

BERRIEN & CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

# PERE CLAUDE JEAN ALLOUEZ & JESUIT MISSION DE SAINT JOSEPH FORT ST. JOSEPH

Father Pere Claude Jean Allouez was a French Jesuit Missionary who founded the "Jesuit Mission de Saint Joseph" circa 1680, on the shores of the St. Joseph River in what is now Niles, Berrien County, Michigan. The Mission existed before the French built "Fort St. Joseph" in 1691. He came to minister to the Native American Indians, and surveyed portions of the Great Lakes Region. Claude is historically significant to the local area, because he followed the 1673 Marquette and the 1679 LaSalle expeditions, who explored the wilderness of Michigan. Due to the diligence of the Indians, and Europeans that followed, his grave location near Fort St. Joseph is still known today. No other French Jesuit Priest more respected by the Cass and Berrien Indians than Father Claude.

When the white man reached the St. Joseph River, and the St. Joseph River Valley (drainage basin surrounding it) in the 1600s, Southwest Michigan was an unbroken expanse of mighty forests, dotted with occasional small "oak openings" drained by countless streams and creeks. The St. Joseph River with its crystal clear waters, teamed with fish, and served as a water highway for Indian birch bark canoes. The region had a network of narrow trails, the most prominent being the "Old Sauk Trail." The French, who were the first white men to come, were record keepers and letter writers, and so they left their descriptions and impressions.

Father Claude Allouez was a good friend of Jesuit Priest Jacques Marquette (1637-1675), who is credited with discovering the Mississippi River with other Frenchmen, and exploring much of Michigan. Marquette was born in Laon, France, and is buried in St. Ignace, Michigan. Marquette's narratives were first published in 1681, in which he talked of Father Allouez.

Another acquaintance of Claude's was Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de LaSalle (1634-1687), the famous Frenchman who explored the Great Lakes Region, and the Mississippi Basin. He was "at odds" with the Jesuit missionaries and Father Claude. LaSalle was said to have had an occasional sour disposition, though he was a brilliant explorer. LaSalle named Louisiana after the French King. He was born in Rouen, Normandy (France), and died on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

New France was the name of the North American region claimed by France. It included parts of the eastern United States, sections of Canada, and lands in between, which included the St. Joseph River Valley of Michigan and Indiana. Great Britain and Spain were seeking the rich resources of New France, as well. The French needed allies to win the war for control of North American and reap the benefit of the area's rich resources; they needed the Indians. To bind the Native Americans to France, the French King sent explorers, fur traders/trappers, peddlers who set

up frontier trading posts with French merchandise, and ambassadors of good will. He sent single men instructed to marry Indian women, military forces, and emissaries with the power to make treaties. The French King sent Jesuit missionaries to win the hearts and souls of the indigenous population. Father Pere Claude Jean Allouez was one of those missionary explorers, and among the local Native Americans he came to convert were the Miami of the St. Joseph River Basin, in the area which is now known as Niles, Berrien County, Michigan.

Pere Claude Jean Allouez was born June 6, 1622 in Saint Didier, Haute-Loire, South Central France. He entered the "Society of Jesus at Toulouse," France and was ordained, in 1655, a Jesuit Priest. In 1658, Father Claude set sail for Quebec (also, called "Canada East"), Canada. There, along the St. Lawrence River, he served the French settlements. "In 1660, he became the superior of the "Mission at Trois-Rivieres, Quebec." In 1663, Father Claude was appointed "vicar general of the Northwest." In that capacity, he was able to travel widely in the Great Lakes region by foot and birch bark canoe, establish missions in remote areas, and spread his Jesuit faith to the inhabitants. In doing so, he explored Lake Superior in 1667, and supplied drawings for a map of the lake. His exploration in Wisconsin, included establishing the Chequamegon Bay Mission in 1665, and De Pere Mission, Diocese of Green Bay on 3/3/1668 in Green Bay. He recorded and published his experiences, travels and activities in the book "The Jesuit Relations" (edited by R.G. Thwaites).

In 1668, after acting as a missionary to Wisconsin's Potawatomi, he established St. Mark's Mission for the Mesquakie. Then he founded St. James Mission for the Mascouten and Miami Indians. Allouez was a colleague and friend of Jacques Marquette, and his immediate superior in 1673. He wrote a famous prayer book. Allouez established missions in Ottawa, Canada, and near La Point on Madeline Island, Bayfield County on Lake Superior. The Mission of St. Francis Xavier by Oconto, Wisconsin was, likewise, founded by Claude, who was, also, the first European to canoe Lake Winnebago and the Fox Rivers.

Father Allouez visited Chicago, Illinois, and ministered to the Illinois Indians there. He named Lake Michigan, "Lac Illiniones" (the Lake of the Illinois'), because the Illinois Indians lived on the shores. His name is engraved on the Marquette Monument of 1926 in Chicago in recognition of his work, and it is believed he founded a "short lived mission there."

Working with the Kickapoo and Dakota Indian Tribes, he wrote that they listened very politely to his sermons of faith and kindness, "then went out and did exactly what they wanted," as they did not trust him. There was good reason, because the French had instructed him to check on rumors of copper deposits, and mining by these Indians. He moved on, finding the Ottawa, Ojibwa, Wyandot, and Mascoutens more willing to listen to his religious tenets, and humanitarian teachings.

As he traveled and explored, the good Father heard rumors of "a great south-flowing river to the west." He is credited with being the first Frenchman, and European, to hear of the existence of the Mississippi River. Claude informed Father Marquette of the rumors, which led to the famous exploratory trip, and discovery, of that river. With this knowledge in hand, LaSalle made his famous canoe journey down the Mississippi, to the Gulf of Mexico, to what is now New Orleans, Louisiana.

The St. Joseph Valley, in what is now Northwest Indiana and Southwest Michigan, at the time of its discovery, "was inhabited by the Miami, Ottawa, Chippewa and mostly Potawatomi. The Miami Native American Indians, in the 1670s and 1680s, occupied the specific regions of western Ohio, Indiana, and Southwest Michigan along the border and within the St. Joseph Valley water shed. They spoke an Algonquain language, "Myaamia" meaning "downstream people." It was on the eastern bank of the "River of the Miami" (St. Joseph River), just north of the Saulk Trail that Father

Allouez, at age 62, in circa 1684, founded the "Jesuit Mission De St. Joseph" in what is now Berrien County, Michigan.

A number of "land grants were confirmed at Versailles, France on May 24, 1689." One had been initiated on "October 1, 1686, by Denonville and Champigny (governor and intendant), for a tract of land (in New France) "on the Miami" for locating a "chapel, house and fields." Father Claude Aveneau succeeded Father Allouez, at the Mission, after Claude died. In Jesuit letters of Vaudreuil, Raudot, and Germain dated November 14, 1708 and November 5, 1711, it was stated that Father Allouez had been with the Miami for nineteen years (in various places in Michigan), and Father Aveneau for twenty-five years.

The Miami were a migratory tribe, moving with the seasons to their hunting grounds, sugar camps, home encampments, and maize fields. Their societies were "gender biased, and dominated by males." The Indian men were hunters and warriors, and leaders. The females did everything else, including the maize agriculture (manual labor being considered "woman's work," and beneath a man's dignity). "Warfare was part of the Indian's regular routine of living" and the Sauk Trail was used "more for making war," than peaceful trade. Iroquois often attacked the Miami and Potawatomi. Stealing members of another tribe and making them slaves was common. The French needed an alliance with these "friendly barbarians" for the fur trade, and to control the territory for the King of France. Father Claude's job was to serve as the Miami's missionary, befriend them, and convert them to the Jesuit faith. He educate them, ministered his faith, set up a trading post for the exchange of French goods for furs, provided medical services, and promoted a strong alliance.

Father Claude was a truly dedicated man, and the Miami grew to "love and respect him." His teachings about "the wisdom of the Great Spirits" soon convinced the Miami that he was very special. When his provisions provided them food at "hunger times," and cures during sickness, "they started to revere him as a deity." The Indians began going to him to mediate disputes and resolve differences. He was especially helpful in negotiating conflicts between the Miami and French fur traders. Ceremonial feasts were provided, he was given gifts, and his sermons were listened to with great reverence. The Indians revered him greatly, bowed down to him, and praised him for his good deeds. The priest had to let them know, in no uncertain terms, that he was not their deity, but rather a servant of the Great Spirit. In any case, a strong affection and alliance grew between the French and the Miami, because of the priest. In total, Allouez spent nine years at the mission, on the St. Joseph River, with the Miami.

With the Jesuit Mission De St. Joseph as his home base, he went on a number of short trips. In 1686, Father Claude went to Ste. Marie de Lacs, and built a cabin there. He visited the site, where in the future University of Notre Dame "would sprout." In 1687, during one of his short journeys, he met LaSalle's expedition who were returning from their Mississippi River trip. The explorers told the priest that their leader LaSalle would be along shortly with another group. The aging missionary to avoid unpleasantness with LaSalle (who did not work well with Jesuits), headed home to Mission De Saint Joseph (Niles, Michigan). Later, he heard that LaSalle, "the testy short tempered commander," had been murdered by his people, and his body had been left near the Gulf of Mexico. The comment, about LaSalle being on his way to Michigan, made to the priest, had been a ruse to hide LaSalle's murder from the missionaries.

On August 27, 1689, Father Pere Claude-Jean Allouez passed away in what is now Berrien County, Michigan. The good priest, over the span of his life, is credited with making ten thousand Indian Jesuit converts, building many Jesuit Missions scattered around the Great Lakes, and educating one hundred thousand Indian mission school pupils. The Miami so revered him, that they

buried his body on the bluff above the St. Joseph River (River of the Miami) in the vicinity of the Mission, and erected a large wooden cross to mark the grave. Since that time, for the last 322 years, there has been a cross marking his grave. (The last wooden one was replaced with a Granite Cross in 1918, and still stands today.)

In 1691, the French built Fort St. Joseph on the site of the Mission, surrounding the chapel and school. It was used to control Southwest Michigan's fur trade, and routes. In 1761, the British battled for control and won, driving the French away. In 1763, Chief Pontiac and his raiders seized the fort. In 1776, the American Revolution ended Great Britain's dominance of the United State's colonies/territories and control of the fort. In 1781, the Spanish briefly occupied the fort, and then it was abandoned. In 1913, an engraved boulder was placed in front of the site. Today local heritage group, "Support The Fort," and archaeologists from Western Michigan University have been excavating the area for artifacts. Father Pere Claude Jean Allouez' grave rested above the flow of history, that unfolded below on the shores of the St. Joseph River, for the last 322 years.

In conclusion, Father Pere Claude Jean Allouez was a French priest, and Jesuit missionary, who founded the "Jesuit Mission De Saint Joseph" on the St. Joseph River, Niles, Berrien County, Michigan in circa 1684. He served and educated the Maimi Indians who lived in Southwest Michigan. Claude was an explorer, emissary, and ambassador of good will to the Native American Indians of the Great Lakes Region. He established missions on the St. Lawrence River, Lake Superior, and Lake Michigan. He ministered to the Indians of Wisconsin and Chicago. Fort St. Joseph was built around his mission. His Miami Indian congregation thought so highly of him, they buried him on the bluff overlooking his Mission, marking his grave with a cross. Father Allouez firmly earned his place in local history.

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