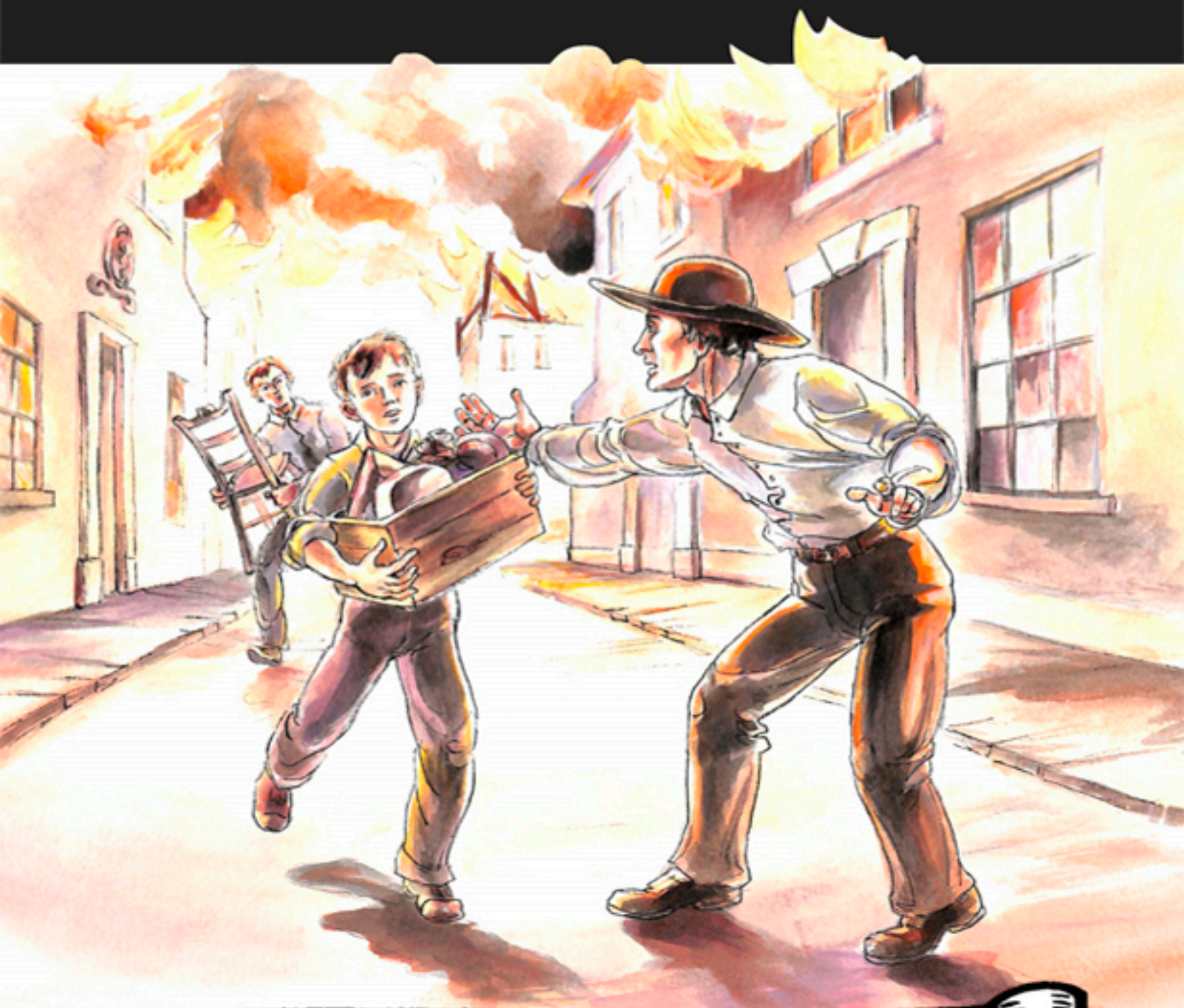


Frontier Priest and Congressman

Father Gabriel Richard



Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Brother Alois, C.F.X.

Frontier Priest and Congressman

Father Gabriel Richard, S.S.

by Brother Alois, C.F.X.



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Portraits in Faith and Freedom

SET 5: MISSIONARIES ON THE FRONTIER

Joseph the Huron

Simon Bruté and the Western Adventure

Frontier Priest and Congressman: Fr. Gabriel Richard, S.S.

Black Robe Peacemaker: Pierre De Smet

Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950's and 60's by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

Web Resources

To access printable maps, a timeline, and other information, visit <http://bethlehembooks.com/frontier-priest-and-congressman-father-gabriel-richard-ss-861>

About Usage of Outdated Terms

In republishing the books that form our *Portraits in Faith and Freedom* series, the editors considered whether it would be worthwhile to update the authors' usage of words like "Indian" and "Negro." The more current preference among many is "Native American" and "African American." The editors found, however, that changing the original terms often did not work well for the context of those times. The attitudes of respect and honesty that inspired these works—written in the 1950s and early 1960s—clearly conveyed the authors' positive meaning. In most cases, therefore, we have let the words stand.

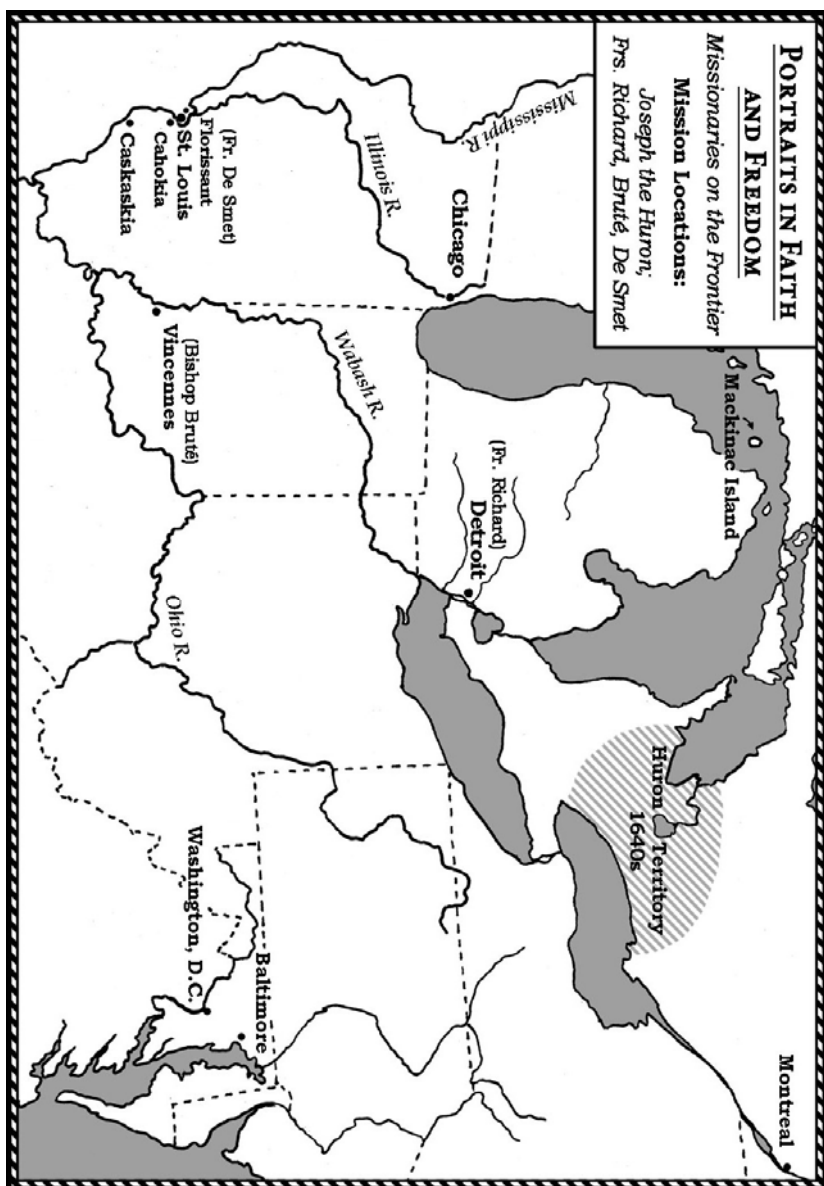
Bethlehem Press

To
my sister and brother-in-law
on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary

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Maps



PORTRAITS IN FAITH AND FREEDOM

Missionaries on the Frontier

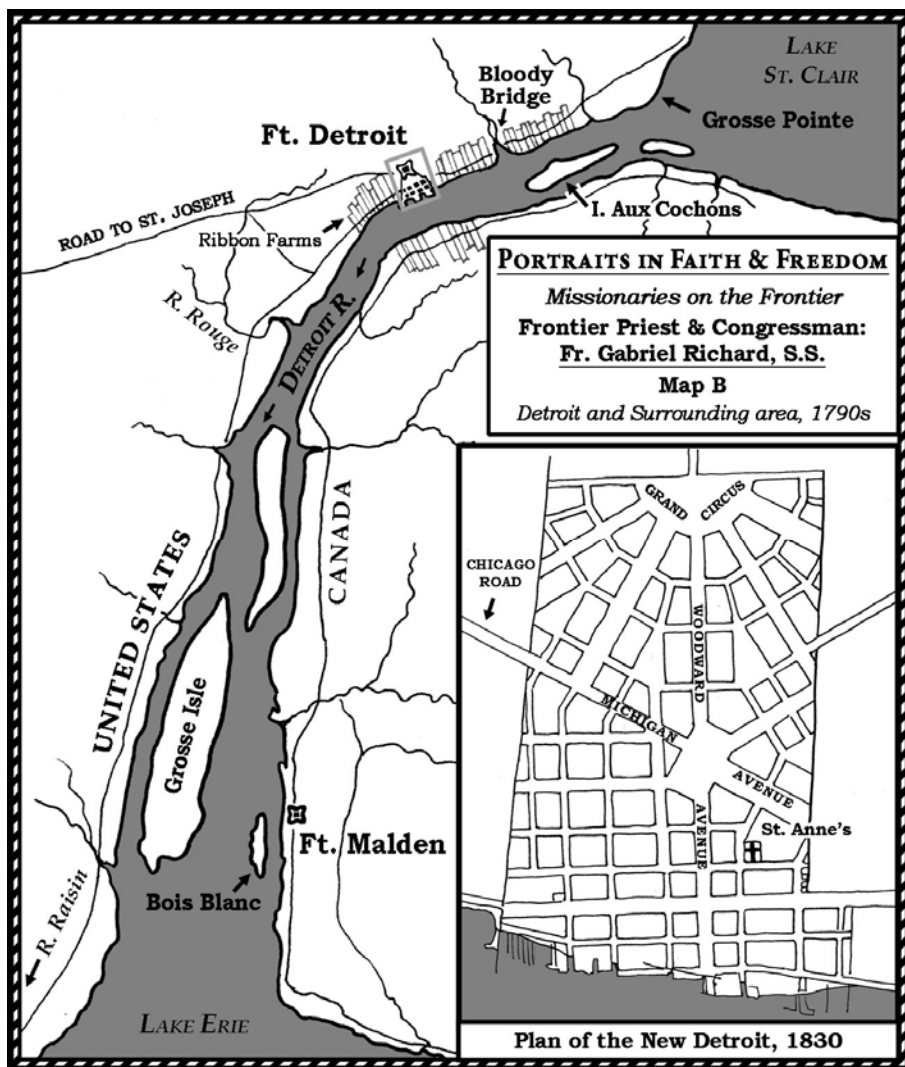
Frontier Priest & Congressman:

Fr. Gabriel Richard, S.S.

Map A

*Significant locations on the
"Western Frontier"*





1. Change of Mission

IT WAS the spring of 1798. A long birch-bark canoe glided northward through the waters of the Wabash River. Night was approaching, and the occupants of the canoe, two men and a boy, kept glancing toward the wooded shore, obviously looking for a suitable spot to land and camp for the night.

"That's it, Father," said the youth, pointing to a strip of land coming into view around a bend in the river. "Look! A beach and an open field behind it."



"Looks good to me, Etienne. How about you, Nicolas?"

"Agreed, Father," answered the man in the rear as he steered the canoe toward the spot. "And I guess we can agree that it was a smart idea to bring the boy along. He is a fine guide, even though he is only fourteen years old."

The boat touched the sandy shore, and the lad in front kicked off his moccasins, leaped out, and guided the craft onto the beach.

"You and your son have both been ideal guides and companions," said the priest as he stepped ashore. "I'll always be grateful that you came with me on this journey."

Nicolas Jarrot picked up his rifle, leaped to the dry land, and strode at once into the woods to hunt game for their dinner. His son Etienne set about preparing a fire. Father Richard unloaded the gear, and then he and Etienne lugged the canoe up the beach and

left it upside down at the edge of the clearing. In case of rain the three could easily shelter themselves under it.

Etienne had scarcely finished his chores when he was down by the river throwing a line into the swiftly moving waters. In fifteen minutes he had two fat trout and a black bass.

An hour later the three travelers were having their fill of broiled fish, fried partridge eggs, and roasted pheasant.

“When I was a boy in France,” remarked Father Richard, “I thought roasted pheasant was the best dish in the world, and after this meal I’m more than ever convinced of it.”

“Did you raise your own pheasants in France, Father?” asked Etienne, eager to hear stories of the land of his ancestors.

“No, Etienne, my father was a retired naval officer. We had a comfortable home at Saintes, but our only luxury was our vineyards. My father was a wise man. He spent his money on the education of his three sons rather than on worldly goods.”

“Where did you go to school, Father?”

“I was sent to a boarding school in Saintes when I was eleven. At nineteen I entered the seminary of the Fathers of St. Sulpice at Angers, and I went to Paris to study when I was twenty-five.”

The priest was silent for a few minutes. Then he went on to tell about his ordination in 1791. The ceremony had to be held in secret, for those were terrible days. The French Revolution was in full swing. All priests who would not swear to support a church set up by the revolutionists were imprisoned.

“Tell us again that story about your escape from the soldiers of the French Revolution.”

“What story, Etienne?”

“You know—how the soldiers of Robespierre were arresting all the priests, and when you heard they were coming for you, you jumped out a window and someone threw a teapot at you and cut your face and left that scar on your cheek, and how you ran until you were all tired out and some friendly ditch-diggers made you jump in a trench and covered you with their coats until the soldiers were gone, and how you worked with them until you got a ship to America.”

Father Richard chuckled at the boy’s breathless recital of the whole story he wanted repeated. Then he sobered.

“It was true that we lived in constant danger. Many priests were martyred. I had to remain in hiding a whole year after my ordina-

tion. Then I came to this country at the invitation of Bishop Carroll of Baltimore.”

“You came as a missionary?”

“No. The bishop asked the Sulpicians to teach in his new seminary. Six of us came over. The sad thing was that there were so few American young men studying for the priesthood that we didn’t have enough to do when we got to Maryland. Up to then I had never thought of being a missionary, but before long all six of us priests volunteered to come west to work.”

“For which, thank God,” said Nicolas Jarrot with fervor. “If you hadn’t come, we wouldn’t have had a priest in Cahokia, or the whole state of Illinois these past six years. Now that you have been transferred to Detroit, I pray the bishop will be able to send us another priest like you.”

By this time darkness had fallen. Except for the occasional sputtering of logs on the fire, the only sounds to break the solemn stillness of the spring night were the croaking of the frogs by the river and the occasional who-o-o of an owl in the forest. Used to these night sounds, the travelers paid little attention to them.

“While you’re saying your prayers, Father,” continued Nicolas, “Etienne will clean up, and I’ll fix the fire. I don’t think we are in any danger. There are no Indians in this area, and I didn’t see any tracks of large animals. With an early start and smooth water tomorrow, we should reach Vincennes before evening. That will be April twenty-first, a full day ahead of our calculations.”

The priest thanked his friend and stood up. He was about five feet nine, but his lean and wiry frame made him seem taller. His face was especially thin, and in the light of the fire his sharp nose, prominent cheek bones, thin lips, and wide mouth with a prominent scar at the lower left side of it, gave him a rather grim appearance. But even in this dim light, his eyes dominated his personality, for they were at the same time dark and sparkling, intelligent and sad, piercing yet sympathetic. Although he was only thirty-two years old, his hairline had receded somewhat, giving him a high forehead, but the hair that remained was thick and long, and trained straight back. The glasses that he wore for reading had left two indentations on either side of his nose. Unlike his companions, who both wore deer-skin jackets fringed at the seams and hems, tight leather leggings, and moccasins, Father Gabriel Richard wore a loose-fitting coat of

heavy cloth that came down only to his hips. His shirt, which was a faded white, was topped not by a regular collar, but by a cloth band a half inch high, lapped over in front. His loose knee-buckled breeches were of the same material as the coat. He had black stockings and rough, high shoes laced with leather thongs. The wide-brimmed hat he wore, even in the canoe, had been laid aside for the night.

The laymen, as they stretched themselves out near the fire, knew that they would be asleep long before the priest finished his evening devotions. When they awoke with the sun, he would already be emerging from the woods, where he had said his prayers and made his morning meditation.

Nicolas Jarrot's prediction that they would arrive at Vincennes before nightfall that next day came true. At exactly 5:00 P.M. the town came into view. Built close to the water, it seemed to have no more than fifty houses in the area enclosed by the usual high palisade and dominated by the fort. The area outside the fence was a pleasant prairie divided into small farms.

"Since Father Rivet isn't expecting you, isn't there a chance he'll be away on a missionary trip?" asked Nicolas.

"I don't think so. The last news I had of him was that he had been unwell for some time. He is more suited for the life of a scholar than that of a missionary. He was, in fact, a very successful teacher in France before coming here."

The canoe soon drew abreast of the town and headed toward the shore, amid considerable excitement. Men on the river bank and in canoes yelled to them, asking who they were and where they were going. A boy who heard their answer turned at once and ran toward the church. By the time the canoe was beached, the casocked figure of a priest was walking toward them. Father Richard left his companions and went to him. The two shook hands and embraced.

Nicolas Jarrot and his son were introduced and welcomed warmly. Four or five Indians who had gathered around the party picked up Father Richard's belongings and carried them into the village.

The party was soon at ease in the priest's house, a one-room affair in back of the church. The commandant of the fort had heard of Father Rivet's guests and had sent over some food. The Indian woman who worked for the priest was cooking it at one end of the

room. The men sat at the other end away from the fireplace, Nicolas Jarrot on the host's bed and the two priests on rough chairs. Etienne was stretched out on the floor playing with the priest's dog. A surprising number of books filled the shelves on the walls. A lantern hung from the low ceiling. Father Rivet was seized with an occasional fit of coughing, but the conversation was lively.

"So you finally have your own rectory here!"

"Yes, such as it is. The three years Father Flaget was here, he lived with Colonel Vigo at the fort. I did too, for a while, but last year I persuaded the men of the parish to help me build this house."

Father Richard nodded. "Benedict Flaget and I were together in France for a while, and everyone who knew him prophesied great things for him. Even George Rogers Clark, whom he met in Louisville, was much impressed by him."

Both priests obviously admired the man who was to become, in a few years, the first bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky. They discussed his personality and zeal for a few more minutes, then Father Rivet switched the topic of conversation.

"And how did you leave Prairie du Rocher, Cahokia, and Kaskaskia?"

"There were many good people there," answered Father Richard, "and I was sorry to leave them."

With a frown Nicolas Jarrot put in, "There were many not so good, too. One of them whom Father Richard denounced for getting married before a judge, reported the matter. This gentleman complained of Father Richard to the secretary of state, demanding an apology, even though Father explained the Church's teaching on such marriages."

"That was just last year," added the priest. "It was perhaps to save me from an embarrassing situation that Bishop Carroll agreed to my transfer to Detroit. Father Levadoux, my former co-worker at Kaskaskia, asked for a curate. He had been assigned to Detroit when that city was ceded to the United States by England."

By this time the Indian woman had their meal ready, and the party moved to the table in the center of the room. Soon after the meal, the two Jarrots stretched themselves on the floor to sleep. The two priests walked for a while in the cemetery next to the church, recalling old times before retiring.