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THE FRENCH PERIOD IN INDIANA

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French civilization in the area which we now call Indiana was centered on three small frontier posts. Ouiatenon, near present-day Lafayette, was the first to be established, with garrisons of the French Canadian Marine stationed there in 1717. Miamis, now Fort Wayne, was founded in 1721. Vincennes was founded probably in the early 1730s. However, long before settlements were built, French explorers, travelers, and missionaries were descending the Wabash and reporting their findings.

In 1679, Father Louis Hennepin, a Recollet friar traveling with the Sieur de LaSalle, wrote of the Kankakee River and the Maumee. At one portage he says, "We found . . . a number of buffalo horns and the carcasses of those animals, and some canoes that the Indians had made, of buffalo skins to cross the river with their load of meat" (McCord, p. 3). Others write of the Ohio River, or the Beautiful River. Concepts of geography were different in those days, however. It was thought that the Wabash flowed into the Mississippi and the Ohio was a tributary of the Wabash. One traveler wrote, "The Wabash River . . . on which part of the Miami are settled, is a very beautiful river . . . . It flows continuously southwest and empties into the Mississippi sixty leagues from the mouth of the Illinois River. It is wider than the Mississippi" (Illinois Historical Collections, pp. 393-94).

The beauty of the country was not enough to lure the French to this wilderness. Rumor, the most common and least reliable source of information at that time, gave a much better reason. A military post on the Wabash was considered in 1710 because of mineral deposits. The Governor of Canada wrote to the Minister of the Marine in France that settlers should be sent to the heights of the Wabash "if a silver mine, a small sample of which was shown to me this year, shall be found to be productive" (Michigan Historical Collections, V. 33, p. 481).

Illustrations by Sharon E. Bailey

Another kind of wealth was furs. Indiana was filled with fur-bearing animals, which would satisfy the fashion crazes in the mother country. Beaver, deer, elk, and buffalo were among the many animals in this area. One visitor wrote of the Ouiatenon village: "Their village is situated on a high hill, and they have over two leagues of fields where they raise their Indian corn, pumpkins and melons. From the summit of this elevation nothing is visible to the eye but prairies full of buffaloes" (Public Archives of Canada, C11A, 23:46v-48).

So the area which later became Indiana held a great deal of appeal for the French. The promise of wealth in precious metals was never fulfilled, but the wealth in furs was very real. Too, the French feared English aggression and expansion on the Wabash. Rumors flew about a post the English planned to establish, "an English post entirely opposed to that of Detroit, which if it once comes to be established, will inevitably overthrow the trade of the Colony," according to one French official. In addition, the missionary zeal which characterized European colonization came into play. The Miami, Ouiatenon, and Piankashaw tribes among others were, according to the French priests, pagans. Their conversion was essential.

The desire for wealth, the need to hold French territory, and the enthusiasm of the missionaries formed the basis for colonization of Indiana. In the early eighteenth century French settlers began to trickle into the interior — military men, voyageurs, and, later, families looking for a new frontier.

THE HISTORY

The actual history of the French period in Indiana is rather brief and relatively uneventful. As we have seen, early explorers sent back reports of wealth and beauty. In the eighteenth century Indiana and Ohio were a refuge for many Indian tribes, or segments of tribal groups. Although the French claimed the land west of the Appalachians, their ability to hold this claim against the English depended upon whether they could take possession of the land and control these tribes.

The difference in the governments of the French and English colonies contributed to the competition between the respective groups of traders. The French government maintained a very strict control of the fur trade, while the English colonies competed with one another for trade, the British government making no effort to interfere.

Trade at French posts was conducted under three different methods of exploitation, each being used at different times: the farming or leasing plan; the license or *conge'* plan; and exploitation by the commandant of the post. In the farming or leasing plan, each post was auctioned to the highest bidder for a three-year period. The lessee conducted trade at the post himself, or sent agents to do it for him. He could send as many canoes filled with goods as he wished, but cargoes were very strictly regulated. Under the license plan, a trader bought or was given a *conge'*, permitting him to trade only at certain posts. Each permit stipulated the number of canoes, names and addresses of the voyageurs, and the route to be taken. In exploitation by the post commandant, the officer held a monopoly of trade in a manner similar to the post farmer. His profit apparently supplemented his military pay.

The fur trade was a barter system, an exchange of raw furs for merchandise. Voyageurs' canoes usually left Montreal in May, arrived at Detroit in July, and then dispersed to the various posts. Once trade was completed they normally returned to Montreal before winter. For the posts in the Indiana and Illinois country, voyageurs often stayed for one to three years. This allowed them to spend more time at the posts and to help in construction of buildings at the forts.

This fur trade then was the main reason for garrisoning the posts, as well as for the settling of the three forts in Indiana.

The first post to be established in Indiana was Ouiatenon, near present-day Lafayette. Instructions were given to the military garrison to break the supposed connection between the Wea and the English and to keep peace with the Illinois Indians. A commandant and a blacksmith were sent, and a few years later a missionary arrived. At this same time, the Sieur de Vincennes, living among the Miami Indians, was ordered to use his influence among the Wea to persuade them to move northward closer to Detroit where they could be controlled more easily. He died, however, during the winter of 1718-19, and his 18-year-old son continued his father's work as agent of the French government.

The death of the elder Vincennes induced the Indians to stay where they were, near his grave. The French government still determined to move the Indians, and Charles Renaud Dubuisson, a captain in the French Marine, was sent to the Miamis to persuade them to move. If unsuccessful he was to stay with them and establish a garrisoned post to combat the English influence. In May of 1722, he had completed a palisaded fort which he named St. Philippe des Miamis on the site of present-day Fort Wayne.

Meanwhile, the younger Vincennes had been transferred to Ouiatenon to command there. The need for additional posts on the lower Wabash was recognized by the government of Louisiana and the Company of the Indies. If and when a post was established, they wanted Vincennes to take charge of it and invite some of the Wabash Indians to locate there. In 1730 Vincennes took some Indians from the Ouiatenon area into the jurisdiction of Louisiana. It was even suggested that he bring his father's bones, to lure the Miamis to the new post. Thus three French posts in Indiana were established by 1731.

Things went smoothly for the three infant establishments; in fact, life could almost have been called dull. Fortifications were built, trade carried on, and presents given regularly to the Indians: tobacco, guns, corn, brandy, knives and vermillion. The arrival of the voyageurs afforded some excitement since they brought goods, necessities, and news to the inhabitants of the tiny outposts.

The first real disruption came in 1729, when plans were made to unite the northern tribes for an attack on the Chickasaw nation. This tribe had massacred the French garrison at Natchez, and both the governments of Canada and Louisiana felt they must be wiped out. Vincennes wrote in 1733 that "all the nations of Canada and the lakes start this spring to go there. Both nations here have gone, even their chiefs. Not a single man remained in all these villages" (Barnhart and Riker, p. 81).

Another brush with Indian warfare occurred at Ouiatenon in 1734. The Canadian Governor described the event in this manner: "Two young men -- one a Frenchman, the other a Savage, fought together. The Frenchman had the advantage. The Savage went for his comrades who assembled tumultuously, struck some blows with their knives and pillaged all the French at the Post, without however, any murder being committed" (Wisconsin Historical Collections, V.17, p. 211). Troops were sent from Detroit, but by the time they reached Miamis word was sent that a Calumet, or peace pipe, had been smoked, the goods returned, and the Indians pardoned. The lenient treatment was justified by the Governor of Canada who reported, "The peace we are since some time endeavoring to establish in the Upper countries and the condition of affairs required mild and moderate means to be preferred on an occasion involving neither the honor of the French nor the King's arms, and arising merely out of a simple fray between some drunken young Ouiatenons and two or three Voyageurs, in an affair of trade" (Documents . . . of New York, V. 9, p. 1050).

Meanwhile, the Chickasaw conflict continued, and in 1736, Vincennes led Indians and inhabitants to join Louisiana's governor in a massive attack on the southern tribe. The result was a crushing defeat for the French and the torture and burning of the younger Sieur de Vincennes (Barnhart and Riker, p. 88). The post on the lower Wabash had not only lost its commandant but most of its garrison and many of the adult males of the settlement. Peace was not made with the Chickasaws until 1740, and in 1742 the Wabash tribes professed to be still in mourning for Vincennes.

In the year 1744, a 33 year truce between France and England ended, and a new series of wars began. The next decade and a half in Indiana was plagued with Indian unrest and rebellion. The post which suffered most was Miamis. The Miami tribe was divided into two factions, one pro-British, the other pro-French. Because of a British blockade, it was difficult to transport supplies to the interior, and the local Indians were disgruntled that the flow of presents had stopped. By 1749 the post at Miamis was in a deplorable state, as described by a Jesuit priest: "The fort of the Miamis was in a very bad condition when we reached it, most of the palisades were decayed and fallen into ruin. Within there were eight houses — or, to speak more correctly, eight miserable huts" (McCord, p. 8).

In 1760 at the end of the seven-year French and Indian War, the rule of France in Indiana ended. The commandants at Miamis and Ouiatenon were relieved by British troops in 1761. On October 10, 1765, the commandant at Vincennes officially surrendered to the English. In this area, the three tiny posts never reached first-rank importance, even though many French officials thought

control of the Wabash and Ohio valleys was the key to French security.

THE PEOPLE

Even though the history of the French in Indiana was brief, a look at the people who came to this area reveals a portrait of a hearty and brave man, unafraid to sacrifice comfort and safety for the good of the colony and for his own freedom. The soldiers, voyageurs, and craftsmen helped to establish these centers of trade and culture, no matter how minute the posts, nor how brief their influence.

The French Canadian Marine

The military men who came to Indiana were probably members of the Compagnies Franches de la Marine, or the French Canadian Navy. In their grey and blue uniforms they made an impressive sight for the Indians, who respected their authority and their trappings. The first members of whom we know in Indiana were an ensign named Bellestre, Captain Dubuisson, and the two Vincennes, father and son.

Documents show the elder Vincennes as a good, capable officer, much admired by the tribes of Indiana. The Canadian governor explained Vincennes' assignment to the interior: "I have the honor to explain to you the reasons which I had to send the Sieur de Vincennes to the Miamis, rather than someone else, because he was much loved by them" (Paris Archives, C11A, 24:217). Later his conduct was commended by his successor, Dubuisson: "Mr. de Vincennes has faithfully performed his duty, and . . . he has labored assiduously here, as well as on his voyage to the Miamis and Ouyatanons last winter" (Wisconsin Historical Collections, V. 16, p. 287).

The younger Vincennes, too, was much respected. A letter he wrote in 1733 reveals his drive and ambition once he reached the site of the fort which was to bear his name. "You do me the honor to indicate to me that I send you a statement of the work done and to be done. There is only one fort and two houses within and it will be necessary very soon to build a guard house with barracks in which to lodge the soldiers. Nothing else is possible in this place with so few troops. I need thirty men with an officer" (McCord, pp. 5-6). Trading permits tell us that Vincennes relied on his mother, who lived in Montreal, to supply him with the necessities of life as well as the niceties. In September of 1722 she sent him 30 jugs of brandy for his subsistence.

Charles Renaud Dubuisson, who was originally designated to command at Ouiatenon and was later sent to Miamis, was a distinguished officer in the French Marine. Vaudreuil, the Canadian Governor, was adamant about assigning Dubuisson to the Wabash country: "It seems to me to be very necessary for the Sieur Dubuisson to continue to serve in this country, since he is more capable than any other officer of governing the Ouiatenon and the Miami, who know and esteem him and among whom he is held in high repute . . ." (Krauskopf, p. 164). Like Vincennes, Dubuisson had an agent to conduct his business in Montreal — his wife, Louise. Even though Dubuisson spent most of his time at wilderness posts, it is of interest to note that after his death he was described as leaving a widow and several children.

Another commandant was Francois de l'Epervanche de Villemure, a cadet in the troops of the Marine. He was in command at Ouiatenon during the overnight Ouiatenon War. Like the other officers, he authorized his next of kin, his wife Suzanne, to conduct his business for him. Epervanche was apparently considered a good commandant because 20 years later he was again assigned to Ouiatenon to govern during the troubled times of the French and Indian War.

Concerning the troops' provisions, basic rations consisted of bread, salt pork, and dried peas. In Indiana fresh beef was often available and purchased for the troops, and vegetable gardens were established. Wild game and fish added variety to the monotonous diet. Brandy was issued to the soldiers, but wine was reserved strictly for the officers.

The size of the ration varied at different times, but the average normal issue consisted of one-and-a-half pounds of bread, half a pound of salt pork, and half a pound of dried peas. In periods of scarcity, very common during the French and Indian War, the ration was decreased and horsemeat was substituted for the pork.

Their pay was small, and the officers had the most difficult time since they had to pay for their own food. Many an officer, especially those who were junior in

rank, had to go into debt or draw on funds from home to meet expenses.

Though the military men in the various Canadian and Louisiana posts were often criticized, they were generally respected by the Indians and kept the peace. They were often suspected of selling goods which were meant to be given as presents to the Indians; too, their assignment to posts was felt to be due to their ability to purchase favors, or the friendliness of their wives toward government officials. Whatever the reasons for their emergence on the Wabash Valley, they provided leadership to both garrisons and Indians and, like the two Vincennes, almost became demigods.

The Voyageurs

Along with the commandants and garrisons came the voyageurs, itinerant traders along the river routes of Canada. The French Canadian voyageurs were probably the most flamboyant figures in the Wabash River Valley: fur traders and travelers, minstrels and bringers of news. The fur trade was, of course, very strictly regulated. Thanks to these regulations, we have names of those who entered this area, as well as an idea of the kind of life they led.

Voyageurs were unique, from their physical appearance to their line of work. Because they traveled in canoes they were, of necessity, short. Few of these men were taller than, say, 5'8" because there was no room in the canoes for long legs. The canoes, or pirogues as they were called, were used as carriers of merchandise and furs, and the cargoes were much more important than fitting in an extra five or six inches of person.

Besides being short, the voyageur was broad-shouldered because he used his arms so much. The voyageur was an expert canoeist and, because his income depended on it, he was fast. On the average he dipped his paddle into the water 45 to 48 times per minute. One of his most difficult jobs while on the route was portaging, or carrying canoe and cargo by land between bodies of water. He carried everything, including passengers, on his back.

Before the voyageur left on his trip to the interior, he was required to make an agreement with a merchant, or *bourgeois*, to carry merchandise to the various posts. The *bourgeois*, in turn, made application to the French Canadian Government for permission to trade. The permit, or *conge'*, was very specific, like the following one:

> "We have permitted the man named Ladouceur, who has served four years as interpreter at the post of the Ouiatenon, with a canoe manned by four men, including himself, whose names and addresses he will give before his departure . . . . The four men will each be furnished a gun for their journey, both going and returning, without their being allowed to get rid of them by trading them to the savages . . . under penalty of three months' imprisonment. We expressly prohibit them from carrying more than four *pots* of brandy each for their use only. We order the three men that said Ladouceur will take with him to be back in this town in the month of September at the latest" (Krauskopf, pp. 170-71).

This is but a extract of the permit which was about ten handwritten pages long. He was also forbidden to trade at any other post along the way and was ordered

to serve as a work force for the commandant of the post once he arrived.

The voyageur ate two meals per day, a brunch and a dinner. Cornbread and a thick pea soup were his normal fare. There was no time for hunting, and meats did not keep on the long journey. At times bird eggs added some interest to the diet, and an occasional duck or squirrel provided fresh meat.

To fill the long hours and the tedium during the trip, the voyageurs sang. This singing not only served as a source of enjoyment, but also kept their paddles dipping to a set rhythm, thus making the trip smoother and quicker. So, in all likelihood, if a man were tone-deaf, it was nearly impossible to be a voyageur. The songs all had the same basic rhythm, ranging from praise of their patron saint, Anne, to bawdy drinking songs. Many of these, still popular today, are part of Canadian folk tradition.

Voyageurs existed not only during the French period but also after the British took over Canada. This unusual group of men faded away with the dying of the fur trade. Their songs and legends remain, however, as well as this famous quotation by one of the last of the French Canadian voyageurs:

> "I have now been forty-two years in this country. For twenty-four I was a light canoe man . . . . No portage was too long for me; all portages were alike. My end of the canoe never touched the ground till I saw the end [of the portage]. Fifty songs a day were nothing to me. I could carry, paddle, walk and sing with any man I ever saw . . . . No water, no weather, ever stopped the paddle or the song. I have had twelve wives in the country; and was once possessed of fifty horses, and six running dogs, trimmed in the first style. I was then like a Bourgeois, rich and happy; no Bourgeois had better dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses; no white man better harnessed or swifter dogs . . . . I wanted for nothing; and I spent all my earnings in enjoyment of pleasure. Five hundred pounds, twice told, have passed through my hands; although now I have not a spare shirt to my back, nor a penny to buy one. Yet, were I young again, I should glory in commencing the same career again. I would spend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life; none so independent; no place where a man can enjoy so much variety and freedom as in the Indian country" (Eccles, p. 181).

The Habitants

Many times voyageurs who came to this area were craftsmen who decided to settle. Others were traders who saw an advantage to permanent residence in the wilderness posts. The most important craftsman to the Indians seems to have been the blacksmith. In 1715, the Ouiatenon Indians specifically requested "an officer to govern them, a missionary to instruct them, and a blacksmith" (Krauskopf, p. 160).

In response to this request, Jean Richard was sent to Ouiatenon where he married an Indian and then returned to Montreal. His trading permit tells us this story: "The man named Jean Richard, formerly interpreter and blacksmith at the post of the Ouiatenon, where he served under the Sieurs de Vincennes, father and son, has represented to us that his wife, who is of the Ouiatenon nation, and who has been continually ill for the two years that she came to live in this colony, wishes to return to her country to recover her health, if it would please us to grant him permission to take her back to said post of the Ouiatenon with her children" (Krauskopf, p. 173). An expense voucher submitted by another blacksmith lists such things supplied to the post as triggers, lead balls, sear springs, cocking pieces, and tomahawks.

Like Jean Richard, many Indiana inhabitants married Indian women. Others brought their wives of European ancestry with them and raised their families here. Jean Baptiste Foucher, a trader at all three Indiana posts, had a son, Antoine, who later became the first priest to be born in the Illinois country.

Birth, marriage, and death records in the Old Cathedral Library at Vincennes tell the stories of many other early Indiana families. Charles and Genevieve Bonneau had nine children born between Miamis and Vincennes, the first being born at Ouiatenon. The baby's baptismal record is typical of those housed at Vincennes. "Today the 21st of the month of May, feast of pentecost of the year one thousand seven hundred fifty-two, I have solemnly baptised Charles Marie, legitimate son of Charles Bonneau and Genevieve Du-de-vois, established in this post. The said child was born last evening at ten o'clock. The godfather was Monsieur Francois Marie Marchant de Ligneris, captain of the infantry, commandant for the king in this post, and the godmother, Elizabeth Cardinal, wife of Claude Dudevoir, grandmother of the child."

Francois and Agnes Godere, who also lived at all three posts at various times, were the parents of at least ten children born in the Wabash Valley. Records tell of Ursule, who died at the age of six years, and of Agnes, who died when she was one year old en route to Vincennes from Ouiatenon with her parents to seek medical help.

Moral and legal standards were sometimes bent to allow for the hardships of a frontier post, as with Louis Godere and Elizabeth Levron. Their marriage certificate is also the baptismal certificate of their three children. They had been married four years earlier in the presence of witnesses because no priest had been available to perform the ceremony. It was a rather awkward situation, but not unusual for the times.

The population here was a mobile one. It is not at all unusual to find someone who was born in Montreal, was married in Detroit, had children at Miamis and Ouiatenon, and was buried at Vincennes. There seemed to be a constant search for new places, perhaps looking for the nonexistent silver mines, or questing after better fur supplies.

CONCLUSION

The French influence in Indiana did not die when the British took over, nor when the American Revolution came to the West. Most of the documents from the three

settlements after the French period was ended are still in the French language. However, as American settlers moved west, the French bloodlines all but disappeared.

French civilization did not have any abiding influence in Indiana. The main contributions were the exploration and mapping of the area and setting in motion the forces which led to the eventual downfall of the Indian nations. Knowledge of French discoveries filtered through to English settlers and the home government via the Indians and voyageurs who trafficked with the British, where they were paid higher prices than they would have received in their own colony. The presence of whites brought the savages not only such useful items as kettles, guns, powder, lead, knives, and clothing, but also the diseases and liquor which killed hundreds — far more than were ever killed in warfare.

Life at the French outposts was uneventful and often dreary. Occasionally, news of events in the outside world filtered through; but rumors, sometimes true, mostly false, were so common that no one was ever sure what to believe. In trying to analyze the reasons which would cause civilized man to remain in such dismal surroundings, the comment of a Jesuit priest is brought to mind: that only the desire for making money could make it endurable (McCord, p. 8).

Today, the French influence in Indiana is only evident in place names: French Lick, LaCross, La Grange, Lafayette, LaPorte, Terre Haute, and Vincennes; as well as the less obvious — Gnaw Bone (after a Frenchman named Narbonne) and Russiaville (after a man named Richardville). These names hint at an almost forgotten civilization, one where people were born, carried on trade, waged war, married, and died searching for what wealth could be found, and a glory which never existed.

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