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A PIONEER MERCHANT
OF ST. LOUIS
1810-1820

The Business Career of Christian Wilt

BY

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PREFACE

THIS study presents an account of Christian Wilt, a pioneer merchant of Saint Louis during the decade from 1810 to 1820, years that mark a well defined period in the development of the western community. In 1810 the Louisiana Territory had been in the possession of the United States for only six years and Saint Louis had for one year been a chartered village in that territory; in 1820 the Territory of Missouri, carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, was being rapidly settled, and Saint Louis, emerging from the pioneer stage, was ready to assume the duties and responsibilities of a city. This she did in 1822, just one year after Missouri had been admitted into the Union as a state.

In this study an attempt has been made to show the rôle played by the business man in the growth and development of pioneer life. The merchant was an outstanding member of his frontier community. As a distributor of merchandise, as a pioneer in building industry, as a banker, as an advocate and patron of social institutions, as a patriot, he was a citizen of importance. An appreciation of his work is necessary to an understanding of the general development of western trade, manufactures, and the social life of that day.

Out of the numberless courageous men who, undaunted by hardships and dangers, pressed on to distant points to open marts of trade in the western wilderness, Christian Wilt has been chosen as a type. In his story, told in detail, one may get in outline at least, a picture of the pioneer merchant and an estimate of the power he wielded in the building of the Middle West. In the early nineteenth century it required a man of courage to establish a business enterprise in the midst of the comparative wilderness that surrounded Saint Louis. At the time of which we write there was great difficulty in maintaining communication between the region west of the Mississippi and the older communities of the eastern states. In the Western districts, separated by a wilderness of hundreds of miles, by areas sparsely inhabited save for roving savages, by stretches of land unin-

viting in their untilled expanse and undeveloped resources, the people were badly handicapped by the lack of means of transportation. The courage and heroism, implicit in the record of the way in which the pioneer settlers faced their hardships and overcame innumerable difficulties, constitute a fascinating and inspiring chapter in the history of our country.

The most important sources for the story of Wilt's entrepreneurial career are his own letterbooks (1812-1815) and those of Joseph Hertzog (1811-1815). The first letter found in Hertzog's letterbook is dated March 20, 1811, while Wilt's first letter was dated almost a year later, January 18, 1812. The letters in both books are arranged chronologically, just as they were copied by the authors when the originals were ready for the post. The books, which are to be found in manuscript in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society in Saint Louis, have recently for the first time been given publicity. Because of limited space it has been impossible to include in this monograph a detailed account of all the projects described in this correspondence, or even to give a complete list of them. However, in the hope of encouraging further study of the early efforts to establish trade centers on the western frontier, an attempt has been made to select such portions as give a clear picture of this young merchant, his ambitions, his character, his successes, and his failures.

The present work had its source in a paper prepared under the guidance of Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox at Columbia University in a seminar in American History. The original material was found in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society of Saint Louis, to whose librarian, Miss Stella Drumm, I am deeply indebted for assistance in the use of the Society's remarkable collections. For their generous and willing aid in facilitating the research for this work, I wish especially to thank the staffs of the Saint Louis Historical Society, the Columbia University Library, the New York Public Library, the New York Historical Society, the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Western

Pennsylvania at Pittsburgh, the Saint Louis Mercantile Library, and the Fontbonne College Library of Saint Louis. It gives me pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness also to Mother Agnes Rossiter, former Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, to Mother Rose Columba, present Superior General, and to Mother Angela, Superior Provincial, for their constant encouragement; to Mr. J. Felix Vallé, who made available for my use manuscripts in his private collections; to Mr. Alphonse H. Clemens, Fontbonne College, Saint Louis, to Mrs. Louis Houck, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and to Miss Ellen Masterson, Quincy, Massachusetts, for their generous and valuable assistance in procuring original source material; and to Monsignor Charles Van Tourenhaut, Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, who put at my disposal his valuable collection of rare books on the history of early Louisiana.

To Professor John A. Krout of Columbia University, I owe a special debt of gratitude for his criticism, advice, and encouragement in the preparation of this monograph. I wish to express my thanks to Professor Allan Nevins for his reading of the manuscript, and also my appreciation for his helpful suggestions. To these and to all others who have in the slightest degree helped in the preparation and rounding out of the work here presented, I am truly grateful.

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SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

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VITA

SISTER MARIETTA JENNINGS, daughter of Thomas and Ellen (Sullivan) Jennings, was born in Shawano, Wisconsin, July 15, 1875. She was graduated from the high school of her native city and in 1919 received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from St. Catherine's College, St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1925 Columbia University conferred upon her the Master of Arts degree.

In 1900 she entered the Community of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. From 1919 to 1925 she was principal of St. Joseph's Academy, St. Louis; in 1923 she was appointed Dean of Fontbonne College, and from 1927 to 1933 was president of St. Teresa College, Kansas City. She returned to Fontbonne as Dean of the College in 1935.