

Antoine Le Clair's statement /

ANTOINE LE CLAIR'S STATEMENT.

FRAGMENTARY NOTES TAKEN BY LYMAN C. DRAPER.¹

¹ In my trip to Missouri, Kansas, Illinois and Indiana in May, June and July, 1868, I was not able to transcribe all the notes I took in rough pencil form—hurrying, as I had to do, from place to place, and had time to copy only a part as I took them. These fragmentary statements by Le Clair, whom I met at Portage des Sioux, Mo., May 27, 1868, I now transcribe in the order in which I took them. There is no attempt at a connected narrative form.— L. C. D.

Francis le Clair, son of Antoine le Clair, was born at St. Josephs, Michigan, in 1795; — his brother, Antoine le Clair, late of Davenport, Iowa, was two years younger.²

² Antoine le Clair, Jr., was United States interpreter at the Sac and Fox Indian agency at Rock Island, in 1833. In August of that year, he served as interpreter between Black Hawk and J. B. Patterson, when the latter secured Black Hawk's *Autobiography*.— Ed.

Antoine le Clair, St., was a native of Montreal; he first located as a trader, at a crossing place just above the old fort, called Para Vache,³ or Cattle Yard (Cowpens), about thirty miles above the mouth of the St. Josephs river—and near there, a little above, was the Pottawattomie village, La Terre Coupee. He there married into a prominent Indian family, about 1792. The elder Antoine le Clair was a blacksmith by trade; but did not work at the business, except for a few years before his death, at Portage des Sioux, Missouri—where he died about 1821, some fifty-five years of age. He was somewhat less than six feet in height—well-built, and a successful trader.

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3 At Para Vache, the roads from Chicago forked— one leading to Fort Wayne, the other to Detroit.—L. C. D.

In 1800, Antoine le Clair, Sr., removed to Milwaukee. No traders were then located there. There probably had been such, however, who would remain during the winter and then return to Mackinaw. Le Clair took his family and 239 remained permanently at Milwaukee. He located about three miles above the mouth of Milwaukee river, at the foot of the first bluff, on a low prairie, on the northern bank of the river—the side next the lake. There were no signs of cabins in the neighborhood, where whites might have formerly traded. On the bluff were woods all the way to the lake; the low prairie was unwooded. There was a good spring from under the bluff, where the Le Clair family obtained water.

There was an Indian village about a mile below, on the opposite side of the river, called Milwaukee. Onongeesay [Onaugesa], a large, fat fellow, was chief. The Indians were mostly Pottawattomies, though there were a few Ottawas among them, but no Chippewas. The narrator has no knowledge of Siggenauk, or old Senahgewoin, being there—nor indeed did he ever hear of them. He has no knowledge of La Chasse. Onongeesay died about 1807, some sixty years old; he had been a chief for many years. He was a Pottawattomie—a fine and worthy Indian, and much beloved; he was no orator, but a good chief. His brother, Matchesepe (in French, *Mauvaise riviere* , or Bad river), succeeded him; he, however, was not so able a man. The narrator never understood that either had distinguished himself, or taken any part in war. In 1809, Antoine le Clair, Sr., and his family moved away from Milwaukee to Peoria, and had no knowledge of Matchesepe or his band afterwards—either when or where they moved; but the narrator thinks they moved on to Rock river.

About 1802, Joseph la Fromboise came from Mackinaw and settled at Milwaukee as a trader— locating about three hundred yards below the Le Clairs; he had an Ottawa wife, and several children. He and Le Clair were about on an equality as traders—they kept Mackinaw blankets, ammunition, cheap and coarse calicoes, cloths, tobacco,

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pipes, knives, awls, needles and vermilion paint, but no liquor. These articles were exchanged for furs and peltries, which Le Clair took to Detroit, and sold for goods,—while La Fromboise took his furs and peltries to Mackinaw. Le Clair would go to Detroit in the spring, select his goods, and about the month of May a small sailing vessel would leave Detroit 240 with his purchases, and those of William Burnett stationed at the mouth of the St. Joseph,¹ and John Kinzie and Robert Forsyth at Chicago, and deliver them. The vessel would then take the year's gathering of furs, etc., as a return cargo to Detroit. The same vessel probably brought goods for the Mackinaw traders. Thus were matters of transit managed, on upper Lake Michigan, say from about 1800 to 1809.

¹ See Hurlbut's *Chicago Antiquities*, pp. 49–78, for an account of Burnett, and extracts from his letter-book, giving interesting references to Northwestern affairs between 1786 and 1803.— Ed.

La Fromboise, a fine, worthy man, moved away from Milwaukee, about 1807, back to Mackinaw. The narrator knows nothing more of him.

Joseph la Croix, from Mackinaw, came to Milwaukee as a trader, about 1804; he had an Ottawa wife and family, and settled about half a mile above Le Clair's, on the opposite side of the river. La Croix did about the same amount of business as Le Clair. When the latter left in 1809, La Croix was still there. He got his goods from Mackinaw.

One Anderson, an American from Mackinaw, came to Milwaukee about 1806,² and remained for two winter seasons. He was a young man, without a family, and located on a little creek just above the Indian village, on the southern side of the river. Not succeeding very well, in his trade, he returned no more.

² Capt. Thomas G. Anderson. See his narrative in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, ix., pp. 153–158; also references to him in Col. Robert Dickson's letters, *post.*— Ed.

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The Indians at Milwaukee would cultivate not to exceed five or six acres to a family,—mostly sweet corn, pumpkins, beans, melons and a few potatoes. They would have to fence in their fields against their horses. They had neither cows nor hogs; they needed no pork as they had game. They would fence rudely, with bushes, poles and brush—sometimes poles fastened to bushes. They used no plows; they would only hoe the ground. There were no buffaloes there, but plenty of deer; very few bear, but no elk. It was a great place for muskrats.

On second thought, one Maronda [Mirandeu], a French 241 Canadian, was living close by where Le Clair settled. He had come from Mackinaw, apparently about two years before—say 1798. He had an Ottawa wife and three or four children, and Le Clair found him there at Milwaukee; he was a good blacksmith, would make hoes, axes, knives, gigs and spears for fishing, and shoe horses for the French traders. He would send by the traders for a small supply of iron, and make his own charcoal. In repairing guns, he was very ingenious. The Le Clairs left him there in 1809. The traders who lived there had one-horse carts,—made there—rough and unironed.

Each trader kept four or five French Canadian engagés, who would cut and haul wood and assist in trading, as well as work in the truck patches. The trader would send some of the more competent and trusty of these men in canoes, with a selection of goods, to different points, more or less distant, to stay all winter and trade with Indians:—or on pack horses over to Rock river, and on Winnebago lake to the Winnebagoes, and return in the spring with furs and pelts.

The Indians at Milwaukee had no fruit trees, except wild plums, which were plenty; there were blackberries, grapes and strawberries, but no raspberries. There were no nuts,—no pecans, no persimmons. The Indians manufactured large quantities of maple sugar for their own use, and for sale; they would live on it fast, and sell to the traders,—the rule in this, as in other things, being first a feast, then a famine. They were improvident, and what they had was soon gone. The Indians had bark lodges for summer; some of these were

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quite long, with divisions, and several families lived in one lodge. Narrator thinks there were about thirty lodges, of all sizes, housing perhaps some seventy-five families, with probably two or three gun men to a family—fathers, sons and sons-in-law.

There was no priest located at Milwaukee in those early times, and the traders there had no chance to school their children. There was no Indian town between Milwaukee and Chicago—and no Indian town at Chicago, though there was around there. 16

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Antoine Le Clair, Sr., left Peoria in the fall of 1812, when the Indians were beginning to be troublesome, and it was dangerous longer to continue there. He went with Major Thomas Forsyth, the Indian agent, to St. Louis, and next spring Le Clair and family went to Portage des Sioux. Le Clair, Sr., and his son, the narrator, were subsequently employed by Gov. William Clark and Major Forsyth, in the Indian department.

Le Clair, Sr., the narrator, and Major Forsyth went with Gov. Benjamin Howard on his expedition to Peoria. Thirteen hundred men went by land and some by water, on keel-boats. There was no fighting. They built a fort at Peoria, and remained perhaps two weeks, when all returned except a garrison for the fort. The Le Clairs went with the land forces—all of whom were mounted—and the militia from Vincennes, Kaskaskia, St. Louis, &c. The provisions were conveyed up the Mississippi and Illinois rivers in the boats.