

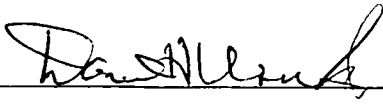
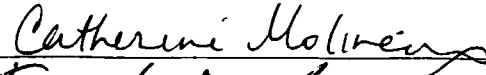
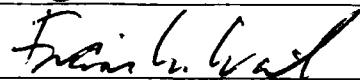
*"Méchant Pays, Méchant Gens": Images and Invocations of the Backwoods Voyageur  
in Colonial Louisiana Rhetoric (Late 1690s—1720s)*

By

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On the basis of this thesis and of  
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taken by the candidate on  
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we, the undersigned, recommend  
that the candidate be awarded  
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## A NOTE ON CITATIONS

Many of the citations in the following text come from a collection of primary documents that were translated and edited by Dunbar Rowland and A.G. Sanders in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The documents were published in five volumes under the title, *Mississippi Provincial Archives French Dominion*. Volume I presents official records from the years 1729-1740; Volume II presents documents 1701-1729; Volume III presents documents from 1704-1743; Volume IV presents documents from 1729-1748; Volume V presents documents from 1749-1763. When citing these texts, historians commonly abbreviate the texts as “*MPAFD*” in footnotes. The following text adheres to that standard. For example, when cited, Volume II will appear as *MPAFD-II*.

## FOREWORD

### An Introduction to Colonial Louisiana and the *Voyageur*

On September 6, 1704 Jean-Baptiste LeMoynesieur de Bienville, in charge of the French settlement at Mobile, wrote to Jérôme Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain, commissary of the Marine in Paris and chief metropolitan director of colonization efforts in the fledgling Louisiana colony. As he and his brother, Pierre LeMoynesieur d'Iberville, had done many times in the previous five years of settlement, Bienville was seeking to give a comprehensive account of the state of the colony. Under a section entitled "Other Hostile Nations," Bienville observed the following:

There are also a number of *voyageurs* on the Mississippi and on the Missouri who are separated into little bands of seven or eight. The Indians are always killing some of them. If they took the precaution to carry on their trading all together, that would not happen to them at all. I have written to the missionaries who are near them and I am sending them an order to make them all descend and to forbid them to trade any more for beavers, as you have done me the honor to do. That is the real way, my lord, to increase this colony. They are very good men, very suitable for this country. They are all told one hundred and ten...<sup>1</sup>

Five years later Louisiana was on the fringe of survival. The colony's population had shrunk to barely one hundred inhabitants, including Indian slaves. Suspected of malfeasance by King Louis XIV and Pontchartrain, Bienville had relinquished his post. From Versailles in July 1709, Pontchartrain lamented:

It is regrettable that we cannot count on these Canadians for the settlement of Louisiana. It is necessary for you to do everything in your power to persuade them to become inhabitants and to make them give up the wandering life that they lead.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Bienville to Pontchartrain, September 6, 1704," *MPAFD*-III, 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> "Pontchartrain to D'Artaguet, At Versailles, July 11, 1709," *MPAFD*-III, 131.

In 1710 Pontchartrain recorded more salacious rumors about the backwoods activities of francophone soldiers and traders:

His Majesty has been informed that there are many Frenchmen and Canadians who are in Louisiana who live in shameless dissoluteness with the Indians and that several of these libertines who go among the Indians in order to carry away slaves get themselves killed there.<sup>3</sup>

Fifteen years later in 1725, Bienville returned to a defense of fur traders' rights, arguing that if they were to be left free to pursue their activities, the colony would prosper even further:

In addition to the fact that there is a great deal of difference between working for oneself and trading for another it is very unusual to find clerks who are as well acquainted with the [fur] trade as the *voyageurs*. Besides the risks are great and the costs too heavy for the Company to find it advantageous. It would get more out of it by leaving this commerce to the *voyageurs*, only demanding as in Canada that they send all their peltries with the price indicated to the Company's warehouse in order to give them credit for them.<sup>4</sup>

What these vignettes capture is the importance of the backwoods, fur trading *voyageurs* in the minds of officials in Paris and in the coastal settlements of Lower Louisiana. These commentaries hint at the strong rhetoric that the *voyageur's* presence elicited, and the text that follows aims to fill in these gaps, as it explores the nature and the context of this rhetoric alongside its veracity.

But, who were these *voyageurs*? Why were they in the backwoods of Louisiana? And, why did they attract such attention? The answers to many of these questions are reserved for later in the text, but first it is important to have an understanding of how *voyageurs* reached the Mississippi Valley in the first place.

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<sup>3</sup> "Pontchartrain to Bienville, At Marly, May 10, 1710," *MPAFD*-III, 140-141.

<sup>4</sup> "Memoir on Louisiana [by Bienville], 1726" *MPAFD*—III, 517.

Though this text opens in the year 1699, French engagement in the fur trade dated from the earliest years of settlement in the St. Lawrence River Valley. The mother country acquired massive wealth, and beaver-skin caps became a popular fashion in France. Up until the 1680s the French had sustained the fur trade with Algonquin-speaking peoples of present-day Ontario, who were the traditional rivals of the Iroquois Five Nations Indians situated across the Great Lakes in present-day upstate New York. Nevertheless, as the Iroquois were attempting to acquire dominance over trade and expand their population by absorbing members of smaller tribes located to their south and west, they came into armed combat with the French. Victory over the Iroquois in the 1680s allowed eager traders in the Canadian Great Lakes region to double their activities, and they flooded Montréal and Québec with pelts. Trappers and traders were so prodigious in their activities that they outstripped demand and the market was oversaturated. Wealthy *commissionaires*, the merchants and businessmen for whom *voyageurs* worked by contract, pressed Louis XIV to protect their profits. In response, the Crown took a more forcible stance in enforcing quotas, and the majority of fur traders were actually stripped of their contracts in the 1690s.<sup>5</sup>

The backwoods fur traders' legal status thus changed overnight. Yet, their activities did not. While some did bemoan defunct contracts, others simply continued to paddle inland streams and rivers in order to engage in unsanctioned trade. Not having to report back to *commissionaires* allowed for even greater freedom of movement that

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the fur trade in central Canada and the Great Lakes region, see Cornelius J. Jaenen. French Expansion in North America. *The History Teacher* 34.2 (2001): 21 pars. 20 Apr. 2006 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/34.2/jaenen.html>>. In addition, despite an emphasis on cultural encounter, Susan Sleeper-Smith includes an excellent examination of *voyageurs'* experience in this region in *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts, 2001).

permitted backwoodsmen to paddle down the Mississippi and its tributaries to present-day Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee. Of course, the royal interdiction on the beaver trade did complicate officials' vocabulary in referring to these backwoodsmen. Two terms rose to prominence—"voyageur" and "*coureur des bois*." *Voyageur* ("traveler") was a term that referred to any person under contract, but not indenture,<sup>6</sup> to perform services for colonial merchants or officials. *Voyageur* activities could encompass fort construction, shipbuilding, and exploratory or diplomatic missions. However, a plurality of *voyageurs* were fur traders, so much so that the term *voyageur* gradually became synonymous with the fur trade. Still, many *voyageurs* had abandoned contracts in the 1660s and 1670s, and this phenomenon produced the *coureur des bois*, a man who "ran the woods" unfettered by commercial obligations to New France. Because of the *coureur des bois*'s unparalleled liberty and the inability of officials to find a means of overseeing him, he attracted venom. At the same time, he could serve as a valuable reconnaissance agent and as an important middleman with Native Americans. Because he was free to violate French mercantile rules that were meant to limit trade cooperation with the English, his proximity to the English frontier trader could present a military advantage to French officials who desired to control disputed frontier territories without making other personnel and financial commitments. In effect, relations with the backwoods trader took on some of the same tones that characterized French tactics in dealing with native tribes. Specifically, in Louisiana's early years under the leadership of Pierre LeMoyne d'Iberville (1699-1706) fur traders—along with natives near the coast—were an important component in buffering English influence and in securing economic survival. The first chapter of this text addresses the first eight years of development,

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<sup>6</sup> Indentured laborers were typically classified as *engagés*.



during which time the *voyageur* was regarded with just as much amity as hostility. Geographically, *voyageurs* oscillated between the backwoods and the forts of Mobile and Biloxi during these years.

Yet, as the next two chapters of the text study, problems with Louisiana's infrastructure were linked to the kind of lifestyle of which the *voyageur* seemed representative to colonial officials. Rhetoric of the period between 1706 and 1717 reflected compounding frustrations. Military discipline seemed to be non-existent, as both soldiers and officers responded to depleted food resources by hunting in the backwoods. *Habitants* in the region bemoaned the delayed arrival of black slaves to plant crops, and without labor or a viable cash crop, the few farmers-by-trade in the region planted barely enough to sustain themselves. When soldiers and settlers did disappear into the backwoods, they engaged in sexual partnerships with Indian women. Some of these men took these native girls and women as domestic slaves and brought them out of the woods to their homes into the coastal settlements. Other settlers complained about the lack of white women or their poor appearance. The few Catholic missionaries in the region and the military-civic authorities agreed that mass attendance and church construction were deplorable, but they engaged in heated dispute about whether Frenchmen should be permitted to take darker-skinned Louisiana Indians as wives. Ultimately, the view of Louisiana that the second and third chapters of this text offer is one in which officials were truly conscious of, and frightened by, the limits of their authority. Moreover, conversations about good governance in the colony and proper models of growth heavily condemned the *voyageur* as an impediment to the establishment of a stable, "settled" colony.

By the late 1710s and through the 1720s administrators tempered their rhetoric with respect to the *voyageur*. Not only was his presence invoked with less frequency because the colony was developing plantations, frontier entrepôts, and a capital at New Orleans, but also the *voyageurs* actually physically retreated. Some sought to expand westward into fresh, fur-rich regions. Others settled down at various points along the Mississippi Valley, where they became full-time farmers or blended farming with fur trading. As the final quotation in the previous vignettes illustrates, the *voyageur* did not disappear from Louisiana documents after the 1720s. Actually, he once again became an economic partner. But, closed was the chapter in which officials feared that every resident of the Gulf settlement might simply follow him into the dense pine forest.

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As a final point of departure, one must have an understanding of Louisiana's slow development, which historians traditionally used as an excuse to ignore the first twenty-odd years of the colony's life. Even Marcel Giraud, the seminal twentieth century historian of Louisiana, offered a portrait of misery and stagnancy. In response, more recent historians like Daniel Usner, Carl Brasseaux, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, and Jennifer Spear, have reevaluated activities in the colony, tabling the issue of the colony's relative importance in France's Atlantic designs and instead focusing on the relationships that colonists were able to cultivate on the ground with other Europeans, with Native Americans, and with African and Creole blacks (beginning in the 1720s). Despite this burgeoning interest in frontier partnerships and communication across color boundaries,

no recent historian has focused specifically on the backwoods fur trader. It is fair to attribute part of this neglect to the freshness of the field. It is also fair to assume that the limitations that primary sources pose account for this vacancy in early Louisiana scholarship.

As young historians of the early Mississippi Valley soon discover, the documents that survive from the period provide a limited range of perspectives. Because most settlers and *voyageurs* were illiterate, they did not record their experiences. The only remnants of *voyageur* voices that we have at our disposal today are the lyrics of paddling songs that have been passed down orally in *métis* societies of central and western Canada. In addition, there is one text—*Fleur de Lys and Calumet*<sup>7</sup>—that records the impressions of André Pénicault, a *voyageur* who was employed less in the fur trade than he was in carpentry and in diplomatic missions. Not only has this text acquired a reputation for being largely apocryphal, but it also remains silent on the fur trading lifestyle. So, presented with these limited options, the historian must turn to the *Archives Coloniales*, official correspondence between military and civic governors in Louisiana and their overseers in Paris.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, many of these texts contain rumor, speculation, and invective all under the guise of truth. In contrast, some of the texts are subdued—what we might call “professional” today in tone. They aim to provide an objective account of events in the region. Although it is challenging and effectively impossible to

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<sup>7</sup> Translated and republished by Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams under the title. *Fleur de Lys and Calumet, being the Pénicault narrative of French adventure in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1953).

<sup>8</sup> At the present time there is no comprehensive published index of these documents. Series C<sup>13</sup>, which pertains to the government of Louisiana, may be found on microfilm in Paris or at the Center for Louisiana Studies in Lafayette, Louisiana. Portions of this series were translated and published in a five-volume set by Dunbar Rowland and A.G. Sanders under the title *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion*.

unravel the backwoods fur trader from officials' rhetoric, the very kinds of lively conversations that the fur trader's existence provoked further contribute to recent portrayals of a dynamic early Louisiana—a society in which raw human instinct held greater force than models of official control, communal progress, or individual moral self-improvement.

## ONE

### Cooperation and Conciliation: The *Voyageur* as a Commercial and Diplomatic Ally (1699-1710)

When Pierre Le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville guided King Louis XIV's ship into the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1699, he was not the first Frenchman in the region. In fact, one of Iberville's primary goals was to locate Monsieur Henri de Tonti, an Italian-born French explorer who was a member of Robert René Cavalier Sieur de la Salle's return-party to Canada in 1678. In 1680 Tonti received orders to paddle westward into the Great Lakes region, where he secured the allegiance of the Illinois Indians and defended them against Iroquois raids. Moreover, Tonti reconvened with de la Salle at Starved Rock, Illinois, where the two set up Fort Louis. Shortly thereafter Tonti was trusted with guardianship of the Illinois settlement, as de la Salle returned to France.

For over three years Tonti waited on de la Salle to return. Little did he know, but his captain had been killed by mutinous sailors during an ill-fated voyage to the Gulf of Mexico. In the intervening years Tonti inserted himself into the Indian affairs of the Upper Mississippi Valley, and he witnessed the establishment of fur traders in the newly fortified Illinois region. Not only did Tonti employ fur traders in his command, he likely engaged in the trade himself as trading post commander. Such activity would have served as a supplement to his diplomatic efforts by providing opportunity for a personal profit.<sup>1</sup> In essence, Henri de Tonti was a *voyageur*, and he happened to be traveling downriver in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the activities and adventures of Henri de Tonti under la Salle, see his journal published by Isaac Joslin Cox within *The journeys of René Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle, as related by his faithful lieutenant, Henri de Tonti; his missionary colleagues, Fathers Zenobius Membré, Louis Hannepin, and Anastasius Douay; his early biographer, Father Christian LeClercq; his trusted subordinate, Henri Joutel; and his brother, Jean Cavelier; together with memoirs, commissions, etc.* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company. 1905).

pursuit of la Salle when Iberville made his Gulf arrival. Consequently, the image of the dependable *voyageur* that Iberville, a Canadian himself, constructed, reflected his experience with Tonti. Though not all *voyageurs* were military veterans like Tonti, they could serve as an important frontier buffer, and Iberville believed in their loyalty to the French cause and in their amenability to control. Iberville's rhetoric (1699-1706) contained an expectation that the *voyageur* could be a cooperative agent in diplomatic and commercial projects.

And, de Tonti and his upriver *voyageurs* did in fact become Louisiana's first backwoods emissaries.<sup>2</sup> On 16 February 1700, Iberville noted: "M. de Tonti arrived toward evening in a boat with eight men, having left fourteen at the Bayogoulas along with their baggage and canoes. The men with him are *habitans*, most of them from the Illinois and Tamaroas, who came on their own initiative to see what there might be to do here, in response to the letter M. de Sauvole sent up there, [saying] that if men came from upriver they would find work and be welcomed here."<sup>3</sup> Even though this particular extract refers to the collection of men as *habitans*, or settlers, these particular individuals were merely part of a more significant stream of Frenchmen in transit southward. Many were driven into the region by trade opportunities, others by the prospect of stable employment, and still others by the imperative to assist kinsmen. Having secured the respect, "M. de Tonti is going back to the Illinois. I entrusted to him several presents to give to the Tonicas [Tunica] and the chief of the Chicachas [Chickasaw] ...I instructed

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<sup>2</sup>Tonty had acquired such a reputation for competency and heroism that some in Paris were surprised to see that Iberville and not he had received governorship of Louisiana. Part of the reason that Tonty may have been overlooked is that unsubstantiated rumors were circulating among Jesuits in New France that Tonty had engaged in sex with an Indian woman and had fathered a child. As Charles Edward O'Neill contends in *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, Iberville may have done little to clear Tonty's reputation.

<sup>3</sup>Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams, trans., *Iberville's Gulf Journals* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981). *Gulf Journals*, 117-118.

M. de Tonti to tell them that we have settled on the Mississippi—friends of all the nations nearby, with whom we are doing business in everything.”<sup>4</sup> This image of M. de Tonti, an independent trader and yet military man, is one of diplomatic mediator. Furthermore, on at least one occasion, Tonti was invested with the power to arrest English traders, who were supposedly taking Indian slaves and causing distress among the Indian tribes of Lower Louisiana. The tactic was to use the *voyageur*’s predilection for trade with the English as bait for drawing in and capturing two English traders: “I instructed...M. de Tonti to try to lure those Englishmen there under pretext of trading for beaver, and arrest them and deliver them to the Sieur de la Ronde.”<sup>5</sup> Granting this right was a statement of trust as well as an implicit acknowledgement of the *voyageur*’s efficacy.

But it was not just de la Salle’s old crewman who accompanied Iberville on diplomatic missions. One day after sending Tonti back upriver Iberville remarked, “I reached the Bayogoulas at ten o’clock in the morning, where I found two of these *voyageurs* that had remained there...Four of these men are with my brother and the others with me, having the intention of descending the river to the fort, and of proceeding to the ships to sell a few beaver pelts they have, which I take to be very few.”<sup>6</sup> Contacts such as these indicate Iberville’s policy of winning the trust of backwoods traders.

By the time of Iberville’s third excursion to the Mississippi in early 1702, *voyageurs* upriver were requesting permission to ply their trade at the newly found fort settlements of Mobile and Biloxi: “Father Gravier, the Superior of the Jesuit missionaries at the Illinois embarked on it [a vessel]. on his way back. as did some *voyageurs*, who had come to talk with me about the beaver pelts they have at the Mississippi and about

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<sup>4</sup> *Gulf Journals*. 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Gulf Journals*. 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

settling at La Mobile and on the Mississippi. I gladly permitted them to do so. They are to carry out their plans next year; the lack of provisions, which we cannot let them have this year, has compelled them to go back up the Mississippi and trade for cheap peltry—buffalo hides and deer skins—and also to fetch the beaver pelts several of them had cached there.’<sup>7</sup> As for the *voyageurs*, such a gesture meant that French *habitants* would be included in their commercial networks.

All the same, *voyageurs* frequently engaged in trade across imperial boundaries. The Spaniards held Texas as well as the nearby port of Pensacola; given that they had only marginally penetrated the Eastern woodlands, they were infrequent partners. In fact, it would be Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, a descendant of one of New France’s first families and later on officer in Louisiana, who would actually open illicit trade with Texas Spaniards and who would later be arrested in Texas for his activities. As for voyaging fur traders, though, the English were the other Europeans. Sometimes Anglophone backwoodsmen were allies, as English traders coming from Carolina made frequent overtures toward French-Canadian *voyageurs*. For the English, such a partnership offered the possibility to undermine solidarity between French administrators and backwoodsmen. And secondly, the British saw a chance to profit from *voyageurs*’ intimate trading ties with Indian tribes like the Choctaw. The notion that they had been strategically placed by English authorities to undermine French trading and diplomatic networks was the common opinion of both Sauvole and Iberville.

Early documents from Iberville’s tenure (1699-1706) suggest a wariness that *voyageurs* would be seduced by the English, but Iberville did not fault *voyageurs* for the temptation. The competition for *voyageurs*’ allegiances was something Iberville feared

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<sup>7</sup> *Gulf Journals*, 165-166.



losing: “they [*voyageurs*] had left them [pelts] there with the intention of carrying them to the English in Carolina if we were no longer willing to accept them. Those Englishmen have made great promises to the *voyageurs*.”<sup>8</sup> Iberville’s apparent warmth toward the *voyageurs* was an expression of this contest with the English. He believed it was possible to secure the loyalty of backwoods traders and that removing them from English influence would mark a victory for the colonial military project. In this respect, just as officials regarded *voyageurs* as ethnic Frenchmen and subjects to the Crown, they followed the strategy of offering enticements to press traders into service.

It was an auspicious sign to Iberville in Biloxi when the *voyageur* found himself at odds with the English trader. Some *voyageurs* resented Englishmen’s efforts to establish themselves at pro-French Indian villages. A letter from Sieur de Sauvole, commandant at Biloxi (1699—d.1701) to Pontchartrain in Paris, recounts an extreme example of this antagonism: “In regard to the Englishman who was established at the Nicacha [he] was robbed and killed by some Canadian *voyageurs* as I have already sent word by the ship.”<sup>9</sup> Sauvole went on to observe, however: “the English have behaved very differently in regard to five Canadians who went to Carolina,”<sup>10</sup> Sauvole’s vocabulary chides these particular Canadians for their willingness to engage the English with as little hesitancy as they engaged the French. Two Canadian traders mentioned by name, Bellefeuille and Soton, visited the English governor of Charleston (by following the Wabash River), and were by him “offered four and a half *livres* for their beaver-skins, which they did not bring in their canoe.” Instead, they reportedly carried samples, a strategy they sometimes employed with the French: “They have acted in the same way

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre LeMoyne d’Iberville. 22 February 1702, *Iberville’s Gulf Journals*, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Sauvole to [Pontchartrain?], 4 August 1701.” *MPAFD*-II, 9-18

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

here. They wish to know whether it will be permitted to send them to France.”

Ultimately, Sauvole requested advice on the burgeoning problem of these “vagabonds and rebels”: who, “once [they] become accustomed to going to the English we shall not see them again soon in Canada or here.” Sauvole was ultimately less tolerant of *voyageurs*’ trading habits than was Iberville; he saw less promise in obtaining the loyalties of people who were rarely averse to cooperating with France’s great colonial rival.<sup>11</sup>

Until his death in 1706, Iberville defended the *voyageur* in his journals. Perhaps he was convinced that he could impose some order on the *voyageurs*’ activities—that they could become valuable assets to the Gulf Coast settlers. His faith had to be confirmed by figures like Henri de Tonti. *Voyageurs* could serve as diplomatic liaisons, since military partnerships with native tribes were constructed around fur trade and gift exchange. In addition, *voyageurs* were sometimes bilingual, and it is likely that a number of backwoods traders in the southern portions of the Valley had at least a working knowledge of Mobilien, the *lingua franca* of coastal Indian tribes. Although records remain silent on the issue of interpreters in Lower Louisiana at this time, Canadian translators assisted settlers in Détroit and Illinois, so it is likely that there were interpreters even amongst a smaller population of *voyageurs* in the lower Valley. Regardless, Iberville envisioned the *voyageur* as a useful middleman and as a French eye on the backwoods frontier.

The earnest fur-trading of *voyageurs* helped secure Louisiana’s material livelihood. For example, on one occasion, 4000 pounds of beaver peltry were shipped into the region from upriver, which Iberville received and purchased with a “very

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<sup>11</sup> Again, see pages 14 and 15 of Sauvole’s 1701 letter. *MPAFD-II*. 9-18.

profound respect.” Agriculture struggled during these years, but Iberville did not see this shortcoming as a death sentence to the colony. Settlers at Biloxi had found a way to obtain foodstuffs like corn and had become dependent upon the harvests of surrounding Indian tribes. As Louisiana was being fed by the *petites nations*, Louisiana’s commerce was being sustained almost single-handedly by the *voyageurs*’ downriver trade. Like French settlers, unsettled traders had come to rely on supply ships and on Mississippi Valley Indians for food, and a profound image of this dependence is found in Biloxi Sauvole’s 1701 report. At a time when his men and the Canadian traders were wracked by a flu outbreak, Sauvole complained: “I have not been able to dispense with having rations given to those [*voyageurs* who were at the fort for the purpose of depositing beaver peltry] whom I thought were the most necessary to us and who without this kindness would have gone back.”<sup>12</sup> Sustaining the backwoods Canadians was an obligation that Sauvole saw no alternative but to assume. The image of the languishing, ill Canadian offers a portrait of the hardships that beset early Louisiana. Undermanned and short on supplies, Biloxi was a poor refuge, but it evidently attracted *voyageurs* who were too sick to fend for themselves.

Two forces came to work simultaneously during the early years of royal control: Backwoods commerce would sustain fort settlements economically, and settlers in these same forts would begin to abandon their stations in order to pursue commercial fortune. As the latter phenomenon became more and more pronounced, the *voyageur* was more explicitly denounced. Even Sauvole’s harshest adjectives were a mild prelude to the rhetorical assault that *voyageurs* would take after Iberville’s death and through the colonial administrations of Bienville and La Mothe Cadillac.

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<sup>12</sup> Sauvole to Pontchartrain, *MPAFD*-II, 12.

Still, in the early years, Iberville's dynamism and voracious diplomacy favored a large umbrella, where there was a place for *voyageurs* to contribute to the colonial enterprise. The conviction that order and control were possible—that *voyageurs* could become reconnaissance agents and diplomatic intermediaries sustained a positive image of their activities and personae. At worst, they were a necessary evil. At best, they were viewed as “strong, lively, and alert.”<sup>13</sup> Their penchant for Indian ways surely seemed a bit odd, but the Kaskaskias village in Illinois had found success. More than these practical observations, though, there was a kind of unstated identification with the image of the *voyageur*. Iberville, commander of French-Canadians on the Hudson Bay and avowed enemy of the English, did relish discipline; at the same time, he admired pluck and independence. He saw Tonti, soldier-cum-*voyageur* as an example of grit, bravery, and loyalty—traits inherent to French-Canadians. After all, despite their occasional dalliances with the English, *voyageurs* were French-Canadian brethren. They, too, were born and raised outside the *métropole*. They, too, fashioned themselves masculine explorers and adventurers.

The great outsider according to Iberville and Sauvole was not the French *voyageur*, but rather the English trader. Early diplomatic efforts focused primarily on heading off English encroachment, and this territorial protectionism sapped the colony of resources and manpower. Commerce was slow to develop, and *voyageurs* filled the vacuum. Despite their geographic position on the periphery of the colony, *voyageurs* became familiar, frequent visitors. They surely had interesting stories to share in the forts. At the very least, they provided information on the activities of the English, on the

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<sup>13</sup> Sauvole to [Pontchartrain], 4 August 1701 [author's translation]. *Archives des Colonies, Série C<sup>13</sup>: Louisiane, Correspondance Générale (Archives Nationales, Paris)* microfilm (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana).

supposed locations of mines,<sup>14</sup> and on political tensions between Indian tribes. Though the majority of *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* never visited Biloxi and instead remained in the backwoods or upriver, enough made the trek to secure the attention of military leaders in Louisiana and officials in Paris.

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<sup>14</sup> Stories of mines on the frontier always piqued the interest of Louisiana officials. Both *voyageurs* and Native Americans relayed information about silver mines, but the information was frequently circumspect. Indians in the Mississippi Valley commonly held the superstition that the first entrant to a mine would die. Many Indians recognized the French fascination with precious metals, and sometimes they invented stories of mines in order to influence French movement on the frontier.

## TWO

### **The *Voyageur* as an Impediment to Military Discipline (1706-1716)**

The 1706 death of Iberville created a power vacuum that the late commandant's brother, Sieur de Bienville, aspired to fill. Perhaps Bienville's aggressive assertion of authority placed strain on the colony. Perhaps it agitated the jealousies of his peers, like Nicholas de la Salle, commissary of Mobile. Whatever the case, Pontchartrain evidently received complaints about the officer's conduct, and he charged naval commandant Diron d'Artaguet and governor-appointee Nicholas Daneaux de Muy to investigate these grievances upon their arrival in the summer of 1707.<sup>1</sup> In fact, after de Muy died, d'Artaguet alone launched a formal inquiry in early 1708, and he compiled the testimony of "eight witnesses, all inhabitants of Mobile."<sup>2</sup> Facing Bienville were a litany of charges of military corruption. For example, a rumor had circulated that Bienville had kept for his own use and profit valuable stores of meat that he had received through exchange with local Indian tribes.<sup>3</sup> Such a personal use of food resources was not so disagreeable in that it imperiled soldiers' rations but instead was distasteful because it threatened to subvert mercantile controls.<sup>4</sup> For apparently similar reasons, Louis's minister treated reports of Bienville's private dealings with fur trading *voyageurs* with suspicion. In fact, of the nineteen-article interrogation that d'Artaguet conducted,

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas de la Salle, who penned a chronicle of the late explorer Sieur de la Salle's journey down the Mississippi, was of no relation to the celebrated explorer. He assumed the position of commissary in 1701 and served until 1709. Diron d'Artaguet was to relieve de la Salle of his duties as commissary, or chief military officer, at Mobile. De Muy, born in France, commanded a regimen of troops in Canada. His service had won him respect, but he died in Havana *en route* to assume the governorship of Louisiana.

<sup>2</sup> "Abstract of Testimony Taken by Mr. d'Artaguet Against Mr. de Bienville: February 24, 25, 26, and 27, 1708," *MPAFD-III*, 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> The testimony tends to harp on the license that Bienville and his brother may have taken in distributing resources and in setting prices that undercut royal control and royal profit.

Article IV comprised Bienville's dealings with backwoodsmen.<sup>5</sup> According to a communiqué addressed from the king himself, "His Majesty [was] informed that the small vessels that are at Mobile have almost always been employed for the account of the late Sieur d'Iberville and of his brothers to transport their goods to Vera Cruz and to carry peltries to his Majesty's vessels and that these same boats were employed... to transport in preference to everything the goods of the said Sieur de Bienville and those of the officers of that ship, which were in great quantity which they sold at an exorbitant price."<sup>6</sup> Not only were military officers engaged in the fur trade, they were reportedly running royal vessels to turn their personal profits.

What this episode reveals is that cooperation with the *voyageurs* was beginning to assume a negative tone in the minds of Parisian officials. Bienville's critics felt that the individual pecuniary interests of the colony's head military official were interfering quite markedly with the integrity and the quality of military leadership in the colony. It was this erosion of military authority that Paris found particularly disconcerting because only an iron-fisted officer corps could govern some of the unruly soldiers that populated Louisiana. Although these soldiers did muster and guard storehouses against potential attack, embarrassing word came from the colony in 1706 that a garrison had not yet been established. This neglect further hurt Bienville in the eyes of Pontchartrain, who overlooked Bienville's diplomatic successes with native tribes and instead focused on an accusation that the commandant had sanctioned a fifty-man raid on an Alabama village.

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<sup>5</sup> "Memoir Serving as a Reply to the Complaints that Sieur de la Salle [Had] Made on the First of October, 1706, Which Were Sent to me by My Lord The Count of Pontchartrain on July 23, 1707," *MPAFD-III*, 107.

<sup>6</sup> "King Louis XIV to D'Artaguette, At Versailles, June 30, 1707," *MPAFD-III*, 64.

followed by the cruel and unacceptable execution of two Alabama prisoners by “slow fire.”<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these rumored abuses, Bienville was not nearly as incompetent or as corrupt as Pontchartrain feared. In reality, though he was lifted from his post, he was exonerated on all charges. It was a demotion that Bienville himself was not unwilling to accept by the spring of 1708: “Mr. de MUY to whom your Lordship had granted the governorship of this country died at Havana, which obliges me to remain although I have received permission from your Lordship to return to France to reestablish my health there...I am not able to endure the continual pain that I am suffering on account of hepatic colic and gout.”<sup>8</sup>

Bienville was exhausted. Many settlers had died of disease and starvation. English traders and privateers were outstripping the French in the number of gifts that they could offer the Choctaw and Chickasaw.<sup>9</sup> But, as historian Marcel Giraud has noted, Bienville performed admirably in the face of adversity.<sup>10</sup> Bienville was able to conserve partnerships with local *petites nations* and with the Choctaw, to the extent that they felt that these Indians had a natural preference for them over the English. Moreover, Pontchartrain was pleased to hear that Mobile and Biloxi were on “good terms with the Spaniards of Pensacola and [that you] are mutually assisting each other.”<sup>11</sup> The colonial settlements were running on miniscule resources; Bienville even found himself without a vessel to

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<sup>7</sup> “King Louis XIV to De MUY, At Versailles, June 30, 1707.” *MPAFD-III*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> “Bienville to Pontchartrain, February 25, 1708.” *MPAFD-III*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the disparity between French and English presents, see Daniel J. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Press, 1992) and Patricia Dillon Woods, *French-Indian Relations on the Southern Frontier 1699-1762* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Consider, as one example of praise, that Giraud remarks on “Bienville’s cunning” and his “talents” in negotiating with the Chickasaws, p. 208, *A History of French Louisiana*, Vol. I, trans. Joseph C. Lambert (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> “Pontchartrain to Bienville, At Versailles, July 11, 1709,” *MPAFD-III*, 129.



dispatch to sea since the colony's lone ship ran aground at the port of Massacre. Just as Pontchartrain was studying Bienville's behavior, Bienville was pleading with Pontchartrain for supplies and personnel. Pontchartrain's judgments did little to assuage disorder and deprivation in the settlement. For example, Bienville requested the introduction of black slaves into Louisiana for exchange with Indian slaves. Pontchartrain claimed that this would not be "practicable" at the time because the inhabitants of Louisiana lacked cash and would not secure the attention of French slave traders until they could offer something in return.<sup>12</sup> In addition, in response to a letter Bienville sent to him on 12 October 1708, which stated, "We now have nothing [food] at Massacre any longer. I am having a detachment of twelve soldiers and an officer held there to guard the port and to keep watch over several colonists who intend to leave the country... It would be just, it seems to me, to oblige them to remain there. I have found myself very much embarrassed to keep in restraint sixty Canadians, both those paroled from the service as well as *voyageurs*,"<sup>13</sup> Pontchartrain was befuddled. He responded by applauding Bienville's and d'Artaguet's mutual efforts to obtain Indian corn from neighboring nations, but acknowledged: "The use of it is very good and one does not suffer when one has it, but I cannot refrain from telling you that I am surprised that in the long time that you have been in Louisiana, the land of which according to the report of those who know the country is very good for all sorts of products, you have not found a way to live there independently of the assistance from France and of that from New Spain. It is necessary that you apply yourself to removing this disadvantage in the future."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Pontchartrain to Bienville, At Marly, May 10, 1710," *MPAFD*-III, 141.

<sup>13</sup> "Bienville to Pontchartrain, 12 October 1708," *MPAFD*-II, 38.

<sup>14</sup> "Pontchartrain to Bienville, At Versailles, July 11, 1709," *MPAFD*-III, 129.

With the end of Bienville's administration the subject of conversation shifted from issues of military necessity and resource allocation and took on the problem of military discipline. Soldiers had begun looking for excuses to go out into the wilderness, which precipitated these concerns. Though risky, an excursion into the Indian villages was one activity that many relished. During Bienville's tenure and through the subsequent governorship of Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac, the question of troops' commitment emerged in literature and reports from the colony. A malaise had definitely set in; as soldiers began to doubt the future of the mission, or their role in it, many concluded that they could find better ways than guarding storehouses to spend their time. Many soldiers had witnessed first-hand other methods to secure a livelihood. Primarily because they had engaged in diplomatic missions alongside backwoods traders and explorers they were equipped with an understanding of the trader's customs and lifestyle. Proud military men believed they had found a way to supplement their incomes and to locate sexual partners. Under Bienville, officials were dismayed by a perceived erosion of manpower in the forts, which they avoided pinning explicitly to the *voyageur*. Despite his own doubts, Bienville continued to work within his brother's philosophy—that given time and patience, the wanderlust of backwoodsmen could be put to some good use for the permanent settlement.

Some fugitive soldiers may have not thought much before they fled the colony. Some probably posed the following questions to themselves: Why await rations when one can hunt? Why plead for pay when one can obtain valuable goods for barter through trapping and trade? The answers to questions such as these made the course seem obvious. Still, not all soldiers had the desire to renounce completely their status in the

army and their role in Louis XIV's fighting forces. For these soldiers, "*congédie*" became an important mode of escape. During this furlough stint, soldiers would seek out adventures on the backwoods. Pursuit of Indian women was a particularly popular leisure activity. While some soldiers simply took their vacation and never returned, others returned to the military refreshed and satisfied. All the same, the specter of desertion still loomed, as these men had tasted the "hopes of a better fortune."<sup>15</sup>

A description of the colony during the summer of 1712 highlights the economic desperation that had worsened under Bienville's watch, and it reflects a growing convergence in understanding the wayward soldier and the backwoods trader: "The misery is great, everybody there is displeased; the soldiers are deserting to the village of savages."<sup>16</sup> Many officials even doubted the original intentions of the young French-Canadian soldiers who refused to remain in their posts: "They have only left Canada for libertinage."<sup>17</sup> Vocabulary, evidently was taking on a more moral tone, and "libertine" was an adjective that was becoming more common in the Louisiana lexicon by the 1710s. In the minds of Louisiana's military and civic leaders, the two primary reasons behind social disorder were the classic temptations: fortune-seeking and sex. Not all those who abandoned the colony became full-time fur traders; some, in fact, were called "filibusterers," a term that may be casually translated as "unscrupulous fortune-seekers." Some ex-soldiers hunted mines; some made a living in the Indian slave trade. But, by and large, these activities were reminiscent of those frequently undertaken by *voyageurs* and backwoods fur traders.

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<sup>15</sup> "Memoir of D' Artaguette to Pontchartrain on Present Condition of Louisiana, May 12, 1712," *MPAFD*-II, 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

To be sure, abandoned soldiers did not just flee for the woods; some sought the aegis of France's imperial rivals, as well—which was just as unacceptable. For example, as late as 1719, during a siege on the Spanish at Pensacola as many as 37 deserters from Louisiana were found to be among the Spaniards' ranks. This discovery was more unsettling in that it followed a 1710 treaty for the mutual exchange of deserters.<sup>18</sup> Even worse, the English were fomenting disorder in French Louisiana, as in 1712 the British in Carolina instructed the Indians to assist all who wished to desert the French Gulf colonies. As a consequence, military desertion was a fear that could be seen as a traditional tactic of subversion undertaken by imperial rivals, speakers of different languages, planters of different flags.

But, the outsiders officials in Louisiana came to blame were francophone and were the very people who were originally meant to populate the colony. They were Europeans “gone native” in manners, morals, and behavior, and they sapped the manpower of the fortification and settlement. Soldiers were susceptible to slide towards debauchery—towards a kind of lifestyle that they had encountered in their early contracts with traders. The *voyageurs*, once accepted by Iberville, began to be seen as “bad examples who will ruin our mission.”<sup>19</sup> What that objective was must have been obscure at times given the woeful support France offered. All the same, losing impressionable young soldiers to imperial rivals, to backwoods trading, and to Indian communities was a profound embarrassment.

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<sup>18</sup> Consider also the example that in February 1716 Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac had compiled a list of seven soldiers who were accused of desertion: “That makes twenty-four men who have deserted at different times through the fault of Sieur de Bienville,” remarked the governor, “La Mothé Cadillac to Pontchartrain, October 26, 1713,” *MPAFD-II*, 214-215.

<sup>19</sup> Cadillac to Pontchartrain (Author's Translation) *Archives des Colonies, Série C<sup>13</sup>: Louisiane, Correspondance Générale (Archives Nationales, Paris)* microfilm (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana).

Vilifying the *voyageur* became so common in the literature that terms like “libertine” and “débauché” became *de facto* epithets. Ironically, one finds many of these condemnations amongst the writings of Bienville, the younger brother of Iberville who inherited a host of mounting problems. In 1709 Bienville wrote to Paris complaining of *voyageurs*’ penchant for commandeering Indian slaves: “they only amuse themselves by going to look for slaves in the Indian camps of Louisiana, who for this reason are aroused against us in addition to the many [*voyageurs*] against whom they can exact vengeance.”<sup>20</sup> Bienville’s fear was that Louisiana’s military security was being harmed doubly—not only by the abandonment of soldiers but also by the poor tact exhibited by slave-hungry novice backwoodsmen.

Clearly, a response was needed, and the French authorities enacted various measures to reestablish military order, or at the very least to stem the tide of desertion, for it was difficult to track down soldiers once they departed for the backwoods. In 1709 Bienville repeated calls for young women. The 1709 demand, as Mandeville recalled, was for “40 women, in order to prevent by marriages the disorders and the debaucheries which are committed with the Indian women (*sauvagesses*).”<sup>21</sup> Correcting the demographic imbalance between the sexes was a tactic meant to pull recent deserters and even veteran traders out of the wilderness. The underlying assumption was that French men would prefer the companionship and intimacy of European wives more than that of Indian wives, who were rarely considered capable of domesticating backwoodsmen.

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<sup>20</sup> “Bienville to Pontchartrain, 1709” (Author’s Translation) *Archives des Colonies, Série C<sup>13</sup>: Louisiane, Correspondance Générale (Archives Nationales, Paris)* microfilm (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana).

<sup>21</sup> “Memoir on Louisiana by Mandeville, April 27, 1709,” *MPAFD-II*, 49.

Importing prospective soldiers' wives was not enough to enact a "good subordination" integral to the colony's military mission, and Bienville followed orders from Paris to mitigate the commercial ventures essential to the *voyageur's* daily existence: "As the French *voyageurs* live in a great state of lawlessness, the only way Sieur de Bienville found to stop their libertinage and their license was to prevent trading . . ." <sup>22</sup> Consistent frustration confirms that these efforts were not completely effective, but Bienville sensed at least a modicum of efficacy. Perhaps he was aiming to convey his own leadership abilities to Paris; no doubt he suspected that a floundering colony could tarnish his and his family's reputation. Bienville's voice contained a tone of precision, of self-confidence, when he remarked: "I have had all the *voyageurs* return here. There are no longer any of them in the woods. They promise me emphatically not to return thither any more. The last *voyageurs* who came from the upper part of the Wabash River brought me several pieces of pure copper and of three other sorts of metal which they found." <sup>23</sup> This message was sent in 1709, at a time when the question of military order was nascent and when the hope of a unified colony seemed realizable (at least through the eyes of Bienville). Bienville felt that all the Canadians—be they former soldiers of Louisiana, or traders via New France—would submit to authority and the social order of a hierarchical military society. Bienville's vision for Louisiana, particularly during his first term as governor, was clouded by the emerging reality of discontentment on the ground. The colony seemed to be becoming backward and isolated, unable to sustain diplomacy, construct the necessary military infrastructure, or to secure the loyalties of woefully paid young soldiers.

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<sup>22</sup> "Memoir of D'Artaguetto to Pontchartrain, February 12, 1710" *MPAFD-II*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> "Bienville to Pontchartrain, June 21, 1710," *MPAFD-III*, 151.

In the political culture of early Louisiana, contention soon developed amongst leaders. What Louisiana's leading men had in common was a desire to acquire private wealth; while it was possible to enrich oneself and the colony at the same time, illicit trading, hoarding and misappropriation of resources were pastimes in which officials dabbled. Even the rank-and-file must have been aware at the very least of rumors, and in some cases the hypocrisy and sanctimony of early officials' deeds may have been enough to convince soldiers that Biloxi and Mobile were not worth defending.

The first significant rhetorical thrashing of Bienville may be found in the observations of Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac [the noble name was self-fashioned]. Cadillac was born in metropolitan France and was known for an acerbic Gascon tongue. By all accounts, he was arrogant and bombastic, prone to subverting colleagues and inferiors. He had experience as the head of the fort at Detroit, a strategic military stronghold and a way-station for Western fur trade, which the French were attempting to revive and to control more effectively. In June 1713, Cadillac arrived in the colony, where Bienville had been first lieutenant, the highest ranking military officer, for years. Antione de la Mothé Cadillac, in port to accentuate his own legitimacy, sought to discredit Bienville's administration.

Bienville's authority was interpreted as too coddling, and Cadillac admonished the government for "abuses of all kinds that are rooted in tolerance, negligence, and ill will."<sup>24</sup> In these conditions, "soldiers without discipline" would be permitted free reign of the backwoods. Despite the mildly coercive tack taken by Bienville, he still recognized the *voyageur*'s diplomatic and commercial utility. La Mothé Cadillac sought

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<sup>24</sup> Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 1713 (Author's Translation) *Archives des Colonies, Série C<sup>13</sup>: Louisiane, Correspondance Générale (Archives Nationales, Paris)* microfilm (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana).

to establish himself in clear contrast. During his tenure as commander of Detroit, Cadillac had advocated intermarriage between white Frenchmen and Indian women as a strategy to bolster colonial population. Thus, from his perspective intermarriage was not an abuse or outrage as long as the native women were domestic, submissive, and amenable to a settled life. But, what Cadillac did not tolerate was freebooting and illicit trade, and he was vigorous in quelling these kinds of activities. In his memoirs, Cadillac recalled an incident whereby “by [my] order the nation of the Miami Indians established on the Mississippi River arrested the French who passed in front of their village by way of the river.”<sup>25</sup> This was to prevent the continuation of the desertion of Detroit’s troops who were in that country. Cadillac had tried to put the yoke on aberrant soldiers once before, even using Indians to accomplish the task. He promised to reform Louisiana—to instill an appreciation for order. Discrediting Bienville, who remained by command a high-ranking officer at Biloxi, though, was Cadillac’s first act.

Cadillac offered a rich, but biased, perspective on the colony, and he tended to group all the officers and soldiers in a state of disorder: “According to the proverb, “Bad country, bad people” we can say that they are a heap of the dregs of Canada, jailbirds without subordination for religion, and for government, addicted to vice principally with the Indian women whom they prefer to French women.”<sup>26</sup> Cadillac’s poetic invective was perhaps an expression of genuine personal disgust at the scene; more likely, however, the account is exaggerated so as to secure Parisian officials’ favor. Cadillac made it seem that he was inheriting men in a state of nature— “In arriving I found all the garrison in the

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<sup>25</sup> “La Mothé Cadillac to Pontchartrain,” October 26, 1713, *MPAFD-II*, 171-172.

<sup>26</sup> “La Mothé Cadillac to Pontchartrain, October 26, 1713,” *MPAFD-II*, 167.



woods among the savages who had done them just as much bad...<sup>27</sup> While Cadillac's denunciation of the *petites nations* tribes was unwarranted, his observation in the garrison may have not been that far-fetched. As d'Artaguet, an outspoken opponent of libertinism, recorded in 1710, the struggle for survival led the settlers to desperate strategies. In June of that year, the shipment of Indian corn from France that the settlers had been expecting had not arrived; "famine" forced the French to charter a vessel to obtain supplies from the Spanish at Vera Cruz. (Pensacola was unable to help.) A perennial shortage of foodstuffs made dependence on native tribes commonplace as well. Evidently, because the colonists were misusing or failing to receive adequate resources (probably a combination of both factors), going into the backwoods was the only true alternative.

Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac believed that officers and soldiers were complicit in a flight from the colony. That his target was Bienville must have been obvious in Paris and in Biloxi: "The officers are no better than the soldiers; as soon as we arrived they were at the point of going to join themselves in the woods [to hunt] in order to try to save their lives."<sup>28</sup> This helplessness was despicable to Cadillac. Moreover, the Governor was adept at spreading blame, going so far as to say in regards to one particular issue: "This is not my fault: M. Crozat ought to blame himself alone for it."<sup>29</sup> A clear rupture in rhetoric occurs with the installment of Cadillac, whose negative tone is representative of heightened urgency and infighting amongst leaders on the ground.

Cadillac did not reserve judgment and, for that reason, he had few friends. After investigating supposed abuses by the Bienville régime, Cadillac tried to humiliate the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> La Mothé Cadillac to Pontchartrain, October 26, 1713," *MPAFD-II*, 162-204.

officer. Bienville did not stand by idly and allow assaults on his character; fluent in the Mobilian language, the first lieutenant led parties of soldiers to the regional Indian villages to renew diplomatic rites, like the smoking of calumet and gift exchange. Under Antoine de Crozat, Louisiana began spending more and more on goods like firearms and beads, which were distributed to friendly tribes. While the LeMoynes recognized the necessity of gift exchange, Cadillac considered the efforts gratuitous. Yet, when Bienville tried to report to Paris that he had made diplomatic gains, Cadillac was quick to step in and claim that he was actually responsible for the gift donation. Cadillac's stern policy even offended d'Artaguette, who had long warned of the need for greater discipline and enhanced social control. d'Artaguette was sympathetic to the difficulties Bienville had faced between 1706 and 1710 and Cadillac interpreted this alliance as an affront; he described d'Artaguette an intractable and stubborn, unwilling to heed the Gascon authority.

Cadillac's greatest ego clash, however, was with one Jean-Baptiste de Bois Duclos, a "twenty-nine-year-old *comissionaire* at Dunkirk, experienced in trading in the Spanish empire and fluent in the Castilian language."<sup>30</sup> Duclos was appointed by the King to a new post, *comissionaire-ordonnateur*, in 1712 when the colony fell under the proprietorship of Antoine de Crozat. The two men were intended to be cooperative equals, partners in governance. While Cadillac was responsible for maintaining military order and for overseeing the construction of fortifications and outposts, Duclos was given charge of administering royal funds and supervising commerce. But, as historian Mathé

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<sup>30</sup> Mathé Allain, *Not Worth a Straw: French Colonial Policy and the Early Years of Louisiana* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, 1988).

Allain observed, the “Duclos-Cadillac feud” became all-encompassing. Every problem, great or small, became a bone of contention.

In the end Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac established viewed himself as a savior to Louisiana; after a while, he began to feel that the territory was unredeemable. Dilapidated and claptrap fortifications. Officers who spent more time pandering to Indians than engineering roads or canals. Soldiers who refused to muster. These sights led Cadillac to assume that Louisiana was a monster. While Duclos calmly observed that two units of fifty troops should be able to sustain the colony, Cadillac decried the backwoods and backwards orientation of the Louisiana military. From Cadillac’s view, the novice soldier under Bienville was beginning to resemble backwoods traders more than representatives of the French army. The status and behavior of the *voyageur* were a reprehensible endpoint toward which poor military leadership had allowed soldiers to descend.

### THREE

#### **The *Voyageur* in Political and Religious Debate over Interracial Sex (1710s-1720s)**

Louisiana officials were sure they knew why their soldiers were deserting, why their decommissioned sailors were heading to the backwoods. Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac put it succinctly: “they [the young French-Canadians] are of an age and a temperament that is vigorous and they like sex, finding nothing that can fix them they go to the savage nations to indulge their passion with the daughters of the savages.”<sup>1</sup> Cadillac was an older man, fifty-five years of age, at the time of his arrival in Louisiana. But, he was patriarch to a large family, and he no doubt identified the pleasures of sex. Not that he condoned these contacts, however. Instead, Cadillac found it deplorable that colonists were frolicking in the woods, emulating savages rather than behaving like Frenchmen ought. Cadillac’s opposition to interracial liaison actually evolved from the conditions he witnessed in the Lower Mississippi. As Governor of Détroit, he had seen similar unions, and he was actually an apologist for interracial marriage and monogamous sex as a strategy for populating the region. However unforgiving Cadillac’s interpretation of *voyageurs*’ commercial activities was, he advocated settled interracial families. Something about Louisiana, though, made him doubt this policy. Maybe it was simply the customs of the Indian tribes themselves that gave him pause. Just as likely, it was that *voyageurs* were establishing a model of interracial sex that threatened the colony’s civic order and nominally Catholic orientation. Cadillac’s

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<sup>1</sup> Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 1710 (Author’s translation, of “*qui sont d’un âge et d’un temperament fort vigoureux et qui aiment le sexe n’en trouvant pas qui puisse les fixer ... leur passion avec les filles des sauvages*”), *Archives des Colonies, Série C<sup>13</sup>: Louisiane, Correspondance Générale (Archives Nationales, Paris)* microfilm (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana).

opinions were representative of a more general rhetorical shift, in which attitudes toward interracial relationships became increasingly hostile. By the mid-1710s civic and religious authorities began to express their displeasure. In the 1720s with the importation of black slaves, a more rigid sexual code was promulgated and rules of inheritance were solidified, thus cementing the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, for at least one decade, marriage seemed to hang in the balance.

One would not have foreseen such desperation given the example of 1690s Illinois. Occasional voices did express concern over relationships between native women and French men. But, the fort community at the Kaskaskias—frequented by Frenchmen who wed and lived with Indian women—was typically regarded a success by the Louisiana administration. Many of these Illinois women had converted to the Catholic faith and had learned passable French; under the pretext of advancing religion, missionaries blessed these unions. In fact, much of the *pays d'en haut* (upcountry surrounding the Great Lakes) was marked by two dominant social structures: the fur trader-Indian woman partnership and the Catholic mission. As French traders and explorers had entered the Mississippi Valley they had found that for a variety of reasons, many Indian women were receptive to matrimony.<sup>2</sup> Missionaries to the region acknowledged not only the Indian women's usefulness as domestic aides but also their role as a civilizing influence on the backwoodsmen. Certain tribes, notably the Illinois, enjoyed a reputation for "mildness" and docility. In fact, in parts of Canada, a *métis* culture gradually developed because of the sheer preponderance of interracial marriages.

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<sup>2</sup> Historian Susan Sleeper-Smith explains in great detail the social opportunities and pressures that led Indian women to enter these marriages with Frenchmen in the Western Great Lakes region. For example, some Illinois women entered into marriages with Frenchmen as a means to escape abusive relationships. In other cases, Illinois fathers gave their daughters to traders in marriage in order to solidify commercial ties.

Mixed marriages outnumbered homogenous marriages fully seven-to-one.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, mobile traders were not the only Frenchmen to engage in these partnerships; rather, a large number of traders retired or limited their voyaging in favor of a settled, monogamous family life that would respect the basic dictates of the Catholic Church.

Early French colonials saw little or no contradiction between interracial marriage and the colonial mission in North America. A longstanding French prejudice present in the administrative literature of the early 1700s was that the French people were naturally more capable and tactful in dealing with North American tribes. Some Frenchmen ascribed a kind of kinship, or mutual destiny, to the French and Indian experience in the Mississippi Valley. Decades earlier in 1635, Samuel de Champlain, architect of Quebec and New France, had articulated a vision of Indian-French contact when he promised Huron chiefs: “our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people.” Such rhetoric pervaded the Canadian colonial mindset, which was no doubt inherited and carried by Canadians into the Mississippi Valley. By the late 1690s, Illinois was seen as a potential model for the Louisiana colony. At the same time, French policymakers on the ground were sensitive to innate differences between Indian tribes. Those who departed from French standards were unsuitable for European touch.

One other key presumption beneath this support for French-Indian Christian marriages was that authorities in the region, religious and secular, would be able to maintain a watchful eye and a measure of social control over backwoodsmen’s activities. Spreading the faith was no small priority for both groups, as Louis XIV, monarch of the premier Catholic power, communicated a desire to evangelize the *sauvages*. A genuine mission to spread salvation did underlie French administrative rhetoric at the beginning

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Edward O’Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana* (New Haven: Yale, 1966), 253.

of the Gulf project, but as time wore on, quotidian problems of survival diverted attention away from God's work, which was further obstructed by the paucity of missionaries in that part of the empire. As a way to encourage goodwill with native Indians, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville applied the strategy of the "strategic mission." These "missions" were constructed in proximity to tribal villages, and they generally housed at least one missionary.<sup>4</sup> More than that, they were fur-trading stations meant to solicit the commerce of Indians as well as of backwoods traders (Trade was vital from the Indian perspective, as absence of trade was tantamount to war<sup>5</sup>). And, in reality, the diplomatic and commercial dimensions of the mission-fort superseded the religious. Precious few missionaries were present in the vicinity, and some of these men actually were instructed to live in Indian villages to teach God's Word.

The missionary's minimal presence in early Louisiana stemmed from a few factors, most notably a lack of necessary provisions. Missionaries doubted the durability of the Gulf project, and carpenters and shipwrights were the kinds of people Louisiana's military leadership requested in letters to Paris. Missionaries expressed frustration with military leaders on the ground who were responsible for garnering resources. In his 1701 letter from Biloxi, Sauvole noted that Reverend Father Gravier and Paul du Ru, leading Jesuit missionaries from the Illinois region, had been instructed to send a certain missionary downriver to assist Louisiana. The response was less than accommodating: "Father Gravier said that the task was not feasible, as he did not have the things he

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<sup>4</sup> See Daniel J. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Press, 1992) and Khalil Saadani, "Gift Exchange between the French and Native Americans," Bradley G. Bond, ed., *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005) for further discussion of rituals of exchange and gift outlays, along with the concept of the "strategic mission."

<sup>5</sup> Daniel J. Usner, *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley: Social and Economic Histories* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1998), 60.

needed for his mission, that he was expecting them by the ships.”<sup>6</sup> The second missionary’s response was so insolent that Sauvole said he “should have sent him to that very place by the reply that he made in the presence of officers and of myself.”<sup>7</sup> True, Sauvole did view du Ru as an exception amongst an “agreeable” genre of men. Still, tensions were high, and civic authorities and religious leaders found themselves at odds from time to time.

It is in this context that interracial relationships started becoming a concern for both authorities. Policies in the Louisiana territory were dominated by secular leaders familiar with the frontier, but who themselves could tolerate only a certain amount of boundary crossing. Under Iberville, interracial sex was of minimal concern; it was a social norm. André Pénicault, a French *engagé* and carpenter who served in diplomatic and exploratory missions to the interior Indian villages, wrote that on occasions when men were received warmly, they frequently spent the night with women of the tribe.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, chiefs would offer their own unmarried relatives as a sign of goodwill. Moreover, in most Gulf Indian societies, there was no taboo on sex between unmarried people. Indian women of the region were reported to be “almost nude, and very free.” Louisiana offered few delights, but the Indian women were supposedly one in which many soldiers on furlough—and even official representatives of Biloxi—partook.

Gradually, this free display of sexuality began to attract the scorn of the authorities. While Louisiana’s native women were loose, the Illinois were demure. While Louisiana natives were of a rich complexion, Illinois women were light-skinned to the

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<sup>6</sup> “Sauvole to [Pontchartrain?], 4 August 1701,” *MPAFD-II*, 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams, trans., *Fleur de Lys and Calumet, being the Pénicault narrative of French adventure in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1953).



point that mixed children would be almost completely European in appearance. Furthermore, Illinois Indians were presumed to be mild-mannered and peaceable; Louisiana Indians, in contrast, were considered enigmatic (Natchez) or outright barbarians (like the cannibal Attakappas). For these reasons, intermarriage lost its rhetorical currency during Bienville's first administration and during the governorship of Cadillac. Louisiana Indians were judged to be inappropriate for good and moral *habitants*. Ultimately, a *métis* culture did not develop in Louisiana because interracial relationships did not produce a large and settled succeeding generation of mixed-blood colonists. Also, despite Louisiana's failures, France had designs to develop Louisiana as an agricultural colony like Virginia, and this imperative seemed to demand white women. D'Artaguette stated in 1710: "There are here... young men and soldiers who are in a position to undertake farms. They need wives. I only know this one way to hold them."<sup>9</sup>

It was not as if there were no white women in the colony from the beginning; the first European women to visit the Gulf actually accompanied Sieur de la Salle in the 1680s. And, there were a few women, many of whom were wed to settlers, who journeyed with Iberville's crew. Yet, the gender imbalance was obvious. In 1708 barely ten-percent of the population was composed of white women. Louisiana officials had to repeatedly goad France into sending girls, and in one tragicomic episode, the Canadians flatly rejected the ladies that were sent on account of their appearance. Evidently, France was not sending its fairest to Louisiana. While soldiers reacted with indifference to these girls, they took keen interest in the Indian maidens from backwoods villages. Not only did they complain about their pay, but they continually pressed for time off in order to

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<sup>9</sup> "D'Artaguette to Pontchartrain, 20 June 1710," *MPAFD-II*, 57. Here d'Artaguette refers to the plan of the vicar-general, Monsieur de la Vente, to seduce backwoodsmen out of the woods with potential European brides.

consort with Indians. In the 1708 census, Nicholas de la Salle's addendum expressed a visceral disgust with "60 Canadian backwoodsmen who are in the Indian villages situated along the Mississippi River without permission from any governor, who destroy by their wicked, libertine lives with Indian women all that the missionaries of the foreign missions and others teach..."<sup>10</sup> Unlike the upriver *voyageur* who fell under the yoke of the Catholic Church, the Louisiana *voyageur* was profligate and was actually *interfering* with the missionaries' efforts to instruct native women.

Documents indicate that these relationships typically did not produce marriages, though they may have produced children. Governor Cadillac, who was one of the first administrators to address the trend, felt that the Indian slave trade was becoming little more than a veiled excuse for obtaining Indian concubines.<sup>11</sup> This trade was traditionally associated with *voyageurs* more than with anybody else, as *voyageurs* not only dealt with Indians in animal skins but also in human chattel. Libertinism and debauchery were merely fancy terms for interracial fornication, and the *voyageur* came to be seen as a kind of a lecher who preyed on Indian girls. It is true that these female sexual partners were sometimes very young, barely adolescent. For example, Marcel Giraud, seminal historian of early Louisiana, has postulated that Antoine Le Page du Pratz, a Dutch-born denizen of French Louisiana who lived with the Natchez and penned a famous account of the 1729 French-Natchez War, fathered a child by a girl of the Chittimachas whom he bought when she was eleven years of age.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, even settled soldiers were adopting the *voyageur*'s amorous tastes: Cadillac recounted that after soldiers purchased

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<sup>10</sup> "Census of Louisiana by de la Salle, 12 August 1708," Quoted in *MPAFD-II*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> In October 1711, Bienville confiscated Indian slaves that "disorderly" French *voyageurs* had taken without permission. See "Bienville to Pontchartrain, October 27, 1711," *MPAFD-III*, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer M. Spear, "'They Need Wives': Métissage and the Regulation of Sexuality in French Louisiana, 1699-1730," *Sex, Love, Race*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: NYU, 2001), 39.

female slaves, they often brought them back to their cabins, ostensibly to do domestic work. But, Cadillac was not too blind to see that sex was the primary service being rendered.<sup>13</sup> Though Cadillac preferred to send a resolute message to soldiers, he obeyed Louis XIV's orders that settlers and *voyageurs* be treated with sensitivity. To combat the Canadians who were using Indians to wash their clothes, to make their *sagamité* (staple corn dish), and to entertain their lusts, Cadillac proposed that washing for the entire garrison be done by French women. Furthermore, he suggested that only male slaves be available for ownership, and he questioned why neither the Canadians nor the soldiers were going to confession if their intentions with Indian women were pure. All in all, the interracial settler society had become a fancy; interracial sex was carrying Louisiana in a direction towards "Babylon."

Once again, Duclos had an opinion on the subject, and he wrote Pontchartrain in December 1715 to protest the permission of marriages between Frenchmen and baptized Indian women, the supposed plan of previous curate Monsieur de la Vente.<sup>14</sup> Duclos laid out four explicit arguments. First, he claimed that "we shall find very few Indian women who will be willing to marry Frenchmen. Accustomed to a certain sort of dissolute life they lead in the villages..." Duclos repudiated the Illinois society, stating that though the women were more "Frenchified," they were still likely to leave their French husbands to remarry their own. Second, Duclos, perhaps in a trademark moment of wishful thinking (he was inclined to give backwoods Canadians the benefit of the doubt), opined that few Frenchmen themselves were willing to marry Indian women except those who live in

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<sup>13</sup> "Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 26 October 1713," Quoted in *MPAFD-II*, 169.

<sup>14</sup> De La Vente, the vicar of Louisiana, was in favor of sanctioning interracial marriages; however, he did support plans for the introduction of European women to the colony as well. De la Vente's advocacy for Indian-French marriage brought him into verbal combat with Sieur de Bienville in 1707, and this conflict between church and civic official lingered on after the replacement of Bienville.

their manner in Illinois. Third, he recognized the difficulty in instructing Indian women in French, as no French Jesuits in Louisiana spoke Indian languages and as Indian women were too impatient to learn French from speakers of solely French. Fourth, Duclos asserted that such marriages would diminish the “whiteness and purity of the blood in the children... so that, in the course of time, if no Frenchmen come to Louisiana, the colony would become a colony of half-breeds who are naturally idlers, libertines, and even more rascals as those of Peru, Mexico...”<sup>15</sup> This discourse elucidates two primary points of importance—one, that the Catholic Church plan was contested by civic authorities, and two, that *voyageurs* and anybody participating in or sanctioning interracial sex were, in Duclos’s eyes doing harm to the French blood. This last strand of discourse seems to invoke a germinating racial consciousness, in which theories of superiority and inferiority were beginning to take shape.

The reestablishment of Bienville’s regime in 1717 witnessed efforts to exert commercial controls over the backwoods trader. The policy of moral suasion continued to rely on strategies of coaxing the fur trader into marriages with French women, of having Christian brethren point out the inherent vice of interracial marriage.<sup>16</sup> Between 1717 and 1720 a massive forced immigration of French convicts into Louisiana, alongside the importation of peasant settlers from Germany, altered the colony’s demographics. The number of women finally began to increase. With this growth, new moral questions arose. Frankly, Louisiana officials had problems enough with the white women entering the colony. And, some of these problems had begun as early as 1713. Governor Cadillac, who was fond of raking muck, reported that during the entire voyage

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<sup>15</sup> “Duclos to Pontchartrain, 25 December 1715,” Quoted in *MPAFD-II*, 207-208

<sup>16</sup> “D’Artaguette to Pontchartrain, 8 September 1712,” Quoted in *MPAFD-II*, 72.

from Paris one soldier made inappropriate advances toward Cadillac's own chambermaid, and it was rumored that he had already debauched two married women.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, during the same years, there were rumors of a Frenchwoman at Isle Dauphine who leant herself to all comers.<sup>18</sup> Later, with the importation of France's dregs, prostitution would become a permanent fixture of the colony and of the newly formed settlement at New Orleans (established in 1718).<sup>19</sup>

1719 was a significant year in that the first African slaves arrived in the Lower Mississippi: soon thereafter, in 1724, a *Code Noir* was promulgated that explicitly outlawed marriages and sex between blacks and whites and that at least attempted to stifle Indian-European partnerships. As in other European plantation societies, social stratification was defended through the interdiction of black-white marriages. Still, liaisons happened across the starkest of color boundaries, as a small but significant mulatto population emerged.<sup>20</sup> As for sex between Indian women and Frenchmen, the practice continued into the 1720s, beyond Catholic or civic control. Without doubt, many French *voyageurs* sensed that they were becoming less and less welcome in the Louisiana territory. So, they retreated. And, with a few exceptions, the issue of Indian-French

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<sup>17</sup> Cadillac to Pontchartrain, 26 October 1713. Quoted in *MPAFD-II*, 184

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the moral impact of European arrivals in the 1720 consult, see Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Moral Climate of French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1763, *Louisiana History (Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association)*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 (Lafayette, Louisiana: University of Louisiana, Winter 1986). Here Brasseaux attends in part to the *voyageur* sexual and religious practices. Also see Bertrand van Ruymbeke, "'A Dominion of True Believers Not a Republic for Heretics': French Colonial Religious Policy and the Settlement of Early Louisiana, 1699-1730," Bradley G. Bond, ed., *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005) for discussion of the influence of Huguenot smugglers, peddlers, colporteurs, and prostitutes on religious development during the 1720s and later.

<sup>20</sup> Two excellent sources for demographic figures are James Pritchard, "Population in French America, 1670-1730: The Demographic Context of Colonial Louisiana" and Paul Lachance, "The Growth of the Free and Slave Populations of French Colonial Louisiana," both of which are also located in *French Colonial Louisiana in the Atlantic World*.

intermarriage retreated from official literature as well.<sup>21</sup> After two decades of uncertainty, it seemed that there would be a generation of white planters to sustain Louisiana's agricultural future.

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<sup>21</sup> One of these exceptions occurred in 1729, as officials in Louisiana stated that, "We shall do with great pleasure everything in our power to prevent alliances of Frenchmen with Indian women. The Council has even issued two ordinances on this subject..." "Messrs. Perier and de la Chaise to the Directors of the Company of the Indies, March 25, 1729," *MPAFD*-III, 636.

## AFTERWORD

### 1729 and Beyond: The Long-Term Impact of the *Voyageur* and the Rhetoric He Inspired

The *voyageur* did not perish with the establishment of a tobacco economy in Lower Louisiana. In the decades following the 1720s the image of the upriver *voyageur* sporadically recurs in official documents. *Voyageurs* were enlisted for reconnaissance during the campaigns against the Natchez and the Chickasaw of the 1730s and 1740s. Some concern was also expressed over rumors of a 1740 Indian attack on fur traders at the Kaskaskias. Many of the hardy backwoodsmen continued to find the Arkansas District and the Illinois more accommodating and consequently headed back upriver.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Mississippi Valley *voyageurs* pushed westward into the territory drained by the Missouri and the Red Rivers. In fact, the eighteenth century saw an efflorescence of the fur trade in present-day Kansas and Missouri under the domination of the Chouteau clan.<sup>2</sup> Fur and skin trading—both the illicit and sanctioned varieties—remained an important facet of France’s North American commerce, and illicit trade would continue past the end of France’s continental empire and through the War of 1812 and the installment of a fledgling republic on the eastern half of the continent.

Still, the rhetorical firestorm in early Lower Louisiana engaged the image of the backwoods trader to an extent that would not again be matched. Despite the relative insignificance of the southern fur trade in France’s grand imperial project, the fur trader

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of French *voyageur* activities at the Arkansas Post, consult the first chapter of W. David Baird’s *The Quapaw Indians: A History of the Downstream People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Cécile Vidal, a contemporary historian of the Mississippi Valley, focuses on mid-18<sup>th</sup> century links between Illinois traders and New Orleans in “Antoine Bienvenu, Illinois Planter and Mississippi Trader: The Structure of Exchange between Lower and Upper Louisiana,” *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, ed. Bradley G. Bond (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See Shirley Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty That Ruled America’s Frontier* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004).

at this time and at this place was important. The *voyageur* emerged as a device in different strands of discourse, touching on commercial survival, military discipline, sexual and religious identity, and agricultural development. Certainly, power struggles and ego clashes amongst Louisiana's military and civic leaders brought the *voyageur* to the forefront, as men vying for influence saw the expediency of brandishing the trader's liberty as a pernicious example of their peers' failed authority.

Establishing a linear and chronological track through understandings and representations of the *voyageur* from Iberville's arrival to the 1720s agricultural expansion is quite difficult. The general trajectory, however, is that *voyageurs* came to be maligned increasingly in Louisiana rhetoric. The first images of the *voyageur* are positive or at least neutral. Iberville's reliance upon Tonty and Canadian diplomatic parties illustrated a level of confidence in the trader's ability to serve as an official mediator for the colonial settlement. Ultimately, optimism and vigor colored the Louisiana project at the outset.

This potency was fleeting, as it did not take long for problems to arise in the colony. Menaced by the British and in the shadow of the Spanish, the French could not help but feel a sense of desperation. What made matters worse was that Paris's support was not sufficient. Lacking materiel and agricultural expertise, the French placed all their stock in Indian diplomacy. During this phase of development (roughly the first ten years), the formidable and foreboding "other" was the English trader, a constant menace to the alliances that the French struggled so mightily to secure. *Voyageurs* became tools to offset the English traders because they had acquired a reputation for dealing directly with the British. On at least one occasion *voyageurs* baited Carolina traders into arrest on



the pretext of wanting to trade with them. Essentially, *voyageurs* were such useful military assets that Iberville began to look upon them as allies and even as compatriots.

In 1708 and 1709, years under de Bienville after his elder brother's death, some began to question the direction that Louisiana was taking. Much of this controversy over Bienville's leadership was fomented by Antoine de la Mothé Cadillac, subsequent governor of Louisiana. Military discipline had become a primary concern, and just as Biloxi and Mobile were plagued by demographic stagnancy, many of the new arrivals to the colony abandoned their military duties to hunt instead for furs or women on the frontier. The *voyageur* was invoked as an example of backwoods libertinage and debauchery, of a carnal pursuit for Indian slaves and female flesh. Officials observed that even officers were being seduced in to the woods. Once men were lost they could not even be expected to remain loyal to French law or to the French mission. Although many *voyageurs* did not renounce their French identity altogether, the act of going to the woods was seen as tantamount to desertion. Like true deserters (some of whom became engaged in the fur trade), *voyageurs* came to be increasingly classified as undesirables, as untrustworthy frontier denizens like the Carolina trader and the Natchez Indian. Rhetorically, the idea of a proximate but pernicious "other" was expanded to include the ethnically French trader on Louisiana's periphery. He came to be seen as a character-type in opposition to that of the settled *habitant* as well that of the loyal soldier. Cadillac was particularly critical of the *voyageur*, but he was not alone in bemoaning backwoodsmen.

Concerns over interracial sex engaged images of the *voyageur*; moreover, this debate spilled over into religious discourse, as the Catholic mission was compelled to

reexamine its position on condoning unions across race. Prior to the settlement of Louisiana the Church affirmed the sanctity of marriages between French men and Indian women in places like the Illinois country. During the early 1700's, clergymen like Pierre François Charlevoix developed a gradual distaste for interracial unions. They had seen and heard of too many examples of "concubinage," of white *voyageurs* indulging in sexual liaisons with non-baptized and unruly Indian women. The general state of harmony that existed between traders and missionaries upriver in the Illinois did not repeat itself deeper down the Valley. Even Governor Cadillac, once a proponent of interracial marriage as a stepping-stone towards a settled society, expressed dismay with the backwoods brand of illicit intimacies. Duclos, Cadillac's great political rival and colleague, adopted an explicitly oppositional stance toward interracial marriage, citing reasons which suggested an immature but emerging color consciousness.

As the 1720s arrived and Louisiana began to forge a diverse economy and demography (thanks in large part to funds extracted from ruined investors and florid propaganda), a new set of questions emerged in which the *voyageur* played a diminished rhetorical role. The arrival of women and of peasants from Germany and France allayed skepticism about Louisiana's agriculture and assured that there would be white settlers to inherit and to increase the land for generations to come. New debates over land distribution, over judicial structures, and over the social status of freshly-arrived African slaves began to attract attention. Questions of morality persisted, but the context changed. Administrators and leaders evinced less concern over the backwoods ethos and instead pondered the salacious reputations of the ex-convicts, prostitutes, salt smugglers, and pirates who were arriving in the colony by the droves. Essentially, there was a new

class of ne'er-do-wells to impugn and to regulate. Pointing the finger at the *voyageurs* could do no good if lax moral behavior found a haven in settled areas like New Orleans.

All the same, *voyageurs* had left an impression on early Louisiana. Daniel Usner has postulated interethnic webs of commercial exchange that developed between whites, blacks, and Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley over the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Though Usner's intent has been to highlight the organic development of contacts between frontier *habitants* and their Indian and African counterparts, it is also possible that the *voyageur's* strategies of trade served as a lesson to settlers trying to survive on the frontier. In particular, the deerskin trade between white settlers and local tribes was likely influenced by the *voyageur's* example and occasionally his direct participation.

As Usner has also acknowledged, historians of French America have traditionally seen Louisiana as an inferior or marginal colony built on a "hybrid" economy—a blend between agriculture and a small-scale fur trade. Still, the first quarter-century in colonial Louisiana witnessed a gradual shift toward a settled, agriculture-first colony, as the French made an attempt to emulate English Virginia (France had been the largest foreign consumer of British tobacco). During the early 1700s and through much of the 1710s, the only truly productive commerce happening in the region was in peltry, and its agents were backwoods traders. For a brief but poignant time *voyageurs* were allies and kinsmen; soon after, they became venal nuisances. Though it is possible that the backwoodsmen responded to praise and to criticism, much of the attention appears to have flowed one-way. The *voyageur* symbolized a kind of mastery over the woods and

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Usner, *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley: Social and Economic Histories* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

the Indian mind; at the same time that he flirted with boundaries or even failed to see them altogether pushed officials' toleration to the tipping-point. The *voyageur* presented a consistent, albeit dynamic, set of behaviors toward which Louisiana's government was reactionary.

Cadillac may have been right about one thing during his tenure: Louisiana was "bad country." Mosquitoes, hurricanes, a plague outbreak, and corn shortages were proof enough of that. As for his judgment of the people, that is his own opinion (though Voltaire proved to be of a similar mind). Yet, thanks to literary figures like Chateaubriand in the early nineteenth century, Louisiana, the *voyageurs*, and Native Americans all became subsumed into a kind of Romantic nostalgia. After the fall of the French empire in North America, the image of the *voyageur* even took on heroic overtones. Seminal historian of upriver *voyageurs*, Grace Lee Nute, attempted to reconstruct *voyageurs'* daily lives in the 1930s but fell prey herself to this discourse, romanticizing brawn, courage, and a supposed sense of adventure. Ironically, few chroniclers until recently have found a "middle ground" for fairly understanding these middlemen.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, contemporary interest in so-called frontier "borderlands spaces" outside the traditional Anglo-centric narrative of American history has brought a fresh approach to understanding the continent. As the example of Lower Louisiana bears out, borderlands exchanges consisted of more than formal diplomatic relations and trade between distinct and discrete political and ethnic entities. The first twenty-five years of

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<sup>4</sup> See Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society, 1955).

France's Gulf colony present a fascinating environment, for boundaries and identities were not merely plastic and immature, they were nascent.

As this study has attempted to show, the French backwoodsman unintentionally sparked a dynamic exchange of ideas about appropriate models of behavior within the context of a "French" colony. If today's colonial historians are truly fond of fleshing out the subtle commercial and cultural exchanges between European and Indian, there is no better place to look than the Mississippi Valley trader. Moreover, if scholars are committed to understanding how colonial spaces gave rise organically to behaviors and ideas that challenged the coercive powers and the expectations of the métropole, a more expanded study of the *voyageur's* imperial impact might follow this project. Ultimately, it is this writer's hope that future students will keep these free agents—these "bad people" — in mind as they explore the fluid frontiers of colonial America.

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