

ROLE OF THE FRENCH IN AMERICAN HISTORY

by Gil Biggie

The 1600's

While the BRITISH Pilgrims were busy setting up house-keeping on the East coast of North America—the “New World”— to get away from a tyrannical King, and have religious freedom, the FRENCH were sending explorers into the rugged territory that is now Canada, the Great Lakes region, and the Central Valley — an area rich in timber and furs.

In 1662 the FRENCH explorer, Robert de la Salle, traveled all the way down the Mississippi—in a birch canoe, no less! He claimed the territory for FRANCE and named it, LOUISIANA, in honor of



CHATEAU DE VERSAILLES. Construction began is 1661, and it became the royal residence and seat of the French government in 1882. Stamped, one-piece white metal button.

Louis XIV. From approximately 1650 through 1750, the BRITISH were entrenched on the East coast, the FRENCH were happily shipping furs down the center of the country, and the SPANISH were quietly mining gold in Mexico and up through the lower part of the West. The mountainous topography of the New World separated these exploring countries and kept them out of each other's way. All were content for a while

NATIVE AMERICANS were watching these new arrivals and wondering, “Where did ALL THESE



18th Century painting on porcelain, set in metal. This button commemorates THE TREATY OF 1738.



TOUR DE LE NESTLE
Both buttons are steel cups, with stamped brass above a pearl background. The button on the left has original tint DF and the button on the right has silvered brass DF.

PEOPLE come from?!?!?!?”

The FRENCH in their typically Laissez Faire and charming style, made friends with the Native Americans. The BRITISH were not so tolerant of the indigenous people and were having quite a few spats over occupancy of the land. This arrangement served the FRENCH well because it resulted in the native peoples joining them to fight against the BRITISH in their many feuds.

The 1700's

The settlers in the Northeast were content farming rocks, but the lucrative tobacco industry in the south, especially in Virginia, was going bust, due to depletion of the land with intense tobacco



FRENCH SAILORS Stamped brass button depicting two sailors, one on each side of the ship's wheel as part of the central anchor, which is attached to the rope border.

farming and a bad economy. (Yes – today is not the first time the country has been in economic trouble.) The busted tobacco farmers soon starting looking for new land.

As a result of unproductive farmlands in Virginia, the BRITISH began eyeballing rich land on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains up to the Mississippi River. The fact that the land was already explored and claimed by the FRENCH was inconsequential. The BRITISH suddenly realized it would be nice to have this land for expansion – and it would be really dandy to get control of the river after they got control of the land. There was even a port, because the FRENCH had established New Orleans in 1718.

So, as if they weren't having enough disagreements with the natives, the BRITISH decided to also take on the FRENCH, and the two countries hotly contested control of this land for many years, elbowing out the Native Americans in the process.

The mid 1700's

PIERROT, left, stamped brass made by Albert Parent & Company of Paris. PIERROT & PIERRETTE, right, characters from the French pantomime. Stamped brass with white metal crescent moon and a fabric background.



NAPOLEON button of black enamel on stamped brass.

From the FRENCH, the BRITISH finally won all the territory in Canada and between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River.

Keep this fact in mind as you read the rest of this article.

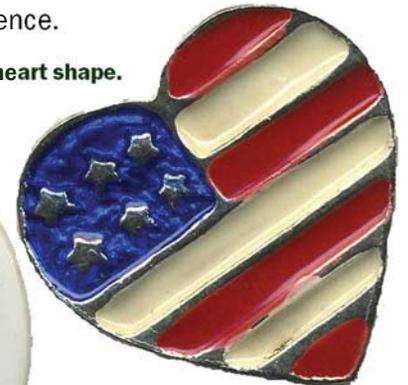
By the late 1700's...

The colonists had just about enough of King George. Rumbings of independence and revolution were being heard over many a beer in taverns across the colonies. About the same

time, the wine-drinking FRENCH were getting pretty annoyed with King Louis XVI. Louis was running constant wars in Europe and running out of money, heavily taxing the people to pay for the wars. Sound familiar?

Meanwhile, back at home, George Washington, too, was learning it costs money to run a revolution and an army needs a lot of food and gunpowder. Another big problem was that the BRITISH had a formidable Navy and George Washington had that puny little rowboat. We were losing the war for independence.

Enamel heart shape.



Nylon button with 1789 across a shape of the country, France. In 1789 the citizens of France marched upon the Bastille and in Versailles the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens

Ben Franklin was all too happy to go to Paris for a few months to cavort with the lovely FRENCH damsels and beg King Louis XVI for money and a bit of Naval support.

By golly, King Louis said, "Yes!" This makes sense, since the BRITISH had been a real nit to the FRENCH trying to expand the Colonies into French held territory.

I am sure the motive for Louis helping us fight the revolution was more to get the ENGLISH out of his wig than befriend the revolutionary colonies.

BUT, the FRENCH do love the idea of liberty.

Nonetheless, if it were not for the:

- FINANCIAL SUPPORT;
- ENLISTMENT OF MANY FRENCH SOLDIERS, ENGINEERS, AND EXPERIENCED ARTILLERYMEN IN THE COLONIAL ARMY;
- SELLING US MOST OF THE GUNPOWDER USED;
- ALLOWING MILITARY ADVISORS TO



HENRY OF NAVARRE stamped brass on a wood button with cut steel border.



EIFFEL TOWER & ARC D'TRIOMPHE
White metal



FRENCH POODLE on a silvered brass button. The poodle wears a paper hat and is tied to a chair around his mid section.

- HUGE NAVAL SUPPORT IN THE WEST INDIES TO BLOCKADE THE BRITISH SUPPLIES, AND FIGHT THE BRITISH OFF NEW ENGLAND SHORES,

..... all of which Louis XVI really couldn't afford to give, the United States never would have been victorious in the revolution. This FRENCH help to

the American Revolution was tremendously expensive and was the final straw to break the financial camel's back in France. We never paid them back and Louis lost his head.



BASQUE DANCERS on white metal



JE T-AIME (I Love You). Nylon button.



ST. JEANNE D'ARC
Celluloid with cut steel and brass.

Remember we mentioned the land west of the Appalachians and into Canada that the BRITISH won from the FRENCH a few years previously? Well, when we defeated the BRITISH with the help of the FRENCH, the BRITISH relinquished not only all the *original* colonies *but also* all that territory which they took from the FRENCH. So we ended up with the colonies on the East coast and the

land up to the Mississippi and into Canada.

How's that for irony? Perhaps Louis was hoping we would return all that land to him in an act of gratitude for all the help. Oh, well. All is fair in love and war, and the French surely have an understanding of both.

The 1800's

1803 LOUISIANA PURCHASE

Thomas Jefferson was concerned that our new country did not have access to the Mississippi River. He approached the FRENCH to bargain for "just a bit" of land on the southern coast, or at the very least, a guarantee of free navigation on the Mississippi River.

France had briefly ceded the Louisiana territory to Spain, which is why we see a small Spanish influence in New Orleans (the Negroes were allowed to vote under Spanish rule), but then France bargained to get the territory back when they needed it to become a dominant force in the Caribbean.

When they realized that the effort to dominate the Caribbean was too costly and poorly lucrative, France decided that it was not worth the bother of maintaining the

Louisiana territory.

Originally, they promised Spain the territory, but the SPANISH annoyed the FRENCH over some treaty, and King Louis decided to talk to Jefferson. Jefferson was ecstatic when Louis said, "Give me \$15,000,000 and you get the whole shebang."

We should be ecstatic as well, since this Louisiana purchase is now the entire center of our United States.

1812

The BRITISH weren't ready to give up the New World just yet. They really wanted the Mississippi and the port of New Orleans to support their own interests in the Caribbean and Northern lands. Andrew Jackson was desperately trying to hold the BRITISH back but the BRITISH were making headway up the ol' Mississip...(Those pesky BRITISH ships!!!)

Guess who comes to the rescue

The Caribbean, Mississippi bayous, and ports around the Gulf were perfect areas for pirates to hide. PIERRE LAFITTE and his brother JEAN LAFITTE had been caught and imprisoned for piracy and involvement in the Baratarian skirmish. Jackson was aware that these men knew the waters, inlets and bayou like the back of their hand. Their enormous skill at fighting and sailing big ships was well known, plus, these pirate leaders had ships and manpower. After all, they were PIRATES!

Jackson, in exchange for a full pardon, recruited the determined Lafittes and their FRENCH "associates" as privateers. He credits their fierce fighting spirit, weaponry skills, and seamanship in turning back and defeating the BRITISH. If it weren't



The Bastille. 18th Century painting under glass.
Collection of Byson Buttons.

for the FRENCH pirates, we would all be eating scones rather than Cajun.

NEW ORLEANS

The military men and engineers that built New Orleans and the Fort Chalmette were university trained FRENCHMEN and professional FRENCH soldiers who served under NAPOLEAN. They were considered the finest in the world. FRENCH men directed and commanded the artillery batteries in the battle of New Orleans.

SUMMARY

IT WAS THE FRENCH:

- WHO FIRST SETTLED CANADA, THE OHIO VALLEY, & EXPLORED THE MISSISSIPPI,
- FOUNDED NEW ORLEANS,
- WENT BANKRUPT GIVING US MONEY, SHIPS AND MANPOWER DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR,
- SAVED NEW ORLEANS IN THE WAR OF 1812,
- AND GAVE US MARDI GRAS

VIVA LA FRANCE!

Two movies about the FRENCH in America which may be of interest are:
MARIE-ANTOINETTE , 2006 About Louis XVI and Marie.

JEFFERSON IN PARIS dated 1995 about Lafayette circa 1780 & the American Revolution.



FRENCH FOP. Stamped, silvered brass on a brass background, with a cut steel border, all set in a steel cup.



COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Pierced French white metal with paste escargot.

Stamped brass French gendarme.

Tinned brass image of a French farce (also a verbal button: pas de vite).

Chanel esigner button depicting Mona Lisa (kept in the Louvre).