

**Review of Carl J. Ekberg and Sharon K. Person,
*St. Louis Rising: The French Regime of Louis St. Ange de Bellerive***

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Every once in a while, a genealogist, an independent scholar, or a historian “upsets the applecart,” so to speak, by doing original research that challenges the perceived wisdom of published sources about an individual, an event, a place, or a period in history.¹ **Carl J. Ekberg** and **Sharon K. Person**, in *St. Louis Rising: The French Regime of Louis St. Ange de Bellerive*,² succeed splendidly in disrupting the status quo and setting the record straight about influences that resulted in the founding of St. Louis, Missouri. Challenges like this are not always readily accepted, but, as Gilles Havard has written, “Error and change are part and parcel of the historian’s craft.”³ The reviewer on the publisher's page gives this description:

Drawing on a wealth of new source materials, Ekberg and Person reexamine the complexities of politics, Indian affairs, marriage customs, slavery, the role of women, and material culture that characterized the 1760s. Their alternative version of the oft-told tale of St. Louis's founding places the event within the context of Illinois Country society.⁴

What this review and other reviews I have seen do not say is that the Illinois Country society that developed on the Mississippi River was forged in the mother colony on the St. Lawrence River in the society of New France, not in France, a badly needed re-vision of the founding culture of St. Louis.

After an Introduction that convincingly examines the facts “Beyond the Laclède – Chouteau Legend,” the “traditional” founding story, the book is divided into two main parts: “Part I. St. Ange de Bellerive and the Illinois Country” and “Part II. Contours of Village Life.” A Conclusion is titled “St. Louis and the Wider World,” followed by Appendix A, “St. Louis Counts,” which presents the 1766 census preceded by a discussion of the census itself. I was particularly interested in this observation.

In the Illinois Country, widows were considered heads of households, and the May 1766 census confirms this for St. Louis. The presence of such matriarchs dramatically alters traditional accounts of early St. Louis, which have generally focused only on Madame Chouteau.⁵

The “matriarchs” are named and precious details given about their lives. This emphasis on individuals and families is a welcome feature throughout the book, enabling readers to see day to day lives in the settlements on the Mississippi River. Included among the families of interest to relatives in the modern-day Detroit River Region is that of **Louis Deshêtres** and his wife, **Thérèse Damours de Louvières**, daughter of **Marie Josèphe de Tonty**,⁶ early residents of St. Louis. Appendix B is the Indian Slave Census of 1770.

¹ We in the FCHSM are guilty of doing this “upsetting” of conventional wisdom concerning the early years of Detroit. See our website at <http://habitantheritage.org>

² Carl J. Ekberg and Sharon K. Person, *St. Louis Rising: The French Regime of Louis St. Ange de Bellerive* (University of Illinois Press; 1st Edition edition {March 30, 2015} and April 2015).

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

⁴ Review at <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/53tkw6ps9780252038976.html>

⁵ Ekberg and Person, 229. Similarly, the traditional accounts of the founding of Fort Pontchartrain / Detroit tend to mention only Madame Cadillac!

⁶ The authors graciously cite FCHSM member Loraine DiCerbo's research on the Deshêtres family that can be read at the url [below](#). Also graciously acknowledged for their original research cited in the book are FCHSM's Gail Moreau-DesHarnais, Diane Wolford Sheppard, and Suzanne Boivin Sommerville. We thank the authors.

All of Part I is fascinating reading as it presents the history of the area from the first arrival of the French on the Mississippi, with its main focus on the lives of **Robert Grotton de St. Ange**, his wife, and his sons, especially **Louis Grotton de St. Ange and de Bellerive**. Part I, Chapter 1, "Fort d'Orléans and the Grotton-St. Ange Family," narrates the story of the voyage up the Missouri River Valley in 1714 by **Étienne Veniard de Bourgmont**⁷ and his later founding of Fort d'Orléans in 1723. Robert Grotton de St. Ange served there with his second wife, **Élisabeth Chorel de St. Romain**. I do not know how you imagine life in the mid-1720s in such a remote outpost of New France, but documents recently discovered allow the authors to provide this description:

[Robert] lived there as lord and master of the manor. If Élisabeth wore fancy French clothes [described earlier], Robert washed down his bison steak or short ribs with red wine transported from France. Indian slaves from western tribes served Élisabeth and Robert as domestic servants. ... [F]our thousand miles away [from Robert's native France] ... he was living like [an aristocrat] ... and his sons Pierre and Louis were stationed there as well.⁸

Chapter 2 of Part I presents "The Rise of Louis St. Ange de Bellerive" with equally surprising and significant details from the primary document manuscripts instead of from the secondary sources that have been considered authoritative until now. Most importantly, the authors treat individuals and families with great humanity and respect, not using them solely as representing proof to demonstrate a pre-ordained thesis.

"The Coutume de Paris Rules," Chapter 7 in Part II, is particularly valuable in fleshing out the lives of individuals and families. Not just a description of the legal system that had been established since 1663 in New France, this chapter mentions specific and ordinary people "going about marrying, buying and selling property, and making arrangements for old age and death."⁹ That this society that became St. Louis followed the Custom of Paris is another aspect that marks it as a descendant of New France, not France, which at that time could have been governed by several different "customs". Women, especially, profited from this legal system.

I can touch on only a few wonderful aspects of this book in such a short review, but not least of its qualities is its writing style. I found myself underlining or starring passages that impressed me. Although the authors rarely indulge in speculation, this passage (avowedly a guess) rang true to me.

It is entirely plausible that *Louis* St. Ange de Bellerive, commandant of Upper Louisiana, named the new outpost after his patron saint, St. Louis (King Louis IX), and that he did so in the summer of 1765.¹⁰

Readers will profit from spending time in careful examination of the many maps, plans, and illustrations (some of them of original manuscripts), as well as the center section of color plates, all chosen to complement the text. Thank you, Carl Ekberg and Sharon Person, for writing this important book. One reading of it has not been enough for me! I will return to it again and again.

http://habitantheritage.org/french-canadian_resources/individuals_or_families

⁷ Étienne Veniard de Bourgmont served as temporary commandant at Fort Pontchartrain / Detroit from early 1706 until Cadillac's return in August 1706 with the large convoy of that year.

⁸ Ekberg and Person, 25.

⁹ Ekberg and Person, 130-131.

¹⁰ Ekberg and Person, last sentence of Part I, 108. You can also order from Amazon; a Kindle Edition is available.

<http://www.amazon.com/>