

French Lane Is a Reminder of Mackinac Island's Heritage

One of Mackinac Island's most unique back streets is French Lane, a narrow pedestrian way that stretches down from Market Street to Main Street above the Star Line ferry dock.

This lane is a survivor from the 1781 layout of Mackinac Island by the British Army. Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair, the commander of the Straits of Mackinac at that time, wore two hats. Under his Army hat – the headgear of a captain of the British army – was the head of a man who had been ordered to find a safe place for his detachment to fortify to defend the Straits of Mackinac for the British Empire and King George III. Under Sinclair's civilian hat – the hat of the Lieutenant Governor of the western portion of the province of Quebec – was the head of a man who had been ordered to show friendship to the civilian fur traders of the Straits.

These fur traders, many of them French speakers from Quebec, were carrying out a profitable trade that benefited the British Empire and the merchants of London. These traders were also maintaining a network of friendships and kinship with the Indians of the upper Great Lakes – the western anchor of what would become the new country of Canada. The little village of Mackinac Island, below the protective walls of the new Fort Mackinac, was built to provide a home and a place of business for these traders. In 1781 and in the following years, French-speaking traders from Fort Michilimackinac and other locations in the upper Great Lakes concentrated themselves on and around French Lane, building log cabins up and down the street. Two of the one-and-a-half-story houses on this lane contain late 1700s log cabins with-



A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

French Lane

in themselves, concealed under modern siding, to this day. So that was how a street built by the British army came to bear the name of a country, France, against which the English had fought for centuries.

A glance at the map shows much of the French heritage of Mackinac Island, with place names such as Allouez Trail, Lousignon Trail, and Marquette Park. Riders around Mackinac Island's Shore Road reach their halfway point at steep Pointe aux Pins, while off our southern shore stretches our bulky island neighbor, Bois Blanc.

Mackinac Island's Catholic parish center, Ste. Anne's Church, is named in honor of Sainte Anne, a favorite patron of many of the people of France and Quebec. In Christian history, Saint Anne is the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary. One of Quebec's foremost churches, Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupre, is a well-known pilgrimage spot northeast of Quebec City to this day, while a cherished painting of Sainte Anne by Leonardo da Vinci is hung in the world-famous Louvre Museum in Paris.

For many of Mackinac Island's earliest decades as a settlement, the French tongue was the language of choice on Market Street and Main Street. The fur traders who worked for John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company largely spoke French or one of the Indian tribal languages, or sometimes a fusion of the two. Island memoirists Elizabeth Baird and Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard wrote separately in

the late 1800s of their childhood years on Mackinac, where French was heard everywhere.

With the decline of the local fur trade in the 1830s and 1840s, the hold of French-speaking culture declined on Mackinac Island. The new Island economy, based on fishing and tourism, did not rely upon French-Canadian traditions. The new Island working class, made up of immigrants from Ireland and other European countries, adopted English as its common tongue, binding Mackinac Island closer together with the rest of the United States.

By the dawn of the modern era of interstate-auto tourism in 1958, 50 years ago, the French heritage on Mackinac had dwindled to a faint memory. This troubled the Mackinac Island State Park's newly hired historical director, Eugene Peterson. A longtime admirer of French culture, Peterson eagerly grasped the opportunity to take symbolic steps to reforge ties between modern Mackinac and its French past. One of his first steps was to build a ceremonial "Avenue of Flags" on the rear of Fort Mackinac, at the halting point for Carriage Tours passenger buggies. Along both sides of the ceremonial walkway, traditional French fleur-de-lis flags snapped in the breeze, sharing the sky with historic and modern British and American flags.

The "Three Flags" interpretation of the history of the Straits of Mackinac reached its apogee in 1966 with the publication by Walter Havighurst of

the classic history "Three Flags at the Straits." Part of the American Forts Series, the book treated the history of white settlement at the junction of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron as a dramatic trilogy, with the French granted chronological seniority over the British and the Americans.

Peterson and the State Park cooperated closely with Havighurst in the writing and publication of this wide-selling book, which sentimentally portrayed the early village of Mackinac Island as a happy place filled with French songs and games, and depicted French-Native American relations as basically friendly and filled with alliances and cooperation. Although later scholarship has sometimes tended to look at pictures like Havighurst's as being overly positive portraits of the American frontier, local lore tends to substantiate the "Three Flags" picture here at the Straits of Mackinac. In particular, the Ste. Anne's parish register and the genealogical history of many Mackinac Islanders and longtime mainland families confirms that many French fur traders and Great Lakes natives got along well, met, married, and raised families together.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Peterson and his State Park employees also flung themselves into the task of excavating and rebuilding key sections of Mackinaw City's Fort Michilimackinac, a fort which – unlike Mackinac Island's Fort Mackinac – had actually been built by the French armed forces. Digs at Fort Michilimackinac uncovered many trade goods manufactured in France or in French-speaking Quebec. Pet-

erson wrote captions for the illustrated book, "France at Mackinac" (1968), a handbook to some of the more dramatic archeological findings discovered up to that point in Mackinaw City. This book was closely followed by Dirk Gringhuis's "Were-Wolves and Will-O-The-Wisps" (1974), a compendium of French-heritage folktales from Michigan and the Mackinac Straits area, also published by the State Park.

As tourism headcounts rose rapidly in the 1960s and early 1970s, hopes were entertained in some quarters that authorities might soon discover remains of a third fort at the Straits of Mackinac, the long-vanished Fort de Buade, built by the French in 1683 at what is now the site of St. Ignace. Some hoped that Fort de Buade, which was occupied from 1683 until 1701, could be rebuilt in the same way as Colonial Michilimackinac was being reconstructed, thus giving visitors a threesome of potential attractions in the Straits of Mackinac area. These hopes have not yet been fulfilled, because the site of this stockade, the oldest of all the forts at the Straits, has not yet been rediscovered.

Recent activities in St. Ignace indicate, however, that some memories of Fort de Buade can be maintained and preserved through further development of the Fort de Buade Museum, a collection in downtown St. Ignace dedicated to Native American and fur-trade-era artifacts.

A glance at this museum, and at the books for sale in local and State Park bookstores, will show that the story of France is still alive at the Straits of Mackinac.

Markers Subject of 'Scavenger Hunt'

Markers: Continued from page 8

been standardized in design over the years, but Skull Cave is an exception.

Ms. Ashlee has coordinated the marker program for 19 years. She compiled her first book in 1991,

The following 25 locations on Mackinac Island have been approved for markers: Battlefield of 1814, Beaumont Memorial, American Fur Company, Biddle House, British Cannon, British Landing, Early Missionary Bark Chapel, Fort Holmes, Grand Hotel, Historic Fort

Mackinac, Indian Dormitory, Island House, Lake View Hotel, Little Stone Church, Mackinac Conference, Mackinac Island, Market Street, Mission Church, Mission House, Agency House, Round Island Lighthouse, Sainte Anne's Church, Skull Cave, Trinity Church, and Washkamo Golf Club.

The Early Missionary Bark Chapel and Agency House markers have been removed, and the Beaumont Memorial is now the American Fur Company, so 22 intact markers can be found today.

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