



ROBITAILLES IN AMERICA #2

*Louis Robitaille,
orfèvre*



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Introduction

This is the second in a planned series of historical papers about Robitailles who left Canada and came to the United States. **Louis Robitaille**, *orfèvre*, (etymologically this means goldsmith, but the term has come to also include silversmith) is the subject of this research. I first learned of Louis during a visit to the Detroit Public Library's historical research room, referred to as the Burton Historical Collection, in the fall of 2011. The collection was founded upon the private library of **Clarence M. Burton**, who donated his rich collection of historical documents from the early days of Detroit to the library in 1915.

Having read about Louis and his trade, I became interested filling in the gaps in his life story. Most of the previously written material about Louis focuses principally on his silverwork. None of these articles include a complete story about the man, his family or his life. Attempting to complete his story has become the most challenging historical research project I have done to date. While a significant number of previously unknown details have been added, several key points about Louis remain unknown at this time and are the subject of additional personal research.

This paper describes Louis Robitaille's life, his family, and his known silverwork. We begin with his early life in Québec; then move to Detroit; followed by a brief return to Québec, then on to Sainte-Geneviève in what had been known as "Le Pays des Illinois" (Illinois Country) or French Illinois, and finally end in Natchez, Mississippi. The conclusion provides a summary on Louis and his wife Louise Munro and a brief description of remaining research items.

Québec, 1768 ~1793

By 1768, the Robitaille family had been in Canada for nearly 100 years. Four generations had been born since the brothers Jean, Pierre, and Nicolas, left Pas de Calais, France, for *Nouvelle France*, and the later immigration of their brother, Philippe Robitaille from France to Montréal. The Seven Years War (also known as the French and Indian War), had run its course, ending with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, and England had won North America.

Silversmiths of French ancestry had been practicing their trade since 1654 in Québec and passing on the skills of their trade to apprentices. The British victory brought additional skilled silver and goldsmiths to Canada and also had opened trade with the British colonies to the South.¹

On 5 May 1768² **Pierre Robitaille** and **Marie Geneviève Parent** added twins to their growing family with the births of Louis and his sister, Françoise. They were baptized the same day in a dual baptism at *Notre-Dame-de-l'Annonciation* in L'Ancienne-Lorette, Québec³. Pierre and Marie Genevieve would eventually raise ten children. Of these, Louis's twin sister Françoise, and another sister, Marie Louise, would die young.

We know little about Louis's childhood but an event important to his future occurred on 25 August 1777 when his elder sister, Marie Geneviève, married **Jean Nicolas Amiot**⁴, son of **Jean Baptiste Amiot** and **Marie-Louise Vincent Chrestien**. The Amiot family lived in Québec and had four sons who were all working silversmiths: Jean-Nicolas the eldest, Jean-Joseph, Laurent and Augustin.⁵

Pedigree chart of Louis Robitaille, *orfèvre*

	Name	Mariage	Spouse
1	Pierre Robitaille	1675-05-05 Québec	Marie Maufait
2	André Robitaille	1706-01-19 L'Ancienne-Lorette	Marguerite Hamel
3	Pierre Robitaille	1732-01-15 L'Ancienne-Lorette	Marie Geneviève Jourdain
4	Pierre Robitaille	1757-11-07 Québec	Marie Geneviève Parent
5	Louis Robitaille	1789-04-21	Louise Munro

Apprenticeship was an important means by which to learn a skilled trade in *Nouvelle France* and it was common in the silversmith trade. Apprenticeship indentures were sometimes used to document these relationships and they were recorded by the regional notaries.⁶ While I have not found any written evidence of such a formalized apprenticeship, it is believed that Louis Robitaille learned his trade from his brother-in-law, Jean Nicolas Amiot. Laurent Amiot is also believed to have done his apprenticeship, which typically began by age 16, under his eldest brother. Since Laurent and Louis Robitaille were nearly the same age, they may have both been understudies of Jean Nicolas at the same time. Of the Amiot brothers, Laurent was the only one of his family known to have completed additional formal study of his trade in France. Following his French training, Laurent returned to Québec and became a very highly acclaimed silversmith.⁷ Meanwhile, Louis Robitaille remained in Québec.

Sometime prior to April of 1789, Louis Robitaille met **Louise Munro**. Louise was the daughter of **Georges Munro**, a Catholic from Fowlis, Scotland, and **Louise Judith Lacroix**.⁸ Louise was born 13 April 1771 and baptized the same day at *Notre-Dame-de-Québec* as Louise Madeleine Munro.⁹ Louise's parents both died in 1777; Georges in March, and Louise in July, leaving Louise and her three sibling's orphaned minors.¹⁰ Louise's grandmother, **Marie Magdelaine Dontaille**, *veuve* (widow) of **Hubert-Joseph Lacroix**, appointed her son, **Joseph Hubert Lacroix**, to be the guardian of Louise and her siblings.¹¹ On 19 August 1777, there was a *procès-verbal*, (oral testimony), signed by *notaire* (notary) **Jean Antoine Panet**, to inventory and sell the property of Louise's parents. After the sale, Magdelaine Dontaille signed the receipt stating she received the proceeds amounting to 6,820 *livres* (a unit of French currency).¹²

On 16 April 1789, Louis Robitaille and Louise Munro made their marriage contract before *notaire* **Pierre Louis Descheneaux**.¹³ It was signed by Louis, who added *orfèvre* (silversmith) after his name; Louise, who signed as Madelaine Louise François Munro; grandparents of both families; Louis's parents; siblings of both families; and last, but not least, Jean Nicolas and Laurent Amiot. Louis and Louise were married on 21 April 1789 at *Notre-Dame-de-Québec*.¹⁴

Louis is recorded as acting on behalf of Madame Lacroix, (the widow Dontaille); on 4 March 1790 in the *bail* (rental), of a property at 14 *rue Saint-Jean* in Québec City. The renter is **Edward Conway**, a master blacksmith. In the *bail*, Louis is identified as a *Marchand Orfèvre*, (merchant silversmith) living at "*La Place du Marché*".¹⁵

Later in 1790, Louis Robitaille was listed in the "Directory for the City and Suburbs of Québec" as an *orfèvre* residing at 3 *rue sous le Fort*. Laurent Amiot was also listed in the same directory as a silversmith located at 2 *rue de la Montagne*.¹⁶ Another source, which does not specify the date, states that **James Orkney**, a clock and watch maker, merchant, goldsmith and silversmith, also ran a prosperous business at 13 *rue de la Montagne*. Orkney's next-door neighbor at this time was Louis Robitaille. Laurent Amiot, and **Michel Forton**, another Québec silversmith, lived a few doors away on the same street.¹⁷ From this we can see that Louis was in close proximity to a number of highly skilled artisans and probably knew all of them.

On 12 May 1790, Louis Robitaille engaged **Paul Morin** in an *alloué*, (accord), for apprenticeship for a period of six years. *Notaire* J. Planté witnessed the *alloué*.¹⁸ The accord was terminated by mutual agreement in 1791. It is interesting to note that Paul Morin was subsequently apprenticed in 1792 to Laurent Amiot.¹⁹

Pedigree Chart of Louise Munro

	Name	Mariage	Spouse
1	Louise Munro	1789-04-21	Louis Robitaille
2	Georges Munro (born in Scotland)	1770-08-24 Québec	Louise Judith Lacroix
3	George Munro	Before 1751-12-31 Unknown	Marie Vial

Maternal side

	Nom	Mariage	Époux
3	Hubert Joseph Lacroix (born in Belgium)	1732-02-04 Québec	Marie Magdelaine Dontaille (Born in Paris)
4	Dominique Lacroix	Before 1703-01-24	Catherine Clement

While getting started in his career, Louis and his wife Louise were also starting a family. On 11 July 1790, their first child, Louise Euphémie, was born in Québec. She was baptized the same day at *Notre-Dame-de-Québec*. Their second child, Judith Geneviève, was born 25 August 1791 and also baptized at the same church.²⁰

On 4 March 1792, Louis Robitaille entered an *accord pour bail*, (rental agreement) with **Catherine Borneuf** a resident of Québec, to lease a two-story stone property with four apartments, for a period of three years commencing 1 May. On 17 August of the same year, the rental agreement was cancelled by a *quittance* (discharge); annex No 359, to the rental agreement. It appears to have released the principals of the agreement from further obligation under the *accord pour bail*.²¹

By August of 1792, according to a census of the Parish of Notre-Dame-de-Québec, which, at that time, essentially covered all of Québec City and its environs, we see that Louis Robitaille, *orfèvre*, is still living at 12 *rue de la Montagne*, next door to James Orkney the clockmaker. The census taker noted that there were five parishioners living at the address, three of whom were communians.²²

An *Obligation* (recognizance) was recorded on 15 October 1792, concerning the loan of 400 *livres*, 20 *sous*, by **Monsieur Pierre Louis Deschesnaux, fils** (son), to Louis Robitaille.²³ This debt may have been the reason for Louis selling jewelry and silversmith's supplies, "all at low prices" as shown in [Figure 1](#).²⁴

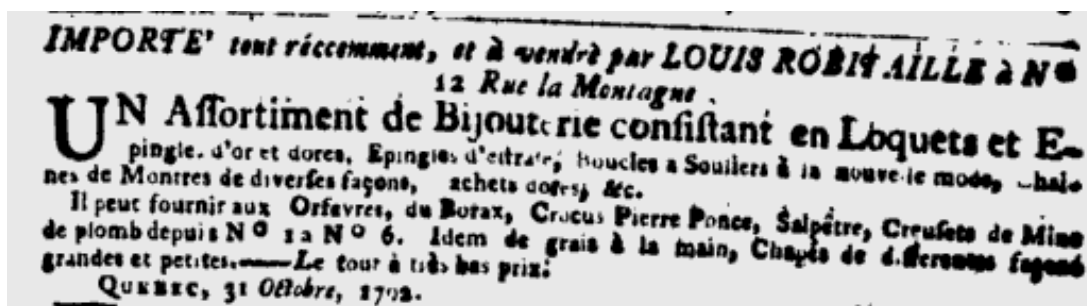


Figure 1- Sale advertisement
Gazette de Québec, 25 October 1792

Image courtesy of Bibliothèque de l'Université Laval and Google News Archive Search

Two documents in *notaire* Joseph Planté's records were executed consecutively on 25 April 1793. The first was a *quittance*, (discharge), where Louis and his 21-year-old wife Louise, terminated the arrangement made by Madeleine Dontaille, her grandmother, which made her son, Joseph Hubert Lacroix Louise's guardian. The remaining financial matters were agreed to be settled amicably.²⁵ The second is a *vente*, (sale), where Louis and Louise purchased a property from Lacroix. The language in the *vente*'s opening section on the part of Lacroix is both pointed and condescending, suggesting that there were bad feelings between the two parties. Under the terms of the *vente*, the Robitailles agreed to pay Lacroix 7,200 *livres*, 20 *sous* for a property on *rue de la Montagne*, bordering *rue Notre Dame*. The terms of the *vente* state a payment of 1200 *livres* was to be made each year, with the first payment due on

31 May of 1793. The text of the *vente* also states that Lacroix has a “special privilege” with respect to the property, that of *bailleur de fond* (money lender). Louis and Louise offered all their current and future property as security.²⁶

Although a detailed review of birth records for Québec in PRDH, Family Search, and Ancestry, does not show a birth attributed to Louis and Louise during this period. Based on facts that will be presented later in this paper, it seems likely that Louise must have been pregnant with their third child, and first son, Louis, sometime during late 1792 or early 1793.

There are few known surviving examples of silver produced by Louis Robitaille while he was in Québec. The *Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec* holds a silver paper cutter in their permanent collection vault that is attributed to Louis. It is believed to have been made between 1790 and 1800.²⁷ The object is shaped like a double-edged sword and is quite unlike any of the other surviving known works by Louis. It does bear a “LR” maker’s mark, somewhat similar to those seen on his later marks, except it is in an oval cartouche instead of the more typical rectangular one. The second item held by the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA) is a silver tablespoon, made by Louis for the **Jean Phillippe** family originally from Québec, who moved to Detroit and built a house and store in 1836 at the corner of Orleans and Atwater Streets. The spoon was donated to the DIA by Mr. & Mrs. **James Keene**.²⁸ The spoon, shown in [Figure 2](#), is exhibited in the Department of American Art’s exhibit hall at the DIA. The maker’s marks on the reverse side of the spoon include two “L R” marks, each in a rectangular cartouche, and one leftward facing rampant lion pseudo-mark, an early marking found in silverware made in Canada.

It seems reasonable to conclude from the existing records that Louis was having difficulty in finding work in Québec where there was significant competition in his trade. With his third child arriving soon, he had to look elsewhere for employment opportunities to support his family. While we cannot know what he was thinking at the time, it seems likely he would seek a location where French was spoken; where there was sufficient population of means who could afford to commission a silversmith; and where lodging and food would be available at a reasonable cost. Montréal would be no better than Québec with respect to competition in his trade and the associated cost of living. It would have to be a more remote location. Detroit was a former French settlement, with many former French Canadians still there in 1793. It is accessible by water and was an active center in the fur trade with Native Americans. Trade silver, a bartering commodity used in the fur trade business, was relatively easy for a skilled silversmith to make.

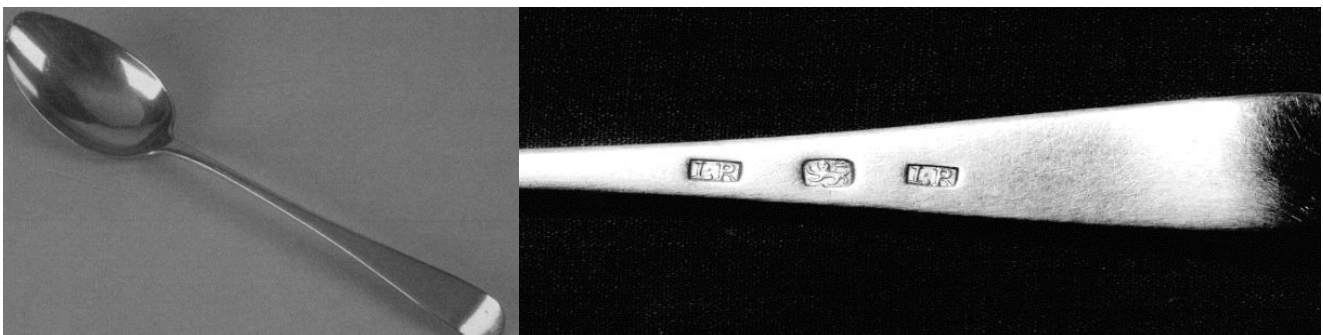


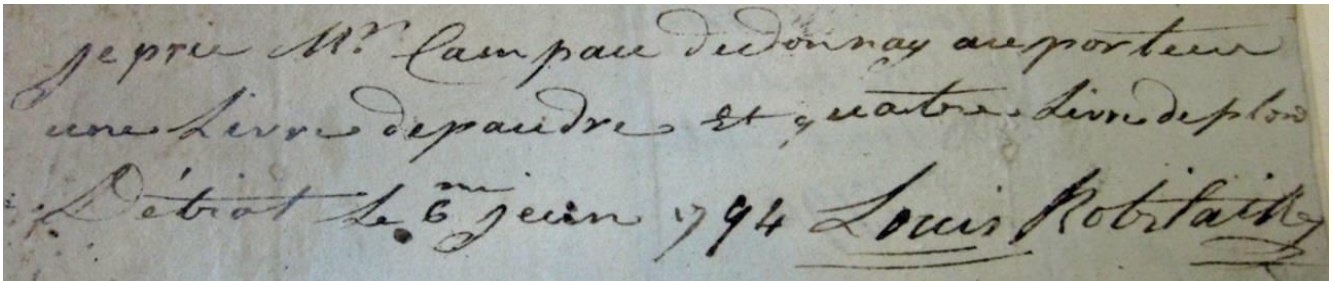
Figure 2- LR Spoon top view & reverse view showing two maker’s marks.
Courtesy of Detroit Institute of Art (DIA)

Detroit, ~ 1793 – 1796

There are several written works which include information about Louis Robitaille that state he was in Detroit from 1792-1799. One is a Master's Thesis written in 1969.²⁹ **Walter Simmons** states that Louis left Québec in 1792, but this seems unlikely because Louis and Louise were in Québec as late as 25 of April 1793 when they signed the *quittance* and *vente* documents before the *notaire*. I suspect they travelled later in 1793, once the weather improved.

The first original documentary evidence I found of Louis's presence in Detroit, dated 1 May 1794, is a sacramental record from Sainte-Anne-de-Detroit Church where Louis and his wife acted as *parrains* (god parents) at the baptism of **François Gouin**, son of François Gouin and **Angélique Godet**.³⁰

A second work, by **Ross Allan C. Fox**, formerly with the DIA, cites two commercial documents as evidence demonstrating that Louis and his wife lived in Detroit.³¹ The first is an order shown in [Figure 3](#), dated 6 June 1794 from Louis Robitaille to **Joseph Campau**, a Detroit merchant, for a *livre* of gun powder and *quatre livres* ("livre" is also used as a unit of weight = 1.08 English pounds) of lead.³²

A photograph of a handwritten document in French. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Je prie M^r Campau de donner au porteur une livre de poudre et quatre livres de plomb". Below this, it says "Detroit le 6 juin 1794" followed by a signature that appears to be "Louis Robitaille".

*Figure 3- Order for powder and lead
Campeau Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit, Michigan*

The next reference by Fox is a 1794 entry in the business papers of John Askin, a fur trader, merchant, and land speculator in Detroit, where Louis Robitaille is mentioned by name as a silversmith.³³

While in Detroit, Louis and Louise had their fourth child, Victoire. She was born 22 September 1795 and baptized 20 October at Sainte Anne de Detroit.³⁴

In a third work, **John E. Langdon** mentions Louis Robitaille, and also his daughter Victoire's birth, but provides no mention of Louis's time in Detroit or subsequent locations.³⁵

To date, I have found no primary evidence that demonstrates Louis Robitaille produced trade silver. Researching this specific point, I had private conversations and correspondence with **Maurice Meslans**, an expert on old silver of the Mississippi River Valley, who has worked with the Missouri Historical Society on related matters and is also familiar with Louis Robitaille's work. Meslans said it is likely that in addition to making commissioned works of silver, Louis

also produced trade silver since this was frequently the case with silversmiths of this era, but that at least to date, no examples of trade silver bearing Louis's trade mark are known to exist.³⁶

Given the lack of primary documents to prove otherwise, it is difficult to say if the relocation to Detroit was beneficial for Louis and his family or not. I have been unable to find any record of commissions or sales of silver works attributable to Louis while he was in Detroit. Perhaps events back in Québec necessitated their return, but regardless of the reason(s), sometime after the birth of their daughter Victoire and before April of 1796, Louis and his family returned to Québec.

Québec, 1796

While Louis and Louise were in Detroit, events were underway back in Québec which would have an impact on them. On 18 March 1794 a *Requête et Déclaration du Demandeur* (Request and Declaration of Order) was filed by Joseph Hubert Lacroix, Écuyer (Squire), in the Court of Common Pleas in Québec City. The claim was against Louis Robitaille and his wife for non-payment of the mortgage on the house they bought from him.³⁷ As previously mentioned, the first payment had been due on 31 May 1793, and according to Lacroix in his court claim, it had not been paid. A summons was issued for Louis and Louise on this matter, but they had not responded as they were in Detroit, not Québec.

On 21 April 1796 the *Gazette de Québec* newspaper ran an article, shown in [Figure 4](#), announcing the court-ordered sale of Louis and Louise's property on *rue de la Montagne*.³⁸ It was printed in both French and English. The legal paperwork filed by Lacroix does not bear signatures by Louis or Louise Robitaille, nor does it record the outcome of the sale. It is likely at least one of them returned to Québec later in the year, because on 17 September 1796 their daughter Victoire died at age 13 months and was buried at the *Paroisse de Saint-Joseph-de-Pointe-Lévis*, cemetery across the Saint Lawrence River from Québec City.³⁹ No further records of Louis and Louise Robitaille were found in the Québec Archives.

DISTRICT OF }
QUEBEC, 6 } BY virtue of a writ of execution issued out of His Ma-
and for said District, at the suit of Joseph Hubert La Croix Esquire against
the property moveable and immoveable of Louis Robitaille goldsmith and
Louise Monro his wife, to me directed, I have seized and taken in execu-
tion as belonging to the said Louis Robitaille and his wife, a lot of ground
situated in the city of Quebec, in Mountain Street, of eighteen feet in front
by seventy three feet in depth extending from said Mountain Street to Notre
Dame Street; joining on the north east side to the lot of Mr. Charles Cou-
ture called Bellerive, and on the south west side to that of Mr. François Blet;
on which lot of ground are two houses erected, viz. the one in Notre Dame
Street built in wood, and the other a stone house of one story high in Moun-
tain Street. Now I do hereby give notice that the said lot and buildings
will be sold and adjudged to the last and highest bidder in the Court House
in the City of Quebec on Thursday the first day of September next, at ele-
ven o'clock in the forenoon, at which time and place the conditions of sale
will be made known by
JA : SHEPHERD, Sheriff.

All persons having claims on the lot of ground and buildings above de-
scribed, whether by mortgage or other right or incumbrance, are hereby ad-
vertised to give notice thereof in writing to the said Sheriff at his office in
Quebec, before the day of sale.

Quebec, 21st April, 1796.

Figure 4- Court Ordered Sale of Residence

Gazette de Québec, 21 April 1796

Image courtesy of Bibliothèque de l'Université Laval and Google News Archive Search

Sainte-Geneviève, 1797 – 1804

By 1795, Sainte-Geneviève, located near Kaskaskia, but on the western shore of the Mississippi River in the present State of Missouri, was a village of approximately 537 people. Initially discovered and settled by the French and considered part of “French Illinois,” the early population consisted principally of settlers who migrated from New Orleans and New France. They were drawn by deposits of salt, lead, abundant game, and rich, fertile, soil.⁴⁰

By the late 1700s, the ownership of New France and French Illinois had changed hands. In 1763, Britain became the owner of what was previously New France, by winning the French and Indian War. The ownership story becomes more complex with the lands west of the Mississippi and the rebellion of the American Colonies against Britain. The western side of the Mississippi was Spanish until 1800, and then reverted back to France until March of 1804. A full description of this period and its impact on Sainte-Geneviève and Natchez is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is not known exactly when Louis Robitaille first arrived in Sainte-Geneviève. However, **Carl Ekberg** states that by the mid-1790s, both Louis Robitaille and another Canadian silversmith, **Louis Coyteux**, from Montréal, were practicing in Sainte-Geneviève.⁴¹ Coyteux came to Sainte-Geneviève from Cape Girardeau, approximately 60 miles south of Sainte-Geneviève, having worked there since 1792 with **Louis Lorimier**, a well-known individual in the Indian fur trade business who is considered to have been the founder of Cape Girardeau.⁴²

The first documented evidence I have found of Louis Robitaille’s arrival is dated 18 May 1797 when he rented a house there for a period of one year, from **Jean Baptiste Placette**, for 80 *piastres* (a unit of Spanish currency) per year, payable at 20 *piastres* every three months.⁴³ Ekberg states that the Spanish *piastre* was roughly equivalent to five French *livres*.⁴⁴ On 6 December of the same year, Placette sold Louis the house. It was described as being in the village, on a plot 110 feet long and 69 feet wide, built in the *poteaux en terre* (post in ground) style which was common in this area, with wood floors and shutters and probably two rooms. The agreed price was 85 *piastres* worth of lead (lead was a common form of currency at the time).⁴⁵

On the 1st of January 1798, Louis Robitaille was a *parrain* (god father), again, this time to **Luis Grenot**, son of Luis Grenot and **Geneviève Constan**. The child was baptized by Father **James Maxwell**, *curé*, (parish priest), of the Catholic Church in Sainte-Geneviève.⁴⁶

At the estate sale of the Carmelite *abbé*, (abbot), **Paul de St. Pierre**, former *curé* of the Catholic Church in Sainte-Geneviève, on 25 March 1798, Louis Robitaille purchased a barrel of sugar for the sum of 47 *livres*.⁴⁷

Louis became a *parrain* again, this time at the baptism of **Louis Eliot**, son of Louis Eliot and **Jeanne Porter**. The *marraine* (god mother) was **Julie Vallé**. Father Maxell presided at the service.⁴⁸

On 3 December 1798, Louis sold the same house to Father James Maxwell, *curé*, for 80 *piastres* in cash. Where Louis moved at this point is not known; however, numerous other primary

documents demonstrate that Louis remained active in Sainte-Geneviève and the Mississippi River Valley well past 1798.

One such document is a letter from **Antoine Soulard** of Saint-Louis, surveyor of the Spanish colony of Upper Louisiana, who wrote on 28 May 1798 to **Jean Baptiste Vallé**, in Sainte-Geneviève, seeking guidance on the weight of two spoons, made by Louis Robitaille, and weighed by Soulard in front of Vallé. Presumably the spoons were made of silver and the weight was in question.⁴⁹ In another letter dated 1799, Louis Lorimier wrote to **Louis Largeau**, discussing the need for one or more silversmiths to work in Cape Girardeau making "*argenterie sauvage*" (Indian trade silver). Lorimier wanted Louis Coyteux, but had not heard from him in some time. He further stated that he would take another silversmith, Monsieur **Champagne**, but explained that Champagne lacked the necessary tools. He then stated that Louis Robitaille had the tools and expertise and if both Robitaille and Champagne could agree on the terms, he would hire them both.⁵⁰

At seven o'clock on the morning 19 June 1801, **Don Joseph Pratte**, Interim Commandant of the Post of Sainte-Geneviève, Louis Robitaille and **Andrew Price** found the body of **Jean Gachard**, who died that morning, in the house of **Joseph Bequet**. Gachard was found lying on a straw mattress with his clothes on. An examination followed where it was determined that there were no marks on his body that could have caused his death so the death was recorded as due to natural causes.⁵¹

Louise Robitaille gave birth to their second son, Pierre François, on 10 August of 1801. He was baptized at the Catholic Church in Sainte-Geneviève by Father James Maxwell on 15 August.⁵²

John Price wrote a Petition to *Capitaine* François Vallé on 5 November 1801 stating that Louis Robitaille gave him a *billet* (promissory note) for 41 *piastres* and 4 *livres* on 2 June 1798 and another *billet* for 16 ½ *piastres* on 29 October 1798. Price further stated that he had asked Louis several times for payment, which Louis said he would do, but that he had still not closed out the debt. Price requested that he be paid without delay. In response, Vallé had a discussion with Louis and ordered that he settle the debt with Price without further delay.⁵³

In litigation on 13 November 1802 between Israel Dodge and Guiho de Kerlyan, Louis Robitaille provided testimony during the arbitration proceedings and was credited for one day of his time for attendance.⁵⁴

On 8 May 1803, Louis once again became a *parrain*, this time to **Aurore**, a *négresse* (female Negro), of Monsieur Gibourd. The *marraine* was **Catherine Vallé**.⁵⁵

The next record, dated 24 May 1803, concerns a situation where Louis Robitaille was requested to make a mould for counterfeiting Spanish *piastres* by **Andrew Gibson**, an American. Louis informed François Vallé about the request and as a result, Gibson was jailed in Sainte-Geneviève. Shortly after his jailing, Gibson escaped and went back across the river to American territory.⁵⁶

October of 1803 brought the interesting case of Mr. **William Hickman**. Madame Louise Robitaille, with authorization from Louis, petitioned François Vallé on 8 October for payment of a debt by Mr. Hickman.⁵⁷ In the petition she stated that she would not normally do this but must do so at this time for the sake of their children. Recall that by then, Louis and Louise had four children: Louise Euphémie (13); Judith Geneviève (12); Louis (10); and Pierre-François (2). To make a long story short, Mr. Hickman fell ill at the house of John Price but moved to the Robitailles' home on 2 August on the advice of **Dr. Walter Fenwick**, an American physician from Kentucky who arrived in Sainte-Geneviève in 1797.⁵⁸ Hickman was seriously ill and remained in convalescence at the Robitaille's home until 21 September. Evidently it was a long and serious illness, but Hickman recovered and was reported as being in "*la parfaite santé*" (in perfect health) when he left. To recover her costs, Madame Robitaille presented Hickman with a bill for 48 *piastres* (the total cost based on a daily charge of 1 *piastre* per day). Hickman protested the bill in writing to Vallé as being exorbitant and also disputed the cost of supplies. Vallé in return ordered arbitration.⁵⁹ The outcome of the arbitration was unanimous: on 10 October 1803 Hickman was ordered to pay Louis Robitaille 48 *piastres* for room and board, plus an additional 8 *piastres* for coffee and sugar provided by Monsieur **Pascal**, and, finally, 5 *piastres* for court costs.⁶⁰

The 26th of October 1803, Louis Robitaille signed a receipt for François Vallé that stated the following: "I the undersigned certify and declare having settled with Monsieur Vallé the accounts and orders between us therefore we are *quittes*, (even on all sides) up to the date of this receipt." Louis Robitaille.⁶¹

On a brighter note, on 14 February 1804, Louis attended the marriage of **Vincent Grenier**, native of Québec, son of Vincent Grenier and **Geneviève Dupras**, on one part, and **Marie Burger**, adopted daughter of Louis Coyteux and **Catherine Burger**, native of the Post at Vincennes on the second part.⁶² On the 23rd of July, Louis is listed as a creditor for 16 *livres*, 20 *sous*, at Pierre Blot junior's estate sale.⁶³ The year ended even better when Louis and Louise had their fifth child, Charlotte Zoé on 20 November. She was baptized in Sainte-Geneviève on 30 December by Father James Maxwell, *curé*. The godparents were Euphémie Robitaille, her sister, and **Jean Baptiste Hubardeau**.⁶⁴ This is the last record found for Louis Robitaille and his family in Sainte-Geneviève.

There are two written works, each of which briefly discuss silverwork produced by Louis Robitaille while he lived in the upper Mississippi River Valley. The first of these, by Ruth Hunter Roach, mistakenly attributed one of Louis's works, a soup ladle shown later in this paper, to one Larkin Rutherford.⁶⁵ The second work, by Norman Mack, makes note of the correction on the ladle and credits Louis with making a set of spoons for Monsieur Loisel of Saint Louis.⁶⁶

While living in Sainte-Geneviève, it is known that Louis made

- twelve silver spoons for **Regis Loisel** of Saint Louis, as evidenced by the promissory note of 23 October 1800 shown in [Figure 5](#);⁶⁷
- a silver soup ladle, shown in [Figure 6](#), and a silver sugar bowl, shown in [Figure 7](#), both of which were made for the **Bolduc** family of Sainte-Geneviève;

- a silver drinking cup, shown in [Figure 8](#), made for **Vital Beauvais St-Gemme** of Kaskaskia and later Sainte-Geneviève ⁶⁸ and
- the two spoons mentioned on page 11 of this paper which were referred to in the Soulard letter to Vallé.

Je promets & m'oblige de faire à l'ordre de Mr. Loisel
 une douzaine de Cuillere d'argent en me fournissant
 la matiere, & Cella pour payement Recue de mon
 dit Sr. Loisel, les quel Cuillaires je ferai à son
 goût faitte & parfaite, St. Louis le 23^{me} Octobre 1800
 Louis Robitaille

ST. LOUIS PROMISSORY NOTE PAYABLE IN LABOR
 Je promets & m'oblige de faire à l'ordre de Mr. Loisel une douzaine de Cuillere
 d'argent en me fournissant la matiere, & Cella pour payement Recue de mon dit
 Sr. Loisel, les quel Cuillaires je ferai à son goût faitte & parfaite, St. Louis
 le 23^{me} Octobre 1800. Louis Robitaille
 I promise and obligate myself to make at the request of Mr. Loisel one dozen
 silver spoons on furnishing me the material and this for payment received at
 my request from Sr. Loisel which spoons I will make to his taste complete and
 perfect, St. Louis the 23rd of October, 1800. Louis Robitaille

Figure 5- Promissory note to Sieur Loisel
 Image courtesy of the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society, Saint Louis, Missouri 63105.
 All rights reserved.



Figure 6- Louis Robitaille ladle believed to have been made for the Bolduc family of Sainte-Geneviève. Note the engraved “B” on the handle. The tureen shaped sugar dish is French and was made by Jean Cheret of Bordeaux.

Photograph is courtesy of the Missouri History Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri.



*Figure 7- Louis Robitaille silver sugar bowl made for the Bolduc Family of Sainte-Geneviève.
Photograph is courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery*



*Figure 8- Handled silver drinking cup made by Louis Robitaille
for Vital Beauvais St. Gemme
Photograph courtesy of an anonymous owner.*

Of his work while in Sainte-Geneviève, the sugar bowl is the most impressive of his creations that are known to exist today. According to the original owners of the sugar bowl, the Bolduc family, there was also a cream pitcher that accompanied the sugar dish which survived “until around 1870 when it was melted down.”⁶⁹

The known silverwork made while Louis worked in the Sainte-Geneviève area and upper Mississippi River Valley, has his customary “L·R” maker’s mark in a rectangular cartouche and the word “Illinois” as shown in [Figure 9](#). Recall that the French referred to this area as “*Le Pays des Illinois*”, sometimes also spelled *Illinois* in those days.

It has been said that Louis Robitaille also made a set of six spoons for the Vallé family and an engraved ladle for Julie Beauvais of Kaskaskia.⁷⁰ Additional tableware made by Louis Robitaille, such as fork shown in [Figure 9](#), spoons, and ladles have occasionally appeared in private sales. It is likely Louis made more silverwork than what is shown here while he was in Sainte-Geneviève, but to date, the author has not found substantiating paperwork or illustrations to prove this.



*Figure 9- Louis Robitaille fork bearing “Illinois” marking
Photograph is courtesy of an anonymous private collector*

In March of 1804, Sainte-Geneviève officially became part of America under the terms of the Louisiana Purchase.⁷¹ Americans began to cross the Mississippi and start the settlement of the Midwest. Earlier land claims by the French and Spanish settlers were contested in the courts and in some cases, rejected.⁷² To former French Canadians, the multiple waves of cultural mixing, which began on the east coast of the Mississippi River following the French and Indian War, continued in greater numbers after the conclusion of the American Revolution, and became a large-scale migration following the Louisiana Purchase, must have been a concern. Surely while Louis and his family were in Québec, Detroit, and Sainte-Geneviève, they had been exposed to British and American Colonists and may well have already begun to learn a bit of English themselves; but coming from a French-Canadian culture, they must have experienced some degree of culture shock once the large-scale migration of Americans began.

Natchez, Mississippi, 1805 – 1851

Natchez is located on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River, approximately 920 miles south by riverboat from Sainte-Geneviève, according to a Traveller's Guide of 1866.⁷³ It has a complex history. The first white settlement was a French trading post built in 1714. In August 1716, a military post was built named Fort Rosalie. It stood on the bluffs just above the eastern shore of the Mississippi River where present-day Natchez now stands. Following a period of bad relations between the French settlers and the Natchez Indians, the post was attacked by the Natchez Indians on 29 November 1729, and over 250 French settlers and soldiers were killed. French reprisals followed in 1730. Fort Rosalie was rebuilt as a more robust fortification and remained in French hands until 1763 when the French & Indian War ended. The fort was turned over to the British who renamed it Fort Panmure.⁷⁴ It remained in British hands until 1779 when it was given to the Spanish. Natchez was populated largely by British Loyalists after the French surrendered and Natchez remained a largely Loyalist settlement, albeit under Spanish rule, until the Americans took control of the area following the 1795 Treaty of San Lorenzo (Pickney's Treaty), although it would be many months before the bickering between the United States, Spain and several competing interest groups were finally settled.⁷⁵ On 30 March 1798 U.S. troops took possession of the fort. Congress on 7 April 1798 created the Mississippi Territory.⁷⁶ The many exchanges of territory during this period were a complicated matter but are well explained in a document produced by the Library of Congress.⁷⁷

By the time Louis Robitaille and his family arrived in Natchez, there had been widespread stories circulated for some time that the Mississippi Territory was like the "Garden of Eden", with an unlimited expanse of fertile country and great opportunity for settlers. The first wave of settlement after Spanish departure began in 1798 when the United States Congress organized the Mississippi Territory. It continued until 1819. During this period, Natchez was one of the primary areas of settlement.⁷⁸ In 1817, Mississippi became a state. Large plantations were common in lower Mississippi and cotton was the principal crop. Slave labor was in widespread use throughout the South. By 1830, slaves made up 73% of the population of Adams County, Mississippi⁷⁹.

In the previous residences of Louis, Louise and their family, the Catholic Church maintained reasonably diligent records for births, and the sacraments of baptism, marriage, and burials. These records were almost always recorded in French. In Mississippi, Louisiana and Missouri, Spanish civil and sacramental records are encountered for a period of time. The early records of Adams County Mississippi are incomplete and the recording of names, particularly those other than English, seems to rely heavily on English language equivalents and phonetic spellings due to the previously described transitions in government.

When the Robitaille family arrived in Natchez, in 1806, they found there were no permanent resident priests, and the priests who did come visit, did not do so on a regular basis. The last assigned priest, **Father Lennan**, was instructed by **Bishop Panalver** of New Orleans, to "pack up all the records and holy vessels and vacate Natchez," which he did in March 1798, including selling the property where the priest's house had been. Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore inherited the Natchez district after it became part of the United States, but given its distance from Baltimore, Maryland, Carroll requested Bishop DeBourg of Louisiana to help manage the

Natchez District. On 6 February 1818, the State of Mississippi passed an act of incorporation for the “Catholic Society of Christians in the City of Natchez and Its Vicinity” allowing them to hold legal title to the property Father Lennan had sold. Between 1789 and 1837 Catholics in Natchez did not have a resident pastor for any significant period of time. It was not until 1837 that Natchez was recognized by **Pope Gregory XVI**, who then established the “See of Natchez”. Even with this action, it was four more years before the new Bishop arrived.⁸⁰ On his arrival, Bishop Chance began organizing the new diocese and lead the building of a new cathedral. In the period before the establishment of the new diocese, records show that the Robitaille family used local civil records for births and deaths and on several occasions, travelled to Baton Rouge, or New Orleans, Louisiana where there were established and staffed Catholic Churches.

Louis and Louise Robitaille came to Natchez with four children. While in Natchez, Zelia, their fifth child, was born. The subsections that follow describe significant life events of each of their children.

Judith Geneviève

Judith was Louis and Louise’s second daughter. She married **Jean François Nicholas Dallier**, who seems to have gone by either François or Francis. He was the son of **Nicholas Dallier and Jeanne Rolland**. François was a *boulangier* (baker), and he was a resident of Natchez. Their marriage contract was found in François Dallier’s estate settlement records.⁸¹ The document, dated 8 March 1806, was written in French, and makes specific reference to the *Coutume de Paris* (Custom of Paris). It was accompanied by a notarized English translation, dated 4 August 1820. The signatures and penmanship in the document, shown in [Figure 10](#), are remarkably clear and readable. Judith’s parents, Louis and Louise are present as are her older sister, Euphémie, and her brother, Louis *fils*, (the son of Louis, *orfèvre*). Other notable signatories included **Fernando Claiborne**, an early government official in Natchez and the subsequent Commander of the Mississippi Volunteers; **Philippe Engel**; and F. S. and J. S. Miller. It is worthy of note that the marriage contract changes the order of Judith’s name to Geneviève Judith Robitaille and that she signed the document as Judie Robitaille. Her mother signed as Louise Robitaille and noted on her signature that her maiden name was Munro (*née Munro*).

The Millers signed the wedding contract one above the other. **Francis S. Miller** was a silversmith from Savannah, Georgia, who probably arrived in Natchez in 1804 or 1805 having only recently married in 1802. **John S. Miller** is probably his younger brother, only one day shy of 20 when he signed. He may have accompanied his brother to Natchez or recently arrived, in either case, he was to open his business in the same location as that vacated by his brother, at the end of the month. J. S. stayed and died in Natchez in 1853, whereas F. S. returned to Savannah by 1807, possibly to claim land won in the 1805 lottery of displaced Native Americans. The nature of the relationship with Louis Robitaille is purely speculation. Louis was probably at least a decade senior to Francis, but as far as we know, he did not advertise his business. Whether Louis worked for, or with, the Millers, or was in friendly competition with them, is yet to be discovered.⁸²

François and his family appeared in the 1816 Census, which shows 1 white male over 21, two white males under 21 and one white female over 21 in his household. The 1818 Tax Rolls of Adams County, Mississippi show five people in the household, one white male over 21, three white males under 21 and one white female over 21.⁸³ There are death records for two children, Munro, who died 30 June 1821 at age 4, and Albert, who died on 22 June of 1823 at about age 12, of drowning.⁸⁴ Both of the children died in Natchez. Given the date of his death, it is likely that Munro was buried in the old Church Cemetery in Natchez. Albert is buried in the Natchez City Cemetery. It is not known who the third young male on the census was, or what happened to him. It is possible it could have been that Pierre François Robitaille, who would have been about 17 at the time of the census, lived with his sister Judith Geneviève and her husband for a period of time.



Figure 10- Dallier – Robitaille Marriage Contract
 Image courtesy of Historic Natchez Foundation

There is no record of François Dallier’s death but there are several newspaper advertisements dated 1820 in the Natchez newspaper that announce the estate sale of the deceased François Dallier. The last of these advertisements, states that Judick [sic] Judith Dallier, and Louis Robitaille, [sic] Robitaille, (Judith’s brother) are the named as the administrators for the liquidation of François Dallier’s estate and that the final settlement will be in July 1820.⁸⁵ Louis and Judith and were formally empowered as Administrators by the Orphan’s Court of Adams County,

Mississippi.⁸⁶ The inventory of François Dallier's personal property totaled \$1,035.23.⁸⁷ Given the date of François's death, it is likely he was buried in the old Church Cemetery in Natchez.

Judith died 30 September 1863 at age 75 of debility and is buried in Natchez City Cemetery, Old Catholic section, Plot 1, Lot 9.⁸⁸ Her son, Albert Dallier is buried in the same plot and has a grave stone. There are no grave stones in the cemetery plot for her husband François, her son Munro, or for Judith.

Louise Euphémie

Louise Euphémie was the first of Louis and Louise's daughters and also married in Natchez. A transaction dated 6 October 1808 was found in the Adams County Clerk's Office records. It involves the marriage of Euphemia Robitaille, (note the change from the French form, Euphémie, to the Spanish form, Euphemia), to **Claude William Grivot**.⁸⁹ The original record is handwritten in a clear manner, with perfect spelling of both names, and includes a short entry at the bottom which reads "I do hereby certify that I have given my consent to the above marriage". It is signed by her mother, "Mary Louisa Robitaille". The entry by Louise on her daughter's marriage license was likely made because Louise Euphémie was still a minor, being just three months past her 18th birthday. The permission statement was witnessed by François Dallier. The fact that Louise's mother gave the permission, and that the statement was witnessed by Dallier, not Louise Euphémie's father, Louis, is notable.

Euphémie and William moved to East Baton Rouge, Louisiana and had twelve children: two boys, seven girls, and three infants who died young.⁹⁰ Possibly as a relic of the previous Spanish rule, the early sacramental records of the Grivot children were recorded in Spanish.⁹¹ The children were as follows: Clodio Juan Adolphe, born 14 February 1813; the certificate states that his maternal grandparents were Luis (Louis) Robitaille and Louise Munro, both of Québec; Claudio Mauricio, born 14 February 1814; Ana Adelaide Asterie, born 8 August 1816; twins born 22 September 1818, Emelia Luisa, and Francisca Ana Felicité; Eliza Eufemia, born 3 November 1820; Anne Elodie, born 30 March 1823; Marie Emma, born 26 September 1827; Marie Louise, born 19 January 1830; one unnamed "Infant" buried 11 July 1824; Euphémie, buried 27 October 1825; and Annette buried 4 December 1825.⁹² Louise Euphémie and her husband, Claude William, both died in New Orleans: Louise Euphémie on 9 October, 1856, and her husband on 18 July 1857.

Louis (*fils*)

Recall in the section on Judith Geneviève Robitaille, we saw the signature Louis Robitaille, *fils*, (son), on her marriage contract. Although no birth records have been found, this signature confirms that Louis and his wife Louise did have a son named after his father. We also know from his age at death that Louis, *fils*, was their eldest son. The following paragraphs describe what has been discovered about Louis, *fils*, during his life in Natchez. To avoid confusing Louis, *fils*, with his father the silversmith, "Lewis" will be used when referring to the son, as this form of his name appears at times in a number of the records that were found in Natchez.

In the 1816 Adams County Mississippi Territorial Census, there is an entry for Louis Robeiti [*sic*] Robitaille, as head of household with one white male over 21, one white female over 21 and one white female under 21.⁹³ Since this census only lists the head of household by name, the white female could have been his mother, Louise, and the child could have been his younger sister, Charlotte Zoé. In 1818, Louis was recorded as Lewis Robitaille on the Mississippi State Census, with the same number of people residing at his house.⁹⁴

On 24 February 1820, Lewis married his first wife, **Mariah Mason Burtis** of Natchez.⁹⁵ By the 1820 Federal Census of Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi, which was enumerated 7 August 1820, Lewis Robitaille had a household of two white males, 26-44, one white female under 10, one white female 26-44, and two slaves.⁹⁶ The 1830 the Federal Census shows Lewis still living in Natchez, but with a growing household: One white male 30-39, three white females under 5, one white female 5-9, one white female 15-19, one white female 30-39 and four slaves.⁹⁷ Lewis also appears in the 1830 Mississippi State, Adams County, Natchez - only Census, but there is no enumeration of other individuals in his residence in this census.⁹⁸

Lewis and his wife Mariah had seven children. Of these, Duncan Monroe died 9 September 1831, age eight months, from anthrax⁹⁹; Louisa died 18 April 1835, at age fourteen and one half, from unspecified sources and was buried in the cemetery of Saint Michael's Church in Convent, Louisiana¹⁰⁰; and Josephine, who died 25 January 1837 of pneumonia at the age of 4 years in Natchez.¹⁰¹ Duncan and Josephine were buried in the Natchez City Cemetery, Old Catholic section, Plot 1, Lot 9.¹⁰² Lewis had no known surviving male heirs. Lewis and Mariah's surviving children were Frances Adeline Robitaille, Euphémie Elizabeth, Virginia, and Mary.

Frances Adeline was born 24 November 1822 in Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi. She married **John M. Demarest** 14 December 1843 at Saint Patrick Church in New Orleans.¹⁰³ John and Frances had six children, two of whom died early; Francis Louis, and John Walter. The surviving children were Edward Judson, Ida Therese, Adam Giffin, and Walter John. John M. Demarest died 31 December 1880. Frances is believed to have died 16 March 1881 in Texas, but her death certificate is from New Orleans. John and Frances are both buried in Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana, Section 96, Lot 38.¹⁰⁴ [Figure 11](#) is a portrait of Frances, unfortunately the date and artist are unknown.



Figure 11- Frances A. Robitaille Demarest
Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James

Lewis and Mariah went to New Orleans in 1826 where their daughter Euphémie Elizabeth Robitaille was baptized at Saint Louis Cathedral on 28 March. The baptismal certificate, states that Euphémie Elizabeth was born 28 December 1824, but doesn't say where. It was probably in Natchez.¹⁰⁵ Euphémie Elizabeth married **Mills Judson**, and had three children; Rosalie Euphémie, born 1846; Frances Maria, born 1848; and Virginia, born 1851. Euphémie Elizabeth

died 25 October 1885 in New Orleans, Louisiana,¹⁰⁶ and her husband Mills Judson died in 1868.¹⁰⁷

We know little about Lewis and Mariah's fourth daughter, Virginia Robitaille. Based on her age at death she was born in 1828, probably in Natchez. It is believed that she never married. She appears in the 1900 Federal Census living in the household of **Edward Judson Demarest**, (the son of Frances Robitaille and John Demarest), in the 4th Precinct of New Orleans, Louisiana, City Ward 14. Virginia is reported as being an Aunt, age 72. In the same census report, she states her father (Lewis Robitaille) was born in French Canada and her mother (Mariah Mason Burtis) was born in Pennsylvania.¹⁰⁸ The statement confirms her lineage and that her father, Lewis, like his parents, Louis and Louise, were all born in Québec. Virginia died in New Orleans, Louisiana, on 14 January 1902 at the age of 74.¹⁰⁹

Even less is known about Lewis and Mariah Mason's last daughter, Mary, other than at age 19 she was reported in the 1850 United States Census for Orleans Parish, Louisiana, in the household of **M. McLaughlin**, age 45, who was from Ireland. Also, at the same address, were her sister Euphémie Elizabeth, age 25; her sister's husband, Mills Judson, age 40; Rosalie Judson age 4; and infant Jane Judson.¹¹⁰

Lewis was active in local politics in Natchez. He appeared as one of six Natchez Selectmen in 1831.¹¹¹ He also served for an unknown time as the Justice of the Peace for Adams County, Mississippi. In 1839, Lewis was the Treasurer of the Catholic Board of Trustees.¹¹²

Mariah Mason Robitaille died in Natchez, 22 July 1837, of dropsy. She is buried in the Natchez City Cemetery, Old Catholic section, Plot 1, Lot 9.¹¹³ Lewis remarried 7 December 1838 to **Cynthia Ann H. Butler** in Natchez.¹¹⁴ There were no children from his second marriage.

Lewis and his family appear in the 1840 Federal Census where they are shown as living in the City of Natchez. The enumeration of individuals living at the residence shows one white male age 40-49, one white female age 5-9, two white females age 10-14, three white females age 15-19 and one white female age 20-29, for a total of eight free white persons and fourteen slaves.¹¹⁵ The family also appears on the 1841 Mississippi State Census, which states that they live in Adams County, in the township of Natchez but no enumeration of other individuals in the household is provided.¹¹⁶

In 1849, Lewis was reported in the Adams County Sexton's report as having died of consumption on 9 January at age 56.¹¹⁷ His death notice also appeared in the Daily Picayune (New Orleans, Louisiana) newspaper.¹¹⁸ Lewis was buried in the Old Catholic section of Natchez City Cemetery, Plot 1, Lot 9, alongside his first wife, Mariah Mason Burtis, and their daughter Josephine.¹¹⁹ [Figure 12](#) and [Figure 13](#) show Louis and Mariah's grave stones respectively



*Figure 12- Louis (fils) Robitaille
grave stone*

Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James



*Figure 13- Mariah Mason Robitaille
grave stone*

Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James

Pierre-François, also known as Munro

Pierre-François was born in Sainte-Geneviève, Missouri on 10 August of 1801; however, there are no records of a Pierre-François Robitaille in Natchez, Mississippi. It took persistent research and a bit of luck to sort out what became of him.

Based on the documents and newspaper advertisements that have been found in Natchez and New Orleans, there was frequent mention of an “M” Robitaille in both locations. Who was this person? As the evidence continued to accrue, it was learned that “M” Robitaille’s first name was Munroe. It was not until his will was discovered in New Orleans however that it was possible to resolve who this person was with certainty.

Munroe most frequently used “M” in signing his records. In his will, written in New Orleans 10 February 1838 he declared his name as “Munro”, which was his mother’s maiden name.¹²⁰ He further stated that he was the son of Louis Robitaille and Louise Munro and gave his age as 36. By deduction, on 10 February 1802 he had to have been born, but be less than 1 year old. Referring back to the date of birth, the latest possible date of birth was 10 February 1802; and the earliest was 11 February of 1801. Pierre-François Robitaille’s baptismal record in Sainte-Geneviève states he was born to Louis and Louise Robitaille on 10 August 1801 and baptized on the 15 August.¹²¹ Unless Pierre-François had a twin brother, which the Sainte-Geneviève Church records do not substantiate, it seems highly likely that Pierre-François Robitaille changed his name to Munro Robitaille after arriving in Natchez. The “Munroe” which shows up occasionally in papers and census reports is probably attributed to the transposing Munro to the more common, and phonetically identical, Munroe. Munro also stated in the will that he was a native of the Territory of Orleans in the State of Missouri. Recall that the geographic partitions of the states since Munro’s birth in Sainte-Geneviève in 1801 had changed significantly by 1838 when he wrote his will.

In the 1825 combined tax roll of Adams County, Mississippi, Munro was listed as owning one town lot in Natchez having a taxable value of \$100. The same record shows that at age 24, he had an income of \$12,500 from the sale of merchandise. By way of comparison, his older brother Lewis is listed on the same document as owning seven town lots with a combined taxable value of \$10,450.¹²²

The next Natchez record bearing Munro's name is a hand-written gift deed to his sister, Judith Dallier, dated 27 November 1827. It shows that the Robitaille family, like many others in Natchez at that time, owned slaves. It is telling that this record is filed in the List of Deeds in Adams County, Mississippi, illustrating that from a legal perspective, slaves were considered real property. In the document Munro states that "in consideration of the kind a sisterly attention paid to me and my household since the month of August 1824, I do bequeath and give to my sister, Judith Dallier, my right and title to two slaves, Bob, age 22, and Maria, age 17". He further stipulates that in the event of his sister's death, the two slaves are to be given to his brother, Lewis, and in the event of his death, to his affectionate mother.¹²³

Both Munro and his brother, Lewis, frequently appear by name in the Direct & Indirect Index to Deeds for Adams County, Mississippi, between 1819 and the late 1840s. There are 57 records where Robitailles are Grantors and 40 where they are Grantees. The records list Lewis and Munro primarily, but occasionally their wives appear as principals. There are numerous entries where property is being bought, sold or gifted between Robitailles and also between Robitailles and their in-laws. There are other records, some of which involve notable families of Natchez. The Index to Deeds does not state if the property being deeded is land or other real property so it is necessary to review each deed to make this determination. Due to the location of the records and the volume of records involved, it was not possible for the author to search every record.¹²⁴ An index of Adams County Court records shows 47 cases attributed to Munro, almost all related to debt collections by Munro.¹²⁵

Munro first appears, by name, in the 1830 Federal Census, for Natchez, Adams County with the following occupants at his residence: one free white male 15-19; two free white males 20-29; one free white female 10-14; (possibly his sister, Charlotte Zoé) one free white female 30-39; (possibly his sister, Judith Dallier) and one free white female 60-69 (possibly his mother, Louise) for a total count of six free whites, and seventeen slaves.¹²⁶ It is not known who the second free white male 20-29 was.

It is clear that Munro was involved in commerce although how he got started is not evident. In the early 1830s, there were numerous notices put in the Natchez and New Orleans newspapers about various Robitaille partnerships being dissolved and new ones being formed. There were at least three such transactions: L&M Robitaille & Company; Robitaille & Tarbe; and Bouny & Robitaille.¹²⁷ Newspapers of Natchez and New Orleans carried numerous advertisements from these partnerships. The content in these advertisements vary, some advertising the sale of large quantities of grain, butter, flour, sugar, and meats, while others advertised warehouse storage, or the transportation of goods by water.

There is no question that these businesses were financially successful. Robitaille & Tarbe posted incomes from the sale of merchandise \$12,500 in 1825, \$23,000 in 1827, \$25,000 in

1828 and \$25,000 in 1829. Unfortunately, the tax rolls for many of the other years are damaged and illegible. L&M Robitaille Company posted incomes from the sale of merchandise of \$26,000 in 1831. Another indicator is that in 1826 or 1827, Munro was able to purchase a town lot valued at \$4,500.¹²⁸ Based on average incomes of the times, it is possible that Louis and Munro could have comfortably retired on these earnings.

Lewis and Munro owned property along the Natchez waterfront. The area was, and is still, referred to as “Natchez-Under-The-Hill” and is where the steamboats and river boats docked to load and unload cargo and passengers. The early 1800’s accounts describe the place as being notorious. Even years later, while Lewis and Munro were in business together, after the shacks that lined the waterfront had been removed, and more modern facilities installed, it was still not a totally safe part of town. However, despite the dubious notoriety of the place, commerce still prospered.

Munro was certainly an interesting individual. From 1 January 1830 to 1832, he was the publisher for the “The Natchez”, a weekly English language newspaper which principally ran advertisements in Adams, Jefferson and Franklin Counties of Mississippi.¹²⁹ He served on the Natchez City Council in 1827 as a Selectman, along with **Samuel Gustine, James Foster, Thomas Munce, Samuel Postlethwaite and Halsey Townsend**.¹³⁰ In 1829, he was the Treasurer of the Natchez Roman Catholic Society.¹³¹ Oddly, as a Catholic, in 1829, he applied for membership in the Natchez Masonic Lodge and was accepted.¹³²

On 13 January of 1832, Munro ran an advertisement in “The Natchez” newspaper which read as follows: “\$25 Reward will be paid for apprehending the runaway slave, **Aggy**. She has not been seen by me since about the 10th of December last; but I have every reason to believe that she is lurking about the city, awaiting my departure from this place as she has heard I intend leaving. I believe no particular description is necessary as she is well known; being the same girl that was owned by Old Mr. George from whom I purchased her. M. Robitaille, Natchez.”¹³³

Sometime after 1832, Munro moved from Natchez to New Orleans. He is not listed in the 1832, or 1834 New Orleans City Directories, but did appear in 1838 edition under the entry for his book keeper who lists M. Robitaille’s address as 19 Common Street, which was likely his commercial address.¹³⁴

The 22nd of June 1835, Munro married **Ara Ann Boots** (who in some records, appears as Mary Ann Boots), at Saint Patrick Church in New Orleans.¹³⁵ Miss Boots lived in Natchez and appeared on the 1830 Census of that town.¹³⁶ The marriage record at Saint Patrick Church does not contain any family member signatures for the bride or the groom.

The next mention of Munro involved the recording of his last will and testament in New Orleans, Louisiana, on 10 February 1838. It was officially filed on 13 February the same year.¹³⁷ In his will, Munro named his wife, Mary Ann, as his sole beneficiary and made no mention in his will of his brother Lewis, or his sisters, who at the time of his will, were all still alive.

On the 1840 Federal Census for Louisiana, in New Orleans, Ward 3, of Orleans Parish, "M" Robitailles household consisted of two free white males 30-39, one white female 30-39 and 10 slaves.¹³⁸

On 7 May 1840, a devastating tornado struck Natchez. The waterfront structures under-the-hill were completely destroyed. In town, many houses were destroyed or severely damaged. To this date, the storm ranks second in the nation for deaths (316) due to tornado. Damage was estimated at around \$21 million in today's currency.¹³⁹ In New Orleans, Louisiana, on 9 May, Munro appeared before the city council and delivered a speech urging the residents of that city to contribute to the relief efforts of the victims of the tornado in Natchez. The city responded generously to his plea.¹⁴⁰

In 1842, Munro is listed in the New Orleans City Directory as a broker with two addresses, 7 Tchoupitoulas Street and at 77 Commerce Street.¹⁴¹ He is listed again, this time in 1843, as a commission merchant at the Tchoupitoulas Street address and at 30 Commerce Street.¹⁴² Throughout this period there were many commercial advertisements for merchandise and shipping involving Munro and his partners in the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper.

Munro died 8 June 1844 in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was buried the same day in Saint Louis Cemetery number 2 "in white tomb number 28, second vault, to the right of the main aisle, parallel to Conti Street. The tomb was constructed by **Demourelle**."¹⁴³ Munroe's will was contested in Probate Court by **Felix James Grenier** and by his brother, Lewis Robitaille.¹⁴⁴

Munro's wife, Mary Ann Boots, prepared her will 23 July 1844. It was filed 24 August 1844.¹⁴⁵ In her will she stated the following: "I declare that my name is Mary Ann Boots, that I am at present a resident of this city, I am thirty-eight years of age, a native of Adams County, Mississippi, legitimate daughter of **John Boots** and **Mary Martin**, my father and mother, that my father is dead and that my said mother is still living, is now married to **William Lazarus** and that they reside, at present in Adams County Mississippi. I declare that I was married to Munroe Robitaille who departed this life on the eighth of June last and that by said marriage I have never had any children."

Following the settlement of any existing debts, Mary bequeathed one third of her succession to her mother, Mary Martin, wife of William Lazarus. To her brother in law, Lewis Robitaille, she bequeathed "a certain lot of ground belonging to her in the city of Lafayette, Parish of Jefferson in this State, near the Orphan Boys asylum." To her goddaughter, she bequeathed a "mulatress slave named **Ellen**, who is about thirteen years old". To "**Whinney Hubbard**, a woman of color" she bequeathed "a large looking glass in the front room for her in consideration of her kindness during her present sickness." Any remaining assets were bequeathed to her mother and her mother's husband to share and share alike. Mary Ann died at her residence, 7 Tchoupitoulas Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, on 21 August 1844, at age 40, oddly two years older than she stated in her will.¹⁴⁶ She was buried in the Natchez City Cemetery.¹⁴⁷

Charlotte Zoé

Louise was 33 when Charlotte Zoé was born on 20 November 1804 and baptized 30 December in Sainte-Geneviève, Missouri.¹⁴⁸ The author has found only one mention of a similar name, Miss Zoé Robitaille, who was listed in the 1843 New Orleans City Directory as being on Toulouse and Royal Streets with an occupation of Milliner.¹⁴⁹ No further records have been found on Zoé Robitaille the Milliner.

Zelia Robertaille [sic] Robitaille

Zelia Robitaille married **Benjamin Wade**, son of Benjamin Wade and **Hannah Coverly** on 21 November 1821 in Adams County, Mississippi.¹⁵⁰ It is believed that Zelia was the last daughter of Louis and Louise Robitaille. Three pieces of evidence support this belief; first, her last name; second the first names of Zelia and Benjamin's children which parallel the names of her siblings; and finally, the fact that the graves of her brother Louis, his wife, and some of his children; the graves of her sister Judith Genevieve and one of her sister's children; and the grave of her mother are all in the same cemetery plot as Zelia and her husband.

Zelia and Benjamin had twelve children: Maria Louisa born 1822; Wells Coverly born 1825; Munro Lewis, born 1827; Eliza born 1829; Benjamin, born 1831; Zelia, born 1834; Francis, born 1836; Josephine born 1838; Emma A. born 1841; Alice Geneviève, born 1844; Lucy Pauline, born 1848; and Clarence Joseph, born 1849.

Benjamin died in Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi on 9 May 1858. Zelia survived her husband and passed in Natchez 8 July 1869 at the reported age of 61. Assuming the age at death is correct, she would have been born in 1808. Both Zelia and Benjamin are buried in the Natchez City Cemetery, Old Catholic section, Plot 1, Lot 9, which was owned by Benjamin Wade.¹⁵¹ [Figure 14](#) and [Figure 15](#) show Benjamin and Zelia Wade's grave stones in the Natchez City Cemetery.. It is possible that Zelia could have been Charlotte Zoe, but not if Zelia's age at death is correct. There would have been about a 3½ year difference in date of birth between the two.



*Figure 14- Benjamin Wade
grave stone*

Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James



*Figure 15- Zelia Robitaille Wade
grave stone*

Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James

Conclusion

Louis Robitaille is probably best described as a travelling silversmith in constant search of opportunity. As previously stated, he likely learned his trade from Jean Nicolas Amiot, and certainly lived near and perhaps even worked with several notable French-Canadian silversmiths. As evidenced by the surviving examples of his silver work, it is competent, but largely of a utilitarian nature. His sugar bowl and drinking cup are notable exceptions. The style was more modern and demonstrates an ability not previously seen in his tableware.

We do not know if Louis continued to produce silver while in Natchez. There is a ladle owned by a collector, which does not include the Canadian pseudo-marks found on the spoon made by Louis for the Jean Philippe Family, nor does it contain the “Illinois” mark often used by Louis Robitaille on his works done in the upper Mississippi River Valley. It is possible that the ladle illustrated in [Figure 16](#), may have been made in Natchez, although to date, this has not been substantiated.



Figure 16- Engraved silver ladle made by Louis Robitaille bearing initials “RK”. L-R maker’s mark is visible on the underside.

Photograph courtesy of Maurice Meslams.

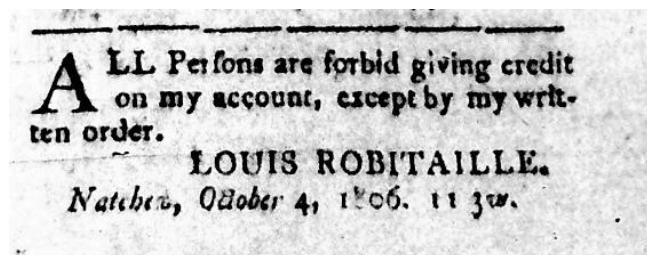
There are inconsistencies about the date of Louis Robitaille’s death in the written works published to date. **Marius Barbeau** lists “Louis Robitaille (1765-92?)”.¹⁵² John Langdon, in his 1966 work, states that Louis Robitaille was born in Lorette in 1765 and lists a date of 1822 as his date of death but provides no references to support this.¹⁵³ I learned that Langdon’s manuscripts and research notes for his books on silversmiths reside in the Fisher Library at the University of Toronto and obtained a copy of these for my research. Langdon’s research notes on Louis are very short and contain no specific confirmation of Louis’s death; however, there is a letter dated 23 April 1954, from the Canadian Archives in Langdon’s research notes which mentions a letter book belonging to **Angus Mackintosh** which is held by the Library & Archives

Canada, (LAC) in Ottawa. The letter book reportedly makes reference to an inventory held in 1819-1822 which lists the names of individuals with whom Mackintosh dealt. Under silversmiths, two names are given: **John Kenzie** and Louis Robitaille. There was no mention of Louis's death in the letter book.¹⁵⁴

The Mackintosh records (Fond MG19 – A31) at the LAC, consists of three volumes. Volume 1 is a ledger, (1806-1821) containing 562 pages; Volume 2 is a set of nine letter books, each about 25 pages; and Volume 3 which is an inventory book. It is only in Volume 3 that we find an entry for, "Louis Robitaille, Silversmith". His name appears in a section of a ledger labeled "P. A.", with the sum of 1 pound 6 shillings in last column. It is not clear from the record book if this is an amount due by Louis or amount paid by Mackintosh. There is also a cryptic reference on the same line of the record book to "Folio 53". Perhaps at one point in time, there was a "Folio 53" which may have provided more information, but these records are not in the LAC fond. Thus, there is no data in Fond MG19-A31 which provides evidence to support the statement that Louis Robitaille worked for Angus Mackintosh or that he died in the vicinity of Sandwich in 1822.

Both PRDH and the church records confirm that Louis was born in L'Ancienne-Lorette in 1768. Neither Barbeau, nor Langdon make any mention of Louis moving to Sainte-Geneviève or having any professional links with Angus Mackintosh in Detroit. In 1969, Walter Simmons stated that Louis returned to Detroit and worked for Angus Mackintosh from 1819 until his death in 1822, citing Langdon's 1960 work.¹⁵⁵ A review of the extant burial records of Natchez, Sainte-Geneviève, Detroit, Windsor, Sandwich, and Québec have yielded no record of Louis Robitaille's death in any of these locations before, during, or after 1822.

It is clear that Louis went to Natchez with his family, as noted by his signature on Judith's marriage contract dated 8 March 1806. Additionally, he ran a notice to creditors in the Mississippi Messenger, a Natchez newspaper, in October of 1806, shown in [Figure 17](#). It was customary for merchants in Natchez to allow credit on accounts until the cotton crops were harvested. Perhaps Louis was concerned about accruing too much debt. Louis's signature appears on 13 November 1807 as a witness to the will of Philip Engel (who was also a signatory to Judith Geneviève Robitaille's marriage contract with François Dallier).¹⁵⁶ Recall, as previously mentioned that on 6 October 1808, Euphémie Robitaille married William Grivot and that it was Louise, her mother, not Louis, who granted permission for her daughter, a minor, to marry Grivot.



*Figure 17- Notice to Creditors
Mississippi Messenger, 4 October 1806*

A review of the wills and burials recorded in Adams County, Mississippi, 1802 - 1812 revealed no records for Louis Robitaille. It is possible that Louis may have died in Natchez between 13 November 1807 and 6 October 1808.¹⁵⁷ At that time, the early Catholic cemetery was located behind the current Saint Mary's Cathedral. This parcel of land was made into a park when the present Natchez City Cemetery was opened in 1824. There are no known accurate records of the burials in the old cemetery. The graves in the old cemetery were not well cared for, and the difficult task of moving the remains of the interred to the new cemetery took many years and was not an exacting process.¹⁵⁸

The Dallier and Robitaille graves at the Natchez City Cemetery have obviously been damaged over the years. The cemetery has experienced periodic funding shortages for care and upkeep and incidences of vandalism are known to have occurred. Given this, it is possible that Louis "Orfèvre" may well rest in Natchez, but probably not with the rest of his family.

It would seem out of character for Louis to leave his family given the history which shows they stayed together for many years during difficult times. Louis also appears to have been a practicing Catholic, given his attendance at the sacraments for his children and frequent appearance as a baptism sponsor for others. Considered collectively, these facts make it seem unlikely that the couple divorced.

One piece of information remains which suggests that Louis died earlier than previously thought, an Adams County, Mississippi, record which describes a marriage between a "widow Robitaille" and Albert Lancelle. The record is dated 2 May 1814.¹⁵⁹ Reviewing the records of Louis and Louise's daughters, none had been widowed during this time which leaves Louise, Louis's wife, as the only likely "widow Robitaille" in Adams County Mississippi. To date, no records of Lancelle's death have been found so it is unknown what happened to the couple. What is further puzzling is that subsequent to the 1814 marriage, (which may or may not have actually happened), and until the date of Louise's death, Louise continued to use Robitaille as her surname.

Louise Munro Robitaille was a remarkable woman. She lived a tough but successful life. To begin with, she lost both of her parents; first her father, and just four months later, her mother, just as she reached the age of six.¹⁶⁰ As the eldest of the children, she likely inherited the day-to-day duties of raising her three siblings: Herbert Dunstan, age about 4; Marie Françoise, age about one and a half; and Catherine, less than a month old. This must have been difficult enough, but her sister Catherine was reported on her *sépulture* (burial) to have been "*en démente*" (mad) since birth.¹⁶¹ She likely also had housekeeping duties, since her grandmother, Madeleine Dontaille, was about 62 when Louise and her siblings were orphaned.¹⁶²

Louise married Louis Robitaille in 1789 at about age 18 and by age 24 she had delivered 4 children; lost her third daughter, Victoire, as a youngster; made two major relocations (Detroit and, later, Sainte-Geneviève), both with young children in tow; and once settled in Sainte-Geneviève, she found herself in a remote village on the edge of civilization. While in Sainte-Geneviève, she had two more children. Louis was forced to travel about the Mississippi River Valley to sell his silverware, and even with those sales, the family still lived a frugal lifestyle. Louise and her young family took care of their house and took on boarders to make additional money

while Louis was away. For reasons we do not know, other than perhaps the promise of better times, the family then moved again, this time to Natchez, in the Mississippi Territory, where Louise, at age 37, gave birth to their last child, Zelia, around July of 1808.

One measure of how well Louise raised her family under such demanding conditions is evident in how well her children did as they move on to adulthood. As previously described, the two eldest daughters married and raised families of their own. Lewis and Munroe not only did well but appear to have been respected leaders in the community, holding various public offices, being involved with the community, and the Church.

Recall that in 1840 there was a devastating tornado in Natchez. There appears to have been no Robitaille deaths attributed to the storm. However, in correspondence dated 21 October 1840, between Father **Joseph Brogard** of Saint Mary's Parish in Natchez, and Bishop **Anthony Blanc** in New Orleans, Father Brogard reported "we almost lost the two best members of our congregation, Mrs. Robitaille and **Mrs. Julienne** but they are better."¹⁶³ It would appear from this information that Louise must have been seriously injured.

Saint Mary's was the first permanent Catholic Church in Natchez following the American occupation. The first mass was said in December of 1843. Three abstracts from the parish announcements of Saint Mary's Cathedral have been found, the first, dated 15 November 1863 which reads "Next Monday a mass will be offered for the soul of Judith Dallise [*sic*] Dallier," the second, dated 18 June 1865, which reads "Tomorrow Mass will be offered for the repose of the soul of Mary Anne Lambert & next Friday for Louisa [*sic*] (Louise) Robitaille and Judith Dallier," and the third, dated 29 September 1867, which reads "Tomorrow a mass will be offered for the repose of the soul of Judith Dallier (anniversary)."¹⁶⁴ Perhaps Louise's daughter, Zelia, had these prayer requests submitted for her mother and sister.

Louise died in on 22 June 1851 of old age just weeks before her 80th birthday.¹⁶⁵ She was buried in the Natchez City Cemetery in the plot owned by Benjamin Wade, [Figure 18](#) depicts her headstone.¹⁶⁶



*Figure 18- Louise Munro Robetaille [sic] Robitaille grave stone
Photograph courtesy of Sally Demarest Hagood James*

Louise was fortunate enough to witness her surviving children grow up, become successful members of the local community, marry, and watch several of them raise families of their own. She survived both of her sons. During her lifetime, there was a great deal of cultural change, as France, Britain and Spain lost their colonial possessions and the United States was born. Unknown to her, she passed just in time to avoid witnessing the young nation become embroiled in a deadly Civil War.

Items of Continued Research

- Where, when and how did Louis Robitaille, *Orfèvre*, die?
- Are there any unique surviving silver works by Louis Robitaille this research has missed?
- When and where was Louis (fils), son of Louis and Louise Robitaille, born?

Should any readers of this paper find any historical errors or have additional data which would enhance this paper or help to close out any of the remaining research items mentioned above, I would appreciate very much hearing from you. Please send any comments or questions to me at: robitaille60@gmail.com

About the Author

Paul is the U.S. representative of the *Association des familles Robitaille* in L'Ancienne-Lorette, Québec; he is also a member of several historical societies, among these, the French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan; the Center for French Colonial Studies; the French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan; and the Old Fort Niagara Association. He is also a Life Member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Following his retirement as an Engineer in the Aerospace and Defense Industry for 34 years, he now has some time to pursue his interests in colonial and military history and enjoy the outdoors in Montana with his family and grandchildren.

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