



Réseau des villes francophones  
et francophiles d'Amérique

## Rendez-vous 2016 Francophone and Francophile Cities Network Lafayette, Louisiana, October 14<sup>th</sup>

### Subject: Citizen Participation

Mr. Mayor, thank you for inviting me to participate in your Rendez-vous 2016.

In America's first economy, namely the fur trade, "*rendez-vous*" was the word used for a large meeting in the wilderness of *coureurs des bois*, trappers, traders, *voyageurs*, and native Americans. The industry was then like a distinct society and French was the glue that kept it together. At these *rendez-vous*, a substantial amount of deal-making and trading occurred. But more importantly, they were an occasion to fraternize and establish a long lasting bond. That bond is still alive today. For instance, at Fort de Chartres in Prairie du Rocher along the "*Chemin du roi*" – or King's Road - in what was called the Illinois country, they celebrated in June of this year their 46th annual *rendez-vous*.

Throughout the American west or what was then the territory of Louisiana, multiple modern *rendez-vous* are also held as cultural celebrations. Capturing these *rendez-vous* and similar events on a designated platform within the Francophone and Francophile Cities Network would help create a unifying portrait of the historic and present socioeconomic ties that bind all regions of French America.

Before retirement, while employed by Canada's financial services industry for nearly 30 years, I visited a large number of wonderful communities across the united states. I often asked myself the following questions:

Why is the fleur de lys proudly displayed on the official seal of North Dakota State? Why do we read the words "*l'étoile du nord*" in French on the flag of Minnesota State? Why did the State of Texas incorporate the white flag of the Kingdom of France into its coat of arms? Why does the Alabama State seal display the golden lilies of France's royalty? Why is the flag of Iowa State and that of Kansas City featuring the French tricolour? Why is the navy blue flag of the French marines of a gone by era still flying over Fort Massiac in Southern Illinois? And why is there a fleur de lys on the flag of Harrisburg City, the capital of Pennsylvania State? In other words, why is there a French emblem associated with so many States of the Union?

After retirement, my grandchildren gave me an iPad. As a hobby, I decided to do a catalogue of all forts built by the French in America. I did not realize at the time that I was collecting pieces of a family portrait. Michael J. Fox once said *“family is not an important thing, it’s everything.”*

Around October of last year, I was made aware of the Network. It reminded me of the legacy of French explorer Robert de La Salle who had established a network of forts along the Great Lakes, as well as Ohio, Illinois and Mississippi rivers. In particular, I noted from the Network's website that the representation from the United States could be larger. According to statistics, there are more French speaking people in the USA than in Canada.

So why would a private citizen like me promote a network dedicated to help municipalities with their economic development, and write French chronicles about tales from the past?

The answer is right here in Lafayette Parish, Acadiana, or Acadia South if you prefer.

By way of background, I am a 10<sup>th</sup> generation Canadian, born in Saint-Sacrement Parish of New France’s capital. My ancestor, Jacques Bernier, was a lawyer in Paris, France, who had a dream of a better life in America. After departing from the port city of Saint-Malo, he arrived safely in the colony of “Canada”, 365 years ago on the evening of October 19, 1651, on a tall ship named Saint-Joseph. He settled at cap Saint-Ignace on the South shore of the Saint-Lawrence river. Saints are everywhere in Québec province. Together, they are a notable French fact, particularly in the vicinity of New Orleans. Any football fan will quickly understand these historical references to saints.

This is my first time on the land of Jean Mouton, founder of Lafayette Parish. Born in the Annapolis Valley of Acadia North, in 1755, the year of *“le grand dérangement”*, he was the grandson of Jean Mouton Senior, a surgeon in Marseille, France’s second largest city, who migrated to the colony of *“l’Acadie”* in 1706 with the objective of pursuing his dream of a fuller life in America that was just starting to bloom.

During the period of time preceding 1706, America’s acute accent had already spread in all directions, from Sault Sainte-Marie (1668), Michigan, to La Baie verte (1634) renamed Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the North to Fort Louis de la Mobile (1702) now Mobile, Alabama, in the South, with Le Poste Arkansas (1686) in Arkansas State, and Kaskaskia (1703), Illinois’ first state capital, at the centre.

The family of Jean Mouton and mine are tied to each other by a shared cultural heritage and common characteristics such as ancestry, homeland, traditions, values, language, religion, a sense of history, and continental experiences like modes of transportation.

Indeed, our respective cradle is France. Our ancestors knew prior to departure about the French accent of America. They brought with them a distinctive *“joie de vivre”*. They took on

greater than normal risks, giving America its spirit of entrepreneurship. In the wild open spaces of the new world, their journeys and adventures were perilous. They received survival guidance from the indigenous people with whom they often partnered in many ways. And most importantly, they succeeded, with thousands of other families of French descent who made America home, in giving birth to the “*American dream*”, which is not a quest for wealth or material abundance, but rather a vision for self-actualization and personal fulfillment. This was also the dream of Samuel de Champlain, the father of New France, who mapped Boston harbor in 1607 and explored what is today the states of Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont and New York before his death on Christmas day 1635.

Inside the pluralism of America, these distinguishing attributes, among several other distinctions such as folklore, are the hallmarks of a society or citizenship without borders. At certain times, they have been reflected at the highest rank of the American administration inside the White House in Washington D.C.

Did you know that Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the third U.S. president, was francophile and spoke fluent French? He lived in Paris for five years where he learned the language. Other presidents of the United States who were able to converse in French are John Adams, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, William Henry Harrison, Rutherford B. Hayes, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who gave a bilingual speech during a 1936 visit to Québec City. Together, they account for eight U.S. presidents out of 44, or 18 percent of the American presidency. In my book, this is an amazing French fact.

The rationale for my pro bono participation in the network is fourfold.

First - many of my friends and acquaintances in the United States have told me that their history of the western portion of the USA starts with the Lewis and Clark team expedition in 1804 sent by President Jefferson to explore the lands acquired from France by the Louisiana Purchase.

Yet, by 1804 many new Francophone settlements had joined those I previously outlined. Here are a few of the additional start-up communities of America that have French at their roots:

Natchitoches founded in 1714 is the oldest permanent settlement in Louisiana State.

Le Poste des Cadodaquious founded in 1719 grew up to become Texarkana City in Texas.

Vincennes founded in 1732 is Indiana State’s oldest permanent settlement.

Ste. Geneviève founded around 1735 is the oldest permanent settlement in Missouri.

Les Grandes Fourches founded in circa 1740, now Grand Forks, is one of the oldest settlements in North Dakota.

Fort Presqu'île founded in 1753 is the first settlement on the site of Erie, Pennsylvania.

Chicagou, now Chicago, founded in 1780 by Haiti-born Jean-Baptiste Point de Sable.

Salina founded in 1796 is the oldest permanent settlement in Oklahoma State. Its origins stem from the fur trade.

As part of my involvement in the Network, I have written to the mayor of these cities, and many others, to make them aware of the Network's existence, benefits and easy access.

Did you know that Ste. Geneviève, with its acute accent, is a charming small town in Western Missouri that holds one of the largest collections of French colonial architecture in the USA? In an article published last week by National Geographic, about making Ste. Geneviève a national park, the author refers to the French colonial period of the United States and any one connected to it as America's forgotten past. There lies an opportunity for the Network to adjust the lenses for a better fit.

Second - many facts and events in French America, whether past or present, are colourful and evocative. Their individual story needs to be disseminated widely because our collective richness, which resides in remembering, is our key to advancement. As a storyteller, the Network has the potential to reach 275 million Francophones on the planet, 60 percent of whom are under the age of 30, and an additional greater number of people in the world of francophilia. In aggregate, this is an audience exceeding 600 million story listeners. Did you know that French is the third most widely used language on the web, after English and German, and ahead of Spanish?

Here, randomly chosen among a wide spectrum of French facts in America, are half a dozen accounts of real people, events and places worth promoting among French speakers and admirers of Francophonie around the globe:

- Mardi gras in cajun country, right here among the 22 exquisitely named parishes of Acadia South, is a genuine celebration of the region's "*joie de vivre*".
- The recovery and showcase of La Salle's flagship "*La belle*" together with over a million artifacts of French origin from Matagorda Bay in South Texas.
- The multiple festivals and parades in Michigan held during French Canadian heritage week between September and October of each year.
- The story behind the lead tablet buried in 1743 by the La Vérendrye brothers and discovered in 1913 by school children in Fort Pierre, South Dakota.
- The return of the original French street names to downtown St. Louis which provide an invaluable and fun history lesson for everyone.
- The pioneer days of Seattle, Washington, when Father Francis Xavier Préfontaine was instrumental in establishing not only a parish, but also a hospital, and an academy still in operation.

With social media, every Francophone or francophile visitor walking the streets of a Network member community will be travelling with an average of 250 spectators. In my view, to be outside the Network is a missed opportunity to develop economically.

Third - a very significant event in the history of the USA, after the 4th of July, is a dazzling French fact of immense proportion. I am referring here to the purchase of the Louisiana territory from France on April 30, 1803, when Jefferson was president. It nearly doubled the size of the United States. All or parts of 15 Western states would eventually be carved out from this colossal land transaction, including Minnesota, the most Northern star of the acquisition. It would be engaging if the state capital of all 15 states fashioned from the territory were to join the Network. Such an addition would enrich people's understanding of the significance of this pivotal time in history.

After the signing of the agreement, Robert Livingston, the U.S. minister to France, said "*we have lived long but this is the noblest work of our lives.... the United States take rank this day among the first powers of this world*".

In May of this year, I wrote to the mayor of every state capital concerned. As of today, only Mayor Carrie Tergin of Jefferson City, Missouri, wrote back indicating she would be supportive of joining the Network. With more support, perhaps a comprehensive tourist circuit about the Louisiana Purchase could be developed in virtual space on the Network or in cooperation with an American airline, or both.

Fourth- as of now, the Network has the critical mass, the structure in place, and a well thought out strategic plan to be successful. With its more than 100 members, including U.S. cities representing 14 states, the network is extraordinarily rich in cultural assets.

The following excerpt from your strategic plan summarizes very well my will to participate in the Network's activities:

*"Today, duty and passion compel us to gather and reassemble the pieces, to patiently rebuild the puzzle of our torn family portrait."*

From my perspective, the Network is both a paradox and a prism. Like a paradox, the more information you give it about your community and its French heritage the more benefits you will receive in terms of economic development. And, like a prism, the acute angle of the Network will transform your city's shining light into a rainbow of colours.

More and more, people are interested in history that is made alive by tourist circuits, movies, cultural products, events or other means. The annual Toronto Caribbean Carnival, also called "*Caribana*", is a case in point. It is a colourful festival that promotes Caribbean culture and traditions. It has grown exponentially since its start in 1967 from a three-day event into three

weeks of celebration, akin to Québec City's "*Fêtes de la Nouvelle-France*" - New France festival. Did you know that each October since 1968, people celebrate the "*Feast of the hunters' moon*" on the grounds of a replicated 1717 French trading post near West Lafayette, Indiana? During the living history presentations, participants re-enact the annual fall rendez-vous of the French and Native Americans which took place at fort Ouiatenon in the mid-18th century. This is a feast for the eyes in need of promotion on the world scale. Hopefully, the City of West Lafayette will soon join the Network in order to capitalize on its rich French heritage which its citizens and visitors have embraced with commitment and passion.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly remind you of the notion of cultural capital, which your strategic plan describes as a situation whereby member cities benefit from initiatives that promote their city's tourist and cultural attractions. To put it another way, cultural capital is created when ancestry, homeland, traditions, values, language, religion, a sense of history, and continental experiences, the very characteristics I have in common with Jean Mouton, become the currency to leverage other types of capital, such as economic resources. In practical terms, it means the future of your community, regardless of its size or location, can be built on its past.

For actionable leaders, cultural capital is the most important type of capital. It will make the difference between maintaining the status quo or building the foundation for making change.

In the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City, there is a gorgeous mural depicting a French colonist returning from Paris to "*Fort Orléans*", near present-day Brunswick, with his Native American bride in a radiant white French dress. The Kansas City Star newspaper declared in an article published on March 30, 2014, about the region's French origins, that "*most who gaze at it (the mural) have no knowledge of this obscure part of Missouri's history*".

Bear in mind, the Network holds the key to a part of America's forgotten past. Together, we want it to be a gold mine of memories for millions of people on all five continents.

Thank you.

Jean-Pierre Bernier

Aurora, Ontario, Canada