Michigan History

French Occupation - 1634 to 1760

by

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Presented by
Gen. Alexander Macomb Chapter
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In all stages of society those unquestionably deserve the highest praise, who outstep their contemporaries. The merit consists in setting the example, in exhibiting the pattern after which others may work. It is easy to follow where there is one to lead; but to be the first to strike out in a new and untried way, in whatever state of society it may be found, marks a genius above the common order. Such men are entitled to everlasting gratitude.

So much has been written concerning the discovery and settlement of Michigan, and it has been done so efficiently, that my task is rather a difficult one, though pleasing. If however, in this short review, the kaliediscopic picture is a pleasant one, inspiring you to a keener interest in our local history, and an appreciation of the forces which humanize all experiences, then the time will have been well spent.

A few dates will be necessary to establish our cycle, however, not dates and figures, but a spirit of the motivating force and the idealism of the time, and a recital of a few of those high souls, who carried the white plume of courage: for it took more than love of adventure or bravery.

In reading colonial history one is most forcibly impressed with the difference between French and English colonies, in their beginnings and in their latter fortunes. Following the discovery of America a great revival of the spirit of adventure lead to colonial enterprises in all parts of the world. Spain took the lead.

The French preceeded the English in effective work though they were not far apart. At that time, the French sailors were admirable mariners and it is questionable whether in spite of the great English captains of that day whose deeds have become famous, they did not wholly surpass their island neighbors in the general quality of their seamanship.

The French as colonists, in the proper sense of the term, were many years in advance of the English and began with more sober aims. The English were bold explorers, and had more the spirit of buccaneering and free booting and far less humanity in dealing with the natives. Before any permanent English colonies were established, they became involved in domestic difficulties with the government, which had ceased to favor such enterprises or pay much attention to them; their neglected infancy was one of the reasons why they at last became so independent of Trans-Atlantic management as to outgrow it entirely. Between the beginnings of French colonization and the time when the English colonies began to increase, French institutions had been attending more and more toward centralization.

When the first settlements were made in America the absolute personal government of Louis lV had become supreme and was as active in this region then known as New France as it was in France itself. The king was also zealous in enforcing religious uniformity. The two great clerical orders of the colonies, the Jesuits, and Recolliers, or Franciscans, held between them substantial authority over all religous matters. Both religous and secular officials were opposed to settlements of remote post. A system of personal oversight was maintained over

every man who came into the country and there is no instance recorded where anyone ever settled down in the wilderness as a squatter or pioneer and cleared a farm for himself. All farming settlements were under fixed and restricted regulations, and everyone who went into the woods liscensed or unliscensed, went as a roving adventuror, not as a settler. This is significant. The French policy as far as the back country was concerned was to manage and control the fur trade, and to return barter with the Indians.

All of this was a monoply confined to favored persons or companies. As a result, a formidable irregular trade arose and the persons concerned in the illicit business were those of the highest rank and importance. They generally managed tp protect their own emissaries and associates, and procure for them sooner or later such advancement as was possible in the colony.

The imigrants that came in comsiderable numbers from various parts of France, but chiefly from Normandy and other northwestern provinces, were of unusual intelligence and enterprise. The policy of the country was attractive, since trade had been made an honorable calling and men of all ranks and conditions swarmed in. There were not many Indians' tribes to which the lower classes had not joined themselves. Many of these were not wanting in shrewdness, and they exercised great influence, to their credit be it said, that they did much to extend the French power and reputation and maintain the French ascendency among the Indians.

The feeling was an honorable one; one of mutual confidence and esteem between Indian and white man. The most notable among the wandering pioneers was Duluth. Much could be said of him but our concern today is the French history of Michigan. Much has been told about the French occupation in the upper peninsula, but the interior was a wilderness, high banks and marshes. Adventuring could only be made on foot while the great water ways and lakes were the open highways. The chief source of activity at this time was the trading post. The French posts in Michigan were subject to constant attack by the English, by indirect efforts and intrigues, and principally with the Indians, though the French had plainly asserted the title of France, and as plainly threatened to use all requisite force to expell intruders.

The first French traveler of note supposed to have visited Michigan was Champlaign in 1623. The French government on more than one occasion asserted that he passed the Detroit and his map showed that he knew the connection of Lake Huron and Lake Erie.

One of the missions which was the result of one of his explorations was at the head of the St. Clair River on the east side of Lake Huron. The stories of the missions, trading companies, and Military posts, are interwoven. However, in the passing let us remark that Jacques Cartier was the first Frenchman to gain a foothold by government authority, that was in 1534.

Champlaign made his first trip to America in 1600 and was probably the first European to camp on the soil of Michigan. It is therefore very fitting that he should be recorded as our first governor , a position to which he was appointed in 1632 and to which he served until his death in 1635.

Returning to the trading posts; white men visited Saulte Saint Marie as early as 1641, yet it remained principally an Indian village, for many years with an occasional Jesuit mission attachment. It was the rallying point for most of the savages in this section for this was the great fish region much sought by the

Indians. For this reason it was first to assume importance as a trading center.

The forests of Michigan were teeming with fur bearing animals whose pe pelts for many years supplied the trading posts. The French policy of trade was monopolistic in character. The exclusive privilege of trading was granted to colonized companies. No one was to go searching for furs among savages, but the latter were to bring them into the depot, which was Montreal.

But a class of advanturous Frenchmen disregarded this ruling and struck out boldly into the wilderness for themselves. As the trading spread St. Ignace and Mackinac seemed more favored places for the French trader and the accompanying Catholic mission: Probably because the climate and soil were more hospitable and they were both on the waterway to more southern localities-- So by 1689 the Saulte was abandoned as a trading post. However in 1750 two officers of the French army of some distinction conveived the idea of a military post at the Saulte, and with an eye to building up their private fortunes sought to obtain a grant of land of great size as a reward for their efforts, to strengthen the French holdings against the English traders, who were then getting numerous and troublesome.

An instrument was executed that same year by Marquis De Jonquiere, governor of Canada, Monsieur Begot, Intendent of the same. Louis IV of France in 1751, ratified and confirmed the instrument, and thus was established the title to one of the largest farms in Michigan: it's modest proportions covering three hundred and thirty square miles or two hundred thousand acres of land. Thus it can plainly be seen that homesiting and agriculture were main consideration with the French.

Of all the Michigan trading posts there was none that grew to greater importance in the fur regime than Michilimackinac and that importance was assumed early. It is claimed that French traders lived there in 1648.

Parkman calls it the chief resort of the coureurs de bois with whom the French authorities could do nothing. This mart was a splendid place for the Jesuit to meet the Red Man so he founded his mission here.

The name of Joseph La France must be mentioned, as he was head of one of the fue companies. The situation was ideal, for the Iroquois dare not venture across the Lake with their canoes, and as they cannot come to it by water, so they cannot approach it by land, by reason of the marshes, fens and rivers difficult to cross.

Charlevoix writing in 1721, speaks of the demoralization of the Island caused by the establishment of a new post at Detroit. In the Catholic church on the island there today , which was the mission church, lies buried under the alter, the mortal remains of Madame LaFrombroise. She was an Ottawa woman, married to a Franchman and carried on the trading post on the Grande River near Lake Michigan after her husband's death.

She had given the site for the mission church and her request to be buried there was complied with. Her daughter married the commandant of Fort Mackinac, Captain Benjamin Pierce, who was the brother of General Franklin Pierce who after became President of the United States.

Among the names of the most illustrious Jesuits missionaries, were those

of Raymbault and Joques, who visited the Soulte in 1641. In 1666, Allonez made the tour of Lake Superior, and with Marquette in 1668 made a complete map of all the great lakes which has been preserved to our time.

In 1670 two priests, Galnice and Dollier, visited the site of Detroit. But perhaps the greatest of all these was Marquette. His life most peculiar in the fact that he was honest, true, and zealous in his undertakings. Unaffected by the jealousies as to trade or preferment he lived a short life of great privation and hardship as most would consider, yet he died happy. A martyr to his energies on the field of labor in 1675. His name is preserved by a river, a city, and a railroad in our state.

Sometime, no doubt, a handsome monument will mark the spot of his third burial at St. Ignace some twelve years ago. His name will always be prominent in his church as one of the few distinguished men who lived and died in Michigan.

It seems fitting, at this time, to mention Father William Frances Gagnier of our time. The last of the black robes who has given forty-six years of his life to missionary service among the Indians in the region of Sault Ste. Marie. He is now seventy-seven years old, but continues to minister to his Chippewa flocks in scattered portions of northern Michigan and Ontario. He is the Sault's one link with the historic past.

Father Gagnier is a Jesuit who followed in the footsteps of Marquette and others who brought christianity to the Iroquois, the Algonquins and other tribes. He officiated at the Jean Nicolet ter-centenary field mass, July 1, 1934. It is my happy privilege to know him and call him friend. And again it is almost time for the cherished Christmas letter. A man of cultural background, a delightful musician, and one who has led a life of perfect self-abnigation.

Before leaving the Soulte the oldest settlement in the state, I must tell of Jean Talon, Igendent of France, who called a great council of Indians at the Soulte in 1671. Fourteen tribes of the northwest sent representatives to meet the French officers, commanded by St. Lusson, who with due ceremonies, took formal possession of the country, and established the first military post in the state.

That same year the mission of St. Ignatius on the south shore was founded. Later a fort was built in 1679 or 80, it is said, by LaSalle, the first commandant. Sieur De Louvigny De la Porte commanded there for four years, and was relieved by Antoine De la Motte Cadillac in 1694 who remained there as commandant for five years.

At this time St. Ignace was the largest "city" in all this part of the country, for, besides the Europeans, adventurers, voyageurs, traders, couriers, priests, officers, and soldiers, there were thousands of Indians, the source of the rich fur supply that was the then known wealth of this land. Picture this setting, as you can: the little mission church and priest's house, with it's mission school and dispensary; the rough fort surrounded by a palisade of high pickets; behind them the waving pine trees, and before them the sparkling waters of the straits. The picturesque garb of the Indians, made of skin, and colorfully adorned. The equally picturesque dress of the traders and courier du bois. The uniforms of the military, and the black froke of the priests formed the animate part of this scene.

There were no women except the Indian squaws, no children except the papoose. Not far from the fort were the camps of the different tribes that had come to trade their furs with the goods of the white man. This is a description of life as it was really lived in our own state nearly three hundred years ago.

And now we will travel up the river which lies befor our door, and moves through a mist of legend and tradition as well as though a landscape of substantial history. Truly, it is an epical river. And, to this site of Detroit in his vessel, the Griffin, came LaSalle, in 1679. Also, Father Louis Hennepin, and M. Tonty.

To LaSalle, may be attributed the first overland journey ever made acr cross the state by a white man. It happened this way. The Griffin left Detroit, August 10, 1676, with LaSalle and twenty-five others; going to Green Bay where t the frigate took on her cargo and started on her return trip to Niagra. LaSalle did not call but with his part of artisans took canoes, crossed to the Michigan shore, coasted down to the mouth of the St. Joseph river, where he established a fort.

The Griffin was to have picked him up there, after discharging her cargo at Niagra, but after long waiting, the truth was brought home that disaster had befallen her, so he started his wonderful journey across the state, overland for Detroit, and thus to Niagra and Quebec; enduring the rigors of February and March, camping out without a tent even, wading swamps, depending on wild game for food, with a courage and fortitude hardly human, finally crossing the Detroit river on a raft in 1680.

The most colorful of all characters and the first white man to touch our shores was Jean Nicolet, and he was greeted by the Red Skins. This simple employee of a trading post, and Indian interpreter and a voyageur, was commissioned by Champlaign to discover the great river that was supposed to have emptied into the western sea; still seeking the passage to China.

Let us orient our minds, for a few momentsfrom the great city of our state, that we motor over and know so well, and visualize the virgin land that Nicolet and his companions saw.

" A forest primeval; mighty trees, wide expanses of blue, our lakes, rushing waters, quiet streams, and the soft rustle of unstartled animals and birds, all beautiful in it's wilderness."

Into this world came Nicolet's canoe, and on the shore of Lake Michigan, thousands of Indians assembled to meet him, for word of his coming had gone before. Many of the Indians had known him when they had gone to the French trading post at Trois Riviers, or Allumette. See him dressed in a gorgeous chinese mandrin, richly embroidered with birds and flowers, great poles are standing on each side of him, from which are hung many presents, gay in color, thus-- he comes among them. In each he holds a huge horse pistol, an imposing sight indeed, addressing the savages he urges lasting peace with the great white father in Quebec. Then lifting the pistols skyward, pulls the triggers, -- the squaws and braves ran back into the bush, believing that the terrible explosion is errible thunder from heaven, which Nicolet had called down. Their confidence is soon restored and they are tremendously impressed.

He could not learn however, about a river which flowed from the west, and which might lead to a passage to Cathy, nor did his mandrin robes awaken atavistic memory of their Chinese origin. He did, however, hear of a mighty river, the Mississippi, and it's course was to to the south and not to the west, so he

went back to Quebec. That was the coming of the first white man to Michigan.

This part of the country, Detroit, was visited by white men as early as 1649, and there were a number of Jesuit missions established in the neighborhood, but not exactly at the location of Detroit, as early as 1655.

The post of Detroit was found by Antoine De la Motte Cadillac, July 24, 1721. He was first in the list of commandants in Detroit, of French rule, and the most interesting of them. Cadillac had great influence over the savages, and to prevent further mischief, from the English, and to secure more effectually the French supremacy, he succeeded in getting permission from Count Pontchartrain to begin a settlement in Detroit, because of its strigetic position.

Born in France, in 1661, Cadillac obtained an excellent education far superior than that of his associates in the new world. He came to America in 1683, married Marie Therese Guion in 1687, and thirteen children were born of this union.

From August 24, 1701, when Cadillac reached Detroit, and the ensuing ten years of his life, is the history of Detroit. A man of unusual energy and ability, the avowed enemy of the Jesuits, also of the corrupt courtiers, who at this time governed Canada, he was the subject of violent and merciless attacks by all of them; his life was embittered and he was finally driven from his home, his property taken from him, and he faced financial ruin.

To soften the blow of his being driven from Detroit in 1710 he was appointed governor of Louisiana. Although assured that his property and possessions would be taken care of by his successor and the avails to be given him, he never obtained anything from a vast fortune, and finally dying, left the open account to be vainly fought for by his decendants.

In 1717, he ceased to be governor of Louisiana, and through influence obtained the appointment of governor of Castelsarrasin, in France. This office he retained until his death in October,1730. The names of Pierre Alfonse deFonty, Etienne Veny, Sieur Dubeisson, Francois Marie PicoteBelestre, and Francois de la Foreste, are linked with those of Cadillac. Francois de la Foreste was really the second commandant of Detroit.

Because of the Indians Cadillac came to Montreal, then by the Ottawa river, which flows around the north boundary of Ontario, to the Mattawan river, to Lake Nipissing, the French river, Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, lake St.Clairs and then to Detroit.

The Indians called thisTeusha Grande, but Cadillac called the new Colony Pontchartrain, honoring Count de Pontchartrain, who was Minister of Marines in 1699. When Cadillac first visited France to obrain permission to establish a cobony on the Detroit. The name Pontchartrain clung to the place a great many years. It was occasionally called Fort Pontchartrain du Detroit, that is Fort Pontchartrain of the strait, from its location on the strait between Lake Huron and Lake Erie. Gradually the name Pontchartrain was dropped in referring to the place and the word Detroit was allowed to remain as the name of the post.

In spite of all opposition encountered by greedy enemies in the colony and the dangerous intrigues of the New York trading interests, this post established by Cadillac , was advancing rapidly in value and importance, - when he was selected to become governor of Louisiana. Though he was more or less thwarted and

opposed by the monopolists, and he was subjected to severe persecutions. He finally triumphed, obtaining valuable privileges and the right of seigneury.

The little village enclosure prepared by Cadillac in 1701 for the protection of his colony, covered a square arpent of land. An arpent, the French measure of that time, was one hundred and ninety-two and nine inches, so that the original village was in the form of a square, each side of which was that distance in English feet. This space was surrounded by a palisade made of young trees, one end embedded in the earth and extending some twelve of fifteen feet above the ground.

Cadillac brought with him, in 1701, one hundred Frenchmen, half soldiers and half artisans. He was also accompanied by one hundred Algonquin Indians. They at once began the erection of a church building and small dwellings for themselves. All of which were built of logs, but not such log houses as we were accustomed to see in later years.

To one who is observant, it is truly confounding to realise the deep spirituality of these early settlers. Always the first spade of earth turned was for their church Their communal life centered around it. Their idealism a propelling force even though there was the human side of things. Perhaps we can attribute to them - I hope you will agree with me - the wonderful growth of our city.

In the interval between 1701 - 1703 the population had increased considerably. Peace had been declared between the French and the Iroquois Indians and people were permitted to come from Montreal to Detroit over the lake route,that i is through Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and through the Niagara and Detroit Rivers.

Before that time all travel had been up the Ottawa River to Lake Nipissing and through that lake and the French and Peckerel Rivers to the Georgian Bay. This newly opened route was one inducement to people to move westward and another inducement was the coming of Madam Cadillac and Tonty (the latter being the wife of Cadillac's lieutenant),with their families and servants,and the coming of the wives and families of the colonists who were already on the ground. The new addition to the population in 1702 forced the commandant to extend the village limits and to place the picket line farther out.Cadillac thought a great deal of his colony to make it a success and to make it respectable.

Cadillac had no sooner left Detroit than contentions arose among the people who were remaining there,and the place began to deyeriorate.

The City of Detroit stands unique in American history,side by side with New Orleans,for its dynastic changes,and for its varied national control:

1st. It was settled by Frenchmen and ruled by France through her colonial representatives in Canada.
2nd. It passed under the rule of England.
3rd. It became an outpost of the United States.
4th. It was again taken possession of by the English.
5th. In the order of its political control it was restored to the American public whose flag has since waved over its territory.

During these governmental changes the French regime lasted about sixty years. French colonists occupied our soil mostly dating from 1701. These settlers were the pick and choice of the Frenchmen who came during the seigioral jurisdiction of Cadillac and subsequently they found the land so fertile,the climate so

congenial,and their markets so good,that they established families and homes, and thrived and increased. This was prior to 1740.

The colonial government of New France under instructions from its home government which had learned of the importance of Detroit,as a post,and its value as a colony,encouraged the imigration of agriculturists and artisans by substantial inducements,and consquently a large number of indigenous Canadians came from the vicinity of the St.Lawrence and established new homes on the banks of Detroit, and this immigration continued until the cession by France of her vast empire in the new world to England subsequent to the fall of Montcalm.

Detroit was surrendered by the last French commandant Picote de Belestre to the New England scout and ranger Major Robert Rogers,in the fall of 1760. But no Frenchman without courage and endurance would have dared the perils surrounding the expeditionary settlement of Detroit.Detroit became Michigan's only depot of trade during the earlier years of its existance dominating and controlling her entire forests of commerce.

The French pioneer clung with great tenacity to the traditions and customs of La Belle France; they were the links connecting him with the shores of his sunny home.

The purity of elegance of the language in Louis XIV time was kept, even the English officers and their wives speaking it.No people piqued themselves in pride of ancestry and old traditions were handed down from generation to generation.

New Years Eve,a number of young men masked,went from house to house, singing a peculiar song,gifts of all kinds filled the cart,which then was given to the poor. New Year's morning every child knelt to receive its parents blessing,even the married ones came with their little ones,for this coveted benediction. But a word about the transportation.

I spoke about the carts which were filled with gifts for the poor. These old French carts were the only things on wheels that could navigate throug the mud,which came well nigh up to the hubs. The occupants would sit turk-fashion on Buffalo robes spread over the straw on the bottom of the cart. To be true, they were very clumsy and unsomfortable and threatened to dislocate every bone in one's body,but I reckon there were no complaints. One stepped to and out from the back. The driver's seat was on the front outside edge of the cart with his feet stretched across the horse's back,resting on the shafts. These carts were in general use from the time of the early French settler to about 1840. It might be opportune to mention now that no swearing was allowed in the community-- a fine was imposed.

Mardi Gras evening was one of unusual mirth,the principal fun being the tossing of pancakes,as the French expressed it (virez les crepes).This was done in the kitchen in the large open fire place with its huge hickery logs. When the cakes were piled high,butter and maple sugar were placed between them; it formed the central dish of a substantial supper that followed. Dancing was enjoyed then. The following day began a Lent that was kept most rigidly.

Being of an intensely religious nature the bell of his church had an

individuality,so it had a christening. Great preparation was made for this ceremony,the godmother carefully chosen,and beautifully dressed. I might mention here,that the first Catholic church was dedicated to St.Anne in 1701: Its pastor the saintly Father Delballe,who was killed by an Indian's bullet in 1706.The original church was destroyed for stragetic reasons,and its fifth successor,consecrated in 1755 by the bishop of Quebec was destroyed in the great fire of 1805.

Many and various were the delightful customs of these people,but time does not permit further detail; But

"There is ever a song in the March of Time
The echoes come up from the long ago
A musical sound wave,and the rhythme and rhyme
Go on through the ages with ceaseless flow
Time plays on a harp of endless strings
And his step keeps the measure wherever he sings
Be the movement quick,or be it slow
It is perfect still in its ceaseless flow
On through the ages that are numbered by years
With never a discord to pain our ears
Could we listen aright,to the song sublime
We would find it perfect in rhythme and rhyme".

- Evangeline M.Griffin