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Milo B. Howard, Jr., Editor

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CONTRIBUTORS

DANIEL SAVAGE GRAY is a professor of history with the Troy State Universtity System, Ft. Rucker, Alabama.

G. MELVIN HERNDON is a professor of history at the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

JAY HIGGINBOTHAM is head of the Local History Department, Mobile Public Library, Mobile, Alabama.

RICHARD L. HUME is an assistant professor of history at Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

SYLVIA KREBS is a professor of history at the Dekalb Community College, Central Campus, Clarkston, Georgia.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE VOYAGE
OF THE PELICAN TO LOUISIANA, 1703-1704

by

Jay Higginbotham

For nearly two years, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, king's lieutenant exercising the functions of commandant of Fort Louis at Mobile, had been anticipating a certain supply ship from France. The promised vessel, which Bienville's brother, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, commander-general of Louisiana, had informed him would eventually arrive, was to be no ordinary supply ship. It would contain what officials in Versailles and Rochefort hoped would be the female progenitors of an eventually populous colony.¹

As early as 1702, Iberville had recommended to Minister of Marine Pontchartrain that the sending of "a hundred girls" to Mobile would accomplish two vital objectives: it would, first of all, increase the birth rate (until 1704 there had been only two or three Caucasian births in Mobile), thus providing a basis for population growth other than by emigration. Secondly, it would furnish incentive for the restless Canadians to settle down and become permanent residents.²

Iberville had arrived at the ambitious figure of "one hundred" because he hoped by the time the girls arrived that the number of Canadians and officers on the colony's rolls would approximate that total. Although Pontchartrain had originally shown some sympathy with this figure, the recent outbreak of war in Europe and the difficulty of convincing "young and

¹Bergier [to Brisacier], March 30, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, R 64. In citing sources, the following abbreviations are used: AAQ: Archives de l'archeveche de Quebec; AC: Archives des Colonies (Paris); ADM: Archives of the Diocese of Mobile; AM: Archives de la Marine (Paris); ASME: Archives du Seminaire des Missions Etrangeres (Paris); ASQ: Archives du Seminaire de Quebec; AVP: Archives de la Ville de Paris; BN: Bibliotheque Nationale (Paris); DGFC: Tanguay, Cyprien, *Dictionnaire genealogique des familles canadiennes*, Vol. I (Montreal, 1871); LSMA: Louisiana State Museum Archives (New Orleans); Min.: Minister of Marine.

²Min to Begon, Feb. 13, 1704. AC,B 25, f. 22v. Min. to LaSalle, Jan. 30, 1704. AC,B 25, f. 14-15v. ADM,A, Sept. 18; Oct. 4, 22, 1704. AC,F1A,11,f. 217-19. Denombrement. Fort Louis, Aug. 31, 1704. AC,C13A,1, f. 468-69v.

well-bred" girls of the advantages of life in Louisiana made a less ambitious number more feasible. A hundred girls could, of course, have been procured (provided funds were approved); but the Ministry was interested only in girls of high moral fiber, as the lack of which quality in new arrivals had recently created substantial unrest in such French colonies as Martinique and Saint-Domingue.³

But where would the future mothers of Louisiana be found in 1703 France? In the hospitals of Paris, Rochefort, or La Rochelle? Pontchartrain rejected these possibilities, for the most part, believing that more favorable sources could be found, though his own office lacked the time and personnel to launch more than a cursory search. Instead he responded to a suggestion by Iberville that Monseigneur Saint-Vallier, Bishop of Quebec, be entrusted with the responsibility of selecting the prospects. After all, had not the bishop only recently erected the new church of Mobile as part of the diocese of Quebec? Did not the bishop himself have a vested interest in who populated his parish?⁴

The bishop could certainly be trusted to act with discretion in the judgment of moral character. Too, his prestige might be instrumental in convincing favored individuals to cooperate in such a venture. If the bishop described life in Louisiana as a wholesome opportunity, would it not carry greater force than an officer's or a bureaucrat's promises?⁵

Saint-Vallier accepted the responsibility with some misgivings, but with the realization that no one in Paris was more ideally suited for the task. Screening the applicants in the summer of 1703, the bishop approved twenty-three girls "reared in virtue and piety . . . who were accustomed [also] to labor and dilligence" Some of the girls had been locally connected with Parisian religious affiliations, such as the "filles du Rev-

³Min. to Desclouzeaux, June 2, 1700. AM,B2,147, f. 255-56. Min. to Puis-Martin, Oct. 27, 1706. AC,B 28, f. 301-02. Min. to Le Page, April 5, 1702. AC,B 24, f. 71. Min. to Begon, Oct. 3, 1703, AM, Rochefort, 1E 50, 41.

⁴Min. to Begon, Feb. 27, 1703. AC, B 23, f. 188-89v. Erection et nomination, July 20, 1703. ASQ, Missions, 65. Min. to Bishop of Quebec, Aug. 15, 1703. AM, B2, 169, f. 433-33v. Min to Desclouzeaux, *op. cit.*, f. 255.

⁵Min. to Bishop of Quebec, *op. cit.*, f. 433v; April 16, 1704. AM, B2, 175, f. 192-92v.

erend Pere Barre," a charitable and educational order closely associated with the *Seminaire des Missions Etrangeres*.⁶ Others such as Louise-Marguerite Housseau and Renee Gilbert had come from towns outside of Paris—Tour and Chantilly respectively. The girls were indeed young and respectable, most of them between the ages of fourteen and twenty. At the time of her selection by Saint-Vallier, for example, Marie-Catherine Philippe was sixteen years of age, daughter of Charles Philippe, a respected resident of Meaux-en-Brie whose close friend, Charles Huguier, and *avocat-en-parlement*, had been a witness to the baptism of Marie-Catherine at Notre-Dame de Chaage a Meaux. Gabrielle Savary, daughter of Pierre Savary and Jeanne Fautisse, had been born the 28th of January, 1684 in the parish of Saint-Denis where her god-father Plomier Deseluse, had been an important merchant. Marie-Marguerite Dufresne, age fourteen, was a daughter of Charles Dufresne, *Sieur Dumotel*, a squire of the parish of St.-Germain. Others of the group, such as Marie-Therese Brochon and Angelique Drouin, were not as well-born perhaps, but of no less piety.⁷

Three of the girls, sisters Jeanne-Louise, Genevieve and Marguerite Burelle, aged twenty, seventeen and fifteen respectively, needed little endorsement by Saint-Vallier, for they were to be accompanied by their parents, Etienne Burelle and Marguerite Roussel, as well as by their younger brother Louis. Burelle, by profession a pastry-cook, was no stranger to the New World. Born in Paris (St.-Severin, L'Ile-de-France) in 1656, he had emigrated to Cap St.-Ignace in Canada at an early age where he married Marguerite, widow of Mathurin Ducheron, *dit* Deslauriers, on Nov. 10, 1682. Siring four children, Burelle migrated to Quebec from Cap St.-Ignace, where a son Vital, was born after which he returned to Paris with his

⁶*Ibid.*, f. 433-33v; f. 192. Collinet a Villermont, May 22, 1703. BN, FF, 22812, f. 125-27. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1703, f. 236. *Ibid.*, Sept. 27, 1703, BN, FF, 22813, f. 85-86v. *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1703. f. 88-9. Min. to Bienville, Jan. 30, 1704. AC,B25, f. 15v.

⁷ADM,A, Aug. 16, 1705; Feb. 23, July 28, 1707. AVP, Extrait du registre des actes de naissance de la paroisse St.-Sulpice, April 25, 1702. ADMV,B, 1732. Marie-Marguerite, however, had been born out of wedlock on July 28, 1689. Her parents had been married in 1690 and she was legitimated in 1702 in the parish of St.-Sulpice. Archives de Seine-et-Marne, N.-D. de Chaage to Meaux, July 11, 1687. ADM,C, March 14, 1726. Archives de la Ville de St.-Denis, RB, Jan. 30, 1684, no. 8896. ADM,A, Aug. 16, 1705; June 11, 1707. DGFC, I, p. 96. AC,F1A, 11, f. 223-23v.

family about the turn of the century. Eager to return to the New World, Burelle seized the opportunity for free passage after learning of Saint-Vallier's search for colonists.⁸

Three of the girls, Jeanne-Elisabeth Le Pinteaux, Jeanne-Catherine de Berenhardt and Marie-Francoise Merienne de Boisrenaud, "les 'superieurs filles," acted with some authority over the slightly younger girls, in concert with Sister Marie Malbecq (chosen by Saint-Vallier himself) and "Monsieur Le Roux" a staff assistant of the "Compagnie du Guet." Saint-Vallier had relayed Pontchartrain's promise that the ministry would provide certain goods and wages for the girls for a period not to exceed one year. The total subsidies, in fact, came to some 7,000 livres, a substantial portion of the colony's budget for that year. To be included in the appropriations was a sum for certain supplies and "niceties" for the girls, of which the responsibility for purchase fell to the wife of the man who was to captain the ship carrying them to Louisiana, Madam Ducoudre.⁹

By the first week in October, arrangements for the voyage were apparently nearing completion, the group's supplies having been purchased by Madame Ducoudre and by a certain Mademoiselle Segulier. The girls no doubt expected to make a quick trip to Rochefort, where a ship would be waiting, freshen up for a few days, and be on their way to Louisiana by the last week in October. Perhaps they would be married and living in some condition of luxury by New Year's Eve.¹⁰

⁸DGFC, I, p. 96. AC,F1A,11,222,23v. Etienne was the son of Pierre Burelle and Jeanne Vanier of St.-Severin. The majority of family signatures show "Burelle," rather than "Burel". ADM,A, June 11, Nov. 27, 1707; March 17, April 7, 1708. Apparently Marguerite Roussel, native of Rouen, was born in 1656. After emigrating to Cap St.-Ignace in 1670 with her parents, Jean-Baptiste Roussel and Louise Meni, she married Deslauriers on Sept. 28, 1673. DGFC,I,pp. 96, 207. LSMA, DCS, May 14, 1737.

⁹In 1703, the allotment for the "filles" totaled 24,950 livres but this was anticipatory to sending 100 girls. AC, F1A,11,f. 66v. 223. Min. to Bishop of Quebec, Aug. 15, 1703. AM,B2,169,f. 433v. Min. to Begon, Oct. 1, 1703. AM,B2,170,f.2. BN, FF. 22813, f. 133-34, 141. La Vente [to Tremblay], Sept. 10, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, R 75. Le Vente [to Tremblay], Sept. 25, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, R 76. Conseil de Marine, Dec. 10, 1718, AM,B1,30, f. 429-29v. Min. to Madame La Coudray, Sept. 12, 1703. AM,B3,169,f.710.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, f. 710. Min. to Bishop of Quebec. Versailles, Sept. 12, 1703. AM,B2,169, f. 703-04.

The convoy did not leave Paris, however, until October 16. After an arduous journey of nearly three hundred miles, its horse-drawn carts having wobbled over the dusty highways that led through the towns of Tour, Niort and Surgeres, the party arrived (during the last days of the month) at Rochefort, a small port ten miles from the mouth of the Charente River. At Rochefort they found that the ship that was to transport them was not yet readied, had not, in fact, even been selected. The Court's September plans had called for Iberville to head a squadron of vessels, including the *Renommee*, the *Charente*, and the *Pelican*, one of which was to transport the girls, but the vagaries of war were causing an almost daily shift in schedules.¹¹

The girls, with their leaders, were temporarily lodged in the orphan's hospital while preparations for the embarkation were completed. During the month of November they were allowed to come and go from the orphanage within rather stringent limits. They began then to hear strange conversation in the town, lurid descriptions which began to stir their native fears: Mobile was a desert in the wilderness, a wasteland inhabited only by boy soldiers and Canadian barbarians. There was little in that barren swamp but poverty and disease and one had constantly to fear the inclemencies of weather as well as attacks by savages and wild animals. Reports of the murder of at least four of their prospective husbands had recently reached Rochefort.¹²

In truth the inhabitants of Rochefort were much more familiar with the seamier side of Louisiana than either Pontchartrain or Saint-Vallier. The local taverns and cafes were filled enough with truths and half-truths alike brought back by Canadians and French sailors who had experienced Louisiana's woes first-hand and who delighted in exaggerating its

¹¹*Ibid.*, f. 703v. AC,F1A, 12, f. 109v. Collinet to Villermont. Rochefort, Sept. 1, 1703. BN,FF, 22813, f. 53-54v. Min. to Villette. Versailles, Sept. 12, 1703. AM,B2,169, f. 662. Min. to Duval, Sept. 12, 1703. AM,B2,169,f.710. Min. to Duguay, Sept. 12, 1703. AM,B2,169,f.657-59v. Le Roi to La Roux, Oct. 3, 1703, AM,B2,166, f.110. Min. to Bishop of Quebec, Oct. 17, 1703. AM,B2,170,f. 142. Min. to La Peigne, Oct. 17, 1703. AM,B2,170,342-343v.

¹²Begon to Villermont, Feb. 14, 1704. BN,FF,22814, f. 44. Collinet to *Id.*, *Ibid.*, f. 130. Extrait de 3 jan., Jan. 10, 1704, BN, FF, NA, 21399, f. 32. Min to Begon, Nov. 7, 1703. AM,B2,170,342-343v.

dangers. When such talk began to reach the ears of the young Parisians they were understandably alarmed. Had they been duped by the Ministry of the Marine? Had Bishop Saint-Vallier not told them the full truth about prospects for a more affluent life? Even the more optimistic of the girls began to doubt the wisdom of continuing, the least confident requesting permission to return to Paris. All of them were, quite conceivably, apprehensive.¹³

To counteract this development, Intendant Begon, in charge of the operation since it reached Rochefort, instituted several emergency measures. First of all, he confined the girls more strictly to the orphanage, discontinuing past privileges to come and go even within narrow limits, so that their heads would not be further filled with "irresponsible gossip." What is not repeated soon loses its force Begon reasoned. Secondly, the girls were soothed with occasional gifts and social get-togethers, were given an allowance of 15 sous per day an extravagance severely criticized by Pontchartrain when news of it reached him. Furthermore, they were promised private quarters apart from the rest of the crew and ship personnel once they arrived on board, a policy, however, that Begon by Pontchartrain's directive had intended anyway.¹⁴

In this manner the girls were somewhat quieted, at least enough to dissuade them from openly disavowing their engagements. Yet as the weeks wore on, then the months, their ship was still not ready to sail. Though it was now certain that the convoy itself would be traveling on a recently captured Dutch vessel called the *Pelican*, commanded by Rene Herve Ducoudre-Guimont, the ships that would escort the *Pelican* to the open seas, a precaution necessary because of the threat of English aggression on the western coast of France, were not yet prepared to embark. Iberville, fallen ill in the autumn, was still not recovered; there was grave suspicion as to whether or not he would be able to accompany the *Pelican* in the *Renommee*, or any other ship, for that matter. Pontchartrain, anxious about the continued delays, was by the month of January ordering Iberville to leave as soon as possible, the latest plans calling

¹³Begon to Villermont, *op. cit.*, f. 44. Collinet to Villermont, *op. cit.*, f. 130.

¹⁴Collinet to Villermont, Rochefort, May 22, 1703. BN,FF,22812,f.126-27. Min to Iberville, Feb. 13, 1704. AM,B2,174, f. 374-74v. Min. to Begon, Mar. 19, 1704. AM,B2,174,f. 709-12v.

for three vessels under the Canadian commander to leave for Louisiana by February 1, 1704.¹⁵

The first of February, however, came and went; still the vessels remained, the anxiety of the girls as well as of the officials daily increasing. Meanwhile additional changes were taking place in the personnel that was to depart on the *Pelican*. The twenty girls that had left Paris in October (excluding the Burelle sisters), were supplemented by additional recruits, some of whom were from Rochefort and nearby La Rochelle:¹⁶ Marie Linant and Marie Grissot, nursing sisters from a local institution hired by Saint-Vallier to help compensate for the loss of Le Roux and Marie-Jeanne Malbecq, who had returned to Paris; a midwife, Catharine Moulois, hired at the substantial salary of 400 livres per year, and her husband Laurent Cloquinet; an edge-tool maker and a carpenter; two companies of soldiers recruited by Le Moyne de Chateaugue and his in-law, Francois Juchereau de Vaulezard, and a frail, lisping seminary priest named Alexandre Huve, who at forty-seven years of age and suffering from the infirmities of myopia and a weak constitution, was an unlikely choice to serve as chaplain in so indelicate a parish as Louisiana.¹⁷

¹⁵Min. to Begon, Oct. 17, 1703. AM, Rochefort, IE 50, 77, 85. Begon a Villermont. Rochefort, Oct. 30, 1703. BN,FF,22813, f. 140-40v. Iberville fell seriously ill in late October. By Nov. 13 he was off the critical list but the effects of his illness lingered until mid-winter. Begon to Villermont, Nv. 7, 1703. BN,FF,22813, 158v. *Ibid.*, Nov. 18, f. 184-84v. Extrait de 3 jan., *op. cit.*, f. 32. Min. to Iberville, Dec. 26, 1703. AM,B2,170,f.705. Min. to Begon, Jan. 2, 1704. AM,B2,174,f.2. Min. to Begon, Oct. 3, 1703. AM, Rochefort, 1E 50, 41, 48-49.

¹⁶Liste des filles et des deux familles qui seront envoyees de Paris to Rochefort. Fontainebleau, Oct. 3, 1704. AC,B25,f.9-10. AC,F1A,11,223-23v. Iberville had been given permission to secure ten recruits from the Rochefort-La Rochelle vicinity but none was taken aboard. Min to Begon, Oct. 1, 1703. AM,B2,170,f. 1-3v. The number of women aboard the *Pelican* totaled twenty-seven (23 marriageable girls, 2 wives and 2 nursing sisters), a sum conforming exactly to the count mentioned in Bienville's September report. Bienville au min., Sept. 6, 1704. AC,C13A,1, f.458.

¹⁷Liste des filles et des deux familles . . . *op. cit.*, f. 10v. AC,F1A,11,f.223-23v. DGFC,I,pp.328, 379, 494. BN,FF,22813,f.133-34,141. Bienville au min., Oct. 10, 1706. AC,C13B,6,f.5-6v. *Ibid.*, AC,C13A,1,f.542; 2,f.16. La Vente [to SME Directors], June 27, 1708. ASQ, Lettres, R 82. In requesting a pair of eyeglasses for "un homme de 52 ans ou environ" in 1708, La Vente is possibly referring to Huve rather than to himself. Tremblay [to Ango Des Maizerets], June 13, 1712. ASQ, Lettres, O 54.

Huve's immediate superior, approved by Bishop Saint-Vallier to serve as cure of the new church at Mobile, was also awaiting passage, having helped escort the convoy from Paris to Rochefort. Henri Roulleaux de La Vente, former priest of the diocese of Bayeaux in Calvados, was already (in 1704) past fifty years of age. Ordained as a priest towards the year 1688, he had only six years previously been leaving for another mission, for the Ile de Bourbon (now Reunion) just east of Madagascar, with another seminary priest, Goulven Calvarin of the diocese of Leon. Calvarin, who was later to serve and perish in upper Louisiana, and La Vente had served well together; they ministered at the mission of St.-Paul near present St.-Denis for over three years, La Vente performing his last act of baptism on July 24, 1701. La Vente, in fact, had served his parishioners beyond duty's call, manifesting unusual interest in their public as well as private affairs. He was remembered long after he departed as "a good man and a noble priest."¹⁸

La Vente, in truth, cut a grand figure among the otherwise blase personnel. Dynamic, forthright, he came highly recommended by the archbishop of Paris, Louis-Antoine de Noailles, as well as by Abbe Henri-Jean Tremblay, agent in Paris of the Seminaire de Quebec. Tremblay, who had known La Vente for nearly fifteen years, had some reservations about his age, his health (even now La Vente was beginning to walk with a limp, early manifestations of paralysis that would totally disabled him by the year 1716), his unlikelihood of mastering the native languages. Yet the abbe considered him "wise, a hard-worker, perfectly capable of ministering to the needs of the people . . . who, however is quite independent." By his latter reference Tremblay was no doubt remembering La Vente's report of August, 1700 when he not only lodged protests against a civil official at Bourbon but presented a written complaint to the colony's governor, Lacour de La Soulaye, signed by 28 witnesses, the signatures of which La Vente had solicited him-

¹⁸Min. to Brisacier, Jan. 9, 1704. AC,B25,F.1v. La Vente [to SME Directors], April 6, 1700. ASME, 958, f. 51-61. *Ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1700, 966, f. 187-89. AAQ, Registres d'insinuation B, 189, 244. Tremblay to bishop of Quebec [and Mssrs.?], March 12, 1704. ASQ. Lettres, M 30,f.7-8. Calvarin, a native of Brittany (Vannes), died in 1719, shortly after his arrival at the Tamarois. ASQ, chapitre, 40; Missions, 43,73c.

self. Such activism led later to a complete break with the governor, resulting in La Vente's leaving Bourbon.¹⁹

Yet La Vente was not in this instance recalled or removed. He had requested, along with his colleague Galvarin, to be replaced. He furthermore had offered to donate monies earned by salary at Bourbon toward the new mission in Louisiana (funds, however, that neither La Vente nor the Louisiana mission ever received). Despite any shortcomings of personality, then, this zealous servant had the blessings of the authorities in Paris. He was capable, he was willing, and, more decisive in his being selected, there was no flock of God's sheep butting the seminary door for a chance to serve in Louisiana.²⁰

By the end of January it was apparent that Iberville would not be able to meet his embarkation deadline. The minister therefore ordered the *Pelican*, under Ducoudre, to depart as soon as possible. "The King," Pontchartrain wrote Bienville on January 30, "is sending to Louisiana the vessel *Pelican* . . . [which] is bringing you the scheduled supplies for the colony. . . . He [the King] had [previously] decided to send M. d'Iberville . . . with two frigates to accompany the said *Pelican*, but the poor condition of his health and other matters that have arisen have prevented the carrying out of this plan."²¹

Despite the note of immediacy in Pontchartrain's missive to Bienville, delays continued to impede the *Pelican's* embarkation. Soldiers were constantly deserting from Chateaugue's and Vaulezard's companies; a concerted attempt to replace them, requiring time and effort, was not fully successful. The spoilage of wine and food supplies, the vicissitudes of weather — all acted further to delay the operation. Moreover, reports of English warships on the horizon were constantly recurring.²²

¹⁹Tremblay [to Laval], June 15, 1703. ASQ, Lettres, N 121, f.6. Penigault, Relation . . . BN,FF, 14613, f.165. Bienville au min. Fort Louis, Oct. 10, 1706. AC,C13B,6, f. 4-9. Tremblay [to?], March 12-15, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, M 30. La Vente [to SME Directors], Aug. 13, 1700. ASME, 966, f. 187-89. *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1700. ASME, 865, f. 121-33. Brisacier [to a missionary of the Mississippi], Oct. 31, 1716. ASQ, Missions, 45.

²⁰La Vente [to SME Directors], Aug. 13, 1700, *op. cit.*, f. 188-90. Tremblay [to Laval], June 15, 1703, *op. cit.*, f.6. Tremblay to bishop of Quebec, March 12, 1704, *op. cit.*, f. 7-9.

²¹Min. to Bienville. Versailles, Jan. 30, 1704. AC,B25, f.4-5.

²²Min to Begon, Dec. 12, 1703. AM,B2,170,f.578-79. Min. to Iberville, March 5, 1704. AM,B2,174, f.572-73.

In the meantime the girls were moved from Rochefort to La Rochelle where after a few weeks stay, a launch left the port, making its way across the large harbor where the *Pelican* lay anchored in deep water. The unusually rough seas made it impossible for the small vessel to reach its destination. After three or four days the launch was forced to return to La Rochelle. A few days later, it made another attempt. This time it was successful in reaching the *Pelican*, followed by a trail of other launches.²³ Once the emigrants were on board, however, the convoy suffered additional delays. Since the *Pelican* was now to be the only ship to sail to Louisiana, all possible supplies were placed on board, almost to the sinking point. Furthermore, new reports of English warships in the area (a clear and present danger made more manifest a few months later when Bishop Saint-Vallier's ship was captured between La Rochelle and the Azores) made it mandatory for more armed escorts to be readied.²⁴

Finally, after the convoy had endured several weeks of severe discomfort, of rolling and tossing in the outer harbor of La Rochelle, Commander Ducoudre weighed anchor and headed for the open seas escorted by a squadron of twelve protecting gunboats. Unknown to Ducoudre a fleet of "twenty-two large English vessels were on their way from Lisbon," to seek them out. The English ships were two or three days too late, however, and Ducoudre was able to avoid them. They did, nonetheless, futilely pursue one of the *Pelican's* rear guard vessels and several days later Ducoudre caught sight of one of them in the distance. Some time later, a few smaller English ships were sighted and the *Pelican* gave chase to one of them, only to be outrun.²⁵

After their tenuous April departure, the *Pelican's* passengers settled back, able now, even in their crowded conditions to relax somewhat. The open seas lay ahead, the skies un-

²³Begon to Villermont, March 25, 1704. BN,FF, 22814,f.85. Collinet to Villermont, April 8, 1704, op. cit., f. 130-30v. It was surely a wise, if callous, maneuver to board the passengers before the supplies.

²⁴*Ibid.*, f. 130. Min. to bishop of Quebec, June 29, 1707. AC,B29,f.30-30v.

²⁵La Vente [to Brisacier], Baracoa, June 25, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, R 74. If La Vente's dates [as first kept in his daily journal and later incorporated into his letter of Sept. 20] are correct, the *Pelican* must have left the outer harbor of La Rochelle on the evening of April 19. La Vente [to SME Directors], Sept. 20, 1704. ASQ, Lettres, R 77. The journal, however, is not extant.

clouded. The Atlantic was unusually warm and serene for that time of year. Perhaps the worst was over, the passengers hoped; perhaps after all, there had been some truth in the bishop's comforting descriptions of the Louisiana colony. It would be nearly three months, however, before the *Pelican* would finally anchor at the entrance of Mobile bay.

A 1796 PROPOSAL FOR A
TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

By

G. Melvin Herndon

In 1796 William Tatham was as excited over his own proposal for a Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway as many present-day Alabamians. Tatham also predicted that his proposed waterway would replace the Mississippi River as the major artery of commerce in the heart of North America. However, the major purpose of Tatham's proposal had to do with international diplomacy — to eliminate conflict and tensions between Spain and the United States in the Southwest.

William Tatham, the eldest son of a poorly paid Anglican clergyman in Cumberland County, England, was sent to Virginia in 1769 at the age of seventeen in hopes that he might find opportunity and success in the New World. He began his new life in Virginia as an apprentice clerk for the mercantile firm of Carter and Trent located above the falls of the James River, with the intention of learning the tobacco trade.¹ After five years of service with Carter and Trent he entered the mercantile business on his own. Apparently he had been a poor student, for by the end of the year his venture into the business world was a miserable failure. His services at the Carter and Trent store far up the James brought him into contact with hunters and settlers as they journeyed across the mountains to the Holston River area, and he seemed far more interested in listening to tales of the frontiersmen than learning the mercantile trade. By spring, 1776 he had abandoned his floundering mercantile business and taken up residence across the mountains in Watauga.² Twelve months later he

¹"Colonel Tatham," *Annual of Biography and Öbituary*, IV (London, 1820), 149-50.

²Tatham to Diego de Gardoqui, Aranjuez, March 13, 1796, Archivo Historico Nacional Estado, Legajo 3890, Expediente 5, Madrid, Spain, Microfilm copy in the Library of Congress. Henceforth cited as AHN, with appropriate document number designated.

went back to Virginia and served rather inconspicuously with several military units during the Revolution.³

After the war Tatham went to North Carolina to study law with William R. Davie and was licensed to practice in that state in 1784.⁴ It was here that he began to associate with a group of prominent North Carolinians interested in promoting an inland waterway to connect Fayetteville, North Carolina with George Town, South Carolina. For the next ten years Tatham spent much of his time surveying in North Carolina, Virginia, and on the frontier west of the mountains. He collected many maps, improving on some from his own observations and surveys, and drafted a few himself.⁵

In 1792 he went to the Southwest Territory to visit Governor William Blount, acquired a license to practice law there, and hung out his shingle in Knoxville.⁶ Tatham placed a notice of his intent to practice law in the *Knoxville Gazette*, but other later notices in that newspaper reveal the real purpose of his sojourn to Knoxville: the collection of geographical and historical data for improving his maps.⁷ He also learned much about frontier intrigue and speculative land schemes. Acknowledging him as an authority, William Blount and others sought geographical information from him.⁸

Both Tatham and Blount left the Southwest Territory in 1793 and both appeared in Philadelphia in 1794. Blount went to promote speculative land schemes and his reappointment as

³Tatham to Thomas Jefferson, Lynhaven, July 19, 1806, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department State, 1789-1906, Record Group 59, Micro-copy 179, National Archives, Washington, D. C.; Tatham to William Burwell, George Town, Columbia, June 13, 1805, Elizabeth G. McPherson, ed., "Letters of William Tatham," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XVI, Ser. 2 (July, 1936), 181-82.

⁴Blackwell P. Robinson, *William R. Davie* (Chapel Hill, 1957), 29, 35, 401; Document signed by Judges Samuel Ashe, Samuel Spencer, and John Williams, AHN, Doc. 56.

⁵Tatham to Messrs. Gales and Seaton, January 6, 1814, *National Intelligencer*, June 12, 1814.

⁶Authorization signed by Governor William Blount, September 17, 1792, AHN, Doc. 56.

⁷*Knoxville Gazette*, September 22, 1792; March 23, 1793.

⁸William Blount to John Gray Blount, September 18, 1793, Alice D. Keith and William H. Masterson, eds., *The John Gray Blount Papers*. 3 volumes (Raleigh, 1952-65), II, 312-13.

governor of the Southwest Territory,⁹ and Tatham his cartographical work. By this time Tatham had built up a large collection of historical and geographical material and hoped to get some of his maps engraved in Philadelphia to sell to land speculators and the War Department. The Secretary of War was in need of good maps, particularly of the frontier, for use in planning and promoting frontier defense.¹⁰

While in Philadelphia Tatham discovered another source of interest in his materials when he was introduced to Josef de Jaudenes, the Spanish charge de'affaires. Tatham showed Jaudenes his collection of material and assured him that he possessed much valuable information concerning frontier intrigue.¹¹ Jaudenes himself was working on a scheme to separate the backcountry from the United States and was convinced by Tatham that he possessed important maps, documents, and information relating to the Spanish-American frontier that would be of great value to the Spanish government.¹² Jaudenes then made a deal that included sending Tatham and his trunks of materials to Madrid at the expense of the Spanish government. He was to remain in Spain until Spanish officials could determine the value of his materials or his services to the Spanish Court. If the Court chose not to purchase his documents, etc., or use his services, his return voyage to the United States, or elsewhere, was to be provided for at no expense to him.¹³

Tatham left New York on board a Swedish vessel in late December, 1795 and reached Spain a month later. He informed a few of his friends of his voyage, giving as an explanation that he was going to Madrid on a secret mission to promote better relations between the United States and Spain.¹⁴ Upon his arrival in Spain, Tatham appeared to be more interested in obtaining employment as an adviser to the Spanish government on Spanish-American relations than selling his documents.

⁹William H. Masterson, *William Blount* (Baton Rouge, 1954), 244.

¹⁰Tatham to Governor Henry Lee, Richmond, July 30, 1793; Tatham to Lieutenant Governor James Wood, Capitol, August 6, 1793, William Tatham Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

¹¹Tatham to Gardoqui, Aranjuez, March 13, 1796, AHN, Doc. 17.

¹²Samuel F. Bemis, *Pinckney's Treaty. American Advantage from Europe's Distress* (New Haven and London, 1965), 160.

¹³Jaudenes to Gardoqui, New York, August 18, 1795, AHN, Doc. 5.

¹⁴"Colonel Tatham," *Public Characters of 1801-02* (London, 1804), 408-10.

He spent almost six months making all kinds of proposals before Manuel de Godoy, the King's chief adviser, finally insisted that he submit his proposals clearly and in writing, which he did on June 4, 1796.¹⁵

The Pinckney Treaty had recently been ratified by the United States Senate, and Tatham felt compelled to express his views on it. The object of the treaty was the elimination of Spanish-American friction along the Mississippi frontier. As this was the stated purpose of Tatham's plan, formulated before the treaty, he had to justify his continued usefulness. He wrote Diego de Gardoqui, the Minister of Finance: "It does not appear to be a reasonable conjecture that anything which the present Treaty . . . contains, will have more than a temporary effect in counteracting evils that certain innate causes deem likely to produce in defiance of the precautions of jurisprudence." In short, Tatham insisted that the Pinckney Treaty would not prevent further aggressive expansion and tension on the Spanish-American frontier. Only his proposal could accomplish this.¹⁶

Tatham's scheme called for the establishment of a department or branch in the Spanish Secreteria to be directed by him and adequately staffed. This department would be responsible for pointing out conditions that threatened the peace and welfare of Spain's American possessions and to formulate plans to avert disruption. Such conditions, Tatham insisted, already existed in the United States. By "writing, publishing, and corresponding" with the proper enterprising people in America, Tatham assured the Spanish Court that he could bring about the establishment of a new nation in the Indian country along that area bordering the Mississippi River. The creation of this new nation was the heart of his scheme.¹⁷

Tatham explained that the "Western People" would readily countenance such a move. The majority of the American people, he declared, were opposed to the speculative land schemes that were taking place and felt this activity endangered peace with Spain. The masses in the eastern and western states

¹⁵Report on William Tatham's Mission from Philadelphia to Senores Don Josef de Gardoqui and Dn. Juan Bauta. Viro, Madrid, June 4, 1796, AHN, Doc. 42.

¹⁶Tatham to Godoy, March 24, 1796, AHN, Doc. 14.

¹⁷Report on Tatham's Mission, June 4, 1796, *ibid.*, Doc. 42.

would develop a good opinion of Spain and settle upon the Indian lands of this new nation if Spain developed a lucrative commercial intercourse with the "people of Kentucky and the Territory South of Ohio" and maintained an apparent neutrality towards settlers moving into this area. Once the land was opened for settlement, Tatham insisted, every settler would gladly pay the Indians "a small Rent for their respective possessions in preference to becoming Tenents" of American land speculators.¹⁸

His scheme called for one more vital step, which would require his own services in the field as surveyor and engineer. He proposed "uniting the Tuniche [Tombigbee] — which empties into Mobile Bay — with the Tennessee River — which flows into the Ohio not far from the union of the Ohio with the Mississippi — by means of a canal; because navigation then being more easy by these rivers from the Ohio to the sea, it would result that the Americans would abandon the Mississippi." The new, inland water route to the Gulf would replace the Mississippi as a means of getting American produce out of the southwest, end all problems relating to the use of the Mississippi, and prevent future American interest and encroachment upon Spanish territory. Here then were the geographical boundaries of the new nation — the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway west to the Mississippi River — which would be independent of the United States, look favorably towards Spain, and eventually become "a subordinate political power for his [Spanish] Majesty's advantage." These people would be a "more peacable, useful, and harmless set of people *as neighbours* then if they were his Most Catholic Majesty's Subjects."¹⁹

By the time Tatham had completed his report, two Spanish officials had finished examining his trunks of documents and papers. They concluded that neither his documents nor his proposals were of any value to Spain. The proposals constituted a reversal of recent Spanish policy with regard to her North American colonial possessions. Due to conditions in Europe, Spain was now concerned first and foremost with the protection of her continental boundaries. Spanish officials were also concerned that the American government might discover,

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

through its charge d'affaires, that Tatham was being provided for in Spain to support possible undertakings prejudicial to the United States. It was feared that this might be adequate grounds for the United States to foment trouble against Spain.²⁰ On June 8, 1795 Godoy requested Tatham to leave Spain immediately.²¹ The Pinckney Treaty and Spain's change in colonial policy in 1795 spelled doom for whatever interest Spain might have had in Tatham's Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway proposal, or any of his other schemes.²²

In 1973 actual construction began in Alabama on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway which the Army Corps of Engineers estimate will, upon completion in 1981, handle over 12 million tons of commerce annually.²³ It has also been estimated that 23 states will share in the navigational benefits of this inland waterway development. In addition, it will attract new industry of heavy types along its course as well as provide for flood control and recreation for millions of Americans.²⁴

The Alabama legislature passed a \$45 million state docks improvement plan in June, 1975 to prepare the docks at Mobile for the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. State officials say the \$45 million will give the state docks at Mobile the impetus needed eventually to supersede New Orleans as the premier port of the Gulf. Reuben Wheelis, Alabama's state docks director, predicts that "Mobile will become the largest and best port in the Gulf of Mexico and one of the greatest ports in the world."²⁵ The waterway is expected to challenge the Mississippi

²⁰Bauta and Gardoqui to Godoy, June, 1796, *ibid.* Doc. 41.

²¹Tatham to [Godoy] June 10, 1796, *ibid.*, Doc. 44. In this letter Tatham acknowledged receipt of Godoy's letter of June 8 and agreed to leave Spain.

²²Tatham returned to the United States during Jefferson's second term as president, after spending nine years in England, and was one of three men commissioned to survey the North Carolina coast from Cape Hatteras to Cape Fear, which was completed in 1806. In 1806, after the shocking Chesapeake-Leopard affair, he sent Jefferson a map containing a proposed inland waterway from the Chesapeake Bay to Cape Fear that would promote the defense and commerce of that area. Some of his proposed canals were later constructed. During the War of 1812 Tatham served as Topographical Engineer for the War Department. G. Melvin Herndon, *William Tatham, 1752-1819: American Versatile* (Johnson City, 1973), 196, 207, 225, 262.

²³*Mobile Register*, January 14; March 22, 1973.

²⁴*Ibid.*, March 1, 1973.

²⁵*Atlanta Constitution*, June 15, 1975.

as the main shipping artery for the midwest. Mobile will provide a port 100 miles closer than New Orleans and the Tennessee-Tombigbee route will cut off some 300 miles from the typical journey up the Mississippi to the midwest.²⁶

It now appears certain that Tatham's 1796 Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway proposal and his prediction that it would become a major artery of commerce for the heart of America will soon become a reality.

²⁶Ibid.