

CTPA Quarterly Meeting

LaSalle in Illinois Country

January 11, 2016

Roosevelt University, Gage Building on Michigan Avenue

Fifty-five members and guests came out in the super cold New Year's weather to enjoy the food and fellowship of our first quarterly meeting of 2016.

Here are some of the announcements President Donna Primas made:

- New CTPA Member ID badges will be handed out at the March quarterly meeting.
- The Improv-style "tour cure" presentation by member Margaret Hicks will take place tomorrow, January 12. (We look forward to reports about this lively tour guide's "show us your neighborhood" event.)
- January 19 & 21, Renee Hills will take two small groups to visit the Pits of the Board of Trade. Sign-ups were closed since there is a strict group size limit. Renee may do this periodically. A number of us went with Renee last year and found it interesting even though there are only a few small pits left where shouting and hand waving can be seen. Most trading today is electronic.
- In February, two events will entertain CTPA people. Our second annual social party at the BlackFinn Pub and Restaurant will take place on Tuesday evening, February 23. On Thursday, February 25 from 4:00-6:00pm, Maureen Callaghan helped to arrange a "fam tour" of the French Market where a number of tour guides take groups. Invitations and RSVP instructions will be issued soon.
- At our next quarterly meeting on Monday, March 14, we will be entertained by Eric Lambert and "From Mississippi to Chicago—the Migration of the Blues" presentation featuring Eric telling the story and playing his guitar.
- Greg Borzo noted that on the evening of Tuesday, January 12, there'd be a free presentation about the history of gospel music with performance by a gospel choir, at the Harold Washington Library.

As always, Donna introduced CTPA Associate members in attendance. A few guests braved the cold: Tina Winthur brought Kari Diesen Dahl, and Greg Borzo brought Christine Bertrand. New Member Jim Collins was introduced. Jim is a Shoreline guide.

PRESENTATION by JEFFREY CARTER

LaSalle in the Illinois Country

Long time CTPA member JEFFREY CARTER was the headline speaker for this Quarterly Meeting, and he illustrated his talk with many wonderful maps, drawings and other artwork. He told the complex story of the myriad journeys of René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle (1643-1687) throughout the upper eastern and central area of what became the USA, around the Great Lakes, and up and down the many area rivers Chicagoans are familiar with. His life was full of problems but he was successful in establishing a network of forts from Canada, across the Great Lakes, and along the Ohio, Illinois, and Mississippi rivers. These forts, along with LaSalle's skill with indigenous languages and friendships with several Native American tribes, helped later French explorers and colonial settlers live in peace.

This was a most entertaining lecture because Jeff has a dry wit and affable style. The power point illustrations were vivid and well illustrated the lecture. We learned much about the history of our local inland waterways, going back to earlier explorers Marquette and Joliet (1673-75).



Jeff's background is rich in this area because he is part of an organization called **"Friends of the Chicago Portage,"** which frequently provides free tours of that historic and famed Chicago portage area, which is marked by a dramatic modern bronze sculpture. Jeff has been giving tours at the portage for years, during which he says there is never enough time to talk about LaSalle, a fascinating character. "If we only had three or four more hours!" Jeff declared.

Yes, Jeff admitted, LaSalle legendarily got lost. One would wonder who wouldn't get lost considering the primitive times, the dense forests, the Indians, Mud Lake and all. During his talk, Jeff used several maps to display the seasonal connections among rivers, called "portages." Some maps displayed what areas were controlled by Indian tribes, the British and/or the French in the late 1600s.

Portages were Keys to the Continent, including the Chicago portage, as was known from writings of the first Europeans to discover the area. What the explorers were looking for, of course, was the fabled Northwest Passage that would connect the Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean and provide a shortcut to China.

LaSalle was born in Rouen, in Normandy, France, was very smart and schooled by the Jesuits to become a priest. He had wanderlust, was very independent and left the seminary about 1666 to join a brother near Montreal. This brother was a priest with the Sulpician order, apparently terrific adversaries to the Jesuits. This theme of animosity repeats itself throughout Jeff's presentation.

About 1670 from his base in Fort Frontenac (Montreal area), LaSalle begins exploring the area around Lake Ontario and the Ohio valley, towards current day Kentucky, in a journey which provides the basis for the later French claim to this area. Jeff talked about Marquette and Joliet and how much of the earlier explorations began far north at St. Ignace near Mackinac Island. He talked of the Village of the Kaskasia at Starved Rock where an Indian guide said the Illinois River would provide a shortcut to the Des Plaines, "northeast through Portage Creek," now near Lyons, Illinois. A map showed early Mud Lake at this juncture. (We know that in 1673 Joliet wrote of the need to "build a canal" to pass "through the foot of Lake Michigan to the Des Plaines.")

By 1673 LaSalle is involved in the very lucrative fur trade, exchanging guns and knives with the Indians for beaver pelts. Jeff shows a painting and says it's of "real cute beavers," and our audience laughs with him. LaSalle is quite successful by 1677.



LaSalle becomes friends with the Iroquois Indians and loves their tales of a Big River (which turns out to be the Ohio, not the Mississippi). LaSalle begins an early adventure way north at the St. Lawrence River in canoes with two priests (and some Indian guides), using his own beaver-fur-pelt money and money earned from having sold some acquired land since he could not extract any funding from the French government. His writings say he could "hear the (Niagara) falls" when the canoes neared Hamilton (Ontario). There, he met Indians who told of other priests in the area who said go to St. Ignace, which is northwest. Some priests went north to Mackinac Island where they were not welcome and had to leave and go home, a 2,000 mile journey, their only success...having created the first map of the Great Lakes.

LaSalle then traveled south along Lake Ontario. His men all deserted him, but his Indian guide stayed, talking about a river to Pittsburgh and the Falls of the Ohio near Louisville. Jeff said some of this may be fact, some legend.

Jeff did explain that LaSalle had “people problems,” and was not well liked. He often found himself without funds to continue his journeys. Indeed he returned to Montreal, where he met Count Frontenac, the new governor of New France, based in Quebec. This was a big influence on LaSalle but once again the natives were restless. The Iroquois became warlike. Frontenac invited LaSalle to speak to a Peace Council as interpreter and mediator. LaSalle agreed to trade furs with the Indians so he could build a fort on their land. Joliet arrived at Fort Frontenac and told LaSalle that the Mississippi River does not go to China, but to the Gulf of Mexico. This gave LaSalle incentive for future explorations.

Lasalle went to France (1674-75) at Frontenac’s suggestion and met with Louis XIV for permission to expand the fur trade. The rebuilt Fort Frontenac (now in stone) became the center of fur trading and farming land. However, LaSalle took business away from merchants in Montreal and also aligned himself with the priests (Sulpicians) in opposition to the Jesuits. There’s a story that competing fur traders attempted to poison LaSalle around this time.

He talked to Colbert and asked to build two forts along the Great Lakes, one at Niagara and one inland near Lake Michigan which became Ft. Duquesne. LaSalle proposed building a great supply ship to traverse these lakes, trading goods.

Lasalle went to France a second time in 1677-78 to seek permission to explore the Mississippi River and areas to further west. During that trip King Louis granted LaSalle a monopoly of buffalo hide trade, but told him not to interfere with the beaver trade.

While in France, LaSalle met Henri de Tonti who became LaSalle’s No. 2 man. He was an Italian officer with experience in wartime where he’d lost a hand, replaced with a prosthetic. De Tonti was called “Iron Hand” by the Indians. Later in 1678, the adventurers arrive in Quebec – LaSalle, de Tonti, and Father Hennepin who was an explorer, a writer, a self-publicist and – as Jeff added, “a liar.” We were shown a beautiful hand-drawn map of the Great Lakes (by Hennepin?). We see a Hennepin-engraved picture of Niagara Falls.

1679-1682 is the period of the second explorations by Lasalle that took him from the northeastern shores of Lake Ontario all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and back.



In 1679, a great supply ship is built, called “Le Griffon,” (LEFT) with the nefarious Luc as pilot, traversing Lake Huron in a storm which “wasn’t a nice trip.” Apparently LaSalle was on board, and expected a welcome upon arrival at Mackinac Island, but the Jesuits were not happy. There, LaSalle discovered men who he had sent earlier for buffalo. They’d stolen supplies and furs at Green Bay from an advance party. The Griffin was sent back to St. Ignace and Niagara Falls, but it never arrived. The Griffin was lost at sea, the first large ship with a documented loss on the upper Great Lakes, perhaps the first of 8,000+ shipwrecks in Lake Michigan.

LaSalle south with a party filling 14 canoes headed for The Saint Joseph River along the south eastern shore of Lake Michigan. In the meantime, The Griffin was lost at sea, the first such loss on the upper Great Lakes, and the first of 8,000+ shipwrecks in Lake Michigan.

LaSalle's party stopped at Benton Harbor near "St. Joe" where Ft. Dauphin was to have been built, but there was no fort. They heard about the loss of The Griffon. LaSalle and De Tonti took the St. Joseph River (MI) north, a journey during which some of LaSalle's men were so angry that one of them shot and wounded LaSalle. The group found Shawnee Indians who showed the portage from St. Joseph to the Kankakee at a bend in the river – near the so-named South Bend, Indiana. Jeff said that few in that area know about LaSalle having been there, even though there's a big plaque at the location.

The St. Joseph led to the Kankakee north to the Des Plaines River to the Illinois River up to Starved Rock where a huge Indian Village was located, but "nobody was home." LaSalle appropriated supplies from this empty camp and moved on up the Peoria River where they encountered potentially hostile Indians, the Illinois. To gain their respect, LaSalle had all eight of the party's canoes fill the stream in a show of force. This was at the area of the Old Peoria Fort and Village, and the New Peoria Fort and Village. Someone said LaSalle was a spy for the Iroquois. LaSalle soothed the suspicions, but the Indians discouraged LaSalle with tales of evil spirits. LaSalle wanted to continue but his men did not.

The party moved downriver to Ft. Crevecoeur, where lived the first civilized occupants of the Illinois River. We see a 1684 map of this fort, located south of today's East Peoria, where today stands a plaque marking the historic site. Moving on (back to 1680), LaSalle returns to Frontenac in the winter when the water is frozen! At Starved Rock, he met Chief Chasaugowac, a mysterious figure who floats in and out of LaSalle's story. This character appears in the journals of Marquette and Joliet.

We see a big area map with arrows all over the Great Lakes illustrating the Iroquois Wars from 1641 to the 1680s, with big massacres. Ft. Crevecoeur was ransacked, and furs were stolen by LaSalle's own men. "We are all savages," apparently one said, and it was "not a good trip for LaSalle," said Jeff. And Tonti is missing! LaSalle goes down the Illinois to the Mississippi River. It turns out Tonti is back in Green Bay.

La Salle's 1682 exploration of the Mississippi from the mouth of the Illinois River to the Gulf of Mexico takes place in winter when there's ice on the Illinois River (illustrated by a painting, RIGHT). He discovers Mud Lake. On February 6, 1682, LaSalle's canoes enter the Mississippi River, and he claims "Louisiana" (for King Louis XIV) for France on April 9 of that year.



Back at Starved Rock, Fort St. Louis is built, to be the first permanent European fortress in North America. The area is home to 20,000 Miami and Illinois Indians, but no Iroquois. It is to be the Gate of Empire, the Seat of Commerce. LaSalle hated the area, wanted to make an ocean voyage.

After a period in the Illinois country, LaSalle again returned to France (1683), again wanting to explore further. Louis XIV said okay to an ocean voyage, and four ships sailed in 1684 from France directly to the Gulf of Mexico towards the mouth of the Mississippi to establish colonies. All ships are eventually lost. In 1686 one ship sinks off the coast of Texas near Matagorda Bay 500 miles off course--"La Belle." (Note there's a documentary called "Voyage of Doom" about the raising of this ship: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/lasalle/>. Also, one can see the raised La Belle being reconstructed in the Bullock Museum in Austin, TX. <http://www.thestoryoftexas.com/la-belle/the-exhibit>)

Living conditions in Texas were very poor and LaSalle's men mutinied. LaSalle is later assassinated in the south in March 1687. Henry De Tonti did not know that LaSalle had died and he tried to find him.

Earlier, while traveling with LaSalle, **Henri Joutel** kept journals. Joutel wrote about the Chicago area, and he may have been the first European to note that one could find a local allium plant there, a “wild onion.” Jeff calls Henri Joutel the First Tour Guide in Chicago.

End of lecture

The audience was a bit surprised to learn that LaSalle had been assassinated. Obviously, his career included many journeys over the ocean and inland seas, not to mention traversing all those rivers with Indian guides and crews of men who objected to his leadership style, in rough weather.

There were a few questions and comments. To us it was interesting that LaSalle Street, Chicago’s historic financial center, is named after someone who was *not* good at financing his journeys, often running out of money. He lost ships, his fur pelts and hides were stolen, he had to borrow money and use furs as collateral. Members of his colonizing party were stranded and near starvation in Texas. LaSalle weathered mutinies because his arrogance alienated people, but, alas, in the end, one LaSalle was killed by one of his men.

A Bicentennial Recreation of a LaSalle Trip!

CTPA member Nancy Kalchbrenner added a footnote to the talk, speaking about a local school French teacher named Reid Lewis who in 1974 began training and planning to take a group of 17 boys on a recreation of LaSalle’s winter journey (1681-82), complete with costumes and reproduction equipment. It was to be part of a Bicentennial celebration and take the kids along LaSalle's route from Montreal to the Gulf of Mexico.

Each boy represented a real person in LaSalle’s original journey. They followed the diary route, stopping along the way as did LaSalle, although LaSalle did not need to deal with injuries due to fender-benders in modern day Toronto! The recreation party also capsized canoes near Devil’s Den at Washington Island (Door County, Wisconsin) and they endured it all through the harshest winter in memory. Still, the intrepid group completed the journey.

Nancy’s brother was among the group of hardy young men who learned a dramatic lesson in history, and sung French tunes and sold a record album they had recorded to help fund the journey. Nancy had brought newspaper articles and the record album and proudly pointed out her brother in photos!

Learn more about this trip here:

<http://personal.psu.edu/faculty/g/a/gal4/LaSalleExpedition2.html>

Respectfully submitted
Judith Randall, CTPA Co-Secretary

LASALLE IN THE ILLINOIS COUNTRY

Biographies

Frances Parkman, 1) "**La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West**", Jon Krakaur, Series Editor, Modern Library, New York NY 10022. *Definitive early biography by the great 19th Century Historian.*, 2) "**France & England in North America Series**" The Library of America.

Anka Muhlstein "**La Salle Explorer of the North American Frontier**", Arcade Publishing, New York, 1994

Donald S Johnson, "**La Salle**", Copper Square Press Series - Publisher, 2002.

Henri Joutel, **Joutels Journal of LaSalle's Last Voyage**, Stiles, Henri Reed, Publisher. (Available from ABE Books and copies are at the Newberry and Harold Washington Libraries.)

References

Milton Quaipe, "**Chicago & the Old Northwest**", University of Illinois Press, 2001. "

Ulrich Dankers & Jane Meredith, "**Early Chicago**", Early Chicago Incorporated, River Forest, IL, (708) 366-7002.

Charles J. Balesi, "**The Time of the French in the Heart of North America**" Alliance Francaise Chicago - Publisher, 1991.

Judith A. Franke "**French Peoria and the Illinois Country**", Illinois State Museum Society Springfield Ill 1995

Video

"**Voyage of Doom**" (PBS Nova Series), WGBH Boston Video, PO Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407-2284, (800) 949-8670 - www.wgbh.org *The story of La Salle's failed journey to the Gulf, and the fascinating discovery in 1995 of his supply vessel, La Belle.*

Internet

LaSalle–Griffon Project, www.lasalle-griffon.org

History of the Great Lakes, www.maritimehistoyofthegreatlakes

Chicago Portage Newsletter/Phil Vierling, www.chicagoportage.org

For The Younger Explorers

Jim Hargrove, **“The World’s Great Explorers Rene-Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle”**, Childrens Press Chicago.

William Jay Jacobs, **“La Salle, A Life of Boundless Adventure”**, Franklin Watts-Publisher.

Tanya Larkin, **“Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet Explorers of the Mississippi”**, The Rosen Publishing Company, Inc.

John Zronik **“Sieur de La Salle, New World Adventurer”**, Crabtree Publishing Company

Arlene Bourgeois Molzahn, **“ LaSalle, Explorer of the Mississippi”**, Enslow Publishers, Inc.

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Worth Richard, **“Voices from Colonial America”**, National Geographic, Washington D.C.