

THE PALIMPSEST

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Pointing the Way

Toward the Mississippi Valley the tide of world empire has been setting for three quarters of a century and is not even yet at its height. The financier may turn his eyes toward Wall Street or Threadneedle Street, the student may plan his pilgrimage to Cambridge or Leipzig, the artist may long for the inspiration afforded by the Louvre or the galleries of Florence, but the teeming millions of the overcrowded places of the world, with hands restless to do and hearts ready to dare, turn eager faces toward this great central basin of North America. In the center of this vast tract, midway between the mountain barriers to the east and to the west, midway between the tropic sea to the south and the frozen sea to the north, stands Iowa. And the way thither — will it interest you for a few moments?

[This account of the French explorations which led to the discovery of Iowa is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from an address by Mr. Weld before the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1910.— THE EDITOR]

Singularly enough the history of the Mississippi Valley began with Jacques Cartier's voyage up the St. Lawrence in 1534. Fishing fleets began to frequent the waters about Newfoundland, occasionally ascending the river for the winter and carrying on a profitable fur trade with the Indians. It soon became evident that this trade was well worth developing, and furs came to be sought by the French in the north as eagerly if not as rapaciously as was gold by the Spaniards in the south. Champlain came up the river, bringing colonists who founded Quebec in 1608, the same year that the English founded Jamestown.

Whence came this supply of furs? And whence came this great river, mightier ten-fold than any of the rivers of Europe? The first of these problems appealed to Champlain's superiors, the latter to Champlain himself. He took but little interest in his colony except as it served him as a base for his explorations. He heard of a great sea to the west and would reach it and find thereby the way to Far Cathay. The St. Lawrence itself was blocked by the Iroquois Indians of northern New York, whose hostility to the French, and particularly to Champlain, was fierce and unrelenting. So he pushed his canoes up the Ottawa until its waters enmeshed with those of a lake called Nipissing. From this lake he followed a river, now known as French River, down to the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron. The Great Lakes lay before him, but it was not his to explore them.

Indeed he had been preceded thus far by Franciscan missionaries who were already established among the Huron Indians at the head of this same bay.

Then followed two decades of confusion and reorganization of the French colonies. The great Richelieu next assumed their management and, though Champlain was reappointed Governor, commerce and trade were monopolized by a company known as the Hundred Associates; while the Jesuits were virtually in charge of all other interests, temporal as well as spiritual.

In July of 1634 it was that the Jesuit missionaries Brébeuf, Daniel, and Davost embarked with the Indian canoe fleet on its annual return journey from Three Rivers to the Huron country. Jean Nicollet was one of this motley company, but the situation was far less novel to him than to his black-robed fellow countrymen. Brébeuf speaks admiringly of him as being "equal to all the hardships endured by the most robust savages." The tiresome ascent of the Ottawa was finally accomplished and the canoes glided out upon the waters of Lake Nipissing; thence down French River to Georgian Bay and on to its head, where the Jesuits established themselves in the place formerly occupied by the Franciscans.

They were soon joined by Nicollet, who had tarried for a time with the Indians on an island in the Ottawa. After procuring a suitable outfit and engaging seven Hurons to act as guides, Nicollet bade adieu to Father Brébeuf and his associates and set

out on his voyage westward. His commission required him to explore such countries as he might be able to reach and to make commercial treaties with the people dwelling therein. The party coasted along the eastern and northern shores of Lake Huron, passing through the dangerous channel to the north of the Manitoulins until they found themselves tossing about in the eddies below the Sault Ste. Marie in water through which now floats a commerce whose tonnage is three times that which passes Port Saïd and Suez.

But for Nicollet the scene seems to have had no special interest. He must have heard from the Indians of Lake Superior, but makes no mention of having visited it. The water coursing past his camp at the foot of the rapids was fresh and gave no promise that the "salt sea" of which he was in search lay beyond. Thus did he miss discovering the greatest of all the Great Lakes.

Dropping down St. Mary's Strait he rounded the upper peninsula of Michigan and passed on through the Straits of Mackinac. The "second lake of the Hurons," as Lake Michigan was for a time called, lay before him. Boldly following the northern shore of this new-found sea Nicollet entered Green Bay, land-locked by the present State of Wisconsin. He pushed on to its head, where he for the first time encountered tribes of Indians with whom he could not converse. He believed himself upon the outskirts of the vast Chinese Empire. Being invited to a

council with the chiefs he donned the gorgeous mandarin's cloak, which he had brought in an oilskin bag to wear at his appearance before the Chinese court, and approaching, discharged his pistols into the air. The impression was all that could be desired, but he soon discovered that he had not yet reached China nor even its outskirts. He was well received, however, and passed on up the Fox River.

After traversing Lake Winnebago he found himself once more among Indians of the Algonquin stock whose language was intelligible. From them he heard of a "great water" which could be reached in three days by a short portage from the upper Fox River. The portage referred to was, of course, that into the Wisconsin River at what is now Portage City. Had he taken this "three days' journey" he would have debouched, not upon a new sea as he supposed, but upon the upper course of the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien opposite McGregor, Iowa. The "way to Iowa" had been pointed out, but many years were to pass before the first white man set foot on Iowa soil. Why Nicollet missed this opportunity, as he had already missed that at Lake Superior, is not in the least clear. What he did do was to travel overland to the south to visit and establish friendly relations with the great nation of Illinois Indians, obtaining at the same time some general notion of the extent of Lake Michigan.

But the discoveries of Nicollet were not soon to be followed up. Scarcely had he returned to Three

Rivers when Champlain died. Then came a succession of incompetent Governors. The Iroquois took advantage of the situation and devastated the country, utterly destroying the Huron nation in 1649. Such of the Jesuit missionaries as had escaped death were hastily recalled. The fugitive Hurons and Ottawas betook themselves to the remotest shores of the Great Lakes or sought refuge at Quebec, while others became amalgamated with the Iroquois themselves. Even the fortified settlements on the St. Lawrence were in danger.

In 1660 Radisson and his brother-in-law, Grosseilliers, launched their canoes upon Lake Superior and followed the south shore to the end of the lake. Here they located the remnants of the Huron and Ottawa tribes, secure in these distant regions from the fury of the Iroquois. It is claimed that the brothers, in their overland explorations, came upon the Mississippi; but, while it may be reasonably inferred, this is not definitely confirmed by Radisson's journal.

Jean Talon, the capable Intendant of New France, was now devoting his best energies to establishing the claim of the mother country to the broad interior, the real extent of which was beginning to unfold with the simultaneous advance of missionary and fur trader. He meant to occupy this region and secure control of its great waterways. Little recked he of Far Cathay. He dreamed of a vast new empire for France. The English, mere grubbers of the soil,

were to be confined to the region between the Atlantic coast and the Alleghanies, while Spanish influence was to be thwarted by the establishment of French colonies on the Gulf of Mexico.

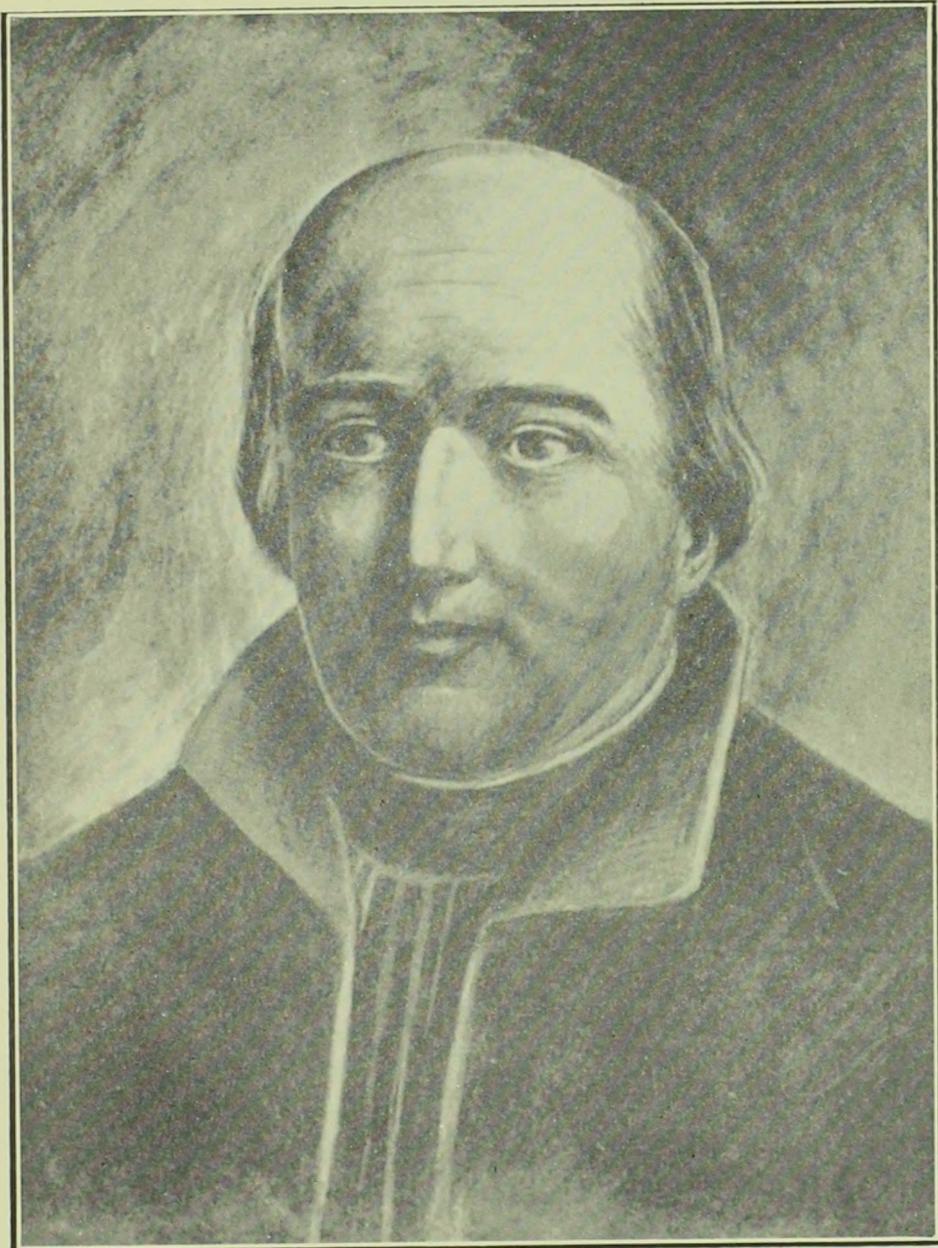
A splendid expedition was organized under Saint-Lusson and sent to Sault Ste. Marie to take formal possession of the whole interior of North America in the name of the French King, Louis XIV. But Talon was determined to give the claim made in behalf of his sovereign a more substantial foundation. He resolved to discover and map the course of that mysterious "great river" concerning which such conflicting but insistent rumors had been current ever since the days of Champlain. To execute his purpose he chose Louis Joliet.

The experienced explorer was joined at Mackinac by Father Marquette, then in charge of the Huron mission at St. Ignace. It was early spring. The ice had just left the straits. They made instant haste to prepare for the journey. Five companions were chosen — all Frenchmen and experienced wood-rangers. Their two canoes of birch bark, stiffened with cedar splints, were selected with unusual care. Though large enough to carry safely the seven *voyageurs* and their provisions of smoked meat and maize, besides blankets, camp utensils, guns, instruments, and a quantity of trinkets to serve as presents to the Indians, they were still light enough to be easily portable. Joliet and the five wood-rangers were dressed in the buckskin suits then worn by

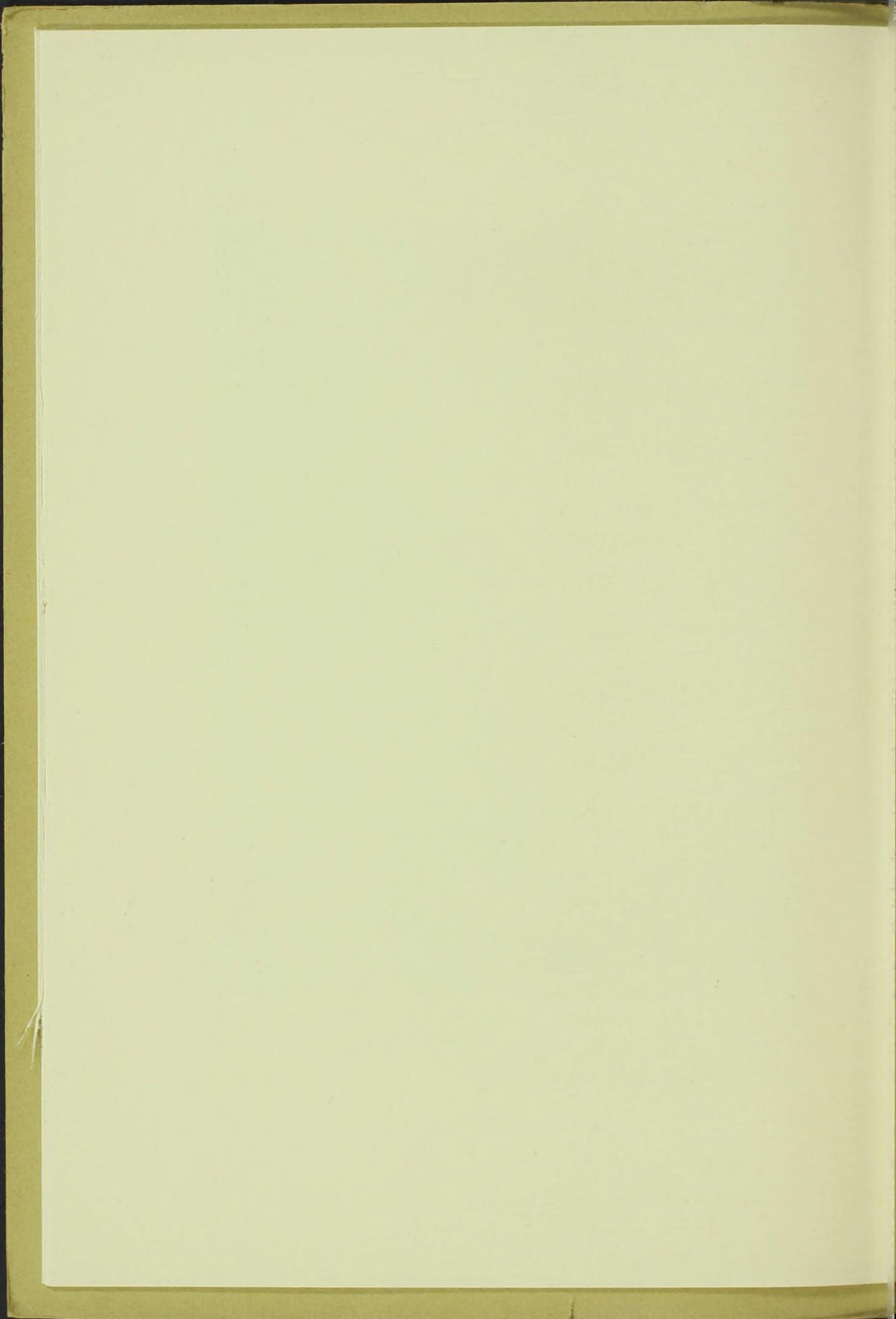
frontiersmen; but Marquette retained his long black Jesuit's cassock and cumbered himself with no weapon save his rosary.

On the seventeenth of May, 1673, they pushed off their canoes into the crescent-shaped bay at St. Ignace, rounded the point to the south, and headed westward along the northern shore of Lake Michigan. The *voyageurs* must have felt the quickening influence of the changing season. They paddled all day, relieving one another by turns. Trolling lines were set to catch fish. At twilight they landed to prepare for the night. The sand of the beach still retained the heat of the midday sun. Each canoe was hauled up beyond the reach of the waves, turned over, and propped up by one edge to serve as shelter. One of the party collected dry driftwood for the fire. Another cut forked sticks and set them up in the sand to hold a crossbar upon which the kettle was hung. Hulled corn was cooked; the fish were broiled in the embers; and Marquette blessed the simple meal. Then, sitting 'round the camp fire, the tired explorers smoked their pipes and rested. Such was the routine of their voyage on Lake Michigan.

Pushing on day after day, along the route followed by Nicollet thirty-nine years before, the party soon entered Green Bay. They turned into the Menominee River and visited the village of the Indian tribe of the same name, which signifies wild rice. Here they heard dreadful tales of the country and the river which they were about to visit and



FATHER MARQUETTE
A RETOUCHEd COPY OF A REPUTED PORTRAIT



were urged to go no farther. A few days later they were welcomed at the mission at the head of the bay, still conducted, as it had been founded, by Father Claude Allouez. After making some final arrangements here they ascended Fox River, crossed Lake Winnebago, and entered the devious course of the upper Fox. On the seventh of June they had reached the neighborhood of the portage to the Wisconsin River, first made known by Nicollet.

Guides were secured to conduct them to the point at which the portage was easiest. This point reached, they carried their canoes and baggage a mile and a half over a marshy prairie and, parting with their guides, launched upon the Meskousing (Wisconsin), whose current might bear them to the South Sea, the Gulf of California, or the Gulf of Mexico, they knew not which.

The navigation of the Wisconsin presented no serious difficulties and ten days later, on the seventeenth of June, the explorers floated out upon the broad surface of a mighty river, which they must have recognized at once as the "great water" which they had been sent to find out and explore. They were in the shadow of the almost mountainous bluff at the foot of which lies the quaint little town of South McGregor, the Bingen of the Mississippi. Beyond lay the rolling prairies of Iowa; but little did they, or their successors for a century and a half to come, dream of such a Commonwealth as ours. The depth and breadth of the channel and the swift-

ness of the current gave them some notion, however, of the extent of the territory to which they had gained access.

The way to Iowa — to the whole Middle West as well — had been discovered. But between the discovery of Iowa and the beginning of the history of this Commonwealth there is an interval of a century or more. During this interval the region was frequently visited by white men. Its broad prairies, the Mesopotamia of the New World, were doubtless well known to the French and American traders who by turns coursed up and down the Mississippi and the Missouri in quest of buffalo skins.

But the men who have made Iowa and our Middle West what it is to-day came, not by way of the Great Lakes from Canada, nor up stream from the French colonies of Louisiana; not in canoes laden with baubles for cheating the savage, but in emigrant wagons with wives and children and bringing agricultural implements. They came swarming through the passes of the Alleghanies and brought with them into this new land the spirit of the American Revolution.

LAENAS G. WELD