

News from Old Mines

The Newsletter of the Old Mines French Project

No. 9, Fall 2018

FROM THE EDITOR

Just when you think you know everything, or at least have access to everything that you could possibly imagine, something new shows up! And this is certainly the case with my own study of the history of Old Mines. I've collected many images, articles, books, documents, but am always delighted when something completely new comes my way either through my own research or through messages I receive from people who have discovered something on their own that they've been willing to share.

This is certainly the case for the material in this issue of *News from Old Mines*. In the past I've included old black-and-white photographs of houses in the Old Mines area in this publication, as well as on the accompanying Facebook page and website. Many of these were found in the online photographic archives of the Library of Congress. Recently I came across three more such photographs, and include them in this issue (below and on the following page). Beyond the brief description provided on the LOC website, I know little about the houses. The photographs are included in the Historic American Buildings Survey, and were apparently taken in the 1930's, perhaps in 1936.

Another wonderful find being shared in this issue is information published in a French newspaper about the visit in 1994 by a St. Louis resident to the hometown of Philippe-François Renault. Copies of the original articles are included here, along with their translations. If anyone knows more about this woman or her research on Old Mines, I would be grateful for any information!

I hope you find some benefit from the information included in this issue of *News from Old Mines*. As always, if you think you have something of interest to share, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me. Contributions are always welcome!

Will Thompson

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Below: Loomes San Soucie cabin, Racola, Washington County



OLD HOMES OF OLD MINES (Source: Library of Congress)

Top: Bequette Log House. Bottom: Lucas Log Cabin. Both Racola, Washington County (1936)



A Frenchman in Missouri/An American in Cousolre

In 1994, nearly 275 years after Philippe François Renault arrived in Missouri to conduct lead mining, a woman from St. Louis by the name of Diana Hartnett travelled to Renault's hometown in France in search of information about his origins. Remarkably, Jean Heuclin, a retired history professor who is from this town, Cousolre, has found two articles from a local paper that chronicle Ms. Hartnett's trip to the region.

Hopefully some online research will allow us to get in touch with Ms. Hartnett, who apparently retired a few years ago from teaching in the St. Louis area, and find out the precise nature of her research and what, if anything, she ended up doing with the materials she discovered.

For the time being, you will find in this issue copies of the original articles (pp. 4-5) as well as their translation (p. 6). It certainly seems that this visit was the source of some fascination on the part of the local residents at the time.

It should, however, be pointed out that there are numerous inaccuracies in the articles, some of which appear to be the result of some imaginative (if misguided) assumptions on the part of the author of the articles.

For instance (and perhaps most important to note), Renault himself was *not* the founder of Old Mines! He may have conducted mining in the same area (although there is little information about where precisely he first did so), but the name Old Mines is not used until late in the 18th century, some 80 years later.

Additionally, it is true that Renault came to America with 200 workers, but it's not certain that they were all from the same community in France. One of the frequently repeated, but inaccurate statements about Renault is that he stopped at Santo Domingo (now Haiti) and purchased 300 slaves that he brought with him to Missouri. Although there was apparently a contract for such a purchase, there is no evidence whatsoever that Renault brought such a large number.

What is true is that Renault did not remain in the Illinois Country for the rest of his life, returning to France to end his days in Cousolre. Of the original 200 men who went with him, some returned to France, yet some apparently remained, and much work is left to be done to determine their fates.

Upcoming Events

2018

December 7-9: [Ste. Genevieve Christmas Festival](#)

December 9: [Le Réveillon, Felix Valle House](#)

December 31: [La Guiannee at Fort de Chartres](#)

December 31: [Ste. Genevieve La Guiannee](#)

2019

February 2: [Ste. Genevieve Kings Ball](#)

April 6: [Old Mines Area Historical Society Seminar](#)

June 8: [Ste. Genevieve French Heritage Festival](#)

August 10-11: [Ste. Genevieve Jour de Fête](#)

October 6: [Fête de l'automne](#)

The Old Mines French Project

Director: Dr. Will Thompson, The University of Memphis

Website: www.oldmines.org

email: oldminesmissouri@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/oldminesfrench



coup de rétro

M/7
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L'Américain de Cousolre

Qui aurait imaginé voir débarquer une enquêtrice à Cousolre, de surcroît américaine ?

Ici, l'affaire est tombée dans les oubliettes. Outre-Atlantique, elle retentit encore. Surtout du côté du Missouri où une citadine de Saint-Louis va jusqu'à faire la traversée pour tenter de percer le mystère de Philippe-François Renault. Un habitant de Cousolre, fils du maître de forge, qui, au XVIII^e siècle, s'exila aux Amériques pour exploiter des mines de plomb et faire fortune.

Avec deux cents compagnons, tous originaires de la commune et des alentours, le pionnier ne tarda pas à créer sa propre compagnie en Louisiane française, sur les rives du Mississippi. Pour cette concession, il reçut officiellement des terres et c'est ainsi

qu'il fonda le village de La Vieille Mine.

Aujourd'hui, ce bourg du Missouri existe toujours. 45 âmes, un petit musée, des cabanes de mineurs. La vie y est tranquille, sans histoire. Mais dans ce trou du Missouri, fait exceptionnel, 80 % de la population est francophone et s'appelle Boyer, Becquet ou Robert.

Se passionnant pour ce phénomène historico-linguistique, Diana Hartnett, professeur d'histoire et de français, n'a pas hésité à faire le voyage. Le temps d'un week-end d'investigations à Cousolre, elle a puisé une mine de renseignements dans les livres et les archives communales. Pour mieux retrouver les racines françaises de ce coin d'Amérique et saluer au passage des cousins très lointains.

V. D.

Elle a traversé l'Atlantique pour visiter Londres, Paris, Fribourg... et achève son périple à Cousolre. Coup de cœur d'une historienne sur les traces de Philippe-François Renault, fondateur d'un petit village du Missouri



Diana Hartnett tente, en compagnie du maire, de percer le mystère qui entoure le bâtisseur d'un village américain.

(Ph. "La Voix")

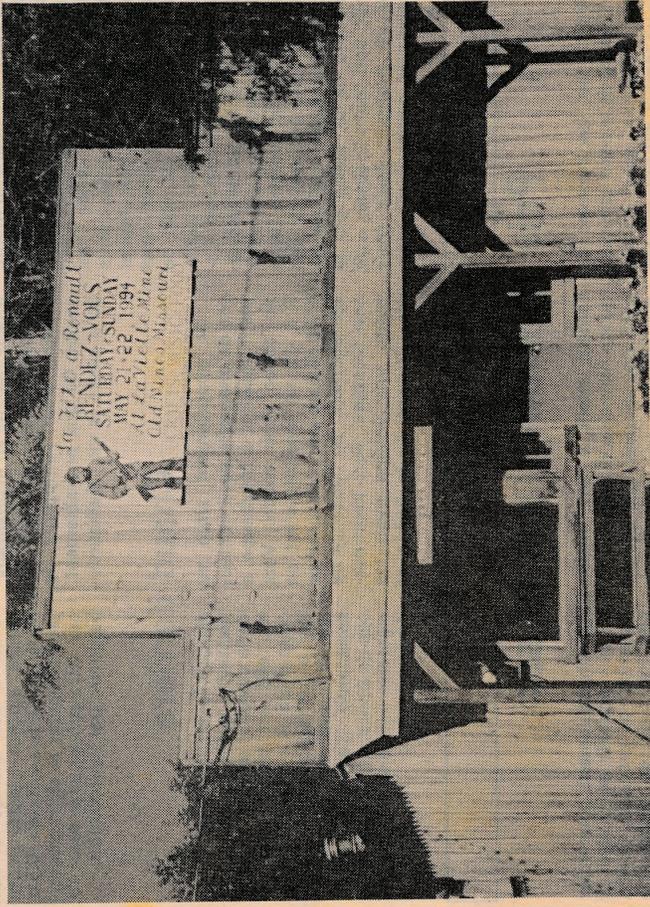
Longs cheveux blancs noués en queue de cheval, tee-shirt blanc, jean, chaussures plates... Diana Hartnett a des allures d'étudiante. Ça tombe bien ! Le temps des vacances scolaires, ce professeur d'histoire et de français venue de Saint-Louis (Missouri), fonce sur le terrain pour jouer les apprentis chercheurs.

Evidemment, on ne tombe pas par hasard dans la campagne avesnoise. Mais c'est que la belle américaine tente d'éclaircir le mystère de La Vieille Mine, un bourg situé à une centaine de kilomètres de chez elle.

Peu le connaisse, et pourtant ! Ses habitants y parlent le français et portent des noms bien de chez nous. Enfin, son bâtisseur n'est autre que Philippe-François Renault, natif de Cousolre.

POUR la petite histoire, il travaillait avec son père, maître de forge, et vivait tranquillement à Cousolre. En 1720, lui prend alors l'idée saugrenue de quitter le pays, et de partir faire fortune aux Amériques. Abandonnant femme et en-

fant, Philippe-François Renault lance l'expédition en compagnie de deux cents ouvriers de la commune et s'installe sur les rives du Mississippi, en Louisiane française, après avoir rafilé au cours du voyage des centaines d'esclaves dans la mer des Caraïbes.



Declin de l'empire américain ! Il ne subsiste que quatre cabanes de mineurs à La Vieille Mine. Et quarante-cinq habitants. Sur, des descendants de Cousolriens.

(Ph. "La Voix")

économiques de son implantation ?» s'interroge Diana, que l'histoire de France aux Etats-Unis a toujours passionné.

Curieuse de nature et fascinée par l'héritage culturo-linguistique laissée à La Vieille Mine, l'enseignante native de Chicago n'a pas résisté à la tentation de venir voir sur place à quoi ressemble la commune mère.

Elle est persuadée d'y déguster des bribes d'explication, et surtout, de découvrir qui est au juste cet aventurier dont on ne sait presque rien. Ni sur ses ancêtres, ni sur la fin de sa vie passée en France.

Autour d'elle, on ne comprend pas toujours (à commencer par son mari) ses moti-

vations. Après tout, La Vieille Mine n'est qu'un tout petit village. Avec quarante-cinq habitants, une société historique, quatre cabanes de mineurs et un coiffeur. Mais peu importe ! Le sujet lui tient à cœur. Diana ira jusqu'au bout. Elle envisage même d'écrire un livre sur l'histoire des Boyer, Robert ou Becquet d'ici et d'outre-Atlantique.

Plonger dans les textes

En tous cas, le professeur aura su mettre son week-end dans le Nord à profit. Explorant le village de fond en comble, à l'affût de la moindre révélation, multipliant les contacts avec les gens du cru, et fouillant

avec M. Ghislain, maire, dans les registres de la commune.

Avant que de filer sur Paris, poursuivre ses investigations aux Archives nationales et à la Bibliothèque nationale, l'américaine goûte avec plaisir sa pause nature. « Le chant du coq le matin, les grenouilles le soir, les grands espaces, c'est vraiment charmant. Tellement différent de l'endroit où je vis... » glisse-t-elle dans une langue parfaite.

Emportant dans sa valise de précieux documents ainsi que la notice historique de la commune de Cousolre, elle sait déjà qu'elle n'est pas venue pour rien. « Le temps de digérer ces livres..., j'y trouverai des merveilles ! »

V.D.

The American from Cousolre (July 12, 1994) [See p. 4]

Who could have ever imagined seeing a researcher (American on top of that) coming to Cousolre? Here, the story has been forgotten. On the other side of the Atlantic, the memory has lasted. Especially in Missouri where a resident of Saint Louis has gone so far as to cross the ocean to try to uncover the truth about Philippe-François Renault, a native of Cousolre, son of the ironmaster, who went to America in the 18th century to mine lead and make his fortune.

With 200 companions, all of them from the Cousolre area, this pioneer quickly created his own company in French Louisiana on the shores of the Mississippi. For this concession he was officially granted land and so he founded the village of Old Mines.

Today, this Missouri community still exists. Forty-five souls, a small museum, some miners' cabins. Life is quiet, not much happens. But in this remote part of Missouri, a remarkable 80% of the population is French-speaking, with names like Boyer, Becquet or Robert.

Fascinated by this historical and linguistic phenomenon, Diana Hartnett, a French and history teacher, did not hesitate to make the trip. Over the course of a weekend of research in Cousolre, she found a treasure of information in books and local archives, so as to more firmly trace the French roots of this part of America and to send a greeting to some very distant cousins.

She crossed the Atlantic to visit London, Paris, Fribourg... and ends up in Cousolre. The passionate mission of an historian looking for Phillippe-François Renault, founding father of a small Missouri village. [See p. 5]

Long blond hair in a pony-tail, white t-shirt, jeans, flat shoes... Diane Hartnett could be a student. Indeed! This St. Louis teacher of French and history is spending the summer vacation making her way through the region playing the part of an apprentice researcher.

Of course, one does not end up in the Avesnois countryside by accident. What the beautiful American is trying to do is to clear up the mystery behind Old Mines, a community located about 100 kilometers from her home.

Few know about it, and yet! The inhabitants speak French and have family names from here. In fact, its founder is none other than Philippe-François Renault, a native of Cousolre.

The short history: he worked with his father, an ironmaster, and lived a quiet life in Cousolre. In 1720, he had the strange idea of leaving home and going to seek his fortune in America.

Leaving behind wife and child, Philippe-François Renault launched his expedition accompanied by 200 workers from the commune and settled on the banks of the Mississippi, in French Louisiana, after picking up hundreds of slaves in the Caribbean during his voyage.

Working the lead mines along the Mississippi with his companions, he soon founded the society of Saint-Philippe, and due to his having constructed the first furnace, he received the concession for some land. A social life thus began and the few cabins were transformed into a village.

Although the business was prosperous, the founder of Old Mines encountered some difficulties, notably with the Indians who stole a large part of what was produced. Soon our hero returned home. His French comrades, however, continued with their mining.

"Why did this resident of Cousolre come here? What are the socio-economic reasons that explain his presence?" asks Diana, who has always been passionate about the French history in the United States.

Curious by nature, and fascinated by the cultural and linguistic heritage in Old Mines, this teacher originally from Chicago could not resist the temptation to come and see for herself what Renault's hometown looks like.

She hopes to find some answers to her questions, and above all discover who, exactly, is this adventurer about whom almost nothing is known, whether it be about his ancestors or about the end of his life in France.

Nobody (including her husband) quite understands what is motivating her. After all, Old Mines is just a small village. With forty-five inhabitants, a historical society, four miners' cabins and one barber. But no matter! The subject fascinates her. Diana will pursue this to the end. She even hopes to write a book about the story of the Boyer, Robert or Becquet families both here and across the Atlantic.

In any case, the teacher will have spent her weekend in the North region well. Exploring the village from one end to the other, attentive to the slightest new piece of information, making contacts with the locals, and searching through the communal registers with Mr. Ghislain, the mayor.

Before leaving for Paris in order to continue her research at the National Archives and the National Library, the American stops to enjoy the natural surroundings: "The rooster's crow in the morning, the frogs in the evening, the open spaces, it's very charming. So different from where I live..." she says in perfect French.

Taking with her precious documents as well as the historical record of the community of Cousolre, she already knows that her trip was not in vain. "When I have the time to go through these books, I will find some marvelous things!"

Henry Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana*: an early portrayal of the French communities in Missouri

Henry Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana, Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811* was originally published in Pittsburgh in 1814. *Views of Louisiana* includes one of the most detailed portrayals of the French communities in Missouri in the period prior to statehood. The following is an excerpt from book two of *Views of Louisiana*, Chapter VI, "Historical Character of the Ancient Inhabitants—Change of Government," in which Brackenridge provides his perspective on the character of the French inhabitants of Missouri as he encountered them upon his return in the region in 1810. Previous issues of this newsletter (# 4 and #5) have featured other passages from this work, with a particular focus on describing the mines and the mining communities in the Old Mines region. The passage below is the first part of a detailed description of the actual lead mining process as Brackenridge observed it in the early 19th century.

What might be the most remarkable feature of the following passage is the reference towards the end to "tiif" [sic]. Although further research on the topic will be required, this may be one of the earliest references to tiff, a word that is unique to the lead mining district of Washington County, Missouri, and one that becomes critically important to the livelihood of the community in the latter part of the 19th century and into the 20th century.

"What is called a *discovery*, by those engaged in working the mines, is, when any one happens upon an extensive body of ore. This is made, by digging several holes or pits, five or six feet deep, in some spot supposed to contain ore, and if a considerable quantity is at once found, the place is called a discovery; but if only a few pounds, it is abandoned. But the fact is, that there are few places, throughout the mine tract, in which such discoveries cannot be made, though perhaps, with different degrees of labor. Several are made every season, and each continues for a time in vogue, and the miners flock to it from all the others, until the report spreads of the discovery of some new spot, where the ore is found in still greater abundance, and procured with more ease; to this place they are again attracted. A *discovery* is at length fixed upon, which obtains the preference throughout the rest of the season. A discovery is sometimes published when there is not much to warrant it, but the number of persons drawn to the place, make one in reality.

The ore is most commonly found in the slopes, near rivulets, in a clay of a deep red color; frequently but a few feet from the surface of the ground, and in huge masses, of sometimes a thousand and even two thousand lbs. but most usually in lumps from one to fifty lbs. weight. The rock which is either a primitive limestone, or a kind of sandstone, is struck at the depth of eight or ten feet. Various kinds of clay are often found in these pits, and amongst some other substances, the *blende ore* of zinc has been discovered. The ore contains a considerable proportion of sulphur, arsenic, and it is believed, of silver; though in respect to the last, it has not been sufficiently tested by experiments, to know whether the proportion would repay the trouble and expense of separating it.... Above the rock, the ore is found in enormous masses, in strata, apparently horizontal, and often two feet thick, and several of these are passed before the rock arrests the progress of the miner. I have seen pits ten or twelve feet deep where the strata of ore had only been dug through, the digger intending to strike the rock before he attempted to undermine; perhaps, gratifying his vanity with the pleasing contemplation of the shining mineral, his riches. In the rock there appears to be no regular veins; the ore occupies the accidental fissures, as is the case generally in lead mines.... The ore is what is called potter's ore, or galena, and has a broad shining grain; but there is also, what is called gravel ore, from being found in small pieces in gravel; and that kind of ore called *floats*, being formed in large irregular, but unconnected masses. The first kind is the most to be depended on: the uncertainty of the floats, and the trouble of smelting the gravel ore, render both of less consequence. The potter's ore, or galena, has always adhering to it, a sparry matter, which the miners call tiif, and which requires to be separated with small picks made for that purpose: this operation is called *cleaning* the ore. The floats have no tiif, and are the most easily smelted."

ST. JOACHIM FALL FESTIVAL, SEPTEMBER 2018

