



## The French in Illinois

### Father Claude Allouez

In 1671 a ceremony was held at a **Chippewa** village near Sault Saint Marie, in what would later be the state of Michigan. Father Claude Allouez, a French **missionary**, claimed all of the middle of North America for his king, Louis XIV. The French priest really did not know how vast an area he had claimed in the name of

France. At the ceremony, he learned of a great river that was thought to flow all the way across the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

Men were needed to explore this river and to search for a trade route that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

On an earlier journey to Lake Superior, Father Allouez was among the first Europeans to meet with members of the **Illiniwek Confederation** who had traveled hundreds of miles north from their homes to trade furs for guns. The Illiniwek wanted firearms to fight other Indians, especially the **Iroquois Confederation**, who were

### Glossary

**Chippewa**—a northern Indian tribe

**missionary**—a person who persuades other people to join their religious group

**Illiniwek Confederation**—a group of tribes, also known as the Illini, who lived in Illinois

**Iroquois Confederation**—a group of tribes from the eastern woodlands



French traders and their American Indian trading partners exchanging European goods for furs. Decorative detail from map of the inhabited part of Canada, for the French surveys engraved by William Faden, 1777. Courtesy Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division (G1105.F22 1777).

## Glossary

**Algonquin**—a language shared by many of the native peoples of central North America

**Calumet**—a very special tobacco pipe used by the Illiniwek in ceremonies

**Catlinite**—a kind of red stone

**logbook**—diary, journal, or daily written record

pushing west into their lands. The French planned to control the middle of North America and wanted to have a strong relationship with the native peoples in that area. Father Allouez took steps to make a link with the Illiniwek, even though he had difficulty understanding their form of the **Algonquin** language. He learned enough to realize that the Illiniwek were under attack from the Iroquois and others.

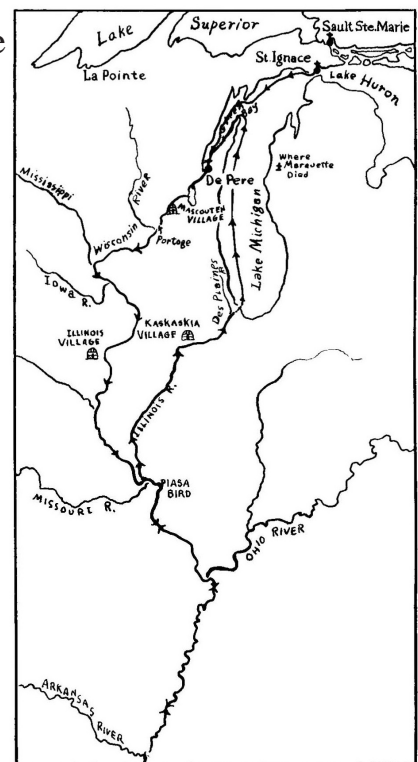
Besides learning the language, Father Allouez observed and recorded what he saw of the culture and daily life of the native peoples he encountered. One of his observations dealt with a ceremony involving a **calumet**. The calumet was a feather-decorated tobacco pipe with a wooden stem and a bowl carved from a red stone called **Catlinite**. Allouez described in his journal a dance performed by the Illini men. In this dance the men would act as if they were fighting an enemy, passing the pipe from dancer to dancer until it was handed to the leader of the group. This calumet dance would be seen again when the French traveled south to the Illiniwek homelands.

## Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette

The French governor chose to send two men to lead an exploring party into the new French lands. One man was Louis Jolliet, a French explorer and expert mapmaker. The other was a Catholic priest and missionary, Father Jacques Marquette. They started their historic journey in Mackinac, Canada by first paddling their canoes across Lake Michigan to present-day Wisconsin, and then they continued down the Wisconsin River.

The explorers entered the Mississippi River on June 17, 1673, and headed their canoes south. These explorers were the first Europeans to see the land now called Illinois. Their handwritten **logbooks**,

Route traveled by Marquette and Jolliet. Courtesy, *Stories from Illinois History*, Illinois State Historical Library.



## Glossary

**journal**—diary, log-book, or daily written record

**confluence**—coming together

**pictograph**—a drawing used to represent a word or idea

**Piasa Bird**—a creature of legend; a pictograph seen and recorded by Father Marquette

Jolliet and Marquette meeting with native people on their travels. Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

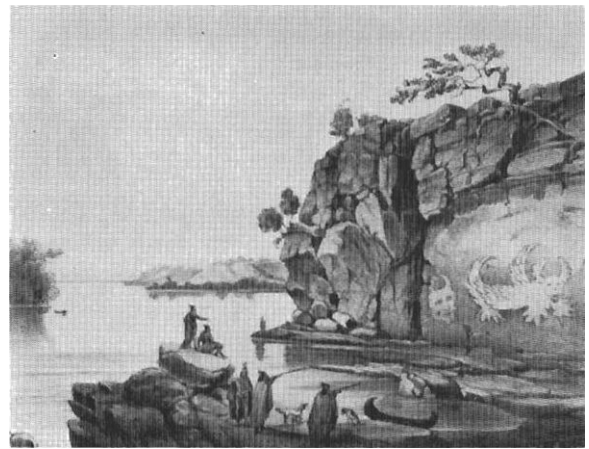


in which they recorded their observations, maps, and lists of plants and animals, marked the beginning of recorded history in Illinois. As they canoed down the Mississippi, they saw human footprints on the muddy banks near the Des Moines River and decided to see where they led. Marquette

wrote in his **journal** that they followed a narrow path and soon came upon a village. The Frenchmen were invited into the village where they smoked from a calumet and enjoyed this successful first meeting with the native people of Illinois.

Jolliet and Marquette continued down the river and passed the **confluence** of the Illinois and Missouri Rivers. At one spot above them on the limestone bluffs, they saw an image which Marquette described as having a human head, a lion's beard, deer antlers, and a long tail like a fish. A reconstruction of this **pictograph**, called the **Piasa Bird**, can be seen today near Alton, Illinois, where the original is believed to have been located.

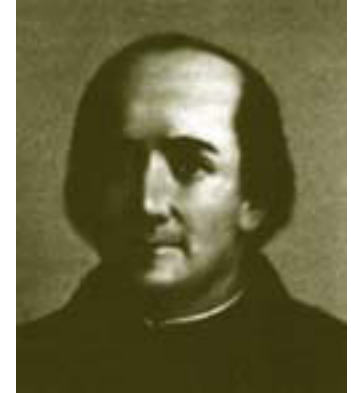
The explorers paddled beyond the point where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi and continued south, still hoping to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. They stopped their journey near the Arkansas River. At that point, after talking with native people, they concluded that the Mississippi emptied into the Gulf of Mexico and not into the Pacific Ocean. Knowing this, plus



Piasa Bird sketched in 1846. Courtesy, *Stories from Illinois History*, Illinois State Historical Library.

being concerned about entering Spanish-held lands and meeting unfriendly southern Indians, Jolliet and Marquette turned their canoes around and headed back north.

On the return journey, they paddled up the Illinois River and the DesPlaines River to reach Lake Michigan. While traveling north through the middle of present-day Illinois, the explorers were impressed by the remarkable prairie lands, a sight like none they had ever seen before. While on the Illinois River, Jolliet and Marquette came upon the Grand Village of the Illiniwek Confederation. Later Father Marquette returned to the Grand Village to live with the Illiniwek and planned to **convert** them to Christianity. He was with them only a short time before he fell ill. He died on the way back to the **mission** at Mackinac. Louis Jolliet, Marquette's companion on the great journey, went back to Canada and never returned to Illinois.



Father Marquette.  
Courtesy Abraham  
Lincoln Presidential  
Library.

## Glossary

**convert**—change to another religion

**mission**—a religious settlement

**Sieur de la Salle - sieur**—a French lord or knight, so this means “Lord of La Salle”

**woodsman**—a man who lives and works in the woods

**colony**—a territory under the control of another nation

**New World**—North and South America

## LaSalle and Tonti

Jolliet and Marquette opened the door to the Illinois country for other adventurers, including Rene-Robert Cavelier, **Sieur de La Salle**. La Salle was an excellent **woodsman** who dreamed of establishing a profitable fur trade and a French **colony** in the **New World**. In Europe, La Salle became partners with an Italian soldier named Henri de Tonti. Tonti had lost a hand in battle and wore an iron hook in its place. They left Europe and came to Illinois. There Tonti helped La Salle run his fur-trading business. His hook made him look very fierce to the native peoples he met. La Salle and Tonti also built forts along the Illinois River to control the trade in the region and to make friends with the native peoples. Fort Crevecoeur was the first French trading center that they built near the present-day city of Peoria on the Illinois River. La Salle then led an exploring party down the Mississippi River all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. He claimed all the land on both sides of the river for France. He called the territory *Louisiana* to honor his king, Louis XIV. La Salle and Tonti went on to build Fort St. Louis at Starved Rock,

north of Peoria. They also succeeded in paving the way for future settlers and traders in Illinois.

## The End of French Control

French Country mapped by Guillaume Delisle, in 1718. Courtesy Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University Library.



Many French men and women who crossed the Atlantic Ocean came to settle in the Illinois country of New France. In the early 1700s French traders, farmers, and missionaries relocated in southwestern Illinois. The Kaskasia Indians abandoned their central Illinois villages and moved south into this same area, joining the tribes of the Illiniwek Confederation, in order

to be nearer the protection of the French government. The French villages and military outposts gave them some protection from their enemies among the other tribes.

This area, with settlements for both the French and the native peoples, was called the *American Bottom*. It was given this name because it was in a location near the point where the Mississippi

and Illinois Rivers come together. The French settlements of Kaskaskia (founded 1703), Cahokia (1699), Prairie du Rocher (1732), and Chartres (1719) were all located in the American Bottom. Fort de Chartres was built in 1720. The first wooden fort was destroyed in a flood and then replaced by one built of stone. Although it was never involved in any battle, it did provide security for those living in the area.

The French settlers in the American Bottom were given land for farming and raising livestock. They farmed in large fields that were divided into long strips of land. Each strip was assigned to a different farmer. These strips were located next to each other and were surrounded by a fence. This meant that the field was held “in common.” Members of the village worked

## Glossary

***pirogue***—a kind of canoe used by the French in North America

***Black Code***—a set of French laws governing the treatment of slaves in the American Bottom

***French and Indian War***—the war between France and Great Britain, with help on both sides from different Indian tribes; they fought for nine years for control of colonies in the New World

***Union Jack***—nickname for the British flag

side by side in the fields and in constructing the fences. Their main crop was wheat. In the winter the villagers kept their animals together inside the fenced area where the livestock grazed on the remains of the crops. The main source of business for these settlers was trading food and furs in New Orleans, located at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Large boats, called ***pirogues***, carried the goods down river.

Many of the French in the American Bottom owned slaves. The slaves helped with clearing the land and farming. The French did have laws, called the ***Black Code***, which said that slave families with children could not be separated. It also stated that slaves had to be given enough food and clothing, and that they had to receive instruction in the Roman Catholic Church. Sick or old slaves had to be given care. Most importantly, under the Black Code, slaves could earn money and even buy their freedom.

After a time, the French found that it was too hard and cost too much to control such a large expanse of land. After losing the ***French and Indian War***, the French were forced to surrender the Illinois country to the British. The French flag was lowered for the last time at Fort de Chartres on October 10, 1765 and the ***Union Jack*** was raised to show that the British had taken control of the Illinois country.



Written by Peter C. Harbison,  
Illinois Historic  
Preservation Agency  
Edited by Laura Reyman  
© Education Services, Illinois  
Historic  
Preservation Agency  
WebMaster: Karen E. Everingham

The British Occupy Fort Chartres, October 10, 1765. Artist Robert Thom. Courtesy Illinois State Historical Society.