

The Excavation of the Indian Church at Ste. Marie

by

Rev. DENIS A. HEGARTY, S.J.,
Martyrs' Shrine, Midland, Ontario

The site of Ste. Marie of the Hurons, near Midland, Ontario, has already provided valuable information on the activities of the early French missionaries and the *mores* of the Christianized Hurons.¹ But it has by no means yielded all its secrets. In the summer of 1954 a small excavation was undertaken by the present writer, mainly in the hope of discovering one, or both, of the original graves of Fathers Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant. The work proceeded from mid-July to mid-September. Those who assisted, at different times, were Father D. J. Hourigan, S.J., a few amateur archaeologists, guests at the Shrine Inn and James Hood, a workman from Midland.

There has never been any doubt that Brébeuf and Lalemant were buried first at Ste. Marie. Father Ragueneau, in his first-hand account, merely stated, "We buried these precious relics (their bodies) on Sunday the 21st day of March, (1649),"² without specifying the place; but Du Creux in his history told how the search party, led by Father Bonin, went to St. Ignace on March 20th, and brought the bodies back to Ste. Marie.³ Christophe Regnaut, writing in 1678, told how he, as one of the party, found the bodies of Brébeuf and Lalemant, and brought them back for burial.⁴ To him also we are indebted for the account of the exhumation and the preparation of the bones to be brought to Quebec.⁵

In the obituary notice of Brother François Malherb who died at Chicoutimi in 1696, there is the simple statement that he had been one of those who helped to bring the bodies of Brébeuf and Lalemant back to Ste. Marie after their death. Later, with Christophe Regnaut, he became a Coadjutor Brother in the Society of Jesus in France and then returned to

¹ Kenneth E. Kidd, *The Excavation of Ste. Marie I*, 1949. Wilfrid Jury, *Ste. Marie Among the Hurons*, 1954.

² *Reference to Relations J. R.*, Vol. 34, p. 149.

³ *Historia Novæ Francæ*, Vol. II, p. 524. Champlain Society editions.

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 34, p. 35.

⁵ Appendix "A".

Canada.⁶

The bodies had been buried “with all possible honour” at Ste. Marie on Sunday, March 21st, 1649. Later, witnesses Christophe Regnaut, the bodies were exhumed, the flesh stripped from the bones which were thoroughly dried, wrapped in silk, placed in chests and brought to Quebec.⁷ The presence of these relics in Quebec within a few years is attested by Regnaut, Father Jérôme Lalemant, Mère Marie of the Ursulines, and others. Soon after his death, Brébeuf’s nephews in France sent a silver bust, life-sized, according to Father Félix Martin, to house his skull. This reliquary is still in the care of the Sisters at Hôtel-Dieu in Quebec.

The obligation of burying the bodies of baptized persons in consecrated ground was as binding in the seventeenth century as it is today. On the other hand, relics are known positively to have been in Quebec in the early fifties of that century. No one suggests that the mutilated bodies were brought intact to Quebec. In the seventeenth century, when travel was by canoe, that would have been a much more difficult task than today. Yet the staff at Ste. Marie could not licitly destroy the remains. The only possible inference is that after the bones were removed the residuum would be replaced in the grave. This has been the interpretation of all Jesuit writers on the question and most others, notably J. Gilmary Shea, Francis Parkman, George M. Wrong, and Kenneth E. Kidd. Father J. M. Fillion, S.J., believed it to the point that, in 1925, the year of the Beatification of the Martyrs, he had a bronze plaque set up among the stone ruins of Ste. Marie stating, “Here lie the ashes of the Blessed Martyrs, John de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant.” All excavations inaugurated by Jesuits have been made with the hope of finding the exact location of these graves.

As long ago as 1844 the site of Ste. Marie was identified by Father Chazelle, first Jesuit Superior in Canada in the nineteenth century, relying on Father Jérôme Lalemant’s description in the *Relations* for 1640,⁸ and Du Creux’s map of the Huron country. In 1855, Father Félix Martin did some excavating, and gave a description and map of the stonework and ditches that were still visible.

During the nineteenth century four different visitors to Ste. Marie, the Rev. George Hallam in 1852, Father Félix Martin in 1855, Thomas Burnet, a surveyor, in 1872, and William Galbraith, an engineer, in 1878, made maps of the place as they saw it. The special features they all saw were the stone ruins and a series of ditches, some shallow, one deep. The deepest ditch

⁶ Father Arthur E. Jones in *Old Huronia*, p. 109. Subsequent writers have always accepted that the burial was at Ste. Marie I, nor has any research produced evidence that it was performed elsewhere.

⁷ *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 34, p. 35.

⁸ *Jesuit Relations*. Vol. 19, pp. 133-135.

ran east to west, to the river, and seemed to mark a southern boundary. Certainly all stone remains visible were north of this. But scientific archaeological examination began only in 1941, after the site had come back into Jesuit possession, through the initiative of the late Father T. J. Lally, S.J. A group of archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum, under the direction of K. E. Kidd, ethnologist of the Museum, worked for four seasons, 1941-1944. Because of circumstances, Mr. Kidd's investigations were confined to this northern portion and were principally made around the stone remains. These lay over one hundred feet from the river bank and roughly parallel to it. No graves were found in this area.

In 1946, Mr. Wilfrid Jury, Curator of the Museum of Indian and Pioneer Life, of the University of Western Ontario, who had been with Mr. W. J. Wintemberg at the original brief excavation of St. Ignace in 1938, had done a thorough examination of that site. In the following year he had conducted, at the request of the Shrine authorities, a further search for the site of the martyrdom of St. Anthony Daniel. That same year, part of a palisade line was found west of the part of Ste. Marie that Mr. Kidd had examined, and Mr. Jury was asked to carry on further investigations. He worked from 1948 to 1951. In 1948 he found several house-sites in this western portion, north of the deep ditch. In the next year work was concentrated on the ditch. In addition to some hundred pieces of timber piling along the sides of the ditch there was evidence in three places that some sort of water-gate had been installed, to control the fall of water to the river. The evidence seemed conclusive that this was a sort of canal.

In the season of 1950, south of the canal, evidence of three buildings inside an enclosure were found. Then, about one hundred and fifty feet south of the canal, the outlines of a large building were discovered, and immediately south of this was the Indian cemetery. This was completely excavated. The bones in each grave permitted the identification of the occupant as man, woman or child, and the only grave which contained no bones was that of two babies. On the other hand, Regnaut had stated that the bones of the two Martyrs had been brought to Quebec, so it was evident that the bodies of Brébeuf and Lalemant had not been buried in this graveyard, though it was the place consecrated for the burial of the Christian dead. It seemed a reasonable conclusion then, that they must have been buried in some place more sacred still.

"Some place more sacred still" could only be either the Church of St. Joseph, set up for public use, or the private chapel of the Fathers. Today, burial within a church or chapel is reserved for high dignitaries of the Church, and in some places, of the State. Popes are buried in the crypt of St. Peter's in Rome, Cardinals and Bishops in their Cathedrals or Seminaries, the royal family of England are interred in St. George's Chapel at Windsor. But visitors to England and the continent of Europe have seen how

frequently laymen were buried in churches as well. Certainly in Rome the homes of martyrs of the early centuries of the Church became not merely the place of burial of the martyrs but also, with an altar erected over the tomb, the home became a church. There was over-sufficient precedent to expect that Brébeuf and Lalemant might be accorded such honour by those who knew their lives so well and recognized that they had died for the Faith. Since their graves were not in the cemetery, they should be in either the Indian church or the private chapel. Which?

Brébeuf had been the leader, not merely of the Fathers who came first to the Huron country, but also of the Indians – Christian and pagan alike. Some pagans at St. Louis had chosen to stay with Brébeuf to the end, along with the Christians, to suffer and if need be, to die with him. All Indians had great reverence for the dead. The Fathers at Ste. Marie knew the admiration of the Hurons for Brébeuf. Surely he would be buried in a place accessible to the Indians; therefore, in the Indian chapel. The grave of Lalemant might be there, too, but wouldn't the Fathers want one of these close, in their private chapel? That, at least, was the argument suggested before a sod was turned.

Father Jérôme Lalemant had written, "We made a cemetery just outside the Indian Church."⁹ The nearest building to the graveyard was the large one (69'X26') immediately to the north of it, whose main door opened directly into the graveyard. Its major axis (as usual in Christian churches) ran approximately east-west; more precisely, from 15° north of west to 15° south of east. Its walls at ground level were twenty inches thick, consisting of ten inches of clay packed between 5-inch slabs of wood. It had been the largest and most solidly constructed of the early buildings. This clearly was the church referred to, and it seemed logical to explore further within its area for the site of the graves of the missionaries.

The excavation was begun on July 19, 1954. The earth of this part of Ste. Marie is very sandy. Previous excavation had shown white sand under eight inches of topsoil; this had naturally been disturbed in 1950, so it was only at a depth of fifteen inches that the sand was, in general, undisturbed. Exploratory cuts were not needed outside the defined area of the church, because of the known consistency of the soil. Therefore, work was begun immediately at the eastern end, where the sanctuary or chancel of a church is usually located. At the 15-inch level post-mold and charred wood were found in many spots, the latter being presumably remains of the timbers that fell when the building was burned at the abandonment of Ste. Marie in June, 1649. It was at the 15-inch level that a certain solidity of the sand was noticed in some places, a solidity that extended over areas of several square feet and went to a depth of two to three inches. The sand had been hard-packed. There was no evidence of any wooden flooring above this. At

⁹ *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 26, p. 209.

this level two clearly marked areas of post-mold were found near the centre of the eastern wall. They were 24" and 21" long respectively, eight inches wide, lying parallel to each other, eight feet apart. Probably this was where the altar stood. Apart from these, no spot in the first 24 feet from the eastern end of the building had been disturbed below the 2-foot level.

The first evidence of deeper disturbance came 25 feet from the east end and three to nine feet north of the south wall. This was known to be the spot occupied in recent years by an outhouse of the nearby farm. The area of this pit was 70 inches by 40 inches and the profile showed that it went down more than four feet from ground level. Because of this depth, it was felt that an examination of this small area would be of no avail. Three feet to the northwest of this there had been a refuse pit, also modern, measuring 48"X42". This also went deeper than four feet. These were the only two sections within the church area which were not examined to undisturbed sand level.

On Friday, August 13, a pocket (or rather, a series of small pockets, in the form of a cross), of bass-wood seeds was found, beginning at the 15-inch level and extending down through the 18-inch, almost to the 21-inch level. This was 45 feet from the eastern wall, 22 feet from the western wall and 11 feet north of the south wall. Such seeds had been found in most of the graves in the cemetery in 1950. Mr. K. E. Kidd in his "Account of the Excavation of the Ossuary at Ossossane" tells of finding similar seeds at the ossuary.

It was hoped that this might be significant. Already at the 18-inch level just south of this seed-pocket an area was visible where the sand had been disturbed. It should be noted that over this entire site the sand had been washed by the waves at a time (after the Lake Nipissing era, ca. 500 A.D.) when the present Wye Lake was much higher than it is now. The washing left an irregular wavy pattern on the sand at different levels, clearly visible in ordinary light. Anyone who has walked on a sandy beach will remember how the lapping of the waves left a pattern on the sand in curved lines. Here there was such a pattern still, the lines 1/4 to 1/2 inch in width, of a faintly gray colour in contrast to the ordinary white sand. In this area, rectangular in shape, the pattern had disappeared and only white sand showed, but all around the original sand-pattern showed. The pattern was broken, and the edges of the broken area marked by straight lines.

Light steel rods, 3/16 inches in diameter, were used to test the consistency of the sand. Where it was undisturbed, the rods could be forced down by hand pressure to a depth of six to eight inches. In this disturbed area they went in easily their full two feet of length.

Careful measurements were taken before further material was lifted. The disturbed sand formed a rectangle, 88 inches long and 42 inches wide. Its long dimension was not quite at right angles to the major axis of the building, but turned 15 degrees to the west; in other words, as it turned out,

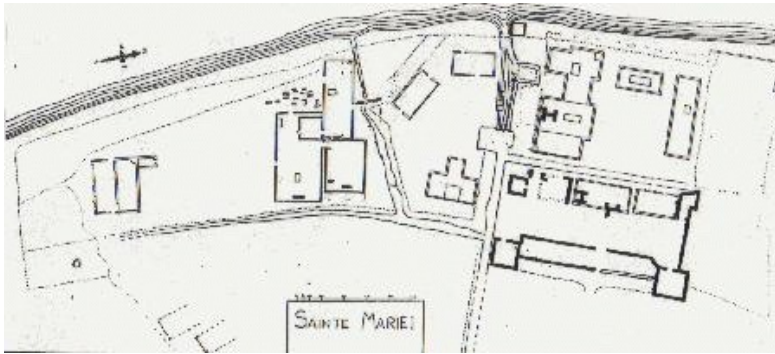


Plate 1: Ste Maries as known by archeological data.

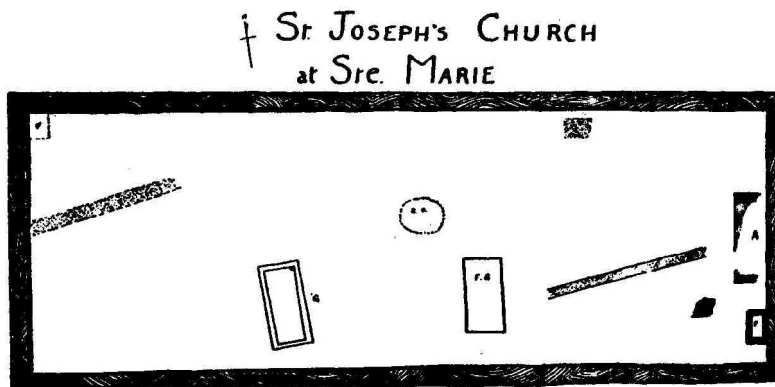


Plate 2: St. Joseph's Church at Ste. Marie.



Plate 3. Dark area surrounded by white sand. Depth 3".

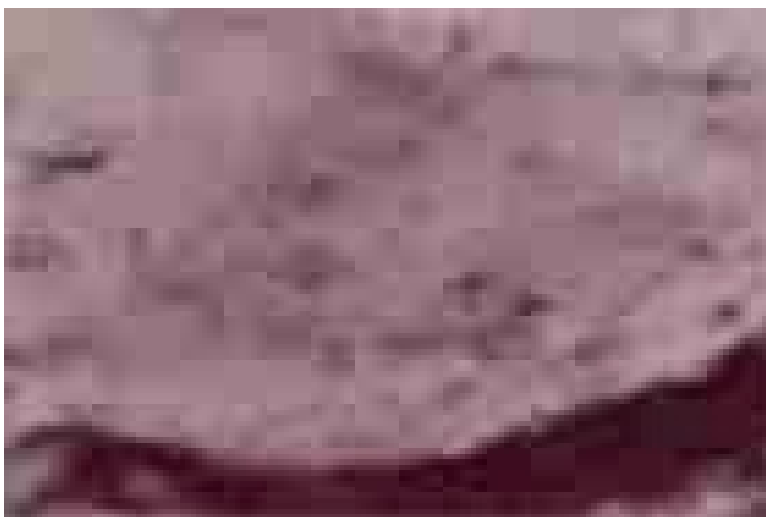


Plate 4. Dark area – with black outline and nails. 3"3".



Plate 5. Slightly deeper – about 3'3".



Plate 6: Southeast corner showing reddish tinge.



Plate 7. At 42" Level – coffin-line still visible.



Plate 8. No pattern to dark matter in coffin. Depth 45".

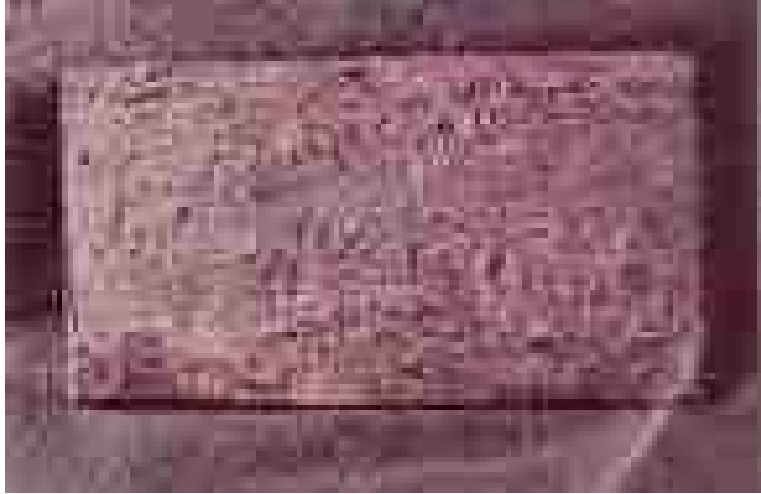


Plate 9. Photograph of plaque before thorough cleaning.



Plate 10. Location of grave near cemetery.

it lay exactly north and south. Its south-western corner was 20 inches from the south wall, 21 feet from the west wall; its north-west corner was 19 feet, two inches from the west wall.

On the following Monday, August 16, work progressed not only on the marked area, but also on its surroundings, so as to leave a clear space all around it. In this way the outline remained clear as long as the weather did, for either rain or wind could, and at times did, interfere with the picture.

At the 36-inch level a nail was uncovered in a vertical position, pointed downwards. It was 3½ inches long, square and handmade, similar to those found in the coffins in the graveyard. At its upper end, for about an inch under the head, there was wood impregnated with rust. By 10 o'clock on Tuesday morning the heads of other nails had come to light at the same level arranged vertically in lines roughly parallel with the sides of the marked area. When the uncovering of the 36-inch level was completed, there appeared a general dark area, contrasting with the surrounding sand, and bounded by clear inch-wide lines of decayed vegetable matter, stained with rust at the places occupied by the nails. At some spots, especially along the southern end, the outline was fringed by a faint red line, suggesting the material had been painted or daubed with red ochre. Photographs in colour were taken before any further work, and other photographs taken at intervals while the work progressed. There could not be the slightest doubt that this was the remains of a wooden box. Its outside measurements were 79 inches in length, 33 inches wide at the top (the north end) and 30 inches at the bottom. Its inside measurements were 77, 31, and 28 inches respectively. These unusual dimensions would have fitted well with the historical tradition of Brébeuf's outstanding physique.¹⁰ The average height of the French peasant in the seventeenth century was 5 feet, 4½ inches,¹¹ but this box was big enough for a man of six foot, three. The largest outside measurements of the coffins found in the graveyard were six feet long, 24 inches wide at the head and 19 inches at the foot.

In the northern half of the coffin there was a considerable amount of dark matter, similar to what had been found in graves previously excavated, identified then as decomposed body tissues mingled with sand. Some of this was collected for analysis, the rest merely removed to the sides to be replaced later. In the whole coffin of this big man, only two small fragments of what might have been bone were found. (Dr. Roderick C. Ross of St. Michael's Hospital Laboratory, Toronto, found that they were not bone.)¹² There was no pattern or definite outline to the dark matter inside the coffin. This

¹⁰ Appendix "B".

¹¹ History of Anatomy.

¹² Our sincere thanks are due to Dr. Ross for this service and for his kind permission to quote him on the matter.

confirmed what had been inferred from Regnaut's account, though not stated in so many words, namely, that after the removal of the bones what remained of the organs and flesh was put back or left in the coffin and reburied.

As the removal and careful sifting of the sand below the 36-inch level were continued it was with the hope that some cloth or braid from vestments might be found; more positive identification was hardly to be expected. (A number of the guests at the Shrine Inn, realizing that this might be an historic occasion, formed an interested gallery.) At the 47-inch level more nails were found, inverted, showing that the bottom of the coffin was near. (In all, 38 nails were recovered from this grave.) Then about 1:40 on Tuesday afternoon, a small rectangular piece of metal, almost the colour of the darkened sand, was uncovered in the north-east corner of the coffin, resting on the last half-inch of decayed wood. It proved to be a small plaque measuring $3\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{16} \times \frac{1}{8}$ inches. It weighed 147.1 grams or 5.17 ozs. Gentle brushing to remove sand and loose particles disclosed a cross engraved near the edge at the middle of one long side and, directly opposite this, the figures "1649". Close inspection showed three lines of inscription, in which it was possible to make out "P Jean de B beuf" and the date "17 de mars" (See Plate).

Under a layer of decayed wood, the bottom of the coffin, there was undisturbed sand at the 50-inch level. In the following weeks the rest of the area of the church was examined for traces of another grave, that of Lalemant, but without positive results. The only disturbance of the sand was that caused by the burning timbers when Ste. Marie was destroyed. For the present, the whereabouts of Lalemant's grave remains a mystery.

The sand sample removed from the grave (Grave Sample I) was later submitted to Professor F. F. Morwick, of the Ontario Agricultural College, for analysis, together with some sand from near the surface outside the church and the graveyard areas (Ordinary sand), and another sample removed from the grave a week later, i.e., from the material which had been removed and then replaced, (Grave Sample II). The following is his report:¹³

Phosphorus Content in	(1) Ordinary Sand	30 lb. to ac
	(2) Grave Sample I	120+1b. to ac
	(3) Grave Sample II	70 lb. to ac
Organic Matter in	(1) Ordinary Sand	very low
	(2) Grave Sample I	moderately high
	(3) Grave Sample II	moderately low

Phosphorus is the most easily recognized chemical from bone after the

¹³ We are deeply grateful to Professor Morwick for his helpfulness in performing the analyses and for his kind permission to quote from his letter.

bone has disintegrated. Organic matter merely shows that flesh of some sort has again become dust.

The Ontario Research Foundation were asked to examine the plaque, to determine the composition of the metal, and to clean it sufficiently to enable the full inscription to be read with certainty.¹⁴ The metal proved to be pure lead. The scale which had formed on the surface of the lead and prevented easy reading of the inscription consisted of a mixture of lead carbonates and lead oxides, natural corrosion products of lead buried for centuries in a moist soil. The inscription had been graved with a blunt-pointed stylus, possibly a nail, and some black substance had been rubbed into the grooves to make the inscription more clearly readable. This showed up clearly under a magnifier, after the cleaning. The black material was not removed from the grooves for examination, since, once removed, it could not be replaced, whereas it was desired to keep the plaque as it was found, as far as possible. All that visual examination could establish was that it seemed to be carbon and might be lamp-black. There were no holes in the plaque, nor any signs of its having been attached to anything. The reverse bore no inscription, but showed markings that seemed to indicate it had been wrapped in birch-bark when deposited in the coffin.

The full inscription (determined after cleaning), on the plaque reads:

†
P Jean de Brébeuf
Brusle par les Iroquois
Le 17 de mars l'an
1649

In English:

†
Fr. Jean de Brebeuf
Burnt by the Iroquois
On the 17th of March, in the year
1649

The reading “le 17 de mars” is surprising. The literary sources are explicit and unanimous in assigning Brébeuf’s death to March 16, “about four in the afternoon.” Lalemant, on the other hand, survived till about nine

¹⁴ We are sincerely grateful to the Foundation for their help in this; especially deserving of thanks are Dr. U. Martius who did the actual cleaning of the plaque just as we asked (i.e., keeping it in the state it was found as far as possible and yet removing the scale so the lettering was legible); and Dr. Ellis, Director of Metallurgy, who not only showed keen interest but also gave complete permission to quote for their report.

o'clock on the following morning.¹⁵ The most plausible explanation seems to be that the full details of the missionaries' last hours became known at Ste. Marie only by instalments. Regnaut and Ragueneau both ascribe the fullness of their information to Hurons taken captive by the Iroquois, who had been present at the torture of the missionaries, and later managed to escape from their captors while on the way to the Iroquois country, therefore *after* the Iroquois departure on the 19th. Several days may have elapsed before they got back to Ste. Marie to be questioned in detail about the tragic events they had witnessed. On the other hand, Ragueneau remarks that by the morning of the 20th, before the little party set out for St. Ignace, they had already learned with certainty that the two missionaries had been put to death.¹⁶ Nevertheless, on this latter occasion the plaque was evidently left in the coffin, as an identification of the remains of Brébeuf.

The peculiar angle of the coffin was contrary to Catholic custom. Usually, if a priest is buried in a church, he is laid with his head towards the altar. A layman would be buried with his feet towards it. Neither position was adopted for Brébeuf's grave. Again, outside a church, burials are usually east-west. Even the pagan Indians of Old Huronia, when digging a single grave, left the dead facing east or west. Perhaps it was as a contrast to this that the Christian graves in the Indian cemetery at Ste. Marie lay mostly north and south. In any case, the presence of this cemetery immediately outside the walls of the church seem to offer the best explanation of the position in which Brébeuf's body was laid in the earth. From the church wall as base, the cemetery was a triangle, with apex to the south. Directly north of the wall, and in the centre of the base, Brébeuf was buried, facing and as it were still watching over his people.

APPENDIX "A"

Regnaut's account leaves the date of the exhumation indefinite, merely saying "before we left the Huron country." Since the complete abandonment of the Huron mission is dated June, 1650, some historians have assumed that the preparation of the bones took place just before that. (So, most recently, Léon Pouliot, S.J., in *Lettres du Bas Canada*.)

However, it seemed to the present writer more logical to suppose that the exhumation was performed prior to the destruction of Ste. Marie on June 14, 1649. Regnaut states that he spent several days first boiling, then drying the bones. This suggests that he had plenty of time at his disposal. We conclude too from Ragueneau's *Relation* of 1650 that prowling bands of Iroquois cut off small groups of Hurons who went to the mainland searching food, and a

¹⁵ *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 34, pp. 137-139.

¹⁶ *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 34, p. 139.

visit then to the site of Ste. Marie would have been highly dangerous. The operation, then, was most likely carried out between mid. May and mid-June, 1649. Ultimate proof that it was done in 1649 came in the excavations. The church had been burned when Ste. Marie was destroyed. "In one hour we saw the work of 8 or 9 years destroyed," wrote Ragueneau. In all the graves in the cemetery, topsoil was mixed with the white sand when the graves were found, i.e. from when they had first been filled in. Had the natural fall of the burning timbers been disturbed, it would have been evident, in 1950. Here there was no such mixture and no charcoal at all in the part above the coffin. Therefore there was no charcoal on the ground when the reinterment was done.

APPENDIX "B"

Brébeuf's height is not expressly referred to in the *Relations* but various allusions give the impression that he must have been a very big man, e.g., his great strength (his pun on his own name "Je suis un vrais bœuf" – "I am a real ox," fit only to carry burdens); the striking contrast in physique between him and Lalemant. Historically, as time went on, later writers seemed to add to his stature.

In 1626, Father Charles Lalemant, writing to Father Vitelleschi (*Jesuit Relations*, Vol. IV, p. 178), said Brébeuf was "corpore robustus", physically strong.

In 1744, Charlevoix in his *Histoire de Nouvelle France* (Vol. II, Chap. 7) used "grand" or "big" to start the description of Brébeuf.

In 1873, Félix Martin in *Vie de Brébeuf* said he was "haute taille et puissant de corp" – quite tall and well built. He also stated the silver bust sent by the family as a reliquary for the skull was life-size.

In 1949, F. X. Talbot in *Saint Among Hurons* used the word "giant" and repeatedly stressed Brébeuf's unusual stature.

In 1954, at last, we can give something fairly definite. The coffin was 6'5" (inside measurement). This was quite adequate for a man 6'3" in height. In addition we know from Ragueneau's description of the tortures (*Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 34, p. 147) that Brébeuf's feet had been cut off then. Brébeuf was certainly a big man.