

Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

Gary M. Lavergne

Privately Published by the Author
Cedar Park, Texas



GARY M. LAVERGNE
AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR

© 2020 by Gary M. Lavergne
All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Edition 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

This book is privately published for the enjoyment and edification of the
Lavergne and related families and is not for sale or resale.

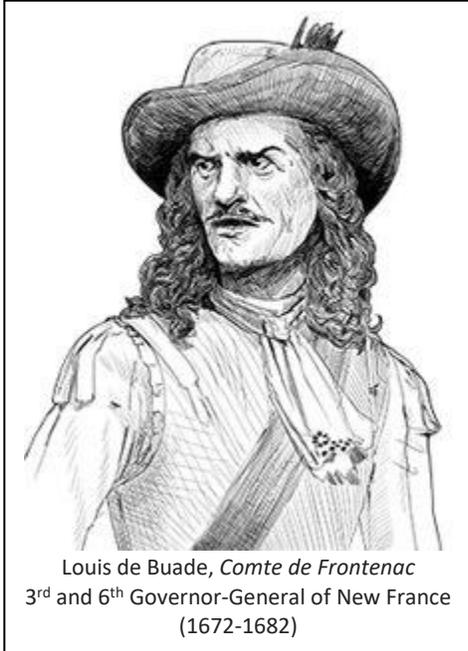
For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book write to:

Gary M. Lavergne
P.O. Box 934
Cedar Park, Texas 78630-0934

garylavergne@yahoo.com

EXPANDING NEW FRANCE

The Laverignes Move to Quebec, New Orleans, and Opelousas



Louis de Buade, *Comte de Frontenac*
3rd and 6th Governor-General of New France
(1672-1682)

Shortly after the French founded Quebec in 1608, their explorers and fur traders pushed westward along the Great Lakes area. The chief activity of the French was the fur trade conducted by the *coureurs de bois* or the "runners of the woods." The Governor of New France, Louis de Buade, *Comte de Frontenac* (1620-1698), showed a preference for fur trading activities over the establishment of farming communities. Thus, the development of New France was merely an attempt to expand the scope of the lucrative fur trade and extend French dominance in the New World. Pierre Esprit Radisson first heard of a great river which ran southward toward the Gulf of Mexico and within a few years the French had explored the upper portions of that "great river."

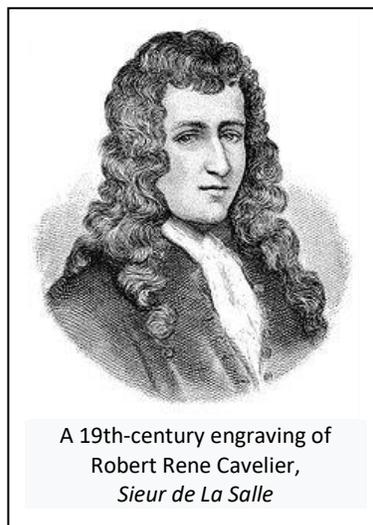
The Jesuits were among the first Europeans to explore the Great Lakes area during their missionary work among the North American Indians. It is a testament to their influence that the first reference to "Mississippi" is found in the diary of Father Claude Jean Allouez (1622-89). He and another priest

set out to explore the great river but they never found it. Another testament to Jesuit influence was that New France's Governor, *Comte de Frontenac*, arrived in Canada with secret orders to curb the influence of the Jesuits. It was Frontenac who asked Louis Joliet (1646-1700), a fur trapper and experienced boatman, and Father Jacques Marquette (1637-75), a Jesuit, to explore the Mississippi River. Frontenac hoped that the expedition would show that the Mississippi River was an artery from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean. If it emptied into the Pacific, an immensely valuable water route to the Orient would have been discovered, greatly enhancing the value of Canada and other French-dominated areas of the New World.

It was in October 1672, almost ten years after the arrival of Louis Lavergne, that Joliet and his party left Quebec to meet Marquette. By May 1673, Joliet, Marquette and five others set out in two canoes. The Indians told the party bizarre stories of the river and its environs in an attempt to discourage further explorations. It was on 17 June 1673 that the party first saw the Mississippi near the confluence of the Wisconsin River. They canoed the Mississippi to present-day Memphis, Tennessee, at the mouth of the Arkansas River. At that location, in July 1673, the party concluded that the Mississippi drained into the Gulf of Mexico, not the Pacific Ocean. Fears of hostile Spaniards and Indians further south convinced the party to head back to Canada. In September of 1673, they arrived in present-day Green Bay, Wisconsin, where they spent the winter. In the Spring of 1674, Joliet returned to Quebec and reported to Frontenac that the lower Mississippi Valley had better soil for farming and a much milder and better climate. Marquette never had the opportunity to report to Frontenac; he died on 19 May 1675 on his way to Canada.

It was during this exciting exploratory period that Louis Lavergne, having arrived in the New World in the latter half of the 1660s, met and married Marie Anne Simon, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Hubert Simon. Their marriage on 26 May 1675 was held during a period of uncertainty and unrest for the struggling village of Quebec. Indeed, New France lingered on the verge of absolute disaster. As a master stone mason by trade, Louis Lavergne's services were certainly essential, both for reasons of military defense and civilian housing. The settlement was small enough so that it seems certain that Louis would have known, or at least have been familiar with the characters involved in the location of and subsequent exploration of the Mississippi River. Louis and Marie Anne Simon set up house in 1675 and raised a family in Quebec until 1687, when Louis died at the age of 40. He left behind a 27-year-old widow with six small children: Marie Anne, age 10; Pierre, age 8; Louis, age 6; Phillippe, age 4; Marie Angelique, age 2; and Marie Louise, age 1. (Marie Anne Simon Lavergne died in 1743 at the age of 83.)

As a resident of Quebec City, Louis Lavergne would most likely have been familiar with a fellow resident named Rene Robert Cavalier, *Sieur de La Salle*. La Salle arrived in New France in 1667, right about the same time as Louis Lavergne, and the settlement's population was about 800 at that time. In 1673 Governor Frontenac sent La Salle to France to report to French Finance Minister Colbert on the status of New France. (See "Quebec City: The Emergence of Louis Lavergne"). He returned to Canada two years later (1675) with a grant of nobility only to return to France (1677) with a request of the King for ships and settlers for the lower Mississippi River Valley. To make his case before the King, La Salle told of rich mines and the prospect of mass conversions of Indians to Christianity—both sheer fabrications. By 14 July 1678, La Salle left France and reached Quebec two months later.



A 19th-century engraving of Robert Rene Cavalier, *Sieur de La Salle*

La Salle made plans to explore the lower Mississippi. His ambitions were plain enough: he wanted to get rich. The drive to explore the lower Mississippi was intensified by a book written by Joliet about his and Marquette's excursion. After reading the book, La Salle entertained dreams of a French empire along the Mississippi. He and Governor Frontenac were very good friends insofar as they shared many of the same selfish and opportunistic ambitions. It was with Frontenac's support that La Salle embarked on his famous trip to the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Before embarking, La Salle enlisted the aid of another explorer of note named Henri de Tonti. Tonti was an Italian whose right hand had been nearly severed by an exploding grenade during a battle against the Spanish. Instead of waiting for medical assistance, he cut off his own hand, which was later replaced by an iron limb. He was commonly referred to as *Bras-de-fer*, or "Iron Hand." La Salle and Tonti started down the Mississippi River in early 1682 with fifty-four Frenchmen and Indians, including thirteen Indian women and children. Unlike Joliet and Marquette, who suspected that the Indians of the lower Mississippi Valley would be more hostile, La Salle found that they were friendlier. On 6 April 1682, the party reached the "Head of Passes" or the northern tip of the Mississippi Delta in present-day Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Once there they split into three groups: one headed by Tonti, another by a Dautray, and the third by La Salle himself who descended the river via what is called today the Southwest Pass. On 9 April 1682, La Salle saw the Gulf of Mexico and "took possession" of the country by erecting a large wooden cross. On it was inscribed: "Louis the Great, King of France and Navarre, reigns, April 9, 1682." He claimed all lands drained by the Mississippi River for France. (This was one of

the largest land claims in the history of the world, as the Mississippi drains most of the North American continent). Additionally, he named the area "*Louisiane*," meaning "the land of Louis."



Joseph-Antoine le Fèvre,
Sieur de La Barre,
Governor-General of New France
(1682-1685)

Upon returning to New France, La Salle was to learn that his friend, Governor Frontenac, had been replaced by a bitter enemy, Joseph-Antoine le Fèvre, *Sieur de La Barre*. La Barre accused La Salle of wanting to be King and seized several forts along the upper Mississippi that had been under La Salle's control. La Salle then returned to France (1683) and appealed directly to the King for the return of the forts and for a chance to colonize the lower Mississippi Valley. La Salle maintained the fiction of peaceful colonization and the necessity of offsetting the expansion of New Spain by embellishing his falsehoods. He claimed to know of Spanish silver mines and proposed an elaborate scheme of establishing a fort about 170 miles upstream from the mouth of the river. La Salle asked for 200 men and a year of supplies; he got somewhat more. The King wrote to La Barre and ordered the return of the forts to La Salle. La Salle got four ships and 300 colonists to attempt to colonize the lower Mississippi. They departed in 1684.

Almost from the beginning, the voyage was a disaster. The commander of the ships, Commander Taneguy le Gallois de Beaujeu, was suspicious of La Salle and from the start their relations were strained, at best. The attempt to reach the Mississippi via the Gulf of Mexico failed as the ships missed the mouth of the river and sailed instead westward to Matagorda Bay in Texas. There La Salle established a settlement called Fort St. Louis (on a bluff overlooking Garcitas Creek in present-day Victoria County, Texas. It is the earliest European settlement on the entire Gulf coast between Pensacola, Florida, and Tampico, Mexico). After months of hardships the realization that he had led many innocent people to an agonizingly slow extinction resulted in LaSalle's murder at the hands of his own men. The Spaniards later found out about La Salle's settlements and destroyed them. And so, for the time, both France and Spain lay claim to Louisiana, which would belong to whomever would settle there first.

After the death of La Salle, France seemed to forget about Louisiana, but there were leaders from both Canada and France who continued to call for the immediate settlement of the lower Mississippi River Valley. The French decision to finally move on settling Louisiana came about more as a perceived need to offset the influence of the Spanish and British in the New World than a recognition of the inherent value of Louisiana as a territorial possession. Secret agents in the employ of King Louis XIV discovered that the British were planning to establish a settlement in Louisiana. Louis Phélypeaux, known as the *Comte de Pontchartrain*, an important government official in France, realized that he had to take immediate action. After a series of conferences with French and Canadian leaders, two possible methods of settling Louisiana were considered:

1. colonists could either be sent down the Mississippi River from the Great Lakes region under the leadership of a man like Tonti who knew the country, or
2. they could be sent by ship directly from France.



Pierre Le Moyne, *Sieur d'Iberville*
Founder of the French colony of *La Louisiane*
of New France. Near present day Mobile,
Alabama. He was born in Montreal of French
colonist parents.

French officials made a concerted effort to appoint an experienced naval commander with leadership qualities to head the expedition. After considering many Frenchmen and Canadians they chose Pierre Le Moyne, *Sieur d'Iberville*.

Iberville was destined to become the "Founder of Louisiana." He seemed to be the ideal choice to begin the colonization of the lower Mississippi River valley. Born and reared in Canada, Iberville had an active childhood. He joined the French Navy while still a teenager and was later to become a fleet commander, winning stunning victories over the British in Hudson Bay and off the coast of New Foundland. The combination of his Canadian roots, naval background, and experience with the British made his selection obvious—and ideal.

Upon arriving at Mobile Bay, Iberville's ships anchored off Ship Island. The next day, 13 February 1699, Iberville and his younger brother, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, *Sieur d'Bienville*,

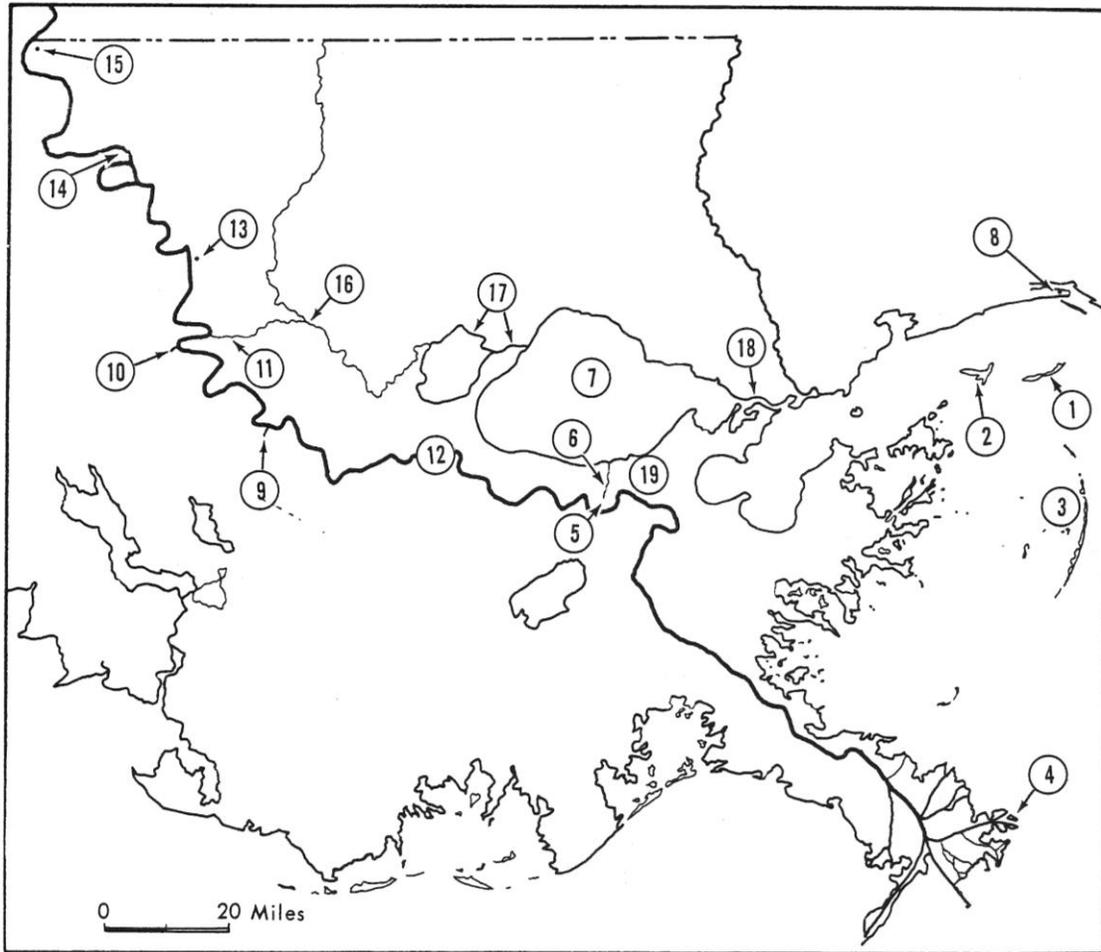
rowed to the mainland and visited the Biloxi Indians. Shortly afterwards, Iberville, Bienville, and about fifty other men set off in two large boats and two canoes in search of what La Salle was unable to find, the mouth of the Mississippi River. The low, marshy, irregular coast along with unfavorable winds and thick fog and storms made progress northward almost insufferably slow. Late one afternoon the party rounded a small cape; the wind drove them toward a series of jutting crags of land surrounding calmer waters. On 2 March 1699, Iberville wrote:

"As I neared the rocks, I perceived that there was a river. I passed between two of the rocks in twelve feet of water, the sea very heavy. ...I found the water sweet and with a very great current."

The "rocks" were really mud-covered logs. The river was the Mississippi. The party started up the river the very next day. On the fourth day Iberville reached a village of Bayougoula Indians who offered to guide them up the river. He was certain he was on the Mississippi when the Bayougoulas presented him with a fourteen-year-old letter Tonti had written to La Salle helping in establishing a colony. (Remember: La Salle had missed the mouth of the river and was to meet his demise with his settlement at Matagorda Bay in Texas).

Iberville was to continue his historic journey by traveling northward past a village of the Mongoulacha Indians, passing the site of the present-day capital of Louisiana. He saw a red pole with the heads of fish and bear attached to it; he called the site "*Baton Rouge*" or "red stick." After being entertained by the Indians, the Iberville Party started back for Ship Island. Iberville and Bienville parted at Bayou Manchac. Iberville returned via Bayou Manchac, the Amite River, and Lakes Maurepas, Ponchartrain, and Borgne; Bienville continued down the Mississippi to its mouth then turned northward toward Ship and Cat Islands. The two brothers arrived at Cat Island within a few hours of one another. (See map below.)

EXPANDING NEW FRANCE



Map Iberville's Ascent of the Mississippi, 1699. (1) Ship Island; (2) Cat Island; (3) Chandeleur Islands; (4) Mudlumps; (5) Portage to Bayou St. John; (6) Bayou St. John; (7) Lake Pontchartrain; (8) Biloxi; (9) Bayou Lafourche; (10) Bayou Plaquemine; (11) Bayou Manchac; (12) Mississippi River; (13) Baton Rouge; (14) Pointe Coupee; (15) Houma village; (16) Junction of Manchac with the Amite River; (17) Lake Maurepas and Pass Manchac; (18) The Rigolets; (19) Isle of Orleans

(Taken from Fred Kniffen's Louisiana and Its People)

By 1 May 1699, Iberville and his men had completed the construction of a small fort on the eastern side of Biloxi Bay. They called the settlement Fort Maurepas, after the Prime Minister of France. The fort was garrisoned by about seventy men with six months provisions. On 4 May 1699, Iberville set sail for France to get new colonists and additional supplies. By rediscovering the mouth of the Mississippi *from* the Gulf of Mexico, and setting up Fort Maurepas, Iberville sowed the seed that was to become French Louisiana.

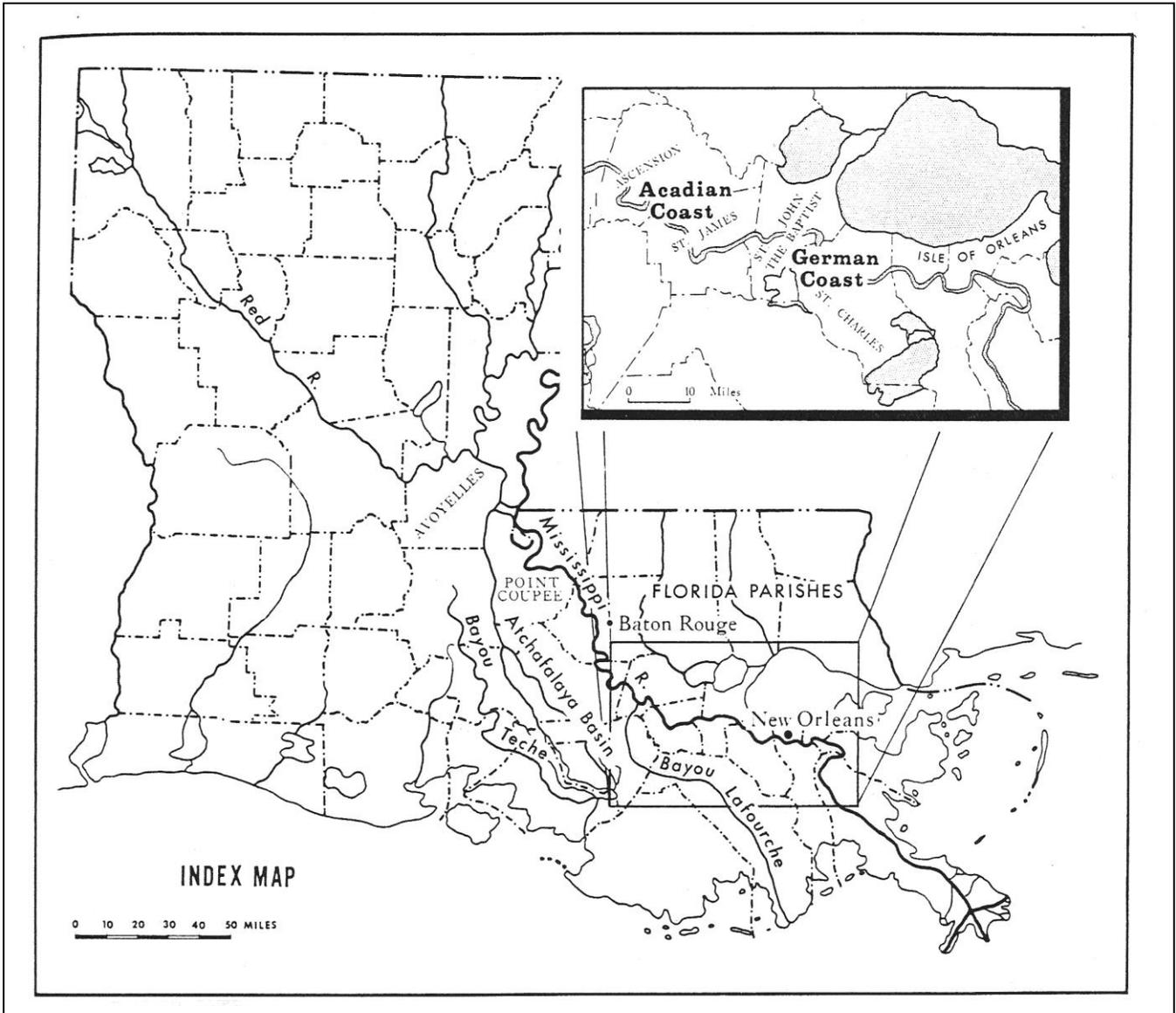
The early years of the Louisiana colonies were exceedingly difficult for the settlers for a number of reasons. First, many of the Canadians were *coureurs de bois* who often refused to engage in agricultural drudgery. Secondly, most of the colonists from France preferred to explore the region in a vain search for La Salle's "gold and silver mines." The absence of women for marrying and home-building also led to some discontentment. The fact that no crops were grown during the first year meant that the original cache of supplies brought over from France was being rapidly depleted. In 1702, Iberville moved most of the settlers to Dauphin Island and shortly afterwards built another settlement on the west side of Mobile Bay. Iberville was to write to the French government that there was a need for "honest tillers of the earth" not more explorers and fortune seekers. Unlike many other French leaders, Iberville saw the need to establish agriculture as the colony's chief means of livelihood. His service to Louisiana was interrupted by yet another war with England, which required his services as a naval commander. Iberville later died of yellow fever in Cuba in 1706.

Louisiana was to grow slowly and painfully under French rule. Louis Lavergne (1681-1750), the son of Louis Lavergne (1647-1687) of Quebec, immigrated to Louisiana in the early 1720s. He first lived in Pascagoula and later married Elizabeth Tommelin on 4 July 1725 in New Orleans. Her father, Pierre Tommelin, was a carpenter who lived in New Orleans on Chartres Street with a new wife and several slaves.

Since Louis Lavergne was a resident of Louisiana before his marriage to Elizabeth Tommelin, he witnessed the establishment of the Louisiana colony. First, Louis married Elizabeth at the age of 44. Perhaps marriage at that late age suggests that he lived for a period of time in areas not inhabited by European or Canadian women, much as the first Louisiana pioneers did. Secondly, he is referred to in Conrad's *Louisiana's First Families* and in Deville's *New Orleans French* as an inhabitant of Pascagoula River. Unlike their parents, Louis Lavergne and Elizabeth Tommelin appear to be farmers with land claims. Many of the farms along the Gulf Coast in the area now known as the Gold Coast of Mississippi and Alabama predated the founding of New Orleans. In October 1726 Louis requested Negro slaves from "The Company." That company was The Company of the West, a business venture of the Royal Bank of France founded under the Director-Generalship of John Law, the son of a wealthy Scottish Merchant. The fate of Louis and Elizabeth Tommelin's request for slaves is not known, but the fate of the Company is. By the time of the Lavergne request the Company was bankrupt. John Law's speculation is often referred to as one of the first business "bubbles" to burst in the New World. Apparently, the couple moved to New Orleans, and later upriver along the Mississippi near what is Kenner and Destrehan in Jefferson and St. Charles Parishes, Louisiana. They were the parents of at least three children, one of whom was yet another Louis Lavergne (1743-1814), who was to leave the Gulf Coast area for the Opelousas Post in the prairies of southwest Louisiana.

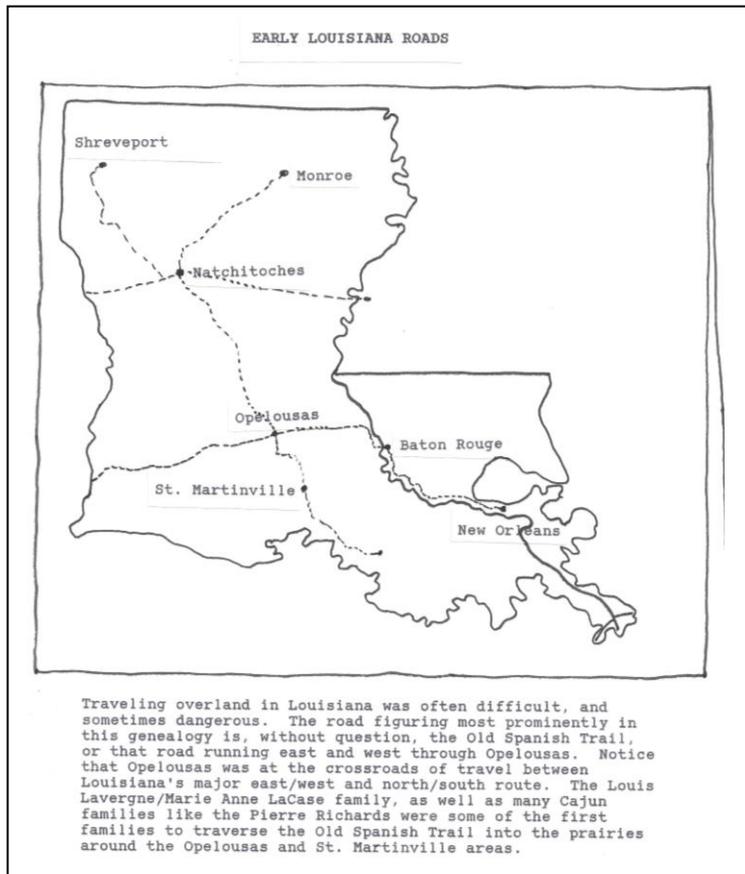
The third Louis Lavergne (1743-1814) was only seven when his father died in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. The exact date of his birth in 1743 is not known. He was at least 11 years older than his bride, Marie Anne Lacase, when they married circa 1767. The first written documentation of their union is the baptismal record of their child, Marie Eugenie, who was born on 7 October 1778. The ecclesiastical event is part of the St. Louis Church archives in New Orleans, establishing the presence of the Lavernes

in the New Orleans area in 1778. After a short settlement along the “German Coast” (St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Parishes) of the Mississippi River north of New Orleans, the next primary document to establish the location of the Lavergne family is the baptismal record of another infant, Eugene, who was born on 1 October 1790 and christened in Opelousas. And so, it is certain that Louis Lavergne moved from the New Orleans/St. Charles Parish area, where he married Marie Lacase, to the German Coast, and then to the Opelousas area around 1778-1780.



The migration of the Lavergnes from the Paskagoula River and New Orleans to the Opelousas Post was probably prompted by events between the time of the Seven Years War (French and Indian War) from 1756-63, and the American Revolution from 1776-83. Shortly after the Seven Years War the Mobile area had been ceded to the British. On that occasion several of the Creole families of the area migrated to a developing outpost at Attakapas (the St. Martin and Lafayette Parish area), but the Lavergnes were not one of them. Attakapas and Opelousas were treeless prairies that could be settled easily. Spanish Governor Philippe Aubry encouraged migration to the area to exploit the rich grasslands conducive to

ranching. Aubry was to write that "since the cession of Mobile, we are entirely without cattle." The need to supply New Orleans with meat hastened the westward migration of Creole and Acadian families to Acadiana. Louis Lavergne undoubtedly had economic opportunity on his mind while along the German Coast in the late 1770s. One of his contemporaries, Pierre Richard, certainly had cattle on his mind when he made a similar move to the Opelousas District. (More on this later.)



Another explanation for Louis' movement to Acadiana is the American Revolution itself. Louisiana's Spanish Governor Bernardo de Galvez actively supported the American cause against the British even before Spain formally declared war against England in May of 1779. There is no question that Louis Lavergne was a Louisiana subject who provided patriotic support. (He is listed as such by the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution—see the documentation above). Military confrontations between the Spaniards and French against the British along the Mississippi and along the Gulf Coast, where Louis was reared, made life uncomfortably dangerous there. Louis and Marie LaCase were married by that time and had at least one, more probably two infants to care for. It may be that the young family decided to head for the prairies of the Attakapas and Opelousas districts to take advantage of the ease of setting up a

homestead, the demand for meat in the New Orleans market, and to avoid the ravages of yet another war with the British.

The arrival of Louis Lavergne and Marie Anne LaCase to the Opelousas area began a history of astonishing procreation. (More of this below in the personal essay "Put Your Heart To The Wind") Almost all Laverignes of Louisiana will trace their lineage to this single, incredible couple. Some Laverignes, but relatively few, would leave the Opelousas area during the next two hundred years.



About the Author



Gary M. Lavergne is a retired Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis for The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored four books and is the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Award for Best Book of Non-fiction, the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Work of Non-fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters, and the Coral Horton Tullis Memorial Prize for Best Book on Texas History by the Texas State Historical Association. He has also written for the New York Times, CNN, and numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He is an elected member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has appeared on DATELINE NBC, the Today Show, Good Morning America, the History Channel, Biography, American Justice, The Discovery Channel and many other network and cable news shows.