

ADDRESS AT THE DEDICATION OF THE BOULDER MARKING THE SITE OF FORT ST. JOSEPH.¹

BY JUDGE ORVILLE W. COOLIDGE.²

WE have assembled here today under the auspices of the Fort St. Joseph Historical Society to commemorate events which occurred nearly a century before the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed at Philadelphia in 1776. We have met here to commemorate the first occupation of the valley of the St. Joseph by white men and the establishment of a military post on the spot where we now meet.

The labors of the Society in placing upon this bluff a massive boulder to remind us of the historic and romantic associations and traditions which cluster round this spot, merit our hearty tribute of thanks and appreciation. If we are normal beings, Providence has endowed us with sentiment and imagination. These elements of our nature, if properly developed, lead us to linger now and then over the earliest records, traditions and legends of the place in which our lot has been cast.

This place and this occasion carry our minds back to a primitive age; to a time far beyond the earliest advent of the American settler to this region; to a time one hundred twenty-five years before Squire Thompson, the pioneer colonist of Berrien County, built his log cabin and planted his field of corn on the flats just north of the bluff.

It was the year 1697 when the French soldiers of "le grand monarque," Louis XIV, first unfurled the French flag over the rude fort on the St. Joseph river which afterwards became known as Fort Joseph. This military occupation followed rapidly in the wake of the first voyage of La Salle up the St. Joseph River, and of the establishment of the mission to the Pottawatomies and Miamis by the Jesuit fathers seven years before.

It was the third day of December, 1679, that La Salle and his

¹Delivered at Niles, Berrien county, July 4th, 1913.

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party of thirty-three persons in eight canoes rowed along the banks of this river at the foot of this bluff. They were the first white men who ever ascended the St. Joseph River, as far as we can learn from authentic records. Before the voyage of La Salle up the river, he had built a rude fort at the mouth of the river at the point where the Daughters of the American Revolution at St. Joseph have placed a boulder to commemorate the event. He called the river the River of the Miamis and named the fort Miami, after a tribe of Indians by that name who then occupied the valley of the St. Joseph. This fort appears to have been abandoned in a few years and even its early history is merged in obscurity.

The explorations of La Salle were accompanied and followed by journeys of the French "coureurs de bois," or runners of the forest, who were engaged in buying furs from the Indians for the French traders of Quebec and Montreal. A natural alliance grew up between these men and the Western Indians, which was strengthened by intermarriage between the Frenchmen and the Indian women.

The advent of the French race, however, into the wilds of the west, was destined to be succeeded by a movement much more important than the visits and alliances of the "runners of the forest."

The Court of Versailles, having gained possession of Canada, was now engaged in a dream of conquest embracing a vast continent. While the English colonists remained contented with the possession of a narrow belt of territory along the Atlantic coast, the French were determined to occupy the vast territory lying between the Alleghanies and the Mississippi and between the Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. By the close of the 17th century, nearly all of this region had been taken possession of formally by the French. In this occupation explorers, missionaries and soldiers joined. The desire to make this territory a New France and to convert the Indians to Christianity went hand in hand. Every missionary became an explorer and every mission was at once preceded or followed by a fort.

A mission to which I will allude hereafter appears to have been located here about the year 1690. The military fort, established shortly afterwards, was named after the river. The name of the river was changed from the River of the Miamis to that of the St. Joseph river in honor of the Patron Saint of the Canadian Catholics.

The first fort, erected in 1697, was a crude affair without earthworks, a mere stockade or palisade equipped with a few cannon. At a later period, but at what particular date we cannot determine,

earthworks were erected on this bluff near the point where we are gathered today. The ruins of these earthworks were in evidence when the American settlers first came and some of the oldest living residents claim to have seen them.

The French occupation of the St. Joseph valley has received little attention from American writers and numerous errors have crept into the history of this region. Traditions, unsupported by any reliable proof, have been narrated as actual facts. The most authentic sources of information regarding the earliest history of this point are the letters and journals of the French missionaries. These have become accessible through the labors of Dr. Reuben G. Thwaites, of the Wisconsin Historical Society, one of the most learned antiquarians of the northwest, who a few years ago completed an extensive compilation of the journals and letters of the French missionaries in the Northwest, in seventy-three volumes, entitled the "Jesuit Relations."

Most of the early historians of the Northwest, including Parkman himself, have erroneously assumed that Fort St. Joseph was located at the mouth of the St. Joseph River and have confounded Fort St. Joseph with Fort Miami. The latter was located at the mouth of the river by La Salle, and was maintained but a few years.

That Fort St. Joseph was established near the present site of the city of Niles and not at the mouth of the river, is abundantly established by the letters, journals and writings of the early French missionaries and travellers and by maps made of this region in the eighteenth century.

In this connection I desire to call attention to the interesting and reliable article on Fort St. Joseph by Lewis H. Beeson in volume 28 of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections. An interesting article was also published in volume 35 of the same series by Daniel McCoy.

In the summer of 1905 I made a personal examination, to some extent, of the Jesuit Relations and the works of Charlevoix in the Chicago Public Library. Charlevoix was a celebrated French traveller who made an extensive trip through North America in the years 1721-1722. Durings his travels he visited Fort St. Joseph in 1721. In 1744 he published at Paris his work entitled "Histoire de la Nouvelle France" and also a journal written while in America in the form of letters addressed to the Duchess de Lesdiguère. The original editions are in the Chicago Public Library. In the history of New France is a map entitled "Map of the Lakes of Canada," which I examined. On this map the St. Joseph River is designated

correctly, Fort St. Joseph is named and it is located at about the present site of the city of Niles. The village of the Miami tribe of Indians is located on the right bank of the river and that of the Pottawatomies on the left bank, immediately opposite.

The Kankakee River, flowing a few miles west of South Bend, is designated as the Teakiki and the portage between the St. Joseph and the Teakiki Rivers is placed a few miles south of the Fort.

In connection with this map, a letter addressed to the Duchess de Lesdiguère by Charlevoix during his visit here is interesting and serves to fix still further the site of the fort and mission. This letter is referred to in the articles by Lewis Beeson and Daniel McCoy. I desire to read a portion of it, although the whole of it is interesting. The letter is headed, "Letter from the River St. Joseph this 16th August, 1721," reads as follows:³

"Eight days ago I arrived at this post where we have a mission, and where there is a commandant with a little garrison. The house of the commandant, which is a small affair, is called the fort, because it is surrounded by a palisade which is a crude affair. There are however some small cannon, ***** sufficient to prevent surprise and hold the savages in check.

"In order to reach the fort one ascends it [the river] 20 leagues. [This would be about forty-eight English miles]. We have here two villages of Indians, one of the Miamis and one of the Pottawatomies. Both are for the greater part Christians but they have been for a long time without pastors and the missionary who has been sent to them lately will have some difficulty in restoring to them the exercise of their religion.

"The River St. Joseph is navigable for eighty leagues and in the twenty leagues that I ascended in order to reach the fort, I saw everywhere a beautiful country covered with trees of great height."

The site of the fort at about this point is also established by the line marked out by the British military authorities in 1772 for a road from Detroit to the Illinois river. This is described in the Haldimand papers.⁴ After designating the eastern part of the road to Kalamazoo, the road is marked out as follows:

"To Prairie Ronde 30 miles,
To Fort St. Joseph 75 miles,
To Portage 12 miles."

³This letter as here quoted differs from the letter as given by L. H. Beeson in vol. 28, and Daniel McCoy in vol. 35 this series.

⁴The Haldimand papers can be found in vols. 9, 10 and 11 of the Michigan Pion. & Hist. Colls. The description of the British military road from Detroit to Fort St. Joseph and from thence to the Illinois and Mississippi is found on page 268 of vol. 10. The carrying point named is the portage to the Kankakee River, commencing near St. Mary's Academy north of South Bend, Indiana, about 2 miles. The names of some of the rivers are Indian, and differ somewhat from the names now used, but it is easy to identify them.—Author.

The Portage here alluded to is a point on the St. Joseph River near St. Mary's, where the French Missionaries and the travellers on their way to the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers left the St. Joseph River and had their canoes carried to the Kankakee four miles distant.

Mr. McCoy in the article referred to has copied a map which was made by John Mitchell in 1755, for military purposes. On this map the fort and two Indian villages are located at practically the same point as indicated on the Charlevoix map made in 1744.

The first fort erected had no earthworks. Subsequently, earthworks were evidently erected, as they were partially in existence when the American pioneers first came here. These earthworks were found a few rods north and west of the boulder. The French flag floated here for over sixty years.

In 1759, however, there occurred one of the greatest events of modern history and that event determined the fate of Fort St. Joseph. Quebec, the great stronghold of the French in America and one of the greatest natural fortresses in the world capitulated to the British forces, and soon afterwards Montreal surrendered. It was practically the final act in the great drama of warfare which had raged relentlessly for four years between Great Britain and France and it decided what nation should govern the destinies of North America.

The French flag was hauled down from every fort along the line of the Great Lakes and rivers of the west and the English flag unfurled in its place. Among the names of the forts which are recorded as having surrendered to the British is the Fort St. Joseph on the River St. Joseph. This took place in 1761 when a detachment of British troops from Montreal took possession of it.

The fort again changed hands in the year 1763. In that year the conspiracy of the great Indian chief, Pontiac, was at its height. The chieftain had visited the Pottowatomies and inflamed their passions against the English colonists. They enthusiastically joined the movement then embracing nearly all of the leading tribes of the west.

The year 1763 was a disastrous one for the English and the English colonies. Fort after fort surrendered to the Indians, among them Fort St. Joseph. A band of the Pottowatomies surprised the British commander, Lieut. Schlosser on the 25th of May. They massacred eleven of the soldiers and took possession of the fort. A description of this massacre is given in Parkman's masterly work on the Conspiracy of Pontiac. The fort was held by the Pottowat-

omies for over a year until Pontiac made his peace with the British when it again passed into their possession. Some minor events in the history of the fort I pass by.

The most memorable event perhaps in the history of the fort took place in 1781. Some years ago, E. G. Mason, then President of the Chicago Historical Society, who was a student of the history of the Northwest, read an essay before the Chicago Society in which he established from the examination of the authentic records found in the Spanish archives at Madrid, the fact that in the year 1781 a Spanish force from St. Louis, a military outpost of Spain, marched to the St. Joseph River, captured Fort St. Joseph, hauled down the British flag and raised the Spanish flag.⁵ The Spanish troops remained only a few days, but they set fire to the fort and store houses and destroyed them when they returned to St. Louis. The fort was never rebuilt.

The event was of historic importance because it was connected with a secret scheme of France and Spain. The American Revolution had not then closed and both France and Spain were engaged in war with Great Britain. Spain was at that time in military possession of all of the territory west of the Mississippi and a part of Louisiana. It was the intention of France at the close of the war to allow her ally, Spain, to take possession of a portion of the territory east of the Mississippi and to control the navigation of that river. She wished to retain for herself most of the Northwest territory and to confine the United American colonies to the Atlantic seaboard. This is clearly set forth in John W. Foster's work entitled, "A Century of American Diplomacy."

This scheme was frustrated by the sagacity and courage of three great men, Franklin, Adams and Jay,⁶ then ambassadors to Europe, who in violation of the instructions of Congress, that they should obtain the consent of our ally, the French government, before making a treaty with Great Britain entered into a secret treaty with Great Britain by which the United States was to have all of its possessions east of the Mississippi and south of Canada.

"We have here," says Foster, "the strange spectacle of the colonies joining with their enemy, the mother country, to circumvent the scheme of their allies." The French officials were extremely angry when the terms of this treaty were made known but the

⁵This forms one chapter of Mason's "Chapters from Illinois History" and is also printed as a separate article in the Magazine of American History for May, 1886, under the title of "March of the Spanish Across Illinois."

⁶Benjamin Franklin was Ambassador to France; John Jay was Ambassador to Spain; John Adams was Ambassador to Amsterdam; and Henry Laurens was Ambassador to London. These men signed the preliminary articles of peace with Great Britain in Nov. 1782, as representatives of the American government.

opposition was useless and Congress, although mildly censuring our ambassadors, ratified their action and insisted on the Mississippi River being recognized as our Western boundary. Thus Michigan was probably preserved from French domination. The action of Franklin, Adams and Jay was clearly justifiable. The secret negotiations between the French and Spanish governments, with the design of acquiring all the territory west of the Alleghanies and the entire control of the Mississippi River, were attended with the grossest duplicity.

I ought not to close this address without referring briefly to the French Missions among the Indians at this point and in the immediate vicinity of Bertrand. The Mission appears to have been established about the year 1690 by Father Allouez. According to the Jesuit Relations, Father Chardon came with the Pottawatomes to this point from Green Bay in the year 1711 and was their first pastor in this region. One of the French missionaries died here and a wooden cross near the site of Miami village for a long time marked the spot of his burial. His name is unknown but it is probable that it was Father Aveneau. There are traditions that Joliet, the discoverer of the Mississippi, and also Marquette were at this point before the year 1690 but there is no authentic proof of any of these visits and I could find no allusion to such visits in the Jesuit Relations.

The French Mission continued until about the year 1759 when it was practically abandoned. A church was again established about 1830, in answer to an appeal made by Leopold Pokagon, a leading chief of the Pottawatomes who was respected by the early settlers. His village was one mile west of Bertrand village. Father Badin, a French Catholic priest, was sent to minister to the Pottawatomes and a church edifice of logs was built near the village of Pokagon. In 1837 this building was supplanted by a new church edifice of brick in the village of Bertrand. By the year 1840 the last remnant of the Pottawatomes had departed from this locality for the Indian reservations beyond the Mississippi. A few of the tribes, however, settled in Silver Creek Township in Cass County, Michigan.

The petition of Pokagon to the Catholic Bishop in 1831 is thus given:

"My Father, I come again to implore you to send us a Black Robe to instruct us in the Word of God. If you have no care for us old men, at least have pity on our poor children, who are grow-

ing up as we have lived, in ignorance and vice. We still preserve the manner of prayer as taught to our ancestors by the Black Robe who formerly resided at St. Joseph. Morning and evening with my children, we pray together before the crucifix. On Friday we fast according to the traditions handed down by our fathers and mothers, for we ourselves have never seen a Black Robe at St. Joseph. Listen to the prayers which he taught them and see if I have not learned them correctly."

It is related that Pokagon after the presentation of his petition fell upon his knees, made the sign of the Cross and recited in his own language the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Apostle's Creed and the Ten Commandments.

The early French Missions among the Indians were productive of great good. A large portion of the Pottawatomies were converted to Christianity and became to a considerable degree civilized and accustomed to industrial pursuits. Between the time of the abandonment of the mission and the appeal of Pokagon, a decline in the condition of the Pottawatomies commenced. A passion for strong drink was encouraged by the liquor sold them by American traders. During the French occupation this traffic was largely suppressed. The French priests despised habits of intoxication. They were remarkably temperate themselves and at all times strenuously endeavored to prevent the use of liquor by the Indians.

It may be questioned whether the method of colonization pursued by the French among the Indians was calculated to become as successful as that of the British. This, however, should be said, that everywhere they treated the Indians with kindness and forbearance. No cruelties such as marked the conquest of the Spaniards in both North and South America attended the peaceful mission of the French. That innate courtesy, tact and power of adaptation to attract other races which have characterized the French race beyond all other races, were inherent in the missionary, the explorer and the soldier alike. The French priests contemplated the building up of the Indian tribes into civilized communities, which should owe allegiance to the French government but preserve their own land and property rights. In this they were destined to be disappointed both by the British conquest and the subsequent policy of the American Government. The Americans were essentially hostile to the continued location of the Indian tribes east of the Mississippi River.

In conclusion, I desire to say that we are commemorating today not only the earliest military occupation of this region but the first

introduction of Christianity and civilization into the wilds of western Michigan. The French priests preceded the French soldiers and the fort followed the mission. The fortitude and heroism of the French missionary in plunging into a wilderness thousands of miles distant from home, inhabited by roving savages, enduring all manner of privation and suffering, have never been surpassed. Many of them were men of brilliant attainments like Joliet, Marquette and Allouez, who left their homes amid the most cultured society of Europe to endure the privations and dangers of a sojourn in forests among savages, without even the ordinary comforts of life.