

**Does the apparent absence of evidence permit us  
to speculate, to extrapolate,  
and to make assumptions stated as facts?**  
Suzanne Boivin Sommerville

On another forum, a contributor wrote to me: “None of your citations happens to mention the color of the pants worn by the Europeans with Cadillac; so using your logic model we can extrapolate the entire party was 'sans pantalons' since that data wasn't recorded.”

This response was made because I had indicated that no currently known sources state, as fact, that any Indians were present at the site of the strait now called Detroit when Cadillac and the large convoy of 1701 arrived to establish Fort Pontchartrain. In fact, the known documents indicate without doubt that no Indians were present there when the French arrived, documents I had cited. When the contributor posed the above question, I replied, in part:

More data has survived than you might imagine. Actually, the phrase “sans pantalons,” without pants, may not have been far from the truth for the voyageurs because they adopted Indian-style pants, the providing of which is sometimes mentioned in the *engagements* / hiring contracts.

I invited him to see and read <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/7299ac> LE COSTUME DES COUREURS DES BOIS : LE MYTHE ET LA RÉALITÉ, by Francis Back, with his drawings of summer and winter clothing of voyageurs based on documentary evidence. He mentions "une chemise de toile" a shirt of toile, covering "brayets, legs wearing "mitasses," etc. The article was originally published in CAP-AUX-DIAMANTS, N° 76, HIVER 2004. It can be downloaded in pdf.

*Mitasses* and *brayets* are leggings and breechcloths (*brayets* are defined as diapers for a baby in the old French dictionaries). Francis Back's article questions the myth and assumption that the French voyageurs wore leather pants, as has been depicted by modern-day artists imagining the clothing they wore and also by historians.

Published in 1953, Alice Tarbell Crathern's "In Detroit Courage was the Fashion. The Contribution of Women to the Development of Detroit from 1701 to 1951," Detroit: Wayne University 1953,<sup>1</sup> also perpetuates this myth of leather garments in New France:

While the men were trapping and trading and building houses, the women would build the homes. Their task was not to be an easy one, nor had the women expected it to be. Their task was to bring the art of homemaking into the small log huts on the river; and they did it. From the first their needles were busy mending rips in leather jackets or patching rough woolens for the men at the garrison or even for the Indians.

Typical of writers who know only the traditions of the American frontier, this author "assumes" the men wore "leather jackets" and "rough woolens". Knowing no better, they believe the French voyageurs must have had a costume similar to what frontiersmen in the United States wore at a later time, in the nineteenth century, but this is far from the truth. Francis Back writes, in my translation:

In 1682, Henri de Tonty informs us that the coureurs des bois are “sans culotte [those who don't wear pants],” because they prefer “*mitasses*” and a “*simple brayet*” to this garment [one made of leather: *vêtements de cuir*”] But when they conduct their canoes,

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.envisionthepast.com/michigan-social-history/>

these men do not hesitate to take off their *mitasses* and *mocassins* to keep them dry. In these circumstances, “the Canadiens are ordinarily in their shirts, barefoot and bare-legged,” as Antoine Laumet, *dit de Lamothe Cadillac* described it in 1695.

The following is the original French from page 17 of the referenced article by Francis Back:

En 1682, Henri de Tonty nous apprend que les coureurs des bois sont des «sans culotte», car ils préfèrent à ce vêtement des mitasses et un «simple brayet». Mais lorsqu'ils manoeuvrent leurs canots, ces hommes n'hésitent pas à enlever mitasses et mocassins pour les garder au sec. Dans ces circonstances, «les Canadiens sont ordinairement en chemise, nu-pieds et nu-jambes», comme l'écrit Antoine Laumet, dit de Lamothe Cadillac, en 1695.

Notice also that Cadillac identifies these men as “Canadiens,” not Frenchmen. New France was called Canada, which is Iroquois for “village,” from its very beginnings. Jacques Cartier called it Canada by 1535. Some historians “assume” there was no Canada until nineteenth century Confederation! Back also makes the point that Native Americans and French adapted items of clothing from the other’s culture. It is not generally known that cloth or textiles was a major item of trade goods. Unlike leather skins of animals, wool was not only warm but dried quickly after becoming wet.

For individuals traveling by canoes subject to sprays of water or overturning, that was important. Francis Back says, “les toiles et les draps de laine comptent pour 65% des marchandises de trocs qu'ils echange pour leurs fourrures.” Cloth (linen or otherwise) and wool accounted for **65%** of trade merchandise for which Natives exchanged their furs. Wool, in particular, sometimes called *écarlatine* for its red color, was so important that the French tried to imitate British versions of this wool, which the Indians preferred and for which they travelled far to obtain in the English colonies. Called strouds by the English, they were not at all what Crathern calls “rough woolens.”

For a while, owning *écarlatines* was against the law for French citizens. I've seen several legal cases.

Since many voyageur ancestors went to Fort St. Joseph (Niles, Michigan), some of you might be interested in this blog about the archaeological finds there:

<http://fortstjosepharchaeology.blogspot.com/search/label/lead%20bale%20seal>

Scan down to the entry for Saturday, July 23, 2011

Lead bale seals were discovered in the dig, and, at first, the crew “assumed” the seals might have been for sacs of seeds sent from France! Their mind-set was that “everyone in a ‘frontier’ settlement must have farmed”. I and others who visited that summer reminded them of the importance of textiles in the trade inventory.

These lead bale seals were marked from Lille, a textile powerhouse in France.

Be aware of the dangerous tendency among both academic historians and family historians to assume that what is true today or was true in the past in areas very different from New France is also true for that distinct 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century society of New France.

## Definitions from the online *Dictionnaires d'autres fois*

Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 1st Edition (1694)  
braye

**BRAYE.** s. f. Linge dont on enveloppe le derriere des enfans nouvellement vestus. Attacher une braye à un enfant, luy changer de brayes. Translation : cloth with which babies are clothed. Put a diaper on a baby, change his diaper.

Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 6th Edition (1835)  
braie

**BRAIE.** s. f. Linge dont on enveloppe le derrière des enfans. Attacher une braie à un enfant. Lui changer de braie. Il a vieilli: on dit, Lange ou Couche.

braies

**BRAIES** au pluriel, s'est dit anciennement pour Culotte, caleçon.  
braies

**BRAIES.1** (brê) s. f. plur.

1. Culotte, caleçon.

CHATEAUB., Mart. 191: Tous ces barbares [les Francs] portaient de longues braies Vieux en ce sens. Fig. et populairement. Il en est sorti, il s'en est tiré les braies nettes, il s'est tiré heureusement d'une mauvaise affaire.

MOL., les Préc. 12: Moi, je dis que nos libertés auront peine à sortir d'ici les braies nettes [saines et sauves]

2. Au sing. Une braie, couche ou linge qu'on met aux petits enfans pour les empêcher de se salir.

3. Terme de marine. Morceau de grosse toile goudronnée que l'on cloue en certains endroits, pour empêcher l'eau d'entrer dans le bâtiment.