

5-1-1973

European Contact with Iowa: Jolliet and Marquette

Leland Sage

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sage, Leland. "European Contact with Iowa: Jolliet and Marquette." *The Palimpsest* 54 (1973), 2-8.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol54/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

European Contact with Iowa: Jolliet and Marquette

by
Leland Sage

On June 17, 1673—or June 15, according to some authorities—Louis Jolliet, a woodsman, trapper, explorer, and map-maker, along with Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit priest-missionary, and five other companions moved out of the Wisconsin River onto the broad Mississippi. For the first time in recorded history the land of the future state of Iowa came under the gaze of men of European descent. This expedition marked the extension of the influence of New France nearly a thousand miles from Quebec and nearly four thousand from Paris.

The few details of the journey which have come down to us have been told many times. Important questions, however, still remain: what moved these men to explore the great river and why were they sent to this region?

Many historians have been content to narrate the voyage, describing the colorful and romantic aspects of the journey. Few have paid attention to the question of motivation. It has often been assumed that simple curiosity about a fabled river or a desire to increase the fur trade lay

behind the expedition, but the explanation is probably more complex. This was not a trip undertaken as a personal venture by Jolliet; even though financed as a private, profit-making enterprise, it was a government project. To understand the basic reasons for the trip we must understand French national policy and how it acted in the New World.

When Louis XIV, the "Sun King," came to active control of France in 1663, he spent considerable time and energy directing the affairs of New France. As a part of his national policy, Louis, and his able minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, attempted to unify continental France and

This brief examination of the larger aspects of the Jolliet-Marquette expedition could easily be diverted into a bibliographical essay rather than a narrative of the expedition. A good place to begin (but not to end) one's reading is Francis Parkman's classic, *La Salle and the Discovery of the West*, Chapter 5, a work available in many editions and mined shamelessly by many writers of secondary accounts. Instead of Parkman, I have used the recent writings of several Canadian historians which appear in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume I (Toronto: 1960), especially the introductory essay by Marcel Trudeau, "New France, 1524-1915." Even more helpful are the valuable works by W. J. Eccles, *Canada under Louis XIV, 1663-1701* (New York: 1964); *Frontenac the Courtier Governor* (Toronto: 1959); *The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760* (New York: 1969), and by Gustave Lanctot, *A History of Canada* (3 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: 1963-1965), especially Volume I. Laenas G. Weld, "Joliet and Marquette in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, I (January 1903), 3-16, first demonstrated the error in Marquette's reckonings and placed the land fall at the mouth of the Iowa River instead of the Des Moines. Anyone especially interested in Father Marquette's career and his contributions to the expedition should consult the recent works by Jean Delanglez, S.J., Joseph P. Donnelly, S.J., and Raphael Hamilton, S.J., and the essay by J. Monet in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Father Marquette's "Journal" is reproduced in the *Jesuit Relations* (many editions). Brilliant interpretive essays are those by Sigmund Diamond, "An Experiment in 'Feudalism': French Canada in the Seventeenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 18 (January 1961), 3-34, and William R. Taylor, "A Journey into the Human Mind: Motivation in Francis Parkman's *La Salle*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 19 (April 1962), 220-237.

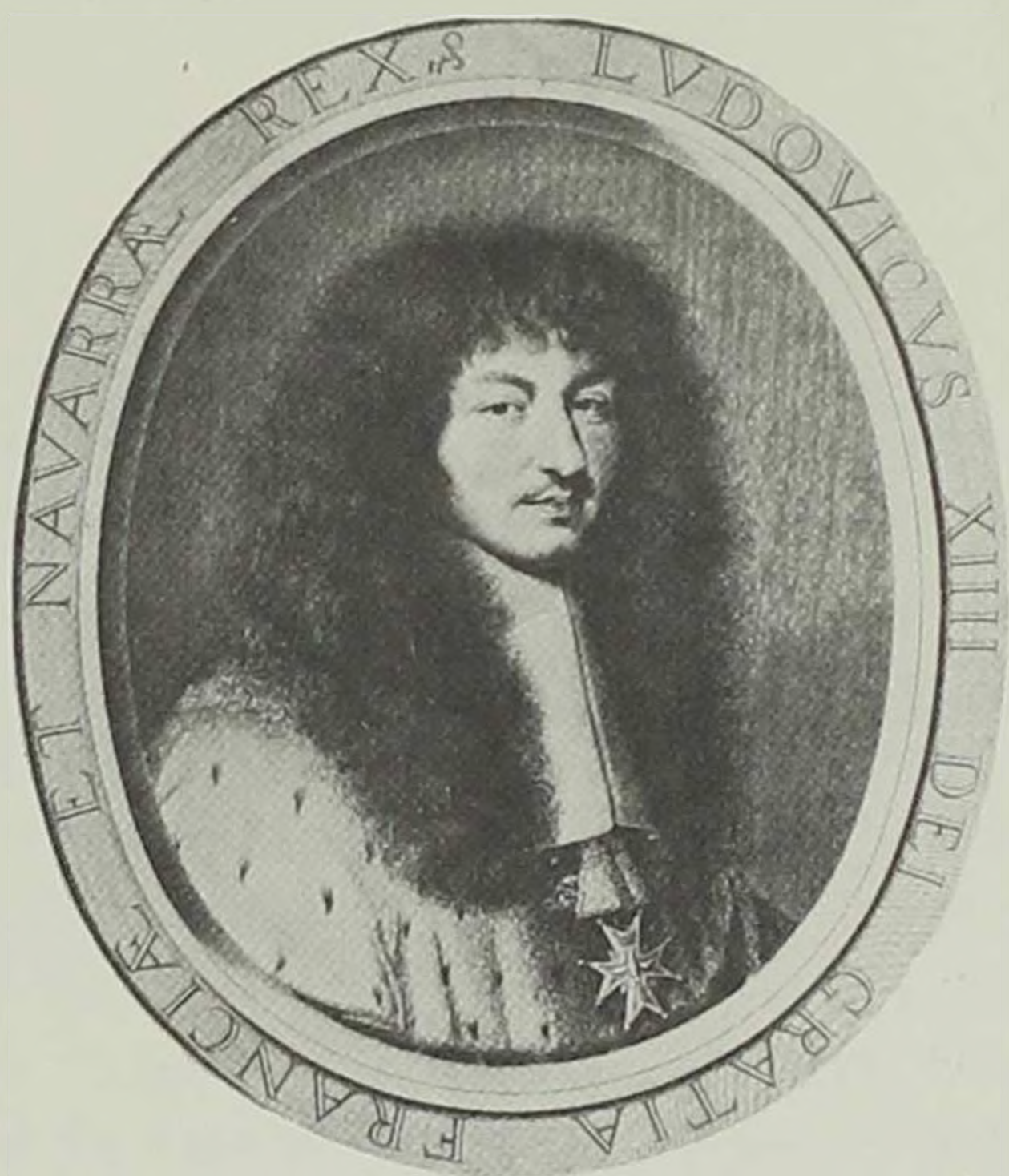
the overseas empire. One of the chief instruments of the crown was the policy known today as mercantilism. This theory of economics (of which Colbert was a leading proponent) held that all economic power should be concentrated in the hands of the mother country and especially in the monarch. Louis sought to be a king with absolute political power. To achieve this he wanted to control the economy of France and its empire.

The mercantilist policies put into effect by Colbert aimed, first of all, at breaking down internal barriers to trade within France itself, and then making the empire

part of a unified French system. Colbert wanted to build in New France a strong colony which could operate without reliance on trade with rival nations or their colonies. In other words, New France was not to be dependent upon trade with the British or the Dutch, but an integral part of a French system. The French in North America were to develop their colony in accord with the needs and wishes of the mother country. All this was part of the attempt to strengthen the political and economic position of France as a nation and was similar to what the British attempted to do with the Navigation Acts.



Joliet and Marquette on the Mississippi (Public Archives of Canada).



Louis XIV (Public Archives of Canada).

The ultimate goal for Colbert was a compact, profitable, French colony in North America which would function as a part of a cohesive empire, working as a single national unit.

In order to make New France fit this pattern, Colbert and the ambitious Intendant, Jean Talon, wanted colonists to develop a broad range of economic activities such as agriculture, mining, fishing, and lumbering. Unfortunately, the fur trade dominated economic life in New France. Farming and foresting did not develop as they did in the British colonies to the south, but easy profits were to be had through the trade in pelts. Because of the narrow base of the colony's economy, New France could not fulfill Colbert's hopes. Such a society could not fit itself into a world-wide political and economic organization.

Despite Colbert's wish that New France remain small and easy to control, the colony continued to grow in size. The bonds of the tightly knit colony he had

envisioned along the St. Lawrence were broken by far-ranging fur traders and by explorers and missionaries who braved the unknown, bringing back stories of their findings and claims they had made in the name of France. Jean Nicollet had gone as far as the present site of Green Bay in 1634. By 1641, the Jesuits had planted a mission and given a name to Sault Sainte Marie, while Father Claude Allouez had established a mission on Chequamegon Bay in Lake Superior, where he also acted as a copper scout for officials in Quebec. Grosseilliers and Radisson, the most daring of all, had gone all the way to what is now Minnesota. In 1671, Daumont St. Luson and Nicolas Perrot had met with representatives of fourteen tribes and claimed their land for Louis XIV. Every explorer brought back information on what he had seen and heard. Most exciting of all were the reports of a great river somewhere to the west, by the name of "Michissippi" or some variation thereof. Father Claude Dablon, the Superior of the Jesuits, had heard so much and in such detail that in 1670 he was able to compile a fairly good description of the Mississippi without ever having seen it.

Other factors were enticing the French out of their confines. The English had managed to plant themselves on both sides of the French settlements, a situation which the French could never allow to stand unchallenged. On the north, English outposts were on Hudson Bay; on the south, they had displaced the Dutch in the Hudson River Valley from Manhattan to Albany. As if these flanking operations were not enough, there was constant danger from the powerful Iroquois confederation of the upper New York region. The

French had two alternatives: they could try to defeat the English and their Iroquois allies and drive them away entirely, or they could fight a holding action and at the same time expand their own territory to the west and south of the Great Lakes. If the latter strategy could be successfully employed, the English could be pinned against the Atlantic seaboard and co-existence might be possible.

The end was in sight for Colbert's plan of a small colony, centered on Quebec and Montreal. Despite his overall goals, the minister had always allowed for options. Expansion of territory was acceptable if there was danger of the land falling into the hands of enemies (like England), which would hurt French trade. There was also the constant hope of finding a southern route to New France, thus escaping the limitations of the St. Lawrence entryway, ice-bound as it was for half the year. These exceptions to Colbert's general rule eventually led to a new policy. As a leading historian of the subject states: "Ironically, it was Colbert himself who allowed the floodgates to French western expansion to be opened." If this reasoning is correct, the Jolliet expedition to the country beyond the Lakes was not merely a quest for a mysterious river nor an effort to increase the fur trade, nor were the explorations of his contemporary, La Salle, so intended. Jolliet and his co-explorers in the King's service were advance agents of imperialism, a logical and perhaps inevitable extension of mercantilism. The explorers were helping their country to multiply its resources, promoting better relations with the Indians, and, if the plans for an expanded and strengthened empire worked out, contributing to

the policy of containment of the hated English along the Eastern seaboard. As important as the Jolliet-Marquette expedition was in searching out the great river and expanding the fur trade, it was even more significant as a part of imperial French policy.

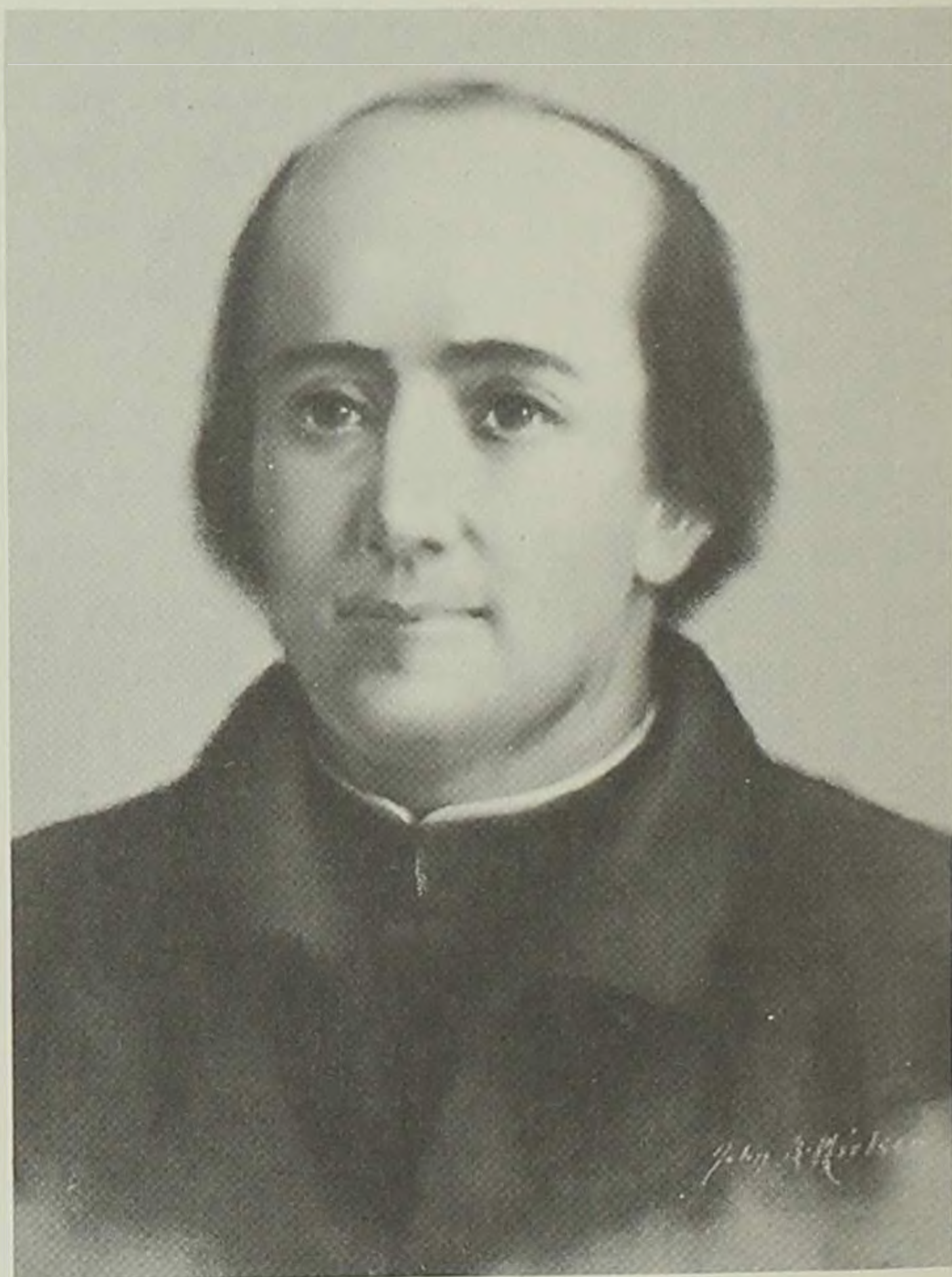
This view is strengthened by the role which the Intendant of New France, Jean Talon, played in planning the expedition, a role that has often been overlooked. Many writers have given the impression that Jolliet was a volunteer, self-directed explorer; many have given Father Jacques Marquette equal or superior billing as an actor in the drama of the expedition. Actually, Talon selected Jolliet as one who had won local fame as a woodsman and mapmaker. Forced to finance his own trip, Jolliet formed a profit-sharing company and out of the list of partners selected five men to be his companions and boatmen on the voyage. A seventh person



Jean-Baptiste Colbert
(Public Archives of Canada).

was to be a priest-missionary, a customary provision on most French and Spanish exploration ventures. Father Jacques Marquette, then stationed at St. Ignace, was the man selected by his immediate superior, Father Claude Dablon, head of the Jesuit order in Quebec. A man of undoubted zeal and great devotion to his calling, and a master of several Indian languages, Marquette eagerly accepted the call to serve with Jolliet.

On May 17, 1673, Jolliet and his six companions pushed off from St. Ignace, Father Marquette alternating as a passenger on the two barks. Going around the northern shore of Lake Michigan, then south into Green Bay, on to the mouth of the Fox River, the route can be followed on the accompanying map (p. 8). Up to this point it was the very same route followed by Jean Nicollet in 1634. Venturing into the Fox River took courage, although Nicollet had dared to do it on his memorable journey. Threading their way onward, they came to a point where the river became very shallow. Friendly Indians of the Mascouten (Muscatine) tribe gave information to Jolliet, some of it inaccurate, and others of the Miami tribe guided the party over a portage of a short distance (through present day Portage, Wisconsin), 2700 paces by Father Marquette's reckoning, 1.28 miles by modern measurement, and then out onto the waters of the Meskouing (Wisconsin) River. The date of departure was recorded as June 14, 1673. When they came to the Great River, with its enormous bluffs



Fr. Jacques Marquette (Marquette U. Archives).

covered with magnificent foliage, it was "with a joy I cannot express," in the words attributed to Father Marquette. The now accepted date is June 17, 1673, though some have figured it as June 15.

The "land across the river," as it seemed to the French explorers, could now appear on maps, by implication a part of the French Empire. But Jolliet's instructions called for exploration of the destination of the river. Apparently making the trip south by slow stages, considering that they had the current with them, Louis Jolliet and Father Marquette went ashore on June 25, a date proclaimed as the official date of the first European presence

on Iowa soil. Once presumed to be at the mouth of the Des Moines River by Marquette's reckoning, modern opinion holds that the landing was at the mouth of the Iowa River, near a spot known today as Toolesboro. Attracted, so the story goes, by the discovery of footprints in the mud, the leaders were eager to see the owners of these markings. After walking several miles inland, the two men came upon Indians, of the family known as Peorias, of the Illinois or Illini tribe, who treated them with great kindness.

After prolonged council meetings with their generous hosts, the two men returned to the river and led their party farther south. After narrow escapes from hostile Indians, and many a close call from disaster on the treacherous river, they finally reached a point where a large tributary, known to us as the Arkansas, emptied into the Great River. By this time they were convinced that they had solved the mystery of their river, that it led only to the Gulf of Mexico, not to the South Sea and to Cathay; furthermore, they heard that the mouth of the river was in the hands of their hated enemies, the Spanish. Rather than risk death at the hands of either the Spanish or Indians more hostile than any so far met, Jolliet reluctantly gave up the plan to go to the mouth of the river and set about the return journey. He boldly changed the route and followed the Illinois River to the Des Plaines, then portaged to the Chicago River and on into the water of Lake Michigan; then north to Sturgeon Bay and by portage to the

friendly waters of Green Bay. Near the present town of De Pere, Father Marquette left the party to go to the St. Xavier Mission while Jolliet and others went on to Sault Sainte Marie. Jolliet studied and amplified his notes during the winter and made a copy for safekeeping at the Jesuit Mission there.

The following spring (1674) Jolliet set out for Quebec. In the dangerous waters of the Ottawa River, almost at the end of his journey, his canoe capsized. Jolliet alone of his crew was saved; the metal chest containing his notes and maps went overboard along with all other mementoes of this trip. Thus it was that the most authentic evidence of this historic expedition, fraught with meaning for the future, was lost. By a stroke of misfortune, even the copy or copies which Jolliet had left in deposit at Sault Sainte Marie were

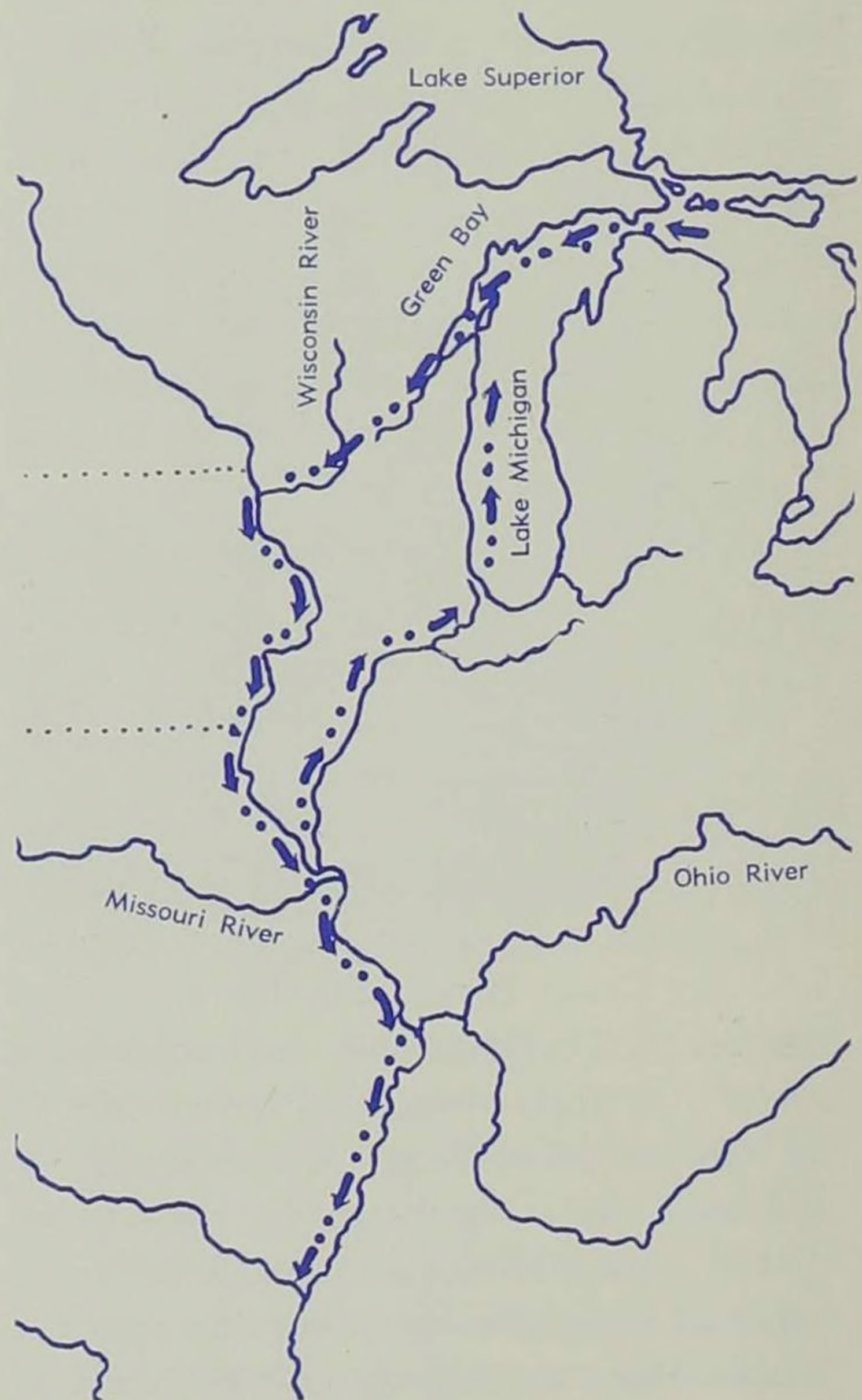


Louis Jolliet

destroyed in a fire. As a consequence of these two mishaps, Jolliet's description of the trip rests upon the notes and maps reconstructed from memory and from oral testimony which he could put into records at Quebec on affidavit.

As for Father Marquette, because of the physical exhaustion after the ordeal of the journey and illness resulting from an abused digestive system, and because of the priority he gave to a return mission to the Illinois country, his records were not immediately turned over to his superiors. Many historians, though not all, think that the account of the Mississippi expedition attributed to him was not wholly his own but an ensuing reconstruction of his notes by his superior, Father Dablon. For this reason and others, a bitter dispute has raged and still smolders, principally among Jesuit historians, as to Marquette's place in history.

Despite the annoying uncertainties due to the loss of key records, despite uncertainties of dates, distances, and locations, the meaning of the Jolliet-Marquette expedition seems clear. The journey was beyond question one of romance and drama. It was a voyage into the unknown which pitted seven men against nature and uncertainty. In addition, the explorers were important instruments of imperial policy worked out in the court of Louis XIV, four thousand miles away from Iowa. □



The route of the expedition (map by H. L. Nelson).