Jesuits in New France and Religious Discoveries 1: The Jesuits in New France

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The Jesuits: The Traveling Priests

The Jesuits traveled throughout New France and established missions to care for the religious needs of the French colonists and their Native allies.

The Society of Jesus, whose members are known as Jesuits, is a religious order started by St. Ignatius Loyola in 1540. The Jesuits came to New France in the early 17th century to serve the religious needs of the colony and Christianize the Native Americans. They established missions throughout the St. Lawrence and Mississippi river valleys and into the western Great Lakes, or pays d’en haut, at places like Fort St. Joseph. Their work continued steadily until the French surrendered to the British in 1760.

The Man in Black: Portrait of a Jesuit Missionary

Father Allouez was one of the most influential missionaries in New France.

One of the most traveled of the Jesuits was Father Claude Jean Allouez. He began his service to the Society of Jesus in Toulouse, France. In 1658 he arrived in Quebec to learn the Indian languages. Soon after, he traveled inland, establishing missions in what is now Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Father Allouez established the mission at Fort St. Joseph in the 1680s when he arrived from the Illinois Country with potential Miami and Potawatomi Indian converts.

The Fort St. Joseph Mission

Jesuit priests were frequently in residence at the fort to say mass and perform baptisms and marriages.

From 1691-1760 numerous Jesuit priests traveled to Fort St. Joseph. Some, such as Father Charlevoix, visited briefly while on their way to other destinations. The priests served the religious needs of the community by saying mass and performing baptisms and marriages. The Fort St. Joseph marriage and baptismal records provide insight into the timing of the visits, the names of the priests, and the sacraments they preformed while in residence.