

The Huron River – In the Beginning

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For us the history of the Huron River begins in the spring of 1680 when Rene-Robert Cavelier Sieur de LaSalle and party who were crossing southern Michigan on foot came upon the Huron in Livingston County.

LaSalle had built a sailing ship a year before above Niagara Falls with the intention of building a fur trade on the lower Great Lakes. The Griffon, a 60 foot vessel, was launched into Cayuga Creek above the Falls on August 7, 1679 and hauled to Lake Erie where LaSalle and his men began the journey to Green Bay, Wisconsin where an advanced party had a shipment of furs that they had purchased from the Indians ready to be loaded on the Griffon. The Griffon then began the return journey to Niagara under the command of the Dane, Lucas, and a skeleton crew. They were to pick up the iron work for a second ship on the return to Illinois where LaSalle and his men had begun a second ship on the Illinois River near the site that would become Peoria.

That fall soon became winter and still the Griffon had not returned. And now a runner reached LaSalle with the word that the Griffon had never reached Niagara. LaSalle had to consider the Griffon lost and he must return to Fort Frontenac in Canada that is now the site of Kingston, Ontario.

LaSalle picked four men to accompany him along with an Indian guide. The four men were Collin, Dubray, Haunad, and La Violette. They skirted the southern shore of Lake Michigan and arrived at Ford Miami near the site of present day St. Joseph, Michigan. From there they began a trek across southern lower Michigan. The first days of this crossing were through brush with thorns and brambles which tore their clothing and bloodied their faces. By the 28th of March they came upon more open ground and were able to kill game for food. One night they were surrounded by a band of Indians called Wapoos who mistook the LaSalle party for Iroquois. In fear they ran off and LaSalle was not bothered again.

By the first week of April they had found the Huron River near Portage Lake and since two of the men were ill, they made camp and built a canoe using elm bark which they had to loosen with hot water. By the time the canoe was finished, the two men were better and they began their journey down the Huron River. Their progress was slow due to drift wood and fallen trees.

The slow progress was beneficial to the sick men who recovered. In five days they had reached the Belleville area. Having passed through what would become Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Just beyond Belleville the Huron River turns south and it was here, at a place called French Landing, that the decision was made to abandon the canoe and strike out on foot to the Detroit River. At the river a raft was built for crossing. Their journey across Canada to Fort Frontenac was accomplished when they arrived on May 6, 1680.

(Photo)

Statue of LaSalle in Belleville's Victory Park. A gift from Park E. and Edna May Gregory. Sculptor Stephen A. Wroble. Dedicated in 1985.

These were the circumstances that brought LaSalle through what someday would be Belleville. The story of this adventurous trip was not long in reaching France. In fact when Cadillac found Detroit twenty-one years later he brought with him one Jacques Godfroy from LaSalle's home town, Rouen, France. His grandson Gabriel Godfroy was known to the early settlers here. In 1809 he came up the Huron River with Louis de Chambre and Francis Pepin to establish a trading post where Ypsilanti now stands.

LaSalle and his party were without a doubt the first people from the western culture to see Belleville and the Huron River. From the accounts they told of the place, many French people came to settle this area.