

Dispatches from the Prairie: French Descriptions of Earliest Chicago

by Paul Creamer

The first written traces of Chicago history were captured in the French language. The authors of these texts, neither professional historians nor historiographers, were for the most part agents of French temporal or religious authorities who quickly passed through the area as they pursued their respective missions. The purpose of this study is to examine the diverse manners in which these individuals described, explained, or recorded Chicago during the French exploration and exploitation of the site of the present-day city, a period that started in 1673 and began declining around 1700. We will consult seven such documents in their order of composition, calling each one a “dispatch.” While these variegated documents (four travel reports, one employment contract, one dictionary entry, and one bill of sale, brought together here for the first time) do not comprise an exhaustive survey, they do help to chronicle the fitful and only partially understood emergence of one of the world’s great cities.

The Portage that Connected a Continent

An examination of the French exploration of Chicago must begin with an explanation of what motivated French and French-Canadian explorers, and later missionaries and fur traders, to go to the area, at that point nothing more than a vast, partially forested marshy plain with no year-round population.¹ Chicago is located near the bottom of Lake Michigan, at the exact site on the North American continent where it was, and still is, easiest and fastest for water travelers to move between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. It was the Chicago River that assured, and continues to assure, this critical link. The river is chiefly composed of three parts.² Its Main Stem, which today forms the northern boundary of Chicago’s Loop business district, flows some mile and a half east to west from the shore of Lake Michigan into the land mass. The river then forks into two parts: its pivotal South Branch, which runs some six miles in a southwesterly direction, and its comparatively inconsequential North Branch, which squibs northwesterly and ultimately separates into three principal tributaries that extend northward nearly to the southern border of present-day Wisconsin.

A portage (that is, an expanse of dry land that separates two bodies of navigable water) of approximately one half-mile in length lay between the South Branch and the Des Plaines River.³ Travelers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would, at that point, drag or carry their canoes from one river to the other.⁴ The Des Plaines River flows into the Illinois River, and the Illinois River into the mighty Mississippi. The water corridor formed by the Chicago, Des Plaines, and Illinois rivers allowed canoeists to travel from any point along the shore of any of the five Great Lakes (themselves interconnected by water⁵) to any point along the Mississippi River, or to make such a trip in the reverse direction.⁶ Thanks to the connectivity offered by its river and portage, Chicago served as the hub of a vast and efficient water network used by Native American travelers for centuries, and perhaps millennia, before any Europeans arrived in the area.⁷ The first French and French-Canadian explorers who entered what is now Chicago did not go there to lay claim the area or even to visit it per se, but simply to exploit its river and portage and then continue their travels. Chicago later became a way station visited by missionaries and fur traders. The former group sought to convert Indians to Christianity, while the latter group sought to partner with them in the fur trade.

The Founders of (Written) Chicago: Marquette and Jolliet

Our first two dispatches come from the French Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette (1637-1685) and the French-Canadian explorer and cartographer Louis Jolliet (1645-1700), whose name is often spelled “Joliet.” They are recognized as the first two non-Native Americans to have set foot in Chicago.⁸ Before investigating their dispatches, it is useful to keep in mind the swampy, primordial state of the future city at the moment in September 1673 when they arrived.⁹ Citing the area’s vast bogs, heavy winds, and brutal winters, Robert Spinney notes that “[b]ecause of the inclement environment, it is little surprise that, although many Native Americans traveled to and from the region of Chigagou [sic], few chose to settle there (5).” The slight Indian presence in the area at the time was essentially limited to seasonal residents and travelers who were *de passage*.¹⁰ There were strikingly tall grasses, and some forested growth, but no permanent structures (Miller 42). More than a century and a half would elapse before what is now known as Chicago was first chartered as a city. Because the city was so late in developing into a population center, and because today it is almost always considered to be a metropolis, we will—for the remainder of this study—refer to Chicago during its pre-incorporation period by the label of “proto-Chicago.”

Marquette and Jolliet’s history-making passage through proto-Chicago was neither preplanned nor anticipated.¹¹ The governor general of New France had commissioned Jolliet to first find, and then chart the course of, what is today called the Mississippi River.¹² In May 1673, the exploratory party, in two canoes, launched from what is now St. Ignace, Michigan, and used the Fox and Wisconsin rivers to successfully locate and enter the Mississippi River. The party then paddled south down the Mississippi, eventually arriving at the mouth of the Arkansas River. Here, having already gathered important navigational information about the Mississippi and been warned by local Indians of the hostility that might await them if they continued further south down the great waterway, the explorers decided to turn back. They intended to retrace their original route and conclude their voyage in what is now Green Bay, Wisconsin. During the return trip, however, the party learned, thanks to another group of local Indians, of a shortcut: a conduit to Lake Michigan formed by what we call today the Illinois, Des Plaines, and Chicago rivers. With Native American tutelage and accompaniment, the party reached proto-Chicago in September 1673, and remained there briefly before continuing northward on Lake Michigan.

Both Marquette and Jolliet wrote extensively during their four-and-a-half-month journey. Jolliet lost all of his papers when his canoe capsized shortly thereafter, and he was therefore obliged, when documenting his trip, to recall everything from memory. For this reason, we may consider Marquette to be the first person in history to write about proto-Chicago, and Jolliet the second. In the following excerpt from Marquette’s written report of the expedition,¹³ the future metropolis makes its first appearance in written literature, although neither the area nor its river is named specifically:

Après un mois de Navigation en descendant sur Missisipi depuis le 42^d degré jusqu’au 34^e et plus, et après avoir publié l’Evangile, autant que j’ay pû, aux Nations que j’ay rencontrées, nous partons le 17^e Juillet du village des akensea pour retourner sur nos pas. Nous remontons donc le Mississipi, qui nous donne bien de la peine à refouler ses Courans, il est vray que nous le quittons vers le 38^e degré pour entrer dans une aultre riviere qui nous abrege de beaucoup Le chemin, et nous conduit avec peu de peine dans le lac des Ilinois [Lake Michigan]. (Thwaites 59:160)

Here Marquette considers what we now know as the Illinois, Des Plaines, and Chicago rivers to be a single river, and boasts that this waterway greatly reduced the length of the group’s journey and

allowed it to reach Lake Michigan with little difficulty. Although we know that Marquette and his party were, at the end of this excerpt, passing through what is now Chicago, he does not use the word “Chicago.” In fact, in the remainder of his writings about this trip, Marquette never again mentions proto-Chicago, its river, or its portage.

Jolliet, it would seem, was far more taken by proto-Chicago, or at least by the potential offered by its river and portage. Our second dispatch is excerpted from a report in which Jolliet extols the astonishing connectivity that would be created simply by digging a single canal:

La quatriesme remarque regarde un avantage bien grand et considérable, et qu'on aura peut-estre de la peine à croire: c'est que nous pourrions aisément aller jusques à la Floride en barque et par une fort belle navigation. Il n'y auroit qu'une saignée [canal] à faire, coupant demy lieue de prairie seulement pour entrer du fond du lac des Illinois [Lake Michigan] dans la rivière Saint-Louis [the Illinois River]. (Thwaites 58: 104)

Although Jolliet does not mention in this excerpt what are known today as the Des Plaines and Chicago rivers, he suggests that a canal be dug at the portage that lay between these two waterways.

Like Marquette, Jolliet never penned the word “Chicago” in his textual or cartographical materials relating to this trip. It was the French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle (1643-1687) who, in 1680, became the first person to put the word in written form, using the spelling “Checagou” (Callary 68).¹⁴ In 1680 La Salle had not yet visited proto-Chicago, but he passed through the area in early January 1682 and, after studying the Chicago River in person, took time to write a stinging rebuttal to Jolliet’s claim that a canal would create an easy water route between Lake Michigan and Florida. In his response, La Salle offers several reasons why such a proposed water route would be doomed to failure. In our third dispatch, excerpted from a longer report, he alleges that the mouth of the Chicago River was too sandy to permit navigation, and that brusque spring flooding on the river would threaten watercraft:

Il est vray, il y a encore une difficulté à laquelle ce fossé [canal] qu'on feroit ne pouroit pas remédier, qui est que le lac des Islinois [Lake Michigan] forme tousjours une batture de sable à l'entrée du canal [the mouth of the Chicago River] qui y conduit, que je doute fort, quoi qu'on dise, qui pust estre nettoyée ou dissipée par la force du courant de Checagou [the Chicago River], quand on l'y feroit tomber, puisque de bien plus grandes dans le mesme lac ne le peuvent faire. De plus, l'utilité en seroit peu considérable, parce que je doute, quand tout réussiroit, si un bastiment pourroit surmonter le grand débordement que les courants causent dans Checagou [the Chicago River], au printemps, beaucoup plus rude que ceux du Rhosne. (Margry 2: 166-67)

Since 1848 Chicago has fruitfully exploited canals as key elements in its overall river system, thereby proving—albeit more than a century and a half after the fact—Jolliet right and La Salle wrong. Ironically, no major street in the city of Chicago today bears Jolliet’s name, while La Salle Street, chosen in the wake of 1871’s Great Chicago Fire to serve as the epicenter of the city’s banks and law firms (Pacyga 100), has been a vital thoroughfare in the heart of the Loop for more than a century.

A Hub for Fur Traders and Missionaries

Once Marquette and Jolliet had signaled the considerable navigational advantages of proto-Chicago, it quickly became a destination for French and French-Canadian fur traders and missionaries. Our fourth dispatch—a 1692 fur-trading contract in French—demonstrates the sophistication of that enterprise and proto-Chicago’s role in it as a trading center. This document is housed today in Chicago’s Newberry Library, which labels it “Fur Trade Contract, 1692” and categorizes it as one of the oldest known fur-trading contracts to contain the word “Chicago,” rendered in this instance as “Chicagou.” The contract is a small parchment rectangle with text on both sides, filled with conditions, signatures, and emendations.

Dated September 15, 1692 and signed by six individuals, this document was composed and executed in Montreal. It formalizes an agreement between one businessman and four *voyageurs*.¹⁵ The four *voyageurs*, using two canoes that they themselves were obligated to provide, agreed to depart from Montreal the following spring and deliver the businessman’s merchandise first to what is now Mackinac City, Michigan, and then to proto-Chicago. On their return trip to Montreal, the *voyageurs* agreed to transport beaver pelts back to the businessman. In addition to a flat fee and food as compensation, the four men were also permitted during the trip to conduct some trade for their personal profit, although the contract carefully circumscribes such activity.

This contract proves that by 1692, if not sooner, proto-Chicago was already an established and important part of a remarkably intricate, multi-participant, multi-cultural trading network. It is of note that the place-name of “Chicagou” is given here as a single word, with no further explanation or clarification. In other words, less than twenty years after Marquette and Jolliet first passed through proto-Chicago, the location of this commercial nexus was unambiguous, even in a punctilious legal document.

Our fifth dispatch is the richest in detail. It is an excerpt from a letter sent by a French Jesuit missionary named Father Jean François Buisson de St. Cosme (1667-1707) to his superior, Monseigneur François Montmorency de Laval. It is dated January 2, 1699. Traveling by canoe, St. Cosme had passed through proto-Chicago the preceding October and visited the Mission of the Guardian Angel, founded and run by Father Pierre François Pinet.¹⁶ Here is an excerpt, retaining the original spelling errors and lack of punctuation:

Leurs maison [mission] est bastie sur le bord de la petite Riviere ayant d’un costé Le Lac et de l’autre une belle et grande prairie Le Village des Sauvages est plus de 100 cinq Cantes Cabannes et une Lieue dans La Riviere il y a encore un autre Village presque aussy grand ce sont tous des miamis. Le Rd Pere Pinet y fait sa demeure ordinaire excepté l’hiver que Les sauvages sont tous alla chasse il va le passer aux Illinois; nous ny visme point de sauvages ils étoient desia tous partis pour leurs chasses; si Lont peut jûger de la suite par Le peût de temp que Le Rd. pere Pinet est dans cette Mission on peut croire que Dieu benissant Les travaux et le Zelle de ce St Missionnaire il y aura la un grand nombres de bons et fervens chrestiens [...]. (Baillargeon 54)

This excerpt describes a relatively large populated area with at least three centers of residency and activity: the mission and the two separate Miami villages. St. Cosme’s full letter depicts proto-Chicago as a vibrant, multi-cultural hub of activity, cooperation, and successful Catholic proselytization, an area whose Native American population spiked or plummeted depending on the season.

When French Proto-Chicago Went Off the Grid

The decision by the French to supply goods and firearms to the Sioux nation unintentionally triggered the beginning of the end of the French presence in proto-Chicago: the Fox nation, rivals of the Sioux, decided around 1700 to exact revenge on the French by forbidding them access to the Chicago River and its portage, and as a result, written traces of proto-Chicago, in French or other languages, essentially disappeared for three-quarters of a century (Quaife, *Checagou* 28-29). Despite the situation in proto-Chicago, back in France readers continued to be fascinated by news and information about New France. One product designed to help slake this curiosity was published in Paris in 1726. Our sixth dispatch is an entry found in a reference work entitled the *Dictionnaire de la nouvelle France, Isles et autres colonies françoises*, itself a part of a larger, multi-volume work entitled the *Dictionnaire universelle de la France ancienne et moderne*. The author of this three-tome reference work is unknown, but it seems clear that this individual was not an explorer, but rather a methodical reader of an array of previously published materials about French exploration, some of it reliable and some of it dubious (Ouellet 6-9).

In eighty-eight large-format pages, the *Dictionnaire de la nouvelle France* catalogues all of France's colonial aspirations of the time, including those in North America. While this dictionary does not mention proto-Chicago, it does offer a detailed description of the Chicago River, even mentioning its portage. Here is that entry, reproduced in its entirety:

CHEKAGOU, ou Chekagon, Rivieres de la Nouvelle France, qui se communiquent par un portage; l'une se jette dans le lac des Illinois [Lake Michigan] à la bande de l'Ouest, vers la partie meridionale de ce la, dans le País des Miamis & des Maskoutens ou nation du feu: & l'autre qui est plus longue se jette dans la Riviere des Illinois [the Illinois River], vingt ou trente lieueüs au-dessus du Fort; c'est à présent le passage le plus ordinaire de Michilimakinac aux Illinois. (33)

Clearly this writer, working in 1726 or perhaps a bit earlier, is unaware that the Chicago River and its portage had by this time been forbidden to the French for a quarter-century. We note that—because the separate names of the Des Plaines River and the Chicago River did not yet exist—the two present-day rivers are identified in this dictionary entry as two rivers sharing the same name of “Chekagou.”

Less than forty years after the publication of the *Dictionnaire de la nouvelle France*, a second pivotal event further pushed the French from proto-Chicago: France, Great Britain, and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris in 1763, thereby ending the Seven Years' War. In agreeing to the treaty's terms, France made enormous territorial concessions to Great Britain, among them the area that included proto-Chicago. Although France had asserted itself since 1671 as the legal possessor of the enormous swath of land that today constitutes roughly the central portion of the continental United States (Miller 28-29), with proto-Chicago lying therein and destined to be “discovered” by Marquette and Jolliet two years later, this vast territory was suddenly recognized, under European law, as being British.

Point du Sable: Beginnings and Endings

A mundane yet revealing bill of sale, drafted and executed more than a century after St. Cosme's letter, serves as a coda to the slowly regressing French presence in proto-Chicago. Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (ca. 1750-1818) is perhaps the most fascinating, misunderstood, and elusive figure in Chicago history. Even the spelling of his name remains problematic.¹⁷ Du Sable was a French speaker (Meehan 447), and although French and/or Haitian ancestry has been proposed, his roots remain unclear.¹⁸ It is certain that at least from 1783 on, he was a U.S. citizen (Meehan 446). Du Sable, proto-Chicago's first non-Native American permanent settler, was black or biracial (Quaife,

Checagou 36, 46). This detail, paired with his primacy in the historical record of proto-Chicago, added some white settlers who arrived there shortly after him (Miller 56). For nearly two decades, he ran a diversified and successful farm and trading-post operation on the northern bank of the Chicago River, roughly one half-mile from its mouth. Precious little is known about du Sable with any exactitude. Most of what is known with certainty comes from our seventh and final dispatch, a French-language bill of sale dated May 7, 1800, a document unknown to scholars until it was discovered in 1913 by Milton Quaife in the Wayne County Archives in Detroit.

Let us consider some of du Sable's possessions.¹⁹ By 1800, du Sable had decided for unknown reasons to relocate to what is now Saint Joseph, Missouri, and so he sold his belongings in proto-Chicago before moving. His list of personal property, furnished in detail in the bill of sale, is stunning for its time and place. An only partial rendering includes eight separate purpose-built buildings, among them a main house, a bake house, and a smokehouse; two mules; thirty-two head of cattle; thirty-eight hogs; forty-four hens; an array of tools; a kitchen's worth of utensils; and a feather bed. Thomas Meehan was so impressed by the enumerated items of fine furniture in du Sable's possession that he openly pondered, more than a century and half after the fact, how such a collection had made it to du Sable's home, located essentially in the wilderness (451).

The diversity of du Sable's possessions echoes the diversity of proto-Chicago at the arrival of the nineteenth century. As Thomas Cronan notes, the area was "a polyglot world of Indian, French, British, and American cultures tied to a vast trading network that was no less Indian than European (26)." But proto-Chicago, as always, continued to change. The future city was, at du Sable's birth, French territory, then British territory as he reached adulthood, and American territory at his death, but multi-cultural and multi-lingual throughout.

The seven dispatches we have examined in this study all show a different aspect or angle of what later became the city of Chicago. From the navigational potential boasted about in Jolliet's report to the prosperity on display in du Sable's bill of sale, each document serves as a tiny pixel in the overall, always changing picture of the history of the city. That LaSalle was patently wrong about Jolliet's proposed canal or that the 1726 dictionary entry falsely claimed the Chicago River to be in regular use by Frenchmen only serves to underline that proto-Chicago was a complicated, ever-changing place. The American author and humorist Mark Twain (1835-1910), in the last paragraph of his 1883 steamboat-era memoir *Life on the Mississippi*, expressed a sense of wonderment at the city's constant change:

It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time. (593)

All seven dispatches were composed during a relatively brief time span: just a bit more than a century and a quarter. Despite such a short time frame, these French-language documents help to trace out the progressive and exciting evolution of a place that Twain himself would know, only eight decades after du Sable had sold his property and left, as a teeming city of more than half a million people.

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Notes

¹On the Chicago area's flora and fauna before the arrival of European explorers, see Pierce 3-6. On the geological formation of the Chicago River and its original course, see Mayer 3-5.

²The Chicago River of today is properly called a "river system," as it is now composed of more than 150 miles of natural and man-made waterways, including five canals that all post-date the French presence in the area. On the progressive changes made to the river, see Solzman 25-53.

³A now-disappeared shallow pool of navigable water once lay between the South Branch and the Des Plaines River. In its time, this pool's dimensions shrank or expanded according to the season and the weather. Although French explorers left this vast expanse of water unnamed, it later acquired the inelegant name of "Mud Lake" in English. The measurement of one half-mile for the portage between the South Branch and the Des Plaines River is correct only if Mud Lake is considered a waterway. If we consider Mud Lake to be solid ground, then the portage grows in length to approximately five miles. See Solzman 22-23.

⁴Two canals, one completed in 1848 and the other in 1900, obviated the need for water travelers to portage between the South Branch and the Des Plaines River.

⁵Canoeists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries traveled between contiguous Great Lakes by using straits, tributaries, and/or portages. More recently, a system of locks has permitted direct, lake-to-lake travel between contiguous Great Lakes.

⁶It was also possible to travel between the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan by using the Fox and Wisconsin rivers (in present-day Wisconsin) or the St. Joseph, Kankakee, and Illinois rivers (in present-day Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois). These two options, however, required portages longer than that of the Chicago River: a mile and a half mile between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, and four miles between the St. Joseph and Kankakee rivers. Ultimately, based on conditions and final destinations, travelers used all three options. On these portages and the seasonal difficulties of traversing them, see Skinner 37-40.

⁷Edmund Danziger notes in his study of the Indians of the Great Lakes region that "they have subsisted on their shores since time immemorial. (3)"

⁸It is possible other Europeans passed through Chicago before Marquette and Jolliet, but if so they left no record. The traveling party of Marquette and Jolliet—bundled into two canoes—consisted of seven men: the two celebrated figures and their five often-overlooked assistants, themselves Frenchmen (Osler 75-76).

⁹It was not until 1833 that a process was initiated to incorporate Chicago. That year the State of Illinois, just a decade and a half into its own existence, received a petition to charter Chicago as a town. Chicago held at that point fewer than 500 residents. Four years later, with its population having swelled to over 4,000, the town was re-chartered as a city. See Pacyga 16-18.

¹⁰To the Indians of the southern Great Lakes region in second half of the seventeenth century, it was normal and habitual to leave, and then to return to, areas that supported agriculture during the warm months but not during the cold months (Tanner 5). At the time when Marquette and Jolliet arrived in the Chicago area, therefore, the local Indians were permanent residents, but not year-round residents.

¹¹A fuller description of this expedition and its impact is found in Osler 75-79.

¹²Marquette and Jolliet were not, in fact, the first non-Native Americans to see the Mississippi or to draw the river on a map, nor was the often-credited Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto. See Holland 14-18.

¹³Many of the written dispatches of Marquette and other missionaries of the time were gathered, edited, published, and circulated relatively quickly by the Jesuits in a format roughly akin to a periodical newsletter. The title of this publication was the *Relations des Jésuites*. In the 1890s, Reuben Thwaites and his editorial team prepared a seventy-three-volume edition that brought together these quasi-newsletters and additional related materials, with the original documents accompanied by English translations. See Greer 1-6, 14-16.

¹⁴Edward Callary notes that the word “Chicago” derives from a Miami-Illinois term originally meaning “striped skunk,” and, by extension, “onion field” (68). Because the Chicago River’s banks were lined with onion plants, the river took the name “Chicago” (Miller 42), as did eventually the land area around the mouth of the river.

¹⁵This summary is derived from the description of the contract on the Newberry’s online exhibition entitled “Frontier to Heartland: Four Centuries in Central North America,” available at <<http://publications.newberry.org/frontiertoheartland/items/show/151>>. The document’s shelf number is Vault Ruggles 419.

¹⁶On the operation of this mission, which ran with one interruption between 1696 and approximately 1700, see Meehan 442. Noël Baillargeon cites a May 1699 letter in which another French visitor to proto-Chicago reports that “les PP. Jesuites ont une Mission de 600 hommes.(68).”

¹⁷At the site of his homestead, at present-day 401 North Michigan Avenue in Chicago, a 1977 U.S. National Park Service plaque spells his name “Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable,” while a mounted bust installed fifty yards away by the City of Chicago thirty years later reads “Jean-Baptiste Pointe deSable.” Chicago’s DuSable Museum, a pre-existing institution renamed in his honor in 1968, prefers “Jean Baptiste Point DuSable.” We will follow Meehan’s spelling.

¹⁸For a summary of this speculation, see Meehan 445-47.

¹⁹The bill of sale is fully reproduced in an English translation in Quaife “Documents” 90-92.

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