

ENCOUNTERING CADILLAC: DETROIT BEFORE 1701

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On July 24, 2001, Detroit celebrated three hundred years of existence as a site for permanent settlement. On July 24, 1701, according to standard accounts of Detroit's history, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac arrived on the shore of the Detroit River. He was accompanied by one hundred Frenchmen in twenty-five canoes. In this story, the Frenchmen bear no distinguishing marks—they are instead portrayed as a nameless and faceless collective in their support of Cadillac's dream of a busy and profitable fur trading post. A lesser number of Native Americans accompanied the Frenchmen in smaller canoes, seemingly prepared also to lend themselves and their efforts to the realization of Cadillac's vision. There were no women in the twenty-five canoes. Although this was not cause for immediate concern, this lack threatened the future economic viability of the new fort. One year later the arrival of Cadillac's wife, Marie Thérèse Guyon, would help transform the fort from a place through which fur traders passed on their way to and from Montreal, to a site of permanent habitation through the establishment of family. In a fashion mimicking the Biblical genesis, Cadillac and his men are purported to have set to work immediately constructing the shell of Fort Pontchartrain. The very next day, they would turn their attention to the building of a church, effectively establishing a French presence in the span of two days.¹

This rendition of events surrounding the birth of the city of Detroit is the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century local historians. Most of these histories adopted as their point of departure the research and writings of Clarence Burton, a self-styled man of letters, successful real estate investor and dedicated devotee of Detroit's history. Burton collected manuscripts concerning every aspect of his hometown and financed the massive effort of transcribing original documents from Europe and North America. Burton also constructed

¹Ferris E. Lewis, *Detroit: A Wilderness Outpost of Old France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1951), 6.

a history of Detroit to suit his personal aspirations and the aspirations he held for Detroit's economic development, attempting to define a point from which the industrial development of Detroit could be traced. He fancied himself, and men like him, as the culmination of what theorist Étienne Balibar describes as a project of nation building. As Balibar explains, the illusion of this type of history consists in seeing oneself as fulfilling a destiny begun at some point in the past and traceable through successive generations and successive moments of decisive action or self-awareness.²

Burton and those who followed his blueprint traced their own urban visions and the reasons for these visions backwards to a point of creation from which something, in the form of European civilization, was carved from the nothing of an undefined and unrefined physical and psychological wilderness. According to this formula, the arrival of Cadillac with his quest to exploit local resources, marks the beginning of the process of clearing a space in this landscape, and sets off Detroit's prehistory from its history. The founding father Cadillac becomes the quintessential and original risk-taker and entrepreneur. All other contemporaries of Cadillac were used by Burton to emphasize the founding father's unique, often mythic character and his suitability for the task assigned to him by destiny. For Burton, the French and Native American others lived at the periphery of the founder's life, acting as passive recipients of the results of Cadillac's ambitions, and living their lives in constant and perpetual reaction to the actions of the founding father. As a part of the untamed and unrefined environment, they became the raw material from which the narrative of the founding father could be hewn.

By examining some of the nineteenth-century histories of Detroit constructed around Cadillac as founding father, it is possible to recover some traces of these contemporaries. This shift in focus to the margins of traditional accounts of Detroit's founding allows for a better understanding of the attitudes of local historians such as Burton. The slippery quality of persons on the margins of these histories acts as a beacon for historians seeking to reinterpret and recontextualize the primary documents used to construct earlier historical accounts. It also offers an opportunity to reexamine the history of early eighteenth-century Detroit. It is possible to trace the invention and subsequent reinvention of Detroit's French history, and to follow the separation of this particular history into two possible scenarios: one emphasizing acculturation or passive adaptation in the face of an inevitable

² Étienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner, eds. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 86.

exploitation of persons and resources, another stressing strategic and proactive decision-making on the part of those relegated to the periphery.

One peripheral contemporary of Cadillac emerged briefly in nineteenth-century accounts of Detroit's founding and confounded Burton's efforts to trace a seamless history across two hundred years. His name was Pierre Roy, born in 1677 in Laprairie. In the last decade of the seventeenth century, Pierre hired himself out as a voyageur, probably to Montreal merchants who were at that time seeking to tap the rich source of in furs in the *pays d'en haut* or upper country around the Great Lakes. At this same time, French Jesuits, seeking to tap an equally rich source in Native American souls in this same geographic area, were hiring voyageurs to take them to their potential converts. At some point during this time, Pierre fulfilled the terms of his contract and became an independent fur trader. During this time, he also met and married a Native American woman of the Miami tribe named Marguerite Ouabankikoué. It is also highly probable that at this point, Pierre came into contact with Cadillac while the latter was commandant at Michilimackinac. Pierre became one of the first to receive a grant of land from Cadillac inside Fort Pontchartrain in the new post at Detroit.

But Pierre Roy would become the basis for a considerable amount of conjecture during the nineteenth-century. Various histories refer to him in passing as having been in Detroit before Cadillac's arrival on July 24, 1701. In a lecture delivered in Windsor, Ontario on April 1, 1861 and published as *Notes Historiques sur la Colonie Canadienne de Détroit*, Rameau de Sainte-Père offered his depiction of the earliest days of Detroit:

Quelques-uus [*sic*] de ces coureur de bois se fixèrent sans doute dans le pays, car lorsque Cadillac vint prendre possession du vieux fort et de son domaine, il nous paraît certain que déjà plusieurs Français étaient établis sur le Détroit, entre autres Pierre Roy et François Pelletier.³

According to Rameau, Roy and Pelletier are established in an area already serviced by a fort. Most importantly, there are other Frenchmen living in the vicinity. In her book *Legends of le Détroit* published in 1883, Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin presents her rendition of the events of Cadillac's landing:

On the 24th of July, 1701, the head of the expedition rounded Belle

³François E. Rameau de Saint-Père, *Notes Historiques sur la Colonie Canadienne de Détroit* (Montreal: J. B. Rolland & Fils, 1861), 6.

Isle and soon landed at a little cove at the foot of the present Griswold Street. The Ottawas and Hurons, whose villages were near, rushed down to welcome them as did also a few French “coureurs des bois,” who lived here. Two of their names are still preserved: Pierre Roy and François Pelletier.⁴

In this account, a motley crew of Frenchmen is clearly established in Detroit before Cadillac’s arrival. Hamlin also makes reference to two groups of Native Americans who are living with the Europeans. But it is Clarence Burton who, in his book *Detroit under Cadillac*, raises the issue of the first white man and thereby establishes its importance. Burton settles this dilemma promptly:

There is one more subject of interest on which I desire to add a few words, the oft repeated question of ‘who was the first white man at Detroit?’ Not who were the first persons passing through the strait, but who first landed at Detroit with a determination to make that place his future home? This question would not have arisen except for statements in some of the earlier Michigan histories, which allege that Pierre Roy and Joseph Parent were located at Detroit before Cadillac came. I believe the statement has no foundation in fact, and I will try to prove its untruth.⁵

Burton continues at length, resting his case on Cadillac’s statements that no one had ever visited the area around Detroit before his arrival. He also emphasizes that the area around Detroit was, as he described it, a neutral ground not occupied permanently by any Indians. By relegating Pierre Roy, Joseph Parent and Native Americans to a position outside his narrative, Burton creates an historical vacuum—a ground zero or starting point upon which the story of Cadillac can be etched. Pierre Roy, Marguerite Ouabankikoué, François Pelletier, and Joseph Parent, along with other Frenchmen and Native Americans become props placed in the hands of the mythic Cadillac.

Historical individuals such as Pierre Roy are often used by historians to garnish the activities of founding fathers and individuals attributed with historic firsts. Collectively, they are presented as the other against which the founder’s accomplishments can be measured. As gender historian Leonore Davidoff explains, this quality of “otherness” is applied to these “designated non-individuals”, marking

⁴Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin, *Legends of le Détroit* (Detroit: Thorndike Nourse, 1884), 28-29.

⁵C. M. Burton, *Cadillac’s Village, or, Detroit under Cadillac: With List of Property Owners and a History of the Settlement from 1701 to 1710* (Detroit: 1896), 16-17.

them collectively as somehow different from that primary person with whom they interact. This primary person possesses the “capacity for action in transformation of their environment” and requires “a subject upon which to act.”⁶ Local historians utilize this concept in their histories of the great man Cadillac, who is portrayed as a self-conscious and willful agent, taking control of his own destiny and acting upon others in his environment. The individuality or unique identities of those around him are sacrificed for the purpose of maintaining a good story that emphasizes his extraordinary character.

These historians insert the backgrounders into a narrative that has “already been written,”⁷ in this case, the biography of Cadillac the founding father. As a group, the French inhabitants at Le Détroit are regarded in the same manner as are Native Americans, namely as being in need of direction and organization by Cadillac. They are neither self-conscious, nor in control of the direction of their own lives and are at the mercy of more powerful and willful historical agents. The mythic figure Cadillac represented the best possible life that those who lived with and around him could wish to emulate. Living the vision of this good life in the new world, he was able to work toward its further development among those who had barely realized its appropriateness for themselves. We can tell much about the aims and attitudes of historians by virtue of how they contextualize the activities of these people on the margins. As backgrounders, these historical figures become types, the equivalent of Rorschach inkblots upon which historians project their interpretations of past events and peoples. There is always little individual variance allowed in the characters of these backgrounders in any one history; they are used as props, much like the rulers used by archaeologists in photographs to illustrate the height, width and length of artifacts. The only variance allowed them is how they are manipulated en masse in each historical rendition to highlight the achievements of the founding father.

Pierre Roy and Marguerite Ouabankikoué are examples of such props, used both by their contemporaries and by later historians to further delineate the legacy of Cadillac. Marguerite Ouabankikoué was a Native woman of the Miami tribe. She probably came to Detroit with the Miami between 1701 and 1703, when Cadillac invited a variety of Algonquian tribes to settle there for purposes of increasing trade at the

⁶Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender & Class* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 233.

⁷Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), 220.

fort.⁸ She is purported to have married Pierre Roy in 1703, although no record exists of this marriage. By aligning herself with Pierre, she would be eventually separated from her people, who would abandon Detroit during Cadillac's tenure. She would also be separated from her husband, who, for all intents and purposes, would leave Detroit to pursue greater trading freedom among his wife's people at the Poste des Miamis, the site of present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana. Marguerite would disappear into the French social presence at Detroit, raising six children in an atmosphere which was becoming increasingly contentious, due to mounting hostilities between some of the tribes who had settled in Detroit and Cadillac, who tended to side with one tribe against another in a continuing series of disputes. With the baptism of each child, she resurfaces briefly in the record between 1704 and 1717, but it is her lack of immunity to and death from the European scourge of smallpox in October of 1732 which establishes and identifies her finally and forever as Native American. Interestingly, it is highly likely that the outbreak of this disease originated in Post Miami, the adopted home of her French husband.⁹

Pierre and Marguerite's lives mirror those of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac and his wife Marie Thérèse Guyon in many ways. The preeminence of Cadillac's arrival at Detroit and the subsequent arrival of his wife, the first white woman to grace the new fort, would, however, garner all the attention of future historians. Plaques, paintings and statues commemorate the introduction of European and French culture through the means of the Cadillacs and the firsts which have been attributed to them. The lives of the two couples, however, are so completely intertwined and interdependent that it is historically care-less to ignore Pierre and Marguerite in order to maintain the myth of the founding father Cadillac. It is at the intersections in the historic record of these four lives where the greatest amount of information on the culture of Detroit in the early eighteenth century can be recovered.

In a book published in 1951 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Cadillac's founding of Detroit, one local historian describes Madame Cadillac's arrival in Detroit in 1702 as the point at which "family life had

⁸Extracts from Cadillac's Report of Detroit in 1703, August 31, 1703 in Ernest J. Lajeunesse, *The Windsor Border Region* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 22-23.

⁹John D. Barnhart and Dorothy L. Riker, *Indiana to 1816: The Colonial Period* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau and Indiana Historical Society, 1971), 84.

begun at Detroit."¹⁰ A bronze tablet depicting her arrival, and completed on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of this event, portrays Madame Cadillac set high in her canoe, two of her children nestled close to her and hovering over the men around her. Beside her are the French men of the Fort and, on the other side, Native men kneel before her in a posture of reverence.¹¹ She and Madame de Tonty, the wife of Alphonse de Tonty, Cadillac's second-in-command, are also identified as the first white women to have ventured that distance from Montreal. It is as if family life had been nonexistent before this point with the marriages of French men and Native women or Native men and women and their subsequent progeny falling outside the category of the family. The quality of womanhood attributed to Mesdames Cadillac and de Tonty also superseded and subsumed that of Marguerite and the hundreds of other Native women who had settled in and around Detroit.

Despite her seeming historic importance, Madame Cadillac becomes a type of backgrounder in this capacity, as surely as Pierre and Marguerite. She represents French womanhood and exists as other to Cadillac only because of her gender, which complements and completes the French male presence in Detroit. Because of this, her quality of otherness in comparison to her husband is not as strongly reinforced as that of Marguerite, who exists at the opposite end of the mythic Cadillac in every possible way. Madame Cadillac arrives with Madame de Tonty and the influence of French culture is felt to have finally taken root. Her life begins, in a sense, as soon as she sets foot on the soil of Detroit. She proceeds to bear a child in Detroit on February 2, 1704. This arrival is noteworthy because it marks the birth of the first white child in Detroit and the baptism is the first religious event recorded in the new church records. It also further solidifies La Mothe Cadillac's role as founder. The birth is also significant because it augers well for the future fertility of the colony in Detroit. It symbolizes the ability of things French to survive and even thrive in a geography that did not readily lend itself to the maintenance of French customs and ways of life.

The birth of Pierre and Marguerite's first child follows that of the Cadillacs' child on April 27, 1704—the second religious event registered in the records of Ste. Anne's Church. Pierre and Marguerite's half-native/half-French daughter becomes the wrong mirror image of the Cadillacs' daughter, lacking the purity of race and social position of the

¹⁰Lewis, *Wilderness Outpost* 15.

¹¹Agnes C. Laut, *Cadillac: Knight Errant of the Wilderness, Founder of Detroit, Governor of Louisiana from the Great Lakes to the Gulf* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931), 166.

daughter born to the Cadillacs. The marriage of Pierre and Marguerite is also a bastardized rendition of that of the Cadillacs, particularly because the record of the marriage was destroyed in a fire at Ste. Anne's in 1703. Its legitimacy is assumed but acknowledged as impossible to verify.

On August 25, 1711, following his departure for a new post in Louisiana, an inventory of all Cadillac's belongings at Detroit was completed by two inhabitants of the Fort and the whole of this extensive property was placed in the care of Pierre Roy, including the church, several houses, a warehouse, church ornaments, tools, animals, foodstuffs, armaments and miscellaneous merchandise ranging from thread and glass beads to clothing for the Fort's soldiers and for the priests.¹² In effect, as Cadillac purported to own everything not directly traded for or purchased by the inhabitants themselves, Roy became Cadillac's surrogate, gaining control by proxy of all of Cadillac's claims to authority at Detroit, without the benefit of his status as commandant. Almost immediately upon Cadillac's removal from Detroit, the first commandant to replace him flouted Cadillac's privileges by confiscating this property.

The property would provide the basis for a series of letters, written by Cadillac to Governor General Vaudreuil, who was not sympathetic to Cadillac's position. Cadillac would eventually appeal to the powers at the French court whom he had originally visited to present his plan to establish the Fort. He argued from France and Louisiana for his right to maintain his trading privileges at the Fort and to his property. He spoke against the succession of commandants who followed him at the Fort and who ignored his property rights. He wrote continuously of the preeminence of his rights—even though he was no longer at the Fort—by drawing attention to his vision for Detroit and his subsequent success in realizing this dream for the good of the French crown. In a letter addressed to the Comte de Toulouse in 1718, Cadillac finally pleads on behalf of Pierre Roy whom he describes as having suffered at the seizure of Cadillac's property. According to Cadillac, Roy's loyalty led to his harassment and as a result of this treatment, he was forced to flee to Montreal. Cadillac further narrates that at Montreal, Roy was treated poorly by Governor General Vaudreuil, who sought to revenge himself against Roy for having harboured Cadillac's property. Cadillac finishes by stating that the unfortunate Roy had again been forced to flee his persecutor, this time for a life outside the colony and

¹² Inventory of Cadillac's Detroit Property, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society Historical Collections*, vol. 33, Cadillac Papers (Lansing: Robert Smith, 1904), 518-28.

among the Natives.¹³ For her part in the empire of Cadillac, Marguerite Roy and a number of other families loyal to Cadillac would be turned out of the Fort by the Commandant Dubuisson and left unprotected in the increasingly unstable environment of hostilities between the resident tribes and the French. Madame Cadillac and her children would suffer the same fate.

By 1719 or 1720, Pierre Roy had completely abandoned the increasingly tight restrictions on trade at Detroit and its series of inept commandants who had harassed him in their quarrels over Cadillac's property and privileges. He was not present to father the last child of his wife Marguerite, a girl born in 1721, listed as an *enfant naturel* or illegitimate child. His brother François acted on his behalf in Montreal, arranging to have supplies and other necessities sent to him by canoe periodically.

Rather than disappearing to live with the Natives, as had been narrated by Cadillac, Pierre became an interpreter between the Miamis and the local French commandant at Post Miami, opening what local Fort Wayne historian Mary Elizabeth Wood calls the first trading post in that area.¹⁴ He had established himself to the extent that his daughter and future son-in-law would request permission by church authorities in Detroit to be married at Post Miami in 1728. A trading agreement between Roy and the French commandant D'Arnaud in June of 1732, the year of his wife's death, provided him with extra monies for his efforts as interpreter. The two men were described as being in equal partnership.¹⁵ Interestingly, with his move to the Miami post, he would gain a place in the lore of another city's beginnings. He would be credited with having founded Fort Wayne, a starting point that would form the basis for Fort Wayne's sense of itself as a bustling centre of trade and commerce. Pierre Roy's abandonment of the Fort at Detroit and his presumed inability to fully protect Cadillac's property became emblematic of the failure of commandants at the Fort and French authorities in general to regulate or understand the distinct cultures of French and Native Americans in this wilderness outpost. Cadillac lived on the edges of the French world in the *pays d'en haut*, balancing a

¹³1718 Letter to the Comte de Toulouse, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society Historical Collections*, vol. 33, Cadillac Papers (Lansing: Robert Smith, 1904), 605.

¹⁴ Mary Elizabeth Wood, *French Imprint on the Heart of America: Historical Vignettes of 110 French-Related Localities in Indiana and the Ohio Valley* (Knightstown, IN: The Bookmark, 1977), 70.

¹⁵ Barnhart and Riker, *Indiana*, 83.

position of privilege with the life of the uncultivated spaces outside Montreal. Pierre Roy lived a similar existence, but finally gave himself completely to life in these same spaces. Pierre Roy and other voyageurs and *coureurs de bois* represented a half-way point on the continuum between the rules and regulations of life lived as a Frenchman and those of its opposite—the rituals of the wilderness which had no apparent rationality and therefore no legitimacy. The uncultivated interior allowed Pierre to become barely visible and finally invisible. This same unknown interior represents that psychological quality of the marginalized other that continues to elude historians. With his departure for life outside of the world of the French fort, Pierre disappears from the record of Detroit and from a position of supposed passivity at the hands of Cadillac and his successors, and resurfaces as the self-made founder in the history of another city's coming into being. He has transformed himself from an object to a willful agent.¹⁶ Pierre is also transformed in the record from one who has fled or reacted, to the individual actively shaping his environment.

¹⁶ Freeman, *Rewriting*, 185.