

*Father Jones
and the
Jesuit Archives*

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Father Jones and the Jesuit Archives

By FRED LANDON

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The State of Michigan and the Canadian province of Ontario must ever share their interest in the Jesuit order since each owes to that religious body the beginnings of its religious history. The men who carried the banner of the Cross into the wilderness of Northern Michigan and planted their missions there and on the Detroit River were the co-workers of those who laid down their lives in the effort to convert to Christianity the Huron Indians located to the south of Georgian Bay. We marvel today at their tremendous enterprise and energy, their zeal and devotion to duty that seemingly enabled them to brave every difficulty and danger and make every sacrifice for their great cause. Their record in journals, letters and yearly reports Parkman wove together in his fascinating story of *The Jesuits in North America*. Rev. Father Campbell wrote the story anew a few years ago in his *Pioneer Priests in North America*. Perhaps less known to American students of history is the work that was carried on through a long period of years by the veteran archivist of St. Mary's College at Montreal. Rev. A. E. Jones, S.J., whose death occurred a few months ago.

Father Jones, having under his own care the documentary history of his order in New France, was afforded unequalled opportunities for research but his own independent contributions to knowledge of Jesuit activity in America in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were of great importance and gave him a high place among American historical investigators. He was a friend of Parkman, and the American historian more than once refers to the treasures of St. Mary's College in Montreal which he used in writing his great work. To special advantages in the way of material at hand Father Jones added a deep love for his order and its history in America. It was his ambition to make a complete record of the Jesuit missions to the Hurons, to compile a list of all who served in the work from first to last, as well as to make positive identification of the sites of the more famous mission stations. These aims he was largely able to accomplish. In a letter I have before me, written in October, 1911, after his volume on the Huron mission had been issued, he says:

“It was the outcome of prolonged research which would have been tedious in the extreme were it not that my heart was in the work. Here the old saw finds its application, ‘Ubi amatur non laboratur, aut si laboratur labor amatur,’ in other words, it was a labor of love. This same incentive, but supernaturally vivified, can alone account for the heroism of the Huron missionaries toiling in the Master’s vineyard.”

In 1909 the Ontario Archives Department published as its fifth annual report the monograph prepared by Father Jones on the Huron missions. The first part of the volume dealt with the identification of the mission sites and was accompanied by a map of “*The Huronia of the Relations*” which upset some theories previously held. The second part of the volume aimed to be a record of each of the mission stations during the whole of its existence, chronicling the arrivals and departures of the missionaries and their helpers in each year, Father Jones had previously added much to the general knowledge of the Jesuits and their missions by his part in the editing of the Thwaites reprints of the Jesuit Relations. To that monumental work he had contributed the “*Theoretical Map of Huronia*” and between this and the later map there were only slight differences, though one had been based on documentary evidence only, the other on like evidence supplemented by a topographical investigation and careful personal inspection of the probable sites.

I remember well the first time that I called upon him in Montreal. He met me at the door of St. Mary’s College and as he stood there in his long black robe, his beard almost to his waist and with a huge key in his hand he might have been Saint Peter. Down stone steps we passed and through great iron doors into the vault-like room that contained the records of the Jesuit order in eastern America. Every wall was shelved to the ceiling and other stacks in the center of the room left little space in which to move about. Row after row of bound records and files of documents were testimony alike to the vast work of the order and the care with which its records had been preserved. The story of Jesuit activity during two centuries, from Montreal to beyond the Great Lakes, was here.

It would take long to list all the historical treasures that were laid out for examination. There were nearly a dozen of the original editions of the Relations, those tiny little missionary reports that were printed for the edification of the faithful and the stirring up of the indifferent. Were there ever missionary reports the equal of these since Paul wrote of his journeyings and work? No library in the world has yet brought together a

complete set of these originals, though Laval University at Quebec has all but three.

The linguistic writings of Father Pierre Potier, who died at the Sandwich mission on the Detroit River in 1781, are among the treasures of these Jesuit archives. There are five volumes, all in the neat handwriting of Father Potier. The two contain the Huron radicals or roots of the five conjugations, the third volume is a Huron grammar and compendium. The fourth a collection of sermons and homilies in the Huron tongue while the fifth volume is made up of the two previous volumes of Huron roots with many additions and a list of some 566 nouns in the order of the conjugations to which they belong. It may not be generally known that the Ontario Archives Department is planning to reproduce these volumes in photo facsimile. The result should be important for the linguistic study of the North American Indians.

The original journal of Marquette is a possession of St. Mary's College that has special interest for Michigan. Parkman, in a footnote in his volume on LaSalle, refers to this important manuscript which has been twice at least reprinted. It is written in a large leather bound book and on the last page appears the declaration of Marquette that this is the true account of his journeyings. Marquette died in harness and Parkman gives some interesting details of the close of his life and of the burial of his bones by Indians at St. Ignace. Human bones, with fragments of birch bark, were found in 1877 on the supposed site of the St. Ignace mission. Marquette's important connection with Michigan was suitably recognized a few years ago by the erection of the Trentanove statue on Mackinac Island near a spot where he is supposed to have celebrated mass.

Those and other interesting records of Jesuit missionary activity were brought forth and commented upon by the archivist. There was something of the parent's love for a child in his handling of these books and papers. He talked much of the manuscript writings of Father Potier and recalled Parkman's description of the conditions under which these writings had originated. In their miserable huts, by the light of the fire, the Jesuits pieced together the fragments of the Indian language. "The standing topic of their evening talk was the Huron language," says Parkman. "Concerning this each had some new discovery to relate, some new suggestion to offer; and in the task of analyzing its construction and deducing its hidden laws these intelligent and highly cultivated minds found a congenial occupation."

It is a matter of wonder that such writings should have escaped not only the perils and dangers of that time but as well the vicissitudes of the days

since. Their early preservation was probably due to their being sent back to Montreal for the use of the fathers there who were expecting later to enter the wilderness. Here they are today and one can almost fancy that they still have something of the smell of smoky fires about them.

Father Jones, whose death will be regretted by friends all over the United States and Canada, was a corresponding member of several of the leading historical societies of the United States. He was honored a few years ago with the degree of the University of Toronto and had long been a member of the Royal Society of Canada. He was a painstaking investigator whose work is greatest because of the way in which it opened up paths along which others will work in the days to come.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Father Jones and the Jesuit Archives* by Fred Landon]