

# A “Noble” Attraction: French Revolutionary Exiles in the Trans-Appalachian West

Thomas C. Sosnowski

With the opening of the Estates-General in May 1789 after a 175 year hiatus, France moved willy-nilly towards its tumultuous revolution. Indeed, after the storming of the Bastille on 14 July, many a noble or other high-ranking members of French society found it appropriate or desirable to depart *la douce France* for more harmonious surroundings. The spirit of collegiality among the nobility and especially the intricate or even byzantine ties of marriage ensured them a welcome in other realms. Most exiled themselves to nearby locations like Cologne, Hamburg, Italy, the Low Countries, and even England (especially London); all of this was truly familiar terrain.<sup>1</sup> However, most surprisingly, a noticeable number made the two to three month journey to the new, trans-Atlantic republic, the United States. One historian guessed that at least ten thousand faced the rigors of oceanic travel in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Many of these were not officially categorized as émigrés, but, nonetheless, they were distraught by the new regime and feared execution or an unwanted change of lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these exiles who arrived in the United States settled in major east coast cities like Boston, New York, Charleston, and especially Philadelphia, which became a focal point for a majority of them. However, a small number were attracted by regions inland from the tidewater and some settled in the valleys of the Appalachians, while others continued further west. Perhaps, two motives can be identified in these “travelers”: some were excited by a spirit of wanderlust and others by a desire to settle down or to fulfill their vocation, i.e., the priesthood. It is possible that the spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau motivated many of them, first, with his image of the “noble savage” and, secondly, with a desire to travel and enjoy the beauties of nature, themes so apparent in his eighteenth century best seller *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

An examination of the “settler” category, an unusual variety of individuals, could begin with a group led by the Count de Nouailles, left the “comfort” of urban, but Quaker dominated Philadelphia to create their own community in central Pennsylvania on the banks of the Susquehanna River,

a settlement they named Azilum. For them it was truly a sort of asylum from the English and Quaker dominated culture of Philadelphia and the depravities, as they perceived them, of the revolution in France.<sup>3</sup> Here they created a settlement that depended on the soil (perhaps in the spirit of the physiocrats) as it did in Old Regime France, but without the amenities of feudalism's remnants. Even the émigré La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, the inveterate traveler who visited them, predicted its demise, especially because of the lack of friendly connections with the anglophones who resided nearby.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the Nouailles contingent attempted to create an anachronistic community where the residents gathered at least weekly for their salons, attired in the best of their Old Regime wardrobes. They even constructed, most probably with the physical assistance of their non-French neighbors, a *Grande Maison* that, according to local legend, would house Marie-An-toinette upon her escape from the Conciergerie in Paris. That building was no mere log cabin, the recently developed form of domestic architecture in frontier America, but rather a clapboard, two-storey structure boasting many a glass window. Too bad it did not survive long this fascinating community.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the ex-queen never escaped and became a martyr to royalism at the guillotine. However, as France began to shed its revolutionary garments, the exiles at Azilum turned their attention to *la douce France* that either welcomed them or, at the very least, did not want to persecute them. Azilum quickly disappeared and only a few "settlers" remained who melded into the local anglophone community by the early 1800s.

The "settler" category should also include those who "purchased" lands during frenetic 1789 and 1790 in the Ohio Valley downstream from the newly organized community of Marietta, itself named after the French queen. Gallipolis, i.e., city of the Gauls, was advertised in France and especially Paris as the future capital of the United States where the quality of tobacco was superior to that of Virginia and the weight and size of the fish in the rivers was beyond comprehension. The swindle of William Playfair (what a misnomer for a surname!) with the duping of the naïve Joel Barlow (author of the bombastic *Columbiad*, an epic poem which he hoped would be the U.S. equivalent of Rome's *Aeneid*) encouraged hundreds, maybe more than five hundred, to relocate on the banks of the Ohio River. In good faith, these unsuspecting French were aroused by this propaganda to secure their futures in the New World. When they arrived and discovered the paper worth of their claims, they were fortunately rewarded with lands by the Ohio Company, which founded Marietta only a few years earlier. Any excitement that might have remained after the arduous journey to the Valley must have been squelched when the emigrants faced the rigors of frontier living, i.e.,

how to tame the wilderness. When the Duke of La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt arrived a few years later, he rightly predicted the demise of the settlement<sup>6</sup>. In fact, it was the same judgment he made about Azilum. His antennae on the future in these two situations proved true.

And should the Duke have met Lezay-Marnésia, he would have castigated him for his bizarre plans for the Ohio Valley. As a high-ranking noble, he dreamed of creating a truly anachronistic community, which he dubbed St. Pierre. Here the spirit of his ultra-conservative Catholicism would reign supreme and a reformed relative of "feudalism" would permeate the social and political structure. His enthusiasm for the region and his proposals evidently did not gain favor across the Atlantic because no settlement resulted from his curious *Lettres*. For him, the U.S. West meant an escape from the uncertainties of contemporary France and the Rousseauian wilderness provided a relief, at least philosophically.<sup>7</sup>

Several exiles traveled west to "round off" their understanding of the new United States and to satisfy their desire for travel. Their noble and literary background made them most probably susceptible to pre-revolutionary salon enthusiasm for the "noble savage" and other romantic nonentities. At least three should be identified: Louis Philippe, the Duke of Orléans and future "bourgeois" king of the French; Talleyrand, the former *Ancien Régime* bishop and incredible political survivor of the ever-changing French political scene; and Châteaubriand, the youthful noble yet to publish his first romantic novel.

Political and social instability in France encouraged the future novelist René de Châteaubriand to travel to the United States in 1791 where he sojourned only some nine months. His "enlightened" spirit at this time included atheism, but he did travel with several Sulpician priests who were persuaded by the Catholic bishop, John Carroll, to settle in Baltimore and organize the first seminary in the new American diocese. Châteaubriand's major foray across the Allegheny Mountains took him to Niagara Falls which already entered the "must" list of the audacious traveler. In his *Travels in America*, he gives the reader an impression of extensive travel in the West, i.e., the Ohio country, including regions around Chillicothe, Ohio. However, with only a short amount of time in the States coupled with the difficulties of transportation, he most probably did not experience all that he claimed. His primary contact with trans-Appalachia was upstate New York where he saw both Indians and what he called the "half-savage" settlers or pioneers. His knowledge of much of the West most probably came from his extensive

readings, which were confused with his reminiscences in the 1820s when he scribed these memoirs. Nonetheless, his experiences gave him a base for several romantic novels, especially *Atala* that propelled him into literary fame. As an exemplar of the romantic era, he followed a storyteller's dictum: "Never let the truth interfere with a good story!"<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Châteaubriand, Louis-Philippe, along with his brothers, truly voyaged extensively in the western marches. Contemporary researchers might wish that he had been more like a John Adams and wrote extensively about his excursions, but, at least, we have a number of diary entries, plus those of the Duke de Montpensier, his brother, who added another dimension to the travels with his paintings. The brothers arrived in the U.S. from Hamburg in September 1796 and departed for Europe in December 1799. Besides visiting other exile communities along the East Coast, they traveled to the Massachusetts province of Maine. In addition, they made two trips across the mountains: first to Niagara Falls and second to New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The latter took them through parts of Tennessee and then to a variety of communities like Zanesville, Louisville, Bardstown, Knoxville, and Natchez. Although they dwelt often on the geography and, most notably, the quality of accommodations and food, they, especially Louis-Philippe, were fascinated by the Indians. Obviously, they spent some time with them in Tennessee and commented in some depth on their life styles and languages. He was far more critical of the white settlers than he was of the Native Americans. Too often it appears as if he expected the quality of life among the settlers to be similar to the European Americans along the East Coast. Most probably Rousseau and others prepared him for aboriginal cultures. Many of his comments were insightful and devoid of racial bias. It is a pity his diary ends at Bardstown, Kentucky, well before the end of his travels.<sup>9</sup>

Another émigré, the always fascinating Talleyrand, sought asylum in the United States. This elegant noble and conversationalist found most Americans to be boorish in manners. He, like many other visitors, criticized their focus on economic success, which elevated the status and prominence of money in society above birth, a bias that one would expect from the old nobility or gentry. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that simultaneously this same Talleyrand created a business relationship with Cazenove, a land speculator from the Netherlands in upstate New York, and examined on a number of occasions lands that could be purchased for future profit. He even indicated that he was willing to seek U.S. citizenship if that would be necessary to continue his financial plans. His only travels to the West were

to Niagara Falls with different routes for arrival and departure. His unkind and thoughtless words about the American Republic denounced both the Indians and the white settlers as primitive.<sup>10</sup>

Several exiles traveled to the West for another reason, that is to prepare studies or inquiries about the new and fascinating United States. The Duke of La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, originally a supporter of the Revolution and confidant of Louis XVI, traveled extensively throughout the States and produced an eight-volume account of his journeys. Constantin-François Volney, a noted French intellectual whose extensive travels already included the Middle East and North Africa, escaped the radical stages of the Revolution by exile in America.

The inquisitive Volney became acquainted with U.S. scientific greats through his membership in the American Philosophical Society, one of Benjamin Franklin's contributions to American intellectual culture. Whether or not with the encouragement of this organization, he traveled extensively in the West, i.e., beyond the Allegheny Mountains. The result was his *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis*. It has been acclaimed the first significant work in geography on the United States, whose twentieth century edition exceeds four hundred pages. It is indeed remarkable, not only as a work of geography, but also of geology and anthropology. Soil, climate, minerals, rocks, vegetation, indigenous peoples and customs and languages, all of these are the foci of his efforts. After his arrival in the U.S. in 1795, he traveled to Monticello to visit that great American intellectual, Thomas Jefferson. From there he traversed the Appalachians and reached Vincennes on the Wabash River in modern Indiana. His return to the East took him past Niagara Falls. Throughout the journey, he remained perceptive, indeed inquisitive, always attuned to the differences in physical geography, and always willing to avoid pre-judgment on the worth or status of the soil vis-à-vis the European continent. Actually his most bitter comments were directed towards Americans in 1798 during the height of the XYZ Affair and the resulting undeclared war with Directory France. This scientist and linguist, who wrote more than a dozen scholarly works, found the United States and especially its West, as fertile grounds for intellectual inquiry. Most of this published work demonstrates easily that fascination of his inquisitive and thought-provoking intellect.<sup>11</sup>

A different kind of inquisitiveness that motivated another exile can be seen in the activities of the Duke of La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt who had inherited his first title (or name, i.e. La Rochefoucauld) upon the execution of

his more distinguished first cousin during the Reign of Terror. This somewhat strange humanitarian barely escaped the radical excesses of the Revolution and arrived in the United States with little money, only a few personal possessions, and his dog.<sup>12</sup> He centered his American life on Philadelphia, but psychologically his estranged condition necessitated additional activity. To spend time with intellectual and conversational delights like Talleyrand and Moreau de St.-Méry, as well as the distinguished Philadelphian Benjamin Chew, was enjoyable but not sufficient. He decided to “see” the new republic and avoid as he said “boredom.” The result was an eight volume *Voyages*, a fascinating and sometimes compelling study that guided him through many of the original states and beyond the Appalachians and even to Canada (where he experienced significant bureaucratic problems). As stated earlier, he visited the émigré community of Azilum in Pennsylvania and later that of Gallipolis in Ohio. In both, he predicted problems in part because of settler inability to work closely with neighboring anglophones. He appears to have had some understanding of culture and interpersonal relationships. His perspicacity could be extended to upstate New York where he also encountered exiles.<sup>13</sup>

A third group of exiles that traversed the Appalachians were the priestly exiles that looked upon the United States as an asylum from the Revolution in France. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Clerical Oath Decree, combined with the dissolution of monasteries substantially adjusted, if not undermined the canonical, religious structure in France. As a result, several Sulpician priests traveled to Baltimore where their new apostolate was the establishment of a seminary under the first Catholic bishop of the U.S., John Carroll. In a diocese of some 50,000 adherents who inhabited the diplomatically established boundaries of the new republic, he understood the need to establish a proper institution to train new clerical leaders. In the first few years of the 1790s, several dozen clergymen arrived and many of them decided to remain rather than return to France, unlike the clerical exiles in the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Among these arrivals were Gabriel Richard, Benoît Flaget, and Étienne Badin.

Gabriel Richard disembarked at Baltimore and began his American ministry at St. Mary’s Seminary. Shortly thereafter he was attracted to missionary work in the Northwest Territory, first at Vincennes and then by 1798 at Detroit, recently released from British control by terms of Jay’s Treaty. Both communities in the 1790s maintained a strong French flavor, but with the growing predominance of the anglophone population, he identified himself with his new home in the Great Lakes region and became fluent in English.

He gained the admiration of many, especially because of his indefatigable efforts in reviving the city after the great fire that destroyed it in 1805. His embrace of the American spirit, especially that of religious toleration, included a friendly relationship with the Presbyterian minister, John Monteith, with whom he founded the Catholepistimiad, the forerunner of the University of Michigan. In addition, as the western population increased substantially in the 1820s, Michigan was designated by the national Catholic leadership as another diocese with Richard as its bishop. Only his unfortunate financial problems appeared to have prevented papal approbation. He died during a cholera outbreak in 1832 without the honor of episcopal consecration.<sup>15</sup>

One of Richard's fellow exiles, another Sulpician, was Benoît (or Benedict) Flaget, who after a short visit in Baltimore pursued his vocation as a missionary in the West, first in Vincennes. By 1810, he was unwillingly appointed as the first bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky. So distraught was he at this episcopal elevation that he returned to France for succor from his Sulpician superior, Jacques Émery (the same superior who sent the Sulpicians earlier to Baltimore) who evidently encouraged him to accept the honor and its attendant responsibilities. He held this office for more than four decades, in spite of several additional efforts to resign, by which time the diocese was transferred to Louisville, the newer and larger community of the diocese. Perhaps, it should be pointed out that Bishop Flaget was assisted by a fellow exile, Jean David, who joined him in his missionary activity and became the coadjutor-bishop in 1819.<sup>16</sup>

The most fascinating of these exiles is Stephen Theodore Badin who came to the U.S. late in his seminary studies and was honored as the first priest to be ordained by Bishop Carroll in Baltimore. He was not like a colleague, Nicholas Delvau, who was involved in a paternity suit and later excommunicated. Badin's ministry stretched from Vincennes, Indiana to the Michigan Territory where he appeared to have worked inexhaustibly among the Indians and then to Ohio where he briefly exercised his ministry including Canton at St. John the Baptist Parish.<sup>17</sup>

Other French clergymen followed the paths of these more famous counterparts. For example, Jean Rivet proselytized in Vincennes until 1813 and Antoine Salmon carried his Christian message to Bardstown until he died in a snowstorm in 1798. Some like Michel Barrière began their North American religious work in the U.S. Band in his case in Kentucky before continuing his ministry in francophone Louisiana. Language for him apparently as for others was a significant barrier. Not all developed the fluency

of Richard or Badin. A final note must include Simon Bruté, another clerical exile, whose career was crowned with the bishopric of Vincennes. The work of these clerics added immeasurably to the nascent Catholic Church in the United States so carefully nourished by John Carroll, a scion of one of the most influential families of late colonial Maryland and the early Republic whose sacerdotal studies for the Jesuit order took him to France well before the U.S. Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Apparently, the trans-Appalachian West had some attraction for those escaping various stages of the French Revolution. It is still worth examining the effects that these encounters had on personages like Louis-Philippe and Talleyrand. The former came to respect many aspects of American life and the latter usually expressed disdain and contempt for the nation that gave him asylum and even supported the undeclared war with the United States from 1798 to 1800. The writings of Louis-Philippe, Volney, and La Roche-foucault-Liancourt add immensely to an understanding of the early Republic and in this case of the early “West” as it was defined contemporaneously. And finally, some exiles added substantially to the religious life of the region through their missionary work and spiritual leadership. While the transitory, French visitors have enlightened future generations about the life styles of early Republic, devoted religious leaders strongly influenced the course of Catholicism and pioneer religiosity. The West was indeed a magnet—for some it held them “in place” and for others it provided a temporary relief from which they were to pull back or “escape” to *la douce France*.

## NOTES

1. For a substantial treatment of these émigrés, consult Kirsty Carpenter, *Refugees of the French Revolution: Émigrés in London, 1789-1802* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

2. Fernand Baldensperger, *Le mouvement des idées dans l'émigration française, 1789-1815* (Paris, 1924; reprinted by Burt Franklin, 1968) I: 105. For an introduction to the émigrés in America, consult the following works: Frances Sargeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940); Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society in 1815* (New York: Octagon Press, 1966); Bernard Faÿ, *L'Esprit révolutionnaire en France et aux États-Unis* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Édouard Champion, 1925); Howard Mumford Jones, *American and French Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927); Roger Kennedy, *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1789-1820* (New York: Knopf, 1989); J.G. Rosengarten, *French Colonists and Exiles in the United States* (Philadelphia & London: Lippincott, 1907); and Anne Catherine Bieri Hébert, “The Pennsylvania French in the 1790s: The Story of Their Survival” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at

Austin, 1981). It should be noted that the émigrés arrived after the census of 1790 and most departed before that of 1800. Also, it is usually difficult to distinguish in American sources between exiles from France and those from Saint-Domingue.

3. For more information about Azilum, read Rosengarten, *French colonists*, and Childs, *French Refugee Life*.

4. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Voyage dans les États-Unis d'Amérique*, was translated into English as *Travels through the United States of America* (London: DuPont [etc.] 1800). This paper uses the latter edition.

5. With the exit of most of the exiles from Azilum, the settlement fell into disrepair quickly. Today, only an historical marker recognizes its existence.

6. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels*, I: 168-169.

7. Claude-François Adrien, Marquis de Lezay-Marnésia, *Lettres écrites des rives de l'Ohio* (Fort Pitt & Paris, An IX [1801]) in *Nineteenth-Century Literature on Microcards* (Louisville, KY: Lost Cause Press, 1956) was written in the early 1790s.

8. René de Châteaubriand, *Travels in America*, trans. Richard Switzer (Lexington, Ky., 1969) is really a collection of thirty years of reading. Many of the places he claims to have visited in 1791 did not exist in the United States of 1791. It is also useful to peruse his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), especially "Livre septième."

9. Louis-Phillippe, Duke of Orléans, *Diary of my travels in America*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York, Delacorte Press, 1977). This work also includes the diary of the Duke de Montpensier and copies of several of his paintings.

10. To assess his American sojourn, consult first Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, *Mémoires, 1754-1807*, ed. Paul-Louis Couchoud & Jean-Paul Couchoud (Paris: Plot, 1957), especially Chapter VII. Also examine *Talleyrand in America as a Financial Promoter, 1794-96: Unpublished Letters and Memoirs*, trans. and edit. Hans Huth and Wilma J. Pugh (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942) and Michel Poniatowski, *Talleyrand aux États-Unis, 1794-1796* (Paris: Perrin, 1976).

11. Constantin-F. Volney, *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis* (Paris, 1803); also published in English as *A View of the Soil and the Climate of the United States of America* in 1804 by C. B. Brown and reprinted in 1968 in London by Hafner Publishing Company. In order to assess the significance of his work, read Anne Godlewska, "Geography under Napoleon and Napoleonic Geography," *Proceedings, Consortium on Revolutionary Europe* (1989), I: 281-302.

12. To become acquainted with La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt's personality and motivations, read *Journal de voyage en Amérique et d'un séjour à Philadelphie*, ed. Jean Marchand (Paris, [n.d.]), 125-131.

13. For example, consult La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Voyage*, I:288-9.

14. See especially *The John Carroll Papers*, ed. Thomas O'Brien Hanley, S.J. (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), I: 464-5. For a useful biography of the first American Catholic bishop, read Annabelle M. Melville, *John Carroll of Baltimore: Founder of the American Catholic Hierarchy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955). For a study of the priestly exiles in England, consult Dominic Aidan Bellenger, *The French Exiled Clergy in the British Isles after 1789* (Bath, England: Downside Abbey, 1986).

15. For more information Richard, consult *Carroll Papers*, II: 28, 33 as well as Frank B. Woodford and Albert Hyma, *Gabriel Richard, Frontier Ambassador* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958), Chapter 2.

16. A good place to start is with (Abbé) Desgorge, *Monseigneur Flaget, Évêque de Bardstown et Louisville* (Paris: Jacquesa Lecorffre et Cie., 1855), 51-354. Please note the hagiographic tone of this biography.

17. See Joseph Herman Shauinger, *Stephen T. Badin, Priest in the Wilderness* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1956).

18. *Carroll Papers*, I: *passim*; II: 111-113; "John Francis Rivet," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 35 (July 1906), 33-51; Sister Mary Salesia Godecker, *Simon Bruté de Rémur: First Bishop of Vincennes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1943); and even Henry de Courcy, *The Catholic Church in the United States: A Sketch of Its Ecclesiastical History*, trans. John Gilamary Shea (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1856), 68-72.

**Thomas C. Sosnowski** is an associate professor of history at Kent State University Stark Campus in Canton, Ohio. He has published several articles on the émigrés through the Western Society for French History and the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe. His biography of Warren G. Harding is included in Philip Weeks, *Buckeye Presidents* (Kent State University Press, 2003).

E-mail [tososnowski@stark.kent.edu](mailto:tososnowski@stark.kent.edu)