

“Detroit never saw such a collection of people.” The Start of the “Fox Wars” 300 Years Ago
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Three hundred years ago in May of 1712, **Jacques Charles Renaud sieur Dubuisson**, temporary commandant, was standing apprehensively on a bastion of Fort Pontchartrain at *Le Détroit du Lac Érié* when, as he later reported in a 15 June letter:

casting my eyes toward the woods, I saw the army of the nations of the south issuing from it. They were the **Illinois**, the **Missouris**, the **Osages** and other nations yet more remote. There were also with them, the **Ottawa** Chief, Saguina, and also the **Potawatamies**, the **Sacs**, and some **Menomenies**. Detroit never saw such a collection of people. It is surprising how much all the nations are irritated against the **Mascoutins** and the **Ottagamies**. This army marched in good order, with as many flags, as there were different nations, and it proceeded directly to the Fort of the **Hurons**. These Indians said to the head chief of the army, “You must not encamp. Affairs are too pressing. We must enter immediately into our Father’s Fort, and fight for him. As he has always had pity on us, and as he loves us, we ought to die for him.”¹

Shortly afterwards, the exchange of fire between the French fort and the Fox fort located “a gun shot away” began. The date of the arrival of the “army of the nations of the south” had to have been after 13 May 1712, the only other precise date Dubuisson mentions except for the 15 June 1712 date on his letter to inform the French Governor-general, **Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil**, about the violence. That letter was to be carried by **Jean Baptiste Bissot de Vincennes**, who had arrived on 13 May, before the army of the south, with eight men from **Miami** territory. He had been sent word earlier in 1712 that help was critically needed. **Antoine Laumet dit de Lamothe Cadillac** had left Fort Pontchartrain the previous spring, 1711, dismissed by the French minister Pontchartrain to eventually assume command in *Louisiane* in 1713. It is Cadillac who had invited the **Fox**, called the “Ottagamies” in this translation, to come and settle at the fort. They had arrived by 1710 and are even documented in the registers of Ste. Anne de Detroit in baptisms of **Outagamis** or **Renards**,² the names the French used for what the English call Fox Indians; *Renard* translates as Fox. They named themselves the **Mesquaki**, people of the red earth. Relations among the Native American Nations who relocated to land near the French fort after 1701 were never totally without conflict, rivalries, and violence in spite of the Great Peace signed in Montréal in 1701.³ The addition of the Fox to the mix in 1710, and eventually their allies the **Mascoutin**, caused further tragic problems. It is not my intent here to present the causes and politics that led to the violence of 1712. My aim is to report, on this the 300th anniversary, facts that have been unknown, ignored, or slanted in published summaries of the event.

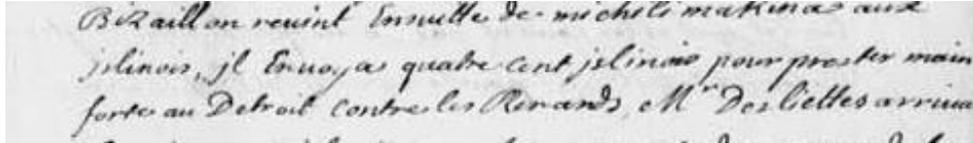
¹ Spelling and punctuation as found, but I have put some names in bold. Renaud Dubuisson, Jacques-Charles. "Official Report ... to the Governor General of Canada, of the war which took place at Detroit, in 1712, between the French and their allies, and the Ottagamie and Mascoutins Indians." *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, vol. 16 (Madison, Wis.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1902): 272 of 267-288. Online facsimile at: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=113>.

Another English translation version is in Vol. 33 of the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 1903 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/0534625.0033.001/574?page=root;rgn=full+text;size=100;view=image;q1=dubuisson>. The two translations differ in some interpretations of the French. The Wisconsin translation is reproduced in *Tonnancour: Life in Grosse Pointe and along the Shores of Lake St. Clair*, Vol. 1, ed. Arthur M. Woodford (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994), but the editor chose to omit part of the second paragraph. The excerpts in English that I cite in this article have been checked in Dubuisson’s original 15 June 1712 letter: 1712, juin, 15 / Détroit, Lettre de Dubuisson à Vaudreuil, Series C11A. Correspondance générale; Canada, MG1-C11A, Original: Volume 33, fol. 160-178v, hereafter Dubuisson, 1712. Unless otherwise noted, all details about the events of May and June 1712 in this article come from Dubuisson’s report. Anyone needing a precise folio reference should inquire.

² I count ten such baptisms in 1710; 19 in 1711; and, in 1712, seven before the Fox attacked the fort in May, and five after the hostilities ended shortly before 15 June. An additional five baptisms appear between 1713 and 1715. Ancestry.ca Early U.S. French Catholic Church Records (Drouin Collection), 1695-1954, D > Détroit, Ste-Anne; Autres Registres > 1704-1744 > Ste. Anne de Detroit, 198 images, hereafter cited as *Autres Ste-Anne*.

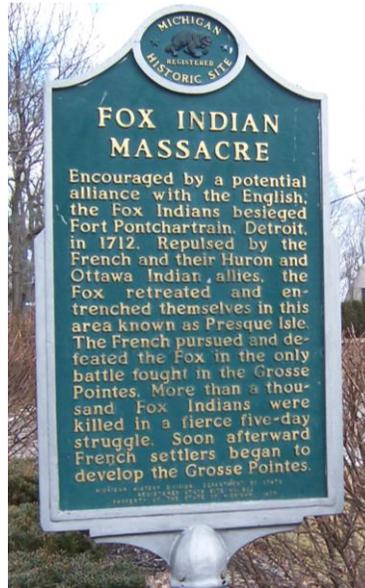
³ See Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

One previously unknown fact concerns **Michel Bisailon**, a subject of my “But I Read It...” in this issue of *Michigan's Habitant Heritage*. Michel played a role in determining the outcome of the combat that broke out shortly after the arrival of the “army of the nations of the south.” It is he who later reported to French authorities that he had recruited 400 Illinois Indians to give assistance at Detroit against the *Renards*.



Translation: “Bizaillon [sic] returned then from *MichilimaKinas* to the Illinois, he sent four hundred Illinois Indians to defend Detroit [*prester main forte*] against the *Renards*.”⁴ Michel Bisailon’s role in recruiting 400 Indians from Illinois territory has never been reported in any versions of the event that I have read.

This arrival and participation of allied Native Americans other than the Ottawa, Huron, and other Native Americans who had resided at Detroit for years is often downplayed or not even mentioned in published accounts of the opening of the Fox Wars. For example, it is not mentioned on the memorial plaque erected at Windmill Point in Grosse Pointe Park, the site of the final battle that took place in 1712 at what is now named the Fox River.⁵



In addition to not mentioning the role of the Native Americans who traveled from the Mississippi River and elsewhere to fight the Fox, this plaque, like many secondary sources, is not totally accurate. First, although the siege at *Presque Isle* (Windmill Point) lasted five days, as the plaque says, 19 days of combat at Fort Pontchartrain preceded it; and Dubuisson’s total estimate of 1,000 dead Fox Indians includes men, women, and children who died inside of the Fox fort or nearby, from gunfire, thirst, starvation, and illness contracted from unburied bodies during that nineteen-day siege while the Fox refused to surrender. The total may include prisoners taken at *Presque Isle* who were then tortured and killed by the Native allies before Dubuisson wrote his report dated 15 June, although

⁴ “*Bizaillon revint ensuite de michilimakinas aux jilinois, il envoya quatre cent jilinois pour prester main forte au Detroit contre les Renards.*” Image from Library and Archives Canada (LAC), [1715] “Justification de Michel Bisailon,” Series C11A, Correspondance générale; Canada, MG1-C11A: Vol. 35, fol. 100 of 99-100v. The LAC summary adds that Michel advised the Illinois Indians to reject the propositions of the English and to remain faithful to the French.

⁵ The commemorative plaque is in the median at Windmill Point Drive and Lakepointe, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. Photo taken by the author 18 February 2012. Note: French settlement of the Grosse Pointes did not begin until after colonists arrived in 1749-50.

some, mainly women and children, were spared to become slaves and about 100 escaped. Second, to say the French alone pursued the Fox to *Presque Isle* is very misleading. Dubuisson stated he had only 30 Frenchmen in his garrison, with the additional eight men who arrived on 13 May led by Jean Baptiste Bissot de Vincennes from Miami territory. The battle began shortly after both Vincennes and the army of the south had arrived. Compared to the hundreds of Native Americans allied to the French who fought the Fox and the hundreds of Fox, Mascoutins, and their allies, the French or French Canadians played a small role indeed. Third, as in other abbreviated accounts of the event, there is not even a hint that, in early spring, the Fox attempted to murder (*poignarder*) an inhabitant of the fort named Lajeunesse, most likely **Pierre Estève dit Lajeunesse**, and “la grande fille de Roy,” most probably **Marguerite Roy**, age eight, the big or eldest daughter of **Pierre Roy** and his Miami wife, **Marguerite OuabanKiKoué**, nor of the insolence of the Fox and the necessary destruction of French property well-before the Fox began their assault. **Pierre Mallet**'s house, the church, and other buildings outside of the fort—the storehouse and other residences—had to be pulled down so that they could not be used by the enemy. The Fox pillaged livestock and feedstock. During the siege, the roofs of houses inside the fort were set afire by flaming arrows and the houses barely saved by quick action. Fourth, few accounts mention **Joseph**, a Catholic **Renard**, who warned Dubuisson of the impending attack by the Fox, at great peril to his life. The “heroes” and “villains” were not as clear cut as an overview of the event might suggest. Joseph had spoken to Governor Vaudreuil the year before, 1711, and was sent to the governor in 1712 along with chiefs of the Illinois and Potawatomi allies to present their account of the combat against the Renards and Mascoutins. Dubuisson reports that “Our Indians” had lost 60 men, killed or wounded, 30 of them dying in the fort. Six or seven French had been wounded by arrows and one inhabitant died and was buried in the cemetery of the fort. Father Deniau wrote the burial record, on 20 May 1712, for “**Alexis Germain**, son of Robert Germain, native of [originally from] the parish of Pointe aux Trembles near *Kebec*, died yesterday about four in the afternoon by gunshot from the *stagamis* [Outagamis] against whom the *nations du Sud* [nations from the South] were fighting at Fort Pontchartrain.”⁶ He had died having received the sacraments.

Most summaries of the beginning of the Fox War refer to the “French” at Fort Pontchartrain but do not name any beyond Commandant Dubuisson and Vincennes, whom some turn into the second-in-command at the fort rather than an officer from the Miami post who replied to the commandant's request for help. The main source for the names of the inhabitants who endured the terror before, during, and after the nineteen-day siege is the register of Ste. Anne de Detroit. I have located for this article the names of some godparents, first, at baptisms of **Fox** Indians: **Marguerite Couque**, *femme de Massé*, on 6 April; **Antoine Magnan dit Lesperance** and **Marie Louise Robert** on 6 June; **Marie Cardinal**, wife of *Lacroix*, on 24 June, but she must have left for Montréal soon after because son René was baptized there 20 September 1712, with his father recorded as absent;⁷ also on 24 June, baptism of Magdelene, *stagamise*, belonging to **Sr François Fafart dit Delorme**, with **Jean Baptiste Patissier dit St Amand**, who signed *jean baptistie patissie*, & **Marie Madelene Frappier**, *femme de Pierre Stebre*, as godparents; and on 27 August, **François Fafart dit Delorme** and **Barbe Loisselle**, widow of *Mr De Ranée*. Other Native Americans received the sacrament of baptism during the spring of 1712: on 10 April 1712, baptism of Jean Baptiste, **Ottawa**, with **Jean Baptiste Verger dit Desjardins** (married Charlotte Catin in 1713) and **Marie Maconce** (Fafard *dite* Maconce) as godparents; **Jacques Philippes**, *voyageur*, and **Catherine Mallet**, godparents on 22 May for a **Huron** named Catherine; and on 2 June an **Illinois** received the sacrament with **Jean Contant**, *soldat*, and **Magdelene Parant** as godparents, to name a few. Dubuisson mentions a *Langlois* who had been stopped by the **Kikapoo** as he was returning to Detroit from the Miami and stripped of letters he was carrying from the priests in Illinois country. The letters were destroyed, and the Indians dismissed Langlois “after robbing him of his peltry.” This is most likely **Jacques Langlois**, who served as godfather for Jacques, an **Iroquois**, with Marie Cardinal *femme de Jacques Hubert dit La Croix* as godmother, on 9 June 1712.⁸ Parents of some of these Indians are named on the records.

If you now suspect that there is much more to know about the events 300 years ago in May and June of 1712, then I will be satisfied *if*, in this brief piece, I can begin to clarify the record. Much remains to be said, especially about the ambiguous position of the Iroquois, the role of the English, and the problems found in the two English translations when they are compared to the original French. The plaque in Grosse Pointe Park mentions the involvement of the English but does not include that of the Iroquois. What is more, the version of Dubuisson's report published in *Tonnancour* (see footnote 1) even cuts the beginning of an important second paragraph of the report, indicating the

⁶ *Mort hier sur les quatre heures après midi d'un Coup du fuzil qui lui fut donné par les stagamis Contre qui les nations du Sud se battoient dans le Fort Pontchartrain. Autres Ste-Anne*, image 18 of 198.

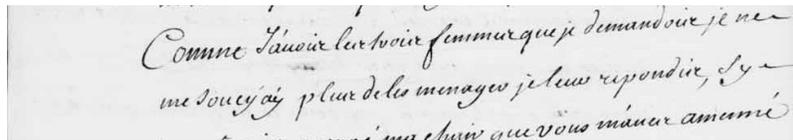
⁷ Family Search, Montréal, Notre-Dame-de-Montréal, 1712, image 35 of 49.

⁸ The baptisms I cite in this paragraph are from *Autres Ste-Anne*, images 71-74 of 198. **See also p. 114 of this issue.**

omission by three dots (...). In this passage, Dubuisson tells the French Governor-general, Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil, that the English had encouraged the Fox to destroy the French fort, then to cut the throats of all of the inhabitants (*égorger*), and to do the same to the Ottawa and Huron domiciled at Detroit. In addition, he says he has confirmation (by 15 June, the date of his report) that a band of Fox had already arrived among the Iroquois (in New York) to "make their village" there among them. After the planned destruction of Detroit, other Fox intended to join the Iroquois. In 1712, France and England were still engaged in a bitter and costly war that had begun in 1702. The Iroquois had generally remained neutral in this conflict among the European powers; but there were no guarantees all of them would continue to honor the Great Peace of 1701 that they signed with the French and their Indian allies, including, in 1701, the Fox.⁹ Some Iroquois had grievances because of attacks against them by some of their Indian "allies," as did the Fox and Mascoutin, tragedies that had not been resolved. The times were perilous for everyone involved, notwithstanding the centuries-old advice of the Roman dramatist Terence that "It becomes a wise man to try negotiation before arms." (*Eunuchus*, V. 1. 19)

This does not mean negotiations did not take place, even at Fort Pontchartrain during the siege. Here, though, many published accounts turn Dubuisson into a villain, in part, I believe, because of inaccurate translations. In reviewing the English language sources for this article, I was particularly struck by a faulty translation of a French phrase in Dubuisson's comment when the Fox delivered to him, after being asked to do so in a brief truce, three Ottawa women, including the wife of **Saguina**. The Fox had abducted them some time earlier and were holding the women as hostages in their fort. The translation reads: "As I had now the three women whom I sought, I did not care any longer to keep **fair** with them [the Fox, emphasis mine]." Edmunds and Peyser, in their book about the Fox wars,¹⁰ italicize "I did not care any longer to keep fair with them" when they quote the line, because they interpret these words as proof that Dubuisson betrayed the trust of the Fox, that he was not *fair* to them.

On the original French, I saw: *Je ne me soucy'ay plus de les menager*,¹¹ which I understand as "I did not any longer worry whether I offended them if I spoke my anger," or "I no longer cared to disguise how I felt about their outrageous actions in order to keep them from reacting against me."



Comme J'avois les trois femmes que je demandois **je ne me soucy'ay plus de les menager**

Soucier, the verb, translates as to care or to be concerned about something or someone. *Souci*, the noun, means care or worry and to be without *souci* means to be without care or worry; *menager* means to handle something in a sensitive or least damaging way as possible; or, in the case of money, the cheapest way. These are words my parents used all the time, but I have also checked the old French dictionaries online. Dubuisson had been required to control his response earlier in the year when the Fox menace had intensified in threatening not only the French but also the Ottawa and Huron Indians at Detroit who had not gone on the winter hunt. The French phrase he used then is *filer doux*,¹² meaning that he had been required to act in a moderate or submissive way, especially when to act

⁹ Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*. A jpg of the last pages of the Great Peace and the pictogram signatures of the Native Americans can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Grande_Paix_Montreal.jpg

¹⁰ R. David Edmunds and Joseph L. Peyser, *The Fox Wars, The Mesquaki Challenge to New France* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 72.

¹¹ Words quoted in French and the image above are from LAC, Dubuisson, 1712. When I checked my reading of this phrase with Michael McCafferty, he observed: "Orthographically, in soucyay, he's using the first y as an i, and he put a dot over it. It's not an apostrophe. He put a dot over the second y, too." McCafferty's succinct translations of the line are: "I no longer cared about handling them carefully;" "I no longer cared about dealing carefully with them;" "I no longer cared about being gentle with them." Fair translates to French *juste*, which Dubuisson does not use. Personal e-mails, February 2012. I thank Michael for his comments.

¹² Online *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1st Edition (1694): "On dit, Filer doux, pour dire, Se moderer, se retenir, se comporter avec douceur, avec modestie, avec soumission. Quand un maistre est en colere, les

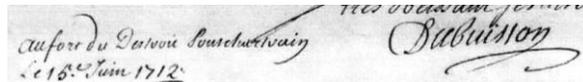
otherwise would foolishly result in damage or retribution. In the early spring, Dubuisson and the French at the fort were definitely not masters of their fate; they were at the mercy of a large and threatening force. The *Michigan Pioneer Historical Collections* translates this passage as: "It was necessary for me to speak to them fair." And the *Wisconsin Collections* version quotes Dubuisson as saying: "It was necessary for me to be very mild." Just before this passage, however, Dubuisson had reported that the Fox claimed to be "maitres de toute [sic] la terre," masters of all the earth, not, as translated, "owners of this country" (WC) or "masters of all this land" (MPHC). If Dubuisson had meant either of these versions, he would have said they asserted that they were "maitres de toute cette terre,"¹³ masters of all this land. These examples are not the only problems I sense with the two translations.

With the support of the army from the south and the return from winter quarters of the Ottawa and Huron, however, Dubuisson threw caution to the winds and spoke his mind, but he himself did not break faith with the Fox. He insisted on permitting the ambassadors who had delivered the hostages to return safely to their fort, as he had promised, but he allowed his Indian allies to have a say about what would happen next. He had little choice. The fact that he did first truly speak his mind has nevertheless been held against him, perhaps because, after admitting that he could no longer hide his true feelings, he reports: "I replied to them, **if** [je leur repondis Sy]

you had eaten my flesh [killed the three female Ottawa] that you have brought to me you would not be alive at this moment [;] you would have felt instantly such heavy damage that it would have buried you so deep into the earth that no one would speak of you anymore, so true it is that I love the flesh [people] of the father of all the nations, as for the freedom [to halt firing briefly to obtain food and water] that you ask of me I will leave this [decision] to my Children [the allied Indians assembled to defend the French] to reply to you, thus I will say no more. [My translation, folio 170]

These are certainly hard words, even preceded by the conditional word *if*. It is easy to be an armchair critic writing hundreds of years after the fact, especially as the allies decided to renew hostilities as soon as the ambassadors reached their fort, resulting in what has been labeled a "massacre" after the Fox escaped in a rainstorm at night to *Presque Isle*. Yet, I also have to ask myself what words I might have spoken on the spot had I been in Dubuisson's situation, especially from the perspective of the 21st century, ten years after 9/11, after hearing and feeling all that has been said and done in reply to those attacks and the actions that followed. Our ancestors were no different. And I can only imagine the panic of those, on all "sides," helplessly trapped in hate and violence. I sympathize with the pain of the survivors of all who died in the battles of 1712. War is never pretty.

In discussing the Fox Wars, "La guerre des Renards," two historians, working exclusively from the French documents, ask: Were these "French-Indian wars?" Their reply is that "they were wars opposing on one side the French and their Indian allies and on the other the enemy Native Americans [that they had in common]. ... The colonists, to a certain extent, participated in the wars of their allies as long as these [allies] were mercenaries in the service of the French empire. The war said to be the 'Fox War,' in its beginnings, at any rate, illustrates this reality."¹⁴ In any event, 300 years later, I choose to quote the words of Odysseus, written by the ancient Greek Homer: "It is not right to exult over slain men." (*The Odyssey*, XII. 412.)

A photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive ink. The signature reads "Dubuisson" and is written on a document that also contains the text "au fort du Destroit Pontchartrain" and "le 15^e Juin 1712".

Signature of Dubuisson au fort du Destroit Pontchartrain 15 June 1712, f. 178v

domestiques font sagement de filer doux. [When a master is angry, the servants should wisely *filer doux*, step carefully, behave themselves.]” I have used this resource to compare my understanding of French words to their meanings in the 17th and 18th centuries. See <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>

¹³ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1st Edition (1694), example sentences: *Il est **maître** de cette terre, de ce chateau*: He is master of this land, of this house; and *Le globe de la terre. Dieu a créé le ciel & la terre*: the globe of the earth. God created the heavens and the earth. I am aware some say that the Fox lived in the Detroit area before the Iroquois drove them out by 1650. Could this have influenced the translators?

¹⁴ Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de L'Amérique Française* (Éditions Flammarion, 2003), 199-200, my translation.