

# Minnesota History Taught Through the Lives of Hypolite & Angelique Dupuis

by Daniel C. Munson

The Hypolite and Angelique Dupuis House on the Sibley Historic Site is a handsome structure. Built of bricks shipped to Mendota from Milwaukee in 1854, it has every bit the “curb appeal” of the larger Sibley and Faribault houses on the same site. The handsome red-brick, the symmetrical placing of the stately vertical windows with the simple yet pronounced cornice practically shouts “mid-19th century respectability.” The house fell into disuse in the early 20th century, but it was restored in the 1920s by a local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and has been used many times since for receptions, teas, and meetings.

While it may be an impressive and interesting structure to students of Minnesota architectural history, the lives of its original owners are at least as interesting as the building itself. The lives of Hypolite and Angelique Dupuis—each of them individually and the two of them together—are fascinating and meaningful. Taken together, their stories nicely illustrate a good deal of early Minnesota history.

Let us then consider more fully the lives of Hypolite and Angelique Dupuis.

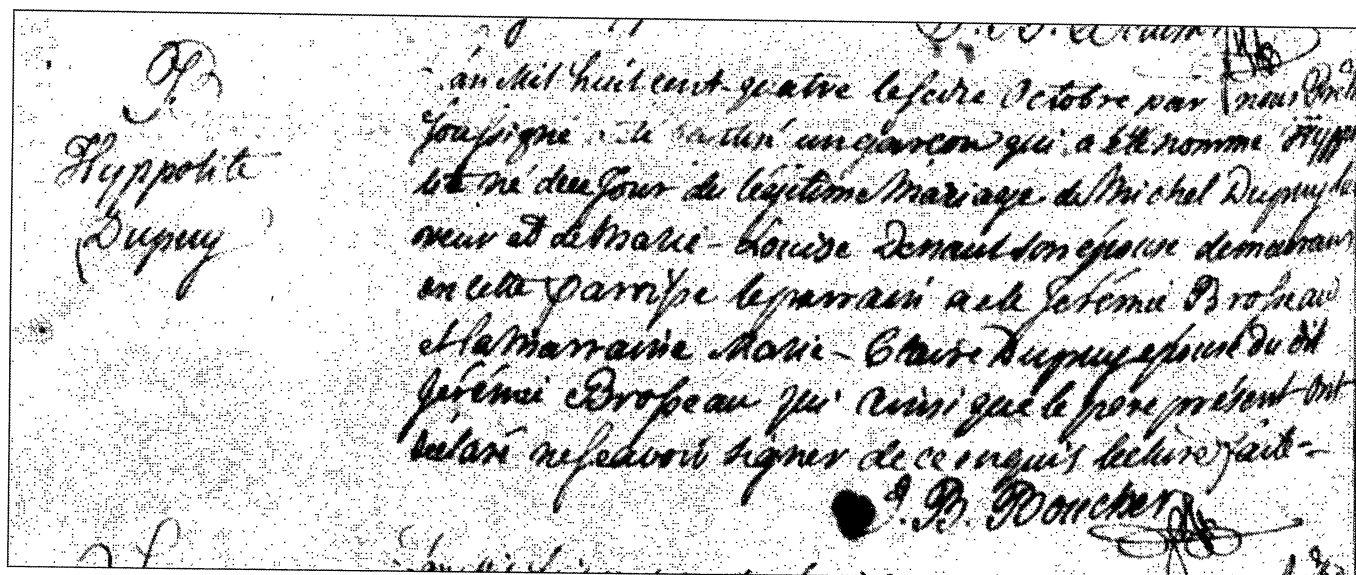
Angelique was born Angelique Renville around 1815, the child of Joseph Renville, Jr. and a Mdewakanton Dakota woman now known to history as Mary Renville. Not much would normally be known of Angelique’s early years, but her father was a prominent figure across the lands that would become the state of Minnesota, and it is through her father’s well documented life that a picture of Angelique’s early years comes into some focus.

Joseph Renville, Jr., Angelique’s well-known father, is thought to have been born around 1779 at Kaposia near present-day St. Paul. Historians tell us “His father was a French trader of much reputation. His mother was a Dakota, connected with some of the principal men of the Kaposia band.”<sup>1</sup> Joseph, Jr. is said to have been sent away as a youth to Canada to receive schooling and religious instruction from a Catholic—by one account a Jesuit—priest.<sup>2</sup> We do know that when the U.S. government sent Lieutenant Zebulon Pike north on the Mississippi in 1805 it was Joseph, Jr.—a man conversant in English, French, and Dakota and knowledgeable of the area around Mendota—who acted as interpreter at Pike’s conference with the Dakota people. Pike later wrote that Joseph was “a man respected by the Indians, and I believe an honest one.”<sup>3</sup> Joseph, like many other Indian leaders, later fought with the British in the War of 1812, leading Indian troops in battles with American forces at Prairie du Chien and Fort Meigs in northwestern Ohio. Joseph lost his British army pension when he became an American citizen in 1823, and shortly after he set up a fur trading lodge at Lac qui Parle (“Talking Lake”) along the Minnesota River near modern-day Montevideo.



*The Dupuis House in Mendota, currently part of the Sibley Historic Site.*

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Hypolite Dupuis' baptismal  
 certificate, Notre-Dame-  
 de-la-Madeleine,  
 Laprairie, Québec.  
 Drouin Collection, Ancestry.

Joseph's wife Mary was also a member of one of the leading Mdewakanton families — Little Crow was a first cousin — just like Joseph's mother. The Mdewakanton were a "woodland" tribe of the larger Dakota people, a tribe that spent most of its time far downstream of Lac qui Parle in the more wooded area that is now part of the vast Twin Cities metropolis. Mary was therefore not a member of the Dakota tribes nearest Lac qui Parle, the Sisseton and Wahpeton tribes. Angelique, daughter of Joseph and Mary Renville, was therefore three-fourths Dakota--specifically Mdewakanton Dakota--Indian.

A Presbyterian named Thomas Williamson arrived at Fort Snelling in the early 1830s looking for a place to begin a mission, and Joseph Renville invited the Reverend Williamson to place his mission at Lac qui Parle.<sup>4</sup> The mission began a school to instruct young people in English and in Christianity, the first such school in Minnesota. Angelique, the daughter of a man who valued formal schooling and the leader of the Lac qui Parle trading post, attended the school that was started at Lac qui Parle in July 1835.<sup>5</sup> The teacher was Miss Sarah Poage, the future wife of missionary Gideon Pond. Thomas Williamson later wrote that these young students like Angelique "learned to read English." Reverend Williamson may have underestimated the difficulty of learning a written and spoken language so different from their native Dakota tongue, going on to comment that "I never heard any of them speaking it much."<sup>6</sup>

Working at that same trading post was a young man born far from Lac qui Parle, in French Canada, an energetic and gregarious fellow named Hypolite Dupuis. Baptismal records tell us that Hypolite was born on October 16, 1804 at LaPrairie de la Madeleine, a village on the south side of the St. Lawrence River near Montreal, Quebec, the son of Michael Dupuis and Marie Louise Denault. Little is known of his early life, but he may have had family connections with the fur trade, because there were a couple of other men named Dupuis on the rolls of the American Fur Company, including Hypolite's brother Michael who would also find his way to Minnesota.

We know that by 1831 Hypolite Dupuis was working for Joseph Renville at Lac qui Parle, a thousand miles west of La Prairie de la Madeline. Young Hypolite Dupuis must have been given a solid education in that little village near Montreal, because he was employed at that trading post as a bookkeeper.

Bookkeeping in the 18th and 19th century was a different and, in some ways, more complicated business than it is today, when computer programs and the stability and wide acceptance of the U.S. dollar has made it a systematic and somewhat routine matter. 18th and 19th century bookkeepers had to wrestle with goods of indefinite

value that often could be sold at different prices in different locations (involving different and non-negligible transportation costs) as well as a mish mash of different currencies—gold, silver, bank notes of varying soundness, etc.—that riddled the whole process with complexity.

The upshot of all this complexity and uncertainty is that when business owners found someone who could make sense of it all they would endeavor to keep them around. Joseph Renville must have spotted this bookkeeping skill in the young Frenchman—arithmetic is an international language—and it appears young Hypolite caught on and became known for it among others connected with the larger trading company.

Hypolite's talents extended beyond bookkeeping. He grew up speaking French, which worked fine among the traders along the Minnesota River—many of them spoke French—but he quickly picked up both the Dakota and the English languages spoken along that trading route. This blend of languages often formed itself into a distinctive "patois" that most of the residents of the area could use to converse, and young Dupuis quickly became a master of this odd dialect.

Such a young man might have had considerable appeal to the Dakota women who lived nearby. Hypolite and his fellow traders and voyageurs were a popular group. They plied their fur trapping and trading skills along Minnesota's rivers and at trading posts at Lac qui Parle and Traverse des Sioux and Mendota and Prairie du Chien with a fun-loving, "devil-may-care" attitude. Even missionaries, religious people normally somewhat cold to a pursuit as "worldly" as fur trading, could not help but enjoy them. Samuel Pond ran a mission to the Dakota along with his brother Gideon for many decades, and he reminisced in print of those "Good Old Days" of the 1830s and '40s when those traders and "their jolly, reckless voyageurs...passed up and down those rivers." Pond reflected on the fact that although progress had replaced them, "there are a few of us yet left who...sometimes almost wish that, instead of the shrill scream of the steam whistle, we could hear again the merry song of the boatman, and see, just once more, our old friends the traders, each one at his post."<sup>7</sup>

Angelique Renville married young trader and voyageur and bookkeeper Hypolite Dupuis. They were married by the Reverend Thomas Williamson at Lac qui Parle in a ceremony described by missionary Stephen Riggs in his daybook:

"Quite unexpectedly, this afternoon [January 11, 1839] we received an invitation to a wedding at the Renville's, one of his daughters marrying a Frenchman...Mr. Renville, who is in part Dakota, received us with French politeness, and soon after the rest of the family entered. These, with several Dakota men and women seated in benches or on the floor around the room, formed not an uninteresting group. The marriage ceremony was in French and Dakota, and was soon over. Then the bridegroom rose, shook hands with his wife's relations, and kissed her mother, and she also kissed all her father's family.

"When supper was announced as ready, we repaired to a table amply supplied with beef and mutton, potatoes, bread and tea."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the formality, the marriage was not a Catholic ceremony. Hypolite was a life-long Catholic and so may have found it a little wanting. Shortly after Hypolite was hired by Henry Sibley to work at Mendota, Hypolite and Angelique were married again in a Catholic ceremony at the St. Francis Mission at Mendota in 1842.

Hypolite Dupuis became a trusted advisor to Henry Sibley at the Mendota office of the American Fur Company, the center of the fur trading business in Minnesota. Sibley was an English-speaker first and a French-speaker second, Dupuis the reverse, but they conversed well enough that Hypolite became Sibley's private secretary. It is widely believed that Hypolite managed the fur business for Sibley when Sibley was



*Hypolite Dupuis, c. 1875*  
Wikipedia

away from Mendota.

Hypolite Dupuis was therefore an important--and popular--figure at Mendota. In "Pioneer Chronicles," Hypolite is described as "a great character" who "could talk like a streak of greased lightning in a mixed language of patois, Sioux and English which only those familiar with Northwestern inhabitants of that day could comprehend. When things went wrong, the villagers all knew it by the excited Frenchman's vociferous clamor of mixed tongues, ferocious gestures and blazing eyes, and it was always better than a circus to them. Hypolite was as good hearted, generous and companionable a fellow as one need wish to meet, when he was in good humor, which was his normal condition."<sup>9</sup> A newspaperman interviewed Hypolite in 1868 and wrote that he was "as full of anecdote as ever" and that "an hour or two whiled away in his company is no loss."<sup>10</sup>

Sibley's absences grew longer and more frequent when Minnesota was organized as a territory in early 1849. Sibley was the territory's representative in the U.S. Congress, and he spent a good deal of time in Washington, DC lobbying on behalf of its residents. Territorial status triggered the demand for a treaty between the U.S. government and the Indians of Minnesota, and Hypolite's boss was right in the middle of the action. Sibley was a champion of the interests of his many Dakota constituents, and Sibley's letters and speeches show how influential he was in making the terms as generous as possible for the Dakota.<sup>11</sup> Two treaties were concluded in 1851. The Mdewakanton and Wakepute tribes near what is now the metro area concluded one--the Treaty of Mendota--and another treaty was made with the Sisseton and Wahpeton tribes further west--the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux.

A critical part of those agreements and one that was not technically part of the treaties themselves was the extinguishing of debts that Dakota hunters had rung up in the 1820s, '30s, and '40s. This was done using a document known now as the "traders' paper." Hypolite would have been instrumental in toting up these debts on behalf of Henry Sibley and his firm. It is interesting to observe that Sibley's claims presented in both these "traders' paper" documents were meticulously kept, with total debts quantified to the penny.<sup>12</sup> (Many of the other traders claimed debts in round numbers like "one thousand dollars" or "four thousand dollars.")

Angelique's involvement in these treaties is also interesting. The Dakota Indians were given money in the form of yearly annuity payments in return for agreeing to relocate to a reservation alongside the Minnesota River--but what of those Dakota like Angelique who were not going to relocate but who were nonetheless considered members of the tribes? The solution arrived at was to give such "half-breeds" a share of the treaty proceeds in the form of single, up-front cash payments to each. Angelique had five children at the time, and her status meant she was given \$1500 (i.e., five children at \$300 per child) out of the proceeds of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. It is interesting to observe that Hypolite signed the treaty even though he was not listed as a trader and was not claiming debts himself, perhaps because he was signing on Angelique's behalf or vouching for the debts claimed by Sibley. The \$1500 figure is not a great amount of money today, but it was then: it was enough to pay for nearly half the cost of the red-brick Dupuis House built a few years later.

Angelique's status as a "half-breed" is memorialized in that Treaty document, but the specifics of her life story are more interesting than that simple ethnic label. Born a member of one of the leading Mdewakanton families, Angelique is a transitional figure in Minnesota history. Dakota by birth and kinship, her youth is spent on a fur trading

post and she is taught to read and write by missionaries, and by the 1840s and '50s she is raising baptized children as the wife of a bookkeeper.

The wilderness that was such a critical part of Hypolite's fur trading business was quickly vanishing during Minnesota's hectic population boom of the 1850s. The white population grew by leaps and bounds, doubling every 18 months or so for a half-dozen years. The fur trading business was doomed by this growth, and shrewd traders like Dupuis and Sibley knew it. They wound up their trading business in 1853.

That same year, the Mdewakanton tribe relocated from near St. Paul to its new reservation land some 100 miles upstream along the Minnesota River.

Consider Angelique Dupuis, living at Mendota that September of 1853, mother now of six children and one Metis orphan, and ponder her thoughts as she watched her kinfolk, those hundreds of Mdewakanton, travel past her house as they made their way up the Minnesota River to try to practice their ancient way of life on their new reservation lands just downstream from Lac qui Parle. Angelique must have felt the force of that transformation of the lands of Minnesota as few others could.

Hypolite was now out of the fur trading business, but the commercial world still beckoned. He envisioned running a general store to serve the growing local population, a store right on the grounds of the old trading company at Mendota. He decided to do the thing up right. He constructed that handsome personal residence that we see today alongside Highway 13, and he partnered with a man called G.S. Whitman to run a general store on ground level.

Hypolite and Angelique and their large family lived in quarters above and all around that general store. They had a seventh child ("Henry Sibley") shortly after the brick house was finished, and five years later an eighth ("Hypolite Paschal," or "Paul").

Hypolite's general store would not survive the deep economic recession that followed the nationwide Panic of 1857. It was a financial swoon that started out east, but it wreaked real havoc on the new and vulnerable and credit-starved Minnesota economy. Undaunted, Hypolite continued to serve at various times as Mendota postmaster, Justice of the Peace, and Dakota County's first treasurer. All this evidently did not keep an energetic man like Hypolite Dupuis quite busy enough: he sold his handsome Mendota brick house and moved to the Devil's Lake Reservation in North Dakota to work as storekeeper at the Fort Totten Indian Agency.

Hypolite was roughly 65 years of age when he moved to the Fort Totten Agency, and he may have discovered that he was not as quick and spry and energetic as he once had been. We don't know precisely when he returned to Minnesota, but we know that he was back in Mendota in July 1879 when he finally lay down and departed this life.

Angelique lived another ten years, joining Hypolite in that "undiscovered country" on the second day of 1890. She was survived by many children and grandchildren. Hypolite and Angelique's many descendants today live and work and brighten the lives of their friends and acquaintances here in Minnesota and throughout the rest of the country.

One of those descendants is Mary Corinne "Connie" Willwerscheid, nee Rafter, of Eagan. She is the great granddaughter of Marie Agnes Dupuis, the third child born to Angelique and Hypolite.<sup>13</sup> She was born in 1934, and while growing up she wasn't told much about her mother's ancestry. She remembers quite clearly Minnesota's celebration of 100 years of statehood in 1958, and the muffled tones her mother used when the occasion caused the subject of her ancestry to be mentioned. It made Connie curious, and when she researched and discovered her mother's family's "mixed blood" ancestry she was told by one of her siblings that she was just "telling one of her fairy tales." Now these many years later those siblings acknowledge their family's fascinating story. Family members reached out to the helpful people at the Sibley



*Connie Willwerscheid, nee Rafter, great-great granddaughter of Hypolite and Angelique Dupuis, is pictured here with her family.*

*Front row: Diane Frazier, Jennifer Ettl, Karen Wyss, Connie, Stephen Willwerscheid and his wife Debbie, and Tracy Grassle.*

*Back row: Brian Frazier, Bill Wyss, and Gary Grassle.*

Historic Site and learned more about those interesting ancestors of theirs.

Connie raised her five children in a handsome modern house built very near where the Treaty of Mendota was signed and just a couple of miles from the Dupuis House. She sent her children off to Henry Sibley High School, and those grown children live still in Minnesota (when they are not vacationing in various exotic locales). When an interested writer/historian asked if they would all gather for a photograph, they (along with a few spouses) quickly agreed on a time and rallied around their mom to take the photo presented here.

Those who pay a visit to the Sibley Historic Site today usually walk through the Sibley House and listen to the dramatic details of the life of the state's first governor and congressman. A stroll back up the hill to the left takes the visitor to the house of Hypolite and Angelique Dupuis--that handsome red-brick structure that serves now as the Visitors Center. Such a walk, when accompanied by a little reflection upon the lives of the original owners, repays the effort. Hypolite and Angelique started life in vastly different places and circumstances, but their lives came together in Minnesota and put them at the center of much early Minnesota history. To give a few moments' thought to the arc of their family story is a worthwhile exercise.



## Endnotes

1. "Sketch of Joseph Renville" by Rev. E.D. Neill, Minn. Hist. Soc. Coll. (1853, 2nd ed. 1872), p. 197-198.
2. "Minnesota: The Land of Sky-Tinted Waters, A History of the State and Its People" by Theodore Christianson (Chicago, 1935)- Vol. I, p. 142.
3. "Expedition to the Headwaters of the Mississippi River" by Zebulon Pike (New York, 1895). Letter to General Wilkinson.
4. Christianson, p. 142.
5. Both of Angelique's parents were Christians by the 1830s, and they welcomed the idea of a school at Lac qui Parle taught by missionaries and other believers. See Neill, p. 203-205.
6. Minnesota Historical Society Collections, a chapter entitled "Earliest Schools in Minnesota Valley" by the Rev. T.S. Williamson.
7. "The Dakota or Sioux as They Were in Minnesota in 1834" by Samuel Pond (St. Paul, 1908), p. 36.
8. "Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux" by Stephen R. Riggs (Chicago, 1880), p.44.
9. "Pioneer Chronicles" (Minneapolis, 1976), p. 54.
10. *The Farmington Telegraph*, July 30, 1868.
11. Letters from Henry Sibley to new territorial governor Ramsey, Sept. 13 and 23, 1849: Sibley envisions a total minimum price of about 10 cents-per-acre (a figure close to the final price), the idea of a Dakota reservation in the southwestern part of the state, the use of treaty monies to establish schools, etc., almost two full years before the treaty terms were finalized. Sibley also gave an impassioned speech on the floor of the House in August 1850 critical of the government's ill-treatment of the Indians of North America and exhorting the government to treat the Indians of Minnesota in a spirit of "conciliation and real friendship."
12. In the "Traders' Paper" signed in connection with the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, Sibley claimed debts owed him by the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of \$144,984.40. In connection with the Treaty of Mendota, Sibley claimed debts owed by members of the Mdewakanton band totaling \$37,722.07. Senate Exec. Doc. No. 61, 33rd Cong., 1st Session (1854).
13. Hypolite and Angelique's daughter Mary Agnes married and had a daughter Mary Theresa Wiggley, who had a daughter Corinne Bartlett, Connie's mother.