

ST. CLAIR COUNTY MICHIGAN

ITS HISTORY AND ITS PEOPLE

A Narrative Account of its Historical Progress
and its Principal Interests

BY

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CHAPTER II

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The first white men to traverse St. Clair river, whose records have been preserved, were Dollier and Gallinée, two French priests who came up the river in the spring of 1670. It is true that Joliet had come down the river the preceding year, but unfortunately his maps and records were lost by the overturning of his canoe in the St. Lawrence river as he approached Montreal. In 1650 Sanson, the French geographer, had published a map of North America, which was the first to show all the Great Lakes, including Lake St. Clair, and their intercommunication and connection with the St. Lawrence, but this map gives no details of this region.

THE GALLINEE MAP

The map of Gallinée, who was an engineer as well as a priest, while poorly proportioned and not at all exact in its relative positions of the bodies of either land or water—he had no instruments of precision with him on the journey—is, however, of much interest and importance. It notes the chief physical characteristics of the route traveled, which included the Upper St. Lawrence river, Lakes Ontario, Erie, St. Clair and the east shore of Lake Huron, with return down the Ottawa river.

The descriptive account of the journey says that after passing up the Detroit river they "entered a small lake about ten leagues in length and almost as many in breadth, called by M. Sanson the Salt Water lake, but we saw no sign of salt in this lake. We entered the outlet of Lake Michigan, which is not a quarter of a league in width (by which he means St. Clair river). At length, after ten or twelve leagues, we entered the largest lake in all America, called the fresh water sea of the Hurons or in Algonquin Michigan." (Lake Huron was called by some early geographers, Lake Michigan.)

Upon the map opposite the St. Clair flats are the words "great

meadows (or prairies),” and the mouths of two streams emptying into St. Clair river upon the west side are shown.

LA SALLE-HENNEPIN VOYAGE AND NARRATIVE

The second traveler and explorer of whom record remains was La Salle, who had formed the ambitious program of uniting by a chain of posts and settlements the French territory along the St. Lawrence with the settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi. In the historic “Griffon,” the first sailing vessel upon the western lakes, La Salle set sail from his shipyard upon the Niagara river August 7, 1679. Fortunately for posterity, he was accompanied by Louis Hennepin, a Recollect priest, who has preserved for us the main incidents of the journey, and whose descriptions are in the main reliable, although he was absurdly egotistic in the importance he assigns to himself, and on all occasions minimizes or entirely omits to mention the services or importance of others.

After Hennepin’s return to Europe he published in 1697 an account of his experiences in a book entitled “A New Discovery of a Large Country in America,” and in it, after narrating the incidents of the preparation and trip through Lake Erie, and referring to the country between Lakes Erie and Huron, he says: “The country between those two lakes is very well situated and the soil very fertile. The banks of the strait are vast meadows, and the prospect is terminated with some hills covered with vineyards, trees bearing good fruit, groves and forests so well disposed that one would think nature alone could not have made, without the help of art, so charming a prospect. That country is stocked with stags, wild goats and bears, which are good for food, and not fierce, as in other countries; some think they are better than our pork. Turkey cocks and swans are there also very common; and our men brought several other beasts and birds whose names are unknown to us, but they are extraordinary relishing.

“The forests are chiefly made up of walnut trees, chestnut trees, plum trees and pear trees, loaded with their own fruit and vines. There is also abundance of timber fit for building; so that those who shall be so happy as to inhabit that noble country cannot but remember with gratitude those who have discovered the way, by venturing to sail upon an unknown lake for above one hundred leagues. That charming strait lies between 40 and 41 degrees of northern latitude.”

This language is perhaps a little strongly colored, and it is probable that where he says wild goats, he had seen small deer, but it requires little imagination even at the present, with the river banks no longer covered with the beautiful timber native to them, to reconstruct the panorama as it slowly spread before the eyes of those Frenchmen more than two centuries and a quarter ago, as they came up the noble St. Clair river. A little further on in his account, Hennepin says: “The current of that strait is very violent, but not half so much as that of Niagara, and therefore we sailed up with a brisk gale, and got into the strait between the Lake Huron and the Lake St. Claire; this last is very shallow, especially at its mouth. The Lake Huron falls into this of St. Claire by several canals, which are commonly interrupted by sands

and rocks. We sounded all of them and found one at last about one league broad without any sands, its depth being everywhere from three to eight fathoms water. We sailed up that canal, but were forced to drop our anchors near the mouth of the lake for the extraordinary quantity of waters which came down from the upper lake and that of Illinois because of a strong northwest wind had so much augmented the rapidity of the current of this strait that it was as violent as that of Niagara.

"The wind turning southerly, we sailed again, and with the help of twelve men who hauled our ship from the shore, got safely the 23rd of August, into the Lake Huron."

By the upper lake and the lake of Illinois, Hennepin means Lake Superior and Lake Michigan.

The map made to accompany the "New Discovery" indicates approximately the general location of the Great Lakes and St. Clair river, but is on too small a scale to show any detail, except that the country lying west of St. Clair river is densely wooded.

LAHONTAN AND CADILLAC

Nine years later, in 1688, Louis, Baron de Lahontan came up the St. Clair river to take over from Duluth the charge of Fort St. Joseph, which had been built two years before on the site where Fort Gratiot was afterwards placed. He thus describes his journey: "September 6th we entered the strait of the Lake of Huron, where we met with a slack current of half a league in breadth that continued till we arrived in the Lake of St. Claire, which is twelve leagues in circumference. The 8th of the same month we steered on to the other end, from whence we had but six leagues to run against the stream till we arrived in the mouth of the Lake of Huron, where we landed on the 14th. You cannot imagine the pleasant prospect of this strait, and of the little lake, for their banks are covered with all sorts of wild fruit trees. 'Tis true the want of agriculture sinks the agreeableness of the fruit, but their plenty is very surprising. We spied no other animals on the shore but herds of harts and roebucks. And when we came to little islands we scoured them in order to oblige these beasts to cross over to the continent, upon which, they offering to swim over, were knocked on the head by our canoemen that were planted all round the islands."

About 1701 either Cadillac or some one connected with his establishment at what is now Detroit, but at that time was nameless, wrote so enthusiastic a description of this general locality that it is worth repeating: "Since the trade of war is not that of a writer, I cannot without rashness draw the portrait of a country so worthy of a better pen than mine; but since you have ordered me to give you an account of it, I will do so, telling you that Detroit is, probably, only a canal or a river of moderate breadth, and twenty-five leagues in length, according to my reckoning, lying north-northeast, and south-southwest about the 41st degree (of latitude), through which the sparkling and pellucid waters of Lakes Superior, Michigan and Huron (which are so many seas of sweet water) flow and glide away gently and with a moderate current into Lake Erie, into the Ontario or Frontenac, and go at last

to mingle in the River St. Lawrence with those of the ocean. The banks are so many vast meadows, where the freshness of these beautiful streams keep the grass always green. These same meadows are fringed with long and broad avenues of fruit trees, which have never felt the careful hand of the watchful gardener; and fruit trees, young and old, droop under the weight and multitude of their fruit, and bend their branches towards the fertile soil which has produced them. In this soil so fertile, the ambitious vine which has not yet wept under the knife of the industrious vine-dresser, forms a thick roof with its broad leaves and its heavy clusters over the head of whatever it twines round, which it often stifles by embracing it too closely. Under these vast avenues you may see assembling in hundreds the shy stag and the timid hind with the bounding roebuck, to pick up eagerly the apples and plums with which the ground is paved. It is there that the careful turkey hen calls back her numerous brood, and leads them to gather the grapes; it is there that their big cocks come to fill their broad and gluttonous crops. The golden pheasant, the quail, the partridge, the woodcock, the teeming turtle-dove, swarm in the woods and cover the open country, intersected and broken by groves of full-grown forest trees, which form a charming prospect, which of itself might sweeten the melancholy tedium of solitude. There the hand of the pitiless mower has never shorn the juicy grass on which bisons of enormous height and size fatten.

“The woods are of six kinds—walnut trees, white oaks, red, bastard ash, ivy, white wood trees and cottonwood trees. But these same trees are as straight as arrows, without knots, and almost without branches except near the top, and of enormous size and height. It is from thence that the fearless eagle looks steadily at the sun, seeing beneath him enough to glut his formidable claws.

“The fish there are fed and laved in sparkling and pellucid waters, and are none the less delicious for the bountiful supply (of them). There are such large numbers of swans that the rushes among which they are massed might be taken for lilies. The gabbling goose, the duck, the teal and the bustard are so common there that, in order to satisfy you of it, I will only make use of the expression of one of the savages, of whom I asked before I got there whether there was much game there. ‘There is so much,’ he told me, ‘that it only moves aside (long enough) to allow the boat to pass.’

“Can it be thought that a land in which nature has distributed everything in so complete a manner could refuse to the hand of a careful husbandman who breaks into its fertile depths the return which is expected of it?

“In a word, the climate is temperate, the air very pure; during the day there is a gentle wind, and at night the sky, which is always placid, diffuses sweet and cool influences, which cause us to enjoy the benignity of tranquil sleep.

“If its position is pleasing, it is no less important, for it opens or closes the approach to the most distant tribes which surround these vast sweet water seas.

“It is only the opponents of the truth who are the enemies of this

settlement, so essential to the increase of the glory of the king, to the spread of religion, and to the destruction of the throne of Baal."

GEOGRAPHER TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In 1778 Thomas Hutchins published "A Topographical Description of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina," which was intended to accompany and explain "A New Map of the Western Parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina." This map was $35\frac{1}{4} \times 42\frac{3}{4}$ inches and included not only the territory named in the title, but also part of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, Lake Erie and part of Lakes Huron and Michigan, with the peninsula between. In the preface to his "Description" he states that the lakes shown in his map were done from his own surveys made preceding and during the French and English war, and since that time in many reconnoitering tours which he had made between the years 1764 and 1775.

Thomas Hutchins, the only person ever having the right to the title of "Geographer to the United States of America," is generally credited with having devised the rectangular system of surveys of public lands, and it is certain that he was the first to put it in practice. His map gives the relative locations of Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair and Lake Huron with approximate accuracy. It is the first to show the different channels at the mouth of St. Clair river. There are three rivers emptying into the St. Clair from the west, one a short, unnamed stream representing Belle river, as opposite its mouth is a small island. A few miles above and evidently intended to represent Pine river is a stream named Riviere a Chines; a short distance above that is another small island, and a little south of the entrance of St. Clair river is a stream coming from the west of considerable length, called Riviere au Sapine, and three or four miles above its mouth is marked "Saw Mill." It seems probable that Hutchins had depended somewhat on his memory here. Riviere au Sapine means river of the pine, or pine lumber, and the mill indicated may be the Sinclair mill built about 1765 on Pine river or a mill said to have been built on Bunce Creek about 1740.

In the "Description," referring to this locality, Hutchins says: "The route from Lake St. Clair to Lake Huron is up a strait or river about 400 yards wide. This river derives itself from Lake Huron and at the distance of 33 miles loses itself in Lake St. Clair. It is in general rapid, but particularly so near its source, its channel and also that of Lake St. Clair are sufficiently deep for shipping of a very considerable burthen. This strait has several mouths, and the lands lying between them are fine meadows. The country on both sides of it for 15 miles has a very level appearance, but from thence to Lake Huron it is in many places broken and covered with white pines, oaks, maple, birch and beech."

DELISLE, POPPLE AND OTHERS

It was nearly a century after the Sanson map of 1650 before maps of this section began to show knowledge of details, such as the tribu-

tary streams running into the river and lake. A map by DeLisle, one of the most noted French geographers, issued in 1703, shows but one stream in St. Clair county, a river running into Lake Huron a short distance above the entrance to the St. Clair river, the small stream having its source near the southwest corner of the county, and a northeasterly course.

The English map of Popple of 1733 shows an unnamed river of considerable size, having an easterly course, and emptying into St. Clair river at about the mouth of Black river, while the map of D'Anville of 1746 shows three streams, one quite long, and toward the lower end of the county, named Belle Chasse, and two shorter ones unnamed above it. This map is evidently followed by the well known English map of Mitchell of 1755, which, however, shows but one stream, the long one bearing the name Belle Chase.

FIRST AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY

The first American geography, issued by Jedediah Morse in 1789, is probably indebted to Hutchins, but the maker of its map of the Northwest Territory, in which Michigan was then included, shows a fine independence in the way in which he distributes rivers and names in this locality. His map shows no rivers emptying into St. Clair river from the west, but between that river and Saginaw bay there are three streams called, respectively, Sawpine river, River a Chines and Belle Chase river. The first is evidently a transference from the Hutchins map of the Riviere au Sapine, and the last is from the Belle Chasse of D'Anville, but these names in their Americanized forms are meaningless.

It seems quite probable that the present name of Belle river is derived from Belle Chasse, or fine hunting, and that River a Chines, which has no meaning, was originally a mistake for River a Chênes, or river of oaks.

EMIGRANT'S DIRECTORY

In 1820 there was published in England a "View of the United States of America, Forming a Complete Emigrant's Directory," based upon the fullest reports then obtainable of the different parts of the country. It thus describes our county: "The straits of St. Clair are twenty-six miles long. The land on both sides is partly prairie, interspersed with strips of lofty woodland, consisting of oak, sugar maple, poplar, black walnut, hickory and white pine. Nature has here planted groves of the latter timber suitable for masts, boards and shingles, which is much increased in value by the scarcity of this excellent wood, since it can be transported to distant parts destitute of so very useful a material. In the straits there are several valuable islands and there is water sufficient for a twenty gun ship."

SCHOOLCRAFT ON THE ST. CLAIR REGION

In May, 1820, Henry R. Schoolcraft, who subsequently was for many years U. S. Indian agent in the Upper Peninsula, and a voluminous

and important writer upon Indian subjects, passed up the St. Clair river as a member of Governor Cass' expedition to the headwaters of the Mississippi. In his account of the journey, he says: "The principal tributary streams of St. Clair river are Belle river and Black river, both entering on the United States shore, the former at the distance of fourteen and the latter at the distance of two miles below Fort Gratiot. The banks of the River St. Clair are handsomely elevated and well wooded with maple, beach, oak and elm. Settlements continue for a considerable part of the way on the American shore and contribute very much to the effect of a district of river scenery, which is generally admired. The lands are rich and handsomely exposed to the sun. The river is broad and deep, with a gravelly shore and transparent water, and its surface is chequered with a number of the most beautiful islands. Indeed, the succession of interesting views had afforded us a continued theme of admiration and we can fully unite in the remark of Baron La Hontan, who passed this strait in 1688 'that it is difficult to imagine a more delightful prospect than is presented by this strait and the little Lake St. Clair.'"

It is obvious that Schoolcraft gave the name of Belle river to what was in fact Pine river, and he probably passed by the mouth of Belle river without observing it, owing to the angle at which it enters the St. Clair river. In going up the river, the party passed nine boats at anchor, because of head winds, and the amount of shipping attracted the travelers' attention. The wildest imagination possessed by any member of that party could not have conceived the number and size of the boats which would be met in a similar trip today, less than a century later.

“It is well known that vessels are subject to great difficulty and hindrance in their passage from the River St. Clair to Lake Huron, occasioned by the rapids at the mouth of the channel. Delays of 15 and 20 days are often occasioned, and it is not uncommon to see from 30 to 40 sail of vessels waiting at the mouth of Black river, for a strong wind sufficient to overcome the eddies and resistance of the current.

“The detention of vessels at the rapids is already a serious drawback upon, and injury to, the commerce of the lakes. If an estimate were to be made of the loss of time, and expense occasioned by it, even in the present limited condition of western commerce, it would be found to amount to a considerable sum. Suppose, for instance, such detention to average only two days upon the vessels now employed in the navigation of the lakes on the upward voyage, who does not see, that in the rapidly increasing commerce of that portion of the union, every day adds to the necessity of obviating the difficulty. By the construction of a ship canal from the lake to Black river above the rapids, it will be obviated effectually, and at the same time one of the finest and safest harbours in the world will be created at the foot of one of the largest and most important lakes in the chain of western waters.”*

The map accompanying the pamphlet is divided into two parts, one intended to show the location of Huron with respect to the lakes, Canada and the east, the other the town of Huron and the canal which was to be an important feature in the town's prosperity. This map also shows the town of Port Huron or Butler's plat of land owned by the same proprietors near the mouth of Black river.

Strange to say, these facts and arguments failed to produce the desired result, which was no doubt affected by the panic and financial depression of 1837. In 1841, realizing that their plat was under the conditions ridiculously large, the proprietors, by George White, their agent, filed a petition in the court to amend their plat by vacating all north of Superior avenue. The reasons given for this action were that all that part proposed to be vacated was a wilderness; there had been but one lot sold (which was a lot at the corner of the Lake Shore road and Holland road, sold to Holland); that it was not then and never would be needed for village purposes. The same petition prayed for a small amendment in what is known as Butler's plat.

The court granted the petition, and thereupon a new plat was made and filed, by which a small part of the original town of Huron was left divided into lots of 25 feet frontage and called the village of Fort Gratiot, and the remainder divided into tracts of varying size from five to fifty acres, which were numbered and called outlots of the McNeil tract. As very few of either the village or outlots were sold by the company, they were in 1841 divided among the proprietors in proportion to their interests.

There had been a postoffice established at the light house in December, 1826, with the name Fort Gratiot, and with George McDougall.

*The city of Port Huron is expending upwards of \$150,000 upon the construction of a canal from Lake Huron to Black river, merely to put a supply of pure lake water into the river. These promoters projected their canal for a purpose entirely different: it was to have a lock near Black river, and it was expected the head would be sufficient to furnish a considerable amount of power.

Finally the name of Memphis, from the Egyptian city, was suggested and adopted and in December, 1848, the postoffice was established with that name, and Henry Rix as postmaster.

A fine farming country surrounded the settlement and it gradually grew in size, but it was not until 1865 that need was felt for incorporation under the state laws. The larger part of the settlement lay in Macomb county, and the act of the legislature approved March 9, 1865, authorized the legal voters of the village of Memphis to organize under the general law relating to villages. This left the boundaries uncertain, but by another act approved March 14, 1879, the village of Memphis was incorporated to include within its limits the south half of section 35 in Riley township, together with land in section 2 of Richmond township.

Presidents: 1865-6, Sherman S. Eaton; 1867, W. P. Russell; 1868, R. B. King; 1869, Lewis Granger; 1870-1, Augustus M. Hodges; 1872, Hiram Burk; 1873-4, Sherman S. Eaton; 1875-6, George L. Perkins; 1877, Francis E. Spencer; 1878-9, Sherman S. Eaton; 1880-1, Joseph H. Dutton; 1884, David C. Coburn; 1886, Charles Conat; 1887-9, Constant Simmons; 1890, Eugene A. Bartlett; 1891-2, S. G. Taylor; 1893, David C. Coburn; 1894, Merritt Sperry; 1895, Joseph Stevenson; 1896-9, Nathan Jarvis; 1900, Frank W. Hause; 1901-2, Peter Cantine; 1903, M. H. Sperry; 1904, Frank Church; 1905, Peter Cantine; 1906-8, George Waters; 1909, Frank J. Lee; 1910-11, Henry Maurer.

NEW BALTIMORE

In 1845 Alfred Ashley and Euphemia A. Ashley, his wife, bought land in the southeastern part of Chesterfield township, Macomb county, extending over the county line so as to include a small corner in the southwestern part of Ira township, St. Clair county, and in 1851 laid out the village of Ashley, which subsequently became New Baltimore, and a postoffice was established under the latter term and when, in 1867, a village was incorporated, the postoffice name was adopted as the name of the village.

On March 17, 1869, an act was approved continuing in effect the act of March 23, 1867, chartering the village of New Baltimore, and providing that all that tract of country, including the docks, wharves, storehouses, and waters within the following boundaries: Commencing at the east end of the east and west quarter line of section 12, in township 3 north, of range 14 east, in the county of Macomb; thence west on said quarter line, and in the line of the so-called Lake School district, to the northeast corner of the eighty acre piece or lot of land recently owned by Dennis Furton, situate in said section 12; thence southerly to the southeast corner of the said lot of land; thence west on the south line of said Furton lot of land to the so-called ridge road; thence southerly by said ridge road to the so-called Salt river road; thence southwesterly by said Salt river road, to the north corner of private claim 343; thence southwesterly and southeasterly on the line of said private claim, to where it intersects the section line between fractional sections 13 and 14, in aforesaid township; thence south on line between said sections 13