

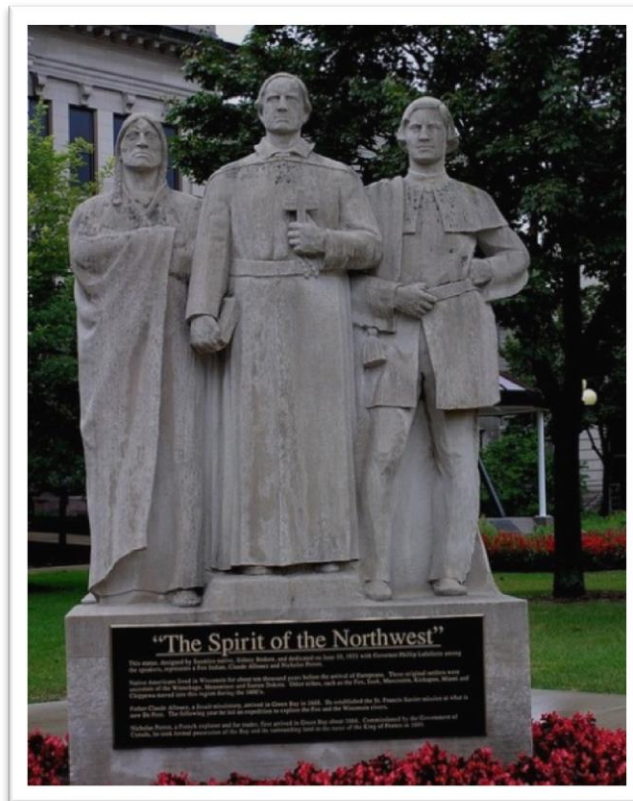
Nicolas Perrot

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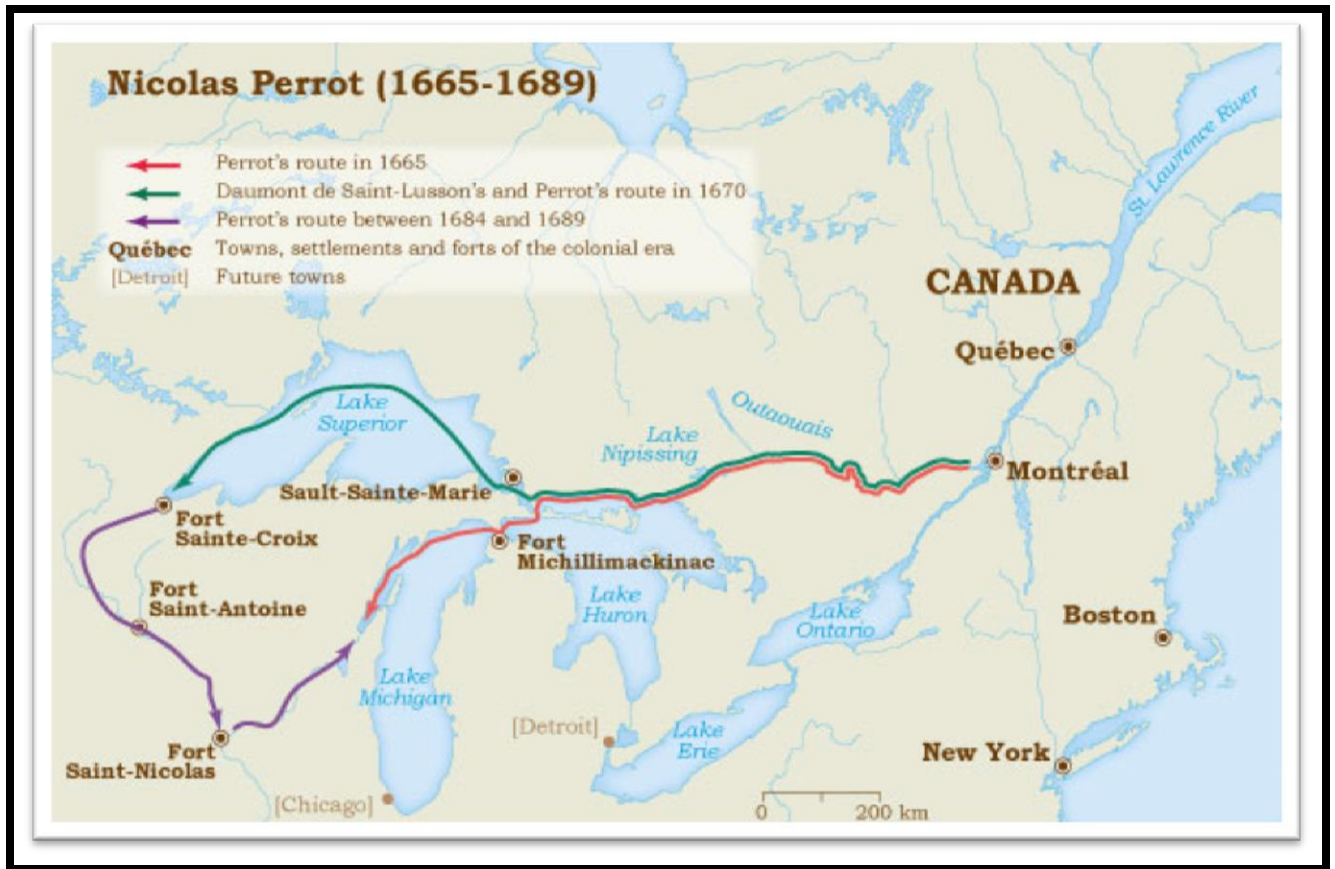


Nicolas Perrot sketch

Nicolas Perrot (1644–1717), explorer, diplomat, and fur trader, was one of the first white men in the Upper Mississippi Valley.



Statue of Nicolas Perrot (far right) in front of historic Brown County Courthouse, Green Bay, Wisconsin.



Map showing Nicolas Perrot's travels and where he helped establish forts.

Nicolas Perrot and his men founded the Fort called Saint Antoine in the spring of 1686 on the eastern shore of **Lake Pepin**. The purpose of this expedition was to establish alliances with the Ioway and Dakota Indians in order to expand French interests in the fur trade market. Although Perrot's venture was not the first French excursion into the upper Mississippi Valley, his was the first attempt to establish a foothold in this region

Biography

Born in France, he came to New France around 1660 with Jesuits and had the opportunity to visit Indian tribes and learn their languages. He formed a fur trading company around 1667 and undertook expeditions to various tribes and land in and around present-day Wisconsin. He was sometimes the first white man seen by the native peoples and was generally well received.

In 1670 he was an interpreter for Daumont de Saint-Lusson, a French commissary assigned to the country of the Ottawas, Amikwas, Illinois, and other Indian natives to be discovered in the direction of Lake Superior. He continued to travel around these areas and engaged in fur trading, giving the natives such items as cooking kettles and hatchets (to replace stone tools). In 1671 he married Madeleine Raclot. He was given a land grant on the river Saint-Michel in present-day Quebec, and the 1681 census showed him having six children.

He continued to be involved in Indian affairs. In 1684 he succeeded in bringing the warriors of several nations to Niagara to meet with the Governor's army, where a peace treaty was signed. In the spring of 1685 he was appointed Commandant-in-Chief of Bais Des Puants (present day Green Bay, Wisconsin) and the neighboring regions when war broke out between the Fox tribe and the Sioux and Chippewa tribes. He worked hard to bring about peace, and was successful, at least for a time. After this, Perrot traveled to the northern waters of the Mississippi River, in the territory of the Sioux, where he built Fort Saint Antoine.

Perrot

In the spring of 1687 he was in the region of Detroit taking part in an expedition. A fire broke out at the Jesuit mission at Bais De Puants, and 40,000 livres worth of his furs were destroyed. Perrot was financially ruined. He returned to Montreal where in the spring of 1688 he served as an interpreter for the treaty between Governor and Onondaga chief Otreouti, who promised the neutrality of the Onondagas, Cayugas, and Oneidas. In 1689 he built Fort Saint-Pierre at the mouth of the Wisconsin River, and established peace among area tribes. In 1690, he and Louis de la Porte de Louvigny led a vital supply convoy from Montreal to Michilimackinac. Their success in breaking the Iroquois blockade of the Ottawa River and in resupplying the western Indians loyal to the French may have saved New France from the Five Nations. In subsequent years he was involved in the discovery of lead mines brought to his attention by Miami chiefs.

In 1695 Perrot brought the Miami, Sauk, Menominee, Potawatomi and Fox chiefs to Montreal at the governor's request, regarding war with the Iroquois. Perrot returned west where his concern was to maintain unity and peace among them in their efforts against the Iroquois. However there was danger, and on two occasions he was almost sent to be burned at the stake with the Mascouten and the Miami tribe.



Plaque commemorating Nicolas Perrot, Clergue Park, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

Perrot then settled on his land grant at Bécancour. The Indian chiefs whom he had known saw him for the last time in 1701 at the Great Peace of Montreal. He still served as interpreter, but this period of his life was marked by financial difficulties and harassment from creditors. He

asked the authorities for a compensation he said was due to him, and a pension in consideration of services long provided, but was not satisfied. He was involved in court cases involving lawsuits filed by and against him. He also wrote his memoirs, which became valuable to later historians.

Nicolas Perrot died on the 13th of August 1717 at about the age of 74 and was buried the next day in the church at Bécancour. Nine of his eleven children outlived him. His wife died in 1724.

Perrot was often unappreciated even during his lifetime, yet was France's best representative among Indians in the western territories of French North America^[*citation needed*]. He was able to learn languages and customs of native tribes and earn their esteem and confidence.

Sources

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- [Biography at the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*](#)
- [Association of Descendants of Nicolas Perrot](#)

PERROT, NICOLAS, explorer, interpreter, fur-trader, commandant at Baie des Puants (Green Bay) and seigneur; b. c. 1644 in France, son of François Perrot, lieutenant responsible for justice in the barony of Darcey in the province of Burgundy, and of Marie Sivot; d. 13 Aug. 1717 at Bécancour and buried the next day in the parish church.

Perrot seems to have come to New France in 1660 as a *donné* of the Jesuits and thus had the opportunity to visit Indian tribes and learn their languages. In 1665, according to Claude-CHARLES LE ROY de La Potherie, he left the missionaries and visited the Potawatomis and the Foxes. In 1666 he was a domestic in the house of a widow, then a servant of the Sulpicians at Montreal. On 12 Aug. 1667, after forming a trading company with Toussaint Baudry, Jean Desroches, and Isaac Nafrechoux, Perrot undertook further voyages among the various nations of Baie des Puants and Wisconsin; he was well received by each of them, and took advantage of this to do some fur trading, although he did not derive much profit from it. He was often the first Frenchman to visit them and to win their affection.

On 3 Sept. 1670, when he returned from one of these trips, he was asked by Intendant Talon* to accompany as an interpreter Daumont* de Saint-Lusson, a commissary assigned "to the country of the Ottawas, Amikwas, Illinois, and other Indian natives discovered and to be discovered in North America in the direction of Lake Superior or Freshwater Sea, in order to search out and discover mines of all kinds there, particularly copper mines . . . in addition to

taking formal possession in the king's name of all the inhabited and uninhabited country. . . .” Perrot then formed a new trading company, this time with Jean Dupuis, Denis Masse, Pierre Poupart, Jean Guytard and Jacques Benoît, and set out with Saint-Lusson. The two travellers stayed at Montreal for some time, and in October went to Lake Huron via the Ottawa River, Lake Nipissing, and French River. They spent the winter on Manitoulin Island, and the following spring Perrot dispatched Indian emissaries to the northern nations with authority to invite them to Sault Ste Marie “in order to hear the king's words which the Sieur Saint-Lusson was bringing to them and to all nations”; for his part, he went among the nations in Baie des Puants to invite them to this important gathering.

On 4 June 1671, before the representatives of 14 nations, Saint-Lusson officially took possession of these territories. The report of this ceremony was signed by Saint-Lusson, Perrot, Claude Dablon*, Claude Allouez*, and Gabriel Druillettes*, as well as by the Frenchmen who were in the locality, being “engaged in fur-trading.” Before leaving Sault Ste Marie, Perrot did some more trading with the Indians. However, on 3 September his furs were seized at Quebec, on Saint-Lusson's orders.

On 11 Nov. 1671, in the presence of the notary Guillaume de Larue, Perrot signed a marriage contract with Madeleine, daughter of Ildebon Raclot and Marie Viennot. While still continuing to take an interest in the fur trade, he settled at Champlain, and on 2 Dec. 1677 he went to live on the river Saint-Michel, on a land grant made to him by Charles-Pierre Legardeur de Villiers, seigneur of Bécancour.

The same year a certain Nicolas Perrot, *dit* Joly-Cœur, had attempted to poison Cavelier* de La Salle at Fort Frontenac (Kingston, Ont.), shortly after Governor Buade* de Frontenac had reviewed the soldiers of the fort on 7 September. This individual, whose nickname alone was on the muster-roll of the soldiers but who was subsequently identified, confessed his crime and was put in irons; in January 1679, according to Benjamin Sulte, he was still in the prison at Quebec. Historians such as Margry and Parkman, basing themselves on the narrative of a friend of Abbé René de Bréhant* de Galinée, attributed to Eusèbe Renaudot, have seen in this man Perrot the explorer and fur-trader. Now this narrative, which is the account of alleged conversations that took place in 1678 in Paris between La Salle and Renaudot in the presence of friends, is not an original document, but a copy whose author and date are unknown to us. Strong doubts can be cast on such testimony; the confusion which has existed up to now has all the less justification because the nickname Joly-Cœur was never applied to our personage in notarial acts, registries of births, marriages, and deaths, or the *Jesuit Relations*. He therefore has nothing to do with this incident.

Although Perrot had established his small family on a farm – the 1681 census showed him as having six children – his journeys to the west did not stop because of that; in fact they continued until 1698. In 1684 Le Febvre* de La Barre, convinced of Perrot's ascendancy over the nations of the west, entrusted him with the mission of inducing them to take part in the war that he was planning against the Iroquois. Not without difficulty, Perrot succeeded in bringing the warriors of several nations to Niagara, where the meeting with the governor's army was to take place. When the peace signed by La Barre was announced, the Indians expressed their dissatisfaction at having to return to their country without having fought.

In the spring of 1685 Perrot was appointed commandant in chief of Baie des Puants and the neighbouring regions. Before he left he gave his wife a power of attorney, authorizing her to act in his name. Just as he was making his way from Montreal towards Michilimackinac, whence he would proceed to the post which had just been entrusted to him, war broke out between the Foxes on the one hand and the Sioux and Chippewas on the other. The latter had even been completely beaten already in a first battle, and their allies the Ottawas were preparing to avenge their defeat. Perrot sought an effective means of re-establishing peace between these tribes. He speedily found it once he had ascertained the causes of the conflict. The daughter of a Chippewa chief had been kept prisoner for a year among the Foxes, and the latter had persistently rejected the gifts which all the nations of the bay had been offering for her ransom. The Foxes had decided to burn the young Indian girl to avenge the death of one of their principal chiefs who had been killed by the Chippewas. The new commandant, accompanied by his 20 men and the young girl's father, went to Baie des Puants. Relying on the esteem in which he was held by the Foxes, he went among them alone, asked them to hand over the captive, and got them to do so. Having received her from their hands, he restored her to her father, on condition that the latter intervene with the Indians of his nation and their allies to make them renounce all hostile acts against the Foxes; this the chief faithfully carried out.

After having thus reconciled these nations, at least temporarily, Perrot, who from that time on was nicknamed Metaminens (the man with the iron legs), left Baie des Puants with his men and went up the Fox River as far as the village of the Mascoutens and Miamis. From there he made the portage which separated the Mascouten and Wisconsin Rivers, went down the latter as far as the Mississippi, and, turning north, went up this river to the beginning of the territory occupied by the Sioux, where he stopped and built Fort Saint-Antoine.

Perrot soon lost part of the powers that La Barre had conferred on him. In the autumn of 1685 the new governor, BRISAY de Denonville, placed under the authority of Olivier MOREL de La Durantaye, the commandant at Michilimackinac, all the Frenchmen who were in the *pays d'en haut*; at the same time he ordered Perrot to go down to the bay and to gather together as he went all allied Indians and Frenchmen, for an attack on the Senecas. Again with difficulty, Perrot persuaded the nations of the bay and the Ottawas to follow him.

In the spring of 1687, after depositing at the Saint-François-Xavier mission the yield from his fur-trading, Perrot went with his party to rejoin the French in the region of Detroit, then he headed for the Seneca country, where he took part in the destruction of five villages. But while he was taking part in this expedition fire broke out at the Jesuit mission in the bay; the church, the adjoining buildings, and the 40,000 *livres* worth of furs that Nicolas Perrot had stored there were destroyed in the blaze. Perrot, completely ruined, returned to Montreal. He had barely arrived before he set about renewing his merchandise in order to resume fur-trading with the Indians of the west, among whom he once more occupied his post as commandant. Having come back to Montreal in the spring of 1688, he served as an interpreter for the treaty of 15 June between the governor and the Onondaga chief Otreouti* (La Grande Gueule), who promised the neutrality of the Onondagas, the Cayugas, and the Oneidas. Shortly before the treaty Perrot had bought from Jean LECHASSEUR, for 4,000 *livres* worth of beaver furs, the seigneurie of Rivière-du-Loup (Louiseville), with rights of *haute, moyenne, et basse justice*; he was to hand this back to its former owner a few years later, having been unable to make the payments on it.

On 8 May 1689, after building Fort Saint-Nicolas at the mouth of the Wisconsin, Perrot took possession in the name of Louis XIV “of Baie des Puants, the lake and rivers of the Outagamis and Mascoutens, the Ouiskouche and Mississippi rivers, the country of the Nadouesioux, Rivière-Sainte-Croix and Saint-Pierre and other more distant places. . . .” The following year Frontenac instructed him to bring into alliance with the French the Ottawas and the other nations of the west, who since the Lachine massacre waited to join the Iroquois. While carrying out this mission, Perrot re-established some kind of peace among these nations. In the course of this journey he discovered, 21 leagues above Mouingouena, the lead mines whose existence had twice been drawn to his attention by the Miami chiefs.

In 1692 Perrot received an order to settle among the Indians of Marameg (Maramet), “to set up between the Miamis and the other nations who might be susceptible to offers from the English a barrier which would thwart all such plans.” Three years later, at the governor’s request, he brought to Montreal the Miami chiefs, of Marameg and those of the Sauks, the Menominees, the Potawatomis, and the Foxes. On that occasion Frontenac urged them to make war against the Iroquois, adding that Perrot and LA PORTE, de Louvigny, the commandant of Michilimackinac, were both required to account to him for their conduct. Finally Frontenac asked the Miamis of Marameg to live together with the Miamis of Saint-Joseph, their brothers, and this was done. The meeting over, Perrot returned to the west, and during his last three years among the Indians his constant concern was to maintain unity and peace among them, his advice to them being to fight rather with the Iroquois. He managed to safeguard France’s interests there, but not without danger to his life, since on two occasions he was almost sent to the stake, first among the Mascoutens and then among the Miamis.

After the suppression of fur-trading licences and the evacuation of the western posts in 1696, Perrot settled permanently on his land grant at Bécancour. The Indian chiefs whom he had known he saw again for the last time in 1701, at the time of the peace treaty signed at Montreal, when he was called upon by Callière to serve as an interpreter for the nations of the west.

Ruined, saddled with debts because of the “extraordinary expenses” that he had incurred, and harried by numerous creditors, Perrot requested from the authorities of the colony sums which he claimed were due to him, and asked the minister for a pension in consideration of his long services, but he did not obtain any satisfaction. Often on later occasions he had to appear before the courts, sometimes to defend himself against his creditors, sometimes to resist those who claimed ownership rights to a land grant which he had acquired in 1704. Perrot’s numerous lawsuits, and the post of militia captain that he held from 1708 to the end of his life, did not prevent him from allowing himself a little leisure, which he used to draft his reports, with the aid of notes taken during his travels.

His *Mémoire sur les mœurs, coutumes et religion des sauvages de l’Amérique septentrionale* is the only one that was published. Perrot’s sole object in writing it was to acquaint Intendant Michel Bégon* confidentially with the true character of the tribes that were allies or enemies of France, and with the kind of relationships that should be maintained with them. He recounted what he knew, what he had seen with his own eyes, without any literary pretension, without any concern for the favours of a public for which his work was not intended,

and he stopped when he ran out of paper. The obvious imperfection of the form is amply redeemed by the truth and accuracy of his information.

The other reports, except the one on the Foxes addressed to Philippe de RIGAUD de Vaudreuil, were also delivered to Bégon. They have not come down to us, but most of them were inserted by Le Roy de La Potherie in volume II of his *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*. They contain a narrative of the Iroquois war against the nations of the *pays d'en haut* and the Illinois, as well as an account of the frequent acts of treachery of which the Indians and more particularly the Hurons and Ottawas had been guilty.

Such are the memoirs consigned to paper by Perrot, who died on 13 Aug. 1717 at about the age of 74 and who was buried the next day in the church at Bécancour. Nine of his 11 children, 5 boys and 4 girls, outlived him, and none of them seems to have felt any urge to roam the woods after furs or to go exploring. His wife, who was subject to fits of mental depression, died in July 1724, having been totally insane for the last four years of her life.

Perrot, who was often unappreciated even during his lifetime, was France's best representative among the Indians of the west. His knowledge of the languages of the country, his natural eloquence, the happy blend of daring and coolness that were the essence of his character, had made it possible for him to win the esteem, confidence, and even affection of the Indians. The Potawatomis, the Menominees, the Foxes, the Miamis, the Mascoutens, and the Sioux granted him, with the honours of the pipe of peace, the rights and prerogatives enjoyed by their own chiefs. His credit was not less among the Ottawas and the Hurons. During the last four decades of the 17th century, at a time when alliance with the nations of the west was indispensable in order to ward off the Iroquois peril and allow access to new territories, Perrot, thanks to the influence that he had acquired, rendered valuable assistance to the colony.

IN COLLABORATION WITH CLAUDE PERRAULT

AJM, Greffe d'Antoine Adhémar, 4 avril, 17 mai 1685, 14 août, 5 sept. 1687, 15 mai 1688; AJM, Greffe de Bénigne Basset, 12 août 1667. AJQ, Greffe de Romain Becquet, 2 sept. 1670. AJTR, Greffe de Jean Cusson, 2 déc. 1677; Greffe de Guillaume de Larue, 11 nov. 1671. AN, Col. C^{11A}, 11, ff.86–100; 13, ff.376–88; 15, ff.3–21; 18, ff.92–108. Charlevoix, *Histoire (1744)*, I, 436; II, 280f.; III, 398. *Découvertes et établissements des Français* (Margry), I, 296, 389f., 397. JR (Thwaites). *Jug. et délib.*, III, IV, V, VI. La Potherie, *Histoire (1722)*. Nicolas Perrot, *Mémoire sur les mœurs, coutumes et religion des sauvages de l'Amérique septentrionale*, éd. Jules Tailhan (Leipzig et Paris, 1864; Canadiana avant 1867, Toronto, 1968). P.-G. Roy, *Inv. coll. pièces jud. et not.*, I, 13, 36.

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