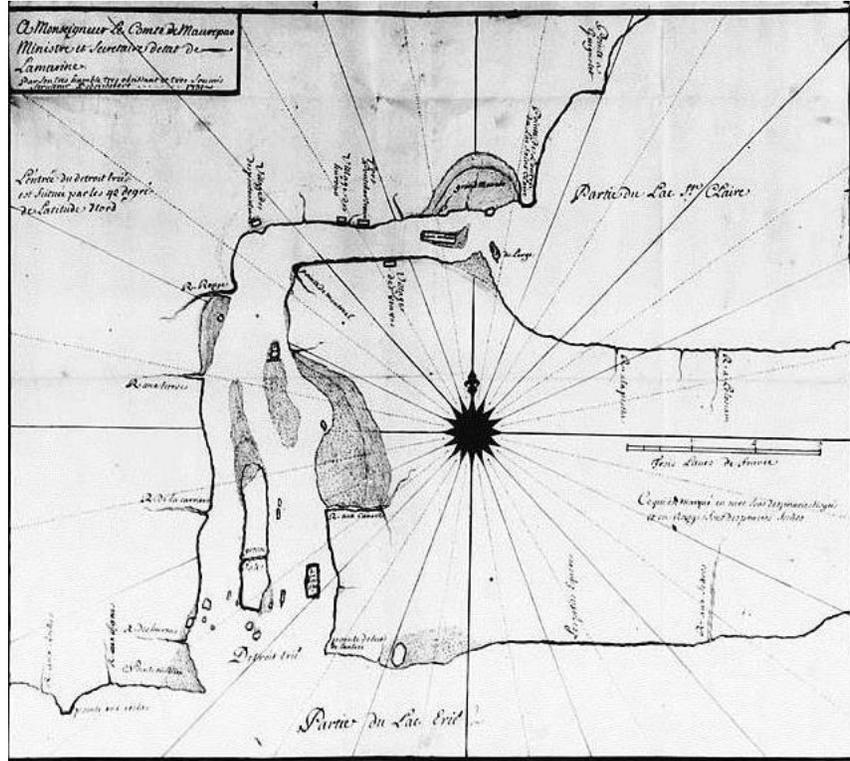


“Bob-Lo” Island, the Huron, and the French Canadians

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According to a recent book about Bob-Lo, the Huron Indians (Wendat-Pétun, later called Wyandotte) named it “*Etiowiteendannenti*, meaning ‘a peopled island of white woods guarding an entrance.’”¹ The French named it *Isle aux Bois Blancs*, island where there are white woods.

Isle aux Bois Blancs is where Jesuit Father **Armand de La Richardie** moved his Mission to the Huron in **1742**. This mission, entitled “The Mission of the Assumption among the Hurons of Detroit,”² had first been established near the fort of Detroit in **1728**.



Boishébert's 1731 map of the full strait, manuscript copy. Color version in Brian Leigh Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis, Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838* (Wayne State University Press, 2001), page 27, Fig. 2.7

George Paré, in his *The Catholic Church in Detroit*, observes:

It has been generally assumed by writers on Detroit history that Father de La Richardie began his missionary labors on the Canadian side of the river, and in the church yard of Assumption parish there is a monument commemorating the landing of the Jesuits there in 1728. There is no evidence to support such a claim. **Boishebert while commanding in Detroit, that is, from 1730 to 1733**, drew up a map of his post. The copy in the Burton Collection places the Huron village at the mouth of the Savoyard Creek [near the fort, at present-day Third Avenue],

¹ Annessa Carlisle, *Bob-Lo: an Island in Troubled Waters*, 8. See a pdf available on the Web. <http://bepdf.sunriverpetlodge.com/book/978-1879094758>

² Very Rev. E. C. Lebel, C.S.B., M.A., “History of Assumption, the First Parish in Upper Canada,” *CCHA, Report*, 21 (1954), 23-37, html version page 4. Available on the Web.

the location given in the text. The ground on the Canadian side of the river, which later became the site of the mission is labeled, "Fields of the Hurons." The Potawatomi village is located on the American side halfway between the fort and the Rouge River, and the Ottawa village on the site of Walkerville [close to Belle Isle, on the south shore].³

Father de La Richardie's own writings about the mission, and those of Father **Pierre Potier**, who joined him at Isle aux Bois Blancs in 1744, can be read in the *Jesuit Relations*.⁴ The mission was moved from Isle aux Bois Blancs to present-day Windsor, Ontario by October of 1749, eventually becoming the parish of l'Assomption du Détroit (now Assumption, Windsor, Ontario) on land donated by the Huron.

George F. MacDonald, using the *Jesuit Relations*, reports that the Hurons' first missionary was:

Father Armand de la Richardi [*sic*] who arrived at Detroit in **1728**. After several years of discouragement he was successful in converting most of them. A report made in 1733 states that a church and a house for the priest had been built. The church, which was seventy feet long, was not large enough for the six hundred Indians who wished to attend the services. His work was interrupted in **1738** by hostilities between the Hurons and the Ottawas, which resulted in the Hurons leaving Detroit and moving to Sandusky.⁵

Father de La Richardie followed his flock to Sandusky and eventually, by 1741, convinced most of them to relocate again, this time choosing Isle aux Bois Blancs. There had been some talk of granting the Huron a place of safety back in the mother colony near Montréal or on Grosse Isle, in the Detroit River, but Father de La Richardie did not wait for the New France authorities to make up their mind.⁶

Father John Clifton Plomer comments:

The removal to Bois Blanc took place in 1742 and the mission was established on a more imposing scale. Besides the church, there was the priest's house, a forge, a house for the smith, another for the domestics, a refectory, barns, a home for the farmer, Jean Baptiste Goyau, and a store or trading-post, which was presided over by a lay brother.⁷

³ George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit*, Detroit: The Gabriel Richard Press, 1951, p. 183, footnote 5. His Chapter 8 discusses the mission to the Hurons. Bolding added by me.

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, Thwaites, ed., Volumes 69 and 70, available on the Web. I have put copies of the relevant pages in a folder in our Mount Clemens FCHSM library. Unfortunately, many of the footnotes created when only Tanguay was available as a source are inaccurate, as I have noted in a few cases. Reader beware!

⁵ George F. McDonald, "Forgotten Facts about Assumption Parish, Sandwich, Ontario," *CCHA, Report*, 18 (1951), p. 41. Also available on the Web in both html and Adobe Acrobat.

⁶ John Clifton Plomer, Introduction, "Lettres de l'abbé J. B. Marchand, curé de l'Assomption, 1796-1825," p. vi. Typed manuscript at Burton Library, Detroit Public Library, LI572H9, P72, Reserved section, one of only four copies in existence. Father Plomer died 16 July 1926, before his book on Father Marchand could be published.

⁷ Plomer, vii.

Father de Gonner assisted Father de La Richardie in 1743-44, but he was not well; so Father Pierre Potier was sent for, arriving at Isle aux Bois Blancs on 25 September 1744, at four a.m.⁸ Together the two priests labored there until Father de La Richardie departed for the mother colony on 30 July 1746.⁹

His departure did not please the Huron, who had grown to truly admire Father de La Richardie. When further hostilities broke out in 1747 among a group of dissident Huron, led by the rebel, **Chief Nicolas (Orontony)**,¹⁰ the Huron requested the return of their beloved Father de La Richardie.

They sent a delegation to Quebec to persuade the good father to come, and to obtain the governor's permission. The latter recognized the wisdom of this step, and ordered the missionary to proceed to Detroit, which he was only too willing to do. He set out with M. de Bellestre on Aug. 23, and reached his destination on Oct. 10. This time he had at his disposal all the resources of the government, for the authorities had given orders that he should be assisted in every possible way.

Meanwhile, the commandant had decided that the Indians could be kept in better order if they were nearer the fort. Accordingly, as Father Potier and his faithful Hurons had left Bois Blanc, and the mission on the island had been destroyed during the uprising, the tribe was brought to the Pointe de Montreal on the south bank of the river, near the present Church of the Assumption at Sandwich, Ontario [now Windsor, near the Ambassador Bridge].¹¹

The Mission to the Huron was thus on Isle aux Bois Blancs from 1742 to 1747, five years. You can read Father de La Richardie's account book for the time on the island and Father Potier's continuation of the accounts in the *Jesuit Relations* cited above. Many French-Canadian names are mentioned. Father Potier reports that in 1747 the Huron village of the Island of Bois Blancs had 33 cabins or lodges, and he records the names of the inhabitants.¹²

On the microfilm of the register for Assumption, "following the entries for 1763-81 and before those for 1781-99," is an article dated 5 April 1886, *Notes sur l'Église de l'Assomption de Sandwich*, 1886, by H. Prud'homme, at least according to the French transcription of the article at <http://www3.sympatico.ca/jlucpilon/marentette/archives/sandwich.htm>

Prud'homme reports:

Father de la Richardie died in Illinois territory in 1758. The small register of this holy missionary served only for Indians and Father Potier continued it after him. (This small register is in the hands of Mf [*sic*] R. de St Père in 1861 [*sic*], during his visit here he asked me to give it to him. It had been given to me by Mr.

⁸ Rev. George Paré, "Pierre Potier, S. J.," *CCHA, Report*, 18 (1950), 51 of 47-57, available on the Web.

⁹ See also Ernest J. Lajeunesse, C.S.B., *The Windsor Border Region*, University of Toronto Press, 1960. Extracts from the account book entries and the Potier manuscript are transcribed on 30 - 41 in English and 247 - 255 in French.

¹⁰ See the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* Online. The Huron had come under the influence of British traders at Sandusky. See *DCB* also for de La Richardie and Potier.

¹¹ Plomer, p. viii.

¹² Lajeunesse, 35-36. See my "'But I read it... 'Is Catherine Jean dite Vien the Same Woman as the Huron Named La Vielle Catherine and Sk8ateenre (Achi8taa) Recorded in Father Pierre Potier's 1747 Census of Village Huron de L'Ile aux Bois Blancs?" on the Miscellaneous page of the FCHSM Website.

Pinsmeault [*sic*] who saw no great importance in it, all written in Indian! [*tout écrit en Sauvage!*])

One marriage is found enregistered; that of **Jean Baptiste Goyeau** and **Marie Louise (Delière)**, blessed in 1747. The witnesses to this marriage were “Goyau”, “Pierre Gourmay”, Marie Louise Doyon, *femme* St Martin, “Guillaume Goyeau”, François Rocheleau, François Regis and Jacques Phillippe Desbuttes. We cite this marriage because it cannot be found on the registers of Ste. Anne du Détroit. [My translation.]

I have not yet had the chance to look at the microfilm myself, but I include this citation in case the names mentioned are part of your families.

Mr. H. Prud'homme also compiled the transcription version of the Ste. Anne de Detroit registers found on the Family History Library microfilm version, a version which, unfortunately, has some errors.

This started out to be a one page brief summary of the French experience at what is now called Bob-Lo Island. As so often happens when I research a topic, I found more than I already knew I would find.

An editorial comment: I couldn't help but notice that Annessa Carlisle, in the excerpt I read on the Web from her *Bob-Lo: an Island in Troubled Waters*, believes that it was on Bois Blanc that the French “**kept**” their Indians, continuing to convert them to Christianity and **taking advantage** of their prowess in living off the land, specifically in trapping for the burgeoning fur trading industry.” (Emphasis mine.) Evidently, she has not read Father de La Richardie, nor Father Potier, nor the petitions of the Huron Indians themselves requesting, indeed begging for, the presence of a missionary among them. Once again I am convinced that history is far more complicated than stereotypes or political correctness would make it seem.

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See also Robert Toupin, S. J., *Les Écrits de Pierre Potier* (Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, Collection Amérique Française, 1996). This huge volume (1329 pages) contains transcriptions in French of the writings of Father Pierre Potier, Jesuit missionary to the Huron and the French from 1744 to 1781 in the Detroit River Region, primarily at the parish of L'Assomption in what became Windsor, Ontario, and also transcriptions of religious acts.

The manuscript copy of the map by Henri-Louis Deschamps de Boishébert may be seen at Library and Archives Canada, Online MIKAN no. 2487451

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=en&rec_nbr=2487451&rec_nbr_list=2487451,3074427,2512009,3058072