

Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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QUEBEC CITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF LOUIS LAVERGNE OF LIMOUSIN, FRANCE

The Age of Exploration and the struggle to colonize the North American continent produced three major imperialist nations: Spain, Great Britain, and France. It was the French ambition to become a world power that brought Louis Lavergne of Mézières-sur-Issoire, Department of Haute-Vienne, France to New France (Canada) in the middle of the 17th Century.

Spain had interests in the New World, but those interests were centered in Central and South America and were fueled by the discovery and exploitation of gold and silver. Great Britain's interest came from a need to relieve the over-population of its island country and centered on agricultural and shipping pursuits. This approach was a much more stable and safe existence requiring permanent residents and quickly establishing supporting institutions—like families, communities, schools, and churches. France's interest first centered on the fur trade, bringing frequent internal clashes between farmers determined to clear land, and fur trappers interested in preserving the wilderness. What all three imperialist powers shared was a deep suspicion of one another. The moves and decisions of each of the powers was always strategic: an attempt to subvert the emerging influence of the others.

Quebec City's history is inextricably tied to its strategic position on a bluff high above a narrowing of the St. Lawrence River. The founder of New France, Samuel de Champlain was the first to realize its value as a military fortress. Champlain was New France and without him it is doubtful that French Canada would exist today. He was the first to see that the chief obstacle to colonization was not the climate, but disinformation spread by French fur trading interests, who monopolized trade, made a lot of money, and did not wish to see the wilderness settled. Much of Canadian History is a chronicle of internal struggles between trappers and agrarian homesteaders.



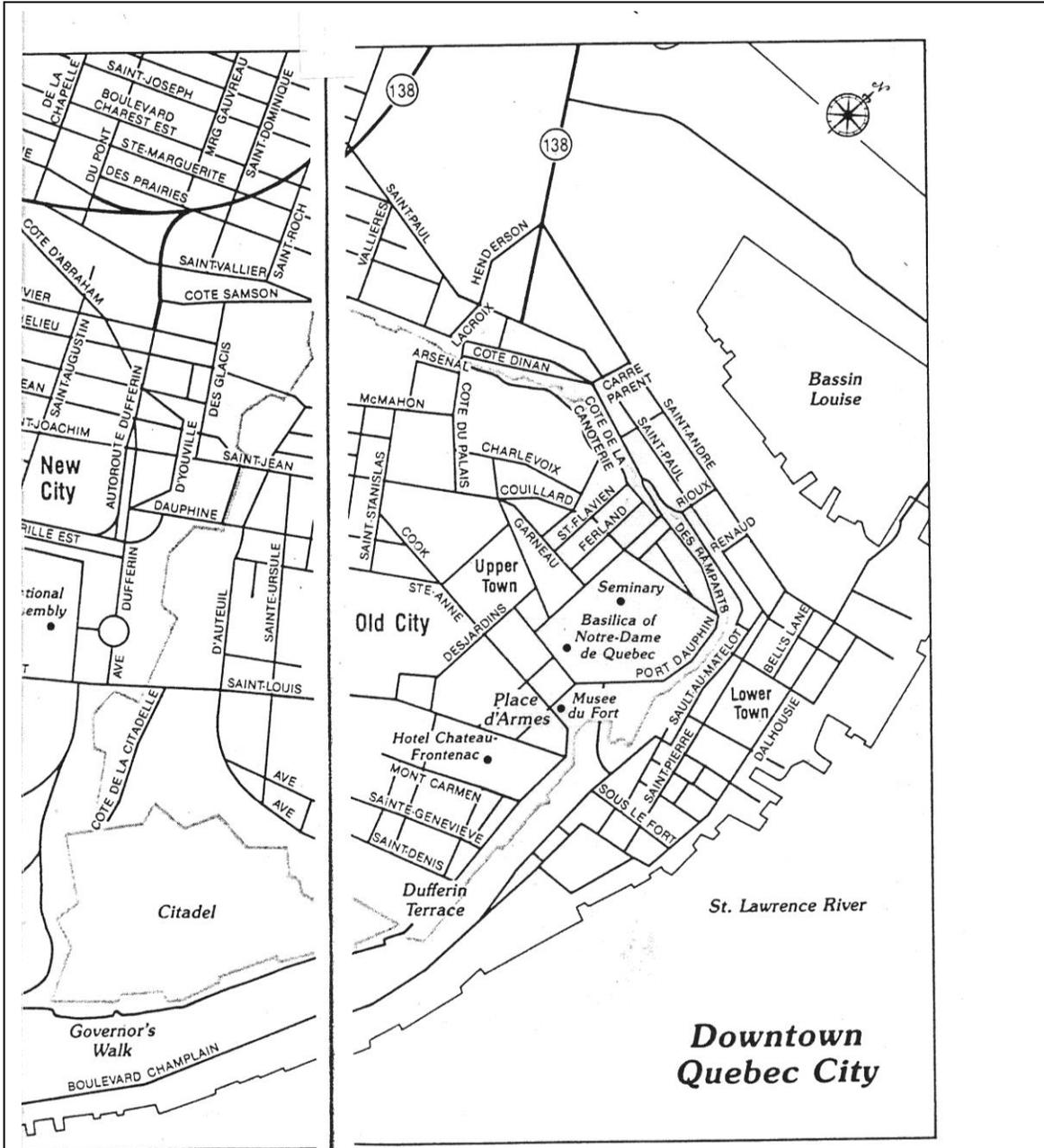
Cardinal Armand Jean du Plessis,
Duke of Richelieu (1585-1642)

One of world history's great practitioners of power politics in international relations was Cardinal Armand Jean du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu (1585-1642), a sincere but not an ardent Catholic. He was an efficient, ambitious, even brilliant administrator. *Raison d'etat* (Reason of State) motivated his policies. He lived in splendor, usually accompanied by his private choir and corps of musicians because he believed such a retinue befitted the chief minister of a great and splendid kingdom. He was largely responsible for building *la grande nation* of Louis XIV. It was Richelieu who sent many Jesuits to the New World for the public purpose of spreading the faith, but they were also spreading French influence. In addition to sending Jesuits, he formed the Company of New France to make France a world economic power. The Company's objectives were simple enough:

1. New France was to be self-sufficient in agriculture;
2. natural resources were to be discovered and exploited; and
3. Catholic missionary activities were to be fostered.

The Company of New France owned the lands and had the right to parcel them out to settlers. In turn, they agreed to sponsor 4,000 settlers in a 15-year period. Not surprisingly, the Jesuits, the fur trappers (referred to as *Coueurs de Bois* or "Runners of the Woods"), and colonists were at odds over the use of land and natural resources of New France. The prime properties would become Quebec City.

Samuel de Champlain was a born explorer. In 1604 he had helped to establish Port Royal, the first French settlement in the New World. In 1608 in an area recently abandoned by Indians he founded the



The above map is taken from Fodor's *Canada*, 1988 edition. The section called the Old City would have been the area inhabited by Louis Lavergne and Marie Anne Simon. As a mason by trade, he would undoubtedly helped to build that section.

settlement of Quebec (later to become Quebec City). Fishing was not feasible in Quebec; its value was military. Early defense systems included a walled fortress that earned Quebec the name "Gibraltar of North America."

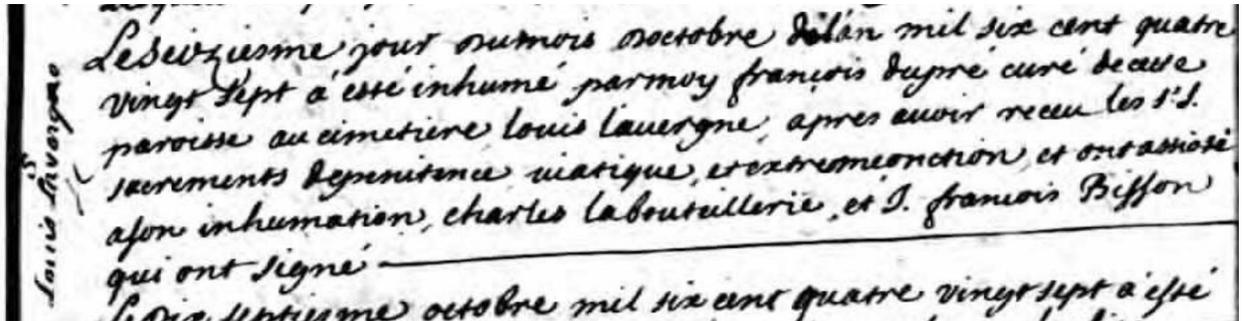
When Louis Lavergne entered Quebec City sometime during the latter half of the 1660s and before his marriage to Marie Anne Simon on 26 May 1675, he entered an area fraught with danger. He lived among a people dangerously divided and reduced to petty bickering. It was as if they were unaware of the other dangers that surrounded them. The French alliance with the Algonquins and Hurons made bitter enemies of the Mohawk and Iroquis tribes. Political struggles between the Jesuits and colonial leaders were concurrent with economic struggles between agrarians and *coureurs de bois*. Champlain's governorship was consumed by wars with the British and their Indian allies, and as a result, life for the newly implanted Canadians was extremely hard. By 1650, there were approximately 500 settlers in Canada. Most of those settlers were engaged in agricultural pursuits in small cultivated areas. For much of that period Canada was on the brink of disaster. What was accomplished in North America in the name of France was pretty much the efforts of the Catholic Church or independent commercial enterprise, and the success of either depended upon a delicate and unreliable alliance with select Indian tribes against other Indian tribes and the British. Those efforts should have been directed by the government: England was much better at that than the French.

Louis Lavergne was probably attracted to adventure or even recruited by the Company of New France to immigrate and help establish the slowly growing Quebec City. He moved to the New World right at the time of the rise of King Louis XIV to absolute power in France. The king's appointment of Jean Colbert as Finance Minister signaled the development of a clearer policy regarding the relationship of Canada and France: Canada was to be used to make France a rich, imperialist empire. The colonies were to develop raw materials and serve as markets for the mother country; the colonies were to become the springboard for further penetration into the North American continent. (The economic policy is called Mercantilism, and it was the same policy that led to the American Revolution against the British from 1776-1783). To build a proper infrastructure to meet those objectives, skilled laborers were needed and there is evidence that Louis Lavergne immigrated as a cobbler or shoemaker. He was later to become a master stone mason. Either way, he was almost certainly recruited for his skills as were many other residents of the Limousin region of France.

After his arrival in Quebec City, the 28-year-old Louis Lavergne met and married Marie Anne Simon, the 14-year-old daughter of Hubert Simon and Marie Viez de la Mothe. Their marriage would last only 12 years; Louis Lavergne died in Quebec in 1687. His death does not appear to have been sudden or the result of an accident. The pastor officiating at his funeral noted that, "...[he] had received the holy sacraments of Confession, Last Holy Communion [Viatique], and Extreme Unction [last rites]." At least one and more probably two of his sons, Louis and Phillippe, floated down the Mississippi River to help settle yet another new territory and city, New Orleans in Louisiana.⁴

⁴ Lavergne family tradition maintains that two brothers "floated" down the Mississippi River by canoe to the New Orleans area. The tradition is supported by documentation in Quebec, insofar as Phillippe Lavergne is recorded as having been born in Quebec on 18 June 1683. There is no record of his having married or dying there, possibly suggesting his departure for Louisiana with his brother Louis. However, unlike Louis, there is no record of his living in Louisiana either. Most family traditions are rooted in fact, but in this case, there is no way to establish this tradition as an historical truth.

Louis Lavergne of Quebec: Burial Information



The image shows a handwritten document in French, likely a burial record. The text is written in a cursive script. On the left side, there is a vertical signature that reads "Louis Lavergne". The main text describes the burial of Louis Lavergne on the 16th day of October, 1687, in the cemetery of Louis Lavergne. It mentions that he was buried by Franois Dupre, the pastor of the parish, after receiving the holy sacraments of Confession, Last Holy Communion (Viatique), and Extreme Unction. Charles Laboussellerie and Franois Bisson were present at the burial and signed the record.

Louis Lavergne
Le seiziesme jour du mois d'octobre de l'an mil six cent quatre
vingt sept a esté inhumé par moy franois Dupre curé de ceste
paroisse au cimetiere Louis Lavergne, apres avoir receu les s^s.
sacraments de penitence viatique, et extreme unction, et ont assisté
a son inhumation, Charles Laboussellerie, et J. franois Bisson
qui ont signé
Le dix sixiesme octobre mil six cent quatre vingt sept a esté

English Translation: "Louis Lavergne: Sixteenth day of the month of October of the year sixteen hundred eighty seven was buried by me François Dupré pastor of this parish in the cemetery Louis Lavergne, after [he] had received the holy sacraments of Confession, Last Holy Communion [Viatique], and Extreme Unction [last rites], and present at his burial were Charles Laboussellerie and François Bisson who signed" {No signatures appear on this version}

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.