

Although the settlement of Constantine dates from the year 1828, the recorded history of the St. Joseph River region covers a period of, almost two hundred and fifty years. The reign of Louis the Fourteenth of France—the "Grand Monarch" of glorious memory—was approaching its zenith when, in the summer of 1679, LaSalle launched his little vessel, the Griffin, the bosom of Lake Erie and in it embarked upon that enterprise of combined exploration and empire building which was to immortalize him in the annals of America. Proceeding around the lakes, the explorer came at length to the mouth of the St. Joseph, where Fort Miami, named in honor of the neighboring Indians, was built.

Fort Miami was the first outpost in LaSalle's far-flung scheme of an empire which was to stretch unbroken from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico, and from its erection, in the autumn of 1679 dates the French occupation of the valley of the St. Joseph. LaSalle's fort, it is true, was soon destroyed; but it was shortly replaced by another, which for strategic reasons was built some distance up the St. Joseph, in the vicinity of modern Niles. Fort St. Joseph, as the new post was called, was for over a century one of the important centers of French influence in the western country. It controlled the vitally important St. Joseph-Kankakee portage—called by Winsor one of the five keys of the continent and close at hand was the junction of the ancient Indian trails from Chicago to Detroit and from Chicago to Fort Wayne. Here Father Allouez, veteran soldier of the Cross, spent his later years of labor, and here, in a recently marked grave, his ashes find repose.

The Indian trail from Chicago to Detroit (best known, perhaps, as the old Sauk Trail) became in time the Chicago Road. It is the oldest highway in southern Michigan, and the first to be improved by the white man. Over it for two decades (until the railroad provided a better means of transit) poured a steady tide of settlers, afoot, on horseback and in covered wagons, intent upon the task of carving out homes in the entrancing wilderness which beckoned them ever westward. Rapidly they transformed the wilderness into an abode of civilization, and in the process of this transformation modern Constantine was born. Although it lies a short distance aside from the Chicago Road, which passed by way of Sturgis, White Pigeon, and Edwardsburg, the picturesque tide of migration which moved westward along the great highway poured out its side streams over the adjacent country, and thus the mill site at the junction of the Fawn and the St. Joseph, was early appropriated. The first grist mill in the county was established here. This furnished the nucleus around which the settlement developed.

There is much that one would like to say but the inexorable limits of the mere Foreword I have been asked to write forbid. If my object of fixing in the reader's mind the fact that the story of Constantine is inextricably bound up with that of the brave days of Tonty and La Salle, of Jesuit zealot and Grand Monarch of France, of semi-savage forest ranger and wholly savage red man be realized, I am content. History is to the community what memory is to the individual. Lacking memory, all progress would be impossible, and human kind would descend to the level of the brute creation. The community memory of its history is a precious possession. The citizens of Constantine do well in cherishing it.