

An inside look at early missions and churches in the bay area

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The first recorded visit by Europeans to Chequamegon Bay was by two French adventurers and fur traders, Pierre Esprit Radisson and Medard Chouart, Sieur des Groseillers, in August 1659.

They remained over the winter, returning to Montreal in the spring of 1660 with a large cargo of furs. In the fall of 1665 the Jesuit missionary, Father Claude Jean Allouez, arrived at the bay from Quebec with a party of fur traders. He constructed the first chapel on the bay, a crude hut, possibly located near Thompson's Creek.

He was recalled to Quebec in the spring of 1668. Allouez was succeeded by Father Jacques Marquette, who either occupied the chapel left by Allouez or constructed a new one on the same site. He was driven away by the Indians in the summer of 1671, ending missionary work on the bay.

In 1695 the French built a small fort on the southwestern tip of Madeline Island, naming it La Pointe. For the next 150 years it was the center of a vast web of trails leading to the east and west over which cargoes of fur arrived at an annual trapper-trader rendezvous. In 1818 two brothers from New England, the fur traders Truman and Lyman Warren, arrived at La Pointe. Proving to be competent traders and honest in their dealings with the Indians, they were hired by Michel Cadotte, a long-time fur trader at La Pointe. They eventually married Cadotte's daughters.

During their annual provisioning trip to Mackinac in the summer of 1825, the Warren brothers were converted to Christianity. Shortly afterward, Truman, suffering from a severe cold, took a ship for Detroit but died on board on July 21. Influenced by his brother's death and his new religious faith, Lyman Warren decided to establish a mission at La Pointe.

In February 1830 Lyman brought Jedediah D. Stevens, a young teacher and lay missionary, to La Pointe, but he remained only until March. The following August, Frederick Ayer, another teacher and lay missionary, and Caroline Rodgers, a young mixed blooded Chippewa interpreter, arrived at La Pointe.

Ayer opened a school where he taught the Indians, fur trade employees and their children. In the spring he returned to Mackinac.

Finally, on Aug. 30, 1831, Rev. Sherman Hall, a fully qualified missionary, arrived at La Pointe. He was accompanied by his wife, Betsy, Frederick Ayer and Elizabeth Campbell, who was an interpreter.

In the summer of 1832 Mrs. Hall gave birth to a daughter, thought to be the first white child born in the western Lake Superior region. Then in August 1832 Rev. William T. Boutwell, a seminary classmate of Hall, joined him at La Pointe. Later that month Warren returned from Mackinac, accompanied by Sabrina Stevens (sister to Jedediah), who assisted Hall and Boutwell.

With the arrival of Hall and Boutwell and their assistants, missionary work among the Indians was resumed after a lapse of more than 160 years since the departure of Father Marquette. In August 1833 they formally organized a mission church at La Pointe, thought to be the first Protestant congregation in Wisconsin.

In 1834-35 they undertook the construction of a mission building, located on the main road along the shore north of the "old Fort." It was a large building, sturdily constructed, which could accommodate the missionary families, visitors and the school and church activities.

In 1838 a Presbyterian minister, Reverend Granville T. Sproat, arrived with his wife, and in 1840 Reverend Leonard H. Wheeler, a Congregational minister, arrived with his wife and a young woman teacher.

There was now a substantial Protestant missionary establishment at La Pointe, and in 1840 they constructed a new Protestant church in the village, closer to their congregation. Reverend Wheeler believed that something had to be done about the deplorable conditions in which the Indians lived, so he proposed to teach them agricultural practices to make them self-sufficient.

He did not think that Madeline Island was suitable for such purposes, however, and in 1845 he erected a new mission house on the mainland near Bad River. Some Indians already lived there, and many at La Pointe who were not Catholics moved there with Wheeler.

He named the site "Odanah" from a Chippewa word meaning village. According to his son, William, Wheeler anticipated that the Indians would eventually be forced onto reservations and selected the Bad River location as superior to others in the region, preempting the land for the Indians.

However, the Protestants did not have the field to themselves very long, for in July 1835 they were joined by a Catholic missionary, Father Iraneous Frederic Baraga. Baraga, energetic and dedicated to his calling, soon gathered a flock of converts and built a church just north of the new Protestant mission building.



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.