The Necessity of Cooperation During the Colonization of Louisiana

ALANA BOWLER

MHIS305 America and Europe from Colonization to Coca-Colonization: 1492 to the present

The first voyage of M. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville to colonize Louisiana was a difficult task. The lack of assistance from the French monarchy, the inconsistent availability of resources, and the unfulfilled expectations of those who journeyed there, would lead to a heavy reliance on the Native Americans for assistance. This essay will discuss the reasoning for cooperation between the French and the Native Americans. This will include an overview of why, on French soil, the economic and political climates made colonization of the New World difficult. Following this will be an explanation of why those living in North America found surviving difficult without assistance from the tribes they came across. How the French saw the Native Americans, and the effects their views had on their interaction, will be described, especially in relation to how this affected d’Iberville’s journey. The perspective of the Native Americans will be given, including the benefits of the cooperation for them and the methods of communication that were used. Finally, the overall significance of these factors will be discussed in relation to d’Iberville’s colonization of Louisiana. Although there were some difficulties in maintaining a peaceful and cooperative relationship with many of the tribes the French came across in North America, the benefits of this will be shown to be of far greater importance.

Prior to venturing to the Mississippi River and colonizing Louisiana, France had already made claim to land in North America. The French fur trade in Canada, which had 2,500 inhabitants by 1663, had been growing, and the idea of increasing profits by expanding the trade further south was explored.¹ La Salle had been sent by Louis XIV in 1684 to “establish control at the mouth of the Mississippi; his goal was to control the Mississippi Valley fur trade and provide a base for defence against Spanish and English encroachment.”² Following La Salle’s discovery of the Mississippi River, he warned of the effects of “foreigners”, likely referring to

the English, fearing that they would endanger the St. Lawrence colony. One of the major incentives for the colonization of Louisiana was the threat of the English. It was not only the threat of having their St. Lawrence colony overrun and the possible loss of trade, but also the refusal to allow the English more control of the North America. In contrast to the English, the Spanish were seen as less of a threat. Though close to the mouth of the Mississippi River, their policy no longer sought expansion. This need to outmanoeuvre the English becomes further apparent in a journal written during the d’Iberville journey. Noting “our frigates sail[ed] much faster than theirs” demonstrates the need to outdo the English.

With the decision made to colonize Louisiana, and to further explore the path of the Mississippi River, French Minister of Marine Pontchartrain elected M. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville. D’Iberville, born in Canada in 1661, would join the French navy in 1675. Regarded as a naval hero by the time he was appointed to the task of voyaging to the mouth of the Mississippi River, he was aware of the need to form an alliance with the Native Americans. D’Iberville discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River and made contact with the tribes there, establishing what could be seen as co-dependent relationships with them. Following the development of Fort Maurepas “on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico, in May 1699 he returned to France.

In the discussion of the significance of the co-dependent relationship between the French and the Native Americans, it is pertinent to analyse its causes on French soil. Particularly relevant to this discussion are the rates of emigration, as well as the economic and political

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6 “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France, to Colonize Louisiana, Under the Command of M. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville, Governor General; Including an Account of His Explorations of the Colbert or Mississippi River, from its Mouth to the Natchez nation; of the Physical Features of the Country; and of the Manners and Customs of the Numerous Indian Tribes He Visited.” Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida, Including Translations of Original Manuscripts Relating to Their Discovery and Settlement, with Numerous Historical and Biographical Notes, available from http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047)).
8 Fredriksen, America’s Military Adversaries, p. 135.
Colonization’s relation to the French economy is also of significance. The fur trade in New France was “the sole source of its exports in the seventeenth century”, and it had a monopoly in the trading of beaver pelts. Trade was expanded south in the hopes of increasing the potential for profit. Planning to both improve and increase their trading posts, as well as their settlements, in the Gulf of Mexico following 1699, they soon learnt that it would be a more problematic venture than what they had faced in the north. The control of the Mississippi River was also important for France economically as there was a heavy reliance on ships for transportation and control. Ships were not only necessary for travel between the two continents, but control of the waterways would allow for quicker transportation of goods and people within North America. King Louis XIV’s marriage to the Infanta of Spain in 1660 created another political link between the two countries. Though the expansion of power through colonization was particularly significant for the monarchs of Western Europe, Louis XIV’s commitment to North America appeared to be limited. In terms of the allocation of resources for the creation and maintenance of colonies and trading posts, France’s offerings were strictly

15 Ibid., 113.
17 Treasure, pp. 228, 235.
limited. D’Iberville’s expedition was occurring at a time when France was dealing with food shortages, and so was unable to ensure regular supplies. Isolation also in relation to their distance from other colonies meant that the expedition was heavily reliant on trade with the Native Americans. The lack of resources provided for the colonization of Louisiana by the French was a critical factor in the development of peaceful relationships with the Native Americans of the Mississippi River.

King Louis XIV, in a letter to M. De Denonville, Governor-General of New France at the time of 1668, mentioned that there had been trade relations between the French and the Iroquois for a time, but also includes references to attacks by Mohawk Indians. Though occurring earlier than d’Iberville’s expedition, the letter demonstrates the ever-changing nature of the relationship between the French and Native Americans. In order to maintain an alliance and a mutually beneficial enterprise, both effort and resources were required.

The lack of emigration from France during this period especially hindered the efforts and progress of colonization. In comparison with the English, the growth of Canada had been severely limited. This was exacerbated by the belief that a population’s size was directly linked to the power of that country, leading the monarch to maintain an inadequate commitment to the development of North America’s colonies. This fear of depopulating the country is especially interesting in light of its size. By 1700, France was the second most densely populated country in Europe, with a population of approximately 20 million. In comparison, England’s population at the time was between 5 to 6 million, and Spain 6 to 8 million. In light of these figures, it seems especially senseless for so few to have emigrated, with significant numbers making the journey only towards the 1750s.

Even before d’Iberville had begun to colonize Louisiana, complications within France were already adding great difficulty to the task, increasing their reliance on Native American cooperation.

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19 King Louis XIV, “Memoir Sent by the King to M. De Denonville, Governor-General of New France, Explanatory of the French Possessions in North America, Especially the South Part of Acadia, from Pantagouet to the Kenne-Beck River; of the Iroquois and Hudson’s Bay” (1668). Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida, Including Translations of Original Manuscripts Relating to Their Discovery and Settlement, with Numerous Historical and Biographical Notes. The Library of Congress Washington D.C. Available from http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0141)).
The effects of these issues on those in North America, particularly in relation to d’Iberville’s expedition, are crucial to understanding the relationship between the French and Native Americans. The lack of resources being sent to North America meant that those living there were heavily reliant on the Native Americans for much of their food supply. The extremely small size of the colonies and trading posts would have made farming substantial amounts impossible, and descriptions of the “gardening rather than farming” in these early years show their efforts were largely futile. The unavailability of necessary tools, as well as a general inability and unwillingness by the colonists to properly accomplish the task, only magnified the problem. Those who colonized Louisiana in its early stages had done so expecting “easy fortunes” or to have been able “to subsist on the crown’s benevolence”. They did not appear to be willing, nor able, to work hard for their survival, and so a heavy reliance on the Native Americans increased.

False information appears to have been another setback for d’Iberville. In a journal written by a man travelling with him, it was noted that when asking the Native Americans about a branch in the Mississippi River they were searching for, they were told on multiple occasions that it did not exist. D’Iberville would come to accept that much of what he had been told about the Mississippi River had been false, likely making his journey more difficult and putting pressure on his relationships with the different tribes.

It is also crucial to discuss how these two groups felt about each other, and the significance of the methods of communication they were using. The French maintained a policy of assimilation throughout the seventeenth century for the tribes they came across. “Francisation” developed from a “paternalistic vision of cultural difference”, and the savages, as they were seen, were to “be educated and brought to civility”, regardless of

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24 Pierre Le Moyne D’Iberville, “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France, to Colonize Louisiana, Under the Command of M. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville, Governor General; Including an Account of His Explorations of the Colbert or Mississippi River, from its Mouth to the Natchez nation; of the Physical Features of the Country; and of the Manners and Customs of the Numerous Indian Tribes He Visited” (1698/1699). *Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida, Including Translations of Original Manuscripts Relating to Their Discovery and Settlement, with Numerous Historical and Biographical Notes*. The Library of Congress Washington D.C. Available from [http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl:ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047))](http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl:ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047))).

whether this view was held by the French officials in the New World.\textsuperscript{26} Though there was the expectation within French policy that the Native Americans would mould themselves to suit the French, the extent to which this actually happened during the early years of the exploration of the Mississippi seems uncertain. Instead, attempts were made to understand the basic aspects of the languages they came across, particularly in understanding key signs.\textsuperscript{27} It was the dependence on relationships with allied tribes to gain furs, food, and assistance against enemy tribes and nations that led to this willingness to adopt some Native American customs.\textsuperscript{28} It is essential, however, to note that while those travelling with d’Iberville did rely on their Native American allies, they still regarded them as savages. In the journal mentioned previously, a story is included about a slave girl who they traded for, noting their surprise when she “wept bitterly at parting with these savages”.\textsuperscript{29} Though they were willing to work with the Native Americans for survival, they did not see them as being anything close to equal in standing or merit.

In relation to how the Native Americans viewed the French, it appears many at the time of the initial colonization of Louisiana were willing to build a mutually beneficial relationship. The tribes that allied themselves with the French were both strong and independent. Those that the French came into contact with “in the first half of the seventeenth century... total[ed] more than 125,000 people,” greatly outnumbering the French.\textsuperscript{30}

Their strength in numbers, including their ability to survive on land that the French seemed so unwilling to cultivate, brings up the question of what the Native Americans wished to gain from an invading group whose numbers were almost non-existent in comparison to their own. With their advantages over the French, they had the ability to play many roles. These included manipulating or threatening trade, and allying themselves with Europeans against


\textsuperscript{27} Nancy Shoemaker, “How Indians Got to be Red,” \textit{American Historical Review}, 102 (1997): p. 634, and D’Iberville, “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France.” Available from \url{http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047))}.

\textsuperscript{28} Boule and Thompson, “France Overseas,” pp. 109-110.

\textsuperscript{29} D’Iberville, “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France.” Available from \url{http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047))}.

rival tribes.\textsuperscript{31} During these years, the French did not seem to be a severe threat to the Native Americans, especially in comparison to the English and the Spanish, who were far more violent and disruptive in their methods of colonization. The Native Americans saw the ability to benefit from their interaction with the French, and many took advantage of the colonizers reliance on them. The trading of weapons, including guns and hatchets, for food, furs and information was common, as noted in the journal documenting the d’Iberville expedition.\textsuperscript{32} These could then be used against rival tribes to, for example, secure territory. Furthermore, the tribes could manipulate the allied French into staying away from rival tribes, attempting to secure their trade and power for themselves.\textsuperscript{33} It was not only weaponry and alliance against rival tribes that the Native Americans sought to gain from the French. Gift giving was a significant part of many of these relationships, providing further cause for trade between the groups. Those such as Quapaws saw no distinction “between trade and diplomacy”, and these “reciprocal obligations” were often expected at meetings with allied tribes.\textsuperscript{34} The application of this “gift-based economy” is evident in d’Iberville’s exploration. References are made numerous times throughout the journal of gifts given to the Native Americans they came across, often displaying their peaceful intentions to new tribes, and solidifying their relationships with their allies.\textsuperscript{35} Gifts were so critical to the maintenance of allied relationships with the Native Americans that in 1701, “24,773 livres” was spent by the monarchy “on presents for Louisiana’s Indians.”\textsuperscript{36} Though religion would come to be an added part of this peacekeeping, it was this practice of gift giving that allowed the Native Americans to further benefit from their alliance with the d’Iberville and other French colonizers.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{31} Boulle and Thompson, “France Overseas,” p. 109.
\textsuperscript{32} D’Iberville, “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France.” Available from http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047)).
\textsuperscript{34} DuVal, ”’A Good Relationship, & Commerce,’” p. 71.
\textsuperscript{35} DuVal, ”’A Good Relationship, & Commerce,’” p. 72.
One tool used in the maintenance was the “calumet, a peace pipe”. Regularly referred to in the account of d’Iberville’s exploration, the calumet “served ritual and diplomacy.” As most tribes they came across had knowledge of the calumet and its purposes, the Europeans quickly realised the benefits of carrying their own. It was described as being “about three feet long, adorned with feathers of birds of different plumage.” According to the journal, it was common for d’Iberville to take part in ceremonies that involved smoking the calumet as part of the maintaining of allied relationships. The pipe was of great use in creating alliances between the French and the tribes they came across.

Though Native Americans had an opportunity to in some ways benefit from the French, they had still been greatly crippled by the invasion of Europeans. Violence and relocation were extreme factors in the number of deaths that occurred, as well as disease, though initially unintended, which brutally diminished the population. These included smallpox and influenza, and would quickly wipe out a large proportion of a population that had no chance to develop a resistance.

The information above makes clear that d’Iberville’s first expedition to the mouth of the Mississippi River was heavily reliant on cooperation with the Native Americans. For the French, alliances with the Native Americans meant access to food, furs, and information about the route they were travelling. Though the regular provision of gifts may have been expensive, these relationships were more beneficial than they were costly. While Canada’s population was slim, that of Louisiana in its earlier years was almost non-existent, with less than two hundred colonizers by 1710. The lack of hardworking emigrants and the difficulties in procuring resources from France had left the colonizers of the New World struggling. Securing food for d’Iberville’s men was not the only issue; a lack of numbers left the colonizers more vulnerable to attack by hostile groups, and so alliances were also necessary for assistance in fighting off any enemies. Such enemies included the English, who the French feared were intending to take control of trade in the area, and who were able to

38 Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground*, p. 1
39 Ibid., p. 19.
40 D’Iberville, “Historical Journal; or, Narrative of the Expeditions Made by Order of His Majesty Louis XIV, King of France.” Available from http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/ascfr:@field(DOCID+@lit(gcfr0018_0047))
41 Ibid.
43 Boulle and Thompson, “France Overseas,” p. 113.
have far more heavily occupied colonies in comparison. The reasoning for the colonization of Louisiana in keeping it separated from the English would come to be demonstrated later, when the “balance of trade” was examined and seen to be producing a loss. Louisiana was not just about attempting to increase the market for furs, it was also holding off further expansion by the English, possibly a more worthwhile venture. For d’Iberville, colonization without Native American assistance, in the conditions they faced, is unlikely to have been possible. The Native Americans were too crucial as a source of food for d’Iberville and his men, and were relied on heavily for survival in the North American environment. As outlined above, without the cooperation between d’Iberville and the Native Americans of the Mississippi River, colonization would have likely been impossible. The provision of food and the assistance in holding off enemies were crucial to the colonization, especially in light of their lack of provisions from the French, and the extremely low levels of emigration to the continent. Adjusting to the customs of the Native Americans, such as the gift-based economies and the calumet was integral to this cooperation. D’Iberville’s strength laid in his ability to recognise the importance of the Native Americans and adjust to fit their expectations and customs. By doing so, he was able to successfully colonize Louisiana, maintaining it for the French and keeping trade away from the encroaching English.

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