Feature Article

By Kathy Hussey-Arntson

Remembering Early Residents of Wilmette

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Early residents who lived in the Wilmette area before the incorporation of the Village of Wilmette on September 19, 1872, contributed to developing the community and are important to its history.

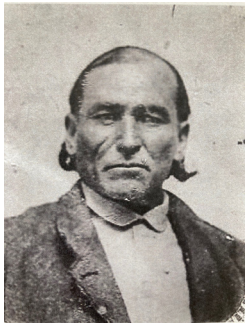
The land originally belonged to Native Americans. They resided in the region for an incredible 8,000 to 10,000 years. Ways of life changed dramatically over this long period, and Native Americans in the area made many innovations, including inventing pottery and raising crops, while continuing to hunt, fish, and gather wild plants for many purposes. By the time of contact with Europeans in the 1600s, the Miami, followed later by the Potawatomi were the largest tribal nations in the area.

When Archange and Antoine Ouilmette and family moved sometime between 1826 and 1829 from the trading settlement near the mouth of the Chicago River to what is now Wilmette, they were in Potawatomi country. Because Archange was of Potawatomi descent, this was a comfortable situation. That was all to change with the signing of the 1829 Treaty of Prairie du Chien between the US government and the Potawatomi, Ojibwe and Ottawa nations and with the federal government's passage of the 1830 Indian Removal Act. Together these actions forcibly removed Native Americans from the region that is today the North Shore.

1852 Dusham home on Michigan Avenue, 1890.

The 1829 treaty also granted Archange Ouilmette 1,280 acres in what is now Wilmette. When the Ouilmettes lived in their cabin near what is today Lake and Michigan Avenues, settlers of European descent began to move near them along the lakeshore, including people such as Charles Beaubien of the Chicago Beaubiens, Lombard Dusham in 1837 from French-speaking Canada, and Mary Johnson Dennis in 1838, sister of Mrs. Edward Mulford of Evanston. Around 1838 the Ouilmettes moved to Iowa to join their Potawatomi kin who had been removed by the US across the Mississippi River. Upon Archange's death on November 25, 1840, her children inherited the 1,280 acres, and 7 of the 8 children (Elizabeth, Sophia, Louis, Francis, Archange, Josette and Mitchell) decided to sell the land as they were no longer living in the area.

The process stalled for several years, partially because any sale of the land had to be approved by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the War Department and then signed by the President of the United States. During this time, the children complained about residents illegally cutting timber from their land. People such as John J. Kinzie and Hon. John Wentworth, then in the House of Representatives, tried to intercede on their behalf. Then Chicago attorney Henry Clarke was approved to handle the land sales which took place between 1844 and 1847. The 8th child, Joseph, held onto his share until 1871. In the 1840s, land in the area generally went for $1.25/acre.



Joseph Ouilmette, undated.

Initially, the Ouilmette Reserve land was sold to a variety of investors who had no long-term connection to the community. Names mentioned in the National Archives' records include Tuttle, Holland & Tuttle, Norton, Hubbard & Palmer, and to Isaac Harmon. Such investors contrasted with the Prussian and Luxembourg immigrants who came in the 1830s and 1840s, purchased land on and west of Ridge Road and who stayed to farm for decades. For many investors along the lake shore, paper money was considered worthless, and many thought banks were not to be trusted, so they invested in land. However, these men, in turn, split up their holdings into smaller plots, and certainly by the mid-1850s, they were selling land to many people who became residents. Among the new residents were land developers and village promoters. Although some of them worked together, they also saw themselves in competition with one other. The Spring newsletter feature will take a look at some of these movers and shakers.