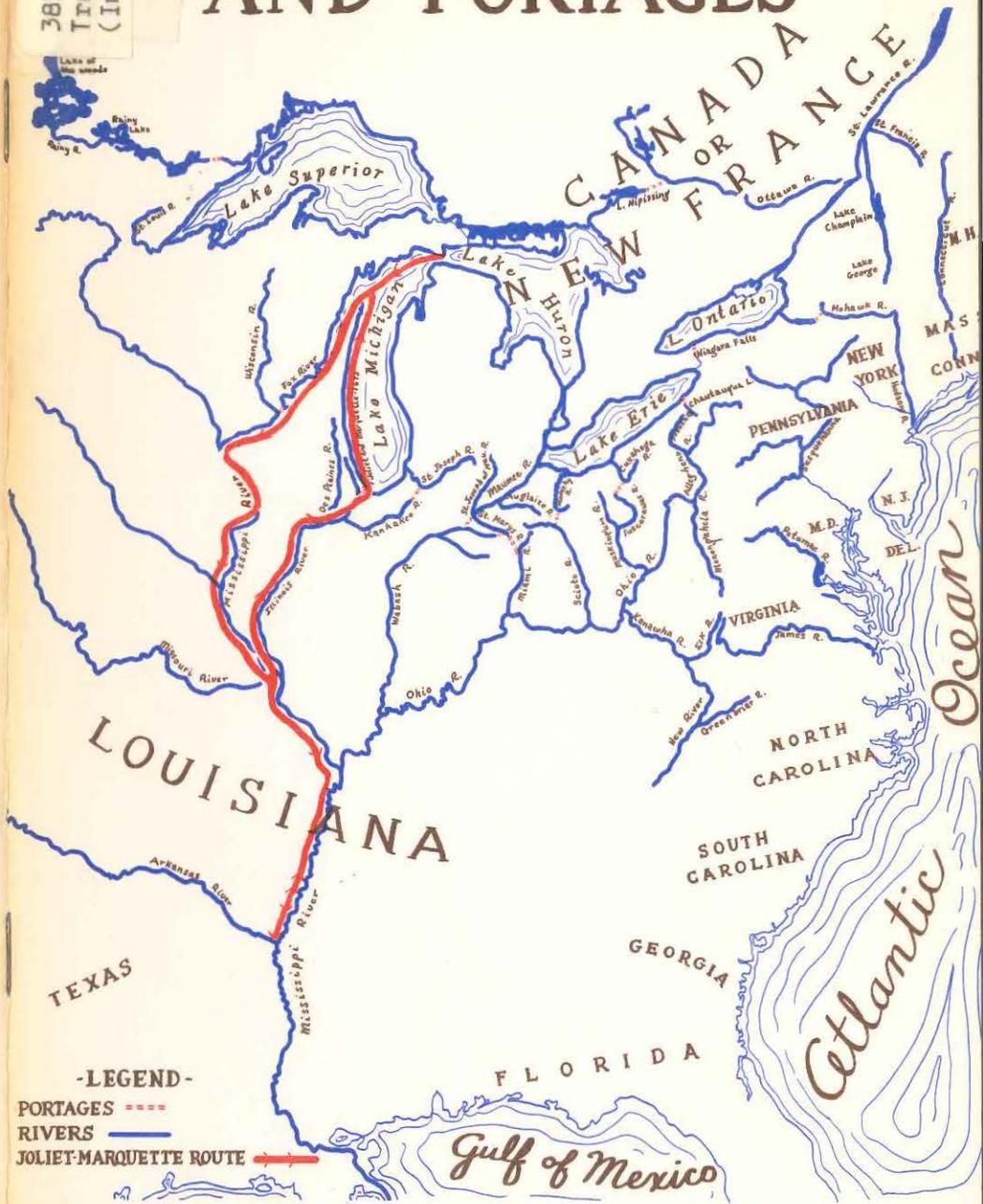


EARLY WATERWAYS AND PORTAGES



-LEGEND-
PORTAGES ----
RIVERS ———
JOLIET-MARQUETTE ROUTE →

CLARENCE A. VANDIVEER

EARLY WATERWAYS AND PORTAGES

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FOREWORD

River systems and connecting portages enabled the early French explorers and traders to penetrate deeply into the interior of America. Forts were later located at these portages; still later, thriving cities grew on the same sites.

The following publication, briefly describing these early waterways, originally appeared as chapter V of THE FUR-TRADE AND EARLY WESTERN EXPLORATION by Clarence A. Vandiveer. The volume was published in 1929 by the Arthur H. Clark Company. The publishers have graciously granted permission to reprint the chapter.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this account in the hope that it will be interesting and informative to Library patrons.

We now come to the period of Marquette's and Joliet's Mississippi expedition. Pere Marquette was a Jesuit priest of an adventurous nature, who like many another missionary in savage lands was an explorer as well as a preacher of the gospel; Joliet, a splendid woodsman and an enthusiastic fur-trader. Both men had heard rumors of the existence of a great river to the south of the Great Lakes which could be reached by easy portages and connecting tributaries. Perhaps more than mere rumors had reached their ears, for we know that ten years before Radisson and Groseilliers had discovered this great river and probably the muddy Missouri as well, but either knowledge of these men's exploit had been forgotten or had been disbelieved, or else what is more probable, their report had been suppressed by jealous rivals who wished to rob the two unpopular traders of their glory. However this may be, Marquette and Joliet, the priest and the trader, set out in 1673 to find the "Father of Waters," one with an eye especially open for the saving of souls, the other for the finding of a good fur-producing country, but both longing to see the river of their dreams. Both men were brave, hardy and fearless, both were honored and respected by all who knew them.

With five companions in two canoes they followed the route of Nicolet up Fox river into Wisconsin's lovely lake region, portaged across to the Wisconsin and floated down that stream to the Mississippi, and on down the great river into the unknown. Their intercourse with the natives was peaceful and pleasant, they enjoyed the weird scenery of the bluffs which bounded the river, they feasted royally on buffalo, which they found in incredible numbers on the rolling, grassy plains which stretched in limitless expanse on either hand. They passed the mouth of the Missouri whose turbid flood came rolling in from the westward and entirely changed the color and character of the river upon which they were traveling. The mouths of the Ohio and of the Arkansas were passed in turn, and finally our travelers were convinced that the great river had its objective point not in the Atlantic or the Pacific, but in the Mexican gulf, in territory claimed by Spain. Arriving at this conclusion they reluctantly abandoned further exploration and turned their prows upstream. They did not return to Lake Michigan by the way they had come but went up the Illinois and across by the Chicago portage instead.

Marquette and Joliet had been very fortunate in their travels but now their good fortune came to an end. Marquette was taken suddenly ill and died before getting out of the wilderness. He was buried on the shores of Lake Michigan by his faithful red converts, who brought the sad news to the settlements. Joliet was not present when Marquette passed away, having hurried on ahead to carry the news of the discovery to Quebec. Frontenac, the French governor, received him joyfully, but when it came to procuring permission to trade in the regions he had explored he met with a flat refusal

and the privilege was granted to Frontenac's friend, Robert Cavalier de LaSalle instead. It was only another case of not being allowed to reap where one had sown.

We have seen how Marquette and Joliet proceeded from Lake Michigan waters to those of the Mississippi by way of the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers and returned by way of the portage between the Illinois and the Chicago. These portage paths and inland waterways played a considerable part in the early exploration and history of the interior of the continent.

Some of these portages have become quite historic. The Indians first located and established the paths connecting the heads of the various rivers, and when the white man came he naturally made use of these ready made trails in his trading and exploring expeditions. The home-building Englishmen built their substantial settlements at the head of bays and rivers along the Atlantic coast. To his back was a wilderness almost devoid of navigable waterways and beyond lay the blue wall of the Appalachians. Consequently he never became a riverman.

The *coureurs de bois* of French and Indian extraction had their homes along the mighty Saint Lawrence and its tributaries, a perfect network of waterways by means of which, with the occasional use of a portage path, he could penetrate by boat almost to the far Cordilleras, and we are to see Vérendrye at the very foot of the Rockies long before our own Daniel Boone had penetrated into Kentucky.

There was a portage from the Ottawa to Lake Nipissing which in turn was connected with Lake Huron by the French river. Champlain, Brûlé, the Jesuits and the early voyageurs used this route from the very beginning.

Another less used portage was one by way of Lake Ontario, the Trent, Lake Simcoe, Lake Huron and connecting portage paths. Champlain used this route in his unsuccessful campaign against the Iroquois in western New York.

A chain of portages connected the western end of Lake Superior with Lake of the Woods, Rainy lake and tributary streams. The fur-traders early appreciated the advantages of this route and the Northwest Company afterward built Fort William on these waters because of the conveniences offered for easy communication and travel.

There was a portage connecting Superior with the Mississippi via the Saint Louis river. Other carries were from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi by way of the Calumet and Des Plaines, from the Saint Joseph to the Kankakee and from the Saint Joseph to the Wabash and thence to the Ohio. This route became an important one in the days of the Vincennes settlement. We have already mentioned the two portages used by Marquette and Joliet.

In Ohio the waters of Lake Erie were linked with those of the Ohio by a number of carries and portages. One from the Maumee led to the Wabash, another from the Maumee led to the Great Miami. General Wayne recognized the importance of these Maumee portages and fortified them in 1794. By similar paths were the Scioto and the Sandusky, the Muskingum and the Cuyahoga united. The Ohio was further linked up with Erie by portages from the Allegheny across to Presque Isle and to Chautauqua lake. Niagara Falls cut off all natural water communications between lakes Erie and Ontario but two portages relieved the difficulty. There was a portage from Lake Ontario to the Mohawk. Sev-

eral portages connected the Hudson river with lakes George and Champlain. This route was much used by the indians in their forays against one another, and in later times was the scene of numerous invasions and battles between the English and French and the English and American armies. The names of Diskeau, Johnson, Montcalm, Howe, Burgoyne, Allen, Montgomery, Gates, Schuyler and a host of others are inseparably connected with these routes, routes which the indians and the men of the fur-trade discovered and put into use.

Two much used war trails were those from the Connecticut to the Saint Francis and from the Kennebec and Dead river to the Chanderie, over which Benedict Arnold led his brave continentals against the grim fortress of Quebec in 1775.

The English were always far better seamen than the French but the latter, once the dash of indian blood was added, far excelled as a river man and a canoe man. The French colonist learned to depend upon water transportation while the English depended more upon overland routes, more as a matter of necessity than from choice. The first American trappers and explorers used the Missouri as their highway but later used the overland routes up the valleys of the Arkansas and the Platte instead.

The indians had portage paths between the two main tributaries of the Ohio and Atlantic coast rivers, the Allegheny being linked to the Susquehanna and the Monongahela with the Juniata. Likewise there were portage paths between the Kanawha and the Potomac and the Greenbriar and the James. None of these trails seems to have been much used by the whites, however.

As so much of the fur-traders' traveling was done by

water, several kinds of water-craft came into use. First and foremost was the famous birch-bark canoe, which was light and serviceable and had been used by the indians for countless years before the coming of the white man. It was the "ship of risk and adventure, belonging by rights to him who goes far and travels light, who is careless of his home-coming. It is the boat that now carries the voyageur and is now carried by him." It rides the waves lightly and is easily propelled - also it is easily capsized. The material for its construction was always at hand in the north country. The birch tree was stripped of its covering of tough paper-like bark and stretched over a graceful framework of cedar, the cracks were caulked with gum, a rude paddle was whittled out and your voyageur was ready for a trip to the farthest region. The birch canoe was the greatest product of indian ingenuity, and the only savage-constructed craft that the white man has adopted permanently for his own use. The Kootenais of the northwest make a very useful canoe out of pine bark, the rough side turned inward, which shows by its construction a one time connection between its makers and the savage craftsmen of the Pacific coasts of Asia. In the far south the hollowed out log of the cypress tree was much in use. On the plains of the far west where wood was scarce the indians constructed a circular frame of willow over which they stretched a buffalo hide. These rude and unsatisfactory craft were known as "bull boats" and were principally used to ferry across the plains rivers, yet long journeys have been made in these crazy affairs without mishap or accident.