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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Wind Whims: *Could Erie Have Been Somewhere Else?*

By David Frew
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A fanciful 1885 mural of Chautauqua Lake, including the Chadakoin River at the east end

It is mid-September 2023. Mary Ann and I are in Celeron, New York, on the outskirts of Jamestown. We are on the eastern end of Lake Chautauqua gazing at red-tipped trees (a harbinger of fall) and watching an endless parade of birds flying along the lake just inches above the surface of the water. Most of them land in front of the chairs where we are sitting. They seem to be there to rest and to

dive for fish. Probably early travelers heading for more temperate southern climates. The first Europeans to come by this beautiful place were the members of the Celeron expedition of 1748. They were French explorers, “voyagers” in huge canoes, who were looking for the best route from Montreal to the Ohio Valley. The French at Montreal had already sent a scout along the mysterious south shore of Lake Erie to look for the best way up and over the Appalachian Escarpment and into the Ohio Valley.

Etienne Brule had discovered Chautauqua Lake and its eastern connecting river: the Chadacoin. It was Brule’s suggestion that a French expedition exit Lake Erie at today’s Barcelona, follow Chautauqua Creek up and over the ridge line to the south and then paddle the length of Chautauqua Lake. From the eastern end of the lake, the Chadacoin River connected with Conewango Creek, which intersected the Allegheny River at today’s Warren, Pennsylvania. The Allegheny merged with the Ohio River at present-day Pittsburgh.

Brule’s primary assignment, however, was to learn about the indigenous people who lived along the south shores of both Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. He was a natural linguist and within a few years had not only learned about the Iroquois, but he had mastered enough of their language to speak with them. The Iroquois seemed to like Brule and invited him to several trading events near Niagara Falls. That was where he met several Eriez Indians and subsequently spoke about them in his reports to New France. Brule was the only European to actually meet and talk with the Eriez, and he eventually described their language, noting that it was fundamentally different from that of the Iroquois. It was not Iroquois as had been reported in the “Jesuit Journals.”



Etienne Brule

Erie. When Celeron had crossed the lake, winds and waves were coming from the prevailing southwest.

As the new party approached the south shore of the lake, land features appeared to be quite different from those described by Celeron. They persisted but eventually realized that they had been blown far off course to the west. The canoe party made a brief attempt to turn upwind and head east, but they found that they could not make headway against the winds and waves. The farther east they paddled the bigger the waves became because of the increasing “fetch.”

Choosing prudence over a difficult upwind struggle, the canoe party eased course, headed to the west and began to look for a place to land. Covering huge distances downwind because of the wind, the canoes continued along an unforgiving coastline until the explorers spotted a low-lying body of land a few miles ahead. As they made their way west, they were able to identify sandy beaches, cottonwood trees and an inlet. It was the best alternative to continuing west and getting farther from the Chautauqua Portage, so they steered the canoes toward shore. As the party closed on the unknown area there seemed to be a narrow inlet leading to a sheltered bay. The voyagers continued toward the sandy beach, thinking that at the very least they would be able to pull their canoes onshore. But as they grew closer, they could see that the inlet (today’s channel into Presque Isle Bay) was navigable. They paddled through and discovered a large, protected bay.

The voyagers stayed at this new and uncharted (by the French) area where they made observations and sketches of their discovery. It did not take them long to learn the size of the sheltered bay and the length of the sandy peninsula (Presque Isle) that protected it. Understanding the general location and direction of the Allegheny River as related to their new position, they soon decided that they had discovered a better portage route than the one suggested by Celeron. The sheltered bay also offered a far-better location for a fort than the lakeshore at Barcelona and it would also provide an anchorage for bigger ships once they had been put into service. All that was needed was an exploration of a possible portage route up and over the ridge line south of the lake and, using crude surveying instruments, they measured the elevation, finding that it was a lesser climb than the 600-foot struggle that Celeron had reported on his portage up to Chautauqua Lake.

Long before the French established themselves at Presque Isle, their advanced scout Etienne Brule had become an expert at Eastern Native American culture. He was fascinated by the Eriez Indians and noted that they were quite different from any of the Iroquois tribes. They were significantly taller, many exceeding six feet in height, and lived in a different way. Instead of living in longhouses that were disassembled and moved every seven years when a tribe moved to a new location like the Iroquois, the Eriez lived in permanently stockaded villages along the shores of Lake Erie. The Iroquois, and the Seneca in particular, were leery of

Lake Erie and never went near it. The Iroquois did not like the Eriez for a variety of reasons, but they traded with them. The Eriez went to the annual Iroquois Indian games, a fall event that was organized like the modern Olympics. And they always won. The most popular event at the games, which were held near today's Kinzua Reservoir, was lacrosse.

While speaking with the Iroquois, Brule learned there was another Pennsylvania tribe that was tall like the Eriez and spoke the same language. The Iroquois told him that the two tribes seemed to be related. Brule traveled south to meet this seemingly related tribe, that also traded with the Iroquois and discovered the Susquehannock. Tribal elders described another powerful native group that lived well south of them. Brule continued his journey to meet them. That tribe was the Nanticoke, which lived on the shores of Chesapeake Bay. It was the Chesapeake tribes, including the Nanticoke, that subsequently became epicenter of the John Smith and Pocahontas adventures.

After spending time near the Chesapeake, Brule traveled back up the East Coast to Montreal, where he reported his discoveries to the French and to the Jesuits who were in the New World seeking to "save Indian souls." Soon after he had made his reports he returned to Lake Erie where he traveled west to meet the Hurons. Brule liked the Hurons and endeared himself to them by helping them in their fur trading with the French. He remained with the Huron for a long time and while working with them managed to annoy the French. They were angered by the fact that Brule was extracting more from French traders during their fur trade transactions. The longer he was away from Montreal the more Brule decided that he liked his Indian friends more than the French, and especially the newly arriving Jesuits who were actively working to change Native North American religious traditions. This reality was not lost on the Jesuits, who grew to dislike Brule and told their French sponsors that he had become a serious problem.

Historians can only speculate about the reasons that Brule left the Hurons and traveled east through Iroquois territory near the end of the Beaver War period. Some think he was going back to Montreal to try to redeem himself with New France. En route, however, he was intercepted by the Seneca, who decided he had literally become a hated Huron. The Seneca imprisoned Brule for more than a year, holding him captive near today's Salamanca, New York. The Seneca and the Huron were fierce enemies. They did not like one another and did not conduct trade. After more than a year, Brule managed to escape. Freeing himself, he decided it was too dangerous to travel east through Iroquois territory, so he backtracked to the west. He probably had planned to travel to Detroit and return to Montreal on the north side of Lake Erie.

During his time with the Seneca, Brule adopted tribal dress mores and added face paint that helped him to fit in. Thus, when he escaped, he looked "almost Seneca." Sadly, when he eventually encountered Huron warriors, who hated the Seneca,

they murdered him. Brule came to a sad end; murdered by the people that he had lived with, liked, and helped. These days Brule is celebrated for his pro-native views. He has become a cultural hero in Canada, where there is a park and placard dedicated to him.



Commemorative to Brule in Toronto, Ontario

Meanwhile, we are left to wonder about the founding of Erie. If it had not been for a northeast wind that drove French voyagers west, could we have become Jamestown, New York instead of Erie? Celeron had planned to develop towns at two strategic locations: (1) on the lake shore near today's Barcelona-Westfield, and (2) at the east end of Chautauqua Lake, where the Chadakoin River would have provided water as well as docking access.

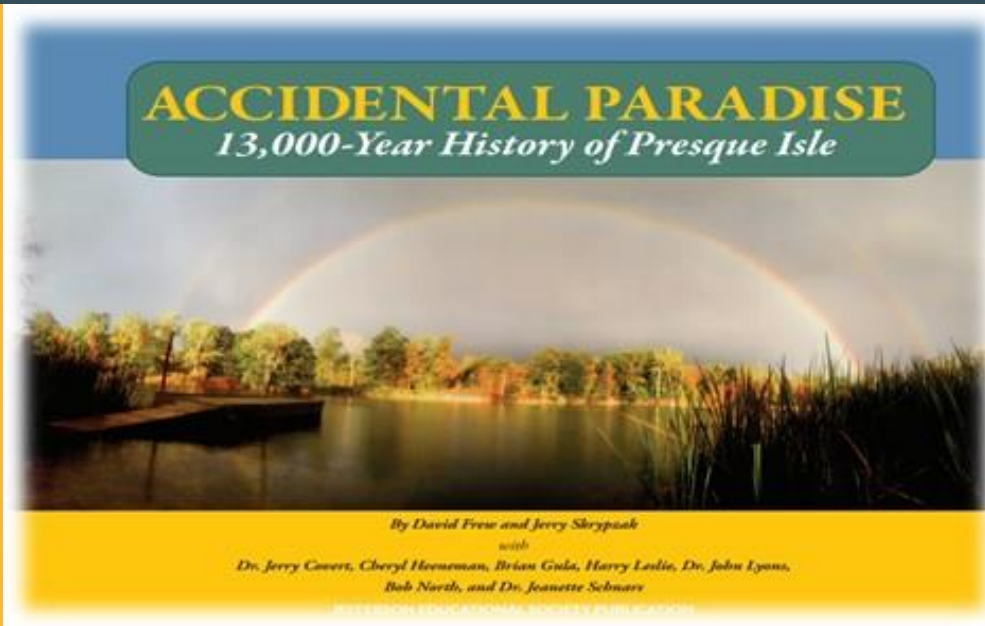
And the New France plan was to follow through on Celeron's suggestion. Would those towns have survived the conflict between the French and the British? If the Erietz had survived the Beaver Wars and not been vanquished by the Iroquois would the French have dared to paddle into Presque Isle Bay? Was it inevitable that a town would have been built where Erie now stands? Each time that I visit Celeron ... I wonder.

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