate notice of the life and character of this lamented gentleman:

The Funeral of the lamented Mr. Nicollet, on Wednesday last; was attended by our most respectable citizens, including members of the reverend clergy from Baltimore, Georgetown, and Washington, the Mayor of the city, Col. Abert, Chief of the Topographical Corps, officers of the Army, etc. The officers of the Topographical Corps officiated as pall-bearers, and every demonstration of respect was paid to the remains of the distinguished stranger. The solemn offices of the Catholic Church were performed in an impressive manner by the Rev. Mr. Donelan, after a few touching and appropriate remarks.

We regret that we know so little of the history of this distinguished man. He was born at or near Sallenches, in Savoy, between Geneva and Mont Blanc. His early opportunities were very limited. At or before the age of twenty he proceeded to Paris, where, attention being attracted to his intellectual aptitude, the means of improvement which that capital so abundantly affords were liberally furnished to him. He became the favorite pupil of Laplace, and soon rose to great eminence as a mathematician and astronomer. He was particularly distinguished as an observer and in the department of physical astronomy. In that sublime work, the "Mechanique Celeste", his name and authority are repeatedly referred to, in itself, no small distinction.

Mr. Nicollet was the author of several works of great merit, and of many papers and memoirs in astronomy and the higher mathematics, which gave him an enviable reputation in the scientific world.

He was a member of the "Bureau des Longitudes," and a principal examiner in the French Navy, a post of rank and importance. Had he remained in France he would probably have occupied the next place in the scientific department of the French Institute. He came to this country about ten years ago, recommended by his high reputation and by letters from the most elevated sources. After travelling a few years, he was engaged by the Secretary of War, Mr. Poinsett, to make a scientific exploration of the vast regions beyond the Mississippi and Missouri, in which duty he spent much time and collected much valuable information. At the time of his death he was engaged in preparing a map and report of the country traversed by the headwaters of the Mississippi. The map is completed; but the report had not received the finishing touch of its author. During his expeditions, Mr. Nicollet paid great attention to the history, laws, customs, and language of our Indian tribes, upon which interesting topics he had designed an elaborate work. He laboriously collected vocabularies and grammars of their numerous dialects, and even notated their national airs, as illustrative of their manners and sentiments. He has left a precious collection of manuscripts upon these subjects, which it is to be regretted for the cause of science, he was not spared to complete and arrange for publication.

Mr. Nicollet was extensively known throughout the United States, and his worth and kindness, as well as his singular talents and acquirements, were generally appreciated. The news of his death will excite general regret both at home and abroad. Of an ardent mind and delicate frame, the labors and anxieties of the last few years were too much for his overtaken spirit. His nervous energies became gradually impaired; the cords of life lost their tone from extreme and unremitting tension. He arrived in Washington about four months ago, since which he has been almost constantly confined by a distressing affection of the stomach and heart, accompanied by great nervous excitability and depression. At times the lamp of life, which was sensibly decaying, flashed up for a moment and gave faint hopes to his numerous friends and admirers. In one of these intervals, about two months ago, he prepared a remarkable paper upon the interesting but obscure subject of "aerolites," which was read for him by a friend at the National Institute, and was much admired. But this was his last labor. On Sunday last, after a violent attack of his habitual symptoms, he fell into a state of utter prostration, from which the most energetic measures could not arouse him, and at a little after six o'clock on Monday morning he expired, gently, nay almost insensibly, it is believed, in the forty-eighth year of his age.

It is thought that these imperfect details will not be without interest to the numerous and distant friends of the departed astronomer. As we stood beside his grave and saw so much genius and knowledge eclipsed beneath the clouds of the valley, we were impressively reminded of the vanity of fame, the narrow bounds of knowledge, and the inexorable decrees of death.

The National Intelligencer, November 9, 1836

Sources of the Mississippi

From a letter written by the scientific traveler, Mr. Nicollet, to the President of St. Mary's College in Baltimore, dated October 1, at St. Peter's, Upper Mississippi, we have been kindly permitted to publish the following extract--Baltimore. Gazette

"I have just returned from a long journey to the sources of the Mississippi. I owe to the politeness and enlightened liberality of Col. Davenport, and the other officers of Fort Snelling, and of Major Taliaferro, all the facilities and the protection which I needed to perform this long, painful, and dangerous expedition. The result of this adventurous journey is, that I have completed the knowledge of the sources of the Mississippi, and have traced a detailed Geographic and Topographic Map of an interesting region, two-thirds of which has hitherto been unknown. The numerous researches which I have made are founded on two thousand astronomical and barometrical observations. I have spent fifty nine nights in the forests of the Northwest, or in the marshes of the Mississippi, and yet my health is at this moment better than it has ever been. Uniting the observations of this campaign with the result of

my labors for three years, in the whole extent of the Valley of the Mississippi, and in every direction in the far West, I find myself enabled to write the physical and civil history of one of the greatest rivers in the world from the height of its sources till it empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

First met Bache and Macomb in 1832 when Bache was a professor natural sciences at the University of Pennsylvania. Had occasion to borrow some of his instruments.