



# THE OUILMETTE HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Wilmette Historical Society

## THE MYSTERY OF ARCHANGE OUILMETTE

A shroud of mystery has always hung about Archange Ouilmette, after whom the Village is named. We don't know what she said or thought about anything; no word she spoke was ever written down. We have no idea what she looked like: there are no photographs, no paintings or sketches. Nobody who met her left behind any description. Local artist George Lusk used only his imagination to create the 1934 portrait that once hung in the old Village Hall and is now on display in the Historical Museum.

Part of this mystery is owing to her having lived so long ago — she died in 1840, before portrait photography existed — and on a frontier, but most of it must be attributed to her having been a woman of Native American and European parentage (known as *métis*). Her husband, Antoine, was himself an obscure figure, but several descriptions of him have come down to us from old settlers' accounts. There is even a surviving letter that he dictated in hopes of compensation for his losses from the burning of Fort Dearborn. Of his wife there is no comparable record. And yet it was to Archange by name, and her children, not to Antoine, that the U.S. government in 1829 deeded the two sections of land (about 1280) acres that would later form the heart of the Village of Wilmette. Despite much speculation over the years since, no accounts from the time give a reason for the gift.



*Portrait of Archange Ouilmette  
by George Lusk, 1934*

Even about her place of birth there are questions. By one account, Archange Chevalier Ouilmette was born at Sugar Creek, Michigan; by another, she was a local girl, born south of Chicago in the Calumet region. The best source we have lists her parents as Pierre Chevalier, a French fur trader, and his Potawatomi wife, Chopa. In 1796 or 1797 she married Antoine

*continued on page 3*

### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### Annual Meeting

*featuring guest speaker*  
**Ann Durkin Keating**

Sunday, January 27  
2:00 - 3:30 p.m.

*See page 6*

#### Lecture

**“Lincoln’s Chicago”**

Sunday, February 24  
2:00 - 3:00 p.m.

*See page 3*

#### Lecture

**“Remembering Marshall  
Field’s”**

Sunday, March 10  
2:00 - 3:00 p.m.

*See page 3*

#### Annual Open House

*in conjunction with the Wilmette Police*

Sunday, May 5  
11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

#### Housewalk

*featuring unique, contemporary houses by  
prominent local architects*

Sunday, May 19  
1:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Save the date!

More details in our next newsletter.

For more news, visit our website:

[www.wilmettehistory.org](http://www.wilmettehistory.org)

*(continued from page 1)*

Ouilmette, a French Canadian trader who had come to the Chicago outpost in 1790 from the Montreal area.

Nevertheless, there are a few important things that we can say with certainty about the life of Archange Ouilmette, pieced together from early documents. And there is much more that can be said about the world she lived in. That world is the subject of Ann Durkin Keating's new book, *Rising Up from Indian Country*, about which Professor Keating will speak at our Annual Meeting in January (see page 6).

The marriage between Archange and Antoine was typical of the culture that by the late 18th century had grown up in the Great Lakes region between fur traders of French descent and the Potawatomi and other Native Americans that had moved into the area in the late 1600s, fleeing the Iroquois wars to the east. In contrast to the unpopulated wilderness depicted in old textbooks, the Great Lakes area was the site of a dense network of villages bound by close ties of kinship. Women like Archange Ouilmette, who undoubtedly spoke the languages of both Potawatomi and French, played a central role as intermediaries between tribal groups and Europeans.

By 1803, when soldiers arrived to build Fort Dearborn, the Ouilmettes were living in a cabin on the north side of the Chicago River, near trader John Kinzie and his family and across the river from the site of the fort. Early Chicago was a sparsely populated community of fur traders employed largely by John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. The traders were heavily dependent upon Potawatomi and other Native Americans for furs. During the War of 1812, the Potawatomi, who allied with the British, ambushed the men, women, and children who were fleeing Fort Dearborn for safety in Detroit, killing many. Only a few residents

remained behind, including Archange and her sister, Susannah Bisson. Juliette Kinzie, John Kinzie's daughter-in-law, later recounted the stories she had heard about the attack. In Kinzie's account, the Ouilmette sisters saved a lieutenant's wife, Mrs. Helm, by hiding her under a large feather bed in the Ouilmettes' house. When the pursuing Potawatomi came to search, they found Mrs. Bisson quietly sitting on the bed, sewing. Another rescue involved a soldier who had come in through the window. Archange dressed him as a French fur trader, a disguise he used to escape. Under the circumstances, these were heroic acts by the two sisters.

Archange and Antoine and their children were among the few families that remained in Chicago between the burning of the first Fort Dearborn and the building of the second fort in 1816. Around 1829, the family moved from Chicago to settle on the land that Archange had been given in the Treaty of Prairie du Chien of that year. The Ouilmette cabin, one of the few houses in the area, served as an informal stopping place for visitors to the region. One such visitor in 1836 was young Alexander McDaniel, who would later become one of the founders of the Village of Wilmette in 1872. In about 1838, Archange and some of her family moved again, this time to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where the Potawatomi from the Chicago area had been relocated. She died there on November 25, 1840.

Archange Ouilmette's biography, meager as it is, demonstrates the influence and importance of métis women in the Chicago area. For most of her life, the Potawatomi, despite the growing numbers of European traders, still dominated the economic and cultural life of the region. By the time of her death, Native Americans had been effectively removed and English-speaking settlers from the Eastern seaboard had begun to build the city that would become Chicago. The world she had known had disappeared.



*The Ouilmette cabin near the lake, detail of a watercolor painted from memory by Charles P. Westerfield in 1908.*