

# The Waters: Point of Origin

written by Eric Atkisson | January 17, 2020



In 1910, a German immigrant named Franz Edward Rohrbeck painted a mural in the rotunda of the Brown County Courthouse in Green Bay, Wisconsin. To the uninitiated the scene it depicts is a strange one, in which a mustachioed white man wearing an ostrich-plumed cavalier hat and Chinese damask robe stands on a rocky shore, enclosed by trees, with a large body of water behind him. His arms are extended up and out, and in each hand he holds a flintlock pistol discharging a stab of flame and a puff of smoke—as if signaling the beginning of some great race. Half-naked Indians surround him, in various states of calm or agitation. One of them is holding a peace pipe.

The moment Rohrbeck's mural commemorates is the landing of French explorer Jean Nicolet in 1634, at a place called Red Banks on the eastern shore of Green Bay, just a few miles from where I grew up. The robe and pistols Rohrbeck painted weren't entirely fanciful; Nicolet was known to use both to overawe the natives he encountered, in what seems today like a quixotic search for a passage to the Orient. *La Baie des Puants*, he named the bay that brought him to Red Banks—"the Bay of Stinkers" or "the Bay of Stinking Waters," after the odiferous green algae he found everywhere. The French sometimes called it more generously *La Baie Verte*, or Green Bay, the name the English kept when they took control of the area in 1763, after the French and Indian War.



A short distance south of Red Banks down Nicolet Drive—one of many things in the City of Green Bay later named after the explorer, including an elementary school, a park, and a bank—the road intersects with East Shore Drive. On a cold day in the winter of 1982-83, a blue Chevy station wagon heading north turned left at that intersection. My father was at the wheel. He pulled a cigarette from the pack of Winstons in his coat and lit it with one eye on the road. The smoke he exhaled mingled with the steam of our breaths in the car. When he wasn't tapping it above the ashtray the Winston dangled from his lips, his voice a tight mumble, or sat poised between the index and middle finger of his right hand, resting on the wheel. Minor feats, these seemed to me, at 10 years old. Dad—41 when I was born—was now overweight and balding, with wispy hair as white as the hard snow on the ground outside. People sometimes asked if he was my grandfather.

The route that day took us west, with the trees of the wildlife sanctuary on our left and to our right, visible in the passing intervals between houses, the frozen bay. A low barrier of rocks ran along the shore. Out beyond those rocks, off places like Point Sable and Suamico, there were wooden shacks and snowmobiles on the ice, even a few small cars. The men in those shacks would have been listening to radios, cooking bratwurst, and drinking beer while they fished through deep holes bored in the ice.

We passed the entrance to Bay Beach Amusement Park, where rides like The Scrambler were closed, tarped over, smothered in snow. In 1934, only a year and a half into his first term as president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood at a podium there and commemorated the 300th anniversary of Nicolet's landing with a short speech, praising the state's early pioneers who, he rhapsodized, "were driven by deep desire to find not alone security, but also enlarged opportunity for themselves and their children."

We took a right, and from there it was a short drive through an industrial neighborhood of low warehouses and cracked, uneven parking lots before we arrived at our destination: a marina at the mouth of the Fox River. Here, awaiting us, was a sight Nicolet and his Winnebago guides could never have

imagined when they paddled by almost 350 years earlier, in search of that elusive passage to the Orient: the Tower Drive Bridge<sup>[1]</sup>, more than a mile and a half long and 120 feet above the water at its peak. It was only a year and a half old that day when Dad and I stood near its cold shadow at the marina. After Lambeau Field, it was already the city's most distinctive landmark.

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When people ask me where I'm from, I often hesitate. To say Houston, Texas, where I was born and lived the first three years of my life, would be to imply a stronger connection to the city than I really have. I am not *from* Houston in the larger, more meaningful sense of the word—evoking a sense of belonging to, or sentimental identity with, a particular place—people seem to have in mind when they ask the question, so laden with expectations and implications, “Where are you from?”

And yet, perversely, when I lived in Green Bay I never hesitated to say that I was from Houston. *Not* being from Green Bay or even from Wisconsin made me different somehow, special, at least in my own eyes. During grade school I even owned a Houston Oilers helmet and jersey, which must have amused the adults in my life to no end. I was too small and skinny to ever play football and had no real interest in sports—a serious character flaw in a town where the green-and-gold G was everywhere, like the graven image of some pagan god.

My father's profession was another source of difference, or *otherness*. When I was about four a friend's dad once asked me what mine did for a living. “He's a doctor,” I told him. “A doctor of what?” he asked. “A doctor of letters,” I replied. This other dad laughed. Many of the fathers worked in agriculture, as he did, or at the paper mills; toilet paper being the city's biggest export. Mine was the chair of an academic department at the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, just a short drive up Nicolet Drive toward Red Banks; his job was the “enlarged opportunity” that brought us north from Houston, when I was three. I was a professor's kid in a blue-collar football town.

It was also a hard-drinking town. Over the years I often heard others proudly boast that Wisconsin had more bars per capita than any other state and that Green Bay had more bars per capita than any city in Wisconsin. It could have been true. I never verified it at the time, but a casual internet search today confirms that Wisconsin does indeed have more bars per capita than any other state—*after* North Dakota and Montana.

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Turn your right hand palm up and thumb out and you're looking at a rough map of Wisconsin. The empty space between your index finger and thumb is the Bay of Green Bay, and the lowest point of that space, where the finger and thumb form an angle of about 45 degrees, is the mouth of the Fox River and the city marina where Dad and I had just parked that cold day in the winter of 1982-83. It was a deserted place; by all indications we were the first to set foot there in days.

I followed him along a row of large boats resting on thick, wooden cradles,

their bows pointed inland and their sterns toward the river. "This is it," he said, stopping behind a 33' Chris Craft Roamer with the words *Mary Jane* painted on the stern. The previous owner had named it that, after his wife. Then he died of cancer and she sold it to us. A great blue tarp covered the top. It too was covered in snow.

"Whoa," I said, looking up at the boat. It seemed as big as the bridge in its own way. A monument. A wonder. An omen of things to come.

"You want to go inside?"

I nodded.

"Alrighty, then. I'll go get the ladder."

The inside of the boat was even more impressive, with a spacious cabin and berth and teak trim everywhere—like a fancy second home that reeked faintly of diesel. I could already imagine our adventurous life on board, exploring the Great Lakes and beyond, retracing, perhaps, some of Nicolet's journeys, of which I knew very little then. A native of Cherbourg-Octeville, France, Nicolet immigrated to Quebec in 1618 when he was about 20 and the city itself only a decade old, surrounded by howling wilderness. In subsequent years he lived among the Algonquins, the Odawas, the Hurons, and the Winnebagos, even marrying a Nipissing woman with whom he had a daughter. When he canoed up the Fox with his Winnebago guides in 1634, they portaged to the Wisconsin River, in the middle of the state, and traveled further south until it began to widen. For some reason this inspired the intrepid Frenchman to believe he was near the Pacific Ocean, so he turned around and rushed back to report his discovery of a passage to the "South Sea." As it turns out, he was only off by about 2,000 miles.

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Our first voyage aboard the *Mary Jane*, five months after that day at the marina, followed part of the same path Nicolet would have taken back to Quebec: northeast along Wisconsin's "thumb," past Red Banks and places like Bayshore County Park, Dyckesville, Riley's Point, and Snake Island. At times the limestone cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment appeared, running along the Door Peninsula's western shore—rock formations so old they predated the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians. From here the escarpment stretched hundreds of miles to the north and east, sometimes visible, sometimes not, before curving south again all the way to Niagara Falls and the south shore of Lake Ontario.

Dad wore a black wool sailor's cap that gave him more than a passing resemblance to the Skipper from *Gilligan's Island*. But our only passenger that day was Patches, the family golden retriever—Prince Patch of Badgerland, Dad sometimes called him, in the mock-formal tone of a subject addressing royalty—and this three-hour tour went smoothly. Soon after we passed Dyckesville he looked at me.

"Want to take the wheel?"

“Really?”

“Of course. Just keep us pointed on this bearing”—he tapped the compass—“and your eyes on the buoys.”

He stood aside and held the wheel while I crawled onto the captain’s chair. I had piloted our previous boat, *The Moonlighter*, more than once, but it was smaller and lighter than the *Mary Jane*. I could *feel* the weight of this steel-hulled monster as soon as my hands touched the wheel, plowing ahead like a force of nature, a wide fan of wake spreading behind us. It took a while before I could relax at the helm, as Dad used the head and rooted around in the cabin below. I kept my eyes glued on the compass and the buoys. One time the previous summer, impatient and looking for a shortcut, Dad had taken *The Moonlighter* outside the buoys between Washington and Rock islands, off the northern tip of the peninsula. Nervously—for I knew from the nautical charts, as well as he did, that the whole area was often no more than two or three feet deep—I leaned over the edge of the boat and studied the water. Sure enough, pale, irregular shapes soon began to shimmer and form beneath the surface.

“Rocks, Dad! Rocks!” I shouted.

He cursed and pulled the throttle into reverse, but momentum carried us forward a few moments before the propellers could do their work—just long enough for the fiberglass hull to bump and shudder against a submerged boulder. Dad cursed some more. It was a delicate thing getting us out of there, and it left me with an even healthier respect for buoys, maps, and compasses—the things that get us through life without running aground.

That was quintessential Dad, though—always in a hurry, always rushing from one goal to the next. Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, he graduated early from high school and lied about his age to enlist in the Army, mainly so he could escape a dysfunctional family; by the age of 22 he had already served a year of active military duty, married his first wife, graduated from college, completed a master’s degree, been commissioned an officer in the Army Reserve, and fathered three children—my older half-siblings—who would grow up in a dysfunctional family of their own. Soon thereafter he moved his family to Southern California, where he eventually met and married my mom. Over the years that restless drive never let up. He was constantly grading papers, writing articles and books, serving on boards, making speeches and other public appearances, looking for that next big job, that “enlarged opportunity” of which Roosevelt had spoken, but ignoring the warning signs—the premature white hair, his weight, the effects of his chain smoking. One Sunday morning in November, 1983, after our first and only season aboard the *Mary Jane*, which we never did rechristen, I found him in the living room at home, kneeling on the floor and clutching his chest, his upper body face down on the loveseat, like an anguished supplicant in prayer. The EMTs listed his cause of death as a heart attack. He had just turned 53.

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“Nicolet, like others we see as founders or initiators, has come to stimulate

ideas about what we are, or ought to be, or could be," wrote Jerrold Rodesch, one of my father's university colleagues, in the inaugural issue of *Voyageur: Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin*. It came out in June of 1984, the 350th anniversary of Nicolet's landing, at a time when Dad and I should have been cruising the waters of Green Bay and Lake Michigan—but the *Mary Jane* belonged to someone else now, who I could only hope fared better than her two previous owners.

I had come to see my father in much the same way others saw Nicolet, as a kind of personal founding figure. He was my earliest role model, my biological point of origin; he even once told me, as I'm sure other fathers tell their children, that I began as "a gleam" in his eye, as if he were some benevolent god. Indeed, at times he seemed to be that, or at least a minor potentate in his grand office on the top floor of the university's Cofrin Library, an imposing reddish-brown work of Brutalist architecture that loomed above the UWGB campus and the surrounding country like a modern-day fortress or abbey.

In the days and weeks after Dad died there were articles in the city newspapers, tributes in the university newsletter, dedications in books and theses, eloquent condolences on typewritten notes with fancy letterheads. The sentiments in each were invariably the same: shock and regret at his untimely passing, praise for his abilities and accomplishments, gratitude for his leadership and mentorship. The word I heard most often when other adults described him was "integrity." He was someone who didn't "suffer fools gladly"—a "dominant, imposing, and forceful man" as one colleague put it in a posthumous tribute. A man who had famously banged his fist on the table at a faculty meeting to make a point. A man who, though it sometimes infuriated them, almost everyone came around to admitting was right—and even if they didn't, they *respected* him. And though I didn't know it at the time, Dad was a graduate advisor to more students than any other professor at the university. Everyone seemed to admire him.

But Rodesch's caution about Nicolet—that the myths surrounding him tended to obscure a "more complex and ambiguous historical significance"—could just as easily have applied to my father.<sup>[2]</sup> For all the praise and all his accomplishments, and for a man whose final book was about "natural hazard risk assessment" no less, he ultimately failed to assess the hazards he posed to himself. In so doing, he failed his family as well. More than one colleague had praised his hard-work ethic and—in a tone of awe and admiration—the fact that he died at home on a Sunday, *working*. Unmentioned in any of these tributes was the fact that his 11-year-old son was the one who found him dead.

"If you're one of the few that's lost a parent so early in life, then you have gone through something that 99 percent of people your age haven't gone through," says an internet article today. It wasn't hard to sense the truth of this, even then. Inevitably, the loss of my own personal "founding figure" threw my thoughts about who I was, or ought to be, or *could* be into confusion. I was in uncharted waters without a bearing. I was angry. In those first few years after his death I lashed out at every authority figure but my mother—teachers and principals most of all. I hated junior high, which I

started the year after Dad's death. I couldn't focus. I got in fights. I grasped at one "rebellious" fad after another—long hair, pierced ears, breakdancing, heavy metal, punk rock, skateboarding—and was so disruptive in class that I was finally suspended for a week and almost expelled.

Some of this anger I directed at Green Bay itself. I had no use for its culture of football, deer hunting, and ice fishing—all things fathers and sons did together. It felt oppressive somehow. I was only happy when I was free of it all, lost in acts of escapism like reading *Lord of the Rings*, playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, or pretending to be Indiana Jones in the woods and fields behind our house. Mom, a native Southern Californian, hated the long winters and would have moved us back to Texas, but the state's economy had collapsed after a massive drop in the price of oil. It wasn't a good time to go back.

So we stayed. Whenever pressed by teachers, principals, or other concerned parties, Mom just repeated her mantra that I was going through a phase. I'd get through it. And she was right, of course; as soon as I went to high school, my grades shot up. I stopped being a disruption in class and started writing more. I enlisted in the Army Reserve and went to basic training between my junior and senior years of high school. I even stayed in Wisconsin for college, where I studied history and philosophy and entertained dreams of being a professor myself someday. It wasn't until 1995—20 years to the month since we'd moved to Green Bay—that we finally sold the house, packed up all of our earthly belongings, and moved back to Texas.

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Strangely, I have no memory of ever seeing Rohrbeck's mural in the Brown County courthouse or of visiting the site of Nicolet's historic landing at Red Banks, where a bronze statue of the famous explorer once stood. Nicolet loomed large in my childhood, but in the same way that Washington or Lincoln did—as famous men I was expected to revere. After leaving Wisconsin I all but forgot about him. It's only been more recently, in my late forties, as I've watched my daughter become a teenager and grown more nostalgic about my own childhood, that I've found myself drawn to this curious Frenchman who lived more than three centuries before I did, whose bronze likeness—relocated from Red Banks to Wequioc Falls County Park in 2009—now looks down from the Niagara Escarpment upon scenery that was once so intimately familiar to me. Nicolet, like my father, was relentlessly driven, forever on the move, forever chasing after the next big thing, heedless of the risks. Both died young. And now, 35 years after that Sunday morning when I found my father's body, the truth is that one seems just as mythic, tragic, and distant a figure to me as the other—not forgotten, but somehow irrevocably lost to the past nonetheless.

I've often wondered what my life would have been like had my father lived, if even just another 10 or 20 years. Had he stayed at the university, which seems likely, the trajectory of my life would have been different. I would not have had any reason to move to Austin, where I met my wife and where my daughter was born. It's difficult to imagine that I would have had the same jobs and opportunities I did that led me to where I am today, in the Virginia

suburbs of Washington, D.C., working for the federal government. I'm not even sure I would have been the same *person* I became, had he lived. Instead of a dead father I idolized and *idealized* for many years, as those eulogies and tributes did in the days and weeks after his death, I would have had to deal with a real father—a flawed creature of flesh and blood, with his own biases and opinions and sometimes oversized ego, who even in life could often be distant. We might have clashed, as many sons and fathers do. He might not have approved of my friends, my choices, my interests. I might even have grown to resent him. There is no reason to assume all of this would have come to pass, of course, but I'm certain our relationship would not always have been an easy, amiable one. Something tells me that for all the pain his death may have caused us, and for all the times I would have liked to have had a father in my life, even now, my father's death was, in some perverse way, a *gift*—an opportunity to chart my own course in life, always mindful of its fleeting nature and the need to savor every moment of it as if it were my last—a final lesson and handoff of the wheel while he retreated below deck, never to return.

My true point of origin.

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When Dad and I completed our voyage that day in the summer of 1983, we docked at a little marina called *The Moorings*, where we had stayed the previous few summers aboard *The Moonlighter*. It was in a sheltered cove called Sawyer Harbor, at the western edge of Sturgeon Bay—the crease in Wisconsin's thumb, which cuts the peninsula in half. As soon as Dad disappeared into the marina's bar and restaurant with the other men, I went back to the *Mary Jane*, retrieved a pair of oars from the boat's cabin, untied our fiberglass dinghy from the boat, and dropped it in the water. I put the oars in and climbed aboard. It didn't take much effort to coax Patches along for the ride. He remembered the routine and crawled in after me, wagging his tail.

I rowed us away from the marina, past a cluster of sailboats moored in the center of the harbor, all the way to Potawatomi State Park on the far shore, where a thick forest of hemlock, sugar maple, aspen, birch, and beech covered a steep hill rising above us. I pulled the dinghy into the woods and hid it from sight, like an Indian of old, then led Patches up a precarious trail around a series of small limestone cliffs—another part of the Niagara Escarpment. Once the cliffs were behind us and the ground level again, we came to the edge of a parking lot and a 75-foot observation tower. While Patches waited below, occasionally letting out a single, mournful bark, I climbed the wooden stairs from one level to the next, passing a few tourists coming down, one cautious step at a time, holding the rails tight. I pretended not to notice the tower's subtle movements, the way it seemed to sway and creak in the breeze, or my unnerving distance from the ground. When at last I emerged on top, with only blue sky above, I had to fight waves of vertigo just to approach the rail standing, rather than on my hands and knees.

It was worth the effort. Here, above the treetops and 225 feet above the water, was a view unlike any other. Below was the harbor and the marina, so

small the people there were barely visible. Beyond was *La Baie Verte*, the Bay of Green Bay, so wide the western shore could not be seen. To the east was the rest of Sturgeon Bay and, somewhere beyond sight, Lake Michigan—as vast and restless as the sea. Nicolet, when he returned to Quebec, would have crossed the northern portion of that great lake and passed through the Straits of Mackinac into Lake Huron, and from there to Lakes Erie and Ontario, past the great roaring cataract of Niagara Falls, and eventually down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal and Quebec City. In 1642, just eight years after his landing at Red Banks, he drowned in that same river when his boat capsized in a sudden storm.

Incredible though it seems, he had never learned how to swim.



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<sup>[1]</sup> Now known as the Leo Frigo Memorial Bridge, after the former president of the Frigo Cheese Corporation and founder of Paul's Pantry, one of the nation's largest programs for feeding the hungry.

<sup>[2]</sup> Rodesch was referring, among other things, to the fact that Nicolet left no written records of his travels and that he was a loyal servant of the Catholic Church and Royal France, whose interests diverged somewhat from those ascribed to Nicolet by FDR and others.

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