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Two Banks of the River

The French Influence of the Red River Region

During the Eighteenth Century

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Two Banks of the River

Every river has two banks, in the same way that every story is two-sided. Research in any subject will show this to be true, and the key to understanding a region is to explore more than one aspect of its existence, deriving a conclusion from the contradictions encountered. Depicting the influence of France in the Red river region, from 1699 to 1803, different circumstances proceed from the past of its development and peoples, into the present. The intent of this paper has been to discuss France's ambition of colonization by gold rushing, agriculture, and trade, the relations between French, Indian, and Spanish residents, the purpose of the settlements, impact of the language, the personality of the frontiersman, his judicial system, and his women, to lead the reader to an awareness of how, through various situations, this region evolved.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the passion blazing through Europe was the proven New World, a magical vision beyond the previously considered "land's end." Stories of this far-away place were loaded with fantasy and fable, enticing all to come and experience the splendors available. Among the Old World countries on the verge of being carried away by this excitement, France was interested in setting forth her rights to the foreign country. French explorers Robert Cavalier de LaSalle and Henri DeFonti had staked claims for the empire in the preceding century, and there were many more potential explorers anxious to make a mark. France's involvement in colonizing Louisiana caused a great impact in three directions: treasure hunting, homesteads, and trade.

One must understand all that colonization entailed. For most countries, it was a luxury hardly affordable, a symbol of prestige. The expense of sending, establishing, and supporting a colony unimaginably distant from the crown was awesome. Yet this risk could prove quite profitable, as Spain's quest into Mexico had been. The idea of being paid in pure gold for one's trouble served to mock feasibility, and there were plenty ready to seek out their share, as rumors of gold and silver, and boulder-sized jewels, whetted their appetite for adventure.

As with most promises of something for almost nothing, the stories of gold-filled streams were soon discredited, even though many wanted to believe them still. The third governor of the territory, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, was requested to return to Paris because of his flat denial of the rumors. He firmly stated, "The mines of Arkansas are a dream!"¹ Pearls from mussel shells along the Red River were plentiful, but were meaningless to those hungry for gold. Those adventurers not in pursuit of "yellow iron"² soon had to settle for a more stable means of existence through their own productivity.

At first, the French government wholeheartedly supported the agricultural aspirations, claiming the primary goal of the French in America was to establish trade.³ In 1714, Cadillac sent Louis Juchereau de St. Denis up the Red River to establish a trading post.⁴ The French at home were a little disillusioned, after having expected great returns on their investments. They hoped that colonization of the region would provide a successful trade pattern. Due to the falling amount of interest in the colonies, the government shoved these colonies and their potential productivity off on the private sector of France.

Louis XIV had given citizen Antoine Crozat a fifteen year monopoly on internal trade in 1713, providing Crozat the opportunity to plant, trade, establish slavery, and collect any treasure found (excepting one-fifth of all returns, which went to the royal treasury). Slaves were brought in, homesteads were set up, and all appeared positive. Familiarly, Crozat's tremendous expenditures brought no recompense, and in 1717 (after the death of Louis XIV) the contract was terminated at his request.

That same year in France, a Scot named John Law instituted a national bank, which circulated paper money. Very soon Law found his bank in great distress as the French economy sagged under spiralling inflation due mainly to the depletion of funds in the royal treasury by Louis XIV, but also in part by the enormous expense of colonization. The government granted Law concessions on the French colony of Louisiana to aid his ailing institution. He consolidated many slave companies into the India company and immediately set up the Mississippi Bubble, a deal promising free transportation, seed and flour for one year, and ownership of any gold, silver, or jewels found, to interested adventurers.⁵ They were to sail from Lorient, France, and assembled there were between twelve thousand and sixteen thousand people, most of which were German. Law also bought three hundred Negroes and had them shipped to Louisiana to serve the colonists.

For those who had already made it over, some progress was made in spite of deplorable conditions. It seemed that it did not matter to the settlers to whom the territory was officially granted, for

their situation was to make the best of it.

The slow but steady progress continued until the disastrous news of Law's failure arrived. Just as the fantasies of riches in gold in the New World never found proof, Law's scheme, just like that of Crozat, faced an unfortunate reality. The India company went bankrupt, and John Law left France in humiliation. Semi-starvation and disease abounded at Lorient, where many were anxiously waiting passage. The Mississippi Bubble had burst.

Along with the abandonment of Crozat, Law, and the French government, the colonists were left with one glaring condition-poverty. At times their only fare was acorns, roots, or tender bark. Those who were more innovative took actions to create other culinary delights. The French missionary Father du Poisson described the use of turtle eggs for omelets.⁶ Of course, this was an unusual circumstance, but this shows that poverty may be relative, for the pioneers were indeed in a land of plenty. Perhaps their poverty was due to a lack of accessible provisions. Available or not, the settlers were hungry.

How would they survive? Their next strategy was trade, and it became the lifeline of the Red River region.⁷ The Frenchmen did have advantages in this aspect: 1) a good location, such asatchitoches on the Red River, the post founded by St. Denis in 1714, 2) positive relations with the Indians, and 3) they experienced only minor controversy for the majority of the time with the Spanish, as they had neither salvation of savages nor military gains as top priority.

Because of France's growing antipathy toward her colony, rela-

tions with the Indians and Spaniards were crucial. The French opinion of the Indians was what could be expected--long accounts are written by the explorers about the Indians, in their ignorance of other cultures, staring in amazement at the white faces, long beards, and restricting clothing, in comparison to their own swarthy complexion, bare jaw, braided hair, and animal skins. In the beginning of French and Indian acquaintances, the barrier of language added to the frustration. Marquette recalled, "I spoke to them in six different Indian languages, none of which they knew."⁸

The explorers learned how the simple Indians adored receiving gifts and that to disappoint them might prove costly. Their generosity lasted as long as their supply of pickaxes, liquor, kettles, pipes, baubles, mirrors, and trinkets held out. It became too expensive to supply the Indians with presents; so, to avoid confrontation, a Frenchman would decline the offer to share the calumet, or peace pipe.⁹ This kept the Frenchman from being obligated to the Indian.

It has been said, "Gratitude is a virtue of which the Indians have no conception,"¹⁰ and it is true that they repeatedly expected more from the frontiersmen. But one must understand the policy of the Indian. He always shared whatever he had, regardless of what had been transacted before. Therefore the Indian, with the unwritten rule of always giving, never kept a record and felt the Frenchman should always be generous, as he would undoubtedly be.

To be sure, there were unfriendly Indian tribes in the territory, including even cannibals and pagan worshippers who whipped and strangled their children. The savage enemies included the Osage, the Chickasaw,

and the Natchez, known for a brutal massacre and slaying of the French missionary, Father du Poisson. But one should look more closely at his ideas about the Indian nations, for just as prejudice toward any race is a narrowminded generalization, there is more to an individual than meets the eye.

Indian sentiment was described in a territorial letter written by John Bernard Bossu, an explorer and administrator in Louisiana: "They prefer the French to the Spanish, whom they cannot abide." This favor is explained in the way the frenchmen's objectives differed from Spain and the goals of her colonists:

The Spanish settlers offer salvation, the French people offer brandy and knives. The Spanish try to make the care-free Indians settle in one place, the French follow the Indians around, roaming in the same nomadic fashion. The Spanish attempt to civilize the Indians, while the French adapt to the red man's lifestyle. 11

Another letter by Bossu contains a humorous account of French and Indian relations. When an Indian shot off the head of a rattlesnake threatening to bite a frenchman, he was given a bottle of taffia¹² (rum) to celebrate. How many Indians would prefer prayer to that?

The reasons in the quote given above concerning the difference in Spanish and French aspirations are perhaps oversimplifications, because later on many Indians did assume European customs, such as going to mass, wearing cloaks or petticoats for the ladies, and learning the French and Spanish languages. Moreover their culture, notably different from European mannerisms, had always been highly civilized in its own right. Examples of tribal traditions include: male and female roles were always specifically determined, there were marriage customs, elaborate funeral

and worship and sacrificial rituals, and a definite social order.

Without attempt at rationalizing the rape of the Indian lifestyle and culture by pioneers, not necessarily those only in Louisiana or the French alone, it is worth noting that the differences of culture mentioned above—appearance, language, clothing, and purpose—did mold the frontiersman's image, incorrectly, of the amiable and cooperative Indian. The pioneer brashly assumed the Indian to be ignorant, passive, and self-sufficient wherever he settled, because the Indian reacted differently than he did. Perhaps this accounts for the obvious lack of consideration on the part of pioneers towards natives, in any new environment. Apparently the lesson that ethnocentricity is a two-way street has not been well digested, for the same insensitivity for persons of different mindsets persists even today. With the European plundering and pillaging of the red man's home, who can blame the warrior Indians for being hostile?

Completing the territorial triangle concerns the French and Spanish inhabitants. Despite former land disagreements and property disputes, the French did live peaceably alongside the Spanish. All three parties, French, Spanish, and Indian, needed each other in one way or another, and therefore had to subsist with the others. For instance, whenever the Machez Indians attacked Macheches, it was the Spaniards of nearby Los Adaes who came to the aid of the French.

The trade between these two existed on an entirely different order. Perhaps this explains why the Spanish were anxious to protect the French settlement, in that a healthy smuggling association was beneficial to both sides. The Spanish missionaries, led by a dishonest friar named

Grappe, desired the material comforts offered by the French, and the French needed the hard money of the Spaniards—pesos were gladly accepted.¹³ This bartering kept the colonists on good terms, and the Bourbon monarchies at home in Spain and France were allies also.

These positive relations were, in part, on the surface; minor squabbles increased, and the French began to overextend their liberties and impose on the Spanish. An expedition by French explorers Chapin and Poissy violated some rules set by the Spanish.¹⁴ The French became blatant in their smuggling patterns. The Spanish were forced to allow two French prisoners to go on a trip to Santa Fe, as the French implied the need for continuation of "good will" between the two colonies. The mistakes did not allow continuation of good will, and Spain sent out a warning. This should not lead the reader to believe that Spain was without error, but France had other distractions. Her colony, Antilles, and its sugar industry beckoned French investors, and the threat of Great Britain was coming into focus. France's disillusionment with her Louisiana territory was too far gone. Once again, Louisiana was handed over, this time to the Spanish in 1761, when Louis XV of France (His Christian Majesty) and Charles III of Spain (His Catholic Majesty) effected a new family compact of alliance, the Treaty of Fontainebleau.¹⁵ This treaty was necessarily kept secret because Spain could not protect Louisiana from Britain.

This loss was only the beginning. In the Old World, Europe had been involved in the Seven Years War. In 1763, Britain and France signed the treaty of Paris to end the war, causing many changes of authority in the American territory. Britain took all of Canada and everything east

of the Mississippi River which had been French, and Spain was openly granted all of Louisiana. The opinion was as follows:

When France lost and gave away a continent in 1763...she was ready after sixty years of endeavor, to admit her failure in colonizing Louisiana...it didn't pay. 16

The Indians, still leaning toward their French friends, pleaded with them not to leave them mercilessly to the unfriendly Spaniards, but to no avail. France was sick of the idea of colonizing, her funds had been bled dry, and she wanted out of the New World.

Nonetheless, while Spanish was the official language, and France had officially turned her back on the colony, it remained loyal French in manners and customs. The Indians did adapt to some civilized customs mentioned before, and the colonists, unhappy with the transfer of French to Spanish authority, openly resisted the Spanish and petitioned to remain French. But most of the administrative positions were held by frenchmen under employment of Spain, because they knew the land, were familiar with the Indians, and were more experienced in colonial administration. The exception to this was the Spanish governor Alejandro O'Reilly, but he was unpopular with the residents anyway.¹⁷

Appearances again are deceiving; Spain never had complete control of the colony, realistically only in name. In 1800, Napoleon Bonaparte coerced Spain into returning Louisiana to the French. Yet, he had enough complications in Europe and needed funds to support his army there. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson, the President of the United States of America, bought the Louisiana Territory from France for fifteen million dollars.

Turning more specifically to the Red River region, which includes southwest Arkansas and northwest Louisiana, the Red River of the eighteenth century was totally unnavigable. Jammed for miles by an uncompromising clot of logs, branches, trees, and other debris, this unusual circumstance was known as the Red River raft.

French settlements in the plain of the East were farm settlements, not forts. Professional troops and fine forts were much too expensive to maintain in the territory, and besides, their goal was not to make war. A common settlement of the period would be surrounded by a log fence, with a guardhouse, but these were mainly for self-defense purposes.

The French language may also be noted for its contribution to the region, in both major and minor ways. Red River is itself a translation of "La Sabloniere"¹⁸ which is the French term for the red clay-banked river. "Bois d'arc" meaning bow wood, refers to the hardwood tree from which the Indians constructed their bows. There are a few names derived from seemingly insignificant incidents occurring to the explorers. West of Fort Biloxi, the pioneers marked "point a l'Assiette" (point or mark of the plate), because in 1700, the explorer d'Iberville supposedly lost a silver plate there. Fifty four miles further on, (eighteen miles above the mouth of the Mississippi) one finds the banks of Dog River, thus named because a crocodile devoured one of the frontiersman's dogs.¹⁹ Also described is a Deer River and Chicken River, about which no detail of the title's origin is given.

Regarding the basic personality characteristics of the Red River folk in the eighteenth century, the settlers inhabiting the undomesticated plains of the territory weren't common Frenchmen, regardless of

pedigree. The typical frenchman, one comfortable and content in his native France, would hardly think of sacrificing his security to confront a savage land full of risk and adventure. Conversely, this land offered security to many. The lawbreakers, the roughnecks, the social misfits, and the adventurous young fools all found a paradise on the uncivilized banks of the Red. The history of this region might have played a different tune had France not repeatedly turned the colonial enterprise over to Crozat, to Law, to Spain, and finally to the U.S. The sturdy, strong, agricultural families weren't attracted to an experiment not totally supported by the government, especially after the ruin of Law's concession and the disaster it incurred at Lorient, thus the agricultural foundation vital to a settlement's development was not established. Instead, hunters and their families, eight hundred strong, exploited the natural resources in abundant North America.²⁰

This exploitation may be a bit exaggerated. For instance, records show a hunt during which four hundred buffalo were killed.²¹ One mustn't neglect the other side however; this kill was for the entire settlement, for the entire winter.

Though the territory was a delight to vagrants and convicts, it wasn't totally lawless. Athanase de Mézières created ordinances for the colonies under Spanish rule, concerning alcoholic beverages, merchandise given to Indians, cattle rustling, runaway minors, and slaves.²² In 1722, de Bienville acting as governor instituted the Black Code, which served as the "germ, origin, and source of most of the slave laws that were enacted in the U.S. for the next 140 years."²³ These laws included: expulsion of Jews, prohibition of any worship other

than Poman Catholic, prohibition of mixed marriages, punishment for any issue from concubinage, abolition of association (meeting) for slaves, abolition of all private property of slaves, prohibition of harboring slaves, and guidelines for the punishment of slaves.

In reaction to these formidable regulations, the judicial system had inconsistencies as all legal systems do. For example, a man named LeBurre committed suicide in 1738. His corpse was brought to trial for suicide, found guilty, condemned, and denied a Christian burial.²⁴

Whether appointed by royal patronage or later because of genuine interest of the region, there were ten governors of the eighteenth century.²⁵ It should be explained that Bienville merely served as interim after his term in 1704, in the times when a new governor had been appointed but had not yet arrived in the territory. These administrators include:

1699 - Sauvolle
1702 - d'Iberville
1704 - Bienville
1713 - Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac
1716 - Bienville
1717 - L'Epinay
(specific date not known-Bienville)
1731 - Perier
1733 - Bienville
1743 - Marquis di Vaudreuil
(specific date not known-Kerlerec)
1770 - O'Reilly
1793 - Le Baron de Carondelet.

All of these governors were French, except O'Reilly.

The colony was a place any woman could find a husband. There were, in fact, three separate occasions in which young girls selected from a public institution in Paris were shipped over to the colony under surveillance, at the request of territory directors, who "thought it impos-

sible to make a solid establishment without them."²⁶

The marriage market revealed these statistics: Before 1740, one half of all women on the frontier were married before their fourteenth birthday.²⁷ With five of every six immigrants being male, and with the higher death rate in women due to the hazards of childbirth on the frontier, a woman, much less a good woman, was truly hard to find. Looking more closely, as with the men, what respectable and secure woman would entertain the idea of leaving France for the primitive Louisiana territory? It was a common known fact among the hunters of the Ouachita Basin that "wives were as vicious as their husbands."²⁸ This brings to question the Parisian public institution from whence came the brides: was it a school, a jail, or even a mental ward?

Hopefully this study has brought to light some of the underlying influences affecting the Red River region. The contradictions aren't meant to distort or confuse, but to add depth and meaning to the people and their lives in the eighteenth century. Its history flows on, and will be forever banked with the two sides of opinion and attitude, as long as humanity is the observer.

NOTES

- ¹Pierre Heinrich, La Louisiane sous la Compagnie des Indes (Paris: 1903), Volume 67, note 5.
- ²Jean Bernard Bossu, New Travels in North America, 1770-1771 (Translated by S.D. Dickinson, F.S.U. Press, 1982), p. 26
- ³Terry Jones, "Colonial Fortifications in North Louisiana: Their Cultural Significance," paper delivered at N.S.U. Symposium, "North Louisiana's Colonial Heritage" Oct. 7-8, 1982. (Hereafter, all symposium papers will be referred to as SP).
- ⁴Stanley Faye, "Arkansas Post of Louisiana, French Domination," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, 1943, vol. 26., p. 649.
- ⁵Heinrich, op cit.
- ⁶W. A. Falconer, "Arkansas and the Jesuits," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1917, vol.4, p. 367.
- ⁷Terry Jones, op cit.
- ⁸Marquette, "Marquette Entertained by the Arkansas Indians," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1906, vol. 1, p. 43.
- ⁹Falconer, p. 371
- ¹⁰Father Du Poisson, extract from letter included in Falconer's publication, p. 372
- ¹¹W. Furrentine Jackson, "North Louisiana: Frontier Image-An Overview. SP.
- ¹²Bossu, p. 36.

- ¹³S. D. Dickinson, "Folkways of Trade in Colonial Louisiana," SP.
- ¹⁴Heinrich, op cit.
- ¹⁵Bossu, p. 8.
- ¹⁶Jackson, op cit.
- ¹⁷B.F. French, Historical Collections of Louisiana (New York: J. Sabin and sons, 1869), listed in Preface.
- ¹⁸Ibid, p. 56. .
- ¹⁹Bossu, p. 52.
- ²⁰Dickinson, op cit.
- ²¹Falconer, p. 56.
- ²²Conrad, Glenn, "Daily Life in a Colonial Post of Spanish Louisiana, SP.
- ²³W Benjamin, "History of the French in Arkansas," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1908, vol. 2, p. 334.
- ²⁴Ibid, p. 345.
- ²⁵French, listed in preface.
- ²⁶Benjamin, p. 157.
- ²⁷Terry Jones, op cit.
- ²⁸Dickinson, op cit.

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