

Jacques Largillier: Merchant, Then Missionary

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In 1985, the editor of the American Heritage Magazine asked a group of prominent writers to describe the point in history they would most like to have witnessed. Novelist Walter D. Edmonds, author of *Drums Along the Mohawk* chose May 18, 1675, the day that Father Marquette, the missionary-explorer, died before his 38th birthday. Here's what Edmonds wrote:

"When he died, one of the men whispered the names of Jesus and Mary in his ear, as he had asked. The other rang a bell. I wish I had been there to hear those small and lonely notes. They marked the end of the most spiritual and down-to-earth of all Jesuits missionaries, and also the end of simplicity and faith that were not to be reborn in America..."-1-

It was a momentous event for novelist Walter D. Edmonds. It was an even greater memory for a companion of Father Marquette, Jacques Largillier. The illness of Father Marquette was typhoid, according to the testimony of Dr. Maximillian Fox of Milwaukee, an expert whom historian Father Joseph Donnelly consulted while researching the life of the great Blackrobe. One of Marquette's two French companions, Jacques Largillier, was ill too. But he helped his comrade Pierre Porteret dig a grave for the priest and cover the remains. By the time they finished the grave, Jacques himself grew worse. He sat beside the grave and, in a stupor, reached over and grabbed a pinch of the dirt from the mound, swallowed it, and stood up cured.-2- That "miracle" changed the direction of his life.

Who was this Jacques Largillier, and what did he do with the years left to him? Historians Father Joseph Donnelly and Dr. Charles Balesi mention him. The Jesuit Relations recall his work. His listing appears in *The Genealogical Dictionary of the Families of Quebec, from its Origin to 1730*. It reads: "Largillier, Jacques, perhaps from Qwierzy, in the Department of Laon, Picardy, the modern department of the Aisne. He was born around 1634."-3- Largillier followed an uncle, Raymond Page, to New France before 1664 and became a merchant. On April 20, 1666, he is cited in a contract with Adrien Jolliet and Denis Guyon to "take a journey to the Ottawa." In 1669 he again set out for the "Upper Country," probably with Jean Peré and Adrien Jolliet, who were sent by the Intendant Jean Talon, a man of great vision, to search for copper. Father Claude Allouez in the Great Lakes country had brought to the attention of the authorities the fact that

copper abounded in the west. When St. Lusson took formal possession of the midcontinent at Sault Ste. Marie in 1671, in the name of Louis XIV, Largillier was there with his fellow merchant-trader Louis Jolliet and twelve laymen, as well as two Jesuits, Claude Dablon and Claude Allouez.

In the meantime, Count Frontenac had come to New France as Governor. Talon urged the new governor to send an expedition in search of the great river of the midcontinent, to see if it flowed to the Pacific. He chose Louis Jolliet as leader. Always in the back of the minds of explorers lay the vision of the rich trade with China. Father Claude Dablon, the Jesuit superior, designated as chaplain to travel with the merchant-explorers a young Jesuit missionary, Jacques Marquette, son of a lawyer in Laon, a priest of virtue and zeal. The team of merchants gathered at the Strait in 1763.

Of the seven members of the partnership whom Jolliet recruited for the expedition, four among them, including Jacques Largillier, had already been with either Adrien or Louis Jolliet in other ventures. Jolliet considered Largillier "an excellent canoeman." His associates called him "The Beaver."

In the canoes were seven men: three partners of Jolliet, two hired men, Father Marquette, and Louis Jolliet. They paddled down the west shore of Lake Michigan in two canoes. They went up to Green Bay and the Fox River, to Lake Winnebago and the portage to the Wisconsin. On June 17, one month after leaving Mackinac, they reached the Mississippi.

The explorers paddled downstream to the mouth of the Arkansas River, then turned back. They went up the Illinois River, through the lands of the Illinois Confederation. They counted more than forty villages, the majority consisting of sixty to eighty cabins, some of as many as three hundred. This was a village of the Peoria where Marquette founded the first parish in Illinois. He called it the Mission of the Immaculate Conception, as he had called the Mississippi the "River of the Immaculate Conception." Before the Frenchmen left, the missionary promised to return and teach the people about the Great Spirit.

From the headwaters of the Illinois River, the travelers portaged to the Chicago River. Going up the west shore of Lake Michigan, they reached the mission of St. Francis Xavier on Green Bay in the fall.

Father Marquette spent the next year at this mission. Presumably Largillier settled the accounts of the expedition; Jolliet wrote two copies of his journal: one, sadly, was burnt in a cabin fire provoked by Sioux Indians at Sault Ste. Marie; the other, unfortunately, was lost in the Racine rapids, above Montreal. That left Father Marquette's journal the only surviving account of the trip.

The journal of Father Marquette was not a day-by-day diary of the discovery and exploration of the Mississippi. Rather, it was a narrative of the voyage put

together after the event by the Jesuit Superior, Father Claude Dablon, from the interviews, dedication, Jolliet's map, and Father Marquette's maps and notes. Jesuit historian Jean De Langlez drew this conclusion from the facts at hand.

The travelers presumably met a group of Illini on the west bank of the river in present-day Iowa. Father Marquette accepted their invitation to return and teach them about the Great Spirit. After a year, Father Marquette planned to return to the people of Illinois. In 1674, Jacques Largillier, now a Jesuit volunteer, or *donné*, and Pierre Porteret accompanied the priest. They left the mission of St. Ignace during the last days of October, late in the year, for a long canoe trip on the waters of Lake Michigan. They traveled in the company of 50 Illinois and Pottawatomi Indians, manning a flotilla of nine canoes. The weather was poor; stormy conditions on the lake most of November often limited their daily progress to no more than five miles. On December 4, forty days after they left, they reached the mouth of the Chicago River. Marquette had maintained a positive outlook all along, as he showed in his journal. After several days in waiting at the Chicago portage for an improvement of the weather, it became clear that Father Marquette's failing health would prevent them from traveling the remaining 60 miles to the Illinois town.

On December 14, they moved to a spot between the Chicago and the Des Plaines Rivers, four miles inland from the lake, and decided to winter there. It was a hard winter. Father Marquette was in poor health, and often he could not say daily Mass. They remained close to the hut they built for shelter. During one of the short shooting trips around the area, however, Largillier learned about another Frenchman wintering in the area. A message was relayed to him, and soon Pierre Moreau, known as "The Mole," accompanied by his partner, remembered only by his nickname of La Barbière, appeared at the hut. They had traveled some 50 miles to bring blueberries and corn to Father Marquette.

In March, Father Marquette, Pierre Porteret, and Jacques Largillier resumed their trip down the Des Plaines River, and on down the Illinois. On April 10, 1765, they arrived at a village of the Illinois and were welcomed warmly. The Illini, a vigorous, populous Algonquin people, formed a loose confederation of Cahokia, Peoria, Tamaroa, Michigamea, Moingwena, and Kaskaskia. They lived in an amazingly fertile land, with game plentiful and crops fruitful. The weather was mild, without the cold of northern Wisconsin or the humidity of places along the Gulf. They crossed the Mississippi in pirogues of hollowed logs, not birch-bark canoes, to hunt buffalo in what is now Iowa. They harvested corn in August or early September.

Powerful and hostile neighbors harassed them: Iroquois from the east, Shawnee and Chickasaw from the South, Osage from the West, Fox and Kickapoo on the north, and Sioux to the northwest. Not for military glory, but to protect their village and families, they tightened their bowstrings. Marquette counted 500 to 600 families living in the village, including about 1,500 men, whom he began to

evangelize immediately. On April 14, Marquette celebrated Easter Mass with all of the solemnity he could muster. Soon he again fell ill and felt that he had to return home to his mission in the north. Once again, a large group of Illinois warriors accompanied the Frenchmen part of the way. They took a different route, using the portage between the Kankakee and the St. Joseph Rivers, a carrying place of between four and five miles, near what is now South Bend, Indiana. La Salle would use this same portage seven years later. By mid-May, Father Marquette was so ill that he was unable to go much farther.

As we understood at the beginning of this account, before they reached St. Ignace, Marquette died and Jacques Largillier was cured dramatically. Largillier then returned to the Straits and visited Father Henri Nouvel, who had succeeded Father Claude Dablon as superior of the Western Jesuit Missions. Jacques asked for acceptance into the Jesuits as a coadjutor brother. He did not wish to wear the Black Robe, but to keep his voyager's clothes and return to the Illinois mission. He had previously been a *donné*, or Jesuit Volunteer as we call them today. Now, at the age of forty, he took his vows as a member of the Order. He was destined to work for forty more years in Christianizing the Indians.

What was the work that Brother Largillier did on the missions? We would presume that he was competent to put his hand to everything of an outdoor nature. The fact that he was called "The Beaver" would indicate activity along practical lines. While he could not say Mass or distribute the sacraments, except Baptism in time of emergency, he could instruct the Indians, young and old, care for the sick, build living quarters, take care of the church and missionaries' cabins, cultivate the soil, and hunt and fish to provide food for the mission. In general, a Jesuit brother was a jack-of-all-trades.

In October of 1676, Father Claude Allouez, who had been in the Illinois country before Father Marquette came through, returned to the Kaskaskia mission. Presumably, Brother Largillier went with him. Father Allouez remained active among the Kaskaskias, the Peorias, and the Miamis for the next twelve years, until his death.

An equally zealous and energetic missionary, Father Jacques Gravier, succeeded Father Allouez in 1689. The Kaskaskia Indians moved father south about 50 miles down the Illinois River to Lake Pimitoui, later also known as Lake Peoria. When Father Gravier was wounded in the wrist by an arrow from a disgruntled Peoria chief, his helpers were kind but limited in their skill of medicine. The swelling grew more painful. Brother Jacques and other Frenchmen urged him to go to Mobile, as Father Jean Mermet stated in his circular letter to the Jesuits in Canada.⁻⁴⁻ Father Gravier went to Mobile, and on to France. He never fully recovered the full use of his arm, but returned to New France.

In the meantime, the Le Moyne brothers, Iberville and Bienville, were laying the foundation for the French Empire in the Gulf area. The Kaskaskia planned to abandon their village and move to Louisiana to escape the warlike Fox. From the east, the Iroquois, too, were a constant threat. In September 1700, under Chief Rouensa, the Kaskaskia left. Father Gravier, Father Gabriel Marest, and Brother Largillier went along. Father Gravier recommended a halt when they reached the Tamaroa village directly across from the future site of St. Louis.

The Kaskaskias found three different tribes of the Illinois confederacy there - the Tamaroas, the Cahokias, and the Michigameas. The latter tribe located principally 50 miles further south on the Michigamea, later to be known as the Kaskaskia River. Rouensa moved his tribe across the river, five miles farther south on the bank of the River Des Peres, near where it empties into the Mississippi River. In this move, Jacques Largillier became one of the earliest Caucasian residents of the St. Louis area, 64 years before Pierre Laclede set up his trading post and Margaret Blondeau Guion moved across the river to be with her husband and became the first woman to settle in St. Louis, in the spring of 1764.

The Tamaroas crossed the river to join the Kaskaskias, and they remained there for two and a half years. Another Jesuit, Father Francois Pinet, joined them. Several times they thought of missionizing tribes up the Missouri River toward the land of the Sioux. In April of 1703, the Kaskaskias moved south, where they established their village on the west bank of the Michigamea, at a point where the smaller river approached within two miles of the Mississippi. This event is duly recorded in the baptismal record. "On April 25, 1703, we arrived on the bank of the river called Michigamea." -5-

In a letter dated March 6, 1707, Father Gravier testified that, of the total population of 2,200, only 40 or 50 were not Christian. Many of the Frenchmen who had settled in Kaskaskia had married Indian women, as is evident from entries in the baptismal record of the time. Of the infants that were baptized between the years 1701 and 1713, eighty percent are reported as having a French father and an Indian mother. Most of the Indians gathered three times a day in the large church - for Holy Mass in the morning - In the afternoon for catechetical instruction; and in the evening for prayers and hymns. The program seemed patterned after that of the villages surrounding medieval monasteries, followed by the great Southwestern missionary, Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino in Sonora, and also southern Arizona at the same time. The missionaries made their daily rounds of the village, visiting the sick and consoling the sorrowful. -6-

On February 23, 1708 Father Gravier reported in his letter on Affairs in Louisiana, that the mission needed someone to take the place of Brother Jacques, who had served so well but was ill and had received Viaticum. Apparently, Jacques abstained from meat during the entire Lenten season. Father Gravier

urged him to eat more substantial meals. Whether he indulged in more buffalo or elk steaks we cannot say, but he did live six more years.-7-

Largillier was still active until the great epidemic of the summer of 1714, that carried off several hundred persons, including both the missionary in charge, Gabriel Marest, who died on September 14, 1714, and Brother Largillier, who died on November 4, 1714. A letter of another missionary, Father Jean Mermet, tells of these sad events. He described Largillier as a "virtuous man" who had spent nearly 50 years in the western missions, and who had asked to live in secular garb for greater service to the missions.-8-

In identifying him as a "virtuous" man, Father Mermet said much. A virtuous man practices great qualities - faith, honesty, integrity, patience, tolerance, prudence, and charity. Largillier showed concern for Father Gravier's serious wound in the wrist. He went, of his own free will, to the Illinois village with Father Marquette, even before his miraculous cure. Then he dedicated the remainder of his life to bringing the light and hope of the Christian message to the early people of Illinois.

He had lived to see Marquette's dream come true, that Christianity had come to the people of Illinois, and that the people of Illinois showed themselves as good as the saintly Father Marquette had said they were. He deserves a place in our memory.

Footnotes

-1- *American Heritage*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Dec. 1974, p. 27.

-2- Rochemonteix Camile de les Jesuites et La Nouvelle France au XVIII Siecle, 3 vols., Vol. 3, p. 612.

-3- Rene Jette, *The Genealogical Dictionary of the Families of Quebec from its Origin to 1730*. Charles J. Balesi, in *The Time of the French in the Heart of North America, 1673-1818*, Chicago, 1992, page 14 and 27; and Joseph Donnelly, *Jacques Marquette: 1637-1675*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 201, 326, 246, 253-54, spell the name "Largillier."

-4- *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 66, p. 63. The *Relations* spells his name "L'Argilier." We prefer the more ordinary spelling, as used by Balesi and Donnelly.

-5- *Record of Kaskaskia Baptisms*, 25 April 1703.

-6- *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 66, p. 128.

-7- Ibid., Vol. 66, p. 125.

-8- Ibid., Vol. 71, p. 231, letter of Jean Mermet.