

FRENCH COLONIAL WISCONSIN 1634 - 1763

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Cover Photo: Author and her parents dressed in Colonial French clothing attending Bastille Days celebration (Milwaukee, Wisconsin). Above Photo: Members of the Compagnies Franches de la Marines de la Baye Verte at site of old French Fort la Baye (Green Bay Wisconsin).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FRENCH WISCONSIN

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Wisconsin history does not begin in 1848, the year in which it became a state, or even in 1789, when it became a territory of the newly formed United States. In fact, Wisconsin and the area known as the “Old Northwest” played a very important role in the earlier struggle for North American dominancy.

It is impossible to speak of Wisconsin history without mentioning the intrepid Frenchmen who first ventured into this area, men like Nicolet, Jolliet, Marquette, Allouez, Radisson, and Groseilliers.

Discovered in 1634 by Jean Nicolet while looking for the fabled Northwest Passage (the straight westward water route to Asia), Wisconsin was a French territory and colony for over a century,

until it's occupation by the English in 1763. Nicolet came to New France from Cherbourg, Normandy in 1618 at the age of 20 and was sent by Samuel de Champlain to live with the Algonquin Indian tribes along the St. Lawrence River. In 1634 Champlain sent Nicolet out to explore the western regions, find the Northwest Passage (if it existed), and make contact and alliances with any tribes that he met. He made his memorable land-fall at what is now Green Bay, wearing “a grand robe of China damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors”, and brandishing two pistols. For nearly thirty years after Nicolet's discovery, the western lands were forgotten by the French. During those thirty years, though, many tribes of the St. Lawrence Algonquins, such as the Sauk and Fox,

began migrating west because of tribal wars with the Iroquois.

As the tribes gradually moved west, the French traders followed them. In the late 1650's and early 1660's two French traders and explorers, Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médart Chouart Sieur de Groseilliers, made several voyages into the interior of western Wisconsin and northern Illinois. The two men built a trading cabin on Madeline Island on Lake Superior, the first known white habitation in Wisconsin.

The primary goal of the French in North America was the rich natural resources. Animal furs, especially beavers, were in great demand in Europe for use in making hats and other clothing. The virgin wilderness of Canada were

fairly teeming with all sorts of animal life. The French found it more profitable to trade the native Indians metal implements, beads, and cloth for those pelts they desired. The Indians profited greatly from this trade as well, and a vigorous relationship developed between the French and many tribes. Young Frenchmen were sent to live with the Indians to become interpreters and were adopted into the tribes. The purpose of the French in North America, unlike the British and Dutch, was more for trade than permanent settlement, there were very few French women in New France. Because of this, and a desire to gain the faithful alliance of the Indian tribes, Frenchmen very often married Indian women. And the Indians often sent

French Marines such as were stationed in Wisconsin during it's time as a French territory.



their sons and daughters to be educated in Montreal and Quebec, or at one of the Jesuit missions.

The four proceeding wars between the English and the French from 1689 to 1763, which spread to the colonies, left the west relatively undisturbed. Life in Wisconsin went on as usual even though the forts at La Baye (Green Bay), and La Pointe (Madeline Island) sent troops and Indian allies to reinforce the east; and posts along the Mississippi were fortified against English attack. Wisconsin was never the site of conflict between the two European powers. Finally, in 1763 after the English victory ending the French and Indian War, the settlements in Wisconsin came under first English control, and then American, in 1789. Even after the absence of the strong French influence for several hundred years, Wisconsin still bears remembrances of them in both family and geographical names.

COLONIAL WISCONSIN

Life in a wilderness colony for the French *habitants* (as the colonists were known) during the eighteenth century was rough. Even with their general congenial relations with the Indians, French settlements were not completely safe from hostile Indian raids. In the early 1700's, the Fox Indians living in the Green Bay/Lake Winnebago area started attacking the neighboring inhabitants, causing problems with the fur trade. Those attacked, pleaded with the soldiers at Ft. la Baye to put a stop to the raids which began a time of unrest for Wisconsin called the Fox Wars. However, these wars were brought to an end in 1740 by the well

respected commandant of la Baye, Paul Marin. Still, the ordinary French peasant in North America was considered better off than his counterpart across the sea. He ate more and had a better diet which was higher in protein. It was also very easy for him to buy a large plot of very fertile land for very little money, and enjoy all of the economic and social benefits that came with being a landowner (such as exemption from taxes).

The Frenchman that, perhaps had the greatest impact on Colonial Wisconsin, was Charles de Langlade who was born at Ft. Michilimackinac on Mackinac Island in 1729. Charles was the son of a French fur

Civilian and Military clothing of early French habitants of old Fort la Baye. Note the anchor symbol of the French Marines on the cartridge boxes.



trader and the sister of a prominent Ottawa Chief. All of his life, Charles de Langlade was well respected by the Indians which gave him the ability to rally Native American support for any cause. In fact, at one point, it was considered by the Ottawa to be the sign of a poor warrior if you failed to follow him.

In 1755, during the French and Indian War, the English government sent General Edward Braddock to capture the French Fort Duquesne at the intersection of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers. Langlade rallied the Wisconsin tribes (the Ottawa, the Chippewa, the Menominee, the Winnebago, the Potawatomi and the Huron) to assist the French forces who opposed Braddock. In the early part of the battle as the French were losing ground, Langlade begged permission from his commanding officer to let him attack General Braddock's column which was just entering a wooded ravine. Receiving the reluctant permission of his superior, Langlade and his Indian forces attacked

from behind the trees. Braddock's regulars fought in a mass line formation according to European strategy and were slaughtered. This action won Langlade respect from both French and British, as well as the title of "the victor of the Monongahela." Langlade continued to build on this reputation when in 1757 he defeated Robert Rogers and his Rangers at "the Battle on Snowshoes."

As the French and Indian war came to a close with the battle of Quebec, Langlade was sent back to the west so that his Indians would not have to participate in the surrender. When the English took control of the Wisconsin territory, Langlade, like many French-Canadians, stayed on to assist the English with the fur trade. Soon Langlade accepted a commission in the British army and after a few minor engagements during the American Revolution, retired. In 1782 Charles de Langlade convinced many of the displaced Acadians to settle with him at Green Bay, where he died in 1800.

LIFE STYLE OF THE WISCONSIN FRENCH *HABITANTS*

HOUSES

There were two types of early colonial houses built in Wisconsin: The first type consisted of vertical posts planted into the earth, covered with clay (as a type of mortar or plaster), and whitewashed.

The better homes were made of squared oak or pine logs, laid horizontally, and dove-tailed together. These houses frequently had a second story. Both types

of homes had tree bark covered roofs pitched like a "witches hat" to prevent precipitation from collecting.

The only stone buildings in New France were a few important forts and cities such as Montreal, Quebec, Louisbourg, and Ft. Carillon (later Ticonderoga). The only stone fortress this far west was Ft. de Chartres (east of St. Louis), which helped to control the upper Mississippi. The rest of the forts and buildings were made out of wood.



Pictured here are two different styles of French colonial women's fashions, the bodice vs the casaque (or short jacket).

FOOD

The French typically had three meals a day:

1. A light breakfast consisting of a piece of bread dipped in brandy or coffee.
2. Dinner, which was the main meal of the day, was usually served at noon. A dinner could include a soup with bread in it; several different dishes of meats; salads; nuts, pickled or raw; fresh berries; and several types of cheeses.

3. Supper, which was usually served between seven-thirty and eight at night, would consist of the same basic dishes.

The *Habitants* abstained from meats on Fridays and Saturdays as an observance of their Catholic faith. On these days they would eat fish, eggs, peas, beans, cabbage, cucumbers, and melons.

The lower classes would have much of the same foods when they could get them.

To drink they had wines (either French or Canadian), brandy, a spruce beer, milk (which they often sweetened with sugar), coffee, chocolate, and water.

The French were, and still are, very famous for their pastries and desserts. The favorite food of this time was the *crêpe*, a thin egg pancake that is still popular today. One favorite of the Indians was the fruit pie, and it has been noted that they would trade valuable furs for a pie when available.

CLOTHING

Women's — The clothing of the Wisconsin French was very similar to that of the English in as much that it was based on European fashions. But it differed in that it was more practical for the North American wilderness.

All women and young girls of the time wore petticoats, which the French called *jupons*. The *jupons* of the Wisconsin French were shorter, about mid-calf, because of the mud and the inhospitable environment. The wealthier a woman was the more *jupons* she would own and wear.

The most important part of a woman, or girl's wardrobe was her under garment, or *chemise*. This was a simple long sleeved gown that reached to about the

knees and would have been used as a nightgown as well.

Women's clothing of the eighteenth century did not have pockets. Instead women wore two pouches, one on each hip, tied around their waist underneath their petticoats. Young girls of marriageable age would embroider intricate designs on theirs and wore them outside of their petticoats to show off their handiwork.

French women also wore a garment called a *bodice*, which was basically a corset without stays worn on the outside. Or she might have worn a short gown called a *casaque*. This was a looser jacket like garment which reached around the hips, had sleeves that came down just past the elbows, and tied at the waist.

A woman of the eighteenth century could not expose her elbows, upper arms, or knees. She always had her head covered for modesty, and married women always kept their hair tied up.

Leather European shoes, among the women of New France, were not very popular because of the amount of mud and water. Instead they wore wooden shoes, a pair of moccasins, or went barefoot.

Men's — The men's (especially the wealthy gentry) fashions of the eighteenth century were based on the military uniforms of the time.

Men also wore a *chemise*, though it was only about waist length. A gentlemen's, or officer's might have lace or ruffles around the cuffs and down the front.

Knee-length breeches with a single fly ("French fly") were the general form of pants worn, though longer trousers were

starting to become more popular towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The next article of clothing was the *veste*, which, unlike it's English counterpart, was worn with sleeves. The *vestes* of the poor men were often only waist length, but those of the upper class reached well to the thighs.

Men of the upper classes, and soldiers wore a *justacorps* over their *veste*.

A *justacorps* was a very full greatcoat that reached down to the knees.

Photo illustrates the similarities between children's clothing and that of adults.





Author attending a French Rendezvous dressed in the clothing of a young Wisconsin Potawatomi Indian.

The French uniforms of the time, both officer and enlisted, consisted of the basic breeches, *chemise*, *veste*, and *justacorps*. All uniforms were made out of wool.

Leather shoes were worn by gentlemen, officers, and soldiers. Those of the common soldier were made on straight lasts. But wooden shoes or moccasins were more common among the *habitants*.

Children's—Boys and girls would wear the same types of clothes that their parents did.

Indian's — Before the Europeans came to North America, the Indians made their clothes out of the hides of animals which they had made supple by working the leather with animal brains, fat, or urine.

After their contact with the Europeans, the Indians began to incorporate European style dress.

An Indian woman, or girl, would wear a *chemise*, wool petticoat and wool leggings to protect the legs. However, the *chemise* was worn on the outside with a hand woven sash around the waist. She could also wear a simple dress made out of cloth and decorated with beads, porcupine quills, or trade silver.

Indian men and boys would wear colorful European shirts with wool leggings and loin cloths. Blankets were draped over their shoulders during important ceremonies.

The moccasin was the universal shoe among the Indians and worn by men, women and children.

Colors and decorations for Indian clothing were specific to the tribe.

TRANSPORTATION

Most Travel throughout Canada, and Wisconsin, was done by canoe and French bateaux. The canoes were made primarily of birch bark, which made them lightweight and easy to portage around rapids.

Land travel was mainly on foot, though the use of large dogs as pack animals was a common practice. These dogs were ideal because they traveled well in a canoe.

Because of the lack of decent trails in Wisconsin forests, horses were not in common use until the end of the eighteenth century.



The Canadian “paddle dance” was a popular social activity among the *habitants* and their families.

SOCIAL LIFE

Even way out in the wilderness of Wisconsin, the French colonists insisted on politeness and good breeding. It was remarked by the Prince de Joinville while visiting Wisconsin that “the French spoken at Green Bay was remarkable for purity and excellence of accent.”

The *habitants* enjoyed many pastimes including boxing, wrestling, dancing, and especially gambling or games of chance (with cards, dices, stones, or carved tokens).

Lacrosse is still a very popular game, especially in Canada. It originated from the very brutal Indian game that the French

named *la crosse*, because of the shape of the sticks. The women of the tribe would stand around the field and beat any man with a stick who tried to leave the game. In some tribes it is recorded that a single game could last for days on end with players being severely injured or sometimes killed.

In the autumn an entire settlement would go out into the woods for several weeks to enjoy the harvesting and making of maple sugar.

Christmas was the most festive time of the year. Presents, though, were passed out at New Year’s.



Author resting outside the house of “the father of Wisconsin” at Old Fort Michilimakinac.

This document was created as part of my senior mastery project at Waukesha South High School, Waukesha, Wisconsin. I chose to research the early Wisconsin habitants because of my experiences as a French and

Indian War reenactor and my life long love of history. Because of my father’s love of military history, I grew-up surrounded by the accounts of Louis Antoine de Bougainville, the Marquis de Montcalm, J.C.B., and Peter Kalm; as well as the works of such noted historians as Louise Phelps Kellogg and Francis Parkman. In researching and presenting this time period I have wished in my own small way to enhance the awareness of a culture which has greatly influenced the history of our state.

I hope that you have enjoyed reading this project as much as I have researching and writing it.

Source:

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