

Descriptions of Detroit or its Residents

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Descriptions of Detroit or its residents:

The following descriptions of Detroit or its residents were made by individuals who visited Detroit from the late 1740s through the mid 1760s. The descriptions have been grouped by topic and then in chronological order.

General Descriptions of Detroit:

Gaspard Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, fils, was a military engineer. In 1749 following the conclusion of King George's War, Roland Michel Barrin, *marquis* de La Galissonnière, *commandant* general of New France, sent de Léry from Montréal to Detroit in a reconnaissance mission. He visited Detroit during the summer of 1749 and wrote his report in Québec on 22 October 1749. Following are extracts from that report.¹

The lands on the east side of the river are bordered by prairies in such a way that the inhabitants have no wood to cut in order to clear their fields and sow their grain. It is only necessary to plough the land and to cut down some shrubs [*fredoches*]. The lands are good and grow wheat, barley, oats, peas and in general all sorts of grains. Fall wheat is grown at that place.

On August 1st, I planted some French grape vines that I had brought from Montreal. They had a good start and were growing well when I left. There were three plants of white and four of purple grapes.

In this garden there are peaches, pears and apples that are very good. The inhabitants also have some on their lands, as well as vegetables and other garden produce that abound there.

The inhabitants of the place say that it is not possible to settle the newcomers² in a village on account of the large starlings that eat the grain. It is true that there are many of them and that people are needed to watch them. It is also true the inhabitants of Detroit at present do not like work. This year, however, they have a fine crop.

Pierre Joseph Bonnécamps, S.J., taught mathematics and accompanied Pierre Joseph Céleron de Blainville on his 1749 expedition to the Ohio River. He spent **7 October 1749** in Detroit.³

I took the latitude in Father Bonaventure's courtyard, and I found it 42° 38'.

I remained too short a time at Detroit to be able to give you an exact description of it. All that I can say to you about it is, that its situation appeared to me charming. A beautiful

¹ Ernest J. Lajeunesse, C.S.B., *The Windsor Border Region* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 47-48; University of Toronto and Université Laval, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, (<http://www.biographi.ca/index-e.html>), hereafter *DCB*, Chaussegros de Léry's biography: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/chaussegros_de_lery_gaspard_joseph_1721_97_4E.html.

² See Gail Moreau-DesHarnais, *Edward Cicotte Ledger 1749-1752*. Gail transcribed and annotated the Ledger which lists the individuals and families who were granted land in the Detroit River Region by Roland Michel Barrin, *marquis* de La Galissonnière. The article appears on the Land and Census Information Page on the FCHSM website: http://www.habitantheritage.org/french-canadian_resources/land_and_census_information.

³ Thwaites, Ruben Gold, editor, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers, 1900, Vol. 69, pp. 191, 193. Available online at: (<http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/>) and the HathiTrust: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000833013>).

river runs at the foot of the fort; vast plains, which only ask to be cultivated, extend beyond the sight. There is nothing milder than the climate, which scarcely counts two months of winter. The productions of Europe, and especially the grains, grow much better than in many of the cantons of France. It is the Touraine and Beauce of Canada.

The Fort of Detroit is a long square; I do not know its dimensions, but it appeared large to me. The village of the Hurons and that of the Outaouas [Ottawa] are on the other side of the river.

Charles de Raymond was a captain in the Troupes de la Marine. He had served in New France for 32 years. In 1754, frustrated by his efforts to win a promotion or a frontier post where he could engage in the fur trade, Raymond wrote a critical account of the state of affairs of New France.⁴

I note the beauty of the climate of Detroit; the goodness and fertility of the lands on which, in most of them, there is but little clearing to be done; the quantity of grassland for raising as much livestock of all kinds as one would like; the abundance of fishing and hunting; its proximity to the posts of the Miami [and] Ouyatanon,⁵ which is [*sic*] the link with the Illinois country and the Mississippi via the Miami and Wabash Rivers; the link with and closeness of the new posts of the Belle Rivière⁶ which is only about one hundred leagues⁷ from Filadelfie [Philadelphia] by land and whose road is cleared by the continual comings and goings of the English who up to now have been doing the trading of this whole region, which is to be feared they will invade subsequently.

All these considerations, then, warrant our paying greater attention to Detroit than we have until now. Let us pour settlers into it in order to populate it and make it capable of protecting and feeding itself and the new settlements of the Belle Rivière in order to keep possession of them and keeping our communications open with the Illinois and the Mississippi, in order to succeed and protect all these regions and your [*sic*] habitants, to assure them of a refuge to enable them not to lose their possessions and families with respect to the wars that we should always fear having with the English, or with the Indian nations. If we come to having it with the later there is no holding onto Detroit if it remains in the situation it is in; its loss will certainly lead to that of all the regions of which we have just spoken, which obviously proves that it is appropriate to establish a town there, to have a governor there, a staff headquarters, and troops proportionate to the interest we must have in our expansion and in maintaining ourselves in such a good a beautiful region.

Captain James Campbell accompanied Major Robert Rogers to take possession of Detroit in 1760. He was the second British commandant of Detroit.⁸ On 2 December 1760, he wrote to Colonel Henry Bouquet. Following is the closing paragraph from that letter.⁹

⁴ Charles de Raymond and Joseph L. Peyser, translator and editor, *On the Eve of the Conquest – The Chevalier de Raymond's Critique of New France in 1754* (East Lansing and Mackinac Island: Michigan State University and Mackinac State Historical Parks, 1997), pp. 59-60.

⁵ The Miami Post was located in present-day Indiana, possibly at Fort Wayne. The Ouyatanon Post was located near present-day West Lafayette, Indiana.

⁶ The Ohio River.

⁷ One French Post league was equal to 2.42 English Miles

⁸ DCB: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/campbell_donald_3E.html.

⁹ Michigan Pioneer and Historic Collections (Lansing, Michigan: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1911 reprint), hereafter *MPHSC*, Volume XIX, p. 45.

The inhabitants seem very happy at the change of government, but they are in great want of everything it has been a very flourishing place before the war, plenty of everything. The Fort is much better than we expected it is one of the best stockades I have seen, but the commandant's house and what belongs to the King is in very bad repair, we got our People quartered in the Fort for the first time this night.

Captain Campbell wrote another letter to Bouquet, probably shortly after the he wrote the above letter, but the letter is not dated. The following are excerpts from that letter.¹⁰

Mr. Navarre who is a most excellent man has undertaken to furnish us with twenty thousand weight of flour at least one hundred Bushels of Peas as much Indian Corn as we shall want we are to pay the same the King of France used to doe, which comes to fifty shillings sterling the hundred weight of Flour.

I refer you to Capt. Crochan [Croghan] for our Indian affairs – I shall have a great trouble in that Department. The French have a different manner of treating them from us. The four nations that live in the environs of Detroit are as much under the commandant as the inhabitants and come for every thing they want. I have told my situation to General Monckton, I have nothing to give them and French left us very little in their Stores only meer trifles indeed they left us five hundred weight of good Powder, which was more than I expected. You should encourage Traders from Pittsburgh as much as possible this winter we cannot persuade the People to go there with their horses, they are only acquainted with travelling in Canoes.

The Fort is very large and in good Repair. There are two Bastions towards the water, and a large fast Bastion towards the inland the point of the Bastion is a Cavalier of wood on which there are mounted the three pounders and three small mortars, or cochons. The Palisadoes are in good order. There is a scaffolding round the whole which is only floored towards the land for want of Plank, it is by way of a Blanket. There are seventy or eighty houses in the fort laid out in regular streets, the Country is inhabited ten miles at each side of the river, and is a most beautiful country. The River here is about nine hundred yards over, and very deep, and every thing in great Plenty before this last year.

They have granted every thing I have desired of hem in Quartering our Troops I have put them on the same footing as in our Collonies. I must tell you I have not had one complaint against our Soldiers since we have been here – noe Rum that is the reason.

Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm was an engineer in the Sixteenth Regiment of Foot in the British Army. He accompanied **Captain Donald Campbell** to Detroit in 1760.

The Settlement of Detroit begins where the Rushes and Swamps along the narrows end, above before mentioned River [Rouge], and extend at the West side for about 12 miles, the Fort lyes 3 miles above said River, made of Stockades about a year ago, high 12 and 14 feet, behind which is a Banquet of Skafellings about 6 feet high, which for want of Planks in not finished, wanting 7200 feet of two Inche Plank, to Compleat them; it contains about 90 Houses, some of them are not Inhabited; the Commanding officers House is out of repair; and a Building cald by the Frenche la Magasin, is not finished being intended for two Stories high, and when completed would contain all the officers at present in Detroit; below the Fort are 15 Houses and above it 68 and at the opposite

¹⁰ *MPHSC*, Vol. 19, pp. 46-48.

Shore 58 more besides Three Indian Villages; and in the whole 221 wooden houses; some of them are very small and ill finished.¹¹

Lieutenant Dietrich Brehm – 1760:¹²

The soil at Detroit is extremely good, producing winter wheat, Indian Corn, good Grass, and all sorts of Garden Stuff and Fruit lik Apples, Pears and Pikhes, they have tried Wines from France, which grow extremely well.

Jonathan Carver was a resident of Massachusetts who visited Detroit on 27 June 1766. Following are excerpts from his Journal regarding Detroit.¹³

The French have several plantations scattered along the shore of these straits for about ten miles below the fort and about twelve miles above as far as Lake St. Clare.

The land is very good, producing all the necessaries of life in abundance, but by reason of the inactivity and idleness of the French inhabitants provisions are very dear, they themselves living but a little better than the Indians and even here seem fully to possess that spirit of gaiety so natural to that nation, for it is not uncommon to see a Frenchman with Indian shoes and stockings, without breaches, wearing a strip of woolen cloth to cover what decency requires him to conceal. Yet at the same time he wears a fine ruffled shirt, a laced waistcoat with a fine handkerchief on his head. But since the English have frequented these parts the French have laid by many of their savage customs.

Importance of Detroit:

Jean Frédéric Phélypeaux, *compte de Maurepas*, French minister of the Marine – **May 1749:**¹⁴

Detroit has at all times been considered an important post; and it is so in fact, not only on account of its position with regard to the savage nations whom it enables us to restrain, but also because it is an obstacle to the encroachments of the English, and furnishes supplies to the voyageurs of all the other Southern posts. It is also one of the most advantageous for the fur-trade.

Pierre Joseph Bonnécamps, S.J., - 7 October 1749:¹⁵

Moreover, we should regard Detroit as one of the most important posts of the Colony. It is conveniently situated for furnishing aid of Michilimakinak, to the St. Joseph River [present day Niles, Michigan], to the Bay [present-day Green Bay, Wisconsin], to the Miamis [present-day Indiana, possibly Fort Wayne], Ouatanonons [near present-day Lafayette, Indiana], and to the Beautiful River [present-day Ohio River], supposing that settlements be made thereon.

Recommendations made for the defense of Detroit:

Gaspard Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, *fiils*, 1749 recommendations:¹⁶

Both for the safety of the French fort and in order to awe and frighten the Indian nations, it would be necessary to have at Detroit the following artillery:

¹¹ Keith R. Widder, *Beyond Pontiac's Shadow – Michilimackinac and the Anglo-Indian War of 1763* (East Lansing and Mackinac, Michigan: Michigan State University Press and Mackinac State Historic Parks, 2013), p. 19.

¹² Widder, p. 20.

¹³ Jonathan Carver and John Parker, editor, *The Journals of Jonathan Carver and Related Documents, 1766 – 1770* (Minneapolis Historical Press, 2004 reprint), p. 66.

¹⁴ Widder, p. 81.

¹⁵ *JR*, Vol. 69, p. 193.

¹⁶ Lajeunesse, p. 48.

8 pieces of cannon of 4-lb. caliber with cannon balls and gun carriages
2 pieces of cannon of 3-lb. caliber with cannon balls and gun carriages
18 swivel guns

The English who have now entered upon the route of the Grande Rivière can continue their way to Detroit and attack it without Fort Niagara knowing anything about it. That would place us in a position of not being in a position of not being able to bring any help.

It is necessary then to garrison Detroit and make it proof against unpleasant events. There is no doubt that if this posts falls into the hands of the English, the Upper Country will be lost to us.

But of troops, settlers and artillery are placed there, we can be assured that no matter what attempts our enemies might make, they will not be able to succeed, even if the Indians should happen to give them a hand. But they will not do this when they see troops, artillery and settlers.

If this post is well garrisoned we shall be in a position to hold the Upper Country, and from the produce of the lands that will be farmed to nourish the garrison of Detroit and even that of Fort Niagara, by means of a barge on Lake Erie. It could be constructed on the Detroit River on Lake Erie. There is enough timber-wood to build a large number of vessels of all sizes.

Once Detroit is set up it will be able to provide at any moment detachments to remedy situations that may arise at Niagara, at Ouatonon [near present-day West Lafayette, Indiana], at the Miamis [present-day Indiana, possibly Fort Wayne], at Michilimackinac, at St. Joseph [near present-day Niles, Michigan] by water and land, at the Baye [present-day Green Bay, Wisconsin] and generally in all the posts, even at Louisiana.

The present enclosure of the fort at Detroit is of upright stakes. In time it could be made of stone. It is very good here and so is the lime and the sand.

Description of the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption on 15 August 1754:

Gaspard Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, *fils*, described how the Detroit residents celebrated the Feast. On 10 August 1754, Father Simple Boquet arrived in Detroit to succeed Father Bonaventure as pastor of Ste. Anne's du Detroit. George Paré translated and summarized Chaussegros de Léry's journal:¹⁷

The day was calm and beautiful. From early morning canoes had been gliding along the sparkling river from Grand Marais and La Petite Côte, all converging at the landing below the fort. The women in their gaily colored kerchiefs, and marshalling their little flocks ahead of them made directly for the church, while the men stayed behind to smoke a last pipe against the inevitable lengthy sermon. In his long red gown, not long enough to hide his clumsy shoepacs, the beadle brandishing his staff of office gave notice that Mass was about to begin and soon the traditional chant of the Church soared from our the willing throats that had known it from childhood.

¹⁷ George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit 1701-1888* (Detroit, Michigan: The Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), p. 195

Later in the day came the procession. A military detachment merely passing through Detroit stayed long enough to hear Mass, and take part in solemnity, First, the women and children fell into rank, then the men. As the two priests came out of church into the crowded little square the soldiers presented arms, and then took their position as guard of honor. Out of the fort and eastward along the riverbank the column proceeded, while over the quiet waters rang hymns of praise in honor of the Virgin Mother. When the procession had returned to receive the final Benediction, the gala day was over and the river was quickly dotted with canoes homeward bound.

Dinners and Dances hosted by the British for the French Canadians:

Sir William Johnson, superintendent of the Northern Indians, visited Detroit during the fall of **1761** and held conferences with the local Native Tribes. During his visit, he attended a dinner and two dances hosted by **Captain Donald Campbell**, *commandant* of Detroit.¹⁸

This day I am to dine with Captain Campbell, who is also to give the ladies a ball that I may see them. They assembled at 8 o'clock at night to the number of about twenty. I opened the ball with Mademoiselle Curie [**Angélique Cuillerier**], a fine girl. We danced until five o'clock next morning.

A little more than a week later, he attended another party:¹⁹

In the evening the ladies and gentlemen all assembled at my quarters and danced the whole night until 7 o'clock next morning.

Foot races:

French Officer **Louis Antoine de Bougainville** describing the foot races which were regularly held at Fort Pontchartrain in **1757**:²⁰

At Detroit, foot races between the natives and the Canadians are as celebrated as horse races in England. They take place in the spring. Ordinarily, there are five hundred natives present [as spectators] sometimes as many as fifteen hundred. The course is a half *league* [*circa* 1 ½ English miles], going and returning from Detroit to the village of the Potawatomis; the road is well made and wide, and there are posts planted at the two extremities. The wagers are very considerable, and consist of packs of pelts laid against French merchandise such as in use among the natives. The most celebrated Canadian who had run and won against the natives is a certain **Campo**; his superiority is so well recognized that he is no longer admitted to the races.

¹⁸ George Paré, pp. 209-210; *DCB*, biography of Johnson: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/johnson_william_4E.html; Campbell: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/campbell_donald_3E.html.

¹⁹ Paré, p. 210.

²⁰ Timothy J. Kent, *Ft. Pontchartrain at Detroit: A Guide to the Daily Lives of Fur Trade and Military Personnel, Settlers, and Missionaries at French Posts* (Silver Fox Enterprises, 2001), 805.