

# EARLY HISTORY OF PORTAGE AND VICINITY

## Derivation of the City's Name and the Early Indian Tribes

(Editor's Note—This is the first of a series of historical sketches, pertaining to Portage and its surrounding territory, suggested by the approaching tercentenary celebration of the landing of Jean Nicolet, early French explorer, on Wisconsin soil, and designed to more thoroughly acquaint Portage residents with the history of the city and its locality.

### Derivation of the name "Portage"

So far as historical records can be traced, the first white men to visit Portage were Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet.

To the Winnebago Indians, who inhabited this section at that time, the word for "a portage" was "Waw-wau-ah-na," now contracted to "Wauona." Portage means the "carrying place." Here the Indians helped Marquette and Joliet "portage" their birch bark canoes from the Fox to the Wisconsin river.

### Early Indian Tribes

Among the different tribes of Indians found at "the Portage" were the Winnebagoes, Sac, and Fox; but the chief inhabitants were the Winnebagoes, which means "men of the sea," a family of the Sioux tribe.

Historians think that possibly the name points to early migra-

tions of the tribe from the Mexican gulf or the Pacific.

It is believed that as early as 1634 this "sea tribe" was visited by French agents and a treaty made with them. Nothing more is known of them for more than 35 years, when early in 1670 they were engaged in active trading with the French. It is not known what territory they occupied at this early date. In 1718 the nation numbered about 600, but in 1814 had grown to about 4500.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century they were in firm alliance with France, but readily changed their course of trade, and when the English took possession of the French posts they asked for English traders to be sent among them, and alternated their support between the French and English in the several conflicts.

In 1825 the Winnebagoes claimed a vast territory extending from Northern Illinois to upper Wisconsin and westward into part of northern Minnesota, but eastward only to include Lake Winnebago.

By terms of a treaty of November, 1837, they ceded to the General Government of the United States all of their lands east of the Mississippi, and agreed that within eight months they would move west of the "great river." This agreement, however, was not fully carried out. They went to a reservation in Nebraska, but later moved to Minnesota.

A few families of Indians remain in the vicinity of Portage today, some still bearing the name of Decorah. They carry on a little farming or gardening, but subsist mainly on basket weaving and odd jobs.

### Indian Mounds and Graves

About ten miles north of Portage is a group of Indian mounds. The first of these, located near the railroad crossing, is known as the Crossing group, and consists of

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six conical mounds. In the woods east of this group are fifteen earthworks, known as the Gale group, named for Miss Hattie Gale of Kilbourn; and to the northeast of these is located the Bennett group, named for the H. H. Bennett. The most striking mound in this group is a bird, having a wing spread of 295 feet.

To the rear of the Agency House at Portage, Four Legs, the great chief of the Winnebago nation, is buried, and the Winnebago mother of Pere Pauquette is buried nearly in front of the Agency House. However, the exact location of these two graves has been lost.

#### Indian Legend of the Wisconsin River

As related by a Chippewa Indian, the bed of the Wisconsin River was formed by an immense serpent.

He was a manitou or spirit, and had his home in the great forests near the Big Lake. Once he started to travel through the forests to the sea, and his huge body wore a great groove or channel through the forests and fields, into which the water rushed. And when he moved his tail, great masses of water splashed onto the land, thus forming the lakes. Less powerful serpents fleeing from him also made channels of their own, thus forming smaller streams or tributaries to the larger river.

Encountering the great body of rock at the Dells, he thrust his head into it and tore the stone apart with his powerful body, and the queer shapes of these rocks are due to his struggle to get thru them.

July 3, 1934

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### Murder and Lynching that Grew out of War Days Animisities

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#### Some Still Remember

A revolting double tragedy was witnessed by the citizens of Portage on the afternoon of the 16th of September, 1869—the shooting

of Barney Britt at the corner where the Christian Science Church now stands by William M. Spain, and the subsequent lynching of the murderer within a stone's throw of the spot where Britt fell.

Britt and Spain were Irishmen, and former members of the same company during the Civil War. During their service they became enemies and never met without a wordy battle.

On the day of the tragedy, Britt came to town from his home in Fort Winnebago and met Spain and the battle began. During the afternoon Spain went to his home, got a revolver and returning to town noticed Britt following him. He told Britt not to follow him and was informed by Britt that he was not following him, but just going about his business. Spain repeated his caution and received the same answer, so he raised his gun and shot Britt through the heart killing him instantly. The shooting occurred in the presence of a large crowd of people and created a great deal of excitement. Spain started for Justice Haskell's office, intending to surrender himself. He was overtaken by the

marshal and deputy sheriff who arrested him and started for the jail. At Haertel's saloon, at the corner of Cook and Clark streets, the angry crowd met them, took the prisoner and forced him into the express office next door and left some one to guard him. An immense crowd assembled. The door was forced open, a rope

thrown about his neck and within a few minutes he was dragged thru the street to the Christian Science church corner and hanged from a limb of the large tree which is still standing at the corner. A thing of present beauty can often be also the reminder of a grim tragedy.

July 7, 1934

## EARLY HISTORY OF PORTAGE AND VICINITY

### An Outline of Territorial Occupation and Ownership

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#### Under Spanish Rule

Though no Spanish explorer had ever penetrated into the Northwestern territory, though none had ever ascended the Mississippi river very far, the claims of the Spanish government included all the great Northwestern territory, including what is now Wisconsin. Spain's discovery of America, and the establishment of a colony in it, gave her a claim, never very strongly asserted of right of dominion over the entire western continent, but she failed to extend her influence very far away from the coast line and so small regard

was given to her claim of possessions beyond the territory she actually occupied. There were no Europeans to dispute the claim practically till 1634, and the period of Spanish dominion is ordinarily given as extending from 1512 to 1634, when Nicolet made his exploration of the Northwest territory for the governor of New France, Samuel de Champlain.

#### The French Regime

By virtue of the daring of the fur traders and the devotion of the French Catholic priests, France was the first European nation whose citizens actually visited and explored the land that is now included in the State of Wisconsin.

When Jacques Cartier sailed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, the basis for a claim of dominion of territory of undefined extent, on the part of France was laid. In 1608, authority over "New France", as the territory occupied by her was called, was inaugurated by the appointment of Samuel de Champlain as governor. So the territory comprising Wisconsin became a dependency of France and her affairs were to be administered by Louis XIV. The enmity of the Fox Indians brought about a condition of affairs that did much to disrupt French dominion over the continental interior.

In this long and glowing struggle for racial supremacy on the American continent, Wisconsin waterways and Wisconsin Indians played a significant part. French supremacy could not permanently exist in the interior of the continent without free communication by boat between the many drainage

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systems of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi river. The Fox-Wisconsin trade route was early recognized in many respects as a most feasible connection between the two systems New France and Louisiana. Wisconsin was the keystone of the arch of French occupation, and so essential to the plan. Interruption of this highly strategic path to the Mississippi finally contributed to the downfall of the power of France in this territory.

French dominion continued till the termination of the Seven Years War between France and England, when the Fleur de Lis of France was lowered to the ensign of George III, on the Plains of Abraham on that eventful day, in 1759, and the ambitious dreams of the rulers of France of vast empire in the new world, had departed forever.

#### English Military Occupation

New France was surrendered to the British in 1763 at the end of a long series of European wars. The treaty of Paris, 1763, ended what is known as the Seven Years War. Wisconsin thus became English colonial territory, and was governed first under military authority from Mackinac, and by the Quebec Act of 1774 was made a part of the province of Quebec.

The British occupation was noted for two things—first, the intensification and development of the fur trade with the native inhabitants, and second, the changes growing out of the rebellion of the seaboard colonies.

Because of the fur trade, the British kept their economic hold on Wisconsin long after the po-

litical transfer to the authority of the United States. It thus happened that Wisconsin remained to all intents and purposes a British possession till the end of the Revolutionary War when the United States government awoke to the fact that there was in this Northwest Territory a rich land to take possession of. By the treaty of 1783 Great Britain formally ceded the territory to the United States, it was not actually surrendered till the year 1793 when the British evacuated the Northwestern military posts.

#### American Occupation

The United States of America had no existence as a government till the spring of 1781 when a constitution was drafted and ratified by the required number of states and in 1879 was declared the constitution of the United States. In 1816 two American forts were built, one at each end of the long Fox-Wisconsin waterway connecting the Great Lakes with the Mississippi; foreigners were forbidden to trade with the Indians. The military period of American occupation began.

Settlers in Wisconsin were rare during these years, and probably there was not a single inhabitant, aside from the Indians, in the limits of Columbia County, while Wisconsin was under French and English dominion. And so the territory embraced within the limits of Columbia county, if Spain's claim of dominion, which was only nominal, be admitted, had been successively under Spain, from 1512 to 1634; France, from 1634 to 1763; and England, from 1763 to 1796.

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# EARLY HISTORY OF PORTAGE AND VICINITY

## Synopsis of Territorial Control from Year 1787 to Date

(Editor's Note — This is the fourth of a series of historical sketches, pertaining to Portage and its surrounding territory, suggested by the tercentenary celebration now in progress at Green Bay commemorating the landing of Jean Nicolet, early French explorer, on Wisconsin soil, and designed to more thoroughly acquaint Portage residents with the history of the city and its locality.

#### Under Territorial Control

Our old settler's business, then, would have been transacted first at Marietta, Washington County, Northwest Territory, if he lived in territory the waters of which flowed into Lake Michigan; if he did not live in such territory he was a resident of no organized county.

His allegiance was next transferred to Indiana, in 1800 by an act of Congress making St. Vincennes his capital. In 1809 he found himself in the territory of Illinois, but he was in no organized county or town till 1809, when he was by proclamation made a resident of St. Clair County with his county seat at Kaskaskia, which was also the capital.

In 1812 he was transferred to Madison County and his county seat was at the house of Thomas Kirkpatrick. There he remained

till 1817, when the town of Silver Creek in Madison County was organized which embraced all Wisconsin.

In 1818, the territory of Michigan was organized and all of Wisconsin attached to it, and Governor Cass established the counties of Brown and Crawford. The dividing line between these counties ran directly north from Illinois through the center of the (portage) leaving our old settler who was transporting goods across it, one moment in Brown county, with his county seat at Green Bay, and the next minute in Crawford county with his county seat at Prairie du Chien. In 1819 his residence was changed by the erection of the county of Iowa, which included this county.

In 1824 the territorial council of Michigan established the county of Milwaukee, which included the six southeastern towns of Columbia county and an old settler of any of these towns would have to go to the town and county of Milwaukee to attend to his affairs.

Columbia county was placed on the map by an act of territorial legislature of Wisconsin.

The county then included the four western towns of Dodge and a small part of Sauk, and the six southeast towns of the present county of Columbia but there was no controversy about the county seat, for there was not a white person at that time within their borders, and was not at the time they were set off into Portage county in 1836, the first entry of land in these towns was made in 1839.

So our old settler has been a resident of — The Northwest Territory, from 1787 to 1800; Indiana Territory, from 1800 to 1809; Illinois Territory, from 1809 to 1818; Michigan Territory, from 1818 to 1836; and Wisconsin Territory, from 1836 to date.

JULY 13, 1934

July 31, 1934

## EARLY HISTORY OF PORTAGE AND VICINITY

### Father Marquette's Missionary Visit to "Portage" in 1673

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#### Pere Jacques Marquette

"And the gospel must first be published among all the nations."

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Pere Marquette, was born in Laon, France, in 1637, was sent to Quebec in New France at the age of twenty-nine years by the Jesuit Order in 1666. His missionary duties carried him through the wilderness to Three Rivers where he spent some time mastering the Indian dialects, and was sent at the age of thirty-one to his first mission at Sault de Ste. Marie, the land of the Ottawas, one of the farthest outposts of New France. Later he was sent to La Pointe on Chequamegon Bay to succeed Father Allouez, from where he was driven with the Hurons and Ottawas to the mission of St. Ignace at Michillimackinac.

In December, 1672, while he was still at St. Ignace, he was joined by Louis Joliet who had been commissioned by Governor Frontenac

at Quebec to accomplish the discovery of the Mississippi. Pere Marquette was appointed to accompany him to assist in the exploration and convert the Indians.

They left St. Ignace in May, 1673, stopping for sometime near Green Bay, and also visited the Mission of St. Francois Xavier, founded by Allouez in 1669. When leaving the mission three Miami Indians were dispatched as guides to conduct the party to the Mesousing (Wisconsin) river, which flowed into the Mississippi. Upon reaching "The Portage" the Indians returned. The Mississippi River was reached June 17th, 1673. They went as far south as Arkansas and returning they portaged to the great lake (Michigan) and on to De Pere.

Marquette spent the winter and following summer at the Mission of St. Francois Xavier while Joliet went back to Canada to report the results of the historic trip. Joliet stopped at the mission at the Sault and left one copy of his notes and maps which were later destroyed by fire. As he neared his journey's end his canoe capsized in the Lachine Rapids of the St. Lawrence. Thus Marquette's notes and maps became the only original records of the journey of discovery, and are now to be found among the government documents at Montreal.

Marquette again returned to work among the Illinois Indians, but ill health compelled him to return to Mackinac. He died on the return trip at a point near the present city of Ludington, Michigan, April, 1675. Later his body was removed to the mission of St. Ignace by his loyal followers among the Hurons. The mission was burned some time after Marquette was buried beneath its church. After many years his grave was discovered and his bones were removed to the sanctuaries of the Catholic church, some now being kept as sacred relics at the University in Mil-

waukee that proudly bears his name, in his honor.

Marquette traversed the shores of Wisconsin on the north, and for some time resided at Chequamegon. He cruised the entire western coast of Wisconsin, crossed the state by way of the Fox-Wisconsin route. For nearly a year he was a resident of the Mission at De Pere. It was for these reasons that the legislature considered him a citizen of Wisconsin and recommended him as worthy of its most distinguished-commemoration. Marquette's statue sculptured by the celebrated Italian sculptor, G. Trentanove stands as one of two of Wisconsin's contributions to Statuary Hall under the dome of the capitol at Washington, D. C.

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