

The Murder of Thibault, the Trader

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Documents

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BELOIT has for long cherished the memory of its first known white settler, Joseph Thibault, who began to trade among the Winnebago in the Turtle Creek region about 1824. Old Joe was a French Canadian with two Indian wives. In 1836 he was living on the site of present-day Beloit, and in that same year sold his claim of "three looks" of land to Caleb Blodgett from Vermont for \$200. With his two wives and several children, Thibault moved to the south shore of Lake Koshkonong, where he disappeared during the winter of 1838-39.

The people living near Koshkonong were convinced that Thibault had been murdered by his younger wife and his son, and a history of Rock County published in 1856 gave the facts of the crime very briefly.¹ Then in 1908 another county history furnished more details including a short account by Lucien B. Caswell, one of the pioneers on Lake Koshkonong, who as a boy lived near Thibault's place. Caswell began his account thus:

I knew Thibault (Tebo), the Indian trader, well. He had two log cabins about a mile and a half above the mouth of Lake Koshkonong on the south side. He was a Frenchman with two Indian wives, one quite old, the other about thirty and very attractive. Thibault was, I should judge, about fifty, quite tall and slender. He kept a stock of goods suitable for his trade with the Indians, such as blankets, ammunition, traps and other articles, which he exchanged with the Indians for their furs. He was said to be a fur buyer for Solomon Juneau, of Milwaukee, and well off, and we always found him honest and exerting a good influence among the Indians.²

Late in his long life, Caswell wrote his reminiscences, and a copy of this manuscript, a most valuable source for Wisconsin pioneer history, was given to the WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY in 1936 by his daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Caswell Perry. This

¹ George W. Ogden of Milton near the foot of Lake Koshkonong supplied the facts in Orrin Guernsey and Josiah H. Willard, *History of Rock County* . . . (Janesville, 1856), 42. See also Wisconsin Historical Society, *Collections*, 6:423-24 (1872).

² William Fiske Brown, ed., *Rock County, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1908), 1:129.

manuscript contains more details of the Thibault crime than ever before printed, including the testimony of a boy who witnessed the murder. We are grateful to Mrs. Zida C. Ivey of Fort Atkinson for having called her grandfather's reminiscences to our attention. We have corrected minor slips in spelling and made the capitalization uniform.

THE EDITORS

FROM MR. CASWELL'S REMINISCENCES³

THIS FRENCH TRADER, Thebault kept a small stock of goods most needed by the Indians, which he exchanged with them for their furs, at no doubt an enormous profit. He was however, square in his deal. He never sold them whiskey, perhaps he dare not, for with a few drinks, they were sure to lose their heads, and might be as likely to kill him, as a big horned buck. It would matter but little to an Injun when under the influence of liquor which it was. But Thebault having his way in all his deal, the Indians were afraid to differ with him. He had like most of the French traders, two wives. One a squaw some older than he was, and another a very bright young woman, as smart and sharp a squaw as I ever saw.

Unfortunately, for the trader, he had a son Frank, about twenty-five years old, who was as reckless and unreliable as his father was honest and reliable. He was about the age of the young wife, and probably gave her more attention than she received from the elder Thebault. Finally the winter of 1838-9 came on, the lake was frozen over and the marshes about the traders quarters closed, and very little was heard of the Thebault family, till towards spring, the absence of the head of the family was noted, as no one seemed to know his whereabouts. The remainder of the family were still in possession of the two log houses, but were little seen. Rumors were afloat, that foul play had in some way disposed of the senior member for no intelligent story gave account or reason for his strange disappearance. The family gave out that the last seen of him, he was going towards a thicket, on the border of a marsh. Frank finally came to our house and

³ Pages 20-22.

with hangdog countenance, told of his disappearance. The country was greatly aroused, far and near people came for a great distance to aid in a search for his body, for little doubt existed as to his fate. No real discovery however was made that pointed to a rational conclusion.

There was one story told some months afterwards by a small boy by the name of Leveck, a half breed, who lived at that time with the family. He stated that Frank and the young wife wanted to move away and go among the Indians west of the Mississippi River; while the old people did not want to go, though the old lady was willing to go if the others concluded to. That one evening they made the boy go to bed quite early. He did not go to sleep, but kept an eye out, for he was afraid something unusual was contemplated. That about midnight, they threw a blanket over the boy's head, supposing he was asleep. He removed the blanket till he could see what they were doing, and he saw them strike the old man with a hatchet several blows, till apparently he was dead.

They then carried him out and that was the last he saw of the body. To corroborate this story, the bones of a man were finally found in the thicket a half mile from the house on the border of the marsh. No arrests however were made and the crime dropped out of mind. Frank and the two women however, soon packed up their goods and wild rice held in store, and moved away, sending the little Leveck [*sic*] boy to his father, who lived somewhere near the four lakes, now Madison. It was not till long after the Thebault family had gone, that the boy told this story, fearing he said to do so, before they moved away, as he was afraid they would kill him if he did.