

Historical Background

Discovery and Occupation

The name Iowa is said to signify "The Beautiful Land," and was applied to this magnificent and fruitful region by its original inhabitants, to express their appreciation of its superiority of climate, soil and location. Prior to 1803, the Mississippi River was the extreme western boundary of the United States. All the great empire lying west of the "Father of Waters," from the Gulf of Mexico on the south to British America on the north, and westward to the Pacific Ocean, was a Spanish province. A brief historical sketch of the discovery and occupation of this great empire by the Spanish and French governments will be a fitting introduction to this history.

Early in the Spring of 1542, Hernando DeSoto, a Spanish Catholic, discovered the Mississippi River. After the sudden death of DeSoto, in May of the same year, his followers built a small vessel, and in July, 1543, descended the great river to the Gulf of Mexico.

In accordance with the usage of nations, under which title to the soil was claimed by right of discovery, Spain, having conquered Florida and discovered the Mississippi, claimed all the territory bordering on that river and the Gulf of Mexico. But it was also held by the European nations that, while discovery gave title, that title must be perfected by actual possession and occupation. Although Spain claimed the territory by right of first discovery, she made no effort to occupy it; by no permanent settlement had she perfected and held her title, and therefore had forfeited it when, at a later period, the Lower Mississippi Valley was rediscovered and occupied by France.

The labors of the zealous French Jesuits of Canada in penetrating the unknown region of the West, commencing in 1611, form a history of no ordinary interest, but have no particular connection with the scope of the present work, until in the Fall of 1665. Pierre Claude Allouez, who had entered Lake Superior in September, and sailed along the southern coast in search of copper, had arrived at the great village of the Chippewas at Chegoincegon. Here a grand council of some ten or twelve of the principal Indian nations was held. The Pottawatomies of Lake Michigan, the Sacs and Foxes of the West, the Hurons from the North, the Illinois from the South,

and the Sioux from the land of the prairie and wild rice, were all assembled there. The Illinois told the story of their ancient glory and about the noble river on the banks of which they dwelt. The Sioux also told their white brother of the same great river, and Allouez promised the assembled tribes the protection of the French nation against all their enemies, native or foreign.

The idea of discovering the great river about which the Indian nations had given such glowing accounts, appears to have originated with Father Marquette, in 1669. In the year previous, he and Claude Dablon had established the Mission of St. Mary's, the oldest white settlement within the present limits of the State of Michigan. Father Marquette was delayed in the execution of his great undertaking, and spent the interval in studying the language and habits of the Illinois Indians, among whom he expected to travel.

About this time the French Government had determined to extend the Dominion of France to the extreme western borders of Canada. Nicholas Perrot was sent as the agent of the government, to propose a grand council of the Indian nations, at St. Mary's.

When Perrot reached Green Bay, he extended the invitation far and near; and, escorted by the Pottawatomies, set out on a mission of peace and friendship to the Miamis, who occupied the region about the present location of Chicago.

In May, 1671, a great council of Indians gathered at the Falls of St. Mary, from all parts of the northwest, from the head waters of the St. Lawrence, from the valley of the Mississippi and from the Red River of the North. Perrot met with them, and after grave consultation, formally announced to the assembled nations that their good French Father felt an abiding interest in their welfare, and had placed them all under the powerful protection of the French Government.

Father Marquette, during the same year, had gathered at Point St. Ignace the remnants of one branch of the Hurons. This station, for a long series of years, was considered the key to the unknown West.