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Germans in Louisiana: The Colonial Experience, 1720-1803

It is an interesting but little known fact that among colonial Louisiana's earliest and most successful pioneers were settlers of German stock. Although constituting only a small fraction of the colony's total population, the few hundred Germans who established themselves along the banks of the Lower Mississippi River in 1722 came to be regarded as Louisiana's most industrious element. Throughout the colonial period, the settlers of the *Côte des Allemands* served as the breadbasket of the colony, supplying from an early date the food requirements of New Orleans. As late as 1803, Napoleon's prefect in Louisiana, Pierre Clement Laussat, proposed that between 1,000 and 1,200 German families be transported to Louisiana yearly since the settlers of "that nationality . . . are the only ones who have always been successful in this country."¹

Despite the recognized significance of the German element among Louisiana's colonial officials, historians of Louisiana have displayed an amazing ignorance of that fact. Only recently have scholars come to admit that the Germans played a crucial role in the development of early Louisiana, with one even proclaiming that "the Germans probably saved the Louisiana colony."² The man responsible for bringing about this more positive reassessment of the German role in colonial times was J. Hanno Deiler. A professor of foreign languages at Tulane University at the turn of the twentieth century, Deiler for the first time brought to light the salient facts of the German involvement in colonial Louisiana. Most importantly, through the use of his brilliant linguistic abilities, Deiler was able to trace over seventy "French" names back to their German origins. It is quite possible that the extensive "Gallicization" of German surnames hid from view the scope of the German presence and prevented scholars from assessing the full extent of the German role in Louisiana's colonial past.

Unfortunately, in his haste to elaborate on Louisiana's German past, Deiler exaggerated. Being an ardent German nationalist, he came to believe that many thousands of his countrymen settled on Louisiana soil, when only hundreds did, and that they came in waves spanning the years 1718-1721, when all in fact arrived in 1721.³ Since many of Deiler's misconcep-

tions still prevail, even among historians, it would seem appropriate to take a renewed look at this important aspect of Louisiana history.

Sending German colonists to Louisiana was a proposal which originated with John Law, the finance minister of France in the early regency of the Duke of Orleans. Law broke with the tradition of excluding foreigners from France's overseas possessions after the failure of the earlier immigration efforts had become apparent. In 1717, despite repeated attempts to colonize Louisiana with French immigrants, the Louisiana colony still had fewer than 400 whites. A concentrated effort to secure for Louisiana new settlers was begun in 1719 when Law granted to the Company of the Indies a twenty-five year lease of Louisiana. In return, the Company was to ship 6,000 whites and 3,000 blacks to the colony. A majority of the whites were expected to be German farmers. It was hoped that their well-known industriousness would transform Louisiana's marshes and prairies into flourishing agricultural communities. A large number of the Germans also were to be settled on Law's huge Arkansas concession which the Company of the Indies had "granted" him.⁴

The recruitment of German farmers began early in 1720. Agents of the Company of the Indies spread through the German states bordering France disseminating propaganda pamphlets advertising the virtues of life in far-off Louisiana. In this literature, Louisiana was glowingly described as a "land filled with gold, silver, copper, and lead mines." Furthermore, the colony was said to abound with game of all kinds and to possess an "extremely pleasant soil."⁵ Many farmers were misled by these spurious claims. In all, roughly 4,000 German peasants, most of them from the Rhineland region, signed up with the Company of the Indies for immigration abroad. They were to enlist as agricultural workers (*engagés*), who might, in time, possess their own farms.⁶

Only a handful of the 4,000 German farmers recruited by the Indies Company ever made it to Louisiana. The entire immigration process, from the time that the prospective colonists left Germany to the time that they arrived at their ultimate Louisiana destination, was nothing but a series of disasters. Roughly half of the emigrants succumbed to the contagious diseases which raged at the port of Lorient while waiting to be shipped overseas. Another 700 returned to Germany, appalled by the conditions which the Company's lack of planning had created. Thirteen hundred Germans eventually boarded the seven vessels which departed from Lorient between November, 1720, and July, 1721. However, of these 1,300 who departed, about 500 were to die during the crossing, and that many again expired on the shores of the Mexican Gulf in the several months after landing.⁷ The inadequate food, shelter, and sanitation which the settlers faced at every step of the way had devastating results.

The entire project of settling Germans on Louisiana soil was only barely saved from total collapse by Governor Jean Baptiste le Moyne de Bienville. The status and destinations of the German colonists landing in the New World was thrown into confusion when it was learned that John Law had gone bankrupt and had fled Paris that previous December (1720). The directors of the Company of the Indies seemed not to know what to do with the German immigrants since many were to have become *engagés* on Law's Ar-

kansas estate. In the midst of this uncertainty, as many of the Germans were dying on the beaches near Biloxi, Bienville stepped in to take command. He ordered the colonists transferred to an area about thirty miles north of New Orleans. This location had previously been cleared by the Oachas Indians and was considered one of the most valuable pieces of real estate owned by the Company of the Indies.⁸

The establishment of the German families along the Mississippi's west bank occurred in January and February, 1722. With the aid of a number of slaves and workers loaned to them by the Company, three small villages named Marienthal, Augsburg, and Hoffen were constructed. Probably the Company's employees remained long enough to aid the settlers in that spring's planting. Placed in charge of the fledgling settlement was Karl Friedrich D'Arensbourg, a Swedish military officer, who had served in the army of Charles XII. For almost fifty years, this Swedish gentleman presided over the German community as its commander and judge.⁹

The relocation of the Germans to their new homesite brought them a new status. They were now recognized not as *engagés*, but as concessionaires. As concessionaires they came into possession of their properties; but, they agreed, for the time being, to sell the surpluses of their farms to the Company of the Indies at predetermined prices. Governor Bienville hoped that the German farmers would eventually become the agricultural purveyors of the capital city. Indeed, that was exactly the role assumed by the Germans after 1731 when the Company of the Indies lost its lease on Louisiana. As the colony's only small independent landholding class located only a few miles north of New Orleans astride the Mississippi, the German element became not only the breadbasket of the capital but also one of the most prosperous groups in the colony.¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite the promise of a successful future, progress in the early years of the settlement was slow and painful. In November, 1722, in the month of the community's first grain harvest, a disastrous hurricane devastated the German area. One observer described the storm as "lasting in all its fury" for fourteen hours and being "felt as far as Natchez in one direction and Biloxi in the other."¹¹ Two of the three villages were almost totally destroyed by the heavy rains and by the high water blown in from the nearby Lac des Oachas (later known as the Lac des Allemands). As many as one-third of the 152 inhabitants of these two villages—Marienthal and Augsburg—may have perished. Most of the survivors resettled among their compatriots in Hoffen, which escaped damage because of its higher location on the natural levee next to the river. A few of the German families temporarily became laborers on Bienville's lands before their eventual return to the German coast.¹²

Almost as tragic as the loss of life and the dislocation from home was the destruction wrought on agriculture. There was every indication that the Germans were hoping for a rich harvest before the storm took its awesome toll. According to Deiler, the entire rice crop, with an expected yield of two thousand barrels and virtually ready for harvest, was destroyed by this hurricane. To the Germans, this disaster also represented another year of unwanted dependence on the supplies of the Company of the Indies.¹³

Hurricanes were not the only hardships the German colonists were

forced to endure in their new homeland. An attack by the Natchez Indians occurred in 1729; flooding was again a problem in 1724, 1734, 1737, and 1739, for example; and, to these hardships can be added such additional difficulties as the almost unbearable subtropical heat, the constant threat posed to crops by weeds, birds, and vermin, and the normal rigors of farm life made worse by the perpetual labor required on dams and levees.¹⁴ One colonist complained to French officials that it was "impossible to subsist on this land" because of the constant threat to crops from "high water and birds."¹⁵ Another pleaded with the Company to supply him with additional rice seed since he and his family had eaten the entire crop which had amounted to only seven barrels.¹⁶

Yet, despite the numerous setbacks, progress was made. A review of the French period shows that the condition of the Germans gradually improved. In 1722, at the time of the settlement's founding, the number of inhabitants stood at 247. Two years later, reflecting the losses caused by the great hurricane of 1722, the population of the German community had fallen to 169. In 1731, 267 people lived in the German coast. Few changes in population were recorded in the 1730s and 1740s; but dramatic increases in the number of people came in the 1750s with the arrival of several boatloads of Alsatian Germans, and in the 1760s when hundreds of French Acadians from Nova Scotia settled among the Germans. By 1766 there were 1,268 white inhabitants residing in the *Côte des Allemands*.¹⁷

Equally instructive are the figures recording the number of animals and slaves owned by the Germans. In 1722, there were no cattle, horses, or slaves in the German community. In 1724, there were six cattle but still no horses or slaves. In 1726, four Negro slaves were purchased by two members of the community; and, within five years, the number of slaves rose to 120, and they were being employed on forty-three separate farms. By 1731, there were also 159 cattle and several hundred hogs in German barnyards, though still no horses. Finally, jumping to 1766, a year rich in data, we find that the German settlement now possessed almost 3,000 cattle, 350 horses, 540 hogs, and benefited from the labor of 535 slaves.¹⁸

French officials were aware of the prosperity of the Germans, and they often paid tribute to them. Edmé Gatien Salmon, Louisiana's Commissioner General of the Marine and a member of the governing Superior Council, reported in 1732 that "the Germans are very industrious and by themselves furnish the market of New Orleans with vegetables, herbs, butter, eggs, poultry, and other goods."¹⁹ A memorandum addressed to the Minister of Colonies in 1764 stated that "the German quarter is one of the most important [areas of the colony], and progress here has been the most rapid."²⁰ These statements, to which could be added many others, suggest that the Germans were a major economic force and that the survival of New Orleans, above all, depended on the productivity of the German element to the north.

By 1763, when the Treaty of Paris awarded Louisiana to Spain, the Germans had attained a relatively secure position for themselves. They seemed happy with French rule and appeared to adapt themselves well to the predominant French culture. A brief view at the acculturation process seems to be in order here, before going on with a discussion of the Spanish period.

To begin with, it must be stated that it is difficult to determine to what extent the Germans were assimilated by the French people and their culture. Indeed, contradictory evidence suggests that they were either quickly and easily absorbed into the French mainstream, or that they "retained their taciturn character, their language and their manners" until the end of the Spanish regime, as one source indicated.²¹ Probably it was through the arrival of additional Germans in the 1750s and 1770s that certain sections of the German Coast were able to retain some of their German characteristics. At the very least, we know that some German was spoken throughout the colonial era by at least a few of the German Coast's inhabitants. But, since we also know that less than a third of the German settlement's citizens in 1769 were Germans or of German descent and that this proportion grew progressively smaller, it is doubtful that the *Côte des Allemands*, as a whole, was still basically a German community at the end of the colonial period.²²

Deiler, who carefully studied the acculturation of the Germans, concluded that assimilation occurred quickly. This was true especially with the original German immigrants. Since virtually all were illiterate, they could not preserve even their German names, let alone other aspects of their German culture. Among the numerous German surnames transformed into French equivalents, the following are some typical examples: Huber was changed to Oubre, Zehringer became Zeringue, Scheckschneider was transformed into Sixtailleur and into twenty-six other variations, Zweig was translated into Labranche, and one colonist who originated from Baden became known as Badeau in Louisiana. Assimilation also came through intermarriages between Germans and French. German mates were popular because they were known to work hard. German girls additionally had the reputation for being fertile. The frequency of intermarriages is attested to through a study of the Heidels. This family, according to Deiler, married into seventy-four different French families in its first five generations in Louisiana.²³ All in all, it must be concluded that the French were very successful in "Gallicizing" their subjects. If the Germans were indeed able to preserve their "character, language, and manners," this preservation of their ethnic identity must have taken place in those sections of the German Coast populated by those Germans who arrived in the early Spanish period.

Spain was far less a cultural force in colonial Louisiana than was France. The Spanish influences were felt mostly in politics and economics. Under Spanish governors, Louisiana was ruled in a more enlightened and purposeful way. More thought was given to the issuing and carrying out of orders, and more effort was expended in the implementing of economic policies. For Louisiana's inhabitants, Spanish rule brought comparatively greater economic benefits, particularly after 1782 when free trade policies were allowed to operate in the colony. However, the Iberian masters also demanded more obedience, and this led to an early clash between rulers and subjects.²⁴

The Revolution of 1768 is an interesting episode in Louisiana's history, and it is especially pertinent because of the leading role played by the Germans. The causes of this uprising are tied to the restrictive trade regulations that were issued by Louisiana's first Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa. These laws attempted to confine Louisiana's commerce to Spanish ships and

to certain specified Spanish ports. For the Germans, an additional reason for joining the revolt was the highhanded way in which Ulloa had "confiscated" 1,500 pesos worth of grain to aid a contingent of recently arrived Acadians from Canada. Within two years of his debut in the colony, Ulloa became intolerable to Louisiana's inhabitants. On October 28, 1768, several local militias led by the 400 members of the German unit captured New Orleans. The Superior Council, the following day, ordered Ulloa to leave. The governor, having only ninety troops at his disposal, sailed on a French vessel for Havana three days later.²⁵

The success of the revolution was temporary. By the time that the governor, Alejandro O'Reilly, arrived in August, 1769, to reassert Spanish control, the revolutionary fervor had already spent itself. With the aid of two thousand heavily armed Spanish troops, O'Reilly marched into the capital and arrested the rebellion's six ringleaders. In the proceedings that followed, it was discovered that there was a heavy German involvement in the uprising. Three of the principal agitators who were apprehended and executed were married to granddaughters of Karl Friedrich D'Arensbourg, the seventy-six-year old commander of the German Coast. The German patriarch was personally implicated in the revolt by allowing the German militia, under his grandson-in-law Joseph Villeré, to march on New Orleans. D'Arensbourg and two of his sons were arrested and forced into exile. The father was allowed to settle in New Orleans, but the two sons were banished to remote Opelousas. Official records report that the German leader was spared only because of his advanced age.²⁶

For many years the Revolution of 1768 evoked bitter memories among the residents of the German quarter. Nevertheless, despite the negative feelings engendered by the early years of Spanish rule, the Germans prospered greatly under their Iberian masters. Among the many important statistics which point to the economic growth of the German settlement, the most revealing are those that deal with the growth of slavery. Between 1766 and 1795, the number of slaves on German farms rose from 535 to 2,797. The average number of slaves per farm increased from a ratio of two to one in the French period to twelve to one in the Spanish era. Some farms now became small plantations that could grow cash crops such as indigo, cotton, or sugarcane. Despite the appearance of plantation life in the German Coast, the principal purpose of most of the farms in the German quarter was still to provide for the needs of New Orleans. Only after the American takeover did the symbiotic relationship between New Orleans and the German community change. It was then that the trend toward large slave plantations became completely dominant on the German Coast.²⁷

The history of the German involvement in Louisiana's colonial past ended in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. The German role, it will be recalled, began in the early 1720s with the establishment of several dozen German families along the shores of the Lower Mississippi. Their settlement, referred to by the French as the *Côte des Allemands*, soon became one of the most fertile areas of the colony. For many decades the Germans served as the breadbasket of the capital city. Culturally and politically, the Germans were of less significance. They were apparently easily assimilated by the French, and, from a political standpoint, were briefly important only in

1768. In the final analysis, it is hoped that this essay will have drawn a balance between those historians, like Deiler, who greatly exaggerated the German influence in Louisiana's colonial past, and others of the nineteenth century who ignored the German role altogether.

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Notes

1. Pierre Clement Laussat to Minister of Interior, New Orleans, 6 Messidor, An XI (June 25, 1803), Laussat Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection (New Orleans).
2. Edwin Adams Davis, *Louisiana, a Narrative History* (Baton Rouge: Claitor's Bookstore, 1965), p. 58.
3. J. Hanno Deiler, *Die ersten Deutschen am unteren Mississippi und die Creolen deutscher Abstammung* (New Orleans: Im Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1904). See also the English version, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and the Creoles of German Descent* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1970). Deiler was misled on his arrival statistics by following too closely the account of André Penicaut, a carpenter stationed in Louisiana between 1699 and 1721. Penicaut suggests in his history that as many as 12,000 Germans landed in the colony in those years. See his *Annals of Louisiana*, in Benjamin Franklin French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida* (New York: Sabin and Sons, 1869), p. 151.
4. Pierre Heinrich, *La Louisiane sous la Compagnie des Indes, 1717-1731* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), pp. 1-52; Helmut Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft des Mississippieltas in kolonialer Zeit: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Deutschen Siedlung* (Kiel: Selbstverlag des Geographischen Instituts der Universität Kiel, 1956), pp. 6-8; and Alexander Franz, *Die Kolonisation des Mississippital bis zum Ausgang der französischen Herrschaft* (Leipzig: G. Weigand Verlag, 1906).
5. *Ausführliche historische und geographische Beschreibung des an dem grossen Flusse Mississippi in Nord-America gelegenen herrlichen Landes Louisiana; in welches die neu-aufgerichtete französische grosse Indianische Compagnie Colonien zu schicken angefangen . . .* (Leipzig: J. Friedrich Gleditschens seel. Sohn, 1720).
6. Les Commissaires du Conseil à Bienville, May 2, 1721, Archives des Colonies, Series C2, Vol. 15, folio 117.
7. Marcel Giraud, *La Louisiane Après le Système de Law (1721-1723)*, Vol. IV of *Histoire de la Louisiane Française*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), pp. 154-167; *L'Epoque de John Law (1717-1720)*, Vol. III of *Histoire de la Louisiane Française*, (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1966), pp. 277-283; and Alexander Franz, "Die erste deutsche Einwanderung in das Mississippital, eine kritische Würdigung," *Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter*, 12 (1912), 190-282.
8. Franz, "Die erste deutsche Einwanderung in das Mississippital," pp. 193-267; and Jean-Baptiste Benard de la Harpe, *The Historical Journal of the Establishment of the French in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1971), p. 170; Giraud, *La Louisiane Après le Système de Law*, p. 249; J.K. Ditchy, "Early Census Tables of Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 13 (January-October, 1930), 224; and Pierre F. X. Charlevoix, *Charlevoix's Louisiana: Selections from the History and the Journal*, ed. Charles E. O'Neill (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p. 168. Charlevoix described the area settled by the Germans as having "one of the most beautiful situations as well as one of the best soils" of all Louisiana.
9. Bienville to the Navy Council, Fort Louis, Biloxi, December 15, 1721, in Dunbar Rowland and Albert G. Sanders, eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives*, 3 vols. (Jackson, Miss.: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927-1932), III, 314; Franz, "Die erste deutsche Einwanderung in das Mississippital," pp. 267-276; and Elizabeth Becker Gianelloni, *Calender of Louisiana Colonial Documents: The D'Arensbourg Records, 1734-1769, St. Charles Parish* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Archives and Records Commission, 1965), pp. 1-36.
10. Ordinance of the Superior Council Concerning Commodities Transported to Town [New Orleans] for Sale by the Germans to the North, November 20, 1724, Archives des Colo-

nies, Series A, Vol. 23, folio 49. See also Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 8-15.

11. Pierre F. X. Charlevoix, *History and General Description of New France*, trans. John Gilmary Shea (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1962), VI, 69-70.

12. See the Census Reports of November 24, 1721, May 13, 1722, and November 12, 1724, in Archives des Colonies, Series G 1, Vol. 464; and Deiler, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana*, pp. 66-98.

13. Deiler, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana*, p. 51.

14. Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 38-60; Perier to Maurepas, New Orleans, March 18, 1730, in Rowland and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives*, I, 70 and 75; and Le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, ed. Joseph Tregle, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), pp. 183-197.

15. Quoted in Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, p. 24.

16. Deiler, *The Settlement of the German Coast in Louisiana*, pp. 57-58.

17. Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 11-37, and 61; Census Reports of May 13, 1722, November 12, 1724, and 1731 in *Archives des Colonies*, Series G 1, Vol. 464; and Glenn Conrad, *The First Families of Louisiana*, Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1970), II, 1-64. For information on the Alsatian Germans, see Glenn Conrad, "Alsatian Immigration to Louisiana, 1753-1759," *New Orleans Genesis*, 14, No. 55 (June 1975), 221-226.

18. Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 11-37, and 61-64.

19. Salmon Memorandum, July 12, 1732, Archives des Colonies, Series C 13 a, Vol. 14, folio 138.

20. Memoire sur la Situation de la Louisiane depuis le Traité de Paris, February 10, 1764, Archives des Colonies, Series 13 A, Vol. 44, folio 148.

21. That comment was made by C.C. Robin, a Frenchman who visited the German Coast at the end of the colonial period. His observations, translated into English, are found in James Alexander Robertson, ed., *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785-1807* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1910-1911), I, 224. Although French officials repeatedly referred to the productivity of the German element, they, nevertheless, rarely provided factual information on the precise nature of that productivity. Evidence for the German economic role in the French period is scanty.

22. Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 61-62.

23. Deiler, *The Settlement of the German Coast in Louisiana*, pp. 119-128.

24. The best account of the early years of Spanish rule is John Preston Moore's *Revolt in Louisiana: The Spanish Occupation 1766-1770* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-155; James E. Winston, "The Cause and the Results of the Revolution of 1768 in Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 15, No. 2 (April, 1932), 181-213; Ulloa to Grimaldi, New Orleans, October 26, 1768, in Lawrence Kinnaird, ed., *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, Vol. II of *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1945*, pp. 77-81; and Jack D.L. Holmes, "Some Economic Problems of Spanish Governors of Louisiana," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 42 (1962), 521-524.

26. The German connection in the Revolution of 1768 is developed by Vincente Rodriguez Casado, *Primeros Años De Dominacion Española En La Luisiana* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científica, 1941), pp. 140-141. Casado maintains that Nicolas Chauvin Lafrenière, the revolution's mastermind, and Joseph Villeré were married to granddaughters of D'Arensbourg, and Deiler informs us that Francois Chauvin de Léry, the commander of the Chaptoulas militia, was also married to a granddaughter of the German patriarch. See his *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana*, p. 43. Furthermore, we know that Jean Baptiste Noyan, the leader of the Acadian militia, was married to a daughter of Lafrenière. See Ulloa to Grimaldi, New Orleans, October 26, 1768, in Kinnaird, *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, pp. 79-80. On D'Arensbourg's involvement, and that of his sons, see O'Reilly to Arriaga, New Orleans, December 10, 1769, *ibid.*, p. 128.

27. These figures on the development of slavery in the Spanish period and after the American takeover are in Blume, *Die Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft*, pp. 61-66 and 111.