FORT BEAUHARNOIS

The erection of a permanent post among the Sioux Indians had been a favorite project of the French in North America from the days of the first discoveries in the West. Such a post was designed not only to secure an alliance with one of the most powerful western tribes, dwelling in one of the richest fur countries on the continent, but also to serve as a link in the chain of discovery by which the French hoped to cross the continent and open a land route to the western ocean. It must be remembered that no one at that time realized the great width of the continent, and there was always the hope that a route would be found, largely by waterways, which would lead as easily to the western ocean as the route by the Great Lakes furnished access to the interior.

When Du Luth in 1679 made his epoch-making journey to the home of the Sioux on Mille Lacs, he expected to push thence westward across the continent to the salt water described to him by his envoys among the western branches of the Siouan people. He was making preparation the next year to pursue his discoveries in that direction, when the misfortunes that befell La Salle's party caused a complete reversal of his plan and turned his face eastward instead of westward. Had La Salle honestly kept to the terms of his concession and had he not surreptitiously attempted to tap the great beaver-bearing lands of the Sioux, expressly against the prohibition of the court, who knows what Du Luth might have accomplished in the latter years of the seventeenth century?

Then came Perrot, the practical, the diplomat in Indian dealings, who in 1686 — after a winter at Trempealeau — built Fort St. Antoine on the northeast bank of Lake Pepin, and there carried on an advantageous trade with the Sioux. It was Perrot who formed the alliance between the Sioux and the French and who took possession on May 8, 1689, for France

of all the Sioux territory about the headwaters of the Mississippi. Le Sueur, who was present at the last-named ceremony, and who was very popular among the tribesmen, cemented the alliance by escorting in 1695 the first Sioux chief and chieftess to the colony, introducing them to the great Onontio, Count de Frontenac, governor of all New France. Le Sueur also secured a concession to search for mines, and in 1700 mounted the Mississippi in a sailboat and built the first French post in the interior of Minnesota.

The founding of Louisiana and the occupation of the lower Mississippi Valley in the early years of the eighteenth century gave an additional impetus to western discovery. Posts were built about Lake Superior, the northwesternmost of these being intended as a base for a far western push. To obtain accurate and definite information of possibilities for westward discovery and to ascertain the best routes thither, the regent, the Duc d'Orleans, sent in 1720 a special envoy to North America; and that his mission might not be made the subject of heedless gossip, it was disguised as a visitation of the French missions of the interior. The ecclesiastic chosen for this examination was a discreet and able Jesuit, Pierre François Xavier Charlevoix.

Father Charlevoix left Montreal early in May, 1721, and with a retinue of *voyageurs* in two canoes made the journey around the lower lakes and reached Mackinac on June 28. Here he met Sieur de Montigny, who was about setting out for his new post at the far end of the Bay of the Winnebago (Green Bay). There the regent's envoy might hope to learn much of the great Sioux country to which Montigny's new post was the entrance. At La Baye, Charlevoix was fortunate enough to meet a delegation of the Sioux, whom he questioned concerning their habitat and the possibility of traversing that country towards the west. The Sioux told him that some branches of their tribe traded with western tribesmen who lived on salt water, and Charlevoix took much encouragement from this report.

Upon his return he made a detailed report to the regent, recommending two routes for western exploration — one through the northwestern end of Lake Superior, one through the Sioux country, and as a preliminary for the latter he urged that a strong fort should be erected on the upper Mississippi and that the powerful tribe of the Sioux should be bound in firm alliance with the French. Matters of this kind moved deliberately in eighteenth-century New France. Recommendations approved in 1723 were not finally acted upon until 1727, but in that year elaborate preparations were made at Quebec and Montreal to occupy the region at the head of the Mississippi.

The chief reason for the delay in carrying out the recommendations of Charlevoix lay in the unsettled conditions of the region now known as Wisconsin, caused by the hostilities of the tribe called the Renards or Foxes. Since 1712 this fierce band of savages had been on the warpath against the French, had infested all the waterways and ambushed all the trading paths, had murdered many of France's red allies, and had even struck down many Frenchmen. In 1716 Captain Louvigny had led a war expedition along Green Bay and the Fox River, and had forced upon the Foxes a somewhat unstable peace, which remedied the situation but very little. In fact, Charlevoix on his voyage of 1721 had been obliged to take a longer route to the Mississippi than that by the Fox-Wisconsin waterway, because of the ravages of this tribe; and upon the Illinois River he saw ghastly evidences of their hostility to the Illinois Indians, France's faithful allies. In the course of this conflict the Foxes had succeeded in allying themselves with the Sioux at the headwaters of the Mississippi, and in procuring from them the promise of an asylum in the event of being driven from their homes in eastern Wisconsin. Thus an additional incentive to the erection of the post was the importance of detaching the Sioux from this alliance with the Foxes.

In order to reach the Sioux country, however, an expedition must pass through the territory of the rebel Foxes; therefore, Sieur de Lignery was sent to treat with this tribe and to make at least a temporary truce with them. Lignery, who was an old hand at Indian diplomacy, was successful in his efforts, and he arranged on June 7, 1726, that in the near future a further conference should be held either at Chicago or at *Le Rocher* on the Illinois River, in which the Illinois Indians and the commandant of French Illinois would participate. Trusting in the results of this truce the new governor of New France, Charles de la Boische, marquis de Beauharnois, gave orders to prepare the expedition for the Sioux country, in accordance with the instructions he had received on leaving France.

Beauharnois was by far the ablest governor France had sent to the New World since the time of Frontenac. He was reputed to be a natural son of Louis XIV, and he had all the dignity and love of ceremony that characterized that monarch. Moreover, he had remarkably good judgment and a grasp of administrative duties rare in the officials of New France. Under the Marquis de Beauharnois Canada had for a score of years a governorship unsurpassed in its colonial history. The time seemed ripe, therefore, for an expansion of colonial influence and for recommencing westward exploration.

The first step toward founding the proposed post among the Sioux was the formation of a commercial company to finance the undertaking. The colonial treasury was always impoverished; but the merchants of New France were eager to participate in opening the vast territory of the Siouan peoples, which had so great a reputation for rich furs. The contract made by the governor with this company is an interesting document from the administrative and economic points of view. The promoters were to have a complete monopoly of the trade of the Sioux country for three years, with a preference for future years. In return they agreed to build a " fort of stakes,

a chapel, a house for the commanding officer, and one for the missionaries." They were also to convey during the ensuing three years, free of cost, provisions and supplies for the commandant and his second in command as well as for the missionaries, the amount and weight of which were specifically stipulated; and they were to buy at Mackinac three or four extra canoes in order to transport these goods over the rapids and shallows of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. This contract, signed at Montreal on June 6, 1727, is preserved in the archives of the Chicago Historical Society.

With regard to the members of this trading company we have some interesting information. Jean Baptiste Boucher de Montbrun and his brother François were grandsons of Pierre Boucher, first historian of the colony of New France, ennobled by the king for his services. He had an immense estate at Boucherville, where he lived in patriarchal fashion, his nine sons and their children around him. The elder Boucher died ten years before the date of this contract, at the ripe age of ninety-seven. His seventh son, Jean, sieur de Montbrun, was the father of the two young adventurers who planned to undertake the fur trade on this farthest frontier. Of the other partners, the Garreaus and Campeaus seem to have come from Detroit; the rest are unknown, save Paul Marin, who became one of the most distinguished officers of the Northwest, but whose personality is somewhat shrouded in mystery. He had been for some years at Chequamegon Bay, where doubtless he had had some knowledge of the Sioux. He was later to end the Fox wars, and to make a fortune from his contact with the western tribesmen. Now, in mid-career, he visited the upper Mississippi probably for the first time.

The Sioux chiefs whom Charlevoix met at La Baye had intimated that they would welcome "black robe" missionaries in their villages; therefore it was determined to send two Jesuits to the new post as messengers of the gospel. Fathers de Gonnor and Guignas were chosen, the latter of whom be-

came the historian of the expedition, giving the details with a lively pen. Guignas joined the party at Mackinac, while the other missionary came out from Montreal. The governor asked from the king, in their behalf, a case of mathematical instruments including a six or seven-foot telescope, thus indicating that they were to take scientific observations, and determine the latitude, longitude, and perhaps the altitude of the new post.

For commandant the governor chose Réné Boucher, sieur de la Perrière, an uncle of the Montbruns, who not only belonged to this well-known family but was a distinguished officer in the colonial troops. La Perrière had seen service during the intercolonial wars and had the unenviable distinction of having led the French and Indian raid of 1708 which resulted in the sacking of Haverhill, Massachusetts. He had visited the Sioux country in 1715 as a preliminary to Louvigny's expedition against the Foxes; and he had been destined for the command at La Baye, but another officer had been preferred in his stead. Having been promoted to a captaincy the previous year, La Perrière was eager to serve once more in the far West; although the command was desired by him, he none the less found the hardships of the journey and of the winter so great that, now nearly sixty years of age and worn by previous services, he was unable to remain at his new post throughout the first year.

The expedition left Montreal on the sixteenth of June, when shy, early summer was abroad in this northern land. We do not certainly know its route, but in all probability the way was up the Ottawa River, with its numerous portages, across the Mattawan Portage to Georgian Bay, and thence to the fort at Mackinac, the emporium of the western country. Not quite five weeks were employed in this toilsome journey, which was a customary one for the *voyageurs* and all the personnel of the fur trade. Nine days were passed at Michilimackinac, buying new canoes, repacking goods, joining

in the social gayeties of the season, meeting old friends, and making new ones. The officers hoped an express would arrive from Montreal before their departure, but none came, and the first day of August they set forth from this northern post for their far journey to the Mississippi, strengthening themselves, writes Guignas, "against the pretended extreme difficulties of securing passage through the country of the Renards."

For a week the little flotilla crept along the north shore of Lake Michigan and the rock-bound coast of Green Bay, arriving on August 8 at the log fort known as La Baye, on the present site of the city of Green Bay. The commandant, François Amariton, received the travelers graciously and assured them that the way was open through the country of the Foxes. With but a brief delay, therefore, the expedition advanced along the lower Fox River, accompanied by Pierre Reaume, official interpreter at the Green Bay post, and Father Jean Chardon, its missionary, who took this opportunity to refresh himself by intercourse with his fellow Jesuits. On August 13, late in the evening, a group of Winnebago chiefs came into La Perrière's camp, bringing presents and offering peace calumets. The next day the French arrived at the Winnebago village on what is now known as Doty Island, a site occupied by this tribe for two centuries or more. Here they were welcomed with volleys of musketry and great demonstrations of joy.

Thence the French canoes crossed the northern end of Lake Winnebago, entered the upper Fox, and advanced to the first Renard village, where the Oshkosh suburb named Oakwood now stands. When their visitors arrived the Fox chiefs ran down to the banks with their peace calumets and quickly arranged for an informal council. At this council, Reaume and Father Chardon were of great use in placating "these cutthroats and assassins," and this interview with a tribe "so dreaded and really very little to be dreaded" was amicably

accomplished. The next morning the interpreter and missionary returned to Green Bay, and the officers, rejoicing greatly at having passed the village of the Fox rebels, set themselves to overcome the winding mazes of the stream, at this time in summer filled with tall reeds and wild-rice stalks. "Never was there a more tiresome voyage made than this. . . . We continued to grope our way, as it were, for a week; for we did not arrive until the [twenty] ninth, towards three o'clock in the afternoon, by pure chance (believing ourselves still far away) at the portage of the Ouisconsin." The portage quickly and safely crossed, they embarked upon the Wisconsin, "a shallow river upon a bed of shifting sand. . The shores are either bare and rugged mountains or low points with a foundation of sand." Early in September the little flotilla of canoes reached the Father of Waters, and began its ascent. The chronicler accurately describes the appearance of the Mississippi: "This beautiful river is spread out between two chains of high mountains, barren and very sterile, regularly distant from each other one league [*three miles*], three quarters of a league, or half a league, where it is narrowest. Its centre is occupied by a chain of islands well wooded, so that in looking at it from the top of the heights, one would imagine that one was looking at an endless valley watered on right and left by two immense rivers."

On September 17, just as the sun touched the zenith, Lake Pepin was reached, and the middle of the southern shore where a low point juts into the water was chosen for building. The woods were dense but offered excellent chance for firewood, by the use of which they were partly cleared by spring. "The day after landing," says our chronicler, "axes were applied to the trees and four days later the fort was entirely finished." What he means by the fort is apparent in the next sentence: "It is a plat of ground a hundred feet square surrounded by stakes twelve feet high with two good bastions." Within this staked enclosure were the commandant's and mis-

sionaries' houses and the chapel, respectively thirty by sixteen feet, thirty-eight by sixteen, and twenty-five by sixteen. Outside the fort each man built for himself a house, and these with the blacksmith's shop and a warehouse for goods formed a considerable village. By the close of October all was snugly finished and one might have seen from any neighboring height the little cluster of huts sending up through wattled chimneys tall columns of smoke into the surrounding forest.

It is not hard to picture this group of thirty to forty persons, most of them accustomed to the life of the woods, making all secure and snug for the long hard winter, which they knew would soon be upon them. Before shutting themselves in their inclosures, however, they had a great hunting excursion in the neighboring woods, but were disappointed in not finding such vast herds of deer as they had heard described. The lack of meat was supplied by the friendly Sioux, a band of whom, consisting of four or five hundred, had hastened to the place and pitched their tepees within sight of the fort, watching with wondering eyes all that these strange white men were doing. Their wonder and astonishment grew into awe and terror on November 14, when a celebration in honor of Marquis de Beauharnois was held. The little wilderness post had been christened in his honor, and on November 4, the day of his patron St. Charles, the missionaries said high mass for him in the morning. In the evening the jollification was to occur; the weather not being propitious, the celebration was postponed until the fourteenth, when "some very fine rockets" were sent aloft amidst the *vivas* for the king and the governor. When the simple tribesmen saw the stars falling from the rockets, the women and children fled in alarm to the surrounding forests, while the men besought the French to stop this dreadful "medicine," which made the very stars fall from the skies.

By this and other means, the visitors acquired a great reputation in this primitive world. The tepees of the redmen soon disappeared, however, as it was time for the winter hunts, and

save for a few stragglers and one band, which came in February, no customers appeared for the traders' goods until rather late in the spring.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of this log village in the primeval wilderness settled down to a long test of endurance during the cold season; but accustomed as most of them were to the rigors of a Canadian winter, they were pleased to find the one on the upper Mississippi less severe; there was less snow than they expected and it had all disappeared by the end of March. Just as they were preparing to enjoy their liberation from the winter's confinement, however, a new misfortune occurred, for the river rose and inundated the point on which the buildings stood. The houses and the fort inclosure were filled to the depth of nearly three feet, and it was not until the end of April that the adventurers could reoccupy their "rather dilapidated" houses.

La Perrière found the flood, added to the cold of the winter season, seriously affecting his health, and so he was obliged to leave his command to his nephew, Pierre Boucherville, and with Father de Gonnor to take the long voyage to Canada. There he arrived so ill that he was not able to report to the governor, who drew from the missionary the facts about conditions in the Northwest. These facts were of vital concern to Beauharnois, for the Foxes had broken their truce, had massacred both French soldiers and Indian allies in the Illinois country, and he was determined utterly to destroy this rebellious tribe. Lignery was ordered to proceed against them, and elaborate plans were made for the second invasion of the Fox River Valley. Large numbers of soldiers and their officers came up from Montreal, among whom were some of the best-known youth of the colony, such as Pierre Vaudreuil, who was later to be its last French governor. From Mackinac the force advanced, sixteen hundred strong, a fourth of which were Frenchmen. But alas for their hopes; Lignery's approach could not be kept secret, the Foxes were warned, and after a toilsome march along the lower Fox River the expedition

reached the Fox villages only to find all the tribe had fled to the interior. "Lignery allows the Foxes to escape," was written by the minister upon the leader's report of the expedition. On his retreat Lignery burned the fort at Green Bay, and took off all the garrison.

Anxiety was great concerning the fate of the French traders and officers at Fort Beauharnois. With the woods swarming with angry fugitive Foxes, intent on wreaking vengeance on every white man, and with the Sioux former allies and friends of the Foxes, the situation on the upper Mississippi was critical. Lignery sent seven of his men overland to warn Boucherville that his post might soon be besieged. He paid two Menominee to guide his messengers, and they won safely through to the fort, where the garrison immediately recognized its danger. The Menominee sounded the Sioux at the Falls of St. Anthony and returned saying they had "Renard hearts." It only remained to escape as expeditiously as possible. On September 18, 1728, Boucherville laid the situation before his men, and all agreed that it would be impossible to hold the post. Lignery had suggested retreat by way of Lake Superior, but, taking into account the lateness of the season, Boucherville thought his best chance lay in running down the Mississippi to the Illinois.

The next day some of his men waited on him to state that they preferred to risk their lives to abandoning their goods. Despite the commandant's urging they insisted on remaining, and he reluctantly left them to their fate. Among these was Sieur de la Jémerais, who by his address was able to preserve himself and his companions and to "hold the fort" for another year.

Meanwhile Boucherville and his cousins the Montbruns, Father Guignas, and eight others took canoes on October 3, in the hazardous attempt to pass the hostiles unobserved. This they were not able to accomplish; just below the mouth of Rock River they were intercepted and taken captive by a band of Fox allies — Kickapoo and Mascoutens. The savages

deliberated whether to turn the white men over to the Foxes to be burned or to keep them for a profitable ransom. The Montbruns, however, succeeded in escaping, and, alarmed by this circumstance, the captors consented to listen to the Frenchmen and finally agreed to abandon the Foxes and make peace with the white men. Boucherville and his men were escorted to Peoria, permitted to communicate with the officers in Illinois, and ultimately returned to Montreal, whither one of the Montbruns had hastened to notify the governor of their peril.

Meanwhile the little group at Fort Beauharnois had fared much better than they had dared to hope. Sometime that autumn they were dismayed by the approach of a large body of Foxes and Winnebago, who claimed that they were friendly and wanted to lodge around the fort. La Jémerais forbade them, and sternly threatened to fire if they came too close, whereupon they withdrew beyond gunshot and set up their wigwams. One of the traders imprudently ventured into one of their lodges to sell a trap. He was seized, and nearly lost his life. The Foxes, however, hearing from Fort St. Joseph, near the lower end of Lake Michigan, that the commandant there was mercifully inclined, begged for a Frenchman to accompany their chiefs thither to testify to their repentance and desire for pardon. La Jémerais volunteered to go; but found to his cost that the Foxes were not sincere. The truth was there were two parties among them; one wishing to approach the French, the other implacable in its hatred. After detaining the young officer twenty-one days, the Indians at last allowed him to proceed to St. Joseph, and he arrived finally at Montreal unharmed.

The prospects, however, for a profitable trade were very small, the Sioux company surrendered its contract, and sometime in 1729 Fort Beauharnois was entirely abandoned and probably looted and burned by hostile Indians.

The Sioux company was re-formed in 1731, with different backers and undertakers. The convoy, which was commanded by Godefroy de Linctot, stopped at Perrot's old wintering

place near Trempealeau Mountain and remained there for five years, conducting a profitable trade with the Sioux and Iowa tribesmen. Father Guignas was missionary for this post also, but we have no such description as he wrote concerning Fort Beauharnois, and our knowledge of the post life is derived from inference. The garrison and traders were in constant danger, as the Fox wars continued, and in 1733 the commandant at the restored Fort La Baye was slain with several of his officers. Linctot was successful in maintaining a hold upon the Sioux; and in the spring of 1736 he removed his post to Lake Pepin — this time on the northeastern side — and resigned the command to St. Pierre. The latter was forced in 1737 to abandon this post and retreated with Father Guignas and the traders by the Lake Superior route.

It was fourteen years before conditions became sufficiently peaceful to admit of another post among the Sioux. In 1750 Paul Marin, who had ended the Fox wars, secured a concession and sent his son Joseph to reoccupy the Sioux country. Here again we are balked by lack of evidence, but there seems reason to believe that Joseph Marin built his post on or near the site of the destroyed Fort Beauharnois. There he remained for six years, conducting a trade of great proportions, which enriched the Marins and all their confederates and unmercifully exploited the fur-bearing animals of the Northwest. Paul Marin was in 1752 sent to the upper Ohio frontier, where he died the next year somewhere above Pittsburgh. His son Joseph seems to have remained at the Sioux post until 1756, when all the outlying garrisons were called in to aid in defending New France against the English.

This last commandant of the Sioux post was in service on Lake Ontario and at Lake George; he was captured at the battle of the Plains of Abraham and after the conquest was one of the French officers who elected to live in France. So far as is known he never returned to the upper Mississippi or to America.

Neither Linctot nor Marin seems to have had the explorer's spirit, although the ministry continued to urge that the Sioux post should be made the basis of westward discovery. St. Pierre, however, who was a grandson of Jean Nicolet, carried the French flag far out upon the Saskatchewan, and might have crossed to the Pacific had he not been summoned to a nearer frontier. Upon Paul Marin's death St. Pierre replaced him on the upper Ohio, and he was the officer to whom Major George Washington carried the summons of the governor of Virginia to retire from that region. St. Pierre was killed two years later in the naval battle on Lake George.

Thus the heroic daring and enterprise of the great line of French explorers was quenched by the bloody deluge of war, and the vast empire acquired by Louis XIV and Louis XV in North America became the spoil of France's bitterest enemy and rival. Even before the ink was dry on the capitulation of Montreal, British traders had pushed their way into the West and reaped where the French had sown. The very site of Fort Beauharnois was forgotten until Americans took possession, and in the nineteenth century American historians resurrected the sources for the French régime on the upper Mississippi.

Fort Beauharnois was well planned and well placed. It was one of the chain of posts which, sweeping around the great arch of French occupation from Quebec on the east to New Orleans on the south, safeguarded the French empire in interior North America. Had France been able to people her colony, the political fortune of the Mississippi Valley might have been different.

We should not forget, however, that the French in the West, as well as in the East, aided the Americans in wresting what is now the United States from Great Britain. Even some of the descendants of the commandants at Fort Beauharnois were on our side during the Revolution. Timothée de Montbrun not only supported George Rogers Clark in the

Illinois country, but was the commandant of that region under the American flag. Maurice Godefroy de Linctot was Clark's most trusted and able emissary among the northwestern Indians, making it possible for the Americans to maintain a foothold on the upper Mississippi until the signing of the treaty of peace in 1783 gave our new nation all east of the Mississippi River.

So we do well to signalize the bicentenary of the founding of Fort Beauharnois in this year of 1927, while we recall the names and deeds of its officers and the strong push made by France to explore and occupy the headwaters of our greatest river and the land of the great tribe of the Sioux.

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