Arrival of Count Frontenac At Kingston in 1673

Story of the Founding of the Limestone City—Interesting Early History of the Settlement Hereabouts.

Towards the point of land now occupied by the City of Kingston, on the 12th of July, 1673, there steered its way, up through the mazes of the Thousands Islands, a flotilla of a splendor never seen before in these remote waters. First, came four lines of canoes, then two large and gayly-painted flat-boats or batteaux, adorned with quaint and mysterious devices, followed by a train of canoes, a hundred and twenty in all. In the first canoe of the train was a cluster of French officers; conspicuous among them was the stately figure of the Count de Frontenac, Governor of New France. The bright sun shone on golden-laced uniforms and the measured beat of the paddles kept time to the strains of martial music; but it was no holiday cruise that had been experienced during the fortnight that had intervened between the embarkation at Lachine and the arrival at Cataraqui. The ascent of such a river as the St. Lawrence involved long and toilsome portages, and hard labor—now of dragging the flag-boats along the shore, and now of stemming the fierce current in water more than waist deep. Frontenac, in person, spurred on his men to their task, sharing their privation, losing a night's sleep from anxiety, lest the water should have got in and spoiled the biscuit, but never leaving his post even while,—amid drenching rain,—the crews struggled with the wild rapids of the Long Sault. When the last rapid had been safely passed, the flotila glided in amongst the placid labyrinths of the Lake of the Islands, past rugged masses of lichened pine-crested granite, through grassy inlets mirroring the varied green of birch and beech and maple, edged with soft velvety moss and waving ferns, fringed with reeds, and starred here and there with the snowy flowers of the water lily. Beyond this enchanted land the islands grew fewer and larger, and now the blue expanse of Ontario loomed wide in the distance.

Welcomed to Cataraqui.

As the miniature fleet approached the point where the Cataraqui joins the St. Lawrence, it was met by a canoe containing some Iroquois chiefs, magnificent in feathers and wampum, accompanied by the Abbe d' Urfe. In the language of the journal of the expedition, "they saluted the Admiral, and paid their respects to him with evidence of much joy and confidence, testifying to him the obligations they were under to him for sparing them the trouble of going farther, and of receiving their submission at the River Katarakoui, which is a very suitable place to camp, as they were about signifying to him." Then they conducted him to "one of the most beautiful and agreeable harbors in the world, capable of holding a hundred of the largest ships, with sufficient, water at the mouth and in the harbor, with a mud bottom, and so sheltered from every wind that a cable is scarcely necessary for mooring."

The expedition landed and pitched tents on the spot now occupied by the Tete de Pont Barracks, commanding the outlet of the Cataraqui River, and protected by the high banks opposite from the eastern winds. The main shore, curving out southwestwardly, sheltered it from the west winds that sweep down the lake. From the northward, the Cataraqui wound between high and curving banks, begirt with marshes, inhabited by water-fowl, beaver and muskrats, while to south and west, hill, headland, and long wooded islands, closed in the noble harbor, the manifest sight of a future centre of trade and commerce.

This spot has been marked out by the Intendant, M. de Talon, during the regime of M. de Courbelles, for "a fur depot with defences," to protect the great trade and check the formidable Iroquois. M. de Courcelles had himself undertaken an exploring journey to Cataraqui in a canoe, and his last official act was to call a convention of the Indians to secure their assent to the erection of the proposed fort. Frontenac, probably prompted by La Salle, was not less alive to the importance of an outpost at the entrance of Lake Ontario which should check the Iroquois raids and intercept the flow of the fur traffic towards the Dutch and English settlers of New York.

At daybreak, July 13th, 1673, at beat of drum, the French force, some four hundred strong,—including Indians,—was drawn up under arms, and the Iroquois deputies advanced, between a double line of men, to the tent of the Governor, who stood, in full official state, surrounded by his officers. After the usual formula of smoking the pipe of peace in silence, the Council was opened by a friendly chief named Garakontie, with the usual expressions of respect for the Great Ononthio. Frontenac replied in his grand paternal style expressing his pleasure at meeting his Indian "children" and the pacific spirit which animated him; and, with gifts of tobacco and guns for the men, and prunes and raisins for the women and children, the powwow broke up.

Meantime, the site of the fort was marked out,—trees were cut down, trenches dug, and palisades hewn, with such energy and industry that,—four days later,—sufficient progress had been made to admit of calling a grand council of Indians, at which Frontenac, after a judicious preface of exhortation and veiled threats, announced his intentions,—as a proof of his affection,—of building a storehouse, where they could be supplied with goods, without the inconvenience of long and dangerous journey. His address seemed to give general satisfaction, and in a few days after, the assembled Iroquois departed to their homes. The expedition also was sent back in detachments; Frontenac with his guard outstaying the rest, in order to receive a deputation from the villages to the north of Lake Ontario. In reporting to the minister, Colbert, the successful accomplishment of his object, he intimated that while this fort at Cataraqui, with a vessel then in progress, would give the French control of Ontario, a second fort at the mouth of the Niagara would command the whole chain of the upper lakes.

The First Commander.

This, indeed, formed part of the comprehensive scheme of the man to whom the command of Fort Frontenac was assigned, Robert Cavalier de Salle. The son of a wealthy burger family of Rouen, De la Salle had come to Canada at the age of twenty-two. Brave, enterprising and enthusiastic, endowed with indomitable firmness and inexhaustible perseverance, his naturally strong constitution, hardened almost to iron by a ten year's course of discipline among the Jesuits, and with an imagination fired by the dream of discovery, he was eager to distinguish himself by taking possession, in the name of France, of the unexplored territories to the south of the Great Lakes. His early dream was of a northwest passage to China by the waters of the Ottawa. But his mind, fired by Joliet's report of the Mississippi, was now concentrated on a more practicable scheme. Fort Frontenac was to be but a step towards industrial colonies in the rich southwestern wilderness and a commercial route down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. A special journey to France, in 1674, secured to him a grant of the fort, a large tract of surrounding territory and the islands adjacent, along with this patent of untitled nobility. Within two years he had replaced the original wooden fort by a much larger one, "enclosed on the landward side by ramparts and bastions of stone, and, on the water side, by palisades. It contained a range of barracks of squared timber, a guardhouse, a lodging for officers, a forge, a well, a mill and a bakery." The walls were armed with nine small guns, and the garrison consisted of a dozen soldiers, two officers and a surgeon, while an additional contingent of some fifty laborers, artisans, and voyageurs added to its strength. In the shadow of the fort, where now stands the oldest portion of the city of Kingston, a small French village of colonists grew up. A little further on was a cluster of Iroquois wigwams and near them the chapel and Presbytery of the Recollect Friars, Louis Hennepin, the well-known explorer, and Luie Buisset.

Here La Salle reigned supreme over his little kingdom and here he might have remained, amassing a colossal fortune, and, perhaps, making Fort Frontenac as important a settlement as Montreal. But his ambition still pointed southward and westward, and despite the persistent opposition of Jesuits and Canadian merchants, he secured, on a second visit to France, permission to undertake the exploration of the country with a view to a route to Mexico, and to build as many forts as he required, provided they were built within five years. His cherished design was eventually to build a vessel at some point on the Mississippi, with which he might follow it to its mouth, thus opening a new commercial route to the Gulf of Mexico. How, in pursuit of his ignis fatnus, he built his brigantine at Fort Frontenac, in which he sailed to Niagara to erect his fort of "palisaded storehouses," and build and launch the ill-fated Griffin,—lost with her first cargo of furs in the stormy and treacherous waves of Lake Erie,—how, after reaching at last the Gulf of Mexico, and taking possession of Louisiana, he fell in the wilds of Texas, by the bullet of a false follower, is known to all who have read the history of New France.

Denonville's Treachery.

Under M. de Denonville, Fort Frontenac was the scene of an act of treachery which stamped his name with an indelible brand of infamy. By the influence of two devoted missionaries to the Oneidas and Onondagas, he inveigled a number of their chiefs into the fort, under the pretext of a pacific conference; and, as soon as they were within the precincts, had them put in irons and carried in chains to Quebec, thence to be transported to France, to wear out their lives in the dismal confinement of the galleys. Strange to say, the outrage was not avenged on the missionaries. The elders of the tribe might be less forbearing "and we, aged and feeble as we are, shall not be able to snatch thee from their vengeful grasp."

A terrible retribution followed ere long, in which the innocent suffered with the guilty. The Iroquois swept the country around Cataraqui, burning the cabins and destroying the crops of the settlers, covering the lakes with their canoes, and blockading the garrison. The hostilities culminated in the midnight massacre of Lachine and the capture of Fort Frontenac, which, like Fort Niagara, was demolished by the Indians. De Frontenac, recalled to supersede the weak and treacherous Dr. Denonville, found the colony laid waste, its villages heaps of smoking ruins, and his favorite fort in ashes, while an ominous war-cloud was rising between New England and New France. Another expedition under his command was soon marshalled at Cataraqui, embracing, besides Indians, Colonial troops, a number of staunch veterans who had followed the standards of Conde and Turenne. Frontenac, disregarding the opposition of his Intendant, M. de Champigny, undertook and completed the reconstruction of the fort before contrary orders could arrive from France. It cost about £600,—a large sum for those days,—and is said, in an old record, to have "consisted of four square curtains, 100 feet each, defended by four square bastions being mounted on wooden piles, and the curtains pierced by loopholes."

A Quiet Half Century.

During the tranquil half century which followed Frontenac's death, we almost lost sight of the fort and settlement at Cataraqui. Father Picquet's complaint, in 1758, of the quality of the provisions he got there, shows how far the settlers lagged behind in agriculture. But the conflict was impending which was to wrest from France her possession in the New World, and Fort Frontenac soon felt the shock. It had been repaired and strengthened to meet the storm. But Abercrombie seized the opportunity when its garrison was drawn off to protect another point, and sent Colonel Bradstreet to take it, with 3,000 men and eleven guns He landed near Cataraqui, on the 25th of August, 1758, and quickly erecting a battery on the site of the present market place, besieged the little garrison of seventy men, commandad by the aged and chivalrous M. de Noyau. The garrison held out as long as possible, but ere the coming reinforcements could arrive, M. de Noyau was forced to capitulate, stipulating, however, for the safety and transport of his troops and of the "sacred vessels of the chapel" to Montreal. Besides the fort, Colonel Bradstreet's prize included the entire French navy in Canada, including twenty-two ships, with supplies for other outposts, 80 pieces of cannon, and a quantity of smaller arms.

Trace of the old fort, and also of the breastwork thrown up by Colonel Bradstreet, were visible many years after the Conquest. The remains of the inner tower were not removed till 1827, and vestiges of the fort were still visible when the Grand Trunk Railway line was opened into the city. A few French and Indian families clung to the site; but the place was scarcely heard of again until its permanent settlement by the U. E. Loyalists at the close of the American War of Independence. A party of these loyalist refugees, undecided where to go when driven from their old homes, were guided by a leader who had formerly been a prisoner in Fort Frontenac, and who considered it an eligible site for settlement. Coming from New York by the circuitous route of the St. Lawrence the men of the party, only, at first, penetrated to the banks of the Cataraqui, where no habitation was to be seen save "the bark-thatched wigwam of the savage, or the newly created tent of the hardy loyalist." They returned for the winter to Sorel, where they had left their families, and, when

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