
THE CHICAGO PORTAGE

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In the spring of 1609 near the present town of Ticonderoga, New York, Samuel des Champlain and his allies the Hurons and Algonquin Indians engaged in battle with a group of Iroquois warriors. This battle, the reverberations of which, especially in the Mississippi Valley, were to be felt for decades, changed the course of history.

Champlain with his arquebus was the deciding factor in the battle. It was the first experience of the Iroquois with European firearms and the Indians fled in disorder. As a result of this defeat, however, they became implacable foes of the French at every opportunity. Maps of the early seventeenth century show the English along the eastern seaboard, the Spanish in Florida and on the western coast, and the French occupying territory extending in a line from the Great Lakes eastward along the St. Lawrence.

Due to the geographical location of the French possessions, and the extent of the country controlled by the Iroquois, who were fierce fighters, the French could travel from the Mississippi Valley northward only by the Lake Superior and Lake Michigan routes. Hence the French often used the Chicago Portage whose history came to be closely associated with the exploits of two gallant men, Pere Marquette and Rene Robert LaSalle.

In May, 1673, Louis Joliet, the son of

a Quebec wagon maker, and Pere Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit priest, left St. Ignace, in what is now Michigan, to explore for Frontenac, the Governor of New France, and to claim new lands for Louis XIV. They followed the west side of Lake Michigan southward, entered Green Bay, ultimately reaching the Mississippi River. Marquette named this river "Immaculate Conception," a name later to be changed to "The Colbert" in honor of a French minister. The explorers continued south on the Mississippi to the mouth of the Arkansas River; then, fearing to proceed farther lest they be seized by Spaniards, they retraced their route as far north as the mouth of the Illinois River, where upon the advice of friendly Indians, they headed up this tributary, as far as Kaskaskia, the Indian's principal town located near the present town of Utica. After a brief visit here with members of the Illini Confederacy, they returned home after entering Lake Michigan by way of the Chicago Portage. The next year (1674) Marquette, in company with two other Frenchmen and ten canoes of Illinois and Pottawatomie Indians landed at Grosse Point (near what is now Evanston), followed the shore line south to the mouth of the Chicago River, where Marquette became ill, and was detained at the Chicago Portage from December till March 30th. On the return trip to

Green Bay, he crossed the Kankakee-St. Joseph Portage but never reached his destination. He died en route and his body was interred at the mouth of a small river near Ludington, Michigan.

At this time, the fur trade was the most important commercial activity of the new country, and LaSalle dreamed of a chain of forts that could be erected on the principal rivers to control this trade. With this object in view, he hurried to France, succeeded in obtaining a knighthood there and returned with power to colonize the vast unknown empire in America. The first efforts in accomplishing this were the erection of two forts on the Illinois River: Fort Crèvecoeur across from the present town of Peoria, and Fort St. Louis at what is now named "Starved Rock". He made three trips across the Chicago Portage, and, contrary to the belief of Joliet, felt that a canal connecting the Des Plaines and Chicago Rivers would not be a success. All of his expeditions, however, were attended with ill luck and finally, due to a miscalculation of longitude, he failed in his quest for the mouth of the Mississippi. He was assassinated on the Trinity River in Texas, but seven of his followers returned to France, again passing over the Chicago Portage.

From 1700 to 1795, the portage was virtually closed to white men due to the danger of attack by Indians. Then, gradually, travel increased and, from the establishment of Fort Dearborn in 1803 until its extinction in 1812, the portage was once more an important north-south avenue of travel. From the fall of the fort until the close of the Blackhawk War of 1832, the route was little used but after the conclusion of hostilities immigrants from the east began to utilize the Portage. This traffic continued until the completion of a canal in 1848 afforded

an easier route, and the Chicago Portage was abandoned.

Glacial Lake Chicago which occupied the present site of Chicago had three stages. In the first, the Glenwood, the water was 55 feet higher, and in the Tolleston (the last stage) 20 feet above the present water level. The Des Plaines River extended then only to Riverside, flowing directly into Glacial Lake Chicago. The outlet of this lake was down the present Des Plaines Valley. When the water receded and a barrier developed near what is now Kedzie Avenue, the Des Plaines reversed its direction and flowed through old Glacial Lake Outlet, leaving a slough a few miles in length between the Des Plaines and Chicago rivers, called Mud Lake. This connected with the Des Plaines by a small stream called Portage Creek. Travellers coming north up the Illinois descended the Des Plaines to Portage Creek, followed this a mile and a half to Mud Lake which was five miles long and one or two miles wide, then skirted its shore for three-quarters of a mile to the Chicago River, which, in turn, lead them into Lake Michigan. At the western extremity of Mud Lake was a small island, one mile in length and half a mile wide which divided it into two channels. The northern channel, the shallower and straighter of the two, was generally used except in dry weather when the deeper, less direct southern channel was followed. On "Tolleston" Beach which fringed the lake on the northern, western and southern sides, ran four Indian trails. The Green Bay trail followed the northern shore, and intercepted two western traces, one of which led to Fullersburg, Downers Grove and Naperville, and the other, southwesterly down the Des Plaines Valley. Along the south side was the Eastern trail which extended eastward and south.