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By Tim Spitzach, Editor

In the footsteps of the faithful

It's a grey March afternoon and I am standing on the riverbank in Harriet Island Regional Park gazing up at the Cathedral of Saint Paul, which is perched majestically on one of St. Paul's fabled seven hills. With its 120-foot wide copper dome rising over 300 feet into the air, it's an imposing and impressive structure that dominates a gap in the city's western skyline. The sight and sound of movement is all around me, intrusive noises caused by traffic, sirens, machinery. But amidst it all, I hear something special coming from the Cathedral, the peal of the bells. Deep, rich tones emanate from the bell tower, riding the breeze toward me and reverberating throughout the river valley. It's a comforting sound that reminds all who hear it to pause and reflect.

Church bells have been used since the first century to remind the faithful to take time from their busy day to stop and pray, and to announce the beginning of a service. Historically, bells were rung at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m., beckoning people to recite the Lord's Prayer. The Cathedral of Saint Paul rings its bells every quarter hour from 7 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays, and until 8 p.m. on Saturdays. Longer peals happen at noon and 6 p.m., and on Sundays before each Mass.

The sound has me thinking of the people who followed a Call to this area, and the impact they made on this community. It started with Father Lucien Galtier, who came to the hardscrabble village of Pigs Eye in 1840 to minister to French Canadians who were living there at the time. In 1841, he built a small log chapel on the bluff in what is today Kellogg Park near Robert and Kellogg, and dedicated it to Saint Paul. He quickly petitioned for the village to be renamed for the patron saint as well. Over a period of 74 years, his burgeoning congregation moved three times before finally building the present-day Cathedral. Archbishop John Ireland celebrated the first Mass there on March 28, 1915, Palm Sunday.

The Catholic community in St. Paul is renowned for its social outreach, especially the Dorothy Day Center that is operated by Catholic Charities. The center provides hot meals, temporary housing, mental health services and medical care to several thousands of homeless people each year.

Not far behind Father Galtier was Harriet Bishop, who traveled to St. Paul on the Mississippi River by steamboat. She arrived in 1847 to start the first school and Sunday School. That Sunday School evolved into a congregation — the First Baptist Church of St. Paul — that is still active today. Its social ministries include providing temporary shelter for families in need, resettlement, housing and transportation services to refugees from Burma who are living in St. Paul, and a variety of projects with other organizations, including the Dorothy Day Center, Naomi Family Center, Martha's Closet, Listening House and SafeZone.

One of the city's most notable early African Americans was the Rev. Robert Hickman, a

slave from Missouri who helped a group of people in that state escape slavery in 1863. The band of believers traveled upriver on a raft. Along the harrowing journey, they were spotted by a benevolent steamboat captain, who towed them to St. Paul. Shortly after arriving, they formed the Pilgrim Baptist Church, which is still meeting today. The congregation commemorated their inaugural service with a baptismal service on the shores of the Mississippi River.

The Jewish community has made its mark on people in the city as well. In 1897, the women of Mount Zion Temple founded a settlement house on the West Side — the Neighborhood House — to assist Russian Jewish immigrants. Today, that organization continues to offer social services to immigrants, refugees and low-income people, including a food shelf that serves hundreds of people each day.

I look at the river, still encased in ice, and am reminded of the Native Americans who lived on and cared for this land for many centuries. About four miles up stream is Pike Island, located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. This is a sacred site for The Mdewakanton Dakota, who consider it to be their Garden of Eden.

I turn around to return to my car and see a large cottonwood tree along the trail with a deep crevice in it. I can see writing within the six-inch wide fissure so I step closer to get a better look. Enscribed in thick black ink are the words “Lord Jesus Saves.” It appears the faithful are still making their mark along the river in more ways than one.