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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Life on the Other Continental Divide: *Long Before Lewis & Clark were Gallinee, Dollier, Marquette, Joliette*

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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As kids we knew that living in Erie was special; that there was something historic about this place. But we never realized that we were living almost on top of one of

the most historically important landforms in North America. Teachers had often regaled us with stories of the “Continental Divide,” the towering spine of snow-capped mountains that had daunted explorers and slowed the progress of the railroad that was destined to span the continent. According to our teachers and to the later stories of the Lewis & Clark Expedition (told so eloquently by Ken Burns), the 1804 expedition that helped to expand and map the continent, and to determine the boundaries of the United States, was critical to our destiny.

But 131 years earlier, in 1673, two French explorers in canoes, Father Jaques Marquette and Louis Joliette made an epoch journey that was, arguably, more important. Dispatched by the government of New France at Montreal, the duo began their quest by traveling in canoes to the top of Lake Michigan and the town of St. Ignace. Their mission was to scout the Great Lakes and find the widely reported passage from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico.

The French had several motivations for sending explorers into New World waterways to map the Americas. First, they were trying to outcompete the British who were “dug in” on the American East Coast but threatening to move west, using existing waterways. The French knew that it was only a matter of time until British explorers and settlers would be making their way west and into the Ohio Valley and they were determined to try to keep them pinned into that tiny edge of the Americas. The British colonies were beginning to express an interest in moving west, however, which was threatening to New France. Several of the colonies had already claimed ownership of land that was west of them by “proclaiming” that their actual boundaries extended west to the Mississippi River (Connecticut’s Western Reserve, for example). To prevent this from happening, the French imagined that they might establish a series of forts in the Ohio Valley, which would discourage the British from moving west. Prior to fortifying the Ohio Valley, however, the French knew they would have to explore and carefully map the entire area, and especially its waterways. To that purpose they began sending explorers, followed by large expeditions from Montreal through the Great Lakes.

In addition to claiming territory for New France, there were “souls to be saved.” Several religious orders, most notably the Jesuits, accompanied French explorers on their trips. Expeditions were simultaneously claiming territory for New France and attempting to make connections with native North Americans. On the surface their efforts seemed mostly focused upon conversions and spreading Catholicism through the New World. Their native convert conversion intentions inspired the French to take great care to understand native cultures, and especially their languages.

As a result, the French and their explorers were much more skillful, linguistically, than the British. Many historians have concluded that French motives were much more selfish than an altruistic desire to spread the faith. Since the French were greatly outnumbered by the British, their strategy may also have been propelled

by an interest in creating military allies. The French were also interested in raising the money needed to fund their incursions into the New World and fundraising efforts back home in Europe were driven by one simple metric: number of conversions. They also imagined native North Americans to be helpful traders.

While the Spanish were most interested in gold and the British in agricultural products (including lumber), the French saw native furs as the most valuable American commodity. Much lighter than gold and far easier to transport than lumber, native furs such as beaver pelts, were enormously valuable in Europe, and the French immediately set up a trading system in which they bartered with the natives, trading guns and ammunition for pelts. The British were also interested in trading with native people for furs but were slower to move into that business than they should have been, from a pure business perspective.

Much of what is known about the French incursions into the New World was recorded by the Jesuits in a regular “newsletter” that was circulated in Europe to garner political support as well as financial contributions from the “faithful.” Their newsletter, called “Jesuit Relations,” reported numbers of conversions, the establishment of missions, and the spread of Roman Catholicism in the Americas. Early scouting reports regarding the best way to get to the Ohio Valley and the Mississippi River were mixed. Some suggested that the most direct approach was to use Lake Erie and portage from there to the south. Others argued that a better transportation strategy would be to access the Mississippi River from the northern Great Lakes.

The French explored both options. They began by sending an advanced scout who was a skilled linguist who had managed to learn several Indian languages to the south shore of Lake Erie in 1670. Etienne Brule became proficient at both Algonquin and Iroquois dialects and managed to meet the Eriez Indians while he was traveling. Brule reported that the best way to gain access to the Ohio River Valley would be to portage onto Lake Erie from Lake Ontario, paddle to today’s Barcelona, N.Y., climb up and into Chautauqua Lake, and then follow creeks and rivers, beginning with Conewango Creek to the Allegheny, then into the Ohio, and the finally the Mississippi. Pierre-Joseph Celoron de Blainville and his expedition followed the proposed Brule track in 1749.



Monument to Gallinee and Dollier at Port Dover

The French also sent an expedition along the north shore of Lake Erie, and two of its leaders, Father Rene de Brehant de Gallinee and Father Francois Dollier, spent a winter at today's Port Dover studying the lake and its south shore. Both men were surveyors and from the top of today's Brant Hill, on clear days, they could easily see the ridge line of the Appalachian escarpment, which still rises above and behind the city of Erie. Using surveying instruments, they calculated the height of the ridgeline and from discussions with the natives who were accompanying them on their westward trek they knew they were observing the northern edge of the Lake Erie drainage basin. And that on the south side of the ridge (dividing) line that they were observing, creeks and rivers would all drain to the south and the Gulf of Mexico. Prior to European arrival there was regular trade between native North Americans on both sides of Lake Erie and the various tribes were familiar with the trails that connected many of the tribes in the eastern part of the Americas.

Table 1
Select French Expeditions into the New World

DATE	NAME	EVENT
1534	New France	France establishes itself in the New World
1620	Etienne Brule	Advanced scout is sent to explore the south shore of Lake Erie and find a route to the Ohio River
1670	Esther Francois Dollier and Father Rene Gallinee	Lake Erie north shore expedition winters in Port Dover where they survey the escarpment ridge south of today's Erie.
1673	Father Jacquez Marquette & Louis Joliette	Expedition down the Mississippi River and back to Lake Michigan, discovers the "hole" in the ridge at today's Chicago.
1679	LaSalle	The Griffon is launched at the Niagara River and sails Lake Erie.
1749	Celoron	Expedition to Lake Erie, Chautauqua Lake, and the Ohio River
1751	Charles Boishebert	Expedition blown off course and discovers Presque Isle and its sheltered bay by accident
1753	Fort Presque Isle	The French build a fort at today's Erie.
1754	French & Indian War	War between the French and English begins.
1759	Fort Presque Isle	The French abandon their fort and burn it down.
1763	French & Indian War ends	The Treaty of Paris

While other French explorers were checking out the possibilities of using Lake Erie to gain access to the Ohio Valley, the Marquette & Joliette expedition of 1763 was testing the efficiency of gaining direct access to the Mississippi River via Lake Michigan. The big river had been "discovered" much earlier by the Spanish. The Spanish had been using the lower Mississippi as a trade route and the Native Americans who were friendly with the French had reported that the upper Mississippi could be accessed via the Great Lakes and was connected to the more familiar Lower Mississippi. The mission of Marquette & Joliette was to demonstrate the practicality of Great Lakes access to the Mississippi.

Marquette and Joliette began by making their way to St. Ignace from Montreal, which was no easy task. Then they set off in two canoes with several voyages and Native American guides, beginning their four-month trip by paddling down Lake Michigan to Green Bay and then up the Fox River and into a stiff current. At the headwaters of the Fox River, they portaged almost two miles over difficult terrain to today's Wisconsin River. As the explorers were planning the trip they were told

to expect a difficult paddle\portage up and over a very high landform, a divide that is now recognized as an east-west continental divide.

Judging from the description they had heard from Native American guides they were conflicted about what they might find on the south side of the ridge line (divide). Some had assumed that the waters on the other side of the divide would lead to the same Mississippi that had been “discovered” by the Spanish. But an alternative theory was that the rivers on the other side of the ridge might lead to the long hoped-for “Northwest Passage,” a gateway to the Pacific Ocean. There were conflicting reports about an enormous “ocean” west of Lake Michigan and while some imagined that it might be the Pacific Ocean, we now know that those reports were describing Lake Superior.

As Marquette & Joliette were to learn, the Wisconsin River led to the Mississippi and after a few weeks of down-stream travel, the explorers realized they were heading south toward New Orleans and Spanish territory, rather than west and to a hoped-for northwest passage. As they continued south, realizing that they were in the Mississippi and rapidly heading toward Spanish territory, they grew concerned about being captured. Nearing the Arkansas River, they began to see Native Americans with European goods and decided that it would be prudent to turn back toward the north. They had not discovered the Northwest Passage, but they had demonstrated that the Mississippi could be accessed from Lake Michigan.

As their upcurrent return trip continued into the extreme heat of summer, the explorers were apprehensive about repeating the very first part of the journey, which had involved difficult paddling and a long portage. After seeking the advice of Indians they had encountered along the river they learned that there was an easier and faster route home. Instead of continuing all the way upriver to the Wisconsin River, they left the Mississippi at the Illinois River, which had a slower current. They continued to the Des Plaines River until it connected with the Chicago River (today’s Sanitary Canal), which ran downstream to Lake Michigan. The connection point and town that developed there was later named Joliet after one of the explorers. Thanks to navigational advice from friendly Indians along the way, Marquette & Joliette had discovered the “hole” in the east-west continental divide. That depression continues into modern times, creating the circumstance where the Chicago River\Sanitary Canal continues to create a “back door” into the Great Lakes at today’s Chicago.

Although Marquette and Joliet made this amazing navigational discovery, charted the upper Mississippi River, and developed important contacts with several native tribes along the river, decision-makers at Montreal eventually decided that the Lake Erie strategy was the best way to reach the Ohio Valley. To that end they sent the Celoron Expedition to test the route that had been scouted by Etienne Brule. Based on reports by Celoron, they were convinced they should

access the Ohio Valley via Lake Erie and Chautauqua Lake. A few years later, the French sent Charles Boishebert with 200 men in canoes to finalize the Celoron route. Paddling across Lake Erie in a stiff northeasterly wind, the expedition was blown past its Barcelona, N.Y. target and discovered Presque Isle and its sheltered bay by accident. Some historians have argued that New France leader Marquis Duquesne had been tipped off to Presque Isle's existence by an unnamed explorer. In any event, once the French understood the strategic and potential military advantage of Presque Isle they built a fort there. Fort Presque Isle was key to their plan to creating additional forts (LeBoeuf and Duquesne) to prevent the British from entering the Ohio Valley.

The ridge line reported by Gallinee and Dollier from Port Dover in 1670, and identified by Marquette and Joliette on their expedition was important to a number of activities during the early history of the United States, and especially the creation of canals and railways. That 1,500-mile landform was America's first and most important continental divide for more than a century. It stretches from Minnesota to upstate New York and varies in height, with its highest elevations occurring just east of Erie near the Pennsylvania-New York border and reaching more than 1,700 feet above sea level.



The east-west divide (ridgeline) serves as the southern edge of the Great Lakes watershed



The traditional Rocky Mountain Continental Divide also defines a watershed, the Mississippi drainage area. Note that the northern edge also defines the second continental divide.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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