

Coutres

# THE PIONEER CASPAR DUBS

## AND HIS EPIC JOURNEY TO THE GERMAN COAST

### A CONDENSED HISTORY OF THE FOUNDER OF THE TOUPS FAMILIES IN LOUISIANA

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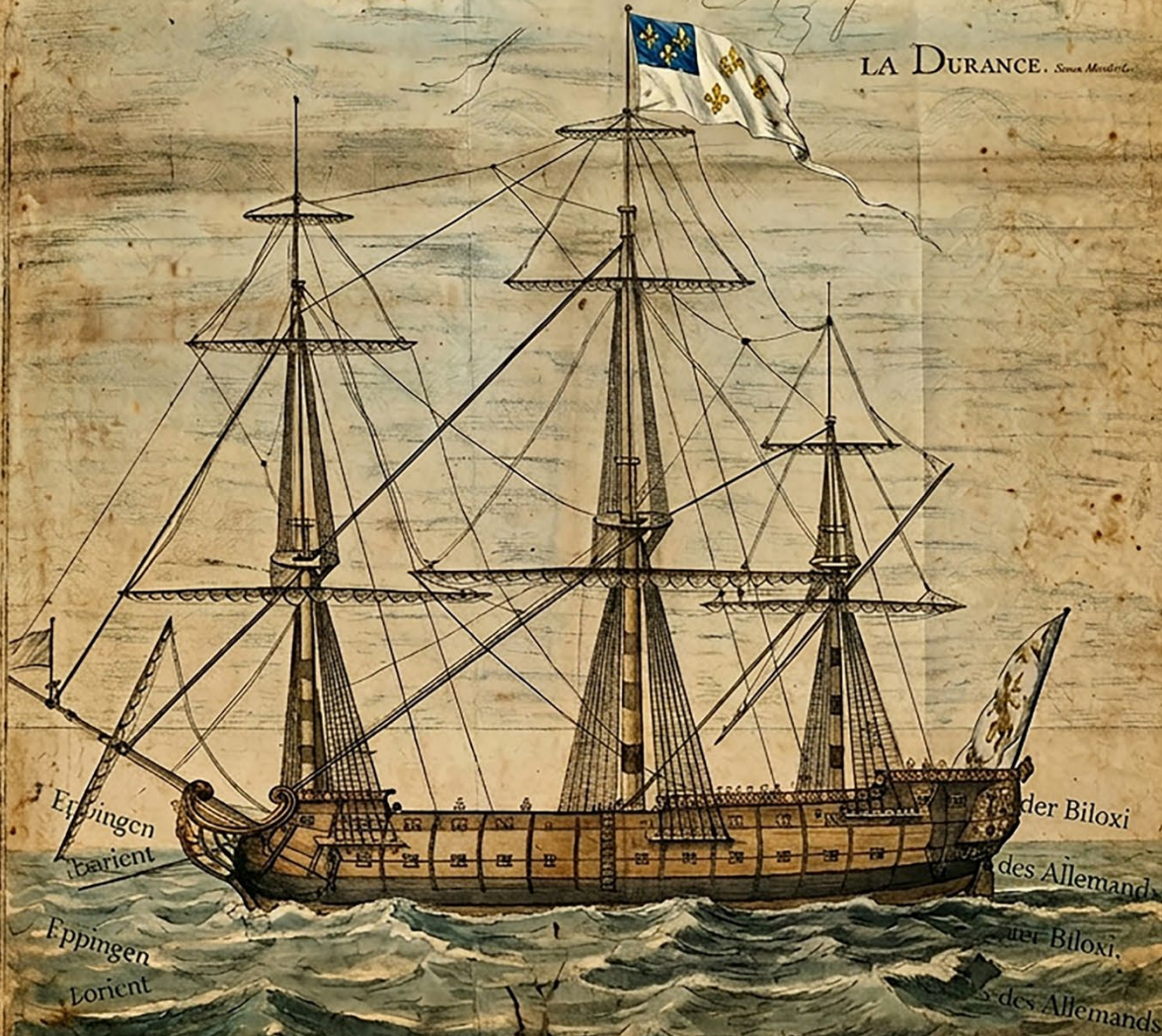
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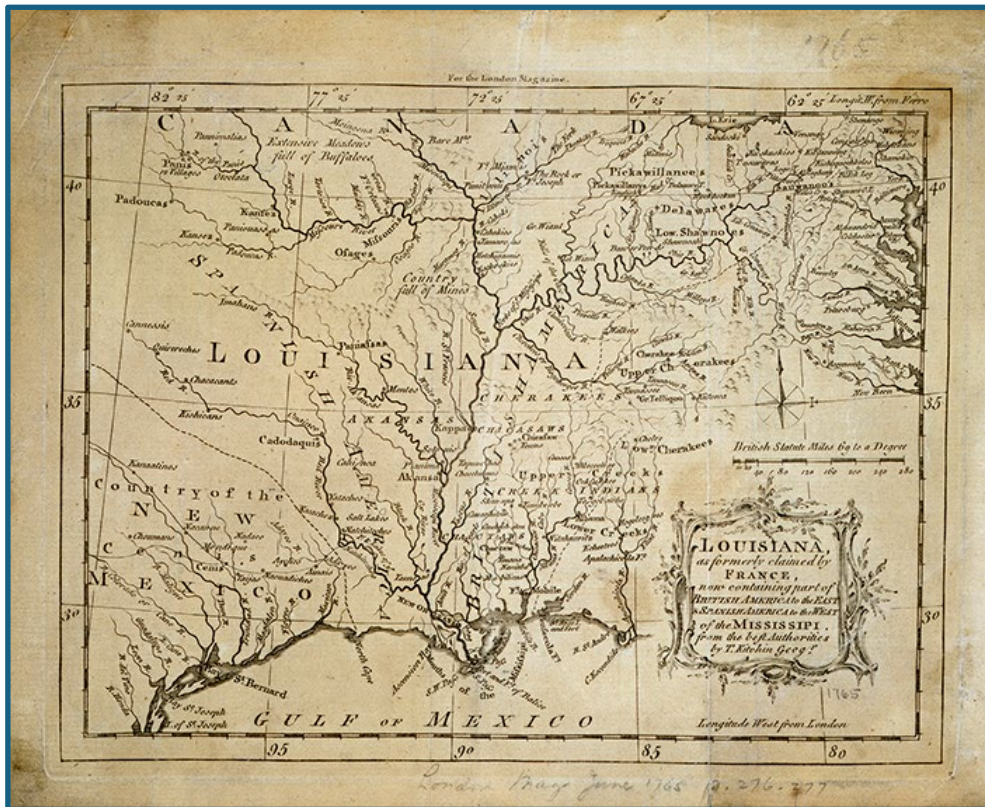
LA DURANCE. *Somma Mardier*





Early maps showing the German Coast and the Louisiana French Colony.

(Courtesy the Historic New Orleans Collection.)





*An artistic depiction of the Gaspard Toups family on the German Coast in the mid-1720s.*

*(Created with Adobe Firefly.)*

*Location of the original German Coast Villages  
in relation to present-day towns.*



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**Dedication...**

To my extended Touns family and especially my late mom, Bonnie Touns Wells, and my late grandmother, Anna Keller (Maw-Maw) Touns, for an amazingly interesting upbringing. You are gone but never forgotten.

### **Acknowledgements...**

I owe a great debt to the inestimable Jay Schexnaydre, a stalwart of the German-Acadian Coast Historical & Genealogical Society, for volunteering to read this manuscript. His keen eye and boundless knowledge improved it immeasurably.

And to my late and much missed cousin, Charlie Clement, who first got me interested in genealogy and the Toups family story.

## **Introduction**

### **Toups: A Family of Cajunized Swiss-Germans**

Caspar Dubs, whose name became Gaspard Toups in colonial Louisiana, is in genealogical parlance my sixth great-grandfather on my mother's side of the family. From him, all Toupses in Louisiana descend.

Swiss born but a German resident, Dubs at thirty-eight-years-old sailed with his wife, Anna Margaretha Hedinger, thirty-five, and two sons, Ludwig, twelve, and Friederich, ten, to Louisiana from Lorient, France, in June of 1721 aboard the frigate *La Durance*.

They were among an estimated 4,000 Germanic emigrees, along with clusters of Swiss and Alsatians, who were recruited by the John Law Company of the Indies to settle French colonial lands straddling the Mississippi River about twenty-five miles upriver from New Orleans in modern-day St. Charles Parish. An estimated 300 to 330 of them would find their way to lands along the west bank of the Mississippi that become known as *Côte des Allemands* or the German Coast.

Caspar, his family and the other Germanic settlers were no ordinary immigrants. They were true pioneers on an epic journey fraught with danger and betrayal. Their story, sketched in scattered historical records and tucked into books, some new, some nearly forgotten, some recently discovered, is one of desperation and courage; of villains and heroes; of disasters avoided and disasters unavoidable. Ultimately, it's the story of perseverance and survival, a testament to their grit and determination.

These Louisiana emigrees were swept into some of the most momentous tides of history, their fates determined in part by

endless wars in feudal Europe; the dissolution of the European confederation known as the Holy Roman Empire; the whims of John Law, one of the century's greatest con men; by decisions made at the glittering French court at Versailles and in the inner sanctums of Bienville, the founder of New Orleans. And yet a mere ten years into its settlement, the German Coast would emerge as "the breadbasket of New Orleans," its farmers like Caspar producing bumper crops that fed not just their families but also kept the French colonial capital from starvation.

But the price had been steep. Historians estimate that some 1,000 to 1,500 Germans boarded seven French ships bound for Louisiana between 1720 and 1721 and at best 500 survived, the rest succumbing to disease, starvation, exposure and even attacks by pirates. Some put the number of survivors, based on colonial census records, at a mere 300 to 330. Others have estimated that eighty-five percent of *all* the estimated 4,000 Germanic emigrees who like the Dubses showed up in Lorient hoping for passage to Louisiana perished. Half of those were felled by disease before they even boarded the ships. Scores more would die in their first years in Louisiana.

I had long been aware of the barebones of Caspar's story. But I had no idea until recently of the depth of hardship and trauma he and these other pioneers endured as they sought to flee the chaos and poverty of eighteenth-century feudal Germany for life in the Louisiana colony. Promoters such as Law, in printed propaganda pamphlets, described it as a kind of earthly paradise. In fact, it was a swampy, untamed wilderness with little infrastructure and almost no trappings or comforts of civilization. The Germans and others would arrive woefully unprepared for many of the hardships and challenges they would face there.

I'm a direct descendant of Caspar through my mother, Henrietta Kathleen "Bonnie" Toups Wells, born Dec. 23, 1926, in Thibodaux, Louisiana. She married William Rexford "Rex" Wells, an outlander from Arkansas, in Houma on Aug. 11, 1945. I am the second of six sons from that union. Bonnie was the youngest of eight children of Louis Joseph "Lulu" Toups, a blacksmith and carpenter, and Anna Virgina Keller Toups, who kept house. All through childhood and through my forties I thought of my Toups family as Cajuns because, like my mother, they spoke what was then known as Cajun French and cooked Cajun food—gumbos, jambalayas, red beans and rice, etouffees and the like (and, I might add, cooked it deliciously.) It was in the middle 1980s that I learned from a cousin of the Swiss-German roots of the Toups family founder. He introduced me to a 1969 book by a Lafayette, Louisiana, genealogist, Neil J. Toups, which laid out in meticulous detail the Dubs/Toups Germanic lineage.

Cajun, of course, derives from shortening and anglicizing the term Acadian. The Acadians were decidedly not Germanic peoples. They were French-Canadian colonists living in *Acadie*, the eastern Maritime Provinces of what are now New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. They were Catholics caught up in the foment of the French and Indian Wars (also known as the Seven Years War.) They were desperately trying to stay neutral but declining, politely, to pledge allegiance to the Protestant British king as the British and French battled for control of North America. The British reaction was to cruelly expel the Acadians from lands they had occupied since the early 1600s, their homes burned and farms confiscated, an act of ethnic cleansing known as *Le Grand Dérangement*.

Starting in 1755, the Acadians were rounded up and put on ill-provisioned British ships; some were sent to France and the

Caribbean, others scattered up and down the Eastern Seaboard, notably Massachusetts and Connecticut. Families were purposely separated and the Catholic Acadians often found a cold and even cruel reception among the austere New England Puritans. A few hundred Acadians managed to escape these deportation voyages by fleeing into the forests and hiding out in places like Cape Breton Island and French holdings to the south including in modern-day Maine. But about half of the 12,000 ship-borne exiles died in these voyages of misery.

Slowly, the survivors regrouped and began making their way to a new home in colonial Louisiana, the first wave of exiles—after a decade of wandering—arriving in 1764. Having found a French-centric haven, some among the first arrivals wrote to their stranded compatriots imploring them to come to Louisiana. Word spread and ships bearing Acadians refugees would continue to arrive until 1785.

So, obviously the Toupses don't descend directly from the Acadians—though that doesn't totally upend the Cajun connection. As I delved deeper into the Dubs genealogy and began to look at Anna Virginia Keller's side of our contemporary Toups family, I began to discover Acadian links. While we were not Acadians per se, several men on my grandmother Keller's side married into Acadian families. Thus, we have Cajun relatives in the extended family tree: Naquins, Robichauxs, Bourgs and Heberts among them.

And, in fact, we are not alone. Many of the Acadian exiles would settle among the Germans on the German Coast and on stretches of land to the north of the German Coast that came to be called the Acadian Coast. And German men, the sons and grandsons of the men and women who sailed with Caspar Dubs, began in large numbers to marry Cajun women. And, thus, it

played out over time that the Louisiana Germans would become thoroughly Cajunized.

By that I mean that German customs of cooking and music, for example, began to fold into Cajun French customs. This is how in Cajun-German kitchens, sauerkraut-and-sausage became smothered-cabbage-and-andouille (a great improvement, in my opinion.) It's how, while the Germans likely brought the accordion into colonial Louisiana and may have played a role in introducing it into Cajun music, the music remained irrevocably French. On the other hand, credit the Germans with their deep knowledge of charcuterie and smoked meats for helping to perfect the Cajun andouille sausage.

It's also common in ethnically mixed marriages for the children to speak the language of the mother. Thus, in the case of German men in marriages with Cajun women, French came to dominate. Indeed, most historians conclude that by the early to mid-1800s, the German language had disappeared in Louisiana, and the Germans had become at heart...French-speaking Cajuns. Hence, historians and writers such as Shane K. Bernard now suggest that the term Cajun should be deployed more properly to include those of Germanic, Spanish, American-English and even Native American descent who have adopted the Cajun language, music and customs as their own. (See my discussion in Chapter 6 on why some think Toups and other Germanic Louisiana families may fit more properly under the term Creole.)

And we all owe a debt to the intrepid Caspar Dubs/Gaspard Toups and his family and the other Germanic emigrees who braved the perils of establishing themselves in a new land. I'm a journalist, not a historian. What follows is their story as best as I've been able to piece it together from historical

documents, books, essays, online genealogical programs and websites. The record is often sketchy, murky and even contradictory, and historians do not always agree on the facts. Such as the story is known, however, it is an amazing tale.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Swiss Roots, Germanic Chaos and John Law**

Caspar Dubs was born in 1683 in the tiny Swiss village of Aesch about forty-five miles west of Zurich in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. He was the eldest of eleven children.

The name is sometimes rendered as Doubs in Swiss records and the name seems to have some prominence there given that a river named the Doubs flows along the Swiss-German border. Though Dubs is more often listed as the preferred Swiss spelling, no doubt Caspar pronounced his name with a long u, as in Doubs or phonetically, Doobs.

French census-takers in Louisiana would interpret Doubs and, applying French phonetics to German words, would change the D to a T and the b to a p and the resulting spelling, Toups, would stick. Caspar in French is Gaspard, and so Gaspard Toups would become his name in Louisiana.

Perhaps for love, Caspar moved from Switzerland sometime before 1708 to the Palatinate, about 175 miles north, in southwestern Germany, a hilly, heavily forested region known these days for its vineyards and scenic vistas. In 1711, records list him as a resident of the village of Eppingen about thirty miles southeast of Heidelberg. There, that same year, he married his first wife, Anna Margaretha Hedinger. Records show that he was a farmer and the couple had sired four children, two of them daughters who died in early childhood.

Caspar left no diary, but historical accounts paint a grim picture of the family's life in Eppingen, which played a central role in the Palatinate, the town these days being part of the German state of Baden-Württemberg. A pretty hill burg known for its well-preserved medieval houses and churches, it also served as a weapons-storage and staging center for Germanic militia.



The Palatinate, also known as the Rhineland-Palatinate, was a notoriously unstable region, subject to an almost constant state of war, political and religious upheaval and economic turmoil. It had been in the maw of the Thirty Years' War, a convulsive conflict of religious strife that began in 1618 and spread throughout central Europe. Pitting fanatically religious Catholics against fanatically

religious Protestants determined to slaughter one another, the war is said to have killed as many eight million soldiers and civilians before it ended in 1648.

"Millions of Germans are said to have died of disease and starvation," during the war, according to a 2020 essay by Jay D. Edwards, a Louisiana State University anthropologist. "The struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism (Calvinism and Lutheranism) was exacerbated by local political tensions, attempts at empire building, by horrible winter weather, and by epidemics. French armies arrived, pillaged and slaughtered, then vanished."

War returned when the Palatinate was invaded during Caspar's time there by troops fighting the War of the Spanish Succession, which raged from 1701 to 1714. Those like Caspar and family who stayed behind would suffer greatly. It was a bloody conflict in which the British, Dutch and the confederations of the Holy Roman Empire that included Germany went to war against Spain and France. It began when Charles II of Spain, who died without an heir, named Louis IX of France as his heir in his will.

That sparked fears among France's and Spain's antagonists that a united French and Spanish crown would attempt to dominate all of Europe. The war led to as many as 1.2 million military deaths, took a huge toll on civilians, changed the map of Europe and would weaken both France and Spain. Eppingen, where Caspar resided, wasn't the scene of a major battle. But residents, already poor, often found their goods requisitioned by French raiding parties, not to mention being taxed by Germanic authorities to help finance the conflict. Danger and economic hardship were always at the door. War wasn't the only issue. In 1707, a hailstorm ruined the entire wheat and wine grape crop. In the winter of 1708-1709, it was so cold that the wine was reported to have frozen in its barrels.

Little wonder, then, that such conditions drove an estimated 100,000 eighteenth-century Germanic peoples like the Dubs family to seek a new start not just in French Louisiana but in settlements throughout the Midwest and East Coasts of what is now the United States. And John Law wasn't the only recruiter. None other than William Penn, founder of the Pennsylvania colony in 1683, traveled to the Palatinate region seeking colonists, particularly persecuted Protestants to whom he pledged religious tolerance. According to data from the Library of Congress,

Germans made up a third of the estimated 1.17 million colonists living on American soil by the middle of the 1750s.

### **Law's Persuasions and Gambits**

Enter John Law.

Law's Company of the Indies had been under contract since 1719 to the French crown to settle the French-held lands in and around New Orleans with new colonists. Law had also been granted a 24,000-acre concession by the crown in Arkansas at the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers. But in truth, French Louisiana was on the brink of collapse.

Law was engaged to keep that from happening. His contract was to run for twenty-five years, putting him in charge of the colony. And when looking for new settlers, his gaze settled upon the Germans. Law knew Germanic confederations were a mess and he also knew the Germans were industrious, skilled farmers with a deep cultural knowledge of agriculture and livestock husbandry—perfect for what Law had in mind. He just needed to seduce them.

He resorted to propaganda pamphlets, distributed in vast numbers throughout Germany's farmlands, that painted Louisiana as paradise of agrarian riches—fruit hanging from the trees, fertile land producing four crops a year, not to mention plentiful wild game begging to be harvested and a Native American population that would be happy to welcome new settlers. And then there are the mines: "The land is filled with gold, silver, copper, and lead mines," these pamphlets said. In fact, there were no mines and the blessings of nature, while bountiful, would have to be pried out of a largely unexplored wilderness with primitive tools.

In truth, French Louisiana was at that time a sparsely populated experiment poorly run and suffering from neglect. Since 1699, according to the Edwards essay, the colony "had amounted to an enormous financial burden on the government of

France. In the five years between 1712 and 1717, the holder of the Louisiana trading charter, Antoine Crozat, had lost the modern equivalent of roughly one billion dollars."

Part of the problem was the method of recruiting the first tranche of settlers. They were mostly French conscripts: convicts rounded up from prisons; beggars; prostitutes; debtors fleeing their creditors; unfortunates arrested on trumped-up charges and put on ships bound for the New World. As a class, they had made for lousy farmers. They had come, many in chains, against their will. Many languished and died. Others refused to work or farm, insisting on passage back to France.

"The people who are sent there are miserable wretches driven from France for real or supposed crimes, or bad conduct, or persons who have enlisted in the troops or enrolled as emigrants, in order to avoid the pursuit of their creditors," wrote the French Jesuit priest Charlevoix who visited the colony in 1721 to check on its condition. "Both classes regard the country as a place of exile. Everything disheartens them; nothing interests them in the progress of a colony of which they are only members in spite of themselves."

This is the world that Caspar and the other Germanic emigrees would find when they finally arrived in Louisiana.

Law's role is central here. Though Scottish born, Law was an infamous speculator and gambler, one of the larger-than-life characters of his century, who had taken up residence in France in 1714. This after bribing his way out of a British prison where he had been sentenced for murder during a duel. The son of a wealthy family with connections, he had befriended the Duke of Orleans, Philippe II, who was the nephew of King Louis XIV—yes, *that* Louie the Fourteenth, the legendary Sun King of France.



John Law (Created with Adobe Firefly.)

In 1717, Law had become financial adviser to the duke and thereby the finance minister of France. Phillippe II had taken the reins of the country as regent after the flamboyant Louis XIV had passed away two years earlier. The heir apparent, Louis XV, was a five-year-old child at the time and would not be deemed old enough to rule until he reached the age of majority.

Louis XIV would go down in history as one of France's most glorious leaders, for a while transforming the nation into Europe's dominant cultural and political power from his glittering palace at Versailles. But his reign was not without missteps. He imposed absolute monarchy, ruled by "divine right" and centralized authority, giving himself almost God-like powers that led France into four expensive, deadly and unpopular wars, the War of the Spanish Succession being the costliest. These conflicts had drained the nation's coffers and left it deeply in debt. Upon Law's ascension as finance minister, the country was broke and didn't even have a national bank or even a currency. Law was hired to fix it.

Law set up the *Banque Générale* and issued paper money, believing that paper notes, backed by the crown's gold and silver reserves, would increase the money in circulation, which, in turn, would increase commerce. It seemed to work for a while. But Law's other financial shenanigans would be disastrous—and the Germanic recruits like Caspar and family would suffer dearly.

For Law also convinced French he could fix their other problem—France's sprawling Louisiana colony. It extended 3,000 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi River to parts of Canada

and encompassed the present states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. It needed new blood and his charter required him to lure 6,000 Europeans and 3,000 enslaved people, notably Africans, to colonial Louisiana, with the accessible area in and around the Mississippi upriver from New Orleans being a prime target. The French at first were squeamish about bringing "foreigners" like Germans to Louisiana, fearing they might turn disloyal, but Law would prevail.

### **The Mississippi Bubble**

As he and the Company of the Indies pushed their recruitment pamphlets, Law attempted to further profit by launching something called the Mississippi Company that was granted a trade monopoly by the crown over France's vast Mississippi Valley territories that included present-day Louisiana. In fact, that monopoly extended to France's colonial empire in Canada, the Caribbean and Africa.

Law issued stock on the promise of vast returns based largely on speculative gold and silver reserves that had yet to be found (and in much of the lower Mississippi Valley didn't exist) and grand projections of colonial agricultural output, particularly tobacco, which would turn out to be wildly inflated. Furthermore, he manipulated the market by offering to exchange crown debt for Mississippi Company shares. If the crown was buying in, who wanted to be left out? Wealthy investors, meaning French aristocrats, land barons and rich merchants, piled in, as did wealthy investors throughout Europe. Share prices rocketed from 300 livres to 18,000 livres in a year—the equivalent, according to one estimate, of \$3,600 a share to an astonishing \$130,000 per share in today's dollars.

Most ordinary Frenchmen were priced out. But those lucky enough to have invested and cashed out early made fortunes; the

term "millionaire" was invented to describe these winners. However, when investors who had driven the stock up to stratospheric values began to realize how wildly Law had inflated the prospects of the Mississippi Company, they panicked and dumped the shares. Law had also tried to calm the waters by printing more money, but that would only make things worse, setting off a wave of disastrous inflation. Law, fearing for his life, fled France in disgrace in December of 1720 and declared bankruptcy shortly thereafter.

As the French nobleman and financial essayist Claude Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon put it at the time, "The chimera of the Mississippi Company, its shares, its lingo, its hocus-pocus for taking money from some and giving it to others had been exposed. Someone had returned from the Company's possessions in America and reported finding only swamp. Law, the king of financial illusion, had no clothes."

Known as the Mississippi Bubble, the bust would be a disaster not just for France, where thousands of French aristocrats were ruined, but for emigrees like Caspar Dubs and thousands like him. They were depending on Law and the intertwined Company of the Indies to adequately staff and provision the ships that would bring them to the New World and to provide some measure of accommodations upon their arrival. They would grievously disappoint in both cases—with deadly consequences. Law would die in exile in Italy in 1729 and many historians say the financial carnage of the Mississippi Bubble and the class resentment it engendered set the stage for the murderous disaster of the French Revolution a half century later.

## Chapter 2

### A Long and Hellish Journey

The Germanic emigrees seduced by Law's pamphlets were in for surprises, most all of them unpleasant.

Picture Louisiana at the time: New Orleans, founded only three years before Caspar and family arrived in 1721, was a struggling, sweltering trading post of maybe one hundred palmetto shacks, a church, parsonage and perhaps 500 people. True, the French had engaged Adrian de Pauger, an engineer, to lay out the town in an orderly fashion and his sketches would eventually form the basis for the French Quarter as we know it today. Still, surrounding the settlement was a vast, untamed swath of swamps, marshes, bayous, lakes and bays through which ran the sprawling Mississippi River which coursed at will, bringing seasonal flooding, some of it catastrophic.

The river bore little resemblance to today's Mississippi tucked behind towering levees and controlled by spillways. Entry by way of the mouth of the river was so dangerous back then—owing to unpredictable currents, unmarked shoals and sandbars, gigantic logjams and other hazards—that navigators studiously avoided it. Or as Marc de Villiers, a French writer and historian, noted in his book, *A History of the Foundation of New Orleans, 1717 to 1728*, "It is easy to go from Fort Mobile to Lake Pontchartrain, and from that lake a portage of one league leads to the Mississippi. By this means, the river is reached without passing through the mouth...which lies twenty-five leagues down a very difficult country, because it is often flooded and filled with alligators, serpents, and other venomous (sic) beasts. In the deepest passes there are only seven feet of water."

Hurricanes were an annual threat. Lethal diseases like malaria, smallpox, diphtheria and yellow fever were common and

at that time untreatable. Alligators and poisonous snakes prowled the woods, swamps and marshes. The long, hot, wet summers would challenge the constitutions of the German emigrees, who were essentially hill people used to a far more temperate climate. While fertile land did exist, most of it sat in low-lying rich alluvial soils that would have to be diked and drained or beneath old growth forests that would have to be painstakingly cleared with the rudimentary tools of the day. Hordes of insect pests would wreck crops and spread diseases. And while Native American tribes at first warily accommodated the new settlers, they would shortly grow resentful and launch raids that would come to terrorize the German and French settlements.

And getting to Louisiana would prove an ordeal.

Caspar and family are found in the logs of the Company of the Indies in the spring of 1721 in Lorient (spelled L'Orient in the eighteenth-century) awaiting passage to the New World. They had likely been there for weeks, perhaps months. The town, on the southern coast of Brittany, was a staging area for the Company's shipping and trading activities and it maintained an office there. The scene at Lorient showed how well Law's recruitment pamphlets had worked.

The Dubs found themselves in a chaotic sea of thousands of Germans, along with a smattering of Swiss and Alsatians, who had embarked overland from their homes to reach Lorient to catch their ships to Louisiana. Law was paying for their passage but in Louisiana they would be *engagés*—indentured servants under contract to the Company of Indies to farm assigned lands. Contracts typically lasted four to seven years at which time the *engagés* might be given title to the land they worked.

For the Dubs family getting to Lorient was not a small trek. It's about 668 miles by land from Eppingen to Lorient and

we have no record of how they traveled. However, a 1997 book by historian Albert Robichaux Jr. titled, *German Coast Families: European Origins and Settlement in Colonial Louisiana*, says records for other German families show that most of them traveled in large groups from the villages from which they were recruited, often led by the mayor of the towns.



*Likely routes taken by the Swiss and Germanic emigrants from their hometowns to the embarkation point in Lorient. (Produced with Adobe Firefly.)*

Other “troops” or “parties” were led by “conductors” presumably under the employ of the Company of the Indies. The book suggests that most of the emigrants gathered at rendezvous points in two French villages, Besançon in eastern France near the Swiss border, and Phalsbourg in northeastern France near the German border. From these points they traveled both by river and overland toward Lorient.

The Besançon groups likely routed through Orleans and Tours while records show six different Phalsbourg “troops” likely took a route that would have led them through Paris. One hitch that many of the Germans encountered: France allowed no

Protestants in the country at the time, and the Germans were "encouraged if not required" to convert to Catholicism, the Robichaux book states. Worth perhaps noting: Caspar Dubs would in the first census of the German Coast be listed as a Protestant, so he somehow seems to have managed to escape this requirement.

Lorient, with a population of around 6,000, was ill-prepared to receive the flood of Law's recruits and the Germans wandered into a disaster of disease and chaos as described in the 2005 book, *The Germans of Louisiana*, by Ellen C. Merrill. A former director of the German archive at the Historic New Orleans Collection, Merrill wrote: "None of the transport ships were ready...and...no provisions had been made" by the Company of the Indies for "the unexpected thousands who continued to arrive...On the outskirts a makeshift camp was set up around a fountain to supply water. Of the 3,991 emigrants known to have arrived in Lorient, up to 2,000 died in an epidemic, thought to be cholera, which broke out in this crowded and unsanitary holding pen." The epidemic killed so rapidly that many of those are said to have been buried in mass graves.

Cholera, which causes intense diarrhea, nausea and dehydration, is passed on by microbes in sewage-contaminated drinking water or food. The disease is treatable today with intravenous fluids, antibiotics and supplements but was a deadly scourge in Caspar's time when none of those things existed. In fact, at the time of the possible Lorient outbreak no one even knew what caused cholera.

The other possibility is bubonic plague, which was afoot in France in 1720 and killed an estimated 100,000 French residents in and around the port of Marseille. The disease, spread by fleas from infected rodents, is easily treatable with modern antibiotics. But in the eighteenth-century, it was a certain

killer known as the "black death" whose epidemics spread horror. Robichaux, in his book, posits that it's entirely plausible that the Marseille plague outbreak not only reached Lorient but may have been carried by ships to the New World.

### **The "Pest Ships"**

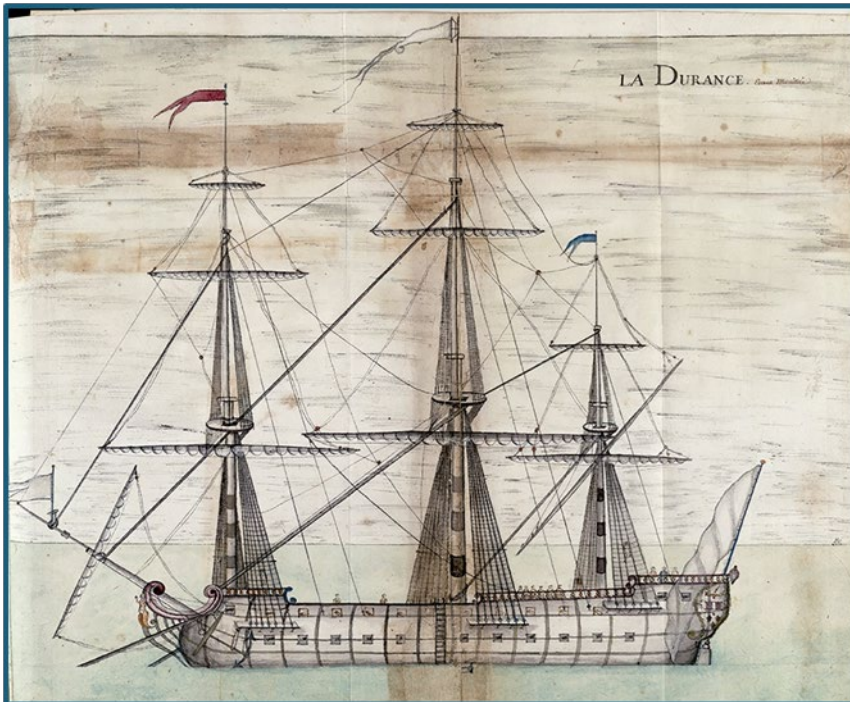
Imagine the anxiety, even terror, of the Dubs family as they waited in the squalid, overcrowded Lorient holding encampment as a deadly epidemic raged all around them—and then boarded a ship provisioned and run by the same company that had so poorly managed and equipped the staging area. So sordid were the conditions at Lorient that 700 potential emigrants turned around and returned to Germany or scattered to other parts of France, according to the historian Reinhart Kondert in his 1990 book, *The Germans of Colonial Louisiana: 1720-1803*.

Life aboard the ships would turn out to be equally horrible. Merrill continued: "The first ship to depart for Louisiana, the *Deux Frères*, sailed in mid-November of 1720 after a five-month delay. But the contagion of the camp was carried aboard by the passengers, and half died in transit, with only 130 Germans and about thirty Swiss reaching Louisiana...The next ship to sail, *La Garonne*, departed two months later, again with ill passengers. First it stopped in Brest (about one hundred miles northeast up the coast) so that the Germans on board could be treated..."

According to another account, sixteen *La Garonne* passengers put ashore at Brest died, and when the ship sailed some days later, disease broke out again. If that weren't horrible enough, Merrill wrote, "After four months at sea, the ship was captured by pirates in Santo Domingo and the passengers held captive for six weeks. When finally released and transported to Louisiana by *La Durance*, only fifty of the (captive) Germans had survived."

In fact, disease was so rampant among the vessels carrying the Germans in 1721 that they were called "pest ships," according to an account by the German-American historian J. Hanno Deiler, in his 1909 book titled, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and the Creoles of German Descent*.

### **A Rough Crossing**



*A sketch of La Durance from Marc-Antoine Caillot's journal. (Courtesy the Historic New Orleans Collection.)*

can guess it was beyond miserable. Caillot's journal came to light in 2004 and was translated and published in 2013 by The Historic New Orleans Collection under the title, *A Company Man: The Remarkable French-Atlantic Voyage of a Clerk for the Company of the Indies*.

In much of the eighteenth-century, known as the Age of Sail, vessels navigated with instruments considered primitive today. Weather forecasts didn't exist. Sinkings and groundings from storms were an accepted hazard.

No diary or ship's log exists of what daily life was like for Caspar and family as they finally sailed on *La Durance*. But based on accounts of a Company of the Indies clerk, Marc-Antoine Caillot, who would voyage to Louisiana on that very ship eight years later, we

And, indeed, in Caillot's journal covering his voyage to Louisiana in 1729 and his employment there until 1731, he wrote of squalls so frequent and tempestuous that he thought more than once the ship would capsize. Passengers stayed seasick for days on end. The twenty-two-year-old Caillot was an employee of the Company and shared an actual cabin. But he reported that food was so monotonous and wretched that the passengers threatened mutiny—at one point drawing guns and sabers and angrily suggesting they would get the captain fired with complaints to well-placed Company officials. Though Caillot had seen *La Durance* loaded with decent provisions before leaving port, none were getting to the passengers; the captain and his officers were clearly hoarding the good food and giving everyone else slop.

"We were very malnourished" and on top of that the captain began to ration drinking water "no matter how fowl" because, he wrote, rats had chewed through some of the drinking water barrels and "a great deal of water had been lost...Since the heat was unbearable, which made us unbearably thirsty, we all flew into a rage and told him (the captain) he was giving us too much salt meat to eat..." But the salt meat wasn't the worst of it. "We have been forced to eat sauce thickened with peas infested by aphids, yellow lard, salted beef, and rice that had been very poorly stored," Caillot complained. And he was a person of some means with connections. Caspar and family and the other Law passengers boarding at Lorient were poor farmers with little power of persuasion.

*La Durance*, likely named for a river in France, was a formidable ship, known as a *flûte* or frigate or ship-of-the-line in French military parlance. It was 164-feet-long with a beam of forty-three feet. Crew size could vary depending on the number of passengers. When Caillot sailed to Louisiana in 1729, he put

the crew number at forty-eight men including officers. Configured as a transport ship on that voyage it was lightly armed with twelve cannons to ward off possible pirate attacks. We know what it looked like thanks to a sketch that Caillot left behind in his journal.

It's about 4,000 nautical miles from Lorient to the Louisiana colony and the Caillot book states that the average crossing took three to six months depending on sailing conditions and the number of stops a ship made to replenish supplies. That's more or less in line with the estimate in a 1916 book authored by N.M. Miller Surrey for Columbia University, titled, *Commerce of the Louisiana Colony During the French Regime, 1699 to 1763*. "Regarding the time required for a voyage from France to Louisiana," the book states, "forty-six days was considered a quick trip to *Cap Francais* (modern-day Haiti) and another forty-six days to reach New Orleans. It was not uncommon, however, for a passage to take three to four months."

But the Dubs' voyage would be far from typical and for peasant passengers like them, there would be no cabin. They would be crowded into steerage, the dark, often poorly ventilated space below decks which is all the poor could afford. Steerage passengers slept on cramped, stacked bunks or hammocks with little room to store their possessions and almost no privacy. They often brought their own bedding. Lice was a chronic issue. Bathing was impractical and sponge baths using buckets of sea water were the best they could hope for.

Food, as Caillot noted, was often of poor quality and monotonous: typically, salt meat, hardtack biscuits and some manner of beans, at every meal. Drinking water was often foul and yet still strictly rationed to about three pints per person per day. Bad food and water produced all manner of diseases,

including scurvy, a crippling, disfiguring malady caused by a lack of Vitamin C found in fresh fruits and vegetables, none of which were available.

A glimpse of the passenger pecking order and costs of these transatlantic sailing voyages can be found in Surrey's book: "The passengers were divided into different classes: those '*la table du capitaine*', '*l'office du capitaine*', '*ration munitionnaire*', '*ration simple*', and those who provided their own food. The '*ration simple*' was one ration, while that of '*ration munitionnaire*' was one and a half a day, per person. In 1731 it cost the crown sixty livres, each, plus the price of their food, to send soldiers to Louisiana." If, as CoPilot calculates, a single 1730s livre is worth a range of \$15 to \$30 today, that puts the cost minimally per passenger at \$900 plus food.

As for sanitation, ships like *La Durance* had long wooden communal latrines, with raised wooden seats similar to outhouse seats, near the aft of the ship where waste simply fell untreated into the ocean. Passengers often had to wait in line to use them and there was no privacy. The odors alone would've made for a wretched experience. Rich passengers and officers with cabins would've had chamber pots and some ships were equipped with "round houses" that were basically enclosed one seaters that at least gave users privacy. Crew members, meanwhile, were forced to use latrines built on to the exterior of the ships, making them impossible to use in rough seas. Add in seasickness and passengers sick and dying from diseases like cholera or plague and you get the grim picture of what it could've been like for Caspar and his family as they sailed toward John Law's promised land.

## **Mysteries of the Voyage**

There is uncertainty as to *La Durance's* actual departure date from Lorient and the number of passengers it carried. Deiler in his book said it was April 23, 1721, with 109 Germans aboard—twenty-two men, thirty-four women and fifty-three children. But Neil J. Toups, in his 1969 book, *The Toups Clan and How It All Began*, said historians unearthed a letter that had been carried aboard the ship that was dated June 3, 1721, thus the frigate could not have left before then.

Circumstantial evidence indicates a later departure and much delayed arrival in the Louisiana colony. Based on Merrill's account, *La Garonne's* departure two months *after Deux Frères* left Lorient in mid-November would mean the frigate set sail in mid-January. Its diversion to Brest one hundred nautical miles to the north to drop off sick passengers would've had it leaving Brest later that month or even early February.

And if *La Garonne* had actually spent "four months" at sea before being captured by pirates, as Merrill writes, that means *La Garonne* was in or near Santo Domingo sometime in June. The island, part of modern-day Haiti, was under French control and was a replenishing stop for French vessels sailing to and from North America. Given that *La Durance* took on the *La Garonne* pirate captives six weeks *later than that*, that would put the ship carrying the Dubs family in or near Santo Domingo around August—with almost 1,500 nautical miles still to sail to reach what the French were calling New Biloxi (today, Ocean Springs, Mississippi, about five miles east of Biloxi.)

It's plausible that the ship arrived in late August or early September. But the journal of a Company of Indies clerk, Jean-Baptiste Bénard de La Harpe, states *La Durance* put in at New Biloxi on October 4, 1721. The number of surviving passengers upon arrival isn't listed.

Why Biloxi instead of New Orleans?

Biloxi, it should be explained, was founded in 1699 with the building of Fort Maurepas on Biloxi Bay, nineteen years before New Orleans. For a while it was the colonial capital. But the original settlement was largely abandoned when the French moved the capital to Mobile (in today's Alabama) in 1710. The French returned the capital to near its original site in 1719, rebranding it as New Biloxi (again, modern-day Ocean Springs.) New Orleans, recall, was still struggling to be anything other than a crude trading post, although the French, after a good deal of political intrigue, would change their minds yet again and in 1723 make New Orleans the capital for good.

And the French still apparently didn't have faith in their captains' ability to navigate large passenger vessels like *La Durance*, with a typical draft of thirteen feet, safely up the Mississippi to New Orleans. So, decisions were made to offload passengers at New Biloxi and then transport them overland or through inland waterways to Louisiana.

### **The Horrors of New Biloxi**

So it was that the Dubs family and other Germans aboard *La Durance*—after a voyage that likely took four months—found themselves dumped on the shores at New Biloxi into encampments as squalid and unwelcoming as the ones they had left behind at Lorient. As the German emigres began to come ashore in 1720 and 1721, they realized that the Company of the Indies had made no provision for them—this explained by Law's bankruptcy and the bursting of the Mississippi Bubble.

"From 1721 to 1723, nothing could be budgeted for Louisiana's subsistence," wrote Joan DeJean in her book, *Mutinous Women: How French Convicts Became Founding Mothers of the Gulf Coast*. So fragile was the state of affairs that in May of 1721, Jean-Baptiste le Moyne de Bienville, the colony's

governor, believed the colony "was unlikely to survive the latest crisis," DeJean wrote.

The Company in the spring of 1720 *had* shipped in provisions to New Biloxi intended to last until the harvest season in the fall, but the supplies were intended for a small number of Company employees who had decamped there. For reasons unknown Company officials decided that the stocks should be consumed immediately, according to DeJean's book. So, as the Law transport ships began to arrive along with those carrying French emigrees who were to settle in New Biloxi, the "horde on the seafront grew ever larger and supplies quickly ran out," DeJean wrote. "A colonial administrator bemoaned the fact that prices for any available comestibles were sky-high and even then 'almost no food was to be had. People are staying alive only with the greatest of difficulty.'"

By late 1720, according to estimates in DeJean's book, 2,500 more or less starving settlers had been abandoned on the New Biloxi beach front and by early 1721 as many as 900 had died. As for accommodations, French women emigrees who had arrived there expecting to be married to colonists described Biloxi as no more than a shantytown. "There is one hut that perhaps could be called a house; the administrators live there. Everything else is but a few sticks in the ground holding up a covering of bullrushes," one of them declared.

Simon Le Page du Pratz, a Dutchman who voyaged with the French to Louisiana in 1718, arrived at Biloxi in 1720 to find famine and starvation stalking the land. He was flummoxed by the decision of the French to even have established a presence there. Ships can't land in the shallows of the bay, he wrote in his 1758 book, *The History of Louisiana*, making the offloading of passengers and goods complicated. Meanwhile, the gleaming sugar-sand beaches, such a tourist magnet today, proved to be a

field of death for those abandoned there. Wrote du Pratz of the landing zone, "It is the most barren of any to be found thereabouts; being nothing but a fine sand, as white and shining as snow, on which no kind of greens can be raised; besides, the place being extremely incommoded with rats, which swarm there in the sand, and at that time ate even the very stocks of the guns."

He observed that at least some of Biloxi's half-starved emigrees were subsisting on oysters plucked from Biloxi Bay. "The great plenty of oysters, found upon the coast, saved the lives of some of them," du Pratz wrote, "although they were obliged to wade almost up to their thighs for them a gun-shot from shore. If this food nourished several of them, it threw numbers into sickness, which was still more heightened by the time they were obliged to spend in the water."

The accounts of starvation deaths don't always match but they are uniformly grim. According to an account by Kondert, some 500 Germans from multiple John Law ships, likely including *La Durance*, were stranded for weeks and months and "the inadequate food, shelter, and sanitation which the settlers faced at every step of the way had devastating results..."

Law's bankruptcy had obviously compounded the problem. "The directors of the Company of the Indies seemed not to know what to do with the German immigrants...and many of the Germans were left dying on the beaches of Biloxi," Kondert wrote. By the end of 1721 "the majority" of those 500 who had landed had died of "disease, exposure or starvation." As for the disease, Robichaux's book suggests that bubonic plague arrived with the ships at Biloxi and the overwhelming presence of flea-bitten rats on the shore would've been ideal for the plague's spread.

It was Governor Bienville, the French-Canadian explorer and arguably the colony's most influential figure, who came to the

Germans' rescue. He acted perhaps out of compassion, but perhaps because he also was attuned to the fact that Louisiana needed new colonists. By one account, many of the New Biloxi Germans were by this time demanding passage back to Europe. To stave this off, Bienville in December 1721 met with Captain Karl Fredrick D'Arensbourg, a bilingual former Swedish soldier born to a German father and Swedish mother. He had also arrived in 1721 from Lorient on *Le Portefaix*, a ship bearing about 300 Swiss and Alsatian emigrees and perhaps a handful of Swedish military officers.

D'Arensbourg, a veteran of the Great Northern War who had signed up for the voyage with the Company of the Indies, clearly impressed Bienville because Bienville would later name him first commandant of the settlement at *Côte des Allemands*—a position he would hold for forty-seven years.



*Bienville, governor of the Louisiana colony. (Created with Adobe Firefly.)*

Bienville sweetened the pot for the Germans, releasing them from their indentured servant contracts to the Company of the Indies and granting them farmland on the west side of the Mississippi about twenty-six miles upriver

from New Orleans in present-day St. Charles Parish. The land had once been occupied and partially cleared by a Native American tribe known as the Ouacha but had been since abandoned.

According to the LSU anthropologist Edwards, "Bienville provided provisions including hand tools (pickaxes, hoes, spades), hogs, poultry, and foodstuffs, sufficient to last them for a year...Bienville permitted them to become habitants, or free and independent small farmers, living on small land grants." His

only requirement was that all surplus fruits and vegetables they produced be sold to the Company of the Indies at prices set by the Company. In Kondert's view, "The entire project of settling Germans on Louisiana soil was only barely saved from total collapse" by Bienville's actions.

Little could the settlers know that Bienville was preoccupied with another pressing matter: an effort by rivals to entirely scuttle the settlement at New Orleans in favor of keeping the capital in New Biloxi or Mobile. In 1719, a mere year after construction of dwellings at New Orleans had begun, the Mississippi delivered a major flood, setting back progress and causing some to suggest that the location of the city was simply unsuitable for settlement. This according to de Villiers' book, *A History of the Foundation of New Orleans*. Indeed, he wrote, Bienville himself was concerned because by January of 1720, "Bienville could count, within the circumference of a league, only four houses underway" in New Orleans.

In reality, according to de Villiers, Bienville not only had personally selected the location for New Orleans on the crescent bend of the river—and thus took umbrage at the criticism—but he had been given large land grants by the French crown in and around the would-be capital. Meanwhile, a number of rivals owned concessions at Biloxi and Mobile and were feverishly working to undermine New Orleans and keep the colonial capital near their land holdings.

"News of the (1719) flood had been greatly exaggerated by partisans of Mobile and Biloxi," according to de Villiers, in a clear effort to undermine Bienville. Through persistence and guile, however, Bienville would eventually prevail and "in 1722, in the face of violent opposition, succeeded in having New Biloxi abandoned," de Villiers wrote. This matters because the

scuttling of New Orleans would've been a disaster for the German Coast given the importance of that market to its economy.

### Chapter 3

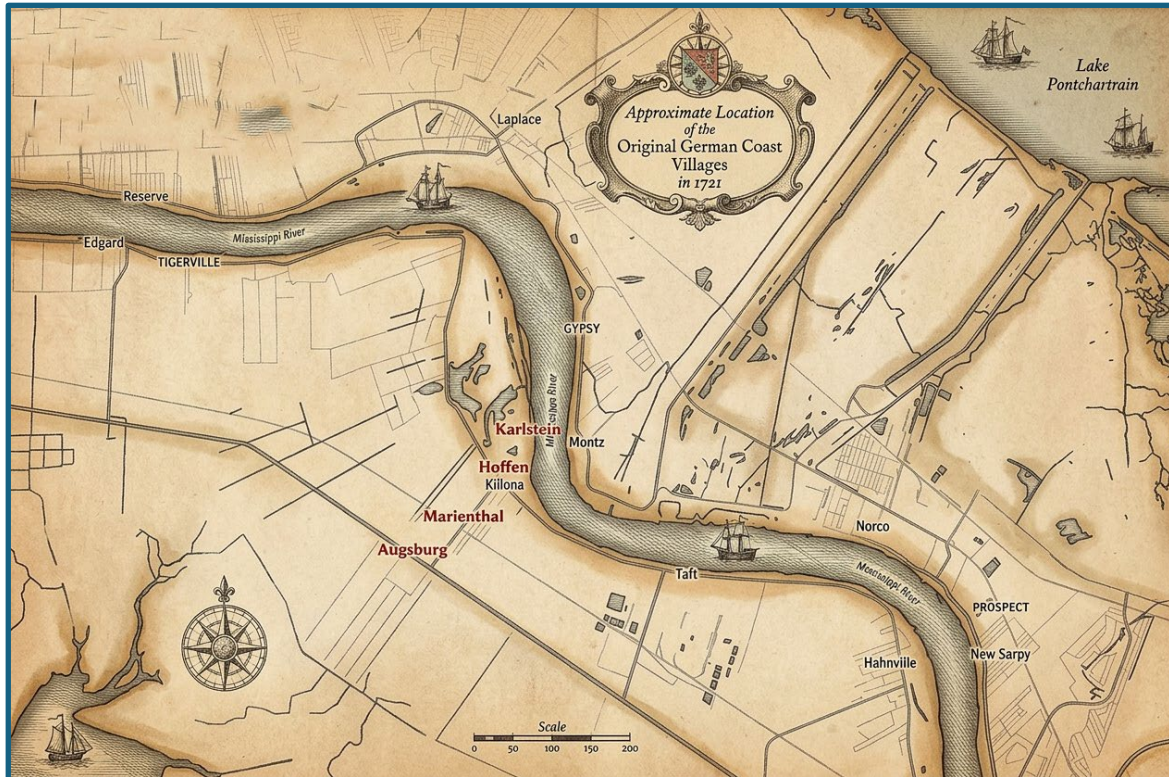
#### Home At Last but Not Out of Danger

Bienville gave further assistance in January of 1722 when he issued an order for the owners of all "longboats and flatboats" to make their vessels available so that the stranded Germans could be transported up the Mississippi River to their new concession. Nothing is known of that journey, but it likely involved its own forms of peril.

Caillot, in his journal, writes of the *La Durance's* arrival in 1729 at a French settlement near the mouth of the Mississippi called La Balise (sometimes spelled La Balize.). It sat about one hundred miles downriver from New Orleans in present-day Plaquemines Parish near what is now Pilot Town. By some accounts it had a population of about one hundred people, mostly fishermen, river pilots and their families, and a tall wooden platform that served as a lighthouse.

After he and fellow passengers rested for three days to recover from their long sea voyage, Caillot and company embarked in pirogues with the aid of river pilots and slaves, fighting the tricky downstream currents, surviving encounters with huge alligators, storms, hidden sandbars, swarms of biting mosquitoes and gnats and, in Caillot's case, a leaky pirogue that sunk and stranded him for hours on a log. "The eight days it took us for that bit of navigation tired us more than the whole crossing from France to this place," he wrote.

At any rate, it's almost certain that Caspar and family and the surviving *La Durance* passengers were among those on the Bienville boat lift. The governor also sent about eighty workers from the Company of the Indies—"lumberjacks, carpenters and slaves"—to help the Germans build their first dwellings, according to Kondert.



A map showing the approximate location in 1721 of the original German Villages, Hoffen, Marienthal and Augsburg. A fourth, Karlstein, would emerge later. By 1740, some of the German Coast families began to migrate north to the areas in and around the present-day towns of Edgard and Reserve in St. John the Baptist Parish, creating what became known as the Second German Coast. (Created with Adobe Firefly.)

The settlement was on the “right” or west bank of the Mississippi River near the present-day city of Killona. (Usage of the terms right and left bank mean the side of the river looking downstream. So, for the Mississippi, right is the west bank and left is the east bank.) What emerged were three small villages, Marienthal, Augsburg, and Hoffen, modeled upon European towns in which houses were stretched out along a single road running through them. The Germans at last could get on with the essential business “to clear, cultivate, and sow the lands around them with the grains and vegetables,” Kondert wrote. A fourth village, Karlstein, would also rise, named after the German Coast commandant, D’Arensbourg. Caspar Dubs—soon to be renamed Gaspard Toups—would be found in the next census in Hoffen.

## **The Great Hurricane of 1722**

Disaster, however, never seemed far away.

On September 12, 1722, as Caspar and his German Coast neighbors undertook their first grain harvest, a monstrous hurricane ripped through the German area. An account by French historian Charles Gayarré in his book, *A History of Louisiana: The French Domination*, has the storm "lasting in all its fury" for fourteen hours and being "felt as far as Natchez in one direction and Biloxi in the other." Two of the three fledgling German villages, Marienthal and Ausgburg, were destroyed by high winds, heavy rains and a surge from nearby *Lac des Oachas*, these days known as Lake Des Allemands.

The Toups book offers a description of what the hurricane did to nearby New Orleans: "The ship *L'Aventurier* set out about six o'clock this morning, but was obliged to moor to the shore a half league below New Orleans, not being able to proceed on account of violent and contrary winds...Towards ten o'clock in the evening there sprang up the most terrible hurricane which has been seen in these quarters. At New Orleans thirty-four houses were destroyed as well as the sheds, including the church, the parsonage and the hospital. In the hospital were some people sick with wounds. All the other houses were damaged about the roofs or the walls...There were ten flatboats broken up and sunk together with launches, canoes and pirogues, and in fact everything in port was lost..."

As many as one-third of the 152 inhabitants of the two destroyed German Coast villages may have died in the storm, according to Kondert. Most of the survivors resettled among their compatriots in Hoffen which, because it sat on higher ground behind a natural levee separating it from the Mississippi, seems to have escaped major damage. Compounding the horror was the destruction of a rice crop that was expected to

yield two thousand barrels and feed the Germans for months on end. "To the Germans, this disaster also represented another year of unwanted dependence on the supplies of the Company of the Indies," Kondert wrote.

### **Glimmers of Prosperity**

What we know of Caspar and family going forward comes largely from censuses taken by the French colonial government and the Company of the Indies. The first, taken in 1722, lists a total of 247 persons living in *Cotes des Allemands*—meaning a substantial death toll from the 300 to 330 estimated to have made it to Louisiana.

By 1724, that number had fallen to 169, most of those deaths likely from the 1722 hurricane and floods that came with it. Caspar appears in that 1724 census, living in Hoffen, the village fronting the river, with his wife, and two sons having cleared "one-and-one-half arpents" or about an acre of land on his farm. He is listed as a Protestant and the owner of three pigs. (It's in this census that the name Dubs gets recorded as Toups and Caspar as Gaspard.)

Interestingly, his neighbor, according to the census, is Ambroise Heidel who would turn out to be the progenitor of the prominent Louisiana Haydel family, Heidel being another name respelled by the French. He is listed as a Catholic, twenty-two-years-old, and a baker. He is living with his wife, an eighteen-year-old brother and his thirteen-year-old brother-in-law who is listed as "crippled." He owns one pig and is described as a "good worker, very much at ease."

The 1724 census provides valuable insight into what life was like. "All these German families enumerated in the present census raise large quantities of beans and mallows, and do much gardening, which adds to their provisions and enables them to fatten their animals (pigs), of which they raise many," the

census states. "They also work to build levees in front of their places." (Mallows are an edible flower variety that were also grown for medicinal purposes.)

In fact, in the mere three years since the Germans first started arriving, they had cleared enough land collectively and successfully planted enough crops that they were already selling their surplus of vegetables and grains in the markets in New Orleans. They would float down the Mississippi River by pirogue and return by paddling across Lake Pontchartrain and navigating down natural bayous that meandered into the German Coast.

By 1731, the population had rebounded to 261 settlers—but also eighteen hired workers and 120 enslaved people. At that point, agricultural output from the *Côte des Allemands* had become central to the survival of New Orleans. Or as historian Gayarré noted in his work, "In truth then, what today we call the 'French Market' really began as a 'German' market with the green vegetables and the staples which these German Coast farmers laid out."

However, farming was hard and hazardous and the Germans at this point were doing all their work without the assistance of slaves or draft animals or in some cases even adequate tools. According to the Deiler book, "Couples toil the fields together and if one or the other is injured or falls sick, the consequences are often deadly. For what can a man and his wife accomplish on a piece of land, when, instead of resting themselves and taking their meals after their hard work, they must go to pounding the trough with a pilon (pestle) to prepare their food, a very toilsome work, the consequences of which are dangerous for men and women. Many receive injuries, and many women get seriously hurt. When one of the two falls sick, it is absolutely necessary that the other should do all the work alone, and thus both perish, examples of which are not rare."

### **Widowhood, Remarriage and a Move**

In 1727, Gaspard's wife, Anna Margaretha, died on the German Coast of causes unknown (birth, death, marriage and baptismal records of those times were lost in a church rectory fire in 1877.) In May of 1728, at the age of forty-five, he remarried to Marie Barbe Kitteler (sometimes spelled Kittler or Kittelere), who had been widowed twice before and apparently had no children from those marriages. They would have three children, a son, Etienne, and two daughters, Marie Jacobine and Catherine. It will be from Frederic by his first wife and Etienne by his second that all present-day Toupses can trace the branches of their trees. Gaspard's eldest son, Ludwig or Louis, would have three daughters and a son, Jean Louis, but Jean Louis would die without a male heir.

Gaspard and family are mentioned next in the 1731 census, and they seem to be doing okay. By this time, he has cleared six arpents or a little over five acres. Ambroise Haydel remains his neighbor and Haydel has a wife, two children, a tenant farmer and is the owner of three African slaves. According to Deiler, sometime after 1727 Caspar and Ambroise had means enough to jointly acquire the holdings of two French German Coast families, Chesneau and Dauny, though there is no record of how much land it involved and what they might have paid.

Gaspard is found again in a French census of which the date has been lost but which Deiler estimates was taken after 1732. By this time, he has relocated to the left/east bank of the Mississippi. The records do not explain the move but perhaps it was to take advantage of lands that had been previously awarded to settlers but never claimed or improved. The colonial government decided to parcel them out to existing German Coast farmers who had proved to be successful. Toups' son Ludwig, who

would now be about twenty-three-years-old, is listed as Louis Toups and living on his own land next to his father's.

The Toupses seem to be steadily doing better since Gaspard and Louis, the census states, had cleared eight arpents of land or a little under seven acres. Ambroise Haydel has moved across the river as well and remains Gaspard's neighbor and is listed as having cleared fifteen arpents or a little more than twelve acres. This long proximity indicates a close relationship between the two families and, according to the Toups book, three grandsons of Gaspard would marry three granddaughters of Ambroise.

Neil J. Toups' book states that Toups and Haydel were residing at *L'Anse aux Outardes*. That locates them about fifteen miles upriver near modern-day New Sarpy. By this time in the early 1730s, the west bank German settlement stretches about twelve miles with fifty-three farms and 200 inhabitants, and the east bank runs for about seven miles, with fifteen farms and sixty-seven inhabitants.

Other Germans listed in that census include surnames that are easily recognizable by their French derivations today: Vickner, these days, Vicknair; Traeger, now Tregre or Tregle; Huber, now Oubre; Troxler, these days, Trosclair; Scheckschneider, now Schexnayder or Schexnaydre; Wagensbach, nowadays Waguespack; Voltz became Folse. In fact, Deiler traced some seventy Germanic settler surnames that would get "Gallicized" and take on French spellings.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A Bear Hunt, a Tragic Death and Indian Troubles**

That life on the Louisiana frontier was precarious was driven home on Sunday, June 12, 1740 when Gaspard's eldest son, Louis, was accidentally shot dead by a neighbor while on a bear hunt with a group that included his father, his brother Frederic, and a friend and neighbor, Pierre Clero.

According to the Toups book, Louis, "crawling on all fours through the dense undergrowth...was accidentally shot and killed by Clero, who mistook him for the bear they had all been stalking." An inquest determined that the shooting was accidental based on testimony from Gaspard and Frederic themselves, and Clero was later issued a pardon.

Louis had been married for about four years by that time to Marie Catherine Horn and the couple had three children, including Jean Louis. Jean Louis would go on to serve in the Spanish militia during the period when Spain took control of the Louisiana colony from France starting in 1763 and ending in 1803, when France reclaimed the colony and sold it to the U.S. government in the act known as the Louisiana Purchase. However, according to the Toups book, Jean Louis died without a male heir.

Gaspard appears in the Louisiana records the year before Louis's death when a filing shows him petitioning the Superior Council, the colony's ruling body, to sell his lone slave named Macon to Joseph Verret. According the record found in the Toups books: "Before Notary Royal, with consent of Sr. Faucon Dumanoir, agent of the Company of the Indies, Joseph Verret and his wife, Edine Seingue, have taken from Gaspard Toups a Negro named Macon, which he acquired from the Company, the said Verret and his wife acknowledge owing the Company of the Indies the sum of 1,114 livres...obligating themselves solidarily (sic) one for

the other to pay said sum in three payments releasing said Gaspard Toups from his indebtedness to the Company for said Negro." It's difficult to interpolate what 1,114 livres represent in today's dollars. If as Microsoft Copilot estimates one livre in 1730s colonial Louisiana would have purchasing power minimally of about \$15 today, that means a young, healthy enslaved person could go for thousands of dollars.

Economics, however, may not have been the prime motivation—perhaps it was fear. By the time of the sale in 1739, slavery had become a fixture among the German settlements, though the numbers were modest. (Recall the 1731 census showing 267 residents plus 120 enslaved people.) Farmers like Gaspard had one or two or a handful at best. But as the numbers grew, so did restlessness among the slaves, a restlessness that would boil over in dramatic fashion decades later. These tensions were magnified as the French and the British, each allied with then powerful Native American tribes, fought proxy battles using their Indian allies.

The Toups book explains it well: "The Indians...were in the middle of the cold war between the French colony of Louisiana and the English colonies of Virginia and Carolina. Of the larger Indian nations, the English allied themselves with the Chickasaws and the French cultivated the friendship of the Choctaws. For many years these two Indian nations served as a buffer between the French and English, preventing warfare, yet creating much havoc and destruction at the prompting of their white allies. The English also sought to undermine the French rule in Louisiana by enticing the negro slaves, through the Indians, to rebel against their masters and desert to Carolina where they would be welcomed."

Native American restlessness was also coming to a boil and the specter—and horror—of a Native American rebellion against

colonial encroachment was driven home in 1729 in the Natchez Revolt. The French in 1716 had established a military base known as Fort Rosalie in the heart of the ancestral lands of the Natchez people about 175 miles north of New Orleans near present-day Natchez, Mississippi. Though relations were at first cordial, the French over the years began ratcheting up their demands that the Natchez give over more and more of their lands to French agriculture.

When the French arrogantly demanded the Natchez abandon the site of their main village so that the French could establish a plantation there, the Natchez, 6,000 strong, violently rebelled. On November 29, they launched a surprise attack, pillaging the fort and killing 231 white men. According to the Caillot book, the Natchez also took more than sixty surviving Frenchwomen and children and at least 106 slaves hostage. The massacre sent shock waves throughout the French colony and set off a more than two-decades-long war of attrition that the Native Americans would eventually lose. Repeated brutal French reprisals resulted in large numbers of the Natchez tribe being rounded up and enslaved and exiled from Louisiana, though some of their numbers managed to escape and meld into other tribes.

Though the German Coasters had nothing to do with this, the Natchez affair had poisoned relations between Native Americans and settlers. By the mid-1740s, the Germans living in isolated villages strung out along the Mississippi would find themselves the targets of series of deadly raids by the Chickasaws, who had been allies of the Natchez. But they were also being attacked by a renegade band of Choctaws which had thrown in with the English, an act that threatened to erupt into a Choctaw civil war. The German Coast residents on the east bank where Gaspard lived lacked a militia and the French maintained only one small, unmanned fort in the region.

Toups and Haydel and the other east bank residents found themselves constantly under threat. As the Toups book explains, "In October 1747, the Choctaws struck the plantations fifteen leagues from Mobile, killing two men, two women and two children. At the same time, another group raided Natchez and managed to escape after killing one soldier. Within a short time, the renegades descended on the lower part of the colony and raided that part of the German Coast known as *L'Anse aux Outardes*."

By 1749, Toups and Haydel and most of their east bank neighbors had had enough and fled to the relative safety of the right bank of the river, where Commandant D'Arensbourg had established a small armed militia. Gaspard, now sixty-four years-old, filed notice on April 10, 1748, with the Superior Council of Louisiana to swap his *L'Anse aux Outardes* property that included a house on the ground with four arpents of land for west bank property that consisted of "a house of posts with 4 arpents of land, owned by Du Codere, act of exchange passed in duplicated before Notary at *L'Anse aux Outardes*."

The swap was timely, according to the Toups book, because five days after Caspar fled, the Indians raided his former settlement, killing one man, scalping his wife, and kidnapping his daughter and a slave. This chapter of the Indian uprisings ended two months later when friendly Choctaws came to the Germans aid and killed off the renegade raiding parties. But the raids would continue on and off. By 1752, many residents of the east bank had quit their lands and sought safety in New Orleans—and declared no intention of returning unless the colonial government sent troops to assure their safety.

Some did return with a troop escort provided by the governor, but the Indian drama wasn't over. No sooner had the troops returned to New Orleans than the Indians launched another

raid on the German Coast. According to the Toups book, "There, they seized the arms of a number of settlers and negroes who were working in the fields, and who, finding themselves destitute of all means of defense, fled to their boats and crossed the Mississippi. These Indians were also caught within a short time, but still the Germans were reluctant to return to their homes. Their fear of the Indians was such that it overcame all other considerations."

Their fears were far from unreasonable. The barbarity that took place—committed by both sides—during the Indian uprisings was almost unspeakable. Caillot, the Company of the Indies clerk in his journal of 1729 to 1731, wrote of mutilation and torture of a European man, his pregnant wife and two young children who were captured by "barbarous savages" as they headed upriver from New Orleans for a settlement in Missouri. The children were "cut to pieces"—and eaten—and the adults suffered a similar fate. French soldiers, meanwhile, were known to set fire to captive Indians and burn them alive—payback for the torture captive French soldiers themselves endured at the hands of certain tribes. The soldiers would often be butchered alive, body part by body part, according to Caillot's accounts.

The residents of *Cotes des Allemands* had reason to worry because they were in the thick of Indian country. In his travels upriver from New Orleans in 1731, Caillot made a point of noting how close the settlement at *Cotes des Allemands* lay in proximity to numerous Native American tribes. "Next to them are the Colapissa Indians, numbering 110. Five leagues from this village you find the Taensa, among whom there are seventy men. Seven leagues farther there is a nation called the Houma, which is about 130 in number. Eight leagues beyond them are the Bayougoulas, who are 200 in number, including women. Forty-two

leagues beyond them there is the village of the Little Tunicas, who 210 in number." (A league is about three miles.)

Little wonder then that on October 4, 1752, D'Arensbourg wrote to the Superior Council that "Ambroise Haydel and Gaspard Toups" had officially declared their east bank lands abandoned and thereby had set in motion the prospect that the properties were fair game to be reclaimed at some later date so as "to prevent future difficulties." The German flight was such that the fate of the *Côte des Allemands* was central to the concern of Louis Billouart, Chevalier de Kerlérec, who had taken over as governor of the colony in 1753. He was aware of the Germans' economic contributions and rued their loss.

"The German settlement has not recovered from the unfortunate blow which it received from the Indians, in or about the year 1748," Governor Kerlérec wrote. "The inhabitants of that post withdraw from it insensibly, and therefore their numbers diminish every day. To those who remain, nothing can inspire a feeling of security, and they are so disgusted with their present position, that many of them have petitioned me for lands elsewhere, unless I grant them an increase of troops for their protection."

The depopulation of the German Coast would be countered to some extent by the arrival of a new influx of families from Alsace-Lorraine starting in July 1754. But in truth, *Côte des Allemands* as a predominantly Germanic enterprise populated by first-wave settlers and their progeny had peaked. No physical evidence of the settlement remains today in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes where the old German villages stood. The present-day town of Des Allemands clearly translates as "the Germans" but, in fact, it was founded as a railroad depot and not incorporated as a town until after the Civil War. It is near but not part of the original German Coast. Some years ago, the

St. Charles Historical Foundation raised money to conduct an aerial search for remains of these early villages using thermal imaging photography and found some "hot spots" thought to be the foundations of buildings between the Mississippi River and Lake Des Allemands near the river town of Killona.

And little else is known of Gaspard's life there save that his wife, Marie Barbe, died April 10, 1754 and he died a year later in March at seventy-one-years-old, leaving such lands as he still owned to his son Frederic. Gaspard would not live to see two other notable historical events on the German Coast.

### **Insurrection and Rebellion**

In 1768, five years into Spanish rule, New Orleans Creoles, some newly arrived Acadians, and a militia from the German Coast rose up together in rebellion against the Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa, who had imposed wildly unpopular trade restrictions on the former French colony. The larger issue was a generalized resentment against Spanish rule, which began in 1762 when France ceded by treaty all its lands west of the Mississippi to Spain as payment for its alliance against Britain in the French and Indian/Seven Years War. That same treaty gave Britain control of lands east of the Mississippi and France's former Canadian holdings.

Louisiana colonists were used to the French way of doing things and simply didn't like the Spanish style. The Creole establishment resented what they perceived as Ulloa snubbing them when he held transfer of power ceremonies at an outpost instead of New Orleans. His orders requiring colony merchants to trade only with Spain and its colonies upended decades of lucrative business arrangements. Ulloa even banned the importation of French wines.

Moreover, Ulloa's government had bought rice and other food stocks from German Coast farmers to feed the newly arrived

Acadians and had failed to pay its debt on time—an act that was seen as confiscation. On November 1, 1768, as the colonial rebels swarmed New Orleans, Ulloa, fearing for his life, fled by ship. But the insurrection was quickly quelled by the arrival in August of 1769 of Spanish General Alejandro O'Reilly with a force of 2,600 men and more than twenty ships. Five ringleaders were executed by firing squad and a sixth died in Spanish custody, earning O'Reilly the moniker "Bloody" O'Reilly," although O'Reilly did issue a general pardon for the rank-and-file Creole, Cajun and German Coast rebels.

The record is unclear as to whether D'Arensbourg, leader of the German Coast militia, took part in the actual revolt. Some historical sources say he did; others say he was unfairly implicated because his granddaughter's husband, Joseph Antoine Villéré, was one of the ringleaders (and the person who died in Spanish custody.) At any rate, D'Arensbourg, seventy-five-years-old at the time, was pardoned but still forced to sell his German Coast properties and lived out his days in exile far from the settlements he had governed.

### **A Slave Uprising**

Then, in December of 1811, a group of as many as 500 African enslaved people took up cane knives, axes and whatever weapons they could find and marched toward New Orleans from areas of the German Coast with the goal of taking the city. They torched farms and plantation homes and killed a handful of whites along the way before they were brutally defeated by a coalition of local militias and U.S. troops. By this time, slavery had become widespread in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes. For example, a 1785 census of the German Coast showed that of 3,203 inhabitants enslaved people made up 1,854 or about 58 percent of the population. This according to data

compiled by Jay Schexnaydre of the German-Acadian Coast  
Historical & Genealogical Society.

The uprising failed. Scores of slaves were killed and more than sixty executed in the following days, their severed heads displayed on pikes as a ghoulish message to any other would-be rebels. Though known as the German Coast Uprising, Germans by that time no longer made up the majority of the German Coast population. Still, it would be the largest slave revolt in American History.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Reflections on the Journey**

It's impossible not to wonder how many times Gaspard Toups, in his harrowing journey to Louisiana and the difficulties of colonial life, asked himself if the journey had been worth it. (Questions no doubt asked also by his wife and sons who sailed with him.)

He had left behind family in the Palatinate and Switzerland (where according to the Toups book, many distant Dubs cousins still reside.) He had buried two wives and a son in Louisiana, and in the end lost much of his farmland to the predations of Indian raids. And yet, he and the other Germanic, Swiss and Alsatian settlers had not merely persevered but created a community that became central to the very survival of New Orleans and the Louisiana colony.

Gaspard left no letters behind so that question is unanswerable. But some, like Albert Robichaux, think historians have paid too much attention to the hardships of the German Coast experiment and too little attention to the motivations and aspirations of the Germans who took the leap to Louisiana. As the introduction to the Robichaux book puts it, "A new picture of our ancestors emerges, and we realize, with a profound feeling of respect for them, that they were not all the downtrodden, meek, virtuous, altruistic, sad, simplistic people that earlier historians have stereotyped. One realizes that many of the immigrants were vigorous, eager, very young, newly married people, and they came, young and old, to seize the opportunity for more freedom and material things. They came with a sense of adventure, bravado, and enormous optimism that carried them through some trying and terrible experiences."

And, in fact, historians not long ago recovered a remarkable letter, written in March 1802, by a German Coast

resident named Johann Lagemann to his brother in Germany. It revealed an almost giddy optimism about the *Côte des Allemands* experiment; it showed that, despite issues of heat, disease, weather and insects, the Germanic migration to Louisiana had been well worth the gamble for those who endured. It also offered a rebuke to slavery, indicating that not all the Germans were on board with the practice of subjugating men and women to a life of captivity and unpaid drudgery. The letter in part reads:

"Beloved Brother, And Remaining Relatives and Friends:

"One thing I must let you know: that I am still alive, where I live and that (Thank God!) my present circumstances are very bearable. I live on the Mississippi, thirteen hours over New Orleans, Northside of the river, *Cote des Allemands*, *paroisse* (parish) St. Jean Baptist.

"February 28, 1800 I was married to Catharina Vicknair, Widow Marchand, with two children: Johann Baptist, age seven and Catharina, age four, and a wealth of 15,000, and what's more, we live in unity and happiness together. November 28 my daughter Magdalene Celeste was born. My wife's father, Adam Vicknair, her mother Margareta Traeger, both are of two of the first and most numerous families here.

"As I write this, we are subject to Spain, free from all taxes and tributes, and are bothered by nothing. All are a member in the militia...The fields yield rice, Indian corn, Indigo, sugar, cotton. Fruit, as you know it in Germany, there is none. Only oranges, peaches and figs. Garden produce is available year-round. Caterpillars and other damaging insects are great inconveniences. The great heat in summer, the quick change of the weather, are dangerous to health and life, especially to foreigners..."

Lagemann, who had spent time in the Illinois region before relocating to Louisiana, took pains to call slavery "barbarical" and wrote "happy is the land that knows no slavery, for it is a pest for morals." But then he notes that here, "All tradesmen are free; everybody does what he can...What is called rightfully pressing poverty does not exist, thank God! Everyone can make enough to get by..." And this, he says, is superior to the "serfdom" that the Germans endured in the old country.

Putting Gaspard's life into even wider historical perspective, he and his family were part of one of the greatest and most important migrations in history. The settling of Louisiana and the founding of New Orleans in 1718 near the mouth of the Mississippi River would make New Orleans an essential international port of trade and open the river to commerce with America's heartland.

Moreover, Frederic Toups' son, Gaspard II, named after his grandfather, is considered an American Revolutionary War soldier since he served in the Spanish militia under Bernardo de Galvez during the time of the Revolution. Galvez's forces, allied with the American rebels, were instrumental in pushing the British from Louisiana and Florida and keeping them from moving up the Mississippi River. Gaspard's service is listed in the *Louisiana Census and Militia Lists, Volume I, 1770-1789*.

And after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, American control of the mouth of the river would prove a strategic asset to our young country. Consider that Andrew Jackson's coalition that fought and defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 included local militiamen, many of whom were descendants of these early Louisiana pioneers. The defeat sealed the end of the War of 1812, sent the British packing, guaranteed America's continued independence and delivered a stern message to any other would-be invaders.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Finally, on Cajun French and the term Creole**

Some of my fondest memories of growing up around my Toups family was listening to them speak French among themselves (even though they didn't pass that language on to us. But more about that later.) I remember once when I was nine or ten being at a sleepover at my grandmother's house in Thibodaux and waking up and hearing Maw-Maw Toups, my mom and my aunt, Nanny Toups Clement, speaking French excitedly among themselves. Then, suddenly, I heard my name spoken in English. That's the only way you knew they were talking about you.

Back then, it was called Cajun French because the Cajuns were the dominant and best-known culture among the estimated one million south Louisiana residents who still spoke French as of 1960. Today, there about 100,000 French speakers, most of them in the twenty-two contiguous south Louisiana parishes that form what is known as Acadiana. And linguists, now having thoroughly studied the French that the Toupses and others spoke, now refer to it as Louisiana French or colonial French.

Here's how it evolved. The French pioneers who settled the province of Acadie, the Acadians, were mostly country people from the west and north of France. They brought that French with them to Canada and spoke it in relative isolation for the 150 years they lived there. By the time they found themselves exiled starting in 1755, they still spoke that French, which was a perfectly fine form of eighteenth-century country French.

But like any language isolated from the mother tongue, the language had mutated, holding on to forms and idioms that had fallen away in the Old World while inventing new ones based on interactions with Native American tribes, the British and traders from other countries. That French would further mutate in Louisiana, where the Cajuns continued to live in relative

isolation for almost two centuries until the post-World War II Baby Boom in the mid-1940s and the oil-and-gas booms that followed radically changed that.

When Louisiana Cajuns encountered new things, they had no idea what that same thing might be called in France or French Canada. So, they improvised. A few examples: the word for car in Cajun French is *char*; in standard French, *voiture*. That's because the first time Cajuns saw a car in Louisiana, they likely asked an English speaker who replied "car" and car got Cajunized to *char*.

A racoon in France is a *raton laveur* and in French-speaking Canada it is sometimes called a *chat sauvage*. In Louisiana French, a raccoon is a *chaoui* (sha-WEE.) One fanciful interpretation is that an early Cajun looked up into a tree, saw a raccoon and said, "un chat, oui?" ("A cat, yes?") More likely, it comes from the Cajun phonetic pronunciation of the Choctaw term for racoon, *shau*.

Another example: Cajuns call a pebble or small rock a *caillou*. In standard French its *roche*. *Caillou* is still known to the French, but it's considered archaic, a bit like Appalachian English speakers using the term "varmint" to describe predatory critters. We know what it means but it's just not used much anymore in mainstream English. That doesn't mean that Louisiana French is "bad French." It simply demonstrates that it is a living, fully adaptable language.

Meanwhile, the African enslaved people who worked the plantations during the French colonial period learned a simplified but perfectly useful form of standard French from their continental French plantation owners. The second generation of French landowners began to refer to themselves as "Creoles," a word that for them meant "homegrown" or native born—that is born on Louisiana soil. They used the term with

pride to distinguish themselves from later waves of French emigrees who were just getting off the boats. It follows that this second generation, speaking standard French, not the country French of the Cajuns, began calling their language Creole French.

But that would not last. Over time Creole French became synonymous with the simplified French spoken by their black workers and also the French that was spoken by free people of color who had come to Louisiana from the French Afro-Caribbean. And, thus, the term Creole in general became widely applied to black French speakers and that is largely how it is used today. Of course, the Toupses could argue that under the original meaning, we are actually Creoles. Confusing, yes? Perhaps we should invent the term Creolajuns?

After the Civil War freed south Louisiana's slaves, the vast majority settled in the countryside where they had toiled, putting them in proximity to the Cajuns. The white French-speaking Cajuns and black French-speaking Creoles had little problem understanding each other and to some extent their French began to meld and overlap. True, this was not then and still is not the French spoken in Paris. But then, neither is the French spoken in Belgium, Switzerland, Montreal, or Quebec.

So why didn't most of the parents of my generation teach us that French?

Following the American takeover of the colony with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, a conscious effort began to mainstream the French-speaking Cajuns and Creoles and "Americanize" them. In 1921, the Anglo-dominated Louisiana legislature passed a constitutional amendment that made English the official language of school instruction. Whatever you make of the intentions, the effect was to prohibit Cajun and Creole kids from speaking French on the school grounds and to punish

those who did. My mother remembers having her mouth washed out with soap by a nun at the Catholic school she attended in Thibodaux because she had addressed another child in French. This happened to many of her contemporaries.

It's also worth mentioning the white Southern Protestant invasion of south Louisiana and its negative impact on Cajun/Creole culture. The oil boom, while it lifted the Cajun region out of its scenic poverty with tax revenues and thousands of jobs, brought tens of thousands of outlanders mostly from Texas, Oklahoma and Mississippi into south Louisiana to work the Oil Patch. While some were charmed by the culture they encountered, many were not. To be blunt, far too many of them brought with them a cultural contempt. They derided the Cajuns for their dearth of formal education, their insistence on speaking their "bad French" and their thick accents when speaking English. Many were anti-Catholic bigots. The slur "coonass" was blithely tossed about—for many Cajuns it was the equivalent of the N-word.

So, shamed and ostracized for speaking their perfectly fine eighteenth-century country French, the vast majority of Cajun parents of my mom's generation declined to pass it on to their children. Or maybe it was simply that they themselves began to abandon French as their French-speaking parents' generation passed on. As the Louisiana French-speaking region began to homogenize, they simply had fewer and fewer people to speak French with while the number of English speakers around them grew. They may have decided that teaching their kids was a lost cause, not worth the effort. I wish my mother had decided otherwise but I can't blame her for that decision. (I did learn by osmosis, as many as my contemporaries did, some of the idioms and phrases and can understand perhaps twenty percent of what's

being said in a Cajun French conversation. But I am in no way fluent.)

The problem is that Cajun/Louisiana French had not been written down until a Jesuit priest, the Reverend James O. Daigle, published the first Cajun French dictionary in 1986. (I wrote a feature about this when I was a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*.) It had been kept alive orally, passed down from generation-to-generation. That link, once broken, has proven virtually impossible to restore on a grand scale. To its credit, the state of Louisiana in 1986 formed the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) to try to reverse the decline.

CODOFIL successfully lobbied for the introduction of French immersion classes in public schools throughout Louisiana's Francophone parishes with the idea of giving Cajun and Creole kids—and others who might be interested—a chance of reconnecting to the French spoken by their parents and generations of grandparents before them. Some credit the agency with at least stabilizing the number of Louisiana French speakers at the present level of around 100,000.

The irony is that while the language has withered, being Cajun has never been cooler or more popular. Even the rednecks who used to make fun of us now want to be Cajun. Our food, music and culture have moved onto the American and even international stage to astonishing popularity. Gumbo is a dish that came out of eighteenth-century peasant Cajun and Creole kitchens to conquer the world. Cajun chefs like Paul Prudhomme and John Folse became rockstars cooking gumbo in places like New York City, Tokyo, Beijing and Rome. Authentic Cajun restaurants can now be found in Manhattan, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle and other major cities and, honestly, in pretty much every American city of more than 250,000 people. About forty-four million

tourists a year visit Louisiana and Cajun/Creole cultural tourism is one of the big draws.

Cajun music and its bluesier Creole interpretation, Zydeco, have taken the world by storm. Cajun fiddler and composer Michael Doucet and his band *Beausoleil* sell out stadiums in Europe and Canada as easily as they sell them out in Lafayette. So do Steve Riley and the *Mamou Playboys*. Pop legends like Mick Jagger and Paul Simon have made pilgrimages to south Louisiana to pay homage to musicians like Clifton Chenier and Buckwheat Zydeco. And, of course, we have our own family Cajun-Zydeco star Wayne Toups who is, without doubt, a distant cousin, according to the Toups book. Finally, you can love or hate the reality show, "Swamp People," but millions of Americans now are primed to watch the seventeenth season on TV. Everybody now knows what "choot dat!" means when it comes to dispatching an alligator.

## **Epilogue**

So, what to make of all this?

No doubt Gaspard Toups and his family and the other German Coast settlers would be astonished by the world they helped to bring forth. They would be amazed that the Toups name continues to thrive throughout south Louisiana and other parts of the state, as do many of the other Gallicized Germanic family names such as the Haydels, Trosclairs and Folses; that the cross-cultural pollination of German and Cajun families that began centuries ago on the German Coast remains very much alive today in the vibrant foodways and music of south Louisiana; that while Louisiana French may be in decline, goodly numbers of people still speak in the old tongue.

And whatever our complaints about the modern world, we only need to superficially ponder the life that Gaspard and family and the other Germanic pioneers lived to understand that we today live a better material life than perhaps at any time in civilization. Consider that it would be 200 years or more before the first of our Toups ancestors got indoor plumbing and electric lights. (As late as 1930, only ten percent of America's farms had electricity and flush toilets.)

We have running water, flush toilets, hot showers, electricity, modern medicine, cars, trains and planes to take us almost anywhere we want to go and the freedom to go there; unlimited and cheap entertainment delivered by fiber optics and satellites to hi-res flat-screen TVs even our parents couldn't have imagined; grocery and department stores full of all the consumer goods we need. The world of knowledge is at our fingertips at the click of a mouse. We do not lie in the dark fretting about cholera or the bubonic plague or starvation, crop failures, unannounced killer hurricanes or whether Native Americans are slipping through the night hoping to cut our

throats. Arguably, the average American today lives with more material comfort and ease than did the royal court at Versailles during the reign of Louis XIV.

Gaspard's story is also interesting because I find it helpful to know in the largest possible sense where we come from. We know intelligence is inherited. But what about the attributes of grit, determination, the urge not just to survive but to succeed and thrive? It's hard to know if these traits are passed on or taught or, as likely, some combination of both. But we do know for a fact, based on Gaspard's and his family's journey, that we come from resilient stock. That's worth pondering as we navigate the shoals of modern life.

Finally, this is my personal observation, but I find it discomfiting—but not surprising—that we descend from ancestors who owned slaves. If you had relatives who had amassed more than fifty to one hundred acres of farmland in the antebellum South you almost certainly had relatives who were slave holders. There are slave owners in my Wells family tree going back to colonial Virginia.

Just to be clear: slavery was and is an abomination and the Civil War was rightly decided, not just because it preserved the Union but freed four million enslaved people. I like to think that had I lived in those times I would've had the courage to stand against slavery. But I didn't live in those times, and it is impossible to understate how entrenched and thoroughly propagandized the support of slavery was among white southerners of all economic ranks. They eagerly invoked white supremacy and defended the institution as benevolent and paternalistic with social and economic benefits for both sides. This was part of the Lost Cause narrative after the war—that the war wasn't actually fought over slavery, that the South was simply and

heroically defending itself and its customs against the "war of Northern aggression."

Although it is true that only about twenty-three percent of white southerners owned slaves (and only three percent owned more than fifty slaves), it is also true that even the poorest of them aspired to become slave owners because they believed slavery was morally defensible and they understood what an economic boon it was to the agrarian South. By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the South was producing seventy-five percent of the world's cotton, and the Mississippi Valley was minting more millionaires than any place in the nation. All made possible by slavery.

Of the ten percent of richest people in America, the majority of them were owners of large Southern plantations profiting from slavery. Had the Confederacy been considered a country, it would've ranked as the fourth richest on earth—all propped up by slavery. Consider, too, that upon the abolition of slavery, the South—its labor force upturned and decimated, its cotton market in the dumps, much of its infrastructure destroyed by the war—sank into a genuine economic depression that would not really end until the post-World War II economic boom. That is, there is a direct correlation between the abolition of slavery and the impoverishment of the post-Civil War South. Slavery was as profitable as it was immoral.

And while many Southerners continued to argue that slavery was not the central issue of the Civil War, every Southern state passed Jim Crow laws that continued to treat freed blacks as inferior beings unworthy of equal treatment under the law. To our credit as a nation, we took action with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other legislation that had the effect of at least demolishing the racist legal structures of the Jim Crow South.

That said, it is worth noting that of the estimated 12.5 million Africans captured and enslaved during the Atlantic slave period from 1525 to 1866, only about 380,000 came to America. The vast majority went to the Caribbean and South America, the largest portion to Brazil. Meanwhile, slavery was not a peculiarly American institution. Virtually every European nation including France, Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy and Portugal actively participated in the slave trade and used slave labor at home.

Certain African nations and tribes willingly sold rivals and enemies to European and American slave traders. There is a centuries-long tradition of slavery in the Arab world, where slavery is still practiced today as it is in some parts of Africa, North Korea and Central Asia.

This is not to excuse or make light of American slavery. It's simply to point out that our slave-holding ancestors were caught up in a worldwide system of inhumanity that flourished among many supposedly enlightened nations and peoples until it finally collapsed under the crushing weight of its immorality and injustice. They did what so many others did and justified it by the tortured moral codes of the day.

Should we feel guilty about this?

I should have preferred our slave-holding ancestors to have decided differently but I am unable to change or fix the past. I think our obligation is to honestly embrace the history, to be enlightened by it, to understand how centuries later the after-effects of slavery continue to be felt and debated in contemporary society. But we can only strive to learn from the past, to live morally in the present, to treat people regardless of race, color or creed with respect and dignity and to pass those values of tolerance and understanding on to our children.

-Ken Wells, March 2026

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### **Notes on sources**

Beyond the sources cited in the bibliography, I gleaned useful information, particularly U.S. Census data and birth, death and marriage records, from online genealogical programs, Ancestry.com and MyHeritage.com, to which I subscribe. Ancestry's subscription also gave me access to Newspapers.com.

For supplemental information on the founding of the German Coast, early New Orleans, Bienville, D'Arensbourg and John Law I

consulted the websites of 64Parishes.org hosted by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities; the Historic New Orleans Collection; the online St. Charles Parish Virtual Museum; and the German-Acadian Coast Historical and Genealogical Society. Hugely helpful was a 2025 summation on the German Coast founding by the Society's Jay Schexnaydre to the Destrehan Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. You can view it here on the Internet Archive: [https://archive.org/details/scpla-Daughters\\_of\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution\\_German\\_Coast\\_Symposium\\_January\\_18\\_2025](https://archive.org/details/scpla-Daughters_of_the_American_Revolution_German_Coast_Symposium_January_18_2025)

I used the digital library of the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>) to find and download useful public domain books on the Louisiana French colony including the works cited in the bibliography by Barbe-Marbois, De La Harpe, De Villiers, Gayarré, Du Pratz and Surrey.

An enlightening essay on John Law's machinations with the Company of the Indies and the Mississippi Bubble can be found here:

<https://engelsbergideas.com/about/>

For statistics on slavery in America, I consulted the website Statista:

[https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880/?utm\\_source=copilot.com](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880/?utm_source=copilot.com)

For a detailed overview I accessed the Library of Congress' discussion of "Pre-Civil War African-American Slavery" and related links. You can find it here:

[https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/national-expansion-and-reform-1815-1880/pre-civil-war-african-american-slavery/?utm\\_source=copilot.com](https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/national-expansion-and-reform-1815-1880/pre-civil-war-african-american-slavery/?utm_source=copilot.com)

I also found useful information on the Smithsonian's "Slavery in America" page and related links:

[https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/changing-america/online/1863/slavery-in-america?utm\\_source=copilot.com](https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/changing-america/online/1863/slavery-in-america?utm_source=copilot.com)

Finally, a must link on slavery in Louisiana is Louisiana's Whitney Plantation website:

[https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/changing-america/online/1863/slavery-in-america?utm\\_source=copilot.com](https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/changing-america/online/1863/slavery-in-america?utm_source=copilot.com)

### **About the author...**

Ken Wells is a journalist and novelist who grew up on the banks of Bayou Black near Houma, Louisiana, second of six sons of an alligator-hunting father and a Cajun-French-speaking mother and gumbo chef extraordinaire. He is the author of six well-received novels of the Cajun bayous and four works of narrative non-fiction, notably *Gumbo Life: A Journey Down the Roux Bayou*, and most recently *Boudin*, a cultural commentary on and lively travelogue through the mania surrounding Louisiana's most popular sausage. He divides his time between Chicago, a lovely little summer cabin in the wilds of Maine and frequent visits to Louisiana. You can read more about Ken on his website [www.bayoubro.com](http://www.bayoubro.com). This work is purely a labor of love reflecting Ken's interest in family, history and genealogy. He is proud to note that he bears the middle name Louis in honor of Louis J. "Lulu" Toups, the grandfather he never knew except through colorful family stories and scattered photographs.