

Jesuit Place Names in the United States

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PLACE NAMES OF RELIGIOUS ORIGIN in the United States are common enough to cause no wonderment. Missionaries or religious-minded pioneers of many faiths were strongly inclined to attach religious or biblical names to their missions and settlements. Among the earliest explorers were the Spanish and the French, who were nearly always accompanied by padres intent on Christianizing the natives. Whatever their national origin, these missionaries belonged to religious orders or congregations which are not always sufficiently differentiated in historical accounts. It is the purpose of this study to single out the names of places for which European Jesuit missionaries are in some way responsible. Although less successful as name givers than Franciscan and Dominican missionaries in areas once held by Spain, Jesuits nonetheless have a respectable number of names to their credit, particularly in the Great Lakes region and in the Mississippi valley.

The Society of Jesus was founded in Paris in 1540 by the Basque ex-soldier, Ignatius of Loyola. Motivated by Counter-Reformation zeal, it grew rapidly as an institute devoted chiefly to missionary and educational pursuits. Francis Xavier, a Spaniard closely associated with Ignatius, went out to the Orient. Other members of the Society bearing the nickname of Jesuits set out for the New World. Unlike many other missionaries, they tended to operate somewhat independently of civil authorities. Before the end of the seventeenth century Jesuits from western Europe explored large areas of the North American continent and founded hundreds of missions, to which they gave commemorative religious names.¹ Many of these missions disappeared as the Indians were pushed to the west, but a significant number survived and gave their names to

¹ The activities of the early missionaries are recorded in the 73 volumes of *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland, 1900).

towns and geographical features. Favorite names were those of St. Mary, the mother of Jesus, of St. Joseph, his foster father, and of Ignatius and Francis Xavier after their canonization in 1622. Eventually the names of the missionary explorers themselves were given to places. All of these and a few related incidental names comprise Jesuit place names in the United States.

The first Jesuits on the North American continent were Spaniards who visited the coast of Florida between 1566 and 1572.² Because of the hostility of the Indians and of Europeans at war with Spain, these missionaries gained no permanent foothold. Their efforts ended in failure and death,³ so that no religious place names in Florida can be attributed definitely to them.

Better results marked the efforts of a handful of English Jesuits who came to Maryland in 1634. Within two years they established the settlement of St. Marys City, which later became the capital of Maryland. This town is located in St. Marys county on the St. Marys river. Nearby on Chesapeake Bay the fathers founded another mission known as St. Inigoes, a name which is a variant form of Ignatius. This mission also grew into a town, which still sleeps quietly by a stream with the same name not many miles below Washington.⁴

Some miles to the north French Jesuits began an extensive missionary effort among the Huron and Iroquois Indians. In the Great Lakes region they had a measure of success with the Hurons, but incurred the hatred of the Iroquois.⁵ Their efforts among these tribes were rewarded with tortures and cruel deaths at Ossernenon in the Mohawk valley near the present city of Auriesville, New York. The canonization of Isaac Jogues and seven companions has given the name of the Mount of the Martyrs to a prominence near Auriesville. New York State has another Jesuit place name, that of St. Regis. St. John Francis Regis never visited the New World, but a waterfall, a river, and a paper-manufacturing city in New York bear his name.

² Felix Zubillaga, ed., *Monumenta Antiquae Floridae, 1566-1572*, Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu (Rome, 1946), p. 461.

³ Michael Kenny, *The Romance of the Floridas* (Milwaukee, 1935), p. 186.

⁴ Thomas Hughes, *History of the Society of Jesus in North America: Colonial and Federal*, I (London, 1907), 567.

⁵ *Jesuit Relations*, XXIII, 25.

Most successful as a name-giver was the well-known explorer Pere Jacques Marquette. The memory of his name lingers in many places in the Great Lakes region and the Mississippi valley, and his statue graces Statuary Hall in the Capitol at Washington. Fellow missionaries gave the name of St. Mary to the strait and to the river and rapids flowing between Lakes Superior and Huron. They also gave the name of St. Joseph to the channel and Canadian island nearby.⁶ The old Jesuit mission of St. Ignace survives in the names of a township, a cape, and a thriving town on the strait of Mackinac. Here lie the remains of Pere Marquette, near which an impressive monument has been erected in his memory.

In Wisconsin the Jesuit mission of St. Francis Xavier among the Winnebagoes gave its name to the town and river of St. Francis.⁷ The neighboring town of DePere is a reminder of Fr. Marquette, as also is Portage,⁸ the place where Fr. Marquette and Joliet began carrying their canoes on their way to the discovery of the Mississippi in 1673. The mission name of La Pointe du St. Esprit survives in the Wisconsin town and cape of La Pointe. Allouez, a suburb of Superior, Wisconsin, was named for Fr. Claude Allouez, successor to Marquette and founder of the mission of La Pointe.⁹

So popular has the name of Marquette been that a railroad, a university, and numerous buildings and businesses of the country bear it. Pere Marquette is the name of a town and state historical monument in Mason County, Michigan. Marquette is also the name of a city, a county, and bay in Michigan on Lake Superior. It is the name of an island in Lake Huron and of a river in Michigan. Towns in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Kansas are named Marquette. A county in Wisconsin also bears the name.

Another Jesuit place name in the Great Lakes region is Charlevoix. A city and county in Michigan were named for Francis X. Charlevoix, missionary, explorer, and historian. The town of St. Joseph in southern Michigan and the St. Joseph river take their names from the mission of St. Joseph, as Charlevoix points out in his journal.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid.*, LIX, 86.

⁷ *Ibid.*, LIX, 179.

⁸ *Ibid.*, LIX, 173.

⁹ *Ibid.*, LX, 157.

¹⁰ Francis X. Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America*, ed. Louis A. Kellogg (Chicago, 1923), I, 91-92.

The memory of Joliet is perpetuated in the city by that name in Illinois. Joliet, the companion of Marquette on the voyage down the Mississippi to the mouth of the Arkansas, took minor orders as a Jesuit in 1662, but was not ordained a priest. The town of Mermet, Illinois, was named after Fr. Jean Mermet.¹¹ The name of Cache River in southern Illinois has been traced to a party of explorers, one of whom was Mermet. Other place names from St. Louis to Notre Dame cannot be verified.

Far to the southwest, another remarkable Jesuit missionary, Eusebio Kino, explored and mapped a large territory hitherto unknown to the white man.¹² He is said to have travelled more than 20,000 miles on horseback. Moving up from Mexico City in 1681, Padre Kino entered a region which he called Pimeria Alta and worked there among the Pima and Papago Indians until 1711. Southern Arizona is included in this region. He and his companions founded many missions in Sonora and Baja, California, which remain as settlements today. In Arizona Fr. Kino and his companions founded more than 25 missions, a few of which are still inhabited places. San Cosme del Tucson (*Tucson* meaning black water) was one of his chief missions. The present city of Tucson occupies its site.

Among Fr. Kino's explorations was Casa Grande, an ancient Indian ruin which he visited, described, and named in 1694.¹³ It is now a national monument as well as a city and tourist attraction. The best preserved of the Kino missions is San Xavier del Bac (Bacoida meaning "a place near a spring"). It is now the center of a Papago Indian reservation. The mission church since rebuilt by the Franciscans is one of the most venerable monuments in Arizona. Other Kino relics in Arizona are the names of two large land grants extending to the south of San Xavier del Bac, namely, San Ignacio del Babocamari and San Ignacio del Canoa. A bronze "Padre on Horseback" preserves his memory in Tucson and at the American National Monument at Tumacacori, Arizona. His bust was placed in Statuary Hall in the national capitol in 1964. Archeologists dis-

¹¹ *Jesuit Relations*, LXVI, 57-65.

¹² Barbara Burr Hubbs, "Rivers that Meet in Egypt," *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions for the Year 1940* (Springfield, 1940), p. 7. Mr. Virgil J. Vogel is the source of this and other useful references.

¹³ See Herbert Bolton, *Map of Pimeria Alta, 1687-1711* (Berkeley, 1919).

¹⁴ Herbert Bolton, *Rim of Christendom* (New York, 1936), pp. 284-286.

covered his remains in 1966 in the ruins of a mission church at Magdalena, Mexico.¹⁵

Father Kino's missions were in a territory that never developed as fruitfully as the Franciscan missions extending from San Diego to San Francisco. Jesuits were permitted to begin work in California relatively late. As a consequence only one small town, San Ignacio, north of San Francisco, bears a Jesuit name. The story is similar in New Mexico. Neapolitan Jesuits arriving there in 1867 took up residence in places named by Franciscans two centuries before them. Only one small hamlet in New Mexico, San Ignacio, has a Jesuit name.¹⁶

Returning to the Mississippi valley near the Gulf, we note that in 1726 French Jesuit missionaries acquired a plantation for their support "ten by forty arpents in dimension" on the western side of the Mississippi River below the present city of New Orleans.¹⁷ The village of Jesuit Bend took its name from this original plantation. Integration troubles in 1955 gave the name more attention than the size of the hamlet justified. Other Jesuit missions in the South spread from Mississippi through Georgia to Virginia, but their names perished with the Indians.¹⁸ In Louisiana the towns of Lawtell (anglicized from *l'autel*, meaning "altar") and Church Point mark the sites of nineteenth century Jesuit missions.

In Kentucky the town of Camellia, named after the flower, recalls the name of George Joseph Camel (or Kamel), a Moravian Jesuit botanist, after whom Linnaeus named the oriental shrub, which Camel had described scientifically.¹⁹ The flower is of course much better known than the origin of the name.

Rivaling Fr. Marquette as a Jesuit name giver was Fr. Pierre de Smet, a Belgian whose explorations took him up the Missouri valley into the far Northwest.²⁰ Belgian Jesuits had come to the

¹⁵ Dan L. Thrapp, "Grave of Father Kino Discovered in Sonora," *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 1966, Sec. III, pp. 5-7.

¹⁶ Lilliana Owens, *Jesuit Beginnings in New Mexico, 1867-1882* (El Paso, 1950), p. 154.

¹⁷ Jean Delanglez, *French Jesuits in Lower Louisiana 1700-1763* (Washington, 1935), p. 114. See also Albert Biever, *The Jesuits in New Orleans and the Mississippi Valley* (New Orleans, 1924), p. 37.

¹⁸ *Jesuit Relations*, LXIX, 203.

¹⁹ E. P. Spillane, "Camel," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1908), III, 216.

²⁰ Pierre de Smet, *Letters and Sketches* (Philadelphia, 1843), p. 87.

mouth of the Missouri in 1823 and had given the name of St. Peter to their mission in St. Charles county. Working up the river into Kansas, Fr. Christian Hoecken founded a mission among the Pottawatomis Indians called St. Marys,²¹ which grew into a college town near Topeka. Another Jesuit name in the region is that of Xavier, a suburb of Leavenworth containing St. Mary College for women.

The journeys of Fr. de Smet took him up the Missouri River in 1840 into the territory of the Flatheads, the Nez Percés, the Blackfeet, the Pend Oreilles, and the Coeur d'Alenes in what is now Montana and Idaho.²² In one of his excursions he is reported to have met Brigham Young and directed him towards Salt Lake. His success in pacifying hostile Indians made him valuable to the Federal Government and induced grateful frontiersmen to preserve his memory in many place names. He himself gave the names of St. Marys, St. Peters, St. Ignatius, St. Borgia, and St. Regis to mission settlements in Montana. He gave the name of St. Mary to a peak in the Bitter Root range and St. Joseph to a river flowing through Montana and Idaho. The names of Borgia and Regis given to tributary streams of the Flathead river never gained currency with the miners and ranchers of the region.

In Idaho the towns of St. Marys and St. Joseph on rivers of the same names are testimonials to Fr. de Smet. He named Lake Roothaan in northern Idaho for Fr. John Roothaan, then Superior General of the Jesuits. The Indians did not take to this Dutch name and called the lake Priest Lake after Fr. de Smet himself. Above it is also an Upper Priest Lake and below it a Priest River flowing from it. On the banks of this river is the town of Priest River. The name Roothaan did not disappear altogether, but remains as the name of a mountain above the lake.²³ A lake in Wyoming and towns in Idaho, Montana, and South Dakota bear the name de Smet. In Alberta a mountain range and peak near Jasper are called de Smet.²⁴ Missions still existing among the Indians at St. Stephens in Wyoming and at St. Francis in South Dakota are also reminders of the extensive missionary work of Fr. de Smet and his companions.

²¹ Gilbert J. Garraghan, *The Jesuits of the Middle United States* (New York, 1938), II, 612.

²² Pierre de Smet, *Missions de l'Oregon* (Ghent, 1848), pp. 80–89.

²³ Garraghan, II, 349.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 350.

Farther to the west in the Oregon country Fr. de Smet also left the memory of more than 5,000 miles of travel among the Indians. One tradition has it that the name "Oregon" comes from the wild sage plant, oregano, but as Gannett notes, another tradition derives the name from the Spanish word *oregones*, "which name was given the Indian tribes inhabiting the region by a Jesuit priest, the word meaning 'big-eared' men."²⁵ Since the territory was called "Oregon" before Fr. de Smet arrived, he could not have been that priest, but he was the founder of the St. Francis mission in Oregon.²⁶ In the state of Washington the town of Priest Rapids on the Columbia may take its name from him. In Alaska at least two towns, Holy Cross and St. Michael, were named by Jesuit successors to Fr. de Smet.

This survey of missionary journeys in the Northwest brings the investigation of Jesuit place names in the United States to a close. A much more thorough study would have been necessary to do full justice to names associated with Jesuit missionary enterprise. Names that gained currency and popular acceptance have prompted this study. Many names of missions are forgotten or survive only as local memories and subjects for historical study.

Space does not permit a classification of the names mentioned above nor an analysis of their patterns, but a few brief observations are in order. The frequency of the names of St. Mary,²⁷ the mother of Jesus, and of St. Joseph, his foster father, reflects a strong veneration for the Holy Family. The favoritism shown for the names of Jesuit saints, especially St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, may be suggestive of chauvinism, but more than likely it is evidence of a certain *esprit de corps* similar to that which prompted Franciscans and Dominicans to name places after their saints. Finally, the widespread adoption of the names of Marquette and de Smet is a tribute to their success as explorers and missionaries.

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²⁵ Henry Gannett, *American Names* (Washington, 1947), p. 197.

²⁶ Pierre de Smet, *Oregon Missions* (New York, 1847), p. 81.

²⁷ Without the addition of the name Magdalene or Salome, it is safe to assume that the name St. Mary always refers to Mary, the Mother of Jesus.