To the enterprising fur trader belongs the honor of spearheading the westward expansion of the American frontier. He was the first to penetrate the wilderness and to make effective contact with the natives. He then played the role of host, advisor, guide, interpreter, and outfitter to the following waves of explorers, miners, and settlers. From the distance of a century and a half the broad canvas of the fur trade shines bright and clear, but many of the figures that conducted it remain faceless.

The French name, Picotte, sparkles liberally through the annals of the upper Missouri fur trade from 1820 to 1865. The inconsistent spelling so characteristic of that day creates the illusion of an army of traders of that, or a related, name, but there were apparently only two of prominence. Honore Picotte, whose given name was often reduced to Henry by the English scribes, rose from clerk to general agent and shareholder in the Upper Missouri Outfit of Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and Company. His nephew, Joseph Picotte, sometimes mistakenly identified as his brother, attained similar ranks in several opposition firms.¹

Editor's Note: South Dakota History regrets that it was necessary to delete all accent and grave marks. Specifically, there should be an accent mark over the e in Honore.

Honore Picotte was born in 1796, according to a biographical sketch of his son-in-law Dr. Louis T. Pim of Saint Louis.\(^2\) This is confirmed by a newspaper obituary that implies he was born no later than October of that year.\(^3\) According to his marriage contract, his parents were Jean Baptiste and Helene (Jarlaix) Picotte, and his birthplace was Riviere du Loup (known as Louiseville since 1879), a village on the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec Province, Canada.\(^4\) Apparently raised in Riviere du Loup, the young Honore received a better than average education, if we may judge by his later attainments.

During that time the fur trade offered a promising career to an energetic young man, especially if his education qualified him for the position of clerk instead of simple voyageur. Honore responded to this lure, perhaps by 1816, the year the flaming rivalry between the Hudson’s Bay and North West companies culminated in the Seven Oaks massacre near present Winnipeg.

Honore’s French origins would have drawn him to the North West Company rather than to its British rival. Support for this conjecture may be gleaned from hints the elderly Picotte gave Thaddeus A. Culbertson in 1850, when they shared a long voyage up the Missouri. The trader revealed a familiarity with the Indian tribes of Lake Superior and Winnipeg, and told of having eaten reindeer dung in the north country, where the natives considered it a delicacy. These could only have been recollections of youthful service in the Canadian trade, and more likely with the North West Company, whose supply route traversed the length of Lake Superior. He also declared that it was 1820 when he first met the Mandans at their earth-lodge villages on the Missouri, a region frequented more by the Canadian than the British firm.\(^5\)

Picotte had probably served for some years as clerk with the North West Company before its British rival absorbed it in the summer of 1821. Although this merger restored peace and

\(^2\) Encyclopedia of the History of St. Louis, 1899 ed., S.V. “Pim, Dr. Louis T.”
\(^3\) Missouri Republican, 15 Oct. 1860.
prosperity to the Canadian trade, it also left unemployed a number of able North Westers, including Honore Picotte, Kenneth McKenzie, William Laidlaw, Daniel Lamont, and James Kipp. They all promptly moved to the United States, where the trade was then less monopolistic.  

In a newspaper letter of 1824 McKenzie wrote that he had clerked for the North West Company before emigrating from Canada in February 1822 to Saint Louis, where he promptly registered for naturalization. The Saint Louis court records show that in that year McKenzie, Laidlaw, and Lamont reported for naturalization, having entered the country by way of Fort Snelling. A history of that fort mentions that McKenzie and Laidlaw passed through in January 1822, en route from the Selkirk Settlement to Praire du Chien. Alexander Culbertson recalled that Honore Picotte and James Kipp were among this party that traveled by dog sled.  

These five immigrants, along with Joseph Renville, an old Canadian-born trader from Minnesota, and two United States citizens, William P. Tilton and S.S. Dudley, organized the Columbia Fur Company. On 17 July 1822 Tilton and Dudley secured a trading license from Indian Superintendent William Clark at Saint Louis to trade with the Sioux on the Minnesota River and the Mandans and others on the Missouri. Under the drive and genius of Kenneth McKenzie the new firm flourished for six years, with Honore Picotte as an active member. McKenzie gradually extended his Columbia Fur Company posts across Minnesota and Wisconsin, where they competed successfully with the Northern Department of John J. Astor's American Fur Company. In the spring of 1823 McKenzie sent a party west to establish Fort Tilton at the Mandan villages on the upper Missouri, where competition was then minimal. However,

10. Ibid.  
before long he challenged all the rival firms operating on the lower Missouri — Joshua Pilcher’s Missouri Fur Company, Pierre Chouteau’s French Fur Company, and the new Western Department of the American Fur Company. The most important of his lower river posts were Fort Lookout, near present Chamberlain, South Dakota, and Fort Tecumseh, further up at the mouth of Teton (now Bad) River, where Fort Pierre would later flourish. 12

The meager records of the Columbia Fur Company list only personnel in Minnesota and on the upper Missouri; the absence of Picotte’s name implies that he served at the lower posts. This is confirmed by the reminiscences of one of his Sioux wives, an exceptionally intelligent and respected woman. She stated that at the age of five years (1825) she first saw Picotte at a post on Teton River, where her father came to trade.13

The year 1827 brought a major reorganization of the fur companies. Early in that year Astor’s Western Department merged with the Chouteau interests. In the face of this threat, the Columbia Fur Company relinquished all of its Minnesota

12. See sources listed previously in footnote 1.
13. Frances C. Holley, Once Their Home or Our Legacy from the Dahkotahs (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1892), p. 288.
and Wisconsin interests to Astor's Northern Department. At the same time the Western Department concentrated its operations on the lower Missouri and contracted with McKenzie, Laidlaw, and Lamont to manage its new division, called the Upper Missouri Outfit. By December 1827 the reorganization and transfer of property were completed, signaling the end of the Columbia Fur Company. As general agent for the Upper Missouri Outfit, the aggressive McKenzie soon established his headquarters at a new post at the mouth of the Yellowstone, which became known as Fort Union.14

These mergers again froze out several old hands, notably Honore Picotte of the Columbia firm and Pierre Didier Papin of the Chouteau firm. Together with six other Frenchmen from Saint Louis, they formed a new opposition company in the spring of 1829, legally known as P.D. Papin and Company. Picotte and Papin erected their principal post, called Papin's House or Teton Post, at the mouth of Teton River to compete with the Upper Missouri Outfit's Fort Tecumseh. The Fort Tecumseh journal for 1830 makes frequent references to this rival post and to Honore. Although trade competition was keen, the isolation from civilization prompted a remarkable degree of socializing between the rival posts.15

P.D. Papin and Company seems to have been born under an unlucky star. In the spring of 1829, when the traders were struggling up the river with a barge filled with trade goods, they had a wreck and lost their cargo. At considerable sacrifice, the partners managed to replace the goods and conduct a winter's trade.16 The next spring Picotte shepherded the fur returns down to Saint Louis and then returned to Papin's House with a pack train of goods on 22 August. Two days later news came that a war party of Rees had attacked one of the upriver trading parties, killing three men and carrying off $1,000 worth of property. It was Picotte who hastened upriver to see if anything could be salvaged.17

These setbacks prompted the partners to negotiate with

14. See sources listed previously in footnote 1.
the Upper Missouri Outfit, which bought them out on 14 October 1830. But this time Picotte, Papin, and Gabriel P. Cerre were taken into the Chouteau firm. Nine days later Picotte and Cerre embarked on the keelboat *Fox* to lead an outfit up to the Mandan villages, where they spent the winter trading under these new auspices. The next spring Picotte returned to Saint Louis, eager to consummate some unfinished business.

On 15 August 1831, at the age of thirty-five, Honore entered into a marriage contract with Thérèse Duchouquette, the minor daughter of Jean Baptiste Duchouquette and his deceased wife, Therese Marie (Brazeau) Duchouquette. This alliance not only tied Honore firmly into the interrelated Saint Louis fur-trading families, but later brought him an inheritance of a tract of land that became Papin and Picotte’s addition to Saint Louis in 1842. Despite unfavorable circumstances, this marriage endured, and Therese maintained a home in Saint Louis where she welcomed her adventurous husband for brief periods every summer. They had two daughters, Rita, born in 1837 or 1838, who married a Mr. Wilkinson, and Celestine, four years younger, who married Dr. Louis T. Pim.

This Saint Louis marriage, however, was neither the first nor the last for Honore Picotte. By universal custom fur traders married native women, Indian style. This was partly the result of isolation at lonely winter posts and partly the prevailing influence of Indian custom. But another compelling reason was that such ties afforded a most effective means of retaining trading allegiances with the tribes. Like marriages in more civilized circumstances, these alliances ran the gamut from the temporary and loveless to the permanent and devoted.

Trader Picotte married successively at least two Sioux women. Sometime in the 1820s he took to wife a sister of the principal chief of the Yankton tribe, Struck-by-the-Ree. This woman bore him a son, Charles Felix Picotte, on 20 August 1830. Probably in October 1840, Honore sent Charles to Saint Louis in charge of Father Pierre Jean DeSmet to be educated. Fourteen years later the young man returned to begin a

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18. Ibid., p. 140.
respected career as trader, treaty negotiator, businessman of Yankton, and then agency interpreter to his mother's tribe. Twice married and the father of several children, he died at the Yankton Agency on 12 March 1896. 21 Charles may have had a full sister, for William D. Hodgkiss wrote in a letter at Fort Pierre on 30 January 1849, "Mr. Picotte's eldest girl, We-ah-Wasta, also died a few weeks ago." 22

Perhaps Honore's first Sioux wife died in the smallpox epidemic of 1837, for the next year he married another Sioux girl destined to become the most prominent woman of her race on the upper Missouri. Her native name was Wambdi Autopewin, or Eagle-Woman-That-All-Look-At, though in later life she was baptized under the prosaic name of Matilda. She was the daughter of Two Lance, a Hunkpapa chief, and Rosy-Light-of-Dawn, a woman of the Two Kettle band. This remarkable woman bore Picotte two children, Mary Louise, born 21 December 1839, and Zoe Lulu, born 4 May 1846. Both daughters returned from convent schools as intelligent and respected ladies who made good marriages. 23 If Honore is to be

judged as a husband and father by the character of his several wives and children, the verdict can only be favorable.

In the fall of 1831 Picotte returned upriver on the keelboat *Assinaboine* with McKenzie, Papin, and others prominent in the Upper Missouri Outfit. He devoted the next three winters to trading with the Yanktonnais at the mouth of Apple River, near present Bismarck. His activities there are frequently noted in the journal of Prince Maximilian, who spent the 1833-34 winter at Fort Clark a short distance above. The trader spent the warm seasons taking down the furs and bringing back trade goods. On 31 May 1832 he witnessed the arrival of the *Yellowstone* at Fort Tecumseh, the first steamboat used by the company to make annual trips to Fort Union. On 17 June he left by keelboat with fur pelts, but by the time he returned on 13 November, he found that Fort Pierre had replaced Fort Tecumseh, by then undermined by the river. He made a similar trip the next summer, and in the spring of 1834 took a keelboat load of Indian corn to Fort Union, no doubt to supply McKenzie’s illicit whiskey still.

John J. Astor retired from the fur trade on 1 June 1834, selling his Northern Department to Ramsey Crooks and his interest in the Western Department to Pratte, Chouteau and Company, the latter retaining, in popular jargon only, the American Fur Company label. Kenneth McKenzie renewed his four-year contract as general agent for the Upper Missouri Outfit, but abruptly left to spend a year in Europe, while Chouteau staved off the disaster threatened by the public exposure of the agent’s illicit still. Although he returned the next year, McKenzie never again played a dominant role in fur trading. According to Alexander Culbertson, the partnerships in the Upper Missouri Outfit began to change in 1835, and Picotte became a shareholder.

For the four-year term of this new contract references to Picotte are rather meager. In 1835 he conducted keelboats up and down the river, but he probably did no trading the next winter, as he made a trip to Chouteau’s New York headquarters in January 1836. There is no mention of him in the tragic summer of 1837, when the company boat, St. Peters, seed a smallpox epidemic that decimated the tribes along the river.

In the summer of 1838 Pratte, Chouteau and Company reorganized as Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and Company, a firm that was to dominate the trade for the next twenty-seven years. At this time McKenzie made his farewell voyage upriver on the Antelope, turning over control to Honore Picotte, his successor as general agent. Picotte immediately moved the field headquarters from Fort Union down to Fort Pierre, where Joseph Leonnais found him firmly established by the next January.

For the next four years Picotte skillfully guided the firm through the transition from reliance on the dying trade in beaver pelts to the growing trade in buffalo robes. Fortunately, he was permitted to make the adjustment during an interval of comparative freedom from competition. At this time Picotte revealed a humane side of his character. In September 1842 Jacob Halsey, the long-time journal-keeper at Fort Pierre, died at Liberty, Missouri, leaving a number of half-breed children. Honore and Matilda took the two youngest, William, who was four, and Charles, two, under their care at Fort Pierre until they were old enough to be sent to school.

Picotte’s managerial honeymoon came to an end in 1842, when competing firms began to form and grow. The most serious opposition on the Missouri was Fox, Livingston and Company, and on the Platte River, Pratte, Cabanne and Company. When the choice of weapons proved to be liquor and violence, Chouteau reacted shrewdly. By fall he had engineered

the appointment to the restored office of Indian agent for the Missouri one of his most reliable traders, Andrew Drips, who was charged with suppressing the liquor traffic.

Before Drips could swing into action, the frantic Picotte sent an urgent plea to Chouteau on 4 January 1843.

We know to a certainty that they [Fox, Livingston & Co.] have five barrels of alcohol at Cedar Island, seventeen at Fort Union . . . and three at Fort Clark . . . . Pratte and Cabanne have twelve kegs en cache at the head of the Cheyenne . . . . Under these circumstances you see plainly that we must lose the Blackfeet and Assinaboine trade next year unless we have liquor. I therefore request you to use all your influence to send us some of that article next year, say four or five hundred gallons . . . . I will bind myself [!] not to make use of it among the Sioux, Rees, Gros Ventres [Minnetarees], or Mandans. At all events we must have it. 34

The copious records of 1843 are filled with complaints from Picotte and others against the opposition’s resort to liquor and mayhem. They kept Drips informed of every move of the opposition, and the agent reciprocated by automatically licensing Picotte’s company to trade at every point the opposition requested. 35

The next year the trade war persisted, but the opposition was losing ground. The success of Picotte’s generalship became obvious when he succeeded in buying out Fox, Livingston and Company in May 1845, and Pratte, Cabanne and Company sold out the next December. Not content with these triumphs, he moved to strengthen the company’s position while making his annual inspection trip on the General Brooke that summer. Since the Mandans and Gros Ventres had moved their villages upriver, he sent Francis A. Chardon from Fort Clark to build a new post, Fort Berthold. By fall the post was a profitable operation. 36 He also ordered the abandonment of Fort

34. Chittenden, American Fur Trade of the Far West, 1: 31.
35. Despite the heavy demands of this rivalry, Honore found the time to extend cordial hospitality and render valuable aid to naturalist John J. Audubon when his party reached Fort Pierre on 31 May on the company steamboat Omega, bound for Fort Union on a scientific excursion (Maria R. Audubon, Audubon and his Journals, ed. Elliott Coues, 2 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897], 1:524-27).
36. See sources listed previously in footnote 1.
Chardon, the Blackfeet post at the mouth of the Judith River, and sent Alexander Culbertson to erect a new fort further up the river near the site of future Fort Benton. Culbertson wished to name his new establishment Fort Honore, but the modest Picotte changed the name to Fort Lewis, in honor of the famous explorer.  

In spite of his good fortune, Picotte was troubled by one of his agents. He had decided that Alexander Harvey, the experienced but violent boss of the former Blackfeet post, should come down to Fort Pierre, where he could keep a personal eye on him. At Fort Union, en route to Fort Pierre, Harvey found three company men plotting to assassinate him. On reaching Fort Pierre early in December, he threatened to prefer criminal charges against the three men. Rejecting Picotte’s best efforts to placate him, Harvey stormed down to Saint Louis to carry out his threats. Honore feared that the vengeful employee might even organize an opposition company.

At Saint Louis Harvey not only pressed charges against the company men, but reported Chardon for selling liquor to the Indians. Although the cases never reached the courts, the four accused were banished from the Indian country for a year and the company’s reputation was impaired. But worst of all, Harvey enlisted the powerful financial backing of the famous Robert Campbell of Saint Louis and induced three dissatisfied company clerks, Charles Primeau, Antoine R. Bouis, and Joseph Picotte (Honore’s nephew), to join him in establishing an opposition firm known as Harvey, Primeau and Company, or the Union Fur Company.

On 17 July 1846 this new opposition company left Saint Louis aboard the Clermont No. 2. Under Harvey’s vengeful drive it eventually established posts to compete successfully with every one of Chouteau’s posts. Although the firm faltered after Harvey died on 20 July 1854, Frost, Todd and Company rescued it two years later. Shortly thereafter, it reorganized as Clark, Primeau and Company and continued until 1860, when it sold out to Chouteau. This opposition managed to endure for

38. Ibid., pp. xlii-xliii.
39. See sources listed previously in footnote 1.
fifteen years apparently because it remained discreet enough to avoid posing a fatal threat to the larger company. In the spring of 1846, when, Honore Picotte made his annual trip abroad the General Brooke, he was gratified to find operations profitable despite the new opposition and the temporary loss of good employees. 40

At Fort Pierre on 30 October he had the pleasure of extending aid and hospitality to Father DeSmet, who was returning by mackinaw boat from his Flathead Mission. Of this welcome stopover the grateful missionary wrote:

Mr. Picotte, the head of the company on the Missouri, received us with singular politeness and cordiality. He forced me to accept his hospitality in the fort for three days; I profited by the delay to announce the word of God to a great number of Sioux and to baptize fifty of their small children. Mr. Picotte on his side had a larger, more comfortable boat built for me, which he filled with all kinds of provisions and even of sweetmeats. I can never sufficiently express my gratitude to him. May the Lord give him credit for his great charity toward me, and reward him someday as he deserves. 41

Picotte’s considerable aptitude for handling people was not confined to charming distinguished visitors. Although he failed with the irate Harvey, he could sometimes mesmerize his employees. In the spring of 1847 the disgruntled Charles Larpenteur, recently relieved as boss of the Blackfeet post, reached Fort Pierre resolved to leave the company despite many years of service. After one conference with Picotte, he wrote, “convinced that I stood fair in the estimation of the Company, I left Fort Pierre next morning in great glee, holding Mr. Picotte high in my esteem.” 42

When the new company boat Martha arrived in 1847, Picotte used it to make an inspection tour of his posts and

40. Ibid.
to return to Saint Louis before heading back to Fort Pierre overland in the late fall. Frederick F. Gerard, eventual bourgeois of Fort Berthold and Ree interpreter for General George A. Custer, recalled that, as a new company clerk, he first went upriver with Honore Picotte. He gave the date as 28 September 1848, but stronger evidence favors 1847. The month and day must refer to the overland departure from Saint Louis, for at that time another company party under James Kipp reached Fort Pierre with John Palliser, the English sportsman, and Picotte did not arrive until late November. There, on 18 December he wrote Kipp that Mrs. Kipp and Mrs. Picotte would be coming upriver on the next spring voyage of the Martha. Three weeks later Andrew Drips warned another bourgeois that his wife might also join this excursion, in which case, "would it not be well for you to dispense with the society of at least some of your present companions?"

The Martha sailed from Saint Louis on 9 May 1848 and returned on 14 July. The records do not state whether or not the wives were aboard or if the "present companions" had departed, but Honore evidently was in the clear. He returned from his inspection trip on the boat to Saint Louis, there to retire from the trade at age fifty-two with a comfortable fortune. In preparation for his retirement, the conscientious gentleman had consigned his Sioux wife, Matilda, and his half-breed children to the care of his most considerate and promising protege, Charles E. Galpin, who had joined the trade in 1839 and was destined for prominence in the company. It was not long before Matilda became Mrs. Galpin, and the devoted couple raised a respected family of their own along with Picotte's offspring.

Picotte's retirement proved short-lived. His absence, as well as that of Pierre D. Papin who had retired at the same time, had required a reorganization of the company field management, which promoted Alexander Culbertson to the position of general

47. Holley, Once Their Home, p. 289.
The results were apparently less than satisfactory, for both Picotte and Papin were induced to return for the 1850 season. Responsibilities were divided, however, so that Culbertson headed the Missouri district above Fort Union, Picotte the district below, and Papin the Platte River district. In preparation for this return to service, Honore made a will at Saint Louis on 7 May 1850, bequeathing his entire estate to his wife, Therese, and daughters, Rita and Celestine. The estate was considerable, for a Saint Louis tax list for 1851 evaluated the real estate alone at $55,600.

Picotte sailed from Saint Louis on 11 May 1850 on the company boat El Paso, which for the first time would venture into Montana above Fort Union to reach a record point just above the mouth of Milk River. At Fort Pierre on 4 June Thaddeus A. Culbertson, a younger half-brother of Alexander, came aboard to conduct a scientific excursion into Indian country. Honore not only played the gracious host, but placed his inexhaustible store of Indian lore at the disposal of the fact-finding Thaddeus. The latter’s journal abundantly demonstrates that the old trader’s Gallic animation was more than a match for his fifty-four years.

When some distance above Fort Union on 18 June, the El Paso steamed through a herd of elk swimming the river. The excited passengers delivered a barrage of lead into the struggling herd. Thaddeus recorded Honore’s role:

Meanwhile, old Mr. Picotte was off in the yawl, sword in hand, after the wounded and to bring in the dead. The sight was most exciting and amusing; the old man sat straddling the bow of the boat, coat off, flourishing his sword, ready to plunge it into the first elk he could reach. One poor animal wounded in the back, was struggling to get away, and after him they put; stick went the sword, but in it would not go; the old gentleman had not examined the point, and on trial it was found as dull as a beetle. But he was too old a hunter to be foiled in this way, and the bow of the boat was again turned to the elk; now they are on it and Mr.

49. St. Louis Co. Probate Court, File No. 5841.
50. Scharf, History of St. Louis City and County, p. 81.
Picotte seizes it by the tail, pushing his small knife up to its handle in its side. The elk kicked and scuffled, but it was of no avail, and soon was on the deck and its hide unshipped, as one of the men called the operation of skinning. 52

Three days later the boat was returning past the famous mound of elk horns that the Indians had been assembling on the river bank for generations. “Old Mr. Picotte has the notion into his head of taking the whole pile to St. Louis, and soon this noted, and almost revered land mark will be on the hurricane deck of the El Paso. All on board, excepting the old gentleman himself, would prefer to leave it untouched, especially as the horns are not in a good state of preservation.” 53 Again on 27 June Culbertson noted: “In the evening when we landed, Mr. Picotte was seen running up a very steep, high bluff, and while we were admiring his activity he called to us; we all at once started off, supposing he had seen game. . . . But on coming up to him we were much amused to hear the old man . . . ask us to slide down the hill to the water’s edge.” 54 Despite the old gentleman’s idiosyncracies, young Culbertson expressed considerable respect for his impressive knowledge, gratitude for his invaluable help, and enjoyment of his stimulating conversation. All of this terminated on 28 June, when the trader disembarked at his Fort Pierre headquarters. 55

In May 1851 Picotte started downriver by mackinaw boat to meet the ascending company boat St. Ange. Stopping off at Bellevue, Nebraska, he met Rudolph Kurz, a penniless Swiss artist who was sketching Indians in their native state. Honore characteristically offered every help, even suggesting that a season spent at one of the upriver posts would serve the artist’s purpose better than a voyage on the company boat. Having continued down to meet the St. Ange, he returned, picking up young Kurz at Bellevue. Cholera had broken out on the vessel, killing Picotte’s personal clerk, among others. Kurz jumped at the offer to take his place. Then, on finding that a new clerk was needed at Fort Berthold, Picotte awarded the appointment

52. Ibid., p. 125.
53. Ibid., p. 128.
54. Ibid., p. 130.
55. Ibid., p. 131.
to the grateful artist, whose sketchbook by this time featured a
drawing of his patron. This is one of two known likenesses of
the fur trader. 56

Returning to Fort Pierre from his inspection tour, Picotte
found that the cholera, having refused to confine itself to the
steamboat, was spreading among the Indians with fatal
consequences. He successfully met the diplomatic challenge of
burying the local chiefs in a style sufficiently impressive to
retain the friendship of the tribes. 57 This was told by Louis
Letellier, a carpenter at Fort Pierre, who also related another
anecdote to illustrate Picotte’s style with the natives. On getting
no satisfaction from an Indian who had willfully killed one of
his cows, the canny trader decided to have the culprit punished
by his chief, Bear’s Rib.

The next morning this chief was in the fort, looking at
us working. Boss Picotte was passing nearby, his head
hanging low, his hands behind his back, as usual, talking
to himself in a tone loud enough to be heard by the
chief. “Where is the time” he was saying, “when there
were brave men in the Sioux Nation. Alas, that time is
past . . . they kill our catties and the braves of today
dare not punish the guilty ones.” Silently, the chief
walked out, found the guilty Indian, and shot him
dead. 58

In the spring of 1852 artist Kurz returned from his
profitable winter among the Indians by mackinaw. Reaching
Fort Pierre on 3 May, he found Picotte lying ill in bed. When
the Banner State returned from her company voyage that year,
the ailing trader presumably boarded her and arrived in Saint
Louis on 30 July, because on 1 September he was there to
swear to an affidavit with two other prominent company
veterans. 59

No evidence has been found to suggest that Honore ever
appeared again on the upper Missouri, where he had spent an

Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 115 (Washington, D.C.,
1937), pp. 65, 70, Plate 38.
Historical Collections 4 (1908): 225.
58. Ibid., p. 226.
eventful life guiding the fortunes of the great fur company. Although the company had applied for its annual trading license on 28 July 1852, naming Picotte and Culbertson simply as traders, probably this was two days before he had reached the company headquarters. No later license carries his name, and the one dated 1 November 1853 lists Culbertson as “principal agent.” 60 This time Picotte’s retirement was permanent, although his illness, at least in its acute phase, proved mercifully temporary.

Of Picotte’s eight years of retirement, only one revealing fact has come to light. He made frequent visits to his relatives who had migrated to the French settlements near Kankakee, Illinois. Among these relatives was Antoine Lottinville, who married Aurelie Picotte, the daughter of Honore’s brother Antoine. 61 Descendants of this branch of the family retain the tradition that their parish priest had dispensed a separation of Honore from an Indian wife. 62 Ever thoughtful, the old gentleman undoubtedly sought this separation to regularize not only his own church marriage, but Matilda’s second marriage to Charles Galpin, who had proved to be a devoted stepfather to Honore’s Indian family.

In a letter of 6 February 1860 Antoine Lottinville wrote that “we have not seen Uncle Honore Picotte since last May, but he informs us that he would come again in March.” 63 If Honore made this promised visit, it was probably his last, for the following obituary appeared in the Saint Louis Missouri Republican on 15 October 1860: “On Sunday, October 14th, at 3 P.M., Honore Picotte, aged 65 years. His funeral will take place on Tuesday, the 16th, at 9 A.M., from his residence at 110 Olive St. between Seventh and Eighth, to Calvary Cemetery. The friends of the family are invited to attend without further notice.” This was all the acknowledgement accorded the passing of a leader in the conquest of the wilderness.

60. “Register of Traders’ Licenses, 1847-73,” pp. 24, 28, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
62. Alphonse J. Baron to author, 16 Nov. 1962, transmitting family recollections prepared the preceding summer by Jessie Genevieve Baron (Sister Ida of Jesus, C.N.D.).
63. Lottinville, Lottinville Family, p. 50.
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