

Jean Nicolet Was Little Known Explorer of Upper Great Lakes

A few steps up above the north pier of Arch Rock, accessible by a wooden staircase, stands a bronze plaque now almost a century old. Unveiled in 1915, the plaque commemorates Jean Nicolet, explorer of New France. The centuries seem to fall away as one climbs away from the busy Arch Rock crowds to this secluded refuge high above the waters of Lake Huron, for Nicolet passed through the Straits of Mackinac in 1634, only 14 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. While English-speaking colonists were still clinging to the Atlantic shoreline, their French cousins had befriended the Indians and were penetrating the heart of the continent.

Jean Nicolet was born in 1598 in France. An adventurous youth, he emigrated to Quebec at the age of 20 and soon plunged into the western wilderness. From the French fur-trading post of Montreal, the Ottawa River spears westward into the Canadian forest. It was in this forest that young Jean lived, traded for furs, and learned the ways of life and travel of his Native North American hosts.

The young colony of Quebec was commanded by an enterprising founder, Samuel de Champlain. Champlain was himself an explorer and the first man to draw and map the mighty lake that separates New York and Vermont – today we call it Lake Champlain. It was clear to Champlain that this new continent was filled with lakes, rivers, and fresh water; in the commander's most audacious journey, he followed the Ottawa River westward to its headwaters, and then further west down unfamiliar new waterways to a great freshwater sea, "Mer Douce," which we know as Lake Huron. This was the first of the Great Lakes to be discovered.

Champlain himself, burdened by leadership responsibilities, could go no further west. He admired Nicolet, and persuaded the frontiersman, by age 36 wise in the ways of the North American forest, to take a canoe



A Look at History

By FRANK STRAUS

Jean Nicolet

westward beyond his own "farthest west" to explore and discover the limits of this great new lake.

In 1634, therefore, Nicolet and a small, hand-picked crew of guides from the Huron nation of Indians, Nicolet's friends, pushed off from the shore of Georgian Bay. At first hugging the island-studded northern shore of Lake Huron, they followed a narrowing channel up to where the source of the lake was revealed in a great rapids of water and thunder of spray. This site was to be given a French name, "Sault Ste. Marie," or St. Mary's Waterfall.

Nicolet and his men then turned south and west, passing DeTour as they renewed their quest for the setting sun. Once again the shores of Lake Huron drew together as the adventurers moved towards a corner of Lake Huron, but this time, instead of a rapid, Nicolet's party saw a broad channel of water and three islands in the stream, one of them with the unusual profile of a great turtle. They were looking at Mackinac Island. Perhaps Nicolet's guides told him some of the massive quantity of Native lore surrounding this place of mystery and power.

Few details are known about Nicolet's journey, as New France had no secular historians at the time. As a devout lay person, Nicolet was well liked by the missionary priests, who disseminated information from Quebec. One of these holy men, Father Barthelemy Vimont, is the little-known hero of Nicolet's memory, as it was Vimont who wrote a brief account of Nicolet's 1634-35 voyage and inserted it into the "Jesuit Relations." Were it not for this account, we would know next to nothing about this coura-

geous adventure. The short Vimont account has nothing to say about the feelings of Nicolet and his men as they passed through the Straits of Mackinac.

It is clear that they passed through the Straits, because Vimont's account then places Nicolet and his companions at the head of yet another narrowing waterway, Green Bay on Lake Michigan. Nicolet had entertained hopes of using the great highway of sweet water as a pathway to rich, mysterious China. Human beings had not yet learned how to measure longitude, and this seemed at the time to be a reasonable goal. The explorer admitted later to Father Vimont that as their canoe approached the southern end of Green Bay, he had unpacked and put on a robe made of silk from China, so that he would be received by the Asians with the deference due to a man of rank.

Instead of the Chinese, Nicolet and his companions found some peaceful Ho-Chunk, members of the tribe often called the "Winnebago" by the whites. The Ho-Chunk did indeed demonstrate their respect for the strange man who had come from far to the east to visit them, feasting him and his men with a surfeit of roast beaver.

Nicolet must have been disappointed at not finding China, but recognized the potential richness of this newly discovered fur-bearing territory. As cold weather was closing in, he and his party wintered in 1634-35 on the western shore of Lake Michigan, probably somewhere at or near Green Bay.

In 1635, Nicolet returned to Quebec with his news and report. The adventurous Jean



In 1934, in honor of the 300th anniversary of Nicolet's journey to Green Bay, the federal government printed a purple, 3-cent postage stamp in his honor. (Image courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

then retired from exploring and settled down to a quiet life in Trois-Rivières, then a rural village on the St. Lawrence River. It was from there, in late October 1642, that he attempted to travel by boat down the river to Quebec City; and it was in this boat that he was drowned on November 1, 1642.

Nicolet's memory was ignored for centuries after his death. French-speaking Quebec, his adopted homeland, was conquered by the British Empire and its records and stories were scattered. A change came during the years surrounding 1900 with the translation and republication of the "Jesuit Relations" in the United States. The population of the Great Lakes was growing fast, with many people of the Catholic faith emigrating to the growing cities and towns of the then-Northwest. The time was ripe to elevate Nicolet from forgotten man to hero. He was the sort of man who fitted in well with the storybooks and school histories of the time.

In 1915, the generous cot-

tager Edwin O. Wood made Nicolet one of the beneficiaries of his historic-plaque campaign. Wood, who had close connections with Lansing, had the state accept a bronze plate in Nicolet's honor, which was ceremonially mounted on the beautiful lookout point adjacent to Arch Rock that now bears his name. There is, as has been noted here, no evidence that the real Nicolet ever set foot on Mackinac Island, although he certainly saw its towering bluffs and shoreline.

In 1934, in honor of the 300th anniversary of Nicolet's journey to Green Bay, the federal government printed a purple, 3-cent postage stamp in his honor. The stamp depicts the moment when the silk-robed Nicolet, a single-shot pistol in each hand, steps ashore from his canoe to greet the astonished Ho-Chunk. For many decades, Nicolet's story was taught to schoolchildren in Green Bay, and he was treated as the father of the city. Since then, his memory has once again begun to fade.

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