

Recollections of Green Bay in 1816-17

By James W. Biddle, of Pittsburgh, Pa.

My first visit to Green Bay was in the fall of 1816. I was concerned with Col. James Thomas in the supply of the troops at Detroit, Mackinaw, Chicago, Green Bay—provided, said the contract, that a military post should be established at the latter place within the year. The post at Mackinaw was then under command of Brevet Col. Talbot Chambers; but in August, or thereabouts, Col. John Miller, afterwards Governor of Missouri, arrived, and taking command, determined on establishing a post at Green Bay.

Vessels were accordingly chartered, and, I think, three companies of riflemen and infantry were put on board. I furnished the required amount of provisions and they all arrived safe, though this was the first instance of merchant vessels navigating the Bay. The leading or most reliable commodore of the fleet was Capt. Dobbins of the "Washington," belonging to Erie, Pa., of hundred tons, the largest vessel at that time on the Lakes, though they spoke of the "Wellington," of one hundred and thirty tons, belonging somewhere in Canada, which *had been* on the Lakes, but found too large or drawing too much water for lake navigation, and had then disappeared. Dobbins sounded the whole way up the Bay, and on his return gave the worst account of the navigation—all shoals, said he, and rocks, with no harbor, river, or creek

The settlement at Green Bay in 1816, as I have remarked, was a very clever one. They had comfortable houses and good farms. It was composed mainly of old *engagers*—Canadian boatmen, who had withdrawn from the employment of the fur companies, and fixed themselves down on a piece of land *fronting on the river*, and married to whole or half-breed Indian women. The custom I found prevailing here was somewhat unique of its kind, as a leading feature of the community, though something of the kind still exists at New Orleans among a distinct class. You Wisconsiners may smile, or grin, or scowl at it, but you cannot alter the facts as I found them at that time. The young people there were generally a cross between the French Canadian and Indian, and marriage between girls of this class and the white men arriving, was of a conventional or business kind, to suit the convenience of the case, the residence of the men not being permanent, or intending to be so. Marriage, therefore, was limited as to time, and was contracted either for life, or for six, or twelve months, as the case might be—with the white men arriving, it was generally of the latter kind. The lover having made choice of a girl, applied to her parents, with whom he entered into a limited marriage contract—specifying the amount to be paid them for deprivation of her services—the amount to be paid her in hand for her own benefit, and the amount per week for her boarding and rent

and added, that he was "a very clever fellow, chief of the nation of Menominees—the handsomest man among the Indians."

Dr. Morse, in his *Tour among the Indians*, in 1820, speaks of him as "the celebrated Thomaw, who died, and was buried, at Mackinaw, and over his grave Mr. John Law of Green Bay, erected a monument with the following inscription:

"Here rests the body of Thomas Carron, Grand Chief of the Folle Avoine (Menominee) nation, who departed this life July 8th, 1818, aged 56 years, regretted by all who knew him." This date makes his death occur a year later than Mr. Biddle, who thinks he cannot be mistaken; and Tomah must have been fully ten years older than the age upon this monument represents, judging from the fact of his being a prominent chief as early as 1779. His son Mau-cau-tau-bee, or Carron, of whom Dr. Morse spoke as a modest, sensible man, is one of the present chiefs of the Menomonees, and has so been ever since his father's death, and has attained the age of fifty-five years.

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of a room in the house, if to remain in the dwelling of her parents. These payments were generally made in provisions, clothing &c.

In case the lover or husband removed from the place before the expiration of the time agreed on, he had the right—as in the case of the *engager*—to transfer his marital claim thus acquired, to another; so that during the term of the stipulated coverture, the girl might find herself the wife of two or more husbands. I knew of several marriages of this kind during the few weeks I was at the Bay in 1816 and 1817. I could state that of Capt. ———, of the U. S. Army, but I decline any reminiscences of names. I was so far intelligent of this, as to be called upon by the Captain, an old acquaintance, to heal some breach between him and his thus acquired wife—for the reason that I could speak some French, which he could not. She was in high *tantrems*, he said, about something which he could not understand. He wanted that I should go with him to ascertain what *could* be the matter. Of course I went, and found the fair dame sulky and sullen, but with an eye flashing high anger. I easily got the truth from her. Her jealousy had been excited or roused by some tale-bearer. I gave her the explanations and details he tendered, with promises of caution and good conduct for the future; and having restored peace between man and wife, I went merrily home. The contracts entered into in this manner were regarded by them as sacred, and no evidences were adduced or known of infidelity on the part of the women, and were consequently highly resented if occurring on the part of the spouse.

The Bay was unblest at this time with anything in the nature or calling of a priest, but it did rejoice in the possession of a magistrate, who had enjoyed the office of judge time without memory of when it began; and long had all the business of the colony been regulated and kept in order by the awe-inspiring authority and portly person of Judge Reaume. No person there could tell when his official duties first devolved upon him, nor from whence his authority was derived. It was sufficient to ob-

tain obedience, that it existed, and no one disputed his authority or appealed from his decision, for, in truth, there was no power above him. Before him all complaints were brought, and all wrongs redressed, and marriages celebrated—for doing which he had fixed fees. In the case of marriage, of which it was discovered he kept some kind of record, if you remained in cohabitation beyond the stipulated time, he would send for you; have you to renew the engagement, or punish you by fine for contumacy or neglect—thus securing a new fee for his own pocket, and enforcing a proper respect for the laws and customs of the country. While I was there, a vagabond French desperado was arrested for an act of violence to a half Indian girl. The case was rather broadly made out against him, which excited the ire of the good Judge to such a degree, that he sentenced the fellow to buy the girl a new frock—it having been proven that her own had been torn in the scuffle, and to work one week in his, the Judge's garden!

It was reported, but I know not with what truth, that his library was enriched with two odd volumes of Blackstone, but whether in French or English I did not learn. A gentleman, a friend of mine, had a dispute with a troublesome fellow about some trifle, and upon whose application, Reaume sent my friend a summons—instead of paper with name and seal, the constable exhibited the well-known large *jack-knife* of the Judge, which had long been made to serve that purpose. On the day of appearance, defendant broke ground for the Judge's, and stopping at a store on the way, bought some cheap article. On approaching the office, he found the Judge at the door, who exclaimed to him in broken English, "You may go away—go away; I has given judgment against ye." "Good morning, Judge." "Good morning; I has given judgment against ye." "Coming along by Burgan's store, I saw this small coffee-pot hanging out, and I bought it to present to you, Judge; will you do me the pleasure to accept it?" "O—yes, tank ye—tank ye kindly—very much 'bliged to ye." "Judge, I don't owe that fellow any thing." "You don't?" "No, I have really overpaid him." "The rascal; I reverses my judgment, and he shall pay de costs."

Now it must not be imagined from this, that Judge Reaume was a bad man. He was the reverse of this, but followed the temper of the times, and bowed to the current of the country's customs, rather than undertake the labor of changing or rising above them. The quiet acquiescence of the people to his authority for so long a time, and the sufferance of his rule and sway under British and American supremacy—and possibly under French, too—for he may not have surrendered until long after Montcalm and Cornwallis did, is an argument at least in favor of the mildness of his administration. Nor was he deficient in intelligence, and possessed much of the natural politeness of the better class of rural French.* The most considerable man however, in the settlement, the one of most intelligence and enterprise—the *substantial* one of the colony, was John Law, who occupied a fine farm on the left bank of Fox river as you ascend, which he afterwards sold to John Jacob Astor, and which now, I think, forms a part of the town of Green Bay.

There is, or was, a natural phenomenon at Green Bay, which I have before made public notice of, and repeat here; I mean a re-

* Judge Charles Reaume was probably a native of Detroit—at least, in 1777, there was a prominent resident of Detroit, named Pierre Reaume; and in 1778, Charles Reaume, was a captain in the British Indian Department, at Detroit, and accompanied Gov. Hamilton in his expedition against Vincennes in December of that year, and when the American Col. George Rogers Clark recaptured that place in February, 1779, Capt. Reaume was among the prisoners, who taking the oath of neutrality, was permitted to return to Detroit. Gen. Clark's *MS. Papers*, in the writer's possession, prove this fact. From Morse's Indian Report, it appears that Capt. Reaume settled at Green Bay in 1790, and probably derived his early commission of Judge from the British authorities at Detroit; and anticipating perhaps, the early transfer of Detroit to the American government, may have had something to do in hastening his departure. When Brown county, in which the Green Bay settlement was and is still situated, was organized under the authority of Michigan Territory, in 1818, Judge Reaume was appointed by Gov. Cass an Associate Justice, and Justice of the Peace; in July, 1824, another filled his place on the bench—hence it would appear, that he died sometime between 1818 and 1824.