

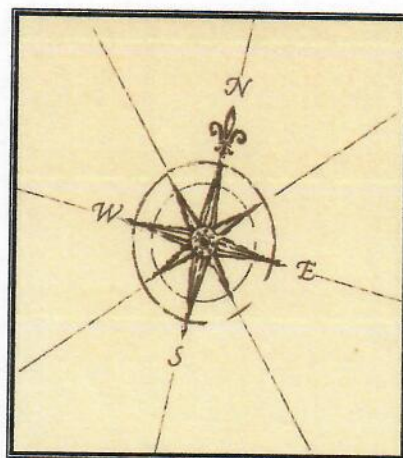
# *The Amazing Louis Joliet*

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# *The Amazing Louis Joliet*

Loyal. Brave. True grit. Heroic. The "Right Stuff." Intelligent. Creative. Daring. Undaunted courage. These are the words I think of when I study the life of Louis Joliet.

This Canadian explorer (1645-1700) was one of the most influential and resourceful individuals to ever live in the New World. He was a linguist, cartographer, anthropologist, scientist, hydrographer, teacher, church organist, business man, seigneur, husband, and father. And he lived in a time when life was primitive by modern standards.

Louis achieved his famous legacy because of his remarkable deeds. He and Father Jacques Marquette<sup>1</sup> were the first people of European ancestry to discover the Mississippi River. They didn't actually discover the river: it was known to Native peoples for thousand of years. But no one knew exactly where it was, where it began<sup>2</sup>, or, most importantly, where it went. Some hoped it emptied into the China Sea or Gulf of California, but no one knew for sure. Others thought it might flow into the Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic Ocean, Sea of Virginia, or Vermillion Sea<sup>3</sup>. They were hoping it might be the long sought-after route to the Orient. And Louis found the answer to the puzzling question.

Louis did not begin life as a child from a famous, wealthy, or noble family. His father, Jean Jolliet<sup>4</sup>, was a poor wheelwright and wagon maker in Québec City. At that time, Québec was not part of Canada, but rather a territory of New France.<sup>5</sup> His mother was Marie d'Abencourt. We don't know exactly when he was born, but he was baptized in the diocese of Québec September 21, 1645.<sup>6</sup> He was probably born in early September, because Catholics baptized their babies within the first two weeks of life, due to the high infant mortality rate.

His father died when he was five. Then Marie, a widow, married Martin Prévost, a successful merchant with a business on Île d'Orléans.



The Old Seminary in Québec<sup>9</sup>

When Louis was 11, he entered the Jesuit College in Québec City (now Laval University). He was a very good student, highly musical, and a gifted map maker. One of his hand-drawn maps of the island of Anticosti<sup>7</sup> and Gulf of St. Lawrence has survived and is on display in the Department of Marine in Paris.<sup>8</sup> He drew the map when he was only thirteen. He studied the Classics and defended his thesis in philosophy in Latin. He then intended to enter the priesthood and took minor orders. But by age 22, he decided the life of the cleric was not for him. Bishop Laval gave him 587 livres and he embarked for France.

Louis stayed in Paris and La Rochelle, probably studying hydrography. When he came back to Canada a year later, he decided he wanted to be a fur-trader and explorer.

It was then that Louis began traveling. He was looking for copper mines in the Great Lakes area, fur-trading, and exploring new territories in the western Great Lakes. He went to Sault Ste. Marie in June of 1671, conducting his fur-trading business.

Jean Talon, Governor of New France and representative of the King Louis XIV (the Sun King), developed the goal of finding the Mississippi, charting it, and determining where it ended. He entrusted Louis Joliet with this task. However, France would not subsidize the expedition, so Louis had to form a commercial society with other business people to obtain revenues to pay for the voyage. He received a letter from the superior of the Jesuits in New France, Claude Dablon, authorizing Father Marquette to accompany him for the voyage to the "Southern Sea." He met Father Marquette at Michilimackinac.<sup>10</sup> They stayed at the Saint-Ignace Mission<sup>11</sup> over the winter, making their final preparations for their expedition to that great waterway known to the Native peoples. Marquette was an expert in Indian languages, and obtained all the information he could from local Indians regarding where the river was. Their purposes in finding the Mississippi were several: they wanted to expand French influence into the New World, expand trade routes, trade with Natives, and spread the gospel of Christianity.

In the middle of May of 1673, the expedition left the Mission. There were seven men, including Joliet and Marquette, in two canoes. Imagine their excitement when they thought of entering territory no European had ever seen before. From Mackinac, the party traveled to Green Bay (Baie des Paunts). Then they entered the Fox River (Rivière aux Renards). They spent some time at the little mission of Saint François Xavier near what is now DePere, Wisconsin. Then they followed the Fox until it was too shallow for canoeing. They heard from the Indians that with a portage of less than 2 miles they would find a tributary of the Mississippi. And they did portage to the Wisconsin (Rivière Meskousing) at what is now Portage, Wisconsin.



Marker at Portage<sup>15</sup>

In Father Marquette's 1673 journal is the following entry:

*"It is easy to lose one's way, especially as the river leading thither is so full of wild oats<sup>12</sup> that it is difficult to find the channel. For this reason, we greatly needed our two guides, who safely conducted us to a portage of 2,700 paces, and helped us to transport our canoes to enter that river; after which they returned home, leaving us alone in this unknown country, in the hands of Providence. Thus we left the waters flowing to Quebec, four or five hundred leagues<sup>13</sup> from here, to float on those that would thenceforward take us through strange lands."<sup>14</sup>*

On June 17, 1673, they entered the Mississippi at what is now Prairie du Chien. This was when things really got interesting. They saw things no European had ever seen before. Strange birds appeared, such as swans with no wings [some types of river swan molt],



Marquette and Joliet discover the Mississippi<sup>16</sup>  
monstrous fish [probably channel catfish] that nearly broke their canoes, ruby-throated hummingbirds, "monsters" with the head of a tiger and whiskers [probably bobcat or lynx], wild

turkeys, ring-necked pheasants, prairie chickens, exotic plants, and groups of wild cattle [bison], some in herds of more than 400. For the first week, they saw no Indians. But as the journey continued southward, they met some Illinois, then many other groups. These people were very friendly and Father Marquette could talk to them. But as they got further and further south, communication became difficult. South of the Ohio River, Father Marquette could not understand the Indians at all. At the present boundary of the Arkansas and Louisiana, they stopped. They knew that the river emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. The Indians became more hostile, and they didn't want to compromise their expedition by a skirmish or misunderstanding. Therefore, they did not complete the entire journey to the Gulf, but accomplished their mission of finding out where the great river flowed.

They turned their canoes around and headed north. This time, they took a different route back. They ascended the Illinois River on August 25, made a portage at Chicago, and entered Lake Michigan. Then they went to Green Bay and back to the Saint-François Xavier Mission, which they reached in mid-October. Louis continued on to Sault Ste. Marie and spent the winter there with the Jesuits, copying his log-book and maps for safe keeping.



Lachine Rapids at Montréal<sup>17</sup>

The next spring, Louis returned home to Quebec, carrying his precious documents, maps, personal papers, and logs in a box with three others. Unfortunately, their canoe tipped in the treacherous Lachine Rapids near Montréal. All his materials were lost and his companions drowned. Louis almost drowned too, being in the water for nearly four hours. He was eventually rescued by some local fishermen. And to make the situation even sadder, his duplicate logs and maps left at the Jesuit Mission at the Sault were burned in a fire. Thus his information was lost to posterity, although he eventually he was able to retrieve most of it from memory.

After his historic voyage, Louis decided to settle down. He married Claire-Françoise Byssot, age 19, in Québec City, October 7, 1675.<sup>18</sup> He hoped they might move to Illinois and establish a French agricultural colony there. But when he asked Colbert (Minister of Finances in France), he was refused. The minister said many more people were needed to populate the current colony at Québec before any expansion was possible. Then he decided to establish a business trading in furs at Sept-Îles with some business partners and his father-in-law. Apparently, this business was successful, because he was able to expand, fix the price of beaver, and make policies regarding liquor sales in the area.

Count Frontenac, the next Governor of New France, had other voyages he wanted Louis to complete. In 1679, he hired Louis to go to Hudson Bay for purposes of trading, cartography, and to determine the amount of British influence there. Although this journey was not nearly as far as his previous trip to Louisiana, it was much more treacherous and difficult, involving over 200 portages. They started their journey by ascending the Saguenay River and paddling along various waterways until they entered James Bay. Louis met Governor Charles Bayly<sup>19</sup> there, and

was very impressed with the trade the British conducted in the area. He noticed that many Natives preferred to take their furs directly to the English, and not deal with middlemen, such as he was. He did not want the English to control the fur trade; that would be too threatening to other traders, especially his own business. He hoped they could be contained or prevented from expanding their operations.

In honor of Louis's service to the King, he was granted the Mingan Islands<sup>20</sup> and the Island of Anticosti. He intended to live on these islands in the summer, trade with natives, develop fishing grounds for cod, seals, and whales, and perhaps eventually trade throughout the land and even to the West Indies.

Louis never lacked for optimism or ambition.<sup>21</sup> He was always thinking ahead of the possibilities that might be available to him.



Anticosti Island<sup>22</sup>

In later life, Louis was appointed to teach cartography, navigation, and hydrography at the Jesuit College in Québec City where he had been a student. He continued to play the church organ at Sunday masses whenever he was available. He and his wife had seven children. Summers were spent with his family on one of the islands he owned conducting business, fishing, and working to expand the influence of New France.

He made one more extensive voyage. In 1694 went to Newfoundland and Labrador. This time he was not in a canoe, but rather a vessel with 6 swivel guns and 14 cannons. He and his business partner (François Viennay-Pachot) hired a crew of 18. He explored the whole coast of Labrador up to Zoar (latitude 56°8' North), studied the Eskimos, cod, whales, trade possibilities, and completed 16 maps. It was the first account of the area and significantly improved the safety of navigation in the area.

Louis lived a full and well-documented life, but his death remains a mystery. No one knows where or how he died. There was never a funeral or burial for him. He did attend a wedding in Quebec May 4, 1700 at Our Lady of Quebec where he signed the parish register.<sup>23</sup> But he was dead before mid-September of 1700, as a mass was said for the repose of his soul on September 15 in Quebec.<sup>24</sup> His death was certified to the French government on October 18, 1700, as he was not available to continue teaching hydrography at the seminary.

Canadian scholars who have studied this issue believe he drowned on his island of Anticosti and is buried there or on one of the numerous Mingan islands. John Ely Briggs said it best, I believe:

*Louis Joliet died sometime in... 1700. Nobody knows just when or where or how. It is probable that the illustrious explorer met his end some place in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where so often he had guided his boat on adventurous voyages. Perhaps his body rests on one of those rugged islands which the fogs envelop with a white shroud and whose shores reverberate incessantly with the cry of gulls and the thunder of billows.*<sup>25</sup>

Louis Joliet is my eighth great-grandfather.<sup>26</sup> I am proud to have him in my family tree. Actually, he is the only famous person in my entire ancestry. Most of my other ancestors

worked at day jobs, farmed, or were involved in trades, such as butchers, stone masons, or sawmill operators.

He was a remarkable man who lived life to its fullest and was a “man for all seasons.”



Birch bark canoe <sup>27</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Marquette was born in Laon, France in 1637. He was ordained as a Jesuit in 1666 and left for New France in the fall of that year. He dedicated his life as a missionary to the Indians. He contracted dysentery on his expedition down the Mississippi, and died in 1675. He is buried at St. Ignace, Michigan. From “Louis Joliet, Explorer” in *Desha County History Programs* (Dumas, Arkansas, Volume 6, Spring 1980), 13-15.

<sup>2</sup>The Mississippi begins at Lake Itasca, in northern Minnesota. The source was discovered by Henry Schoolcraft in 1832.

<sup>3</sup>*Desha County History Programs*, 13.

<sup>4</sup>Amazingly, French-Canadian surname spellings were not standardized until the 1960s by the PRDH (*Programme de recherche en démographie historique*) in Montréal. The vast majority of citizens were illiterate and many spellings were employed by the notary or priest. Other spellings for Joliet were: Joliette, Jolliet, Jolliete, Jollyet, Jollyiette. Pay site accessible at [www.genealogie.umontreal.ca](http://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca).

<sup>5</sup>Canada did not achieve status as a Dominion until July 1, 1867 with the Confederation of four Provinces (Ontario, Québec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick). Morton, W. L. *The Critical Years: the Union of British North America, 1857-1873* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964).

<sup>6</sup>PRDH, September 21, 1645.

<sup>7</sup>Anticosti is a large island in the St. Lawrence. It is a corruption of an Innu term meaning “where bears are hunted.” [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org). Accessed June 4, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Briggs, John Ely. “Louis Joliet, French Explorer” in *Palimpsest* (Iowa City, Iowa: July 1923), 240.

<sup>9</sup>*Grand-Séminaire de Québec*. Photograph by Gilbert Bochenek, 2008. Accessed through Laval University and [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org), June 1, 2011.

<sup>10</sup>Michilimackinac was a Native American fishing village and fur-trading post established in the 1600s on the southern shore of the Straits of Mackinac in Michigan. Huck, Barbara, et al. *Exploring Fur Trade Routes of North America* (Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, 2002), 102.

<sup>11</sup>St. Ignace was a Jesuit Catholic mission established in the 1600s on the northern bank of the Straits of Mackinac. Huck, 104.

<sup>12</sup>Actually, wild rice.

<sup>13</sup>One league was about three miles.

<sup>14</sup>Marquette, Jacques. "The Mississippi Voyage of Jolliet and Marquette," in Kellogg, Louise P., Editor. *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1917), 235. Accessed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org/diary/001366.asp](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/diary/001366.asp) on June 21, 2011.

<sup>15</sup>Cole, Harry. Photograph of marker of the portage courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. Historic Images collection, 1905.

<sup>16</sup>Peters, Cal. N. "Marquette and Joliet Discover the Mississippi River," Photograph of a painting made by Peters, ca. 1950 in Wisconsin Historical Society Visual Materials collection PH 482. Accessed online at [www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=64385](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=64385) on June 22, 2011.

<sup>17</sup>Colocho. Photograph of the Lachine Rapids. 2006. Accessed by Google Images, June 5, 2011.

<sup>18</sup>PRDH, October 7, 1675.

<sup>19</sup>Charles Bayly was the first overseas Governor of the Hudson Bay Company. The Hudson Bay Company is the oldest business in North America, founded in 1670. Vachon, André. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. (Toronto, Ontario: Université Laval and University of Toronto, 2000). Found at [www.biographi.ca](http://www.biographi.ca). Accessed May 27, 2011.

<sup>20</sup>The Mingan Islands are an archipelago of about one thousand small islands in the northern St. Lawrence, near Anticosti.

<sup>21</sup>*Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. Accessed April 22, 2011.

<sup>22</sup>Bourque, René. Photograph of Anticosti Island. 2009. Courtesy of [www.anticostiphotos.com](http://www.anticostiphotos.com). Accessed May 21, 2011.

<sup>23</sup>Tanguay, Abbé Cyprian. "The Death of Louis Joliet." *Magazine of Western History* (New York, 1885), 70-72.

<sup>24</sup>Slater, Renee. "Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliette." In Speake, Jennifer. *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 771.

<sup>25</sup> *Palimpsest*, 248.

<sup>26</sup> Author's Descendent Line from Louis Joliet. Information from Belisle, Earl. *The Belisle/Dufresne Family*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: self-published manuscript, 1975).

1. Louis Joliet 1645-1700  
+Claire-Françoise Bissot 1656-1710
2. Jean Baptiste de Mingan Joliet 1683-1733  
+Marie Mars 1688-1776
3. Marie-Anne Joliete 1714-1776  
+Noel Alain 1706-before 1759
4. Marie-Angélique Alain 1741-1773  
+François Morin 1731-1764
5. Marie-Louise Morin 1761-1792  
+Pierre Boin dit Dufresne 1760-1823
6. Antoine Dufresne 1791-1880  
+Euphrosine Groleau 1797-1828
7. Antoine-Hilaire Dufresne 1822-1900  
+Marceline Paquin 1822-1904
8. Celina Dufresne 1850-1922  
+Joseph Belisle 1846-1915
9. Narcisse Belisle 1878-1956  
+Elizabeth Mars 1884-1962
10. Gerald Belisle 1908-1962  
+Helen Winberg 1912-1980
11. Author 1946-  
+Spouse of author 1947-2021

<sup>27</sup> Langford, John. Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario. 2009. [www.voyageurquest.com](http://www.voyageurquest.com). From Google Images. Accessed May 12, 2011.

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