

## FREEMASONS AND SPECULATORS: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE FRANCOPHONE MERCHANTS OF DETROIT, 1796 TO 1863

Jay Gitlin with S. Heath Ackley

This conference, I think, marks a beginning—a serious attempt to reassess and acknowledge the French impact on the Detroit region.<sup>1</sup> Fifty years ago, in 1951, *American Heritage* magazine celebrated the 250th birthday of Detroit with a series of short historical articles. The usual cast of characters made their appearance: Cadillac, Pontiac—than quickly onward to Mayor Cobo and Walter Reuther. Raymond Miller, then Chairman of the Department of History at Wayne State, wrote a brief summary of Detroit's history. Not surprisingly, he described the first Detroit as having been born in 1701 and having died in 1805. The great fire of that year cleared the air—in his words, "the old Detroit was gone." The French village now began to give way to new buildings and institutions—Miller mentions the Masonic lodge as an example. New settlers from New York and New England swarmed in giving the city a vital infusion of energy and leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Melvin Holli, writing in the late 1970s, pursued such a theme in an article entitled "French Detroit: The Clash of Feudal and Yankee Values" and in his introductory essay to a documentary history of the city. Wrote Holli, "the French habitant culture [was not] able to withstand the invasion of the aggressive, literate, and

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me to be a part of this historical celebration. It is a great honor to be participating in a panel which includes such distinguished scholars as Professor Fernand Ouellet. I am indebted to a former student at Yale, S. Heath Ackley, who gathered many of the documents I have used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond C. Miller, "Detroit—Old and New," *American Heritage*, 2:4 (Summer 1951).

institutionally mature 'cultural imperialism' of the Yankee."<sup>3</sup> Earlier in the century, the historian Almon Parkins stated the case bluntly: "French conservatism stood in the way of progress."<sup>4</sup>

Much of this should sound familiar to you. It certainly does to me. I have found similar statements in the historiography of virtually every United States city with a French ancestry—and there are, by the way, many such cities. Edwards and Hopewell, authors of the first book-length history of St. Louis wrote, "The love of liberty is inherent in all men, and consequently, when the news came to St. Louis that Louisiana was purchased by the United States, the inhabitants rejoiced in the change." The incoming "race" of Anglo-Saxons, the authors continued, "possessed more industry, a superior knowledge in agricultural and mechanical pursuits, and above all, an enterprise and expansive views, which soon gave them a controlling influence" to the "mortification" and "envy" of the "native inhabitants" who were forced to "occupy only a secondary position." Not wishing to offend their readers of French descent, the authors go on for several pages to describe the virtues of the old French, offering the usual stereotypes of "good humor, gaiety, limited education, humble fashions and cabins, love of music and dancing."<sup>5</sup> A later popular history of St. Louis, *Catfish and Crystal*, written by Ernest Kirschten and published in 1960, stated that "the American flag meant for the French of St. Louis the invasion of 'the Bostons.' That was their name for the Yankees and for all Americans from east of the Mississippi... Less ambitious than the new fortune seekers, most of the French were inclined to maintain their old pace, to enjoy life, and to wonder why the newcomers did not also do so."<sup>6</sup>

Written to reinforce the self-congratulatory patriotism of nineteenth and twentieth-century Americans and borrowing heavily from the racial categories established by Francis Parkman, such histories relegated the founding francophone families of cities such as Detroit to a quaint and thoroughly irrelevant past. Not unlike the

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<sup>3</sup> Melvin G. Holli, "French Detroit: The Clash of Feudal and Yankee Values," in *The Ethnic Frontier: Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, ed. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95; and Melvin G. Holli, *Detroit* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Almon E. Parkins, *The Historical Geography of Detroit* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1918), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Edwards and Menra Hopewell, *The Great West and Her Commerical Metropolis* (St. Louis, 1860), 278.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Kirschten, *Catfish and Crystal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 79-80.

attraction of white Americans to vanishing Indian clichés and pseudo-Indian tribal names and lore, so beautifully described by historian Phil Deloria in his book *Playing Indian*,<sup>7</sup> French cavaliers and black-eyed Creole damsels provided convenient exotic others that at once reinforced the superiority of modern Anglo-American culture and provided a release from the burdens of a competitive society full of urban anxieties. Visions of such French predecessors satisfied nostalgic longings for a simpler age and provided a link to a supposedly authentic past. In short, the French past supplied local color. And so in St. Paul, Minnesota, they celebrate Pig's Eye Parrant—the perfect comic representative. Blind in one eye, a member of the fur trade proletariat, Pierre Parrant was described as having "intemperate and licentious" habits, speaking "execrable English," and as being "the Romulus of our future city."<sup>8</sup> They named a local beer after him. What could be more authentic than that? By trivializing the "colorful" early French period of that city, the activities of francophone businessmen and speculators, lawyers and jurists are ignored. In Maurice Thompson's classic novel, *Alice of Old Vincennes*, published in 1900, the French become passive spectators to the heroics of George Rogers Clark. Watching the raising of the American flag, they shout, in their quaintest of accents, "Vive Zhorzh Vasinton."<sup>9</sup> And in Michigan, we have the popular *Shoepac Recollections*, written by Orlando B. Wilcox and published in 1856. Describing Detroit in the 1820s, the author wrote that one could "behold the Frenchman, riding in his two-wheeled cart to market with white fish and onions, and screaming a rascally patois."<sup>10</sup>

There are, of course, a whole host of such works from Detroit, from Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin, Louisiana, etc. While such works and the stereotypes they employ have some basis in reality, they obscure as much as they reveal. The problem is that nineteenth-century authors such as Bela Hubbard, who moved to Detroit in 1835 and wrote about his early experiences in the city later in his life, in 1887, wrote as much to entertain as to edify. Later historians who use such sources do so at their peril. Even worse, modern historians seeking to understand French activities in the early nineteenth

<sup>7</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 271.

<sup>9</sup> This is the last line of the novel: Maurice Thompson, *Alice of Old Vincennes* (Indianapolis, 1900).

<sup>10</sup> Walter March (Orlando B. Wilcox), *Shoepac Recollections: A Way Side Glimpse of American Life* (New York, 1856), 11.

century, have used English-language sources written by men such as William Hull and Lewis Cass in Michigan and Judge John Lucas in Missouri who were competing with French inhabitants for political office, for land, and in the Indian trade. Hull, the first governor of Michigan Territory, alienated the French residents of Detroit almost as soon as he arrived. In 1809, four years after he assumed office, the inhabitants sent a petition to President Madison requesting Hull's removal. Not surprisingly, Hull's letters to Secretary of War William Eustis were full of invective for the French and attempted to portray them as being friendly with and similar to the Indians.<sup>11</sup> Lucas and Cass both began their careers as Jeffersonian appointees. Zealous in the pursuit of frontier fortunes, they both endeavored to pry real estate out of the hands of Indian and French holders. Running into resistance from equally ambitious francophone businessmen, Lucas and Cass were not above insinuating to officials back in Washington that the French in the West were an indolent people whose land claims were generally without merit and whose very existence constituted an impediment to progress.<sup>12</sup> In St. Louis, it was fashionable for many years to use an apocryphal quote to demonstrate the charming isolation of the old French inhabitants. Introduced to Lafayette during his triumphal return to the United States in 1824-25, a Frenchwoman was said to have remarked, "C'est votre premier visite en Amerique?" More telling, I think, is a remark overheard by Eugenie Berthold of St. Louis as a child. She described a French lady conversing with an Anglo-American man who "saw fit to criticize many of the things concerning her circle.... He [went so far as to say] that it would take many French funerals to improve St. Louis."<sup>13</sup>

What I would like to do then in the time I have left is to I propose that we take another look at the French in Detroit, especially in that

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<sup>11</sup> See the *Collections of the Pioneer and Historical Society of Michigan*, 8 (Lansing, Michigan, 1886), 587-592.

<sup>12</sup> For Lucas, see *Letters of J.B.C. Lucas from 1815 to 1836* (St. Louis, 1905); Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C., 1968), chapter 6; and James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980*, third edition (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), chapter 4. For Cass, see Frank B. Woodford, *Lewis Cass: The Last Jeffersonian* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1950); John D. Haeger, *The Investment Frontier: New York Businessmen and the Economic Development of the Old Northwest* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> Eugenie Berthold, *Glimpses of Creole Life in Old St. Louis* (address published by the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, 1933).

half a century after the old village burned down. Specifically, I would like to reexamine the mercantile elite families such as the Campaus, Morans, Desnoyers, and Berthelets—to name but a few. Although the French of the Detroit region, in general, have been overlooked by historians looking past the French colonial period, it is the elite who have remained more invisible. Thanks to the fine work of Dennis Au, we actually know more about the French to the south of Detroit in Monroe County, who tended to be less wealthy and less urbane.

I would suggest that the French merchants of Detroit did, indeed, constitute a viable urban bourgeoisie. Far from being passive, they aggressively sought to benefit from their priority and were active not only in the Indian trade, but in real estate, banking, and later in industry. They were, in short, quite prepared to compete with the incoming easterners in both the economic and political arenas. Ultimately, many of these families assumed their place in the social hierarchy of the city, yet much like the francophone families in other cities such as New Orleans and St. Louis, they remained distinctive throughout the nineteenth century. Finally, I would suggest that we compare the activities of these French businessmen and their families in a broader context. There are striking similarities to and even connections with the francophone communities elsewhere in the Midwest and the Mississippi Valley. Their collective histories, I believe, shed light on the important transition from frontier to region in the Middle West and may even be of interest to Canadian historians still intrigued by the old debate over the impact of the Conquest on French Canadian society.

Let us begin with old Joseph Campau. Campau was well-known to earlier historians of the city such as Clarence Burton who declared, "There is no more interesting character connected...with the history of Detroit."<sup>14</sup> In a more recent biographical sketch published in *Michigan History Magazine* in 1991, Donald Voelker wrote, "While the Frenchman Campau was once proclaimed Michigan's wealthiest citizen and Detroit's largest landowner, few Detroiters today can recall anything more about him than the avenue named in his honor."<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campau, a great-grandson of Jacques Campau, a blacksmith from Montreal who had moved to Detroit in 1708, was born during the British regime in 1769. His death in 1863 at the age of 95 made the front page of *The Detroit Free Press*—incidentally, the paper he founded with his nephew John R.

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<sup>14</sup> Clarence M. Burton, *The City of Detroit, Michigan*, 4 vols. (Detroit: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 1293.

<sup>15</sup> Doanld W. Voelker, "Joseph Campau, Detroit's 'Big Shot,'" *Michigan History Magazine* (July/August 1991), 39.

Williams in 1831. The newspaper noted that "the entire city turned out for his funeral"—which was conducted by the Masons. Robert B. Ross, who collected reminiscences of Joseph and his son Daniel J. Campau for a newspaper feature in 1894, wrote the standard description of the older merchant which has been used many times:

Joseph Campau, gentleman, 90 Jefferson Avenue, was the name and address of one of the most noted French citizens of Detroit. In 1837 he was sixty-six years old, and had retired from active business life. He was a six-footer, of spare frame, wrinkled, clean shaven, white-haired and dark-complexioned, with sharp, twinkling, brown eyes, and a clerical appearance, to which his ruffled shirt, high stock and black clothing contributed. Joseph was rather distant with strangers, but with friends and acquaintances he was demonstrative and loquacious, venting his opinions on social, political and religious questions in a very frank and unconventional manner.<sup>16</sup>

At the time of his death, Campau's estate was valued at \$3 million dollars, making him the richest man in Michigan. In 1894, his heirs estimated his real estate empire to be worth some \$10 million dollars.<sup>17</sup> Given such enormous wealth, it seems rather odd that Professor Holli chose Joseph Campau as an example of French Detroit's feudal values. With no disrespect to Holli—an excellent practitioner of twentieth-century American urban history, but perhaps a bit out of place in the early national period—his analysis is based on a number of problematic assumptions. The first was that French business practices in Detroit were rooted in seigneurialism. Leaving aside for now his faulty equation of seigneurial tenure with feudal tenure, we must first say that the seigneurial regime of New France never survived the trip to Detroit. The most recent scholarship of French colonial practices in the areas now a part of the United States by Professor Carl Ekberg notes the absence of any local seigneurs in Detroit. The French crown itself served as seigneur, but it is doubtful that any collections of manorial dues ever occurred.<sup>18</sup> Holli suggests, nevertheless, that seigneurialism created bad habits among the French in contrast to land-hungry, agriculturally productive New Englanders accustomed to freehold tenure. Moreover, he argues that the French habitants rarely profited by their priority in the real estate

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<sup>16</sup> Robert B. Ross, "Detroit in 1837: Reminiscences of Joseph and Daniel J. Campau," *Detroit Sunday News Tribune*, 4 November 1894.

<sup>17</sup> See Holli, "French Detroit," 90; and Ross, "Detroit in 1837."

<sup>18</sup> Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 14-15.

booms of Detroit and Michigan. Instead of making windfall profits, they either sold cheap or clung to their holdings like old-fashioned *rentiers*. Holli completes his analysis of Campau the premodernist by citing his ownership of slaves. This fact and his love of horses and trafficking in liquor finishes his portrait of Campau's "seigneurial world of station and rank."<sup>19</sup>

We may, indeed, indict Campau for not being a New Englander. But he was not a man much impressed by station and rank; rather, he was a shrewd and calculating *negociant*. He and many of the older French families profited mightily from their land, as we shall see. And, indeed, they often did not buy and sell parcels, but preferred to subdivide farms into city lots, opening streets, building homes and commercial properties, and collecting rents. As one French descendant wrote, referring to his ancestor Judge Charles Moran, "The steadily-growing city thus poured an ever-increasing tribute into his hands."<sup>20</sup> If we are to label such activities as being feudal, then we must redefine the habits of America's urban landlords. It is probably true that neither the French in Monroe or in Detroit were particularly productive farmers, but why should they be when they were preoccupied with the fur trade and other business concerns. French Detroit in the year 1800 was an incipient city, and businessmen such as Joseph Campau were concerned with their families and their fortunes. Part of a transatlantic world of commerce, they were utterly middle class. The old privileges of the ancien regime were, at best, a distant memory. Comparing these francophone businessmen to Anglo-American frontier farmers, Holli found the former lacking in industrious habits. Ironically, men like Campau were simply behaving like capitalists and already occupied a social and economic position higher than most American settlers and their own francophone relations south of Detroit, who worked small farms and held less profitable positions within the fur trade.

Though acknowledged to be somewhat eccentric and perhaps a bit crusty, Campau's career was rather typical of his circle in Detroit. That circle included men such as Henry Berthelet who ran a store, engaged in the Indian trade, and operated several tanneries and other industrial enterprises. Campau's brother Louis, a fur trader and one of the developers of Grand Rapids, was married to Thérèse Moran. The Morans, near neighbors of the Campaus, were also heavily involved in a host of land developments and business ventures. Joseph Campau's wife, Adelaide Dequindre, was the older

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<sup>19</sup> Holli, "French Detroit," 89.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bell Moran, *The Moran Family: 200 Years in Detroit* (Detroit: Alved, 1949), 56.

sister of Julie Dequindre, who married Thérèse Moran's nephew, Judge Charles Moran.<sup>21</sup> Suffice it to say, these prominent families intermarried and formed a rather close-knit community. But this circle was not closed. In French Detroit, as in other francophone communities throughout the American mid-continent, a significant number of prominent merchants were recent arrivals. Some came from Canada after the Conquest. Others, especially in New Orleans and St. Louis, came from St. Domingue at the turn of the century. In short, these French communities were works in progress—they were not static.

In Detroit, Pierre Desnoyers arrived from Paris in the 1790s and became an important citizen in the town. Joseph Campau's son Daniel married Marie Françoise Palms, the daughter of Ange Palms—a former officer under Napoleon. A surprising number of francophone immigrants from France and Belgium, including political exiles, settled in American cities with francophone communities in the first decades of the 19th century. Palms' descendants wound up in Detroit and New Orleans.<sup>22</sup> And in Detroit, a number of British merchants married into the French community. John Askin married Marie-Archange Barthe. Her sister Thérèse married Commodore Alexander Grant. William Park and his partner George Meldrum married, respectively, Thérèse Gouin and Marie Chapoton. Their children spoke French and most remained Catholic. Joseph Campau's sister Cecile married Thomas Williams from Albany.<sup>23</sup> Joseph's nephew, John R. Williams, would become his trusted business associate and was Detroit's first elected mayor in 1824.

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<sup>21</sup> For information on the French families of Detroit, see Father Christian Denissen, *Genealogy of the French Families of the Detroit River Region, 1701-1936*, 2 vols. (rev. ed.) (Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1976); Judy Jacobson, *Detroit River Connections* (Baltimore: Clearfield Genealogical Publishing, 1994); Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin, *Legends of Le Détroit* (Detroit: Thorndike Nourse, 1884); Bernice Cox Sprenger, comp., *Guide to the Manuscripts in the Burton Historical Collection* (Detroit: The Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 1985); and Moran, *Moran Family*. For more on the Berthelet activities, see Brian L. Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 179, 181.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the Palms family, see Herbert V. Book, *Family Records* (privately printed, 1963). I want to thank Katie Palms, a Yale student, and her family for lending me a copy of this book.

<sup>23</sup> For more on this "composite community," see F. Clever Bald, *Detroit's First American Decade, 1796 to 1805* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948), chapter 3.



John R. would become a leading political figure in Detroit and an ardent spokesman for the French community. Although he spoke and wrote in English and French, he thought of himself as French. Writing to François Navarre in 1819 about an upcoming election, John R. observed passionately that this was a contest between the French and the Yankees and that the former must unite. "Je vous exhorte mon chér Colonel, ainçi que tous nos amis & concitoyens, de tenir ferme—soyez assuré que la conteste est veritablement entre nous tous, les natifs de pays, & les etrangers qui voudroient deja insolémment nous ravir nos droits & nos priviléges naturels." The result would be "glorieux pour notre patrie Canadienne."<sup>24</sup> John R. was clearly not ambivalent about the side to which he belonged. And these French families were not about to stand by and let their city and their position be taken from them.

The earliest tensions revolved around issues of culture and manners. Frederick Bates, an early American arrival and Jeffersonian bureaucrat, found himself attracted to the young ladies of the town, but reported that he made "little progress with the french girls."<sup>25</sup> Small wonder. At a church service, he and a friend had taken "Miss Navarre's pew." They carelessly spat upon the kneeling bench, and when Mlle. Navarre arrived and took her accustomed place, she discovered to her horror that her dress was stained by tobacco juice. Miss Navarre told her friends that Bates "had more ill-manners and less decency than even the Yankees generally had."<sup>26</sup> In Detroit, as in New Orleans and St. Louis, newly arrived Protestants were scandalized by the Creole Sabbath—the French habit of enjoying themselves—racing, gambling, dancing, even drinking—after church services. Attempts to place restrictions on Sunday amusements were defeated definitively in St. Louis in 1811. In New Orleans, a final attempt by a group of Protestant ministers to prevent theater performances and balls on the Sabbath was ridiculed unmercifully in the French-language press and easily defeated. In Detroit, however, the first Board of Trustees with an overwhelming

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<sup>24</sup> John R. Williams to François Navarre, August 31, 1819, Navarre Family Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Bates to Sally Bates, May 5, 1799, in Thomas M. Marshall, ed., *The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates*, 2 vols. (St. Louis, 1926), I, 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Bates*, I, 17.

Anglo majority in 1803 passed an ordinance to reduce "drunkenness, idleness, and profanity on the Sabbath day."<sup>27</sup>

The arrival of General William Hull as the first territorial governor stiffened the resolve of the French community. Among the various complaints in the petition requesting his removal in 1809 was that he did not bother to translate his proclamations or the laws of the territory into French. In Detroit as in St. Louis, the francophone majority had to fight to keep French as a public language. Official documents were thereafter printed in both languages until 1827, although political broadsides in French appeared in Michigan and Indiana into the 1830s. French remained a language of the marketplace as late as 1860, but by that time it was commonly spoken only in the domestic circle.<sup>28</sup> In his 1949 history of the Moran family of Detroit, J. Bell Moran noted with some scorn, the "customary Yankee indifference" to the French language.<sup>29</sup>

Leaders of the French community remained politically active as the city grew. John R. Williams won four straight elections as mayor in the 1840s. His cousin, Daniel J. Campau, was elected city treasurer twice in that decade. Both men, along with Judge Charles Moran, became leaders within Michigan's Democratic party and—contrary to Prof. Holli's assertion—were among the founders of Detroit's public schools, accomplished only after a compromise was reached on the reading of the Bible. Ardent Jacksonian Democrats, John R. Williams and Joseph Campau founded the *Detroit Free Press* in 1831 to serve as the voice of that party which supported the electoral rights of Catholic immigrants and resisted the attempts of Whigs and evangelicals to impose temperance laws.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Corporation of the Town of Detroit, *Act of Incorporation and Journal of the Board of Trustees, 1802-1805* (Detroit: Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 1922), 40-41.

<sup>28</sup> On these and various other bones of contention between the French and the incoming Anglos in Detroit and its hinterland, see: Russell Bidlack, *The Yankee Meets the Frenchman: River Raisin, 1817-1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948); Eric H. Kadler, "The French in Detroit, 1701-1880," *The French-American Review*, 6:2 (Fall 1982); and Bald, *Detroit's First American Decade*.

<sup>29</sup> Moran, *Moran Family*, xxi.

<sup>30</sup> For two representative documents, see Daniel J. Campau, Letter to the Delegates of the Detroit City Democratic Convention, February 19, 1853, Campau Family Papers; and John R. Williams, "To the Free and Independent Electors of Michigan," August 30, 1823, Williams Family Papers; both in the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. The best

Like the French elite of St. Louis, the French in Detroit were above all interested in protecting their real estate investments. And politics and land were always connected. In St. Louis, the Chouteau family monopolized the position of city surveyor.<sup>31</sup> In Detroit, John R. Williams served on an all-important committee to investigate private land claims, the foundation of wealth for older French families. His cousin, Daniel J. Campau received an appointment from President Franklin Pierce as Register of the United States Land Office in Detroit.<sup>32</sup>

The old private claims dating from the French regime were zealously defended and pursued by this mercantile elite. Joseph Campau, for example, successfully defended three separate claims in Grosse Pointe amounting to over two hundred acres.<sup>33</sup> Such lands on the outskirts and in the central districts of growing cities such as Detroit were subdivided and developed. Whatever personal misgivings the French may have had about the influx of Anglo-Americans, they recognized that settlement would increase the value of their properties and acted accordingly. And so we may observe a flurry of private Indian purchases in Michigan in 1795 and 1796 and a rush to obtain Spanish land grants in Upper Louisiana or Missouri from 1795 to 1803, all in anticipation of American sovereignty. When Boards of Land Commissioners disallowed claims, political pressure was applied to appoint new commissioners or to review such claims in Congress. The Chouteaus of St. Louis were masters of such techniques, employing, among others, Thomas Hart Benton and Daniel Webster to pursue their interests.

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overview of politics in Michigan in this period is Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

<sup>31</sup> For more information about the Chouteaus and St. Louis, see William E. Foley and C. David Rice, *The First Chouteaus: River Barons of Early St. Louis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); and Jay Larry Gitlin, "Negotiating the Course of Empire: The French Bourgeois Frontier and the Emergence of Mid-America, 1763 to 1863" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> See Ross, "Detroit in 1837," and Silas Farmer, *The History of Detroit and Michigan* (Detroit: Silas Farmer and Company, 1884), 977-982.

<sup>33</sup> The information on the Campau landholdings comes from Denis J. Campau, Rent Book, 1863-1880, and Denis J. Campau, Cash Book Commencing June 9th, 1863, of Denis J. Campau, Receiver of the Estate of Joseph Campau, Esq., Campau Family Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan; Ross, "Detroit in 1837;" and Voelker, "Joseph Campau."

Like the Chouteaus, the Campaus—Joseph and his brothers Louis and Barnabas—began their business careers as fur traders. Louis and Barnabas spent more time in Indian country. Joseph stayed in Detroit, ran the store, and outfitted other traders. Also like the Chouteaus, the Campau family at first marketed their furs through Canada, but gradually switched to commission houses in New York. The Chouteaus ultimately took over John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, became the power brokers of the West, and one of the richest families in the United States. The Campaus, though never as prominent as their St. Louis counterparts, followed a similar path to great wealth. The key, ironically, was the decline of the fur trade from 1808 to 1815, and the federal government's need to dispossess the Indians as settlers moved west in greater and greater numbers. As the pressure mounted to obtain land cessions from various tribes, French merchants—often well-liked and usually trusted by their Indian clients—were in a unique position to profit. And they profited in three ways: 1) by having land set aside for themselves in treaty negotiations; 2) by providing annuity goods promised by the government to the various tribes as specified in treaties; and 3) by receiving money directly from the government in payment of individual Indian debts, such money being subtracted from the amount the government was obligated by treaty to pay into tribal hands. Joseph Campau, who apparently spoke a number of Indian languages and welcomed natives passing through Detroit, owned and operated posts on the Huron River at Lake Erie, the Clinton River at Lake St. Clair, and in Saginaw. Louis Campau had posts and agents at Muskegon, Manistee, Kalamazoo, Lowell, Hastings, Eaton Rapids, and the mouth of the Grand River. As the fur trade became a business of treaty goods and land cessions, the Campaus—like the Chouteaus—profited mightily. Barnabas Campau served as a witness to the treaty with the Ojibwa at Saginaw in 1819. Another treaty, signed in 1836, guaranteed a payment in silver to the Campaus to cover Indian debts. With a guaranteed cash flow, the Campaus, like the Chouteaus, were not only able to withstand the Panic of 1837, they were able to increase their land holdings when others were forced to sell cheap. The exact profits are difficult to calculate, but Louis Campau was said to have earned over \$100,000 through such means.<sup>34</sup>

Like the Chouteaus, the Campaus bought land and invested in other ventures. Both families had an interest in local distilleries—especially useful in the Indian business. The Chouteaus

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<sup>34</sup> See Ida Amanda Johnson, *The Michigan Fur Trade* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1919), 129, 135; and Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (Mattituck, NY: Amereon House, 1972), 185-187.

became important brokers of railroad bonds, owned several blast furnaces, a rail factory, and a rolling mill. Joseph Campau more modestly became a stockholder in what became the Michigan Central Railroad. Above all, he gathered a fortune in real estate. Campau's holdings included the Normandie Hotel, Fraternity Hall, the Newberry and Campau buildings on Griswold Street, more than 1,000 acres in Grosse Pointe Township, and 500 acres in Springwells Township. In addition, he possessed lands in Macomb, St. Clair, Saginaw, Monroe, and several other Michigan counties.<sup>35</sup>

I would suggest that the Campaus, the Morans, and other French families with substantial landholdings, tended to be cautious in their speculative ventures, preferring a steady return on individual properties to large subdivisions and wildcat ventures. This served them well in the 1830s when newcomers to Detroit such as C. C. Trowbridge served as front men for eastern capitalists such as Arthur Bronson of New York and overextended themselves as the Panic of 1837 swept over the West.<sup>36</sup> Without going into the complexities of federal policies, local politics, land, and banking, I would observe that the Campaus, again like the Chouteaus and other French fur traders with means, had become informal bankers to the community in the first decades of the 19th century. In St. Louis, Auguste Chouteau in 1816 closed most of his private accounts and helped secure a charter for the Bank of Missouri, serving as the bank's president until 1821. His son Henri would pursue the family's banking interests.<sup>37</sup> In Detroit, Joseph Campau and his nephew John R. were among the organizers and first shareholders of the Bank of Michigan in 1818, with John R. serving as the first president until 1824. In that year, Williams resigned because the Dwight family of Springfield, Massachusetts had acquired two-thirds of the shares. John R.'s position as a leader in the French community had by then evolved into his becoming an advocate of local control against the power of eastern outsiders. He led the fight to charter a rival bank, the Farmers' and Mechanics' Bank, in 1829, and a struggle soon developed over the issue of federal land sales deposits. In 1835, a group of Democrats led by John R. incorporated another institution,

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<sup>35</sup> See sources in footnote 31.

<sup>36</sup> For a fuller account, see Jack F. Kilfoil, *C.C. Trowbridge, Detroit Banker and Michigan Land Speculator, 1820-1845* (1969; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1979); and Formisano, *Mass Political Parties*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> For the Chouteau side of this story, see Gitlin, "Negotiating the Course of Empire;" Primm, *Lion in the Valley*, 108-110; and Foley and Rice, *First Chouteaus*, 178-79.

the Michigan State Bank, which a Democratic state administration used for deposit of state funds.

These financial struggles represented on one level a contest for the political soul of the emerging state, as well as a practical contest over development and speculation. It is rather telling that in 1830, a young Whig disciple of Detroit's William Woodbridge, Munius Kenney, wrote to his patron from Washington where he had gone to seek a government appointment. In this letter, Kenney commented about Joseph Campau's sharp business practices. Complaining about the amount he owed Campau for an "old poney" and a rental property he described as a "wreck, almost a stable," Kenney wrote: "I wish Shakspear had known Campau, and he would not have fallen so far short of the insatiable sordidness of real life as he has in his delineation of Shylock."<sup>38</sup> Kenney later became a Whig member of the Michigan legislature and perhaps the leading advocate of Sabbatarian and temperance legislation. Although Campau was undoubtedly an efficient landlord, we may also assume that political and personal differences colored Kenney's opinion. When Woodbridge ran for governor in 1839, Whig leaders attempted to attract French voters with a circular addressed "aux citoyens français, et anciens habitans du Michigan." Despite the appeal and Woodbridge's ability to speak French, the party's leaders later complained that there was "not one man" on the ticket "calculated to call out any portion of the French population to our support."<sup>39</sup>

I think it should be clear by now that the French community in Detroit, especially the leading families, did not disappear from view after the fire of 1805. Far from being passive, the Campaus, Morans, Desnoyers, Berthelets, and many others I have not mentioned in this talk, were active in their pursuit of profits and leadership. They challenged the attempts of eastern capitalists to dictate the course of Detroit's development and resisted the attempts of Whiggish conservatives to impose their cultural values. Given their activities and their financial success, I think we must ask ourselves just how tradition-bound they had ever been, even in 1805?

The Catholicism of the French is often taken as one measure of their traditional character. Putting aside the fairness of such an unwarranted interpretation, have we overlooked some interesting complications? In the year 1800, Joseph Campau became the first Frenchman in Detroit to join the Zion Lodge, Number 10, Ancient

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<sup>38</sup> Munius Kenney to William Woodbridge, 24 June 1830, William Woodbridge Correspondence and Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>39</sup> Formisano, *Mass Political Parties*, 200.

Free and Accepted Masons. Following his lead, Gabriel Godfroy and six other Frenchmen had joined by 1805. Freemasonry, of course, was frowned upon by church as being both anti-Catholic and dangerously liberal. Indeed, when Campau, in ill health in 1802, asked Detroit's Father Richard for spiritual aid, the priest made him promise, among other things, to withdraw from the lodge. That year Campau went to confession and took a more active part in church affairs, even being chosen a *marguillier* or churchwarden. Richard would come to regret that move. Campau—apparently feeling much better—did not withdraw from the lodge and was reelected treasurer by his freemason brethren before the year was over.<sup>40</sup> Following the fire of 1805, French citizens living to the northeast of the village—described as "the most prosperous portion of the parish—and the most belligerent—demanded that St. Anne's be rebuilt in their vicinity or "that they be given a church of their own."<sup>41</sup> The controversy dragged on for years until 1817 when Bishop Flaget silenced the dissenters and excommunicated the seven ringleaders—including Campau. The following year, the bishop visited Detroit and united the flock. All seven leaders were restored to the faith, except Campau, who would not submit. He was the only member of his family not to be buried in Mt. Elliott, the catholic burying ground. His tombstone does, however, bear the Masonic emblems of the square and compass.<sup>42</sup> The point here is that Catholic freemasons tended to be highly educated and progressive. Campau's contemporary Pierre Chouteau, Jr. was also a freemason. French Catholic freemasons dominated the fabrique or board of church trustees controlling St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, resulting in a serious church schism in 1805. We may, perhaps, attribute such tendencies to Americanization, but the freemasons in New Orleans were actually resisting attempts by the church hierarchy to appoint priests sympathetic to the American cause.<sup>43</sup> Disputes between middle-class francophones and church officials

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<sup>40</sup> Bald, *Detroit's First American Decade*, 205.

<sup>41</sup> George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit, 1701-1888* (Detroit: The Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), 302, 485.

<sup>42</sup> Ross, "Detroit in 1837."

<sup>43</sup> See Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), ch. 5, "French Freemasonry and the Republican Heritage."

over the control of church property and liberal ideas were also becoming more common in Canada.<sup>44</sup>

In Detroit, as in St. Louis and New Orleans, the French did not disappear at the end of the colonial period. I would argue that they were, in fact, of critical importance in the transition from frontier to region, from the fur trade to the modern city. Proud of the places their ancestors had established, the mercantile elite sought to profit by their priority in the town and their influence in Indian country. Their role, ultimately, was primarily economic. Although the struggle lasted much longer in New Orleans, the attempt to retain French as a second public language was over in Detroit and St. Louis by the late 1830s. In certain urban neighborhoods and more rural areas, French speech and customs continued. The more prosperous middle-class evolved into an urban gentry before the Civil War. In St. Louis, these families clustered around Frenchtown, today known as Soulard for the developer who first laid out that addition. In Detroit, the French elite moved to Hamtramck and Grosse Pointe. There, the next generation expanded their connections and began to resemble others of their class. One of Pierre Desnoyer's daughters married the eminent educational reformer, Henry Barnard. A granddaughter married the son of writer Orestes Brownson. At the same time, two granddaughters became nuns and a grandson became the pastor of St. Aloysius in Detroit. These families remained distinctive. Like the French elite from other American cities, they attended Fordham, Notre Dame, and Georgetown.<sup>45</sup> The use of French continued, but now as a second language. They took pride in their orchards, especially their old French pear trees. Did their French roots matter? I would say "yes." As a charter elite that was neither Anglo nor Protestant, their very existence insured a debate over cultural values and immigrant rights that, in Michigan, became quite heated. I think it is important to insist that French Detroit did not cease to exist in 1805, that the francophone community remained important in the construction of the American city. We also need to encourage the preservation, use, and even publication and translation of the abundant primary sources that exist in the Burton Historical Collection—especially the nineteenth-century material that would shed more light on the French in this pivotal period.

Finally, I would suggest that the collective history of the French commercial elite in Detroit, St. Louis, and New Orleans should be of interest to historians of Quebec. Even as Lord Durham wrote about

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<sup>44</sup> See Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), chapter 3.

<sup>45</sup> See Moran, *Moran Family*, and the other sources cited in footnote 20.



Louisiana as a useful model of assimilation, the francophone community in that state was adamantly fighting to maintain French as a charter language in public education, government, and commerce. Many years ago, while reading an essay by José Igartua on "The Merchants of Montreal at the Conquest," I was struck by the author's list of names.<sup>46</sup> It reads like a virtual who's who of the American fur trade in the first half of the nineteenth century. How many French Canadian families pursued opportunities in places such as Detroit and St. Louis? When historians debated in the 1950s and 1960s on the impact of the Conquest on French-Canadian society, I think many agreed on the symptoms that called forth the Quiet Revolution. They disagreed, however, on both the diagnosis and the cure.<sup>47</sup> The debate on the French-Canadian bourgeoisie cannot be resolved so easily, but perhaps it should be extended. I have argued that merchants such as the Campaus and Chouteaus easily distanced themselves from ancien regime habits. Aggressively capitalist, dangerously progressive, and utterly successful, they remained French and Catholic—a distinctive bourgeoisie. At the same time, as urban elites, they dealt with issues of linguistic and cultural assimilation early in the nineteenth century. I think it is time for their stories to become part of the larger history of the French in North America.

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<sup>46</sup> José E. Igartua, "The Merchants of Montreal at the Conquest: Socio-Economic Profile," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 8:16 (November 1975).

<sup>47</sup> See Dale Miquelon, ed., *Society and Conquest: The Debate on the Bourgeoisie and Social Change in French Canada, 1700-1850* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1977).

