

Legends and Reality: some Truths not Told in Hamlin's Tale "Francois and Barbe"

Suzanne Boivin Sommerville, FCHSM member (s.sommerville@sbcglobal.net)

I love legends and fairy tales. These stories filled my childhood. My neighbor friends and I even acted them out, creating costumes and sets and improvising some of the dialog. Once, I was Rumpelstiltskin. At the end of the play, I pounded my foot through the opening of a dining table whose center extension boards had been removed to leave a hole that allowed Rumpelstiltskin to crash under ground, never to be seen again! As a college student, I majored in language and literature, exploring the great fiction and drama of the world, some purely imaginary, set in future times and places. I even tried my hand at writing fiction. I knew the characters in my readings and in my own writing existed in the mind. Only much later did I begin to write about truly historical persons, those who had lived and breathed and cried and laughed in a particular place, at a particular time.

Historical fiction and legends, though, can feature people who lived in a known time and place, as well as purely made-up characters. Think of George Washington and the cherry tree as one legend that teaches a lesson, but which our first president never lived! The presence of real people adds verisimilitude, a big word that simply means a sense of reality. But writers of legends and of historical fiction do not always stick to the facts about these real people, times, or places. The trick for a reader, when this occurs, is to distinguish between fantasy and fact. It is especially important to do this when reading the delightful nineteenth-century work *Legends of Le Détroit* by **Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin**, originally published in Detroit by Thorndike Nourse in 1884 and illustrated by Miss Isabella Stewart. Not many people know that Gale Research Company republished Hamlin's book in Detroit in 1977,¹ giving the "legends" a new audience almost 100 years after they had originally appeared.

Marie Caroline Watson Hamlin preserved French, French-Canadian, and Indian lore in her book. A similar attempt to preserve these aspects of the French-Canadian past was taking place in the nineteenth century in Canada, along with new works of traditional history. Some readers, however, when they see a recognizable name or event from the history of Early Detroit in Hamlin's book, have been bound and determined to believe every word of her legends as absolute truth. What I am suggesting in this article is that it is a mistake to accept at face value Hamlin's linking of certain precise historical persons present in Detroit to the specific legends she spins. One example is Hamlin's legend entitled "Francois and Barbe," said to take place sometime after 1710, the only date mentioned.²

The story's framework is simple. A wife and mother, with her young children, on a dark and stormy night, wolves howling outside, is afraid because her husband has not yet returned from an expedition. To calm herself and her babes, she narrates old Indian stories that "explain" some natural phenomena: the dispute between the east and west wind that resulted in the seven-year pattern of water levels on the Detroit River and the connection between disobedient children and the "June flies" that invade the Detroit area each spring, only to be crushed underfoot. But her husband does not return. Influenced, she guesses, by the tales she has told her children, she begins to hear a voice calling to her among the dogs baying in the night. The voice tells her to go to her husband. Bravely, she leaves her cabin and eventually finds him trapped under a fallen tree. His friend has died. Soldiers from the fort rescue her husband, and he

¹ The Gale Research publisher in 1977 was Frederick Ruffner. I had one of his sons as a student at Grosse Pointe South High School. The book has also been translated into French: Watson Hamlin, Marie Caroline, *Legends of le Détroit*, Detroit, Thorndike Nourse, 1884; traduction française, Richard Ramsay, *Le Détroit des légendes*, Sudbury, Société Historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1991.

² The tale begins on page 49 (69 of 344 of the 1884 Adobe digital version of her book that I have. This version is available for download on openlibrary.org at <http://archive.org/stream/legendsofledtr00hamluoft#page/48/mode/2up>

exclaims that he had begged the spirit of his fallen companion to go to his wife to get help, an eerie explanation of the “voice” the wife heard.

Now, a moving and emotional tale like this could have anyone's name attached to it: a fictional name, like those found in fairy tales (Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty [*La Belle au Bois Dormant*, the beautiful woman sleeping in the woods]) or a real name from the history of Early Detroit. Hamlin chose to use historical names to provide verisimilitude, a connection to real *habitants* of Le Détroit. And that is where the “history” essentially ends. Let's see why this is so. I will quote some of the actual passages and insert, at certain points, the Latin word *sic* in brackets, [*sic*], and a number. “*Sic*” simply means that the word or words are as written but have a perceived error. Other words or comments in square brackets, [], are my addition. Here is the beginning of the legend.

FRANCOIS AND BARBE

A Legend of the Habitants

IT WAS in the early days of the colony that Barbe Loisel sat alone with her [*sic 1*] little children in the rude settler's cabin on the banks of the Detroit [*sic 2*]. Without raged the fierce winter's blast. In the huge fireplace the flames danced merrily above the hickory logs, and the iron crane held the steaming pot-au-feu. She was waiting for her husband's return from a distant expedition, whither he had been sent by de la Forest, Commandant of Fort Pontchartrain. It was Francois Fafard, dit Delorme, a noted interpreter. Theirs had been among the first marriages recorded in the register of the little church of Ste. Anne, and their signatures [*sic 3*], with their quaint characters, are still to be seen to-day. She had been the widow of Francois Gantier, Sieur de la Yallee Ranee [*sic 4*], a French officer of high rank, who was killed [*sic 5*] in 1710. Her youth [*sic 6*], beauty and unfortunate condition appealed to the manly heart of Delorme, who won her, and his strong arm shielded her from many dangers inseparable from a frontier life. To-night he had promised to return, and she knew it could only be an insurmountable obstacle that could cause him to break his word.

The blood-curdling howling of wolves were doleful symphonies to ears strained to catch the first sound of familiar footsteps....

Thus, the scene is set and the major characters introduced. These are my comments to correct *sics 1, 4, and 6*: **Barbe Loisel** had no known children from her three marriages. She was baptized 30 August 1663, Montréal; (1) married Pierre Roussel, 26 October 1676, Montréal, at age 13; (2) married **François Legantier, sieur de la Vallée et de Rané** [*sic 4*, correction of spelling], 28 November 1689, Montréal, at age 36; (3) married **François Fafard dit Delorme**, 30 December 1713, Détroit, at age 50.³ If Barb Loisel had no known children and married for the third time at the age of 50, she cannot be the woman comforting her “little children [*sic 1*]” and would definitely not be a woman whose “youth [*sic 6*] ... appealed to the manly heart of Delorme.” Marie Magdelaine Jobin, wife of François Fafard *dit* Delorme, interpreter of the *Stauois* [Ottawas] and a *habitant* of Fort Pontchartrain, had died at about 45 years old, buried 29 January 1711, in the cemetery of the fort. There were young children from Delorme's first marriage living at the time of his remarriage, but they were not the children of Barbe Loisel; and Delorme had waited almost three years to take a second wife. More evidence that Barb Loisel did not have any children of her own is reinforced by this detail from their marriage contract written at the fort on 27 October 1713, three days before their marriage before a representative of the Church.

Item the said future spouse Delorme consents and intends that the said future spouse *dame*

³ All events are verifiable in Jetté and on PRDH and, for the Fort Pontchartrain records, on printouts of the originals.

Deranée, in case that God disposes of him and he dies first, will retain, in addition to the 400 *livres* [in property that she brought and contributed to their community property], the part of a child from their said community property.⁴

Thus, whatever property the two of them accumulated together would belong solely to Barbe Loisel after Delorme's death, there being little chance that she would bear a child after the age of 50, when she had had given birth to none so far. Ordinarily, half of the community property went to the child or children born of the marriage and half to the surviving spouse. Delorme would have already seen to the inheritance of his children by deceased Madeleine Jobin from the community property held by them at her death, with all children inheriting equally, male and female. There are other details in the contract, such as that "the said Delorme declares he does not know how to sign"; but "barbe Loisel" did sign the original of the contract. And this brings me to *sic 3*: Hamlin affirms that "their signatures, with their quaint characters, are still to be seen today." François Fafard *dit* Delorme, although a valued interpreter of the Ottawa language, could not sign his name; Barbe Loisel could and did sign many religious records and legal documents too numerous to be listed here. She was not necessarily just the "unfortunate" woman Hamlin depicted as one who needed "the strong arm" of Delorme to rescue and protect her but, in fact, an active business woman with assets of her own.

The legend includes *sic 5*, that Barbe Loisel's second husband "was killed". There is no evidence that François Legantier, *sieur* de la Vallée et de Rané, left this earth because of anything but a natural death. Identified as a lieutenant, he died 13 November 1710, and was buried in the cemetery, having had time to receive, with the "sentiments of a True Christian," the sacraments of Penance (Confession), Eucharist (Holy Communion), and Extreme Unction (Last Rites), as stated on his burial record. Making him a victim of violence enhances the aura of peril that Hamlin evokes for the "frontier" she imagines.

One final correction: "the rude settler's cabin on the banks of the Detroit" [*sic 2*] is another error because the only dwellings at the time of Commandant François de LaForest (he died in 1714) were inside of Fort Pontchartrain. Houses outside of the fort would not be erected for many years.

Hamlin's legends, all of them, are not directly connected to any living or dead persons, especially not to any *habitants* of Early Detroit. They are universal stories with wide application to many people. I find the personal details and the physical and legal environment of François Fafard *dit* Delorme and Barbe Loisel, as well as the indication of the strong religion of her first husband, as fascinating as the old legend that concludes the story: the belief, preserved among Indian Nations and among the French and passed on by Hamlin, that affirms that deceased spirits – in some unknown, sometimes other-worldly way – can communicate with the living. This is a legend I have heard in my lifetime from my French-Canadian parents. This belief was to them – and it is to me – a source of comfort to sense it is possible, if only in imagination, to receive such messages. I have embraced these messengers when they came to me, I readily admit.

And I will never be tempted to believe, for even one second (will I?), that my ancestor **Catherine Dorbelle** could possibly have served as the model for the French fairy tale *La Belle au Bois Dormant*, Sleeping Beauty,⁵ although her name seems to suggest it, doesn't it? She sleeps beautifully (*Elle dort belle*, with a silent /t/ in the word *dort*). Of course, I won't ...

⁴ Deposited with the notary Adhémar in Montreal 17 January 1714. Photocopy of the contract.

⁵ Catherine Dorbelle was the wife of Michel Voydy / Vedie; they are parents of Jeanne Voydie / Vedie, from Paroisse de St-Germain, Diocese d'Anger, who married Jean Dumet / Demers 9 November 1654, Montréal, PRDH couple #47202. Catherine never traveled to New France. Sleeping Beauty was published by the French author Charles Perrault *circa* 1697.