

Prairie du Chien, in 1811

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LETTER FROM NICHOLAS BOILVIN, INDIAN AGENT, TO WILLIAM EUSTIS, SECRETARY OF WAR.¹

¹ This letter, written to the secretary of war—Hon. William Eustis—in 1811, by N. Boilvin, a well-known Indian agent, at this time at Prairie du Chien, was found among the papers of Governor Edwards. It is published as containing a description of that old French settlement, at that early period. The statement in the letter of the number of Indians visiting Prairie du Chien annually must excite surprise, and it is evident that there was quite a large commerce there at that time. I was not aware before reading this letter that the Indians at that early period were so extensively engaged in mining for lead ore and in manufacturing lead. The point at which they carried on their operations being described as sixty miles below Prairie du Chien, must have been at the lead mines of Julian Dubuque, where the city of Dubuque now stands. They might possibly have worked also on the east side of the Mississippi river, in what was afterward known as the Galena lead-mines. The earliest discovery of lead-mines in this country was made in this region. On an old French map, published in Paris in 1703, lead-mines (*mines de plomb*) are put down on both sides of the Mississippi river at this point. On the east side of the river the designation on the map is put down as being on the “Rivière de Parisien,” afterward known as Fever river. E. B. Washburne.

The letter is taken from *The Edwards Papers* (Chicago, 1884), edited by the late E. B. Washburne. Nicholas Boilvin appears to have first visited Prairie du Chien in February, 1810, but at what time he was appointed Indian agent is uncertain. His father seems to have been a resident of Quebec, during the war of the American Revolution, and to have won a good record by great kindness to a wounded surgeon of the American army who

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was held captive there. Nicholas came to the Northwest, after peace was declared, and engaged in the Indian trade. Chancing to meet, in St. Louis, the surgeon whom his father had befriended, the former secured for the son the position of Indian agent. When McKay attacked Prairie du Chien, in 1814, Boilvin went upon an American gun-boat, with his family and other American residents in the village, and fled. In addition to his office as Indian agent, Boilvin held the position of justice of the peace under the government of Illinois Territory; having been appointed as such, for the county of St. Clair, May 3, 1809, and for the county of Madison, June 12, 1814. In *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, ii., p. 126, there is a humorous story of his manner of administering the law, which is doubtless much exaggerated; very much as Charles Reaume's judicial record at Green Bay has been made the butt of many a careless historical writer's little joke, the better to spice narratives that might otherwise have proved insipid. The truth appears to be, that both Reaume and Boilvin were men of fair ability, faithful to their small trusts and quite on a par with the degree of personal dignity and respectability then in vogue in the two Wisconsin outposts of civilization. Boilvin furnished the war department, at one time, pursuant to instructions, with a Winnebago vocabulary.—(*Wis. Hist. Colls.*, x., p. 65.) It appears that, under date of April 25, 1811, about twelve weeks after the above letter was written, Secretary Eustis vested Boilvin with “discretionary power to expend on account of the government as much as should be thought necessary and for which he was to be allowed.”—(*Edwards Papers*, p. 138.) This same discretionary power, the result of a high degree of official confidence in his trustworthiness, was confirmed by another letter from the secretary of war, bearing date July 28, 1815. In *American State Papers*, vi., p. 32, Boilvin's account of expenditures in his agency during the first five months of 1812, “for articles purchased, express hire, pay of interpreters, &c.,” foots up \$3,255.31. In Canada, Boilvin was “well known to Mr. Brisbois, Sr.,” they afterwards being fellow-residents at Prairie du Chien, Boilvin died in the summer of 1827, on a keel-boat, on the Mississippi river, while on his way to St. Louis, and was buried at the latter place. “He was of common height, rather stocky, stooped and bowlegged,” and left a son who afterward died in California. In regard to this statement of the year of Boilvin's death, it is proper to say that in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, ix., p. 286, it is

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given, on B. W. Brisbois's oral relation, as 1824; but in *The Edwards Papers*, p. 292, I find a letter from Gen. Joseph M. Street to Gov. Ninian Edwards, dated July 7, 1827, in which he says that Henry Clay had written him, under date of June 10th, to the effect "that Boilvin was dead," and he (Clay) had recommended to the secretary of war the appointment of Street as successor, It is clear that Clay had then but recently heard of the fatal accident to Boilvin, which must, therefore, have occurred in the early summer of 1827. Boilvin's sub-agent was John Marsh. The death of the agent must have been previous to the middle of June, for it appears, by Brig. Gen. Henry Atkinson's report of the Red Bird disturbance, made to Maj. General Gaines, Sept. 28, 1827, that at that time Marsh was in charge of the Indian agency at Prairie du Chien: "About the middle of that month [June] Mr. Marsh, sub-agent, was informed, through the Sioux, that Prairie du Chien would be attacked." At the convention held between Atkinson and the Winnebagoes, at Prairie du Chien, Sept. 9, Marsh witnessed the articles in the capacity of agent. Street was appointed to succeed Boilvin, and arrived at the agency on the first of November, as will be seen by his letter of Dec. 28, 1827, post.— Ed.

Prairie des Chiens is on the left bank of the Mississippi, Illinois Territory, about six miles above the mouth of the 248 Ouisconsing, and 700 miles, by estimation, above St. Louis;1 the distance is probably over-rated as a well-manned boat

1 I have received a letter from the chief of engineers, U. S A., dated Washington, D. C., April 23, 1888, making the following official statement: "In a table of distances on maps of the Mississippi river, by Major F. N. Farquhar, Corps of Engineers, the distance between Prairie du Chien, Wis., and St. Louis, Mo., is five hundred and one-half miles."— Ed.

249 is able to ascend from the latter to the former place in twenty days, but it generally takes double the time for a loaded boat to perform the same route. The plat of ground on which the village stands may be said to be an island of about three miles long and a mile broad, but in the season of low water the back channel is dry except where it forms a small

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pond or lake, which may be easily drained. In fine, the back channel is nothing more than a small creek or bayou.

Prairie des Chiens is an old Indian town which was sold by the Indians to the Canadian traders about thirty years ago,¹ where they have ever since rendezvoused, and dispersed

¹ In 1781, exactly thirty years before Boilvin's letter, three French Canadians, named Basil Giard, Pierre Antaya and Augustin Ange, arrived on the "Prairie des Chiens," and the *Hist. Crawford Co.* (p. 280) claims that they were the first settlers in Crawford county. This assertion was also made by Major Z. M. Pike, U. S. A., who, in the course of his expedition to the sources of the Mississippi, visited Prairie du Chien, in 1805, six years previous to Boilvin's account, with the exception that Pike omits the name of Ange, who had left the prairie several years before the arrival of the expedition, and cites Dubuque as one of the original trio, which is clearly an error. Giard had a Spanish claim, three miles square, across the river, the site of what is now McGregor, Iowa; he was a trader, had a Sac woman for a wife, and died at Prairie du Chien, in 1819, aged about seventy years. Antaya was a farmer, and had a Fox half-breed for a consort; he died about 1815 or 1816. Ante was at first a voyageur, but afterwards became a trader, and wandered off to the headwaters of the Missouri, where he traded among the Sioux and died; he was, however, at Prairie du Chien during the treaty of 1825. An extended and learned controversy as to whether a French fort and trading post was established at Prairie du Chien, at least a century earlier than the advent of the three adventurers above named, will be found in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, x.,— articles by James D. Butler, Consul W. Butterfield, and Lyman C. Draper. — Ed.

250 therein merchandise in various directions. The Indians also sold them at the same time a tract of land measuring six leagues up and down the river, and six leagues back of it. The village contains between thirty and forty houses, and on the tract just mentioned about thirty-two families, so that the whole settlement contains about 100 families.¹ The

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men are generally French Canadians, who have mostly married Indian wives; perhaps not more than twelve white females are to be found in the settlement.

1 Pike, in 1805–6 (*Expeditions*, p. 46, appendix to part i.), said that the town proper then consisted of “eighteen dwelling-houses in two streets; sixteen in Front street and two in First street.” These, with other houses, “in the rear of the pond,” and “scattered round the country, at the distance of one, two, three and five miles,” together with three houses on the west side of the Mississippi, made, “in the village and vicinity, thirty-seven houses, which it will not be too much to calculate at ten persons each, the population would be 370 souls; but this calculation will not answer for the spring or autumn, as there are then at least 500 or 600 white persons.” The settlement had apparently not made much progress, between 1805 and 1811.— Ed.

These people attend to the cultivation of their lands, which are extremely fertile. They raise considerable quantities of surplus produce, particularly wheat and corn. They annually dispose of about eighty thousand weight of flour to the traders and Indians, besides great quantities of meal, and the quantity of surplus produce would be greatly increased if a suitable demand existed for it. All kinds of vegetables flourish in great perfection, and such is the beauty of the climate that the country begins to attract the attention of settlers. Different fruit trees have lately been planted and promise to grow well.

Prairie des Chiens is surrounded by numerous Indian tribes, who wholly depend on it for their supplies. It is annually visited by at least six thousand Indians,² and hitherto

2 Doubtless an exaggeration. Pike, after stating, in 1805–6, that as many as five hundred or six hundred whites rendezvoused at the prairie each spring and autumn, says that in the spring the gathering of the traders and engagés would attract “300 or 400 Indians, when they hold a fair; the one disposes of remnants of goods, and the others reserved peltries.” — Ed.

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251 they have resorted to the Canadian traders for goods, because our own apprehended much danger in attempting to carry on a trade with them, particularly as the Canadians generally prevail on the Indians either to plunder them or to drive them away. Only one trader of our town returned into that quarter during the last year.

Great danger, both to individuals and to the Government, is to be apprehended from the Canadian traders; they endeavor to incite the Indians against us; partly to monopolize their trade and partly to secure friendship in case a war should break out between us and England. They are constantly making large presents to the Indians, which the latter consider as a sign of approaching war, and under this impression frequently apply to me for advice on the subject. Hitherto I have been able to keep them friendly.¹

1 Oct., 1815, William Clark, Ninian Edwards and Aug. Chouteau, commissioners to treat with the Indians of the Mississippi basin, reported, from St. Louis, to the secretary of war: "The Indians about Prairie du Chien are represented by Mr. Boilvin (the agent at that place) and several other persons who have lately returned from there, as being in a state of the greatest commotion, occasioned by their divisions with regard to peace with the United States; all of which, together with the conduct of the Sacs [the British band], and the failure of the Winnebagoes, Menomonees, and Chippewas to meet us, is thought by the most intelligent white men who have been in that country, as well as by some of the most respectable friendly Indians, to be the result of the immense presents which the British government have lately distributed, and the constant intrigues of British traders, who certainly have a greater quantity of merchandise on the Mississippi at present than they ever had in any former year; indeed, from accounts from various quarters, it appears that they are making the greatest possible efforts to retain their influence over the Indians, and to engross the whole of their trade." —(*Am. State Papers*, vi., p. 10.)— Ed.

The United States have it in their power by the adoption of one simple measure to turn the current of Indian trade on the Upper Mississippi, and to put an end to the subsisting intercourse between the Canadian traders and the Indians. Prairie des Chiens from its

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central position is well calculated for a garrison and factory. It affords health, 252 plenty of fine timber and good water. But as the Indians are numerous a garrison at that place will require at least two companies of men. The Sacs, Foxes, and Iowas can be as well supplied at the latter place as at the former, particularly as they have mostly abandoned the chase, except to furnish themselves with meat, and turned their attention to the manufacture of lead, which they procure from a mine about sixty miles below Prairie des Chiens.¹ During the last season they manufactured four hundred thousand pounds of that article, which they exchanged for goods. The Sioux and other Indians in that quarter have excellent mines, and might be easily prevailed on to open them, especially as the profits of this manufacture is much greater and less precarious than the laborious pursuit of peltries. A few tools will be necessary for them, and perhaps a blacksmith to repair them would be of great use.

1 See "Notes on Early Lead-Mining in the Fever-River Region," *post.*— Ed.

As soon as the Indians in general turn their attention to lead, the Canadian traders will wholly abandon the country, as they have no use for that article, at least in the way of commerce. To introduce the manufacture of lead, requires only the adoption of the measures I have mentioned. The factory at Prairie des Chiens ought to be well supplied with goods, and lead ought to be received in exchange for the merchandise. This trade would be the more valuable to the United States, as lead is not a perishable article, and is easily transported; whereas peltries are bulky, and large quantities are annually spoiled before they reach the market; under such a system, the Canadian trade would be extinguished.

William Morris, Esq r , of Kaskaskia,² I have no doubt,

² Boilvin means William Morrison. who settled at Kaskaskia as a trader in 1790. He was the leading spirit of the firm of Bryant and Morrison; his partner being Guy Bryant, his uncle, a resident of Philadelphia. The firm had an extensive wholesale and retail establishment at Kaskaskia, which obtained supplies from St. Louis, Ste. Genevieve, Cape

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Girardeau and New Madrid; their trade extended as far off as Pittsburg, New Orleans and the Rocky mountains, and Prairie du Chien was one of their most active posts. Bryant and Morrison's boats were "the largest and best that up to that time had ever stemmed the waters of the Mississippi." Morrison, who had rare executive ability and was one of the most influential and energetic men in the Mississippi valley fur trade, amassed great wealth, for those times; in 1801 he built at Kaskaskia a stone residence and furnished it on a scale of luxury which for a long time quite outrivaled anything of the kind in the Illinois country. He died in April, 1837, and was buried at Kaskaskia. His brothers, Robert and James Morrison, followed him to Kaskaskia in 1798 and became prominent citizens there. Both William and James were army contractors. From June 1, 1815 to May 31, 1816, inclusive, James had a contract with the war department for the delivery of army supplies within the Illinois, Missouri and Indiana Territories, at rates varying from 17 to 36 cents per ration.— Ed.

253 would supply the troops at Prairie des Chiens cheaper than anybody else, perhaps at 35 [cents], perhaps at 30, per ration, which is the same price as is allowed for the ration at Fort Madison. This gentleman is as able to furnish as any man in the country, as he is a merchant of extensive business, and has most of the people in his debt. At any rate I am convinced that I can procure the rations to be furnished at Prairie des Chiens as cheap as it (*sic*) is now furnished at Fort Madison. I have the honor to be sir, with esteem,

Your ob t serv t , N. Boilvin .

Washington City, Feby. 2 d , 1811.

Hon. Will'm Eustis, Secty of War .