

First People to Live in St. Joseph County: Alexis Coquillard

Alexis Coquillard is considered to be one of the founders of the city of South Bend. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 28, 1795. At the age of 17 he served under William Henry Harrison in the War of 1812. After the war he became a fur trader and an agent for John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company.

In 1823 Coquillard came to South Bend and established a trading post on the west bank of the St. Joseph River. He was a big man, over six feet tall and weighed around 250 pounds. Though he could neither read nor write, he spoke French and English as well as the Potawatomi language. He was so loved and respected by the Indians that at one time the Potawatomi wanted to make him their chief. Coquillard was a man of daring and bravery. In his early life, while trading with the Indians, he welcomed thrilling adventures other men might have avoided.

In 1824 he married Frances Comparet, the sister of his business partner. Alexis and his young bride were the first to make a home in the wilderness. They built a frame house near the fur trading post. Their only child, Theodore, was born here in 1846. Later Coquillard built a larger log store and home near what is now the corner of LaSalle and North Michigan Streets. Soon afterward, the first ferry on the St. Joseph River was started here.

Coquillard built one sawmill and two flourmills. The Kankakee Customs Mills was built in 1837. It was located on an outlet of a canal he dug near Marion Street. After a dam was built on the St. Joseph River in 1844, he built a modern flourmill on the northeast corner of the present Colfax Avenue. Unfortunately, it was here he met his death. He was inspecting the building after a fire had swept through the mill. He fell from a partly burned timber and died soon after as a result of these injuries.