

It Started with Jean Nicolet de Belleborne

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Put Green Bay on the Map!

The bay of Green Bay was shaped by a series of glaciers, which moved through this region thousands of years ago. Through time, a bay was formed which is presently 119 mile long and covers an area approximately 3,000 square miles.

The Fox River and Green Bay were a vital link to all who lived on or near its shore. Each spring and fall, enormous flocks of geese, swans, canvasbacks and other waterfowl species would blacken the skies on their ancestral migratory flights. Fish could be heard splashing in the marshy edges of the bay. Wildlife thrived on the abundance of food and shelter. Indian villages were scattered along the bay. The inhabitants caught fish, hunted, farmed and gathered food. The bay formed a natural barrier affording them protection from enemies.

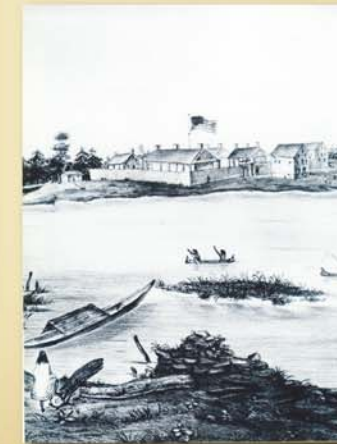
Samuel de Champlain, explorer and founder-governor of 17th century New France in Quebec, heard the name and rumors of a strange race that called themselves "People of the Sea". This held mystery and the promise of untold wealth with its fertile soil and virgin forests teeming with fur-bearing animals. It was told that this "People of the Sea" traded with people living still further west and who reached them by crossing a vast extent of water in large canoes made of wood, not bark, and who because of their lack of beards, their shaved heads, costumes, etc., seemed to greatly resemble the Tartars or the Chinese. Actually, these people were the Sioux and the "People of the Sea" were the Winnebagos. Champlain believed that by pushing westward, he would find a shorter route to China. He thought it would be sufficient to penetrate two or three hundred leagues inland, in order to find, if not the Pacific Ocean, at least a bay or some great river leading there. He chose Jean Nicolet to explore and find the treasures he envisioned.

And thus it was that the first European to visit this area was Jean Nicolet de Belleborne, son of a Normandy mail carrier, in 1634, just 14 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Early in July of 1634 the young Frenchman and his entourage of seven Hurons embarked from Quebec in canoes. They arrived at the area of Red Banks in late summer or early fall. The area's inhabitants were the Winnebagos, a Sioux-speaking tribe. It was with these people that Nicolet spent the winter, exploring the waterway beyond la Baie and forming alliances important to commerce. After a year in the wilderness, Nicolet returned to Quebec in 1635. A few months after Nicolet's return, Samuel de Champlain died and with him the passion for exploration and discovery. No extended stays were made at la Baie Verte until Pere (Father) Claude Allouez established St. Francis Xavier mission at Rapides Des Peres in 1671.

The French called the bay "la Baie Verte" because of its greenish color, but it was known to the Indians here as "la Baie des Puants - the Bay of the Stinking Water".



In 1634...



Green Bay became the region's first European settlement because of its location between the Great Lakes and the Fox River which provided a vital link to the Mississippi River. In the 1830's, Daniel Whitney foresaw the potential of the natural waterways and constructed docks at the mouth of the East River where it runs into the Fox. Such facilities attracted sailing ships of all kinds to the settlement. Furs were taken in exchange for supplies needed by traders and settlers.

From the mid 1700's to the mid 1800's, this region had passed through a period of total French dominance to be absorbed as part of the vast British Empire and finally, part of a new nation. The 1800's saw logging, shipping and agriculture move into the area. The days of the missionaries and French voyageurs paddling their canoes to Indian villages in search of new passageways or trading posts no longer existed. The virgin white pine forests of northern Wisconsin brought in existence new industries. Lumber and shingle mills became Green Bay's mainstay along with shipping and farming. All through the late 1800's, Green Bay was the focal point for Wisconsin's lumber boom, being the main shipping center for lumber camps of the region.

Immigrants, dissatisfied with life in Belgium, Poland and Germany along with Dutch, Irish and Scandinavians, undertook the journey to Wisconsin with hopes of a better life. As the forests disappeared, farmers moved in to plant wheat, oats and vegetables and raise dairy herds. Growing numbers of settlers found a livelihood in commercial fishing and hunting. Thousands of pounds of lake trout, whitefish, sturgeon, chubs, perch, and herring were caught. These were either smoked or salted and packed for shipment to Midwestern markets. Vast marshes along the bay consisting of huge beds of wild rice and wild celery drew waterfowl to these areas. From the 1870's to the early 1900's men known as market hunters paddled their way through the marshes and flats of Green Bay. During this era large numbers of birds were taken. They were sold to local meat markets and later shipped to Milwaukee and Chicago.

As the lumber boom declined in the 1890's, papermaking (an industry that came into existence in the area during the 1880's) assumed increasing importance in the region's economy. The first mills made paper from straw and rags. But as the industry grew more advanced, the pulp from local forests was used.

By 1900 the bay and river were no longer the major means of passenger transportation. New roads were built and railroads replaced sailing vessels. Yet the bay and rivers had not outlived their usefulness. An unlimited water supply and a source for hydroelectric power made this an ideal location for industrial growth and development.

Find out more about us at www.green-bay.org

"From the earliest explorer in 1634, to the first permanent European settlement in 1765, Green Bay has contributed to the history, leadership and development of the state and the nation. The blending of many nationalities and traditions has made our community strong. We remember and honor our past and are looking to the future."

-Mary Jane Herber, Local History Librarian, Brown County Library, Green Bay