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Cavalier de LaSalle: The Niles story begins

The earliest written history of this area goes back to 1679 when the French explorer, the Cavalier de LaSalle, ascended the St. Joseph River.

LaSalle's party, of which Friar Louis Hennepin was a member, probably comprised the first group of explorers ever to travel this way.

They followed the St. Joseph River from Lake Michigan to South Bend, where they made the portage across to the headwaters of the Wankakee River.

Several members of LaSalle's party left records of this trip, the most complete and interesting of which is the one written by Fr. Hennepin.

Upon his return home, Fr. Hennepin hurriedly compiled a record of his travels. Although he was inclined to minimize the contributions of LaSalle and Henry de Tonty, LaSalle's lieutenant, his book contained the first map ever published of the lower end of Lake Michigan.

Fr. Hennepin, a Belgian, told how he had arrived in Quebec in 1675 where he found LaSalle planning a voyage of exploration of the Mississippi River which had been discovered by Joliet and Marquette in 1673.

The expedition began in August of 1675. They sailed in the Griffin, the first sailboat on the Great Lakes, from Niagara Falls across Lake Erie and then to St. Ignace in the Straits on Mackinac, where they paused briefly.

The group then sailed to Washington Island, near Green Bay, Wis., where the Griffin was loaded with furs which were to be

and planning the expedition. The ship never returned to Niagara.

Two hundred and fifty-one years later, the water-logged hulk of a ship believed to be the Griffin was discovered in Mississagi Strait of Manitoulin Island in Georgian Bay.

The day following the Griffin's departure, the 14 persons left behind started out down the western shore of Lake Michigan, which was then called Lake of the Illinois.

Only eight of the men had guns; the remainder were equipped only with bow and arrows.

Another 20 men, who had been left at the Straits, had been ordered to proceed down the eastern shore. The two groups had expected to rendezvous at the mouth of what is now known as the St. Joseph River. The meeting place presumably was chosen on the basis of reports obtained from Indians.

But LaSalle's group found no one there and no evidence that the group, which was under the command of Tonty, has ever been there.

Despite the fact that Fr. Hennepin and others urged LaSalle not to wait for Tonty's group because of the approaching winter, LaSalle elected to remain at the mouth of the river.

The group constructed a fort which LaSalle designated Fort Miami. The fort was not so much for defense as to keep the men occupied, and the month of November was spent in this work.

On Nov. 20, about half of the other group arrived and the party, numbering 30 in eight canoes, began the ascent of the river in their search of the portage which

The explorers carried very little with them and Hennepin wrote that his only possessions were "my portable chapel, one blanket and a mat of rushes which were to serve me for bed and quilt."

The group encountered considerable difficulty in locating the portage and on one occasion, when LaSalle himself had gone off in search of it, members of the party feared he had become lost or perished. He was finally found wandering in an area that is now Mishawaka, Ind.

George Pare, in his history of "LaSalle and the Recollects," said the explorers were finally directed to the portage by an Indian hunter.

The portage was about two miles long and Fr. Hennepin described it as being on "marshy lands that are so quaking one can scarcely walk on them."

LaSalle did not succeed in exploring the Mississippi on his first expedition because of difficulties with the Indians and his own men.

He returned to Montreal and in 1681 he organized a new expedition. He realized his dream of following the Mississippi to the sea in 1682 and his explorations added a new empire to the French crown.

LaSalle returned to France and organized a plan for colonization of the new realm. He sailed from France, intending to enter the Mississippi from the Gulf, and to establish a colony 60 miles inland.

He could not find the mouth of the river and, according to Pare's findings, "he tramped through the wilds of Texas in a frenzy of despair until he was shot down by one of his own men."

The colonists died off one by one