

# Pipestone

National Monument  
Minnesota

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## George Catlin



*Few yet know how they [Indians] live, how they dress, how they worship, what are their actions, their customs, their religion, their amusements... as they practice them in the uncivilized regions of their uninvaded country, which it is the main object of this work, clearly and distinctly to set forth. (Catlin)*

George Catlin was born in Pennsylvania in 1796. As a child, Catlin was interested in Indians, natural history, science, and the arts. He was educated at home and trained as a lawyer, giving up that profession when a group of Native Americans visited Philadelphia. The group sparked his interest and he decided to devote his career to painting Indians in their native land. As a painter, Catlin was largely if not entirely self-taught.

Catlin spent 1830 to 1836 traveling thousands of miles from the Missouri to the Southwest, which resulted in his producing 470 portraits and portrayals of Indian life representing almost forty different tribes. In 1832 Catlin had his most productive year for painting Indians in the field. He traveled up the Missouri aboard the American Fur Company's new steamboat *Yellowstone* on its first voyage to Fort Union Trading Post in North Dakota, almost 2,000 miles above Saint Louis. On this trip, he painted the Assiniboin, Blackfoot, Crow, Plains Ojibwa, and Cree. Further downriver he visited and painted the Hidatsa and Mandan, semi-sedentary farming tribes in their palisaded villages of earth lodges near Fort Clark .

It was during his travels among many different Indian tribes in the early 1830's that Catlin noticed many Chiefs and warriors using pipes made of a richly colored, red stone. When he asked about the stone, he was told

of a single quarry near the dividing ridge between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Indians claimed the site was sacred ground where Indians of many tribes met in peace to quarry the stone which was the color of human blood. Catlin became very interested in finding the source of this remarkable stone, and set off in search of the fabled pipestone quarry.

In 1836, despite objections from the Santee Sioux, Catlin insisted on visiting the Pipestone quarries (what today is known as Pipestone National Monument). The Santee told Catlin that the area was off limits to whites, but Catlin later admitted that his curiosity and determination increased with their vehemence. After visiting the quarries, he took a sample of pipestone away with him and sent it to Boston to be analyzed. It was named *Catlinite* by the geologist who received the sample of this stone, previously unrecorded in modern science.

The number of whites who visited during the 1830s increased, with shorter and shorter time between visits. By the end of the decade, the steady stream of white visitors had begun to bring the quarry to the attention of the non-Native American world.



Perhaps Catlin's most famous piece about the pipestone quarries, '*On the Coteau des Prairies*' depicts Indians working in the quarries, the Three Maidens, and Winnewissa Falls in the background.

# Other Early Explorers

Contrary to popular belief, George Catlin was not the first white man to visit the quarries. There were several accounts of people visiting the Pipestone area before 1836, and as early as the late 1600s, Europeans knew of its existence.

## Charles Le Sueur (1657-1704)

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were occasional reports of a location from which the stone originated. In 1700, Pierre Charles Le Sueur, a French trader who defied French trading regulations and traveled deep into areas Europeans had not explored, identified the "Hinhanetons" of the "village of the red-stone quarry." Most probably, he reached the vicinity of what today is the monument and found newly arrived Yankton Sioux. Le Sueur's report was the first evidence that anyone lived by the quarries.

## Philander Prescott (1801-1862)

About the first of September, 1832, Prescott, a trader for the American Fur Company, was ordered to proceed to the Big Sioux River country located in what is now the state of South Dakota to hunt beaver. After a number of days on the trail with his brigade and family in tow, Prescott located the famous Pipestone quarries. He wrote, "The next morning we moved off in search of water, for where we camped water was scarce and the horses could not get enough. About noon we arrived at the famous place called the Pipestone Quarry."

Prescott and his party blasted the quartzite layer above the pipestone, collecting enough stone to make about twenty pipes. He described the deposit as follows: "When I was there diggings were about 100 yards long, and at the south end the diggings are about ten feet deep. The pipestone is about a foot thick, but in seams from 1/4 to 3 inches thick; in the deep part of the quarry there is more clay and the pipestone is speckled. Otherwise it has pale, white spots, and some has deeper red spots. And some is a pure red and smooth as marble, and fire does not crack it."

A note at the end of the section of Prescott's journal covering the period from 1829-1833 states that "Though [the quarry] is not shown on any map earlier than 1703, records indicate that as early as 1637 Indians living far from the quarry treasured the pipes made from the stone found there." Although Prescott and his party stayed only briefly, they were the first of many traders, explorers, and interested observers to come to the site.

## Joseph Nicollet (1786-1843)

French scientist and geographer who led three American expeditions to map the upper Mississippi area between 1836 and 1839. In 1836-1837 he went up the Mississippi to Lake Itasca and then along the St. Croix River. Next in 1838, he traveled from Fort Snelling to the Pipestone Quarries, where he documented Indians quarrying pipestone. Finally in 1839, he led an expedition across the breadth of land between the Missouri and upper Mississippi rivers. His journeys resulted in the influential book, *Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi*, which was a remarkably accurate record of an area more than half the size of Europe. His journals tell us that he learned much from the inhabitants of this region, particularly the Dakota and Ojibwe. The Nicollet Inscription can be seen at post #7 on the Circle Trail.

## Early Settlement of Pipestone Town

As more and more pioneers traveled west, the settlements of small towns began. Farmers were drawn to the area because of the rich soil. **Charles Bennett**, a druggist from Le Mars, Iowa, was also intrigued by the legends of the pipestone quarry. He first traveled here in 1873 with a party of four others. He decided then that it would be the ideal place to establish a town. Previously, settlement of the region had been slowed by territorial disputes between the area's American Indians and the U.S. government and eventually by the Civil War.

Bennett returned in 1874 and, using a load of lumber hauled from Luverne, built the city's first house. The five-foot tall building was only meant to serve as a marker to show passersby that a claim had been made. New settlers arrived and by 1878, Pipestone was a small but thriving trade center.