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The Origin and Meaning of the Name Chicago

The name Chicago is derived from the local Indian word *chicagoua* for the native garlic plant (not onion) *Allium tricoccum*. This garlic (in French: *ail sauvage*) grew in abundance on the south end of Lake Michigan on the wooded banks of the extensive river system which bore the same name, *chicagoua*. Father Gravier, a thorough student of the local Miami language, introduced the spelling *chicagoua*, or *chicagou*, in the 1690`s, attempting to express the inflection which the Indians gave to the last syllable of the word.



Allium Tricoccum - Native Garlic Plant

The French who began arriving here in 1673 were probably confused by the Indian use of this name for several rivers. They usually wrote it as *Chicagou*. Gradually other names were given to the streams composing this system: *Des Plaines*, *Saganashkee*



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(Sag), Calumet (Grand and Little), Hickory Creek, Guillery (for the north branch of the present Chicago River), and Chicago or Portage River (for the south branch). Students of early Chicago history likewise tend to get confused, unaware of these name changes, but early French maps and narratives, when carefully interpreted, make it possible to discover who and what was where, and when.

As a name for a place, as distinct from a river, Chicagou appears first in Chicagoumeman, the native name for the mouth of the present Chicago River, where Fort Dearborn was built in 1803. As a name for a place where people lived, the simple Chicagou was first used by the French about 1685 for a Jesuit mission and French army post at the site of Marquette`s 1675 camp along the south branch. This interpretation, and the etymology of the name Chicago, derive largely from the memoirs of Henri Joutel, the soldier-naturalist associate of La Salle on his fatal last journey, 1684-1687, to Texas. Joutel spent nearly three weeks in the Chicagou area in 1687-88, and one of his first investigations was into the origin of this name which he had heard from La Salle and many others. His detailed description of the plant, its "ail sauvage" taste, its differences from the native onion and its maple forest habitat, point unambiguously to *Allium tricoccum*.

English accounts tracing the name to a "wild onion" date from after 1800, when different groups of Indians, mainly Potawatomi, had displaced the original Miami. In the Potawatomi language, chicago meant both the native garlic and the wild onion.

The downtown Chicago or Fort Dearborn area, exposed to wind, weather and passing enemies, was not where the local Miami and other people lived when Frenchmen, led by Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette, S.J., began arriving in 1673. In early 1675 Marquette found a group of Illinois merely camped there before setting out for the Green Bay area. The local population`s villages were scattered along rivers and streams in more sheltered environments. Archaeologists have identified dozens of places in the greater Chicago area where they lived, and a few were vaguely recorded by the early French.

Early French forts, camps and settlements, and one or two British army camps are also rather vaguely recorded and can only be approximately located by examination of many obscure pre-1800 maps and documents. The following represents an attempt to piece



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together all available clues and put these locations and people in a time series. In so doing, it will be necessary to correct some longstanding misconceptions, such as the customary labeling of Jean Baptiste Point de Sable as Chicago's first permanent resident. This account, however, ends with the important figure of Point de Sable, because with him begins an era for which historical data are available in much greater abundance. Detail may be found in the encyclopedic entries of this website under the appropriate names, and in the chronology section under the dates given.

- Louis Jolliet, Jacques Marquette and five others; 1673 camp at western end of portage des chênes, marked by the Chicago Portage Historical site. Marquette's party also camped here in March 1675.
- Louis Jolliet and associates, 1673-1675; two 1674 maps prepared under Jolliet's direction allude to the explorations made during this period. Jolliet's detailed rendering of the river system in the Chicago area and of the lower St. Joseph River indicate intimate knowledge of the terrain. During this time period, there were probably two building sites on the west bank of the Des Plaines (then Chicagou). One was probably at the mouth of the Tukoquenone (Du Page) River, the other opposite the mouth of Hickory Creek at Mont Jolliet in present Joliet. This distinctive alluvial mound, which the Indians called Missouratenoui (place where pirogues were dragged or portaged) was a prominent landmark for native and French travelers, as it was at the crossing of the major east-west Sauk trail. Marquette in early 1675 met two of Jolliet's associates who were living and trading in this area: Pierre Moreau (La Taupine) and Jean Roussel or Rousseliere, the unnamed "surgeon" in Marquette's journal.
- Jacques Marquette, S.J.; 1674-75. He and his two companions, the experienced voyageurs Jacques Largillier and Pierre Porteret, camped briefly near the mouth of the Chicago River, and in mid-January moved to a site on the south branch, probably selected as a result of 1673-74 explorations in the employ of La Salle, in which Largillier may have taken place.
- Claude Allouez, S.J.; 1677. He visited for several days at a native village somewhere along the Des Plaines, en route to the great Kaskaskia village opposite Starved Rock.



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- La Salle`s employees; 1677-79. Two trading camps, probably both on Hickory Creek, perhaps near New Lenox. The surgeon Jean Roussel, who worked for La Salle in 1669 and again in 1677-80, may have been in both groups, because he knew the area from his 1673-75 experience. Assuming the same for Michel Accault (Aco) would explain the latter`s detailed knowledge of native traders, and of their territories and languages, as early as 1679-80. The 1677 trip produced the buffalo pelts which La Salle showed to Louis XIV in France the following winter. In 1678 the king gave La Salle control over the Illinois country and the rights to trade in buffalo, which were very abundant southward from Mont Jolliet and Hickory Creek. The 1678-79 trip produced a large quantity of beaver pelts which were taken to present Door County, Wisconsin, and loaded on the Griffon, which soon sank with great loss to La Salle`s creditors. La Salle seems to have traveled along Hickory Creek twice in 1680, on a route he had not previously seen. On his second trip he found a trace of earlier European presence, a bit of sawed wood.
- La Salle and party, January 1682. Camp along the west bank of the Des Plaines, en route to the mouth of the Mississippi River, probably at Mont Jolliet, opposite the mouth of what the chaplain, Father Zénobe Membré, called the Chicagou (Hickory Creek). They were waiting for a party of hunters who had separated from the main group after leaving the St. Joseph River. [Hickory Creek flows west from Skunk Grove in eastern Frankfort Township. Chicagoua is the Miami and Illinois word for skunk.]
- La Salle`s fort, 1683. Probably at the New Lenox site. In 1994 a team led by archaeologist Rochelle Lurie unearthed, in the midst of an extensive Indian settlement, a rectangular feature of apparently European origin. La Salle, in a letter from here (at the "portage de Chicagou") described it as being 30 leagues, about 72 miles, from his newly completed Fort St. Louis on Starved Rock and near a trail (Sauk) from the east. The actual river distance, measured on the plats of the 1822 U.S. Government surveys, is about 32 or 33 leagues. The west end of the portage des chênes, the only portage route seriously studied by historians in three centuries, was about ten leagues farther to the north, a route La Salle disliked.
- Jesuit mission and French army post, c.1685-86. Probably on the site of Marquette`s 1675 camp, about where Damen Avenue crosses the south branch of the Chicago River. Referred to by Joutel, who described the entire area and the maple forest where he found the native garlic, but not the mission and post which had probably been mostly



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destroyed by the Iroquois in July 1686. This site is probably the same one farmed 1809-1812 by James Leigh (often erroneously called Charles Lee), a retired sergeant of the Fort Dearborn garrison. In an 1811 letter to his commander-in-chief Col. Jacob Kingsbury, Leigh mentioned the maple-basswood forest here, a typical habitat of the native garlic, *Allium tricoccum*.

- French fort, commanded by Lt. Nicolas d'Ailleboust, sieur de Mantet, 1693-96. Probably at the mouth of the Grand Calumet River, then near present Gary, Indiana. The river is marked R. de Chicagou on the "Louvigny" map, which Mantet helped prepare in 1697. Mantet had been ordered to the region to quell Indian unrest in the St. Joseph River area. He and the garrison evacuated this post in May or June of 1696, pursuant to royal orders. This fort, which was erroneously placed in the Fort Dearborn area by the Treaty of Greenville, 1795, may be the same as the Petit Fort or "Little Fort" of various British and American accounts of 1779-c.1803, and the mythical progenitor of the later settlement at Waukegan.
- Jesuit Mission of the Guardian Angel, 1696-c.1702. Site of the Merchandise Mart. Headed by Father Pierre-François Pinet. Two large Miami villages were nearby.
- Trading post of Tonti, Accault and La Forêt, managed by Pierre de Liette, Tonti's cousin, 1697-c.1702. Near site of Tribune Tower. Was probably discontinued with the establishment of Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit by Cadillac.
- Trading post owned by Simon Guillory of Michilimackinac, manager not known; c.1716-[?]. Opposite Merchandise Mart on the west bank of the north branch of the Chicago River, which was still called Guillory River in 1824 and 1830. Gurdon Hubbard described the site as it appeared in 1818, sometime after it had been vacated by French traders forced out of business by the American Fur Company. Guillory's father, also Guillory, was a trader to the Great Lakes as early as 1683.
- British trading post, 1782-83. Probably that of Jean Baptiste Gaffé, somewhere along the Chicago River. This may have been where Mme Rocheblave, wife of British commandant, took refuge with their children on her way to Quebec after he was arrested at Fort de Chartres and imprisoned at Williamsburg and New York. Her sister was the widow of Prisque Pagé, prominent Kaskaskia merchant and mill owner, whose



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family name became attached to the Du Page River and the village, now called Channahon at its mouth.

- Farm of Jean Baptiste Point de Sable, c.1784-1800. Near site of Tribune Tower; later `owned` by John Kinzie.