

Battle for the Soul

Métis Children Encounter Evangelical Protestants
at Mackinaw Mission, 1823–1837

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#165

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
East Lansing

HRA012033

orphan girl, the daughter of an Indian mother and an African-American father. When the girl was eleven, the Biddles placed her in the Mackinaw Mission.²⁴ In 1822, Agatha supported Moconamas and his family of six from L'Arbre Croche for six months while she nursed one of them through an illness. In addition, Agatha and Edward arranged for proper burial on Mackinac Island of perhaps as many as fifty Indians.²⁵

Edward learned from Agatha that hospitality was essential to success in the trade. He and his partner, John Drew, kept a house at Mackinac for the purpose of lodging Indians visiting the island. Biddle and Drew supplied fire food, furnishings, and firewood to any Native person in need. For years they employed William McGulpin to bake fifty or sixty barrels of flour a year into bread to be given to hungry Indians. Away from Mackinac, Thomas Guthrie and other clerks working for Biddle carried out their boss's instructions to furnish "the Indians all the time with clothing, provisions—and such necessities as they required . . . " at their trading posts at Grand Traverse, along the Grand River, and elsewhere.²⁶

Although Edward Biddle adjusted to many of the practices of his wife's people, he never abandoned his American ways. He used American capital to finance his participation in the fur trade and fishing. After the Treaty of Washington in 1836 had been ratified, both Edward and Agatha made claims for partial reimbursement of the cost of benevolences that they had provided to Indians over the years.²⁷ Edward also held a number of offices in the local government including sheriff, assessor, surveyor, and village president.²⁸ Until his death in 1859, Edward Biddle stood by Agatha and her people, but he never wavered from his determination to live as an American dedicated to the ideals of the United States. He continued in the tradition of European-American men in the fur-trade society who married Native women, accepted many of their customs, and yet lived as European Americans on the middle ground.

While the Laframboises and Biddles linked the older fur-trade society with the newer American society, Augustin Cadotte lived primarily within the expanding parameters of the old order. Augustin maintained the long-standing practice of French-Canadian and Métis men marrying Native women when on 12 December 1822 he wed Madeline, a Chippewa woman.²⁹ A year earlier their son François had been baptized by Father Gabriel Richard in Ste. Anne's Church.³⁰ Little is known about the parentage of either Augustin or Madeline.³¹

Augustin Cadotte was a fisherman and also a day laborer for wealthier people. Cadotte's probate records reveal an "ordinary" French-speaking male making his living and participating in the market at Mackinac until he died in 1825. In the early 1820s, Augustin sold whitefish, trout, wood, and hay to Edward Biddle,

hauled things for John Whelan, hulled corn and gardened for Joseph Rolette, and dug potatoes for William McGulpin. Cadotte rented out his boat to John Campbell for four and one-half days at six livres per day. French Canadians and Métis still conducted their business in livres, thereby perpetuating French-Canadian ways in a local economy that was coming under increased control by American businessmen. Cadotte spent some of his wages buying lime, lumber, and deerskins from Michael Dousman, an American, and numerous items including candles, nutmeg, cloth, and whiskey from Biddle.³²

The experience of the Laframboise family, the Biddles, and the Cadottes demonstrate how the presence of Americans made a complex society even more complicated. Although each family occupied a different place in the social structure of the fur-trade society, their lives show how people of all classes intermingled, thus blurring class distinctions. Through their connections with Americans the Laframboises, Biddles, and Cadottes linked the people of the eastern United States with the fur-trade society while perpetuating traditional relationships at Mackinac. Magdelaine retained the respect of her Odawa people while gaining considerable influence among both French- and English-speaking European Americans. While she traded for smelly furs along the Grand River during the winter of 1816, her daughter married the brother of a future president of the United States on Mackinac Island. Agatha Biddle prevailed upon her American husband to conduct his business in ways that respected the customs of her people. As a result, Edward Biddle served the same people with whom he did business. His cousin, Nicholas Biddle, the President of the Second National Bank, would not have found Edward's family acceptable in Philadelphia society, but mixed marriages were common at Mackinac.³³ Augustin and Madeline Cadotte's marriage typified many of the traditional members of the fur-trade society who continued to live as they had for over a century. French-Canadian and Métis men who before 1812 had performed most of the labor for French and later British traders, now performed similar tasks for American employers.

Augustin Cadotte and many of his fellow Métis lived in run-down dwellings situated in unkempt yards. At the time of his death, Cadotte's residence was described as "one shell of a house & one stable" with a "small garden without fence."³⁴ A typical lower-class Métis house was covered with bark and of the old French design "with corner and centre posts filled in."³⁵ Whitewash could not conceal the decaying condition of many Métis homes or the poverty of the Métis who subsisted by fishing, gardening, or laboring.³⁶ Métis workers depended upon their horses to pull carts and their dogs to drag sleighs across the ice in winter. But horses stabled in yards, pestered by flies breeding in manure, and barking dogs