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EARLY FRENCH FORTS AND FOOTPRINTS

OF THE

VALLEY OF THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI.

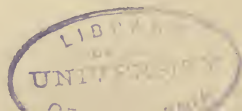
By E. D. NEILL.

OFFICERS of the army, when stationed at Fort Snelling, so boldly situated on a promontory of saccharoid sandstone at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi, or on duty at the more secluded posts Forts Ripley and Ridgely, in looking at the locality on Nicollet's map marked "Ruins of French Fort," have, with the writer, no doubt, often wished there were some works in the English language imparting information concerning the old French *régime* in that region. After a diligent search we have gathered a few facts, which are woven into an essay.

One of the most picturesque scenes in North America is the approach to Lake Pepin. For miles the steamboat ascending the Mississippi glides through an extended vista, crowned in the distance by an amphitheatre of hills which define the basin of the lake.

In the summer the islands of the river, luxuriant with vegetation, and the banks flanked by abrupt bluffs of limestone, with cedar trees standing like sentinels wherever root-hold can be found, make an impression which the traveller cannot erase in a lifetime.

Occasionally these steep walls of stone recede, with their fanciful outline of castles and battlements, and prairies



sufficiently elevated to be secure from the inundations of spring, appear, which were enticing spots to the ancient *voyageur* after a long and wearisome day's paddle in his frail canoe.

Just below Lake Pepin, on the west shore, opposite the mouth of the Chippeway river, is one of the beautiful plateaus, which captivated Nicholas Perrot, a native of Canada, who had been familiar from childhood with the customs and dialects of the Northwestern savages, and who had been commissioned by the Governor of Canada as commandant of the West.

Near the site of the present village of Wapasha, with twenty other bold spirits, he landed in the year 1683, and erected a rude log fort—the first European structure in that vast region—a generation before New Orleans, two thousand miles lower down on the same river, was founded.

This primitive establishment, within the limits of the new State of Minnesota, on some of the old maps is appropriately marked as Fort Perrot. During the winter of 1683–84, the party proceeded to visit the Sioux above the lake, but were met by a large delegation descending on the ice, who returned, and escorted the Frenchmen to their villages.

In 1685 it became necessary for Perrot to visit the Miamis, to engage them as allies against the English and Iroquois of New York. On his return from this mission he was informed by a friendly Indian that the Foxes, Kickapoos, Maskoutens, and other tribes had formed a plan to surround and surprise the fort and employ the munitions of war against their enemies the Sioux.

With all possible speed the commander came back; and on the very day of his arrival three spies had preceded him, and obtained admission under the pretext of selling beaver skins; and they had now left, and reported that Perrot was absent and that the fort was only guarded by six

Frenchmen. The next day, two additional spies came; but Perrot, in view of his danger, devised an ingenious stratagem. In front of the doors of the buildings, on the open square within the enclosure, he ordered all the guns to be loaded and stacked, and then the Frenchmen were made to change their dress after certain intervals, and stand near the guns; and thus he conveyed the impression that he had many more men than the spies had observed. After this display the spies were permitted to depart on condition that they would send from their camp a chief from each tribe represented. Six responded to the demand; and as they entered the gates their bows and arrows were taken away. Looking at the loaded guns, the chiefs asked Perrot "if he was afraid of his children."

He replied, "that he did not trouble himself about them, and that he was a man who knew how to kill."

"It seems," they continued, "that you are displeased."

"I am not," answered Perrot, "although I have good reason to be. The Good Spirit has warned me of your evil designs. You wish to steal my things, murder me, and then go to war against the Nadoueissieux. He told me to be on my guard, and that he would aid if you gave any insult."

Astonished at his knowledge of their perfidy, they confessed the whole plot, and sued for pardon. That night they slept within the fort; and the next morning their friends began to approach with the war-whoop. Perrot, with the fifteen men under his command, instantly seized the chiefs, and declared they would kill them if they did not make the Indians retire.

Accordingly, one of the chiefs climbed on to the top of the gate, and cried out, "Do not advance, young men, or you will be dead men. The Spirit has told Metaminens [the name by which they designated Perrot] our designs."

The Indians rapidly fell back after this announcement, and the chiefs were allowed to leave the fort.

In the year 1687 Perrot, Du Luth, and Chevalier Tonti came to Niagara, with allies, and united with Denonville in making a raid upon the Senecas of the Genesee Valley—which proved unsuccessful.

After this Governor Denonville, of Canada, furnished Perrot with a company of forty men for the purpose of a second expedition to the Upper Mississippi. Early in the spring of 1688 they had again reached Fort Perrot; and as soon as the ice disappeared from Lake Pepin the Sioux came down, and persuaded Perrot to ascend and visit them in their villages. His reception was most flattering. Placed on a beaver robe, he was carried, amid triumphal songs, to the lodge of the chief.

While Perrot went to New York, one of the Sioux chiefs, with a hundred followers, attacked the fort; but the nation disclaimed the act, and punished the perpetrators. As Perrot was about to depart, a French trader stated that he had lost a package. To discover the lost goods the following scheme was devised. The commander ordering one of his men to bring a cup of water, but really filled with brandy, he told the Indians that if the lost articles were not produced he would dry up their swamps and hiding places, and then immediately set on fire the brandy in the cup. The Sioux, terrified by what seemed to be the burning of water, and believing that he might set even a river on fire, organized themselves as detectives, and quickly found the missing property.

In 1689 Perrot returned to Green Bay, in Wisconsin, and they made a formal minute of his action as an officer duly deputed to establish friendly and commercial relations with the Sioux of Minnesota. The "proces-verbal" is as follows:—

“Nicholas Perrot, commanding for the king at the post

of the Nadouessioux, commissioned by the Marquis Denonville, Governor and Lieutenant-Governor of all New France, to manage the interest of commerce among all the Indian tribes and people of the Bay des Puants, Nadouessioux, Mascoutins, and other western nations of the Upper Mississippi, and to take possession in the king's name, of all the places where he has heretofore been, and whither he will go :

“We this day, the eighth day of May, one thousand six hundred and eighty-nine, do, in the presence of the Rev. Father Marest, of the Society of Jesus, missionary among the Nadouessioux ; of Monsieur Boisguillot, commanding the French in the neighborhood of the Ouisconsin on the Mississippi ; Augustin Legardeur, Esq., Sieur du Caumont, and of Messieurs Le Sueur, Hebert, Lemire, and Blein,

“Declare, to all whom it may concern, that being come from the Bay des Puants, and to the Lake of the Ouisconsin, and to the river Mississippi, we did transport ourselves to the country of the Nadouessioux, on the border of the river Saint Croix, and at the mouth of the river Saint Pierre, on the bank of which were the Mautantans ; and further up to the interior, to the northeast of the Mississippi, as far as the Menchokatoux, with whom dwell the majority of the Songeskitons, and other Nadouessioux, who are to the northeast of the Mississippi, to take possession, for and in the name of the king, of the countries and rivers inhabited by said tribes, and of which they are proprietors.”

To this report are attached the signatures of the witnesses.

Notwithstanding Perrot had so thoroughly examined this region, in the year 1703 La Hontan, with unblushing effrontery, published a book of travels, in which he claims to have explored a certain long river, near the head of Lake Pepin, on the banks of which lived many wonderful tribes.

He asserts that he entered this tributary on the 2d of November, 1688, and ascended in a canoe day by day until near Christmas—forgetting that canoe-navigation after the middle of December would be impossible, as the rivers would be frozen.

Although Bobé, a learned priest at Versailles, wrote to De L'Isle the geographer of the Academy of Sciences, as early as 1716, in these words, "Would it not be well to efface that great river which La Hontan says he discovered? All the Canadians, and even the Governor-General, have told me that this river is unknown," yet for nearly half a century there appeared on the maps of America, in the atlases of Europe, the Long River, compared with which the Amazon was diminutive.

Charlevoix, the distinguished and generally accurate historian of New France, speaks of La Hontan's alleged discovery "as fabulous as the Isle Barrataria, of which Sancho Panza was made governor;" yet, a century later, the distinguished astronomer, Nicollet, is completely misled, and, in a report to the Congress of the United States, says, "Having procured a copy of La Hontan's book, in which there is a roughly-made map of his long river, I was struck with the resemblance of its course, as laid down, with that of Cannon River, which I had previously sketched in my field-book."

In 1690 Perrot visited Montreal, and, after a brief stay, returned to the West. But, in consequence of the hostile feeling of the Fox Indians, it became unsafe to travel through the valley of the Wisconsin; and therefore Le Sueur, who had been several times in the far West since 1683, was despatched to La Pointe, towards the head of Lake Superior, to maintain peace between the Sioux and Ojibways, and thus keep open the Bois Brulé and St. Croix Rivers and have ingress to the valley of the Mississippi.

On the west side of the channel of the Mississippi,

between Lake Pepin and St. Croix, there is a continuous chain of islands; and on one of these, ten or twelve miles from the modern town of Hastings, there is a small prairie. Easily accessible with canoes, yet retired, it was the spot selected by Le Sueur for the second French post in Minnesota. Here, in 1695, by the order of Frontenac, he erected a fort, as a barrier to hostile tribes. Charlevoix, alluding to it, says, "The island has a beautiful prairie, and the French of Canada have made it a centre of commerce for the western parts, and many pass the winter here, because it is a good country for hunting."

After the establishment of this post, Le Sueur brought to Montreal Teeoskahtay, a great Sioux chief, and the first of that nation who had visited the city. In a council he thus addressed Governor Frontenac: "All of the nations have a father, who affords them protection; all of them have iron. But he was a bastard in quest of a father; he was come to see him, and begs he will take pity on him."

Placing twenty-two arrows on a beaver robe, and mentioning the name of a Sioux band for each arrow, he continued, and, among other things, said, "Take pity on us. We are well aware that we are not able to speak, being children; but Le Sueur, who understands our language and has seen all our villages, will inform you next year what will have been achieved by these Sioux bands represented by these arrows before you."

Poor Teeoskahtay never saw Dakotah-land again. After a sickness of thirty-three days, in the spring of 1696, he died at Montreal, and was buried in the white man's grave, instead of being elevated on the burial scaffold, as his fathers were.

Le Sueur did not then return to the Mississippi, but sailed for France, and obtained permission to open certain mines supposed to exist in what is now the State of Minne-

sota; but, while coming back to America, the ship in which he sailed was captured and carried into an English port.

After his release he proceeded to France, and in 1698 obtained a new license to take fifty men to the supposed mines; but arriving at Montreal, the Governor of Canada postponed the execution of Le Sueur's project, inasmuch as it had been thought best to abandon all posts and withdraw Frenchmen from the region west of Mackinaw.

Nothing daunted, the indomitable man once more crossed the Atlantic to press his claims at court. Fortunately, D'Iberville, a Canadian by birth, was made Governor of the new territory of Louisiana, and proved a friend and patron.

In company with the Governor, he arrived at a post not far from Mobile, on the Gulf of Mexico, in December, 1699. The next summer, with a felucca, two canoes, and nineteen men, he ascended the Mississippi. On the 14th of September he sailed through Lake Pepin, and on the 19th entered the river St. Pierre, now called by the Indian designation, Minnesota.

Ascending the latter stream, he reached the mouth of the Blue Earth; and on a small tributary, called St. Remi, he founded the third post of the French, situated in 44° 13' north latitude. The fort was completed on the 14th of October, 1700, and called L'Huillier, after the Farmer-General in Paris, who had aided the project.

On the 10th of February, 1702, Le Sueur arrived at the post on the Gulf of Mexico, and early in the summer sailed for France in company with Governor D'Iberville. The next year the workmen left at Fort L'Huillier also came down to Mobile, being forced to retire by the hostility of Indians and the lack of supplies.

Cadillac, writing to Count Ponchartrain, under date of August, 1703, says:—

“Last year they sent M. Boudor, a Montreal merchant,

into the country of the Sioux to join Le Sueur. He succeeded so well in the trip, that he transported thither twenty-five or thirty thousand pounds of merchandise with which to trade. This proved an unfortunate investment. * * * * *

“I do not consider it best any longer to allow the traders to carry on trade with the Sioux under any pretext whatever, especially as M. Boudor has just been robbed by the Fox nation. * * * The Sauteurs, being friendly with the Sioux, wished to give passage through their country to M. Boudor, but, the other nations being opposed to it, differences have arisen which resulted in the robbery of M. Boudor. * * * The Sioux are a people of no value to us, as they are too far distant.”

For twenty years the posts in Minnesota were abandoned by the Canadian Government, and the only white men seen were soldiers who had deserted, and vagabond *voyageurs*, who in their tastes and principles were lower than the savages. It was at length perceived that the eye of England was on the Northwest. A despatch from Canada to the French Government says, “It is more and more obvious that the English are endeavoring to interlope among all the Indian nations and attach them to themselves. They entertain constantly the idea of becoming masters of North America, persuaded that the European nation which will be the possessor of that section, will, in course of time, be also master of all America, because it is there alone men live in health and produce strong and robust children.”

To thwart these schemes, which in time were accomplished, the French proposed to reopen the trade and license traders for the Northwest. On the 7th of June, 1726, peace was concluded by De Lignery with the Sauks, Foxes, and Winnebagoes, at Green Bay, and Linctot, who had succeeded St. Pierre, in command at La Pointe, on Lake Superior, was ordered to send presents, and, by the pro-

mise of a missionary, endeavor to detach the Sioux from their alliance with the Foxes.

Two Frenchmen were, therefore, sent to dwell in the Sioux villages, and to promise that if they would cease to fight the Ojibways, trade should once more be resumed, and a "black robe" come and teach them.

The trader and missionary in those days were in close alliance, and an Indian, in the presence of Count Frontenac, once said, "While we have beavers and furs, he who prayed was with us, but when our merchandise failed, those missionaries thought they could do no further service amongst us." The truth was simply this, however, that when the trader left it was unsafe for the man of God to remain.

The next spring arrangements were made to carry out these pledges, and preparations were made by traders and missionaries to accompany the convoy.

The Jesuit fathers of the seventeenth century, like Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century, were disposed to contribute to science; and on April 30, 1727, the Governor of Canada wrote to France that the fathers appointed for the Sioux mission desired a case of mathematical instruments, a universal astronomic dial, a graduated demi-circle, a spirit-level, a chain, with stakes, and a telescope of six or seven feet tube.

On the 16th of June the convoy departed from Montreal for the Mississippi. The commander of the detachment was a fearless officer, De la Perriere Boucher, the same man who gained an unenviable notoriety as the leader of the brutal savages who sacked Haverhill, Massachusetts, a few years before, and exultingly killed the faithful Puritan minister of the village, scalped his loving wife, and then dashed out his infant's brains against the rocks.

On the Wisconsin shore, half-way between the fort and the head of Lake Pepin, there is a prominent bluff, four

hundred feet high, the last two hundred of which is a perpendicular limestone escarpment. The Sioux have always gazed upon it as "wawkon," for from its top, their legend saith, the beautiful Wenonah leaped into the arms of death rather than marry her parents' choice, and be embraced in the arms of a warrior she could not love.

Opposite the Maiden's Rock, as it is called, on the Minnesota side, there juts into the lake a peninsula, called by the French Point du Sable. It has always been a stopping place for the *voyageur*; and here, on September 17, La Perriere du Boucher, with his party, landed, and proceeded to build the fourth and last French post in the Valley of the Upper Mississippi, of which we have any record.

The stockade was one hundred feet square, within which were three buildings, subserving, probably, the uses of store, chapel, and quarters. One of the log huts was thirty-eight by sixteen, one thirty by sixteen, and the last twenty-five by sixteen feet in dimensions. There were two bastions, with pickets all around, twelve feet high. The fort was named in honor of the Governor of Canada, Beauharnois, and the fathers called their mission-house, "St. Michael the Archangel."

Guignas and a companion were the Jesuits in charge. Mr. Shea, whose zeal in collecting everything the Jesuits wrote pertaining to America entitles him to our regard, in his compilation of "Early Voyages up and down the Mississippi," has inserted an interesting letter from Guignas, written in May, 1728.

The father says, "On the morning of the 4th of November (1727), we did not forget it was the general's birthday. Mass was said for him in the morning, and they were well disposed to celebrate the day in the evening, but the tardiness of the pyrotechnist caused them to postpone the celebration to the 14th, when they set off some very fine rockets and made the air ring with a hundred shouts of

Vive le Roy! and *Vive Charles de Beauharnois!* * * * *
What contributed much to the amusement, was the terror to some lodges of Indians who were at that time around the fort. When these poor people saw the fireworks in the air, and the stars fall down from heaven, the women and children began to fly, and the most courageous of the men to cry for mercy, and to implore us very earnestly to stop the surprising play of that wonderful medicine.”

The spring of 1728 was remarkable for floods, and the waters rose so high as to cover the floors of the fort. This year also, in consequence of the hostility of the Foxes, the majority of the traders who had applied for the new establishments withdrew with the missionaries. In going to Illinois during the month of October, the zealous Guignas was captured by some of the allies of the Foxes, and was only saved from being burned by the friendly interposition of an aged Indian. After five months of bondage he was set free.

Several years after this the post seems to have been rebuilt a few hundred feet from the shore, beyond the reach of high water, and to have been under the charge of St. Pierre, in the language of a document of that day, “a very good officer, none more loved and feared.” Father Guignas also revisited the post, but the Sioux were not friendly.

The Governor of Canada, under date of May 10, 1737, writes, “As respects the Sioux, according to what the commandant and missionary have written relative to the disposition of these Indians, nothing appears wanting; but their delay in coming to Montreal must render their sentiments somewhat suspected. But what must still further increase uneasiness, is their attack on the convoy of M. de la Veranderie.” Captain St. Pierre appears to have been the last French officer that resided at the post, although there were traders there in 1745–46, for that winter the lessees lost valuable peltries by a fire.



Jonathan Carver, the first English traveller to the Falls of St. Anthony, in 1766, describing Lake Pepin, says, "I observed the ruins of a French factory, where it is said Captain St. Pierre resided and carried on a great trade with the Nadowessies before the reduction of Canada."

We believe that further research will show that this same Captain St. Pierre became the aged Legardeur St. Pierre, in command of the rude post in Erie County, Pa., in December, 1753, to whom Washington, just entering upon his manhood, bore a letter from Governor Dinwiddie, and, after being courteously treated, was sent home with a dignified but decided reply.

The present article, it is thought, contains all the knowledge at present accessible in relation to the French forts on the Upper Mississippi; and the principal authorities consulted have been MSS. in the Parliament Library of Canada, Charlevoix, La Harpe, La Potherie, New York Colonial Documentary History, and Shea's "Voyages up and down the Mississippi."

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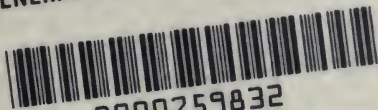
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