

Darkest Africa; and although its results were slow of development,—for in the seventeenth century man was still cautiously deliberate,—this initial visit of the forest ambassador of New France to the country of the Upper Lakes broke the path for a train of events which were of mighty significance in American history.¹

Let us examine the topography of Wisconsin. The State is situated at the head of the chain of Great Lakes. It is touched on the east by Lake Michigan, on the north by Lake Superior, on the west by the Mississippi, and is drained by interlacing rivers which so closely approach each other that the canoe voyager can with ease pass from one great water system to the other; he can enter the continent at the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and by means of numerous narrow portages in Wisconsin emerge into the south-flowing Mississippi, eventually returning to the Atlantic through the Gulf of Mexico. From Lake Michigan, the Fox-Wisconsin river system was the most popular highway to the great river; into Lake Superior there flow numerous turbulent streams from whose sources lead short portage trails over to the headwaters of feeders of the Mississippi. From the western shore of Lake Superior, Pigeon River invites to exploration of the Winnipeg country, whence the canoeist can by a half-hundred easy routes reach the distant regions of Athabasca and the Polar Sea. In their early voyages to the head of lake navigation, it was in the course of nature that the French should soon discover Wisconsin; and having discovered it, learn that it was the key-point of the Northwest—the gateway to the entire continental interior. Thus, through Wisconsin's remarkable system of interlacing waterways, to which Nicolet led the way, New France largely prosecuted her far-reaching forest trade and her missionary explorations, securing a nominal control of the basin of the Mississippi at a time when Anglo-Saxons had gained little more of the Atlantic slope than could be seen from the mast-head of a

¹The chief authority on Nicolet is Butterfield's *Discovery of the Northwest* (Cincinnati, 1881). See also *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xi., pp. 1-25.