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FORT ST. CHARLES AND THE NORTHWEST ANGLE¹

The northern boundary of Minnesota from Lake Superior westward runs through a tangle of lakes, rivers, and portages. When it reaches the largest of all the lakes separating this state from Canada it suddenly leaps northwestward. Through the Lake of the Woods it threads its way past numerous islands, graciously leaving some on the American side and others on the Canadian, until it approaches a long narrow inlet, where it veers westward, dividing the inlet in two. At the innermost point on the inlet, the boundary line, abandoning a course that is determined in some fashion by topography and water routes, turns southward and runs straight down to the forty-ninth parallel. Having reached that famous line, it abruptly swings west and follows it to the Pacific Coast.

To return to the inlet in the Lake of the Woods, the land on its north side is Canadian, while that on the south side is American. The American territory is separated from the rest of the United States by Buffalo Bay, a southwestern projection of the lake. This isolated bit of land, comprising about a hundred and fifty square miles, is the Northwest Angle. That this Angle should be American rather than Canadian provokes endless curiosity among those who scan the map of Minnesota, but the explanation is simple. It

¹ An address given on June 19, 1937, at the Roseau session of the fifteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. The writer is indebted to Mr. Lewis Beeson for assistance in assembling the materials upon which the paper is based.

goes back to the treaty of 1783, which provided that the boundary from Lake Superior was to follow the line of water communication to the Lake of the Woods, run through that lake to its northwestern point, and then follow a course due west to the Mississippi River. Geography in this instance outwitted diplomacy, for the Mississippi was conspicuously absent from the region west of the Lake of the Woods. In 1797-98 David Thompson definitely proved that the Mississippi rose considerably south of the Lake of the Woods. After the Louisiana Purchase it was suggested by Americans that the boundary, instead of engaging in a futile pursuit of the Mississippi, should run along the forty-ninth parallel, and this practical proposal was adopted in the Convention of 1818, with the proviso that a boundary line should be drawn due south from the Northwest Angle point to the forty-ninth parallel. In 1824 and 1825, the Northwest Angle Inlet was selected as the northwest point of the Lake of the Woods, and this selection was confirmed by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. The minutiae of surveys and the disposition of minor boundary problems could be worked out only over a long period of time — with important decisions coming as recently as 1872, 1908, and 1925. On one point, however, there could be no possible dispute: when the line south to the forty-ninth parallel was surveyed, it was evident that a projection of the lake cut off from the rest of the United States the slice of land south of the inlet.

It was on the south side of the inlet separating Canada from the United States, on what is now American and Minnesota soil, that La Vérendrye and his associates built Fort St. Charles more than two hundred years ago. The Northwest Angle is no mere geographic curiosity; it has a deep historical interest and will always occupy an important place in the story of the early Northwest. Here was a central point for vast plans, a depot on a pre-pioneer route of trade

and travel; with this fort are intertwined the dreams and hopes of a great French explorer and fur-trader; from this spot were projected a series of far-flung posts; this was the base for ambitious expeditions toward the unknown West; on these waters sped the canoes of hardy voyageurs; to this fort came courageous wilderness priests; on an island of this lake occurred one of the darkest tragedies of French-Canadian history; in this region were enacted the last scenes in the drama of the French regime in the American Northwest.

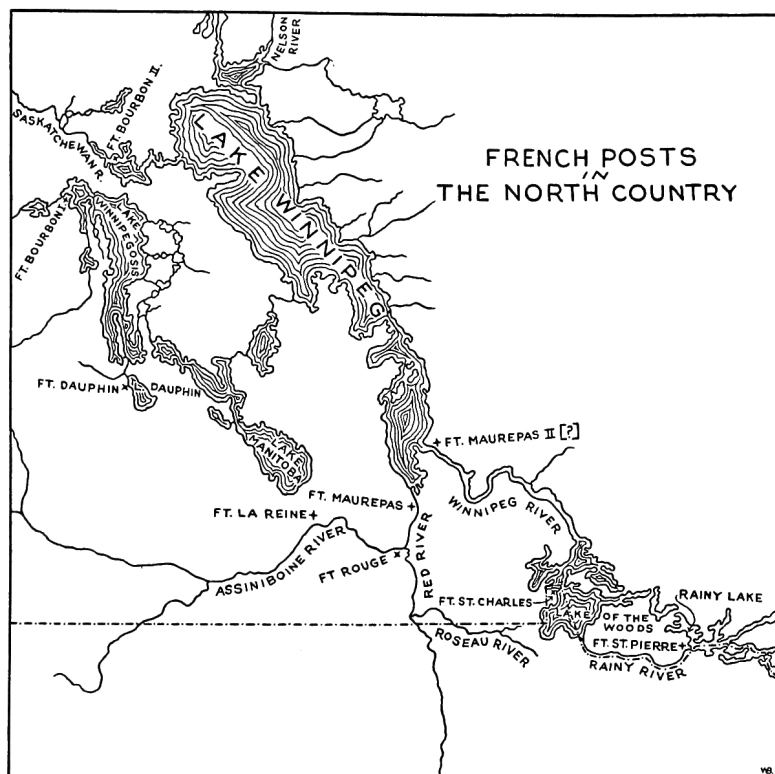
In order to understand those last scenes, one should recall, if only for a moment, the larger story of the French in the West, a story which for Minnesota alone has a sweep of more than a century. In the dim background of the seventeenth century, only a couple of decades after Jean Nicolet's epoch-making journey in 1634 to Lake Michigan, we glimpse in the Middle West the daring international traders, Radisson and Groseilliers. In 1673 Jolliet and Marquette floated down the Mississippi and within six or seven years the explorer-statesman Du Lhut pushed westward from Lake Superior to Mille Lacs, dreaming of finding a way to the Vermillion Sea, and Father Hennepin, emissary of the mighty La Salle, came northward from the Illinois country and discovered the Falls of St. Anthony. Close on their heels came Perrot, builder of Fort St. Antoine on the Wisconsin side of Lake Pepin, and Le Sueur, who just at the close of the seventeenth century established Fort L'Huillier, mined blue earth, and collected beaver skins in the heart of the Minnesota country. An interlude of more than a quarter of a century separates Le Sueur from the eighteenth-century enterprises in the Minnesota Northwest, but in 1727 La Perrière ventured into the upper Mississippi country to build Fort Beauharnois, and four years later La Vérendrye made his bold plunge into the hinterland of Lake Superior. It was a period of revived French in-

terest in exploration, and both men were looking for a way to the shores washed by the Pacific.

Indeed, La Vérendrye seems to have derived his inspiration from tales of western rivers told him by Indians at his Lake Nipigon post, notably by a certain Auchagah, who had journeyed a considerable distance into the West and had picked up rumors of a river that emptied its waters into a great salt sea and of armor-clad men who rode on horses. La Vérendrye believed that the tale contained some truth and he persuaded Auchagah to draw a map on birchbark tracing the route of his travels beyond Lake Superior. This map he sent to Beauharnois, the governor of New France, and in 1730 he saw the governor personally and disclosed his ambition to make an expedition to the sea of the West. He asked for money, supplies, and a hundred men. The governor approved the plan and forwarded to Versailles a request for its authorization.

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Vérendrye, was then forty-five years old and had already had a varied career. He was born in New France in 1685, at Three Rivers, where his father was governor and his mother's father, Pierre Boucher, had been governor, and when he was only twelve years old he entered the army. In his twenties he went to France and there in 1709 he fought and was wounded at Malplaquet, the decisive battle of the War of the Spanish Succession. A few years later he returned to Canada and became an officer of a colonial regiment. He married Marie-Anne Dandonneau du Sablé, a daughter of the Sieur de l'Île du Pas, in 1712 and had four sons—Jean Baptiste, Pierre, François, and Louis Joseph—all of whom ultimately came to Fort St. Charles. These boys were growing up at the time La Vérendrye was placed in charge of the fur-trading post on Lake Nipigon.

The king's reply at length arrived from France. It proved disappointing, for, although Louis XV authorized a



western expedition, he was unwilling to make a grant for its expenses. He did promise La Vérendrye a monopoly of the fur trade beyond Lake Superior. The governor in fact had already given him a similar assurance, and this enabled him to get financial support from a number of Montreal merchants interested less in exploration than in beavers. So in June, 1731, the veteran of Malplaquet had started from Montreal for the West with his three eldest sons, his nephew La Jemeraye, and a party of about fifty soldiers and voyageurs. At Michilimackinac the expedition was joined by a Jesuit priest, Father Mesaiger, and on August 26 the canoes carrying the Frenchmen landed at Grand Portage

on the north Superior shore. La Vérendrye, facing a mutiny among his men, who were reluctant to push into the unknown hinterland of the Great Lakes, took most of them north to spend the winter at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River, while La Jemeraye, with one of La Vérendrye's sons, one voyageur, and a guide, crossed the portage to the Pigeon River and made his way as far as the western end of Rainy Lake, where he built Fort St. Pierre, naming it in honor of La Vérendrye. The next summer, in 1732, the commander joined the men at Rainy Lake and then, with his followers and an escort of fifty Indian canoes, struck out for the Lake of the Woods, where he established Fort St. Charles. This was the second in a chain of French forts that was ultimately to include Fort Maurepas, at the mouth of the Red River; Fort Rouge, at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, where much later the metropolis of the Canadian Northwest was to be built; Fort La Reine, some distance up the Assiniboine; and Forts Dauphin and Bourbon, erected by La Vérendrye's sons in the Saskatchewan country.

Fort St. Charles was named in honor of the Canadian governor, Charles de la Boische, Marquis de Beauharnois, for whom another Minnesota post, that of Fort Beauharnois on Lake Pepin, also was named. The fort on the Lake of the Woods was surrounded by palisades—a double row of spruce, aspen, and oak stakes from twelve to fifteen feet high. The east and west sides of the enclosure measured a hundred feet long; the other two sides, sixty. There were two gates, one on the north side, which faced the lake, the other on the south, giving access to the neighboring forest; and there was also a watchtower. Inside the enclosure were houses for the commandant and the missionary, a chapel, four main buildings, a powder magazine, and a storehouse. La Vérendrye's lodgings and the quarters for his men were evidently toward the rear of the fort, away from

the lake. The chapel seems to have occupied much of the west side, with the priest's house in front of and to the north of it. The storehouse probably was near the gate leading to the lake. The establishment as a whole was somewhat smaller than Fort Beauharnois. One of the Frenchmen stationed at Fort St. Charles described it as "but an enclosure," inside which were "a few huts of square logs, calked with earth and covered with bark."

The records leave no doubt that the fort was frequently the scene of much bustle and activity. In the spring of 1733 La Jemeraye got ready to journey to Quebec to report upon the progress that had been made and to obtain fresh supplies. Three canoes were filled with furs collected during the winter and were sent to Lake Superior. These canoes returned in August laden with merchandise. As many as a hundred and fifty canoes arrived at the fort in one day, each carrying two or three Indians and loaded with meat, buffalo fat, bear oil, wild rice, and other things to trade. One day some three hundred warriors stopped on their way to attack the Chippewa of Madeline Island, and the next day five hundred more came on an expedition against the prairie Sioux. After forts were established to the west and north, men were dispatched from Fort St. Charles with supplies and merchandise for these newer posts, or returned with furs to be packed for the journey eastward to Montreal.

Let us look in on a trading council held at Fort St. Charles with a party of Cree and Assiniboin Indians in the winter of 1733-34. When the Indians arrived they saluted with three volleys the French flag that was flying over the fort, to which La Vérendrye and the twenty Frenchmen who were with him replied. Then the chiefs were allowed to enter the fort, where mutual compliments were paid and they were given tobacco and provisions. The next day the Indians presented the Frenchmen with gifts of beaver skins

and about a hundred pounds of buffalo meat, and they in turn were given a sack of corn and a large supply of tobacco. "My children," the white leader said to them, "I will tell you tomorrow what are our Father's orders to me regarding you, and shall let you know his will."

On the next day, New Year's Day, 1734, the Indians thronged into the fort at ten o'clock in the morning. The Frenchmen had placed at the center of the grounds thirty pounds of tobacco, forty pounds of bullets, two hundred gunflints, twenty axes, sixty knives, sixty ramrods, sixty awls, and supplies of glass beads, needles, and vermilion. Before distributing these gifts, however, La Vérendrye made a speech. The great chief of the Frenchmen, he said, would be glad to learn of the Indians' visit. The French were numerous, there was no land unknown to them, they had only one chief, and La Vérendrye was his mouthpiece. If the Indians obeyed this chief, he would send many Frenchmen each year to satisfy their needs; but they in turn must bring in plenty of skins in exchange. The next day La Vérendrye again entertained the chiefs, giving them cloaks, shirts, breeches, leggins, powder and shot, axes, daggers, knives, hatchets, beads, and flags. Incidentally, he asked them if they had any knowledge of iron and was interested when one of them said he knew of several places where iron could be found.

This scene discloses La Vérendrye in the role of a negotiator and trader. But he was also a farmer, perhaps the first white farmer in Minnesota. The fort had been established with an eye not only to trade, but also to fishing and hunting, the availability of wild rice, and good land. The Frenchmen cleared the land the first year by burning. Abundant wild rice enabled them to save their corn for seeding. They planted corn and peas, and of the latter La Vérendrye reported a harvest of ten bushels for one of seed. He also made some effort to teach the Indians to

sow corn. But with all his care, life at the fort was precarious. Heavy rains in 1733 damaged the wild rice crop and that autumn La Vérendrye sent ten men to the other side of the lake with tools to build a shelter at the mouth of a river and with nets for fishing. The fishing was excellent. That fall the men caught more than four thousand whitefish, not to speak of trout, sturgeon, and other varieties of fish. They returned to Fort St. Charles on May 2, 1734, after the ice had melted, having lived during a northern winter on the food furnished them by lake and country. The problem of food was not the only serious one that faced white men in the primitive West. Sometimes there must have been grave danger from forest fires. Jean-Pierre Aulneau, a young Jesuit missionary who went out to Fort St. Charles in 1735 to take the place of Father Mesaiger, thus described his trip from Lake Superior to the Lake of the Woods: "I journeyed nearly all the way through fire and a thick stifling smoke, which prevented us from even once catching a glimpse of the sun."

In 1734 La Vérendrye, worried over his debts and the demands of his creditors, journeyed the long way to Montreal and Quebec to re-enlist their support and to report to the governor. He returned to Fort St. Charles with his youngest son, Louis Joseph, the following year. Early in 1736 he suffered a great loss in the death from exposure of his nephew La Jemeraye, and before the year was over an even heavier blow fell upon him. Provisions, goods, and powder ordered by La Vérendrye in Montreal the previous year had not yet arrived at the fort. They were badly needed, and the commander decided to send three well-manned canoes to meet the brigade that was on its way west. The plan was to secure some of the supplies and to hurry back to the fort with them. Jean, the explorer's eldest son, was selected to lead this relief expedition. He took with him Father Aulneau and nineteen voyageurs.

Not long after leaving the fort the members of this party beached their canoes on an island in the Lake of the Woods. Here they were surprised by a large Sioux war party, looking for revenge upon the French for maintaining friendly relations with their own bitter enemies, the Cree and Assiniboin, and all the white men were killed and beheaded. The course of this terrible tragedy we can only imagine—perhaps a seemingly friendly arrival of the enemy, masking treachery, or possibly a stealthy approach that caught the Frenchmen unawares, then the sudden attack, the blood-curdling yells, a spirited defense, finally stillness. Eventually La Vérendrye learned what had happened, and his heart was heavy with grief. “I have lost my son, the Reverend Father, and my Frenchmen, misfortunes which I shall lament all my life,” he said. Later he had the bodies of his son and the priest and the skulls of the voyageurs buried beneath the chapel of Fort St. Charles. He had the fort itself rebuilt and “put in such a condition that four men could defend it against a hundred.” There was no thought of giving it up, but the next spring the garrison of Fort Beauharnois on Lake Pepin was withdrawn by its commander, St. Pierre, because of the increasing hostility of the Sioux, who were gloating over their trophies from the North. The tragic affair on the island in the Lake of the Woods thus compelled the abandonment of the French post on the upper Mississippi.

We usually think of the voyageurs who served La Vérendrye as nameless, but it is interesting to know that in Montreal are preserved copies of the engagements that they made with him and his business associates before they departed for the post of “Winnipeg” in the North—that is, Fort St. Charles. The Minnesota Historical Society has transcripts of no fewer than twenty-one of these documents from 1731. They give us such names as Jacques La Vallée, Paul Chevalier, François Provanché, Joseph De

Laurier, Pierre Le Boeuf, Roc Touin, Antoine Millet, and Jean Baptiste Renaud, as well as the terms and conditions of their employment. A typical agreement called for a year's service at a compensation of five hundred livres payable in beaver skins after the return of the engagé, who promised to help in "going up and coming back," to paddle canoes, to transport merchandise and furs, to be obedient and faithful, and not to leave without the consent of his employers. Let us give an honored place in the story of Fort St. Charles to the French-Canadian voyageurs—gay of heart, bright of dress, superbly skilled in the art of handling the *canot d'écorce*, singers of "A la claire fontaine" and other ballads, pioneers of western waters. They have earned it, for they manned the canoes that carried explorers and fur traders into the heart of the inland empire, they built the fort itself, and nineteen of them died alongside the commandant's son and the Jesuit father in that bloody hour on Massacre Island.

When in 1737 La Vérendrye revisited Montreal—a journey of two months and eighteen days—he was pressed by the governor to forward his exploration of the farther West. The governor in turn was urged on by the impatient colonial minister in France, Count Maurepas, who evidently believed that La Vérendrye had succumbed to the lure of beaver skins. The truth seems to be that La Vérendrye had never forgotten his ambition to find the western sea, but he clearly regarded the expansion of the power of New France as fundamental, a first essential. He would set up new trading posts, win the loyalty of the Indians, increase French trade at the expense of the English in the North, establish a firm base for an advance to the mountains and sea of the Far West. It must not be forgotten that from the first he had in effect been left by the government to shift for himself in his western enterprise, to make his way without government funds. He was obliged by every cir-

cumstance to take a realistic view of the problems that confronted him in the wilderness.

Upon his return to the West in 1738 La Vérendrye made his famous journey to the land of the Mandan Indians in the Missouri River country, taking with him two of his sons and a large party of voyageurs and traders. His reports give an interesting picture of the Mandan. He found them to be industrious, living in spacious dwellings, making excellent wickerwork, using earthen vessels, and "great eaters . . . eager for feasts." Every day, he said, they brought him "more than twenty dishes" of corn, beechnuts, and pumpkins, "always cooked." He was especially impressed by their cellars, "where they store all they have in the way of grains, meat, fat, dressed skins and bearskins." Before he returned to Fort La Reine, which was now the French base in the West, he instructed two of his men to remain behind with the Mandan, and when they rejoined him the next autumn they brought him circumstantial reports, gathered from Indians who had visited the Mandan, of white people living far to the west in towns "near the great Lake the water of which rises and falls and is not good to drink."

Clearly, if the mystery of the sea whose water was not good to drink were to be solved, a more ambitious exploration was called for. It was undertaken in 1742. Unfortunately, however, La Vérendrye himself was unable to join in it, and it was left to two of his sons to conduct it. "On January 1st, 1743," wrote one of them, "we were in sight of the mountains." A few days later they reached the foothills of the mountains—and this was farthest west for the Vérendryes. Most scholars today believe that they reached, not the Rockies, but the Black Hills. When the explorers returned to the Missouri, they deposited an inscribed lead plaque as a record of their journey. A hundred and seventy years later that plaque was picked up by a South Dakota school child who was playing on a hill above

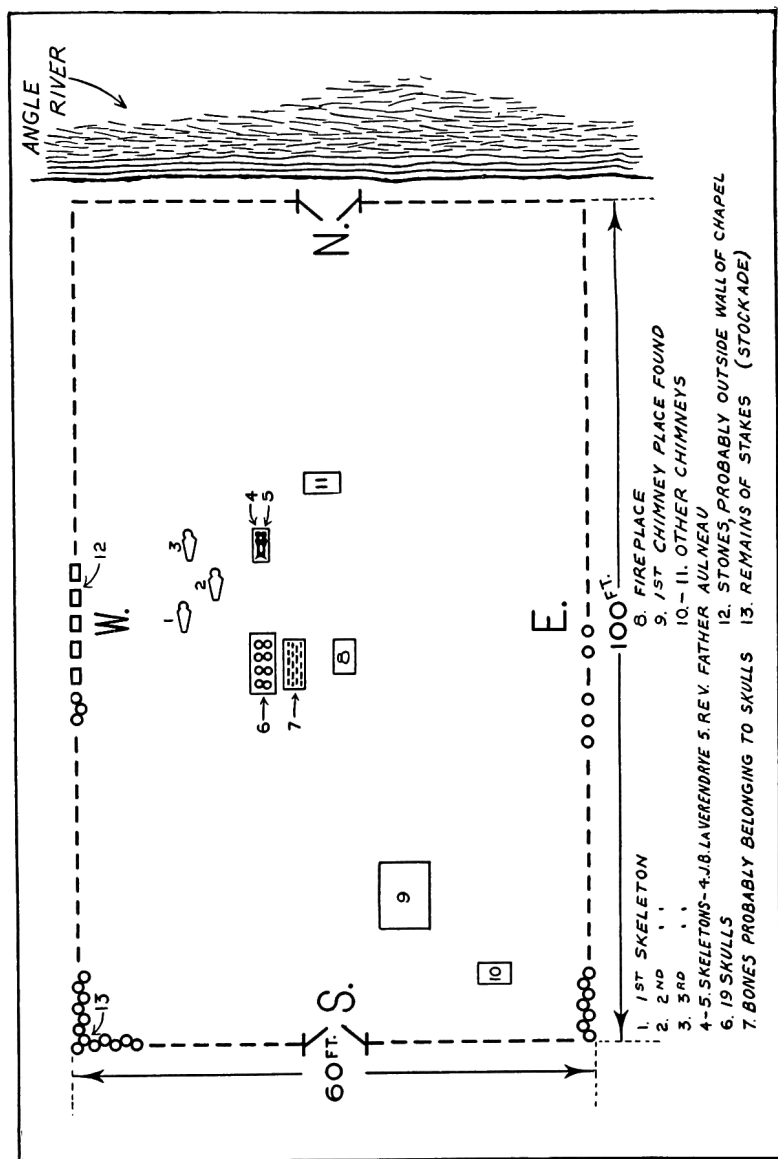
Fort Pierre—a message from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, the elder La Vérendrye was keenly alive to the possibility of utilizing the Saskatchewan River approach to the farther West; but he was ill, under the fire of criticism, and burdened with a debt of more than forty thousand livres, and so he was obliged to return again to Quebec. There he found that he still retained the confidence of the governor, but that the skepticism of Maurepas had increased. He was at first denied a merited promotion in military rank and relieved of his position as commandant of the western posts. His achievements spoke for themselves, however, and in 1746 he was promoted to a captaincy. Three years later he won an even higher honor—the coveted Cross of St. Louis. Two of his sons received promotions in the military service and he himself was reinstated as commandant in the West. It was too late, however. He intended to go back to the wilderness in 1750 “to continue the establishment of posts and the exploration of the West,” but the intention was never realized, for on December 5, 1749, at Montreal, he died. He had not discovered the western sea, but, as Beauharnois once said of him, he had given himself “wholly to the task and devoted to it the whole proceeds of the new posts which he established with so much trouble and care and with extreme risk.”

Fort St. Charles had been at first the western capital of the empire that La Vérendrye was carving out in the interior Northwest. After some years it seems to have yielded priority of importance to the newer posts established in the more strategic centers of the Canadian Northwest, but it continued to be a scene of activity until the eve of the British conquest, when it fades from the records. It was undoubtedly the longest occupied French post on Minnesota soil. For how many years the palisades and chapel

and other buildings of the fort escaped the ravages of fire we do not know, but we do know that ultimately they were destroyed. As long ages passed the very site was forgotten. In more modern times, however, the story of Fort St. Charles and other posts of the West began to arouse interest. La Vérendrye himself has been accorded a high place in the history of Canada and the American Northwest; monuments in honor of his achievements have been erected in Quebec, Three Rivers, Winnipeg, and other Canadian cities, as well as at the North Dakota village that bears his name; and his journals and letters have been studied by scholars with great care. Only a few years ago they were published by the Champlain Society in a superb volume edited by Mr. Lawrence J. Burpee. In these vivid records the old fort comes to life again, the voyageurs ride western waters, and La Vérendrye himself lives and breathes. Back in 1889 an old man named Alneau told a Jesuit at La Vendée, in France, that his family possessed a package of letters written by a relative, a Jesuit priest, who had been massacred by Indians in North America a hundred and fifty years earlier. Thus was brought to light another important contemporary source of information, the letters of the martyred Jean-Pierre Aulneau. And in 1890 the Jesuits of St. Boniface College, Manitoba, stirred by interest in that priest's life, tried to identify the island on which he was killed. They came to the Lake of the Woods and on an island associated by tradition with the massacre they placed a memorial cross. Later, in 1905, the Archbishop of St. Boniface had excavations made on this island, which is on the Canadian side of the boundary line, in a futile search for relics, and he had a small memorial chapel built.

In 1902 a search had been made for the site of Fort St. Charles. A party from St. Boniface landed on the north shore of the Northwest Angle Inlet and there, at a spot



THE EXCAVATIONS AT FORT ST. CHARLES, 1908

[This plan is based upon a sketch by Father J. Blain, in *Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 7:229 (September 15, 1908).]

pointed out to them by an Indian chief, they unearthed an old fireplace. This spot they believed to be the site of Fort St. Charles. It was investigated further in 1907, but in 1908 a new expedition under the auspices of the Historical Society of St. Boniface, which had been organized immediately after the discoveries made in 1902, rejected the earlier identification and found the exact spot where the fort had stood. It was on the south, or American, side of the inlet, not on the north. The ruins of a large fireplace were the first discovery. Then, on subsequent days, though the buildings and palisades had long since crumbled away, the fort took shape in the minds of the searchers. Here had stood the chapel, there the priest's house, over there the quarters of the commandant. Remains of the posts which enclosed the fort were found, and buried in the soil were discovered a pair of steel scissors, a carpenter's chisel, a shoe buckle, two iron handles, several knife blades (one with the name "Alice D." on it), a staple for a lock, nails of several kinds, iron rings, beads, and other objects.

But the most dramatic and thrilling find was made at the site of the chapel. There the skeletons of Jean Baptiste de la Vérendrye and of Father Aulneau and the skulls of the massacred voyageurs were found. In all, nineteen skulls and five skeletons were uncovered, two of the latter clearly those of Jean Baptiste and the Jesuit father, for the two had been placed together in a wooden box and bore evidence of wounds and with them was found confirmatory evidence—two keys, another bunch of five keys, a piece of gilt glass, beads such as belong to a rosary, the hook for a priest's cassock, a shoe buckle, a hunting knife, an awl, and a few other objects. It is chastening to be obliged to add that all the material found by the excavators at Fort St. Charles was stored in the old St. Boniface College and lost or destroyed when that building was swept by a devastating fire fifteen years ago. A few bones were indeed found after

the fire, but even these could not certainly be identified with the relics from Fort St. Charles, for nine students and one Jesuit father were burned to death in the fire. Fortunately, however, the finds were recorded in pictures before this disaster occurred, and these pictures, together with a sketch plan of the fort drawn by the Reverend Father Blain, S. J., are reproduced in a valuable bulletin issued by the Historical Society of St. Boniface, supplementing a full report upon the excavation.

Such, in broad outline, is the story of the old French post at the Northwest Angle. Fort St. Charles constitutes a significant and dramatic chapter not only in the history of Minnesota but in that of the entire American and Canadian Northwest, and the post commander is a major figure in the epic of the continent as the discoverer of the vast interior Northwest. It is time for American interest—local, state, and national, perhaps with Canadian co-operation—to express itself through the erection of a permanent historical marker on the site, supplementing the wooden cross very appropriately placed there by the emissaries of the Historical Society of St. Boniface. The area of the site should be re-excavated with a view to acquiring additional detailed information and to building at some future time a replica of the original fort. The fathers of the Catholic church have done a pioneer service to history in making known and acquiring the site. I believe that either the United States or the state of Minnesota, in co-operation with local historical interests, should reserve this spot and an adjacent area for posterity as a permanent park set aside by virtue of its international historical importance. To the central interest of the old French fort is added that of the international boundary and of the water route itself, strategic in the days of the fur trade and in the more modern period of the Dawson land-and-water road from Fort Garry to Port Arthur. Nor must we neglect the scenic and recreational

point of view. The region is in fact a natural park, for Fort St. Charles stood by the waters of a majestic international lake, studded with picturesque islands, its waters teeming with pike, whitefish, and the royal muskellunge, its irregular shores entrancing in their wild beauty. The primeval northern charm of the Lake of the Woods appeals today to Americans and Canadians as, long years ago, it stirred the sons of New France, whose chansons floated across its waves.

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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