White Man Finds Wisconsin

The credit for putting Wisconsin on the map goes to two Frenchmen. In the early 1600's, Samuel de Champlain and Jean Nicolet were both far from home when they came together and began the process that resulted in the first white man setting foot in Wisconsin.

Champlain came to what is now the providence of Quebec in Canada in 1608. He arrived as the Governor of New France, as the area was then known. In addition to being responsible for administering France's claim in the new world, he was also charged with expanding those holdings through exploration.

In 1615, Champlain ventured west from Quebec. He got as far as what he called "The Great Fresh Sea". We now call it Lake Huron, one of the five Great Lakes. All of the lands beyond "The Great Fresh Sea" were unexplored by white men by 1615.

During his journey, Champlain was told by Indians he met of what lay beyond. They described two other large lakes beyond Huron. They also told of a smaller lake, with a river outlet, settled by Indians they called "Winnepegou". The area they described is our Lake Winnebago and Fox River. Champlain wanted the mystery of the two large lakes and one small one investigated, but he needed the right man to do it.

That man arrived in Quebec in 1618 in the form of Jean Nicolet. He was first sent by Champlain to live with the Indians in what is now upstate New York. There, he spent six years learning their language and customs. When he returned to Quebec, in 1624, he was proficient in Indian language and customs. He was installed as the interpreter of a large fur trading center, called Three Rivers, in Quebec. Fur trading was the major activity there at the time.

By 1634, Champlain had decided that Nicolet was his man to explore the area described to him by Indians during his own journey 19 years earlier. In July, 1634, Champlain commissioned Nicolet to visit the Winnepegou Indians and the fresh water seas of what was then known as "The Northwest". His mission was also to instruct the Winnepegou in the benefits of religion and the fur trade.
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Nicolet’s journey was risky. There was no way of knowing how the Winnipegou would receive him, or if he would even make it to the land alive. Nicolet’s method of transporation was a birch-bark canoe, powered by his own paddling. The birch-bark canoes were very light, and were easily battered by even mild storms.

Nicolet, who was 36 years old at the time, was confident of his ability, and set out on the Ottawa River, heading west, as part of a trading convoy. He broke away from the convoy upon reaching a Huron Indian settlement down river. There, he used his Indian language and custom skills to enlist seven Indians to join him in the voyage of discovery.

Nicolet and his band headed west, along the north shore of Lake Huron. Several severe storms turned the lake into a boiling caldron, forcing them to beach their canoes and take shelter in the vast forests which came right down to the edge of the lake. Some of the storms forced them to stay on land for days at a time, since using their canoes on the stormy lake would have meant certain death. To sustain themselves, Nicolet and his band lived off of what they caught in the lake or hunted on land.

Eventually, Nicolet arrived at what is present-day Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. There was a settlement of Algonkin Indians on the site. When Nicolet set foot on the land, he became the first white man to visit what, 150 years later, would be known as the Northwest Territory.

From Sault Ste. Marie, Nicolet’s party headed south. They passed through the Straits of Mackinac into what is now Lake Michigan. The group followed the lake’s north coast, along present-day Upper Michigan. They camped each night on the edges of the virgin forests which covered the land like a green blanket.

Nicolet made his next important landing at the mouth of the present-day Menomonee River on the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan border. Here he encountered a band of Menomonee Indians. From them, he learned about the land and Indians to the south. He sent one of the Indians from his party ahead to herald his approach to the Winnipegou Indians, who were settled at the mouth of the Fox River in present-day Green Bay.

As Nicolet came upon the mouth of the Fox, he sighted vast marshes of wild rice swaying in the breeze. Nicolet expected to see Chinese people on the shore. At the time, it was thought the China Sea was very near the Great Lakes since the vast size of the North American continent was unknown. His hopes were further reinforced by talk he had heard from the Menomonee Indians of the strange people who lived at the mouth of the Fox.
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After Nicolet's canoe was beached just below the Fox River's mouth, he put on a brightly colored ceremonial gown, expecting to meet the Chinese. You can imagine his surprise when he was greeted by a large of number Indians. They were impressed with Nicolet's manner of dress and were further awed when he fired his pistols into the air. They had never seen a firearm before and soon dubbed him "Manitou" or wonderful man.

Word of Nicolet's arrival quickly spread through the Winnepegou villages, and soon thousands of Indians had gathered to view Nicolet. A great feast ensued in which dozens of beavers were consumed. Nicolet smoked a peace pipe with the Indians and exchanged gifts.

From Green Bay, Nicolet then pushed upstream along the Fox. At the time, the Fox was a wild and untamed river. On both sides of the river, Nicolet saw large fields of maize (corn) which the Indians used to barter with other Indian tribes. He had to portage the rapids at DePere, Grand Chute, and Winnebago Rapids. Nicolet encountered another Indian settlement when he landed on the north shore of a large island, now known as Doty Island.

From here he entered Lake Winnebago. He continued his journey south, entering what is now the upper Fox River at Oshkosh. He was in search of what the Winnepegou called the "Mascoutins" or Fire Nation. He found the Indian village near present-day Berlin. This was where Nicolet ended his voyage. Had he pressed on just a little further, he would have come upon Portage and the Wisconsin River. The great river would have lead him to an even greater one, the Mississippi. But the honor of being the first white man to discover the Mississippi was not to be Nicolet's.

Nicolet returned to Quebec, reported his findings to Champlain, then resumed his duties at Three Rivers. It would be more than 20 years before two other French explores ventured back into the wilds of Wisconsin and discovered what Nicolet had missed.

These men were Pierre Radisson and his brother-in-law, Medard Grosseilliers. In June, 1658, the pair traveled west to Lakes Huron and Michigan. Unlike Nicolet, Radisson and Grosseilliers followed the western shore of Lake Michigan, spending the winter of 1658-9 with the Indians in the area. In the spring of 1659, the pair entered the Fox River at Green Bay and followed it all the way to the Mascoutin village where Nicolet ended his voyage.

The Mascoutins told Radisson and Grosseilliers about the Sioux Indians, a tribe to the west. Apparently, the Frenchmen and the Mascoutins ventured west. Radisson, in his diary, talks about traveling on some great rivers during this time. Some historians believe his description of one river is that of the Mississippi.
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Even though Radisson and Groseilliers did not travel the Mississippi, it was not long before other French explorers did. LaSalle claimed to discover the river in 1670, and Louis Joliet and Father Jacques Marquette in 1673.

The explorations of Nicolet, Radisson, Groseilliers, LaSalle, Joliet, and Marquette served to pave the way for more white men to come to Wisconsin. French missionary, Father Claude Allouez, arrived in Green Bay in 1669. In 1671 he established the first permanent settlement by white men in the Fox Valley, the mission of St. Francois Xavier at DePere. The door was now open to the white man in the Fox Valley.

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Glenn Brill