

*The Des Plaines River*

1673-1940

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PORTION OF CORONELLI'S MAP OF 1688  
This map was one of the earliest to give effect to the discoveries of Marquette, Joliet, and La Salle.

*The*  
*DES PLAINES RIVER*

1673 = 1940

*A Brief Consideration*  
*of*  
*Its Names and History*

By

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## PREFATORY NOTE

**D**URING A RECENT CONVERSATION IN A HOME ON the banks of the Upper Des Plaines, there were found to be as many ideas regarding the origin of the name of the River as there were "settlers" present. In an attempt to arrive at a definite answer to this question, I looked up a number of early references to the River in maps and books in my library, and found that the changes in the name furnished a very interesting basis for a summary of the history of the River. When these references were examined by the Chicago Historical Society and the Newberry Library, both institutions stated that this list was the first attempt they had seen to trace from early French days to modern times the names by which the River had been designated.

This is by no means an indication that the River has been neglected from a literary angle. Not only was it described fully, nearly three hundred years ago, by the French priests and explorers, but it has received more than its share of attention in the annals of our Courts of Law. In fact, the evidence in the case of the United States of America vs. the Economy Light & Power Company, amounting to several thousand pages, constitutes one of the most exhaustive studies of the character and history of a river that has ever been made. In another case (the States of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania vs. the State of Illinois and Sanitary District of Chicago) no less a personage than Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes placed his stamp of approval on the correctness of the translation of Father Dablon's report in the "Jesuit Relations". But the question of the origin of the name, having no bearing on water power or drainage disputes, has been

*neglected. Even Mrs. John H. Kinzie, in 1856, was led into the error of writing that "Riviere Aux Plaines" was the original French designation for the River.*

*To fill in this gap left by the priests, explorers, and lawyers, I have listed more than eighty-five references to the Des Plaines, which have been selected not only to show the development of the name, but to provide a guide to some of the interesting early descriptions of the River.*

HERMON DUNLAP SMITH

*December, 1940*

## THE DES PLAINES RIVER

**T**HE TERSENESS OF JULIET'S RHETORICAL question, "What's in a name?" has implanted this thought so strongly in our minds, that we are almost ready to believe that there is little, if anything, in a name, although we are confronted with daily evidence to the contrary. In names, as in honorary degrees or military decorations, mere numbers add an impressive air of authority. Even the Governor General of the Bahama Islands sounds very important when he says, "I, Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David." If seven such rather commonplace names are enough for a Duke, a river which has had over forty colorful Indian, French, and English names can certainly claim a long and aristocratic ancestry.

The aristocracy of the Des Plaines River, however, does not depend on its many names, but rather on the important part it has played in the early history of the Continent. Interestingly enough, there is a close link between the two, in that the name of the River changed as its role changed, so that by following the development of the name, we also follow the history of the River.

The early importance of the Des Plaines arose from its being the connecting link in the Illinois-Chicago River route, by which it was possible for goods to pass from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi. As such, it was from earliest times one of the great "keys of the Continent". The importance of Chicago in the Twentieth Century has risen largely from the same geographical factors of strategic location which made the Des Plaines portage important in the Seventeenth.

The first white men known to have used the portage were Marquette and Joliet in 1673, although Parkman believes LaSalle may have been there two years previous. Marquette's Journal provides the earliest record we have of the coming of Europeans to the site of Chicago, but in it neither the present Des Plaines nor the Chicago River are referred to by distinctive names. Marquette calls the Des Plaines simply the "river of the portage". The French priests and explorers for many years did not give it a name which was distinct from the two other rivers in the connecting water route, and usually called it "Illinois" or "Chekagou". At this time, the Illinois, and hence the Des Plaines, was quite often called "La Divine", as a compliment to Count Frontenac, whose wife and her friend, Mademoiselle d' Outrelaise, were referred to as "Les Divines" at the Court at Quebec.

It was not for over a hundred years that the independence of the Des Plaines from the Illinois and the Chicago Rivers was recognized by a cartographer who gave it a designation of its own, "Plein." Curiously enough, this occurred during the same period in which the independence of the nation was established. This word, which can properly be used in French to refer to "high water" seems to be derived from the habit of the Des Plaines of overflowing its banks, a tendency which was as well known to Marquette by 1675 as to some of the modern "pioneers" whose cabins were flooded in the high water of 1938. Marquette has left a very colorful record of his unhappy experience. "On the 28th [March 28, 1675] the ice broke up, and stopped above us. On the 29th, the waters rose so high that we had barely time to decamp as fast as possible, putting our goods in the trees, and trying to sleep on a hillock. The water gained on us nearly all night, but there was



a slight freeze, and the water fell a little, while we were near our packages. The barrier has just broken, the ice has drifted away; and, because the water is already rising, we are about to embark to continue our journey . . . [March 31] The very high lands alone are not flooded. At the place where we are, the water has risen more than twelve feet."

The first use of the modern name, Des Plaines, occurred about the time of the first serious consideration of the construction of a canal. Whether there was any connection between the two, it is impossible to say. The idea of a canal is as old as the knowledge of the River. In 1674, Father Dablon, quoting Joliet's oral statement, had reported, "We could go with facility to Florida in a bark and by very easy navigation. It would only be necessary to make a canal by cutting through but half a league [one and a half miles] of prairie to pass from the foot of the Lake of the Illinois [Lake Michigan] to the River St. Louis [Des Plaines-Illinois]."

During the days of the French explorers down to comparatively modern times, there was, during periods of high water, a continuous passage from the Illinois River to Lake Michigan, through the Des Plaines River, the Chicago River, and "Mud Lake", a connecting slough about five miles long, located a little east of the site of modern Riverside.

In a letter of LaSalle's written in 1685, which gives the first detailed description of the Portage, the situation is described as follows: "This is an isthmus of land . . . at the west of the Illinois Lake, [Lake Michigan] which is reached by a channel [the Chicago River] formed by the junction of several rivulets, or meadow ditches [such as the Skokie]. It is navigable for about two leagues to the edge of the prairie, a quarter of a mile westward. There is a



PORTION OF MAP FROM THE DUBLIN EDITION OF BIRKBECK'S  
 "NOTES ON A JOURNEY IN AMERICA"

*This map was published in 1818, the year Illinois was admitted to statehood. At this period, cartographers were still somewhat vague as to state boundaries. Note relation of Illinois to Lake Michigan.*

little lake, [Mud Lake] divided by a causeway, made by the beavers . . . from which runs a stream, which, after winding about a half league through the rushes, empties into the River Checagou [Des Plaines] and thence into that of the Illinois. This lake is filled by heavy summer rains, or spring freshets, and discharges also into the channel which leads to the lake of the Illinois, the level of which is seven feet lower than the prairie on which the lake is. The river of Checagou does the same thing in the spring when its channel is full."

LaSalle realized, however, that such continuous navigation was possible for only a few days in the year, and for very small boats. He pointed out that in the summer there is often no water at all in the river, "as far as Fort St. Louis" (Starved Rock). Unfortunately, the tendency of the Des Plaines to extreme fluctuations in water level, which LaSalle's keen eye had noted, was not fully recognized by later engineers, with a consequent tendency to underestimate the length of the canal which would be required. Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which was written in 1781 when Illinois was still part of Virginia, said, "The Illinois is a fine river, clear, gentle, and without rapids; insomuch that it is navigable for batteaux to its source. From thence is a portage of two miles only to the Chickago, which affords a batteau navigation of sixteen miles to its entrance into Lake Michigan." Father Dablon's ditch through "about half a league of prairie" was ultimately found to require a canal of nearly one hundred miles at a cost of many million dollars.

It is a strange paradox that the relative importance of the Des Plaines as a highway of commerce should have begun to decline soon after the completion of the canal which was intended to crown

its glory. The project for a canal was laid before Congress in 1808 by Albert Gallatin. In 1816 a treaty was negotiated with the Indians, under which they ceded a strip of land for canal purposes, extending for about ten miles on each side of the proposed route, from Lake Michigan to the confluence of the Fox and Illinois Rivers. This territory was surveyed by Captain John C. Sullivan in 1817 and 1818. The boundaries determined by him are still known as "the Indian Boundaries", and are commemorated by various road houses in the Chicago district, such as the Indian Boundary Tavern on the Skokie Highway near Niles Center.

After further surveys and many disappointing delays, construction and financing of the canal were finally voted by the Legislature in 1836. An additional appropriation was included in the notorious Omnibus Bill of 1837, which also provided an ambitious railroad and highway network to be built by the State, and, incidentally, for the transfer of the capital from Vandalia to Springfield. It is interesting to note that what is now the greatest railroad center in the world was entirely omitted from this extensive state railroad system, as its transportation needs were presumed to be cared for by the proposed canal. Any further action on these projects was indefinitely delayed when the banks suspended specie payments in the spring of 1837 and the Panic ensued. By 1848, when the Illinois and Michigan Canal was finally finished, the railroads were already beginning to overshadow the canals as arteries of commerce. In spite of the expenditure of over ten million dollars, the Canal was too small for lake boats, and connected with a river that was barely navigable during much of the year. It was nonetheless an important factor in the commercial development of Chicago.

Unfortunately, the Illinois and Michigan Canal channel was not of sufficient capacity to carry off the Des Plaines floods. On March 12, 1849, the year following the completion of the Canal, shipping was piled up in the harbor at Chicago by a severe flood in the Des Plaines. But what was more serious, the flow of the Canal was not adequate to take care of the increasing amount of sewage, even after the direction of the Chicago River had been reversed in 1871 by cutting down the summit level of the Canal. In spite of various makeshift efforts to improve the situation by auxiliary pumping arrangements, a serious Des Plaines flood in August, 1885, swept the sewage out into the Lake, and the city water pollution became so intolerable that a drastic remedy became necessary. This led to the creation of the Sanitary District of Chicago, under which the "Drainage Canal" was completed in January, 1900.

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During the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century, while the fur trade was active in the Middle West, there were still frequent references to the River as a trade route, and to the terrific obstacles of the portage.

Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard left in his autobiography a graphic description of the Mud Lake passage he made in 1818 as a voyageur of the American Fur Company. "Mud Lake drained partly into the Aux Plaines and partly through a narrow, crooked channel into the South Branch, and only in very wet seasons was there sufficient water to float an empty boat. The mud was very deep, and along the edge of the lake grew tall grass and wild rice, often reaching above a man's head, and so strong and dense it was almost impossible to walk through them.

“Our empty boats were pulled up the channel, and in many places, where there was no water and a hard clay bottom, they were placed on short rollers, and in this way moved along until the lake was reached, where we found mud thick and deep, but only at rare intervals was there water. Forked tree branches were tied upon the ends of the boat poles, and these afforded a bearing on the tussocks of grass and roots, which enabled the men in the boat to push to some purpose. Four men only remained in a boat and pushed with these poles, while six or eight others waded in the mud alongside, and by united efforts constantly jerking it along, so that from early dawn to dark we succeeded only in passing a part of our boats through to the Aux Plaines outlet, where we found the first hard ground. While a part of our crew were thus employed, others busied themselves in transporting our goods on their backs to the river; it was a laborious day for all.

“Those who waded through the mud frequently sank to their waist, and at times were forced to cling to the side of the boat to prevent going over their heads; after reaching the end and camping for the night came the task of ridding themselves from the blood suckers.

“The lake was full of these abominable black plagues, and they stuck so tight to the skin that they broke in pieces if force was used to remove them; experience had taught the use of a decoction of tobacco to remove them, and this was resorted to with good success.

“Having rid ourselves of the blood suckers, we were assailed by myriads of mosquitoes, that rendered sleep hopeless, though we sought the softest spots on the ground for our beds.

“Those who had waded the lake suffered great agony, their limbs becoming swollen and inflamed, and their sufferings were not ended for two or three days.

“It took us three consecutive days of such toil to pass all our boats through this miserable lake. . . .”

After experiences such as this, it is not surprising that Hubbard should have taken a leading part in the agitation for a canal.

In 1827, on his return to Chicago from some Indian negotiations in St. Louis, General Lewis Cass ascended the Des Plaines and reached Mud Lake at nightfall. According to his biographer, “It soon became so dark that they could not discern the bank. The lake was covered with the broad leaves of a kind of lily, favorite haunt of disgusting looking water snakes. A birch canoe cannot touch the shore without danger of having a hole broken through its slight material. . . . Finding they could not get to shore safely, the party spent the night upon that slimy sheet of water. Eighteen men in a small canoe, in a hot summer night, with the poles stuck into the mud across the canoe to steady it, accompanied with the most intense rain and with the most intense thunder and lightning,—such are the reminiscences which belong to that memorable night. And he who was not there, or has never been in such a place, if such another place there is, has little conception of what a formidable enemy a mosquito can be. During that long night,—long in suffering, though short in the calendar, for it was in the month of July,—their venomous attacks were beyond the power of description.”

By 1835, the fur trade was rapidly passing, but the river was frequently mentioned by travelers, due to the necessity of fording it on the way to the West. Harriet Martineau, in her *Society in*

*America* (1837), in describing a trip from Chicago to Joliet, writes, "A little further on we came to the River Aux Plaines, spelled on a sign board 'Oplain'. The ferry here is a monopoly, and the public suffers accordingly. There is only one small flat boat for the service of the concourse of people now pouring into the prairies. Though we happened to arrive nearly first of the crowd of today, we were detained on the bank above an hour; and then our horses went over at two crossings, and the wagon and ourselves at the third. It was a pretty scene, if we had not been in a hurry; the country wagons and teams in the wood by the side of the quiet clear river; and the oxen swimming over, yoked, with only their patient faces visible above the surface. . . . As we proceeded, the scenery became more and more like what all travelers compare it to,—a boundless English park. The grass was wilder, the occasional footpath not so trim, and the single trees less majestic; but no park ever displayed anything equal to the grouping of the trees within the windings of the blue, brimming river Aux Plaines."

In 1831, when the John H. Kinzies made a trip from Fort Winnebago, Wisconsin, where Mr. Kinzie was Indian Agent, to visit Mrs. John Kinzie, Sr. in Chicago, they pushed on so as to make the crossing at Barney Laughton's place (on the site of modern Riverside) by nightfall on a raw March evening. "It was almost dark when we reached Lawton's," Mrs. Kinzie writes in her *Wau-Bun*, published in 1856. "The Aux Plaines was frozen, and the house was on the other side. By loud shouting we brought out a man from the building, and he succeeded in cutting the ice, and bringing a canoe over to us; but not until it had become difficult to distinguish objects in the darkness. A very comfortable house



was Lawton's after we did reach it—carpeted, and with a warm stove—in fact, quite in civilized style. . . . Mrs. Lawton was a young woman, and not ill-looking. She complained bitterly of the loneliness of her condition, and having been 'brought out there into the woods' . . . but we tried to comfort her with the assurance that things would grow better in a few years."

With steady emigration to the west and southwest, highways to a large extent displaced the undependable Des Plaines as a route of travel in those directions. However, in the 1830s the valley of the Upper Des Plaines was still the best way to reach the undeveloped region to the north, especially as the Green Bay trail was still in a primitive state. In 1834, Daniel Wright, the first white settler in what is now Lake County, built his house a short distance west of the Des Plaines River, about a mile south of the site of Half Day. Within a short time, a respectable colony of several families had settled along the relatively open west bank of the River in this neighborhood and further north. By September, 1835, Hiram Kennicott had opened a general store near the mouth of Indian Creek (below Half Day). This river settlement is credited with most of the "firsts" of Lake County,—the first wedding, the first death, the first sawmill, and the first negro, who used to boast that he was the first "white-man" to plant corn in the County!

Conjecture as to the origin of the present name of the River has been a favorite pastime of historians. Hurlbut, for example, says, "It is understood to receive its name from a variety of maple, which the Canadians call 'Plaine'." Professor Keating, the historian of Major Long's second expedition (1823), also brings the maple tree into his report that "in Potawatomi the river is termed Sheshikmaoshike Sepe (which signifies *flumen arboris quae mingit*).

This appellation," he explains for the benefit of mediocre Latin scholars, "is derived from the great quantity of sap which flows from this tree in the spring." To this day these sugar maples are landmarks of great beauty, especially in the fall, when they turn a gorgeous yellow-orange.

Since the River was called "Plein" for some thirty years before it was called "Des Plaines", it seems a reasonable supposition that the latter was derived from the former, particularly in view of the similarity of their French pronunciations. In days when written references to the River were infrequent, a change from "Plein" to "Des Plaines" would not be improbable. The latter name, the River of the Plains, would be appropriate for a river which was about to be cut through the prairie, as Father Dablon had suggested one hundred and fifty years earlier.

There seems to have been an easy transition from the old name of "Plein", via "De Plein" (1817) and "Desplain" (1817) to "Des Plaines" (1819). It may appear strange that a period of about sixty years should have elapsed before this latter name was generally adopted. During these sixty years we find over a dozen corruptions in frequent use. In the leading early American atlas, (Carey & Lea) the River is designated in different places in the same volume by four different names. The many variations are readily accounted for by the fact that this was the period during which the River was encountered by illiterate fur traders, emigrants, and travelers whose spelling would be entirely phonetic. This is in contrast with the earlier period when reference to the River would be largely by learned priests and cartographers, and the later period when, with the extension of its settlement, standardization of the name would be expected.

By a parallel tracing of the history of the River and its names, we find both divide themselves into three main periods:

<i>Period</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Usual Name</i>
Early explorers and voyageurs	1673-1778	Chekagou or Illinois
Fur trade	1778-1825	Plein
Canal and settlement of the valley	1825-	Des Plaines, or miscellaneous variations, especially Aux Plaines, and Oplain.

Throughout these changes in name and significance, covering nearly three centuries, the River has held faithfully to the characteristics which have given it an individuality,—almost a personality,—to those who have used it as a means of transportation, or more recently, as a playground. These characteristics are the extreme variations in its water level,—from “plein” to mud hole,—and the peaceful beauty of the “grouping of its trees”, which Harriet Martineau admired over a hundred years ago.

## SOME EARLY REFERENCES TO THE DES PLAINES

Date	(*)Cartographer or Historian	Designation
1674	Dablon, "The Jesuit Relations"	Saint Louis
1674	*Unknown	La Divine
1674	*Joliet or Raudin	La Divine or L'Outrelaize
1675	Marquette, "The Jesuit Relations"	River of the Portage
1680	La Salle	Divine
1680	*Unknown	Rivière de la Divine
1682	Membré	Divine, called by the Indians, Checagou
1682	La Salle	Checagou
1684	*Franquelin	Chekagou
1687	*Homann	Chicagou
1687	Joutel, "Journal"	Illinois
1688	*Franquelin	Checagou
1688	*Coronelli	Chekagou
1695	*Coronelli	Chekogou
1697	*Louvigny	Chicagou
1698	Hennepin, <i>New Discovery</i>	Divine
1699	St. Cosmé	branch of the Illinois
1700	*De Lisle	Illinois
1709	*Moll	Divine
1718	*De Lisle	Chicagou
1720	*Moll	Ilinese
1737	*Homann	Illinois
1744	*Bellin	Illinois
1744	Charlevoix, <i>Journals of a Voyage to North America</i>	Illinois
1746	*D'Anville	Chicagou
1755	*Mitchell	Illinois
1761	*Jefferys	Chicagou
1763	*Kitchin	Illinois
1777	*Pownall	Illinois or Chicagou
1778	*Hutchins	Plein
1781	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i>	Illinois
1782	*De Lisle	Chicagou
1783	*Faden	Illinois
1783	*Wallis	Chicagou
1783	*Cary	Plein
1783	*Kitchin	Illinois

Date	(*)Cartographer or Historian	Designation
1784	*McMurray	Plein
1785	*Fitch	Plein
1790	*Delamarche	Chicagoo
1792	*Stockdale	Piein
1793	*Doolittle	Plein
1794	*Kitchin	Chikagou
1795	*Mann	Maple
1795	*Scott	Plein
1798	*Morse	Plein
1804	*Cary	Plein
1814	*Carey	Kiccapoo
1817	Brown, <i>Western Gazetteer</i>	Plein or Kickapoo
1817	Storrow, <i>The Northwest in 1817</i>	De Plein
1817	Major Long, "Report"	Desplain
1818	*Sullivan	La Plain
1818	*Carey	Kickapoo
1818	Birkbeck, <i>Notes on a Journey in America</i> (Map)	Plein
1819	*Melish	des Plaines
1819	Graham & Phillips, "Report"	Plein
1821	Schoolcraft, <i>Narrative Journal</i>	Plein
1821	Tipton's <i>Journal</i>	Le Plein
1822	*Carey & Lea, <i>American Atlas</i>	Riviere des Plaines, la Plaine, Plaines, des Plains
1824	*Lucas	la Plaine
1825	Schoolcraft, <i>Travels in the Central Portion of the Mississippi Valley</i>	Des Plaines
1825	Keating, <i>Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River</i>	Des Plains (Map), Des Plaines, Sheshikmaoshike Sepe
1826	*Finley, <i>A New General Atlas</i>	Des Plaines
1829	*Tanner	la Plaine
1830	*Goodrich	Despatch
1831	Kinzie, <i>Waubun</i>	Aux Plaines
1834	*Mitchell, <i>Tourists' Pocket Map of the State of Illinois</i>	des Plaines
1834	Peck, <i>A Gazetteer of Illinois</i>	Des Plaines, Aux Plaines, Anglice O'Plane
1834	*Taylor, <i>Traveling Map of the Canadas</i>	Des Plains
1835	Shirreff, <i>A Tour Through North America</i>	Oak Plains
1835	Hoffman, <i>A Winter in the West</i>	Au Plaine
1835	*Strong	des Plains
1837	(Mitchell), <i>Illinois in 1837</i>	Des Planes
1837	Martineau, <i>Society in America</i>	Aux Plaines or Oplain
1839	*Bradford	Des Planes

Date	(*)Cartographer or Historian	Designation
1841	Government Survey	Des Plains
1841	<i>The Geography of America and the</i>	
	<i>West Indies</i>	Plane
1841	*Tanner	des Pleines
1844	Brown, <i>The History of Illinois</i>	des Planes
1844	Thacker, <i>Muskrat Hunting</i>	Oplain
1844	Appleton, <i>Southern &amp; Western Trav-</i>	
	<i>elers' Guide</i>	Illinois
1845	Little Fort (Waukegan) <i>Porcupine</i>	O'Plain
1846	*Mitchell	des Pleines
1852	Curtiss, <i>Western Portraiture and Emi-</i>	
	<i>grants' Guide</i>	O'Plain
1855	*Chapman	O'Plaine
1858	Childs, <i>Recollection of Wisconsin</i>	Eau Plaine
1877	LeBaron, <i>The Past and Present of</i>	
	<i>Lake County</i>	Oplain, Aux Plaines, Des Plaines
1880	Hurlbut, <i>Chicago Antiquities</i>	Desplaines

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