
**Review by Lawrence B. A. Hatter, Washington State University.**

Québec remembers. Step into the street anywhere in the province and you’ll encounter “je me souviens” on a license plate, recalling the history of New France. The motto is not just about the Québécois invoking the memory of their French heritage from before the British conquest in 1760, but it is also a statement of their continued cultural existence in North America: we are still here. Neither the Anglophone British Empire, nor the “ROC” (the Rest of Canada), managed to erase the French presence in the St. Lawrence River valley.

But the reach of New France stretched far beyond the St. Lawrence River region. How has the French presence fared in the *pays d’en haut*, which we now call the American Midwest? Though less demonstrative than in Québec, tens of thousands of residents of southeastern Michigan and southwestern Ontario continue to celebrate their French heritage more than 250 years after the fall of New France. With fewer than one percent of Michiganders speaking French at home in 2000, how has the footprint of French colonialism persisted in Motown and the surrounding area?[1]

Guillaume Teasdale’s interesting new book *Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815* helps to explain the ways in which French colonization survived both the British conquest of New France in 1760 and the British cession of the trans-Appalachian West to the new United States after the War of Independence. In particular, Teasdale emphasizes how French colonists built a strong connection to the lands on both shores of the Detroit River, which remade the landscape through distinctive property lines (narrow strips of land, fronting the river) and the planting of fruit orchards. While the French presence in the Detroit-Windsor metropolitan area is much more subtle than in Québec or Montréal, it is still there.

Once banished to the sidelines of colonial America, French colonists have made something of a comeback over the past decade. Nowhere are the fruits of the global turn more abundant than in early America, where scholars have moved beyond the geographical boundaries of the thirteen colonies that later became the United States to embrace #vastearlyamerica (to use the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture’s Twitter hashtag). This decentering of the British Empire (or, at least, the mainland colonies from New Hampshire to
Georgia), has helped to promote a renaissance in scholarly interest in French America among historians working in Canada and the United States. Over the past decade, scholars, including Robert Englebert, Jay Gitlin, Karen Marrero, Robert Morrissey, Paul Mapp, Brett Rushforth, Andrew Sturtevant, and others have recovered the importance of France to understanding North America history.\[^{2}\]

While it would currently be an exaggeration to say that Teasdale is entering a crowded field, he is nevertheless careful to position his contribution within the growing literature on French America by choosing to focus on the growth of Detroit as a French agricultural community. As such, *Fruits of Perseverance* complements recent work on the growth of French urban communities in the so-called creole corridor from Québec to New Orleans, the participation of French colonists and indigenous peoples in the fur trade, and the colonization of the Illinois borderlands. In addition, Teasdale is mindful of the early-nineteenth century American imperial narrative, which denigrated the “backwardness” of French farmers for their refusal to engage in “material acquisition and competition” (p. 112). Exploring French farmers in the Detroit River region, then, provides a way to take French colonialism and its legacy seriously.

*Fruits of Perseverance* focuses on French land occupation in the Detroit River region by seeking to explain how an agricultural society similar to the rural settlements of the St. Lawrence River valley developed in the isolation of the Great Lakes, and how it managed to endure both British and American occupation. Teasdale argues that the answer to this question lies in the nature of the seigneurial system of land tenure adopted in Detroit in the 1730s. Without the creation of the *seigneurie directe*, he states, “colonial Detroit would have remained nothing more than just another French outpost of the Upper Country” (p. 5). This form of seigneurial tenure ensured the standardization of landownership in Detroit and its environs under the direct control of the Crown, rather than a noble or cleric, as was the case with the *seigneuries particulières* in the St. Lawrence River valley. At the same time, the absence of a seigneur in the Detroit River valley after the fall of New France in 1760 meant that the farmers there lacked an advocate and the system disappeared more quickly than in the St. Lawrence.

The creation of a *seigneurie directe* was an unintended consequence of the machinations of the military entrepreneur Antoine Laumet de Lamothe Cadillac, who founded Detroit in 1701. Cadillac, keen to create his own powerbase in Detroit, attempted to recreate the seigneurial system of the ancien régime. Cadillac played the part of the local seigneur, cutting out the colonial administrators in New France and establishing a direct relationship with the French Crown. In the end, Cadillac overplayed his hand and lost royal favor. His maverick behavior, however, ensured that the government of New France would direct a second wave of colonization at Detroit on behalf of the king. Beginning in the 1730s, Detroit became a *seigneurie directe* with the appointment of Robert Navarre as the first royal notary to supervise land transactions. Aided by the Crown’s sponsorship of transporting families from the St. Lawrence River valley, rural settlements lined both shores of the Detroit River valley by 1760.

The capitulation of New France followed British General James Wolfe’s victory at the Battle of Quebec in 1759. The formal cession of New France to the British Empire by the Treaty of Paris in 1763 was accompanied by a Royal Proclamation that forbade colonization west of the Appalachian Mountains. As such, Detroit occupied an ambiguous position in the British Empire as an island of settlement in what was meant to be an ocean of indigenous homelands. While the conquest challenged French property rights, pragmatism won out: British military commanders
needed French farmers to supply their garrisons in the West. Nevertheless, tensions did arise, particularly over common lands, to which British officers offered informal private land rights to favored individuals.

The American Revolution brought new disruption to the Detroit River region. The United States’ independence divided the river’s shores, which, through a geographical oddity, meant that the northern shore was part of the United States, while the southern shore remained within the bounds of the British Empire. The waterways that had united the French community for over eighty years now threatened to divide it. At least that was the case on paper. Moreover, the French community in the town of Detroit and on the farms along the northern shore experienced the second regime change in just twenty years. The Articles of Confederation had reserved a spot for the province of Quebec to join the United States as the fourteenth state, but French colonists rejected this offer in no small part because they feared being submerged in an Anglophone union. Would such assimilation be the fate of French Detroiters after 1783?

No. Or, at least, not immediately. While the seigneurie directe was long gone by the 1780s, neither British authorities in the new western province of Upper Canada, nor U.S. officials in the Northwest Territory and its successors could completely erase the indelible mark that French land grants had left on the landscape of the Detroit River region. British and American land officials generally upheld French colonial land titles, even as they went about the business of issuing new land grants under the Anglo grid system. In other ways, 1783 and the delayed British evacuation of Detroit in 1796 (after more than a decade of diplomatic wrangling) were marked by continuity as well as change. Teasdale describes the growth of French fruit orchards in the Detroit River valley, whose climate was better suited to the cultivation of apples and pears than the more northerly latitudes of the St. Lawrence River valley. Some of these orchards survive to this day. The international border also did little to interrupt marriages within the French community, with families on both shores continuing to tie the knot, despite their different nationalities. Indeed, migrants from the St. Lawrence River valley continued to move to Detroit, augmenting the local French population.

How and when did the French rural settlements of the Detroit River valley begin to diminish? Fruits of Perseverance does not offer a clear answer to these questions. Although the book’s subtitle ends in 1815, Teasdale alludes to the role that nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization played in accelerating the erasure of the French presence. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 promoted the western migration of tens of thousands of Anglophone Americans from the eastern states, which transformed Francophones into a minority for the first time in the region’s history. Teasdale suggests that the Detroit River only truly began to divide the French community in the 1830s. By the 1860s there were few cross-border marriages, and the region’s landscape was also changing in line with Michigan’s industrializing economy: most French windmills had disappeared by the 1870s. By the early-twentieth century, Teasdale claims, the French community of the Detroit River region was completely assimilated into American society.

While these incomplete answers point to the complexity of assimilation, a longer book would have been well-served by more thoroughly attempting to chart the course of the Americanization of Detroit. After enduring for more than a century, the reader is left wondering how the French community experienced assimilation after 1825. Was this something that the community resisted? Or were these powerful new economic forces simply too irresistible, seducing French people to adopt the English language and American culture as the price of so-called progress?
How does the experience of the Detroit French compare to the cultural assimilation and resistance of French Canadians in the St. Lawrence River valley during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? And, finally, how do people of French ancestry in the Detroit River region celebrate their heritage today? Teasdale alludes to the continued vibrancy of the French heritage community in his preface and in several photographs of cultural monuments in the Detroit metro area, but it is difficult for the reader to get a clear sense of the overall picture of the endurance of the French community in the twenty-first century.

_Fruits of Perseverance_ makes an important contribution to our understanding of French colonialism and its continuing legacy in North America. While the legal intricacies of land titles may not appear the most inherently exciting topic, Teasdale explains how the indelible marks that they left on the landscape of southeastern Michigan and southwestern Ontario continue to resonate with people of French heritage. Family lore records the migration from the St. Lawrence River valley to the “ribbon farms” of the Detroit area (p. x). The fall of New France predates the creation of the United States, yet, even in the relatively isolated outposts of the French Empire, we can still glimpse the symbols and forms of French colonialism. It is no longer possible for historians of colonial America to ignore France. It is still here.

**NOTES**


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