

Where Did Nicolet Go?

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THE THEORY that Jean Nicolet visited Green Bay in 1634 has been accepted as gospel truth for so long—even by leading historians—that any attempt to show he did not will doubtless be greeted with disdain. Considering how extremely flimsy is the evidence upon which the accepted theory is based, however, I may perhaps be pardoned for advancing another one.

First, let us recognize the fact that all reports of Nicolet's journey to the "People of the Sea" have come down to us second hand. He left no firsthand accounts, but he told of his adventures to some Jesuits, who wrote them into their *Relations* in somewhat garbled form.

The earliest reference to Nicolet's voyage of 1634 is found in Paul Le Jeune's *Relation* for 1640.¹ "Let us return now to the fresh-water sea [*Lake Huron*]," it reads. "This sea is nothing but a large Lake which, becoming narrower in the West, or the West Northwest, forms another *smaller Lake*,² which then begins to enlarge into another great Lake or second fresh-water sea."

Disregarding any previous theories as to where Nicolet went, let us interpret this passage in terms of modern geographical knowledge. The picture we get is of Lake Huron narrowing to the St. Mary's River, then widening into a smaller lake, which in turn enlarges into Lake Superior. The question arises: "Which is the smaller lake?"

On the next page of Le Jeune's *Relation* we come to this passage: "for, in fact, there is a Rapid, which rushes at this point [*Sault de Ste. Marie*] into the fresh-water sea. Beyond [*au delà*] this rapid we find the *little lake*, upon the shores of which, to the North, are the Roquai. To the North of these are the Mantoue. . . .

¹ Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 18:229 (Cleveland, 1898).

² The italics used here and in the passages that follow are the author's.

Passing this *smaller lake*, we enter the second fresh-water sea, upon the shores of which are the Maroumine; and still farther, upon the same banks, dwell the Ouinipigou. . . . In the neighborhood of this nation are the Naduesiu, the Assinipour," and other tribes. From this it is obvious that the "smaller lake" or "little lake" is beyond the Sault, and that it opens out into another very large lake, which could be none other than Lake Superior. Looking at the map, we see no little lake in this location — only Whitefish Bay. But maps are sometimes misleading.

Imagine yourself in a canoe, setting out westward from the head of St. Mary's rapids, without a map or any knowledge of how the land lies. Since you are looking for a tribe living to the west or southwest, you follow the south shore of the river, and after you pass Point Iroquois, no more land is seen to the north. The south shore leads you on westward, but eventually it turns at a right angle and leads you straight north for about eighteen miles. Not until you pass Whitefish Point does the land fall away again to the west, and the huge expanse of Lake Superior open up before your eyes.

To all intents and purposes, then, you have been traveling along the southern and western shores of a lake — quite a large lake, but much smaller than either the fresh-water sea below the Sault or the second fresh-water sea upon which your canoe is now floating. If this explanation seems farfetched, look at a map of the north shore of Lake Erie, and remember that Galinée in his *Relation* of the voyage with Dollier de Casson referred to Long Point Bay as a "little lake."

To continue now with Le Jeune's *Relation*: "But I will say, in passing, that it is highly probable one can descend through the second great lake of the Hurons, and through the tribes that we have named, into this sea that he [*an Englishman*] was seeking. Sieur Nicolet, who has advanced farthest into these so distant countries, has assured me that, if he had sailed three days' journey farther upon a great river which issues from this lake, he would have found the sea."³ This is the only mention Le Jeune makes of Nicolet in

³ *Jesuit Relations*, 18:237.

connection with the voyage under discussion. The "second great lake of the Hurons" is evidently Lake Superior, and Le Jeune speaks of a river issuing from that lake. Of course, no river issues from Lake Superior except the St. Mary's. Possibly he misunderstood Nicolet, or possibly he meant that Nicolet's route issued from the lake. Barthélemy Vimont's *Relation* of 1642 describes Nicolet's meeting with the People of the Sea, but gives no indication of his route.⁴ For information on this, then, we can depend only on Le Jeune's account, written six years after the voyage took place.

The question now arises: Why have we been told all these years that Nicolet turned back from the Sault and headed south through the Straits of Mackinac for Green Bay? Simply because the tribes that Le Jeune indicates Nicolet met lived on the shores of Green Bay *several years later*. But it so happens that these tribes, without exception, were nomadic, and in 1634 they could easily have been living on the shores of Lake Superior, instead of on Lake Michigan.

After conversations with Nicolet, Le Jeune mentioned the following tribes which later lived near Green Bay: Roquai, Maroumine, Ouinipigou, and Mantoue. The first three were undoubtedly the tribes also known as the Noquet, Maloumines, and Winnebago. The Winnebago were also known as the Puants, because they were the people of the sea or "stinking water." (The word Winnipeg has the same derivation. La Vérendrye spelled it "Ouinipigon." This is the same word as Le Jeune's "Ouinipigou," with the final *n* or *u* misprinted.) As the *Relation* of 1648-49 says: "These peoples are called Puants, not because of any bad odor that is peculiar to them; but, because they say that they come from the shores of a far distant sea toward the North, the water of which is salt, they are called 'the people of the stinking water.'"⁵

Now let us follow, through references in the Jesuit *Relations*, the movements of these tribes to the neighborhood of Green Bay, or Baye des Puants, as the French called it.

The Roquai or Nouquet in 1634 were on the north shore of the "smaller lake." In 1657 the "Noukek" were near St. Michel (Green

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, 23:277.

⁵ *Jesuit Relations*, 33:151.

Bay). In 1669 the Nouquet were spread along the south coast of Lake Superior, "*whence they take their origin.*" The Mantoue or Mantone in 1634 were north of the Roquai. In 1657 they were near the Sioux, ten days northwest of St. Michel (that is, south of Lake Superior). In 1670 they were west of the Fox River. The Maroumine or Maloumines in 1634 were on the shores of the "second fresh-water sea," east of the Ouinipigou; and in 1657 they were near St. Michel. The Ouinipigou or Winnebago were five hundred leagues from Quebec as the crow flies—evidently a wild guess—in 1623. They were on the shores of the "second fresh-water sea," in 1634, beyond the Maroumine, and they were "called Ouinipigou because they come from the shores of a sea about which we have no knowledge." In 1657 they were near St. Michel, and in 1670, at Baye des Puants, which was named for them.⁶

The chief reason why Nicolet is said to have visited Green Bay appears to have been because the object of his trip was to visit the People of the Sea, after whom Green Bay was named Baye des Puants. But mention of the bay by this name does not appear in the *Relations* until 1648-49—fourteen years after Nicolet's journey. Champlain's map of 1632, it is true, shows a "Rivière des Puans" flowing into the north channel of Lake Huron out of a lake where there is a mine of red copper on an island. But as no native copper has ever been known north of Lake Huron, the location of the lake and river must have been wrong. A map of 1643 in the *Relations* is copied directly from Champlain's, but even with the added knowledge acquired during the eleven intervening years, there is no indication that Lake Michigan was then known. It therefore seems evident that when Nicolet visited the Winnebago they were living on the south shore of Lake Superior, but that some time within the next fourteen years they crossed the Michigan Peninsula and established themselves near Green Bay. Whether they were the first to make that journey of some fifty miles (thirty-five miles in an air line) we cannot say. But it hardly seems likely. A manuscript map reproduced in Grace Lee Nute's *Lake Superior* shows an overland route, labeled

⁶ See *Jesuit Relations*, 18:231, 44:247, 54:133, 55:185; Gabriel Sagard-Theodat, *Histoire du Canada*, 1:194 (Paris, 1866).

"Traverse que les Sauvages font," starting from a point between the present Marquette and Munising and crossing to Green Bay.⁷ Though the date of the map is considerably later than 1648, the traverse would seem a natural one for Indians to make if they were moving from one lake to the other.

To sum up: First, Nicolet left no firsthand account of his 1634 voyage. We only know through Le Jeune that he explored part of the "second great lake of the Hurons," and we infer from the context that he visited there the Maloumine and Winnebago. Second, we know that the Winnebago were living on the shores of the Baye des Puants fourteen years after Nicolet's voyage. Third, it is mainly on these two premises that historians have based the theory that Nicolet visited Green Bay. Fourth, the weak points in this theory are: (a) All the tribes Le Jeune mentions in connection with Nicolet's voyage were nomadic. (b) The supporters of the theory hold that Green Bay is the "smaller lake" and Lake Michigan the "second fresh-water sea" or the "second great lake of the Hurons." But Green Bay is not beyond the Sault, nor is it on the way from the Sault to Lake Michigan. (c) Le Jeune does not say that the Winnebago were living on the shores of the smaller lake, which is supposed to be Green Bay, but on the shores of the "second fresh-water sea."

It would appear, then, that the only point in favor of the accepted theory is that some of the tribes Nicolet presumably visited were later living near Green Bay; while the only weak spot in the theory now advanced is that Whitefish Bay is not really a little lake.

I made the notes on which the foregoing argument is based fifteen years ago, and they have lain undisturbed ever since. In the meantime, other evidence may have come to light which will support or weaken either of the two theories, and criticism of both will be wholeheartedly welcomed.

⁷ Nute, *Lake Superior*, 30 (New York, 1945).



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