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FRENCH WINE MAKERS AND THE LAUNCHING OF AMERICAN VITICULTURE

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AND THE LAUNCHING OF AMERICAN VITICULTURE

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While one cannot speak of sustained French immigration to the American colonies, some notable examples can be cited. The Labadists were mystics who lived communally on their 4,000 acre Maryland farm. There were the French settlers of Gallipolis in Ohio who, it appears, produced a wine so poor in quality it was named *méchant Suresne* after a wine known for its sourness produced near Paris. The arrival of French Huguenots in South Carolina is of particular interest because, for the first time, a large group of settlers reached the New World with the primary aim of growing grapes. They had left France for England to escape religious persecution and in 1763 petitioned the British Government to provide them with land in South Carolina so that they could “apply themselves to the cultivation of vines and of silk.” The request was approved. Setting sail a year latter, the Huguenots reached South Carolina founding the township of New Bordeaux in the southern part of the colony. They were joined four years later by another group of co-religionists lead by the forceful Louis de Mesville de Saint Pierre. But now came a setback. The colony’s governing body refused to provide the settlers with the funds needed to purchase vine cuttings. Saint Pierre thereupon decided to return to England and appeal for financial aide to Lord Hillsborough secretary for the American Colonies, but to no avail. Rumors had it that Hillsborough had received a 250,000 British pounds bribe from French wine

merchants dismayed at the prospect of losing the lucrative American and British markets. Budgetary constraints are a more likely explanation. A costly war with France had just ended forcing the British Government to reduce expenditures. It was about that time that Parliament, seeking new sources of revenue, passed the Stamp Tax and Revenue Act which set the stage for the American Revolution.

Samples of New Bordeaux wine were submitted to the Royal Society earning for Saint Pierre a gold medal but nothing more. Other personal appeals proving to be equally fruitless—one was even addressed to King George III— Saint Pierre decided to take his message to the public publishing a tract bearing the lengthy title, *The Great Utility in Establishing the Culture of Vines and the Absolute necessity of Supporting the Infant Colony of French Protestants Settled in New Bordeaux South Carolina, who have brought the Culture of Vine and the Art of Raising Silk to Perfection*. When nothing came of this, Saint Pierre had no recourse but to sail back to South Carolina stopping off in Madeira, however, to purchase vine cuttings. (Had financial support been provided by wealthy Huguenots?) A final setback awaited his return for the cuttings died soon after being planted, victims of the root-boring lice, phylloxera. The New Bordeaux community eventually scattered, Saint Pierre being its last resident. He would die in the first year of the American Revolution, the victim of an Indian attack.

Although Saint Pierre was unable to create a productive vineyard, his efforts were not lost on future winemakers, especially those from Bordeaux who knew of the fledgling community across the ocean that bore the crescent city's name, and of the valiant grape grower who had ventured there. Some followed his example and many more seriously

considered doing so, for after Saint Pierre, sailing to the New World to grow grapes had become a realistic prospect appealing to adventurous souls willing to brave the unknown.

The close political and commercial ties between France and the United States forged during the War of Independence may explain why numerous winemakers from greater France—thereby including parts of Belgium and Switzerland— chose to migrate to America in the years that followed the conflict. Among these none was to play a more prominent role than Pierre Legaux. Trained as a lawyer but with an abiding interest in winemaking, Legaux reached America in 1783 settling in Spring Mill, a village north of Philadelphia. He lost no time purchasing an estate of 206 acres and planting three hundred vines from Burgundy, Champagne and Bordeaux— all *Vitis vinifera*— he had brought with him from France. He then set about organizing a joint stock company, The Pennsylvania Vine Company capitalized at \$20,000, whose investors eventually included Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. (Political rivalries could apparently be set aside when it came to growing grapes and making wine!) A confident Legaux could not envision any difficulties as the following notice placed in the *Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* indicates:

“the first vintage ever held in America would begin at the vineyard, near Spring Mill, and in a few weeks Mr. Legaux will begin to produce American wine, made upon principles hitherto unknown, or at least unpracticed here. This will form a new era in the history of American agriculture. . . . Succeeding generations will bless the memory of the man who first taught the Americans the culture of this generous plant.” (Cited by Thomas Pinney in *A History of Wine in America*.)

The vines, however, failed to survive, victims again of phylloxera. With less than 15 % of the shares in the company sold, Legaux had no choice but to declare bankruptcy and put his vineyard and house for sale. How bleak was his situation can be gauged by the

testimony of a visitor who found him “wearing stockings full of holes and a dirty night cap.” But Legaux had no intention of giving up winemaking for he proceeded to rent fifteen acres and began again to plant vines and this time successfully. Thinking that the thin leaves were those of the *Constancia*, a *Vitis vinifera* from Capetown, South Africa, Legaux concluded that he had succeeded where he and others had previously failed: to grow *Vitis vinifera* varieties in American soil. In fact what he had planted was the Alexander, an accidental hybrid much appreciated by Thomas Jefferson who thought it “as good as the best Burgundy and resembling it.”

His faith in American viticulture restored and with adequate funds thanks to the public stock offering which had resumed, Legaux regained control of his estate now named Montjoy on which he planted 18,000 vines, with an adjoining nursery containing 200,000 more vines. His goal, he declared, was “the cultivation of the vine and the supply of wines, brandy, tartar and vinegar from the American soil, and the extension of vineyards and nurseries of plants of the Burgundy, Champagne, Bordeaux and Tokay wines, and to procure vine-dressers for America.” (Cited by Pinney.)

News of Legaux’s achievement reached Bordeaux where it provoked a predictably hostile response from the city’s powerful *négociants*. An appeal was made to Bonaparte, France’s First Consul, who agreed that the matter was sufficiently grave to merit immediate attention. François André Michaux, a noted botanist, was dispatched to the United States to assess American wine making activities. We ignore the content of Michaux’s report but it must have been sufficiently alarming for the French minister in Philadelphia to be instructed to spare no effort to induce Legaux to uproot his vines. As he had surrendered his citizenship and property holdings when he left France, these

would be returned to him; in addition he would be given a cash payment of \$3,500 upon his return to France. Legaux did not deign to respond.

A series of natural disasters created new challenges. In 1803 there were severe frosts and a hailstorm which destroyed most of the vines. Legaux's response was simply to replenish his vineyard with new vines as we learn from an entry in his journal of April 15, 1805: "The day at half past ten o'clock at night I received a letter from Mr. McMahon [secretary of the vine company] with three boxes of grape vines, sended by Mr. Lee American Consul from Bordeaux, all in very good order and good plants of Chateaux Margaux, Lafite, and Haut Brion, 4,500 plants for \$230." English was evidently still a foreign tongue to M. Legaux! Then more disasters: a heat wave followed by a lengthy drought. By 1807 Montjoy was no more than an overgrown field. But the Frenchman remained undaunted. After a series of failed lotteries, he fired all his workers and was now laboring in the vineyard alone. He wisely decided to abandon the planting of *Vitis vinifera* in favor of the Alexander still thought to be the Constancia. At long last success: in 1809 a first vintage was produced. Legaux's tribulations, however, were not at an end. An infestation of caterpillars descended on his vines. Then came the upheavals produced by the War of 1812 and this time Legaux capitulated. After a quarter century filled with some successes but mostly setbacks, the Pennsylvania Vine Company ceased to exist. Legaux died in 1827. His poignant last words are worth remembering: "No horses nobody no money and any assistance whatever to expect. What shall I do?"

The importance of Legaux's contribution to American viticulture cannot be overstated. Cuttings from his nursery found their way to vineyards throughout the United States. They were planted in Jefferson's vineyard in Monticello; Colonel Morgan planted

them on his farm in Princeton before taking them to western Pennsylvania; Nicholas Longworth cultivated them in Ohio; and Jacques Dufour, as we are about to learn, brought them to Kentucky. Then there were the countless visitors to Montjoy who, stirred by Legaux's words and the sight of the vineyard, returned to their farms determined to engage in grape growing and wine making, thus keeping viticulture alive in the young republic.

The idea of growing European grapes in America was next taken up by Jacques Dufour, of Vevey Switzerland. As a youth Dufour had heard the complaint of French officers who had served in America that good wine could not be produced there, presumably because of the poor quality of native grapes. Why then not plant European varieties, the noble *Vitis vinifera*? Encouraged by his family to do just that Dufour began the long trek to the United States, arriving in 1796. His first task was to find suitable land which led him to explore every part of the country, an experience that proved disappointing, most vineyards being neglected or, as in the case of Jefferson's in Monticello, completely abandoned. Only one vineyard impressed him favorably and that was Legaux's in Spring Mill. He heard that Jesuits had planted vines near St. Louis and headed there but not content with what he found decided to go further west to Lexington, Kentucky, where some Swiss had founded a colony. Lexington was a bustling town of some culture, the great legislator Henry Clay being one of its leading citizens. However appealing he found the town, it was Kentucky's rich soil so similar to that of Switzerland that convinced him that his search was over. Following Legaux's example, he set about organizing a joint stock company, the First Vineyard of Kentucky, known subsequently as the Kentucky Vineyard Society, capitalized at \$50,000. A promissory note was

obtained from a local bank with which Dufour purchased 633 acres, along the banks of the Kentucky River, at Big Bend 25 miles west of Lexington. He then traveled to Spring Mill to purchase 10,000 cuttings including Alexanders (still thought to be the Constantia) but mostly *Vitis vinifera*. (Evidence that as late as 1798, Legaux had not given up on them.) So confident was he of the outcome that Dufour invited his family to join him. Seventeen of them made the long voyage to Kentucky, arriving in the vineyard's second year when all the vines were flourishing. Then, in the third year, disaster! Except for the Alexanders all the vines had withered and died. The demise of Kentucky Vineyard Society soon followed.

However dire their plight, the Dufours were not prepared to abandon their viticultural quest. The right soil had clearly not been found. Why not try Indiana? *Eh bien, pourquoi pas!* And so the clan headed for Indiana, then still a territory, staking out land along the right bank of the Ohio River. Thus was born Vevay, Indiana (spelled with an "a" to distinguish it from the Swiss town). Vines were duly planted and as these were of the Alexander variety, all survived and indeed flourished. With wine production burgeoning, Dufour decided on a patriotic but also commercially astute gesture: several barrels were loaded on to carts and shipped to Washington D.C. where they were offered to President Jefferson who was favorably impressed with the wine's quality, thereby gaining for Indiana the reputation of being a grape growing region. More grape growers arrived and soon the land around Vevay was covered with vines, making Indiana for a time the center of winemaking in the United States. The good times, however, did not last. In 1818 the speculative bubble burst sending land values and the price of produce

plummeting, grapes included and therefore of wine. By the end of the 1820s most of the vineyards were gone except for Dufour's which survived until the 1850s.

Dufour died in 1827 the year after he had published *The American Vine Dresser's Guide*, the standard reference work on viticulture until the end of the 19th century. A fitting successor to Pierre Legaux, Dufour showed that American winemaking could be a profitable activity, a state of affairs unknown to the Pennsylvania winemaker. Subsequent viticultural pioneers such as Nicholas Longworth of Ohio, Nicholas Herbemont of South Carolina and Louis Renault of New Jersey were certainly aware of Dufour's accomplishments and could not but be influenced by them.

If Legaux and Dufour had known viticultural success, this was not the case with Jacques Lajonie of Switzerland and Jean Claude Roudet of Bordeaux. The two made their way to southern Alabama in the 1820's where French expatriates— mostly officers who had fled France after the fall of Napoleon— had established a “Society for the Cultivation of the Vine and Olive.” It did not take long for Lajonie and Roudet to discover that neither vines nor olives could survive the region's intemperate climate and their cultivation was abandoned.

The failure of the Alabama venture does not seem to have discouraged other French cultivators from trying their hand at grape growing in America. Alphonse Loubat chose as his destination New Utrecht, Long Island. There, on forty acres, he began growing *Vitis vinifera* grapes with predictably calamitous results. Wishing to spare others that outcome, Loubat, in 1827, published a book bearing the same title as Dufour's: *The American Vine Dresser's Guide*. Loubat's study, however, is written in

both French and English, indicating that it was intended as much for his countrymen as for Americans. He describes numerous diseases of the vine but is silent in regard to phylloxera, which is not surprising as he knew as little about the infestation as Saint Pierre, Legaux and Dufour before him. Another half century would have to elapse before phylloxera was identified.

Loubat's warning went unheeded. André Parmentier, a Belgian resident of Brooklyn, then a rural community, who is best remembered as the creator of a botanical garden in which he grew 400 species of ornamental trees and shrubs and 200 varieties of roses and other flowers, persisted in cultivating *vinifera* varieties. When all succumbed he turned to American hybrids, principally Catawba, but did so reluctantly as is evident from his 1828 catalogue in which he advertises twelve European varieties but not Catawba or any other American variety. It was one of the last commercial attempts to promote *Vitis vinifera*, for by then every grape grower knew that attempting to plant them in American soil was a hopeless task. If the country was to produce drinkable wines it would have to be with American grapes.

In the year that Parmentier published his catalogue, the Maryland Society for the Promotion of the Vine was incorporated "to carry on experiments of the cultivation of both European and native grapes." Its demise was swift, the Society surviving but three years. One who would have not been surprised by that outcome was Nicolas Herbemont, a Frenchman who, following Saint Pierre's example, migrated to South Carolina. Intending at first to grow European varieties, Herbemont altered his plans when he learned of the previous failures and began growing American varieties such as Bland, Isabella, Renoir, and Warren. A cutting of the last was sent to the renowned Prinz nursery

in New York which was so impressed with its attributes that it renamed it the Herbemont before having it distributed throughout the United States, making the Frenchman the best-known viticulturalist of his day. The seriousness of Herbemont's commitment to viticulture can be gauged from the words he wrote at the end of his life: "I was born in a country where the culture of the vine is the principle object. My greatest wish has always been to introduce it into the United States and particularly into South Carolina. To the attainment of the desired object, I have for upwards of 18 years spent all of my exertions. It has not been without very considerable expense, labor, time and perseverance, that I have finally come after many failures, to succeed in cultivating the grape advantageously and to making good wine." It is significant that Herbemont employs the term "good" rather than excellent. Constrained to make wine with native American grapes, he harbored no illusions as to the results. Here may be found the reason why, after the 1830s, French grape growers ceased migrating to the United States. Viticultural perfectionists, they were not drawn to a land where the making of superlative wines was impossible. Making "good wine" was, for them, not good enough.

By the middle of the nineteenth century Alexanders, Catawbas, Isabellas, Blands and Herbemonts were ubiquitous in American vineyards. Another variety about to make its appearance would supplant all these: the Delaware. Paul Prévost, a French/Swiss grape grower who had settled in Frenchtown New Jersey, is credited with its discovery which occurred in the late 1820s. Two decades later it was rediscovered by Abraham Thompson, editor of the *Delaware Gazette* of Ohio (hence the grape's name) who traced it back to Prévost, then no longer alive. The Delaware has been called an accidental hybrid, but I am not convinced. Already practiced, the process of controlled hybridization

was not beyond the competence of an accomplished horticulturalist such as Prévost. One¹¹ can surmise that he was seeking to produce a grape that combined the best qualities of the French and American varieties, that is one with high levels of sugar and able to withstand harsh climatic conditions, requirements the Delaware met. Still considered today the première of American grapes, the Delaware remained, until the advent of the French-American hybrids, the grape against which all other grapes were measured.

Excepting for Saint Pierre, French winemakers cannot take credit for initiating viticulture in America, a distinction that belongs to the early Dutch and English settlers and to such individuals as William Penn, Thomas Jefferson, Edward Antill and William Alexander, (and then there is the pioneering work done by the Spanish missionaries in California). It must, however, be acknowledged that these efforts were marginal without lasting consequences, the aim being to produce some wine to meet one's needs, or in the case of Jefferson and Antill, to carry out an interesting experiment. This was not the intention of the French whose goal was to launch an enduring commercial enterprise, one requiring expert knowledge, acute sensibility and above all a commitment to viticultural excellence. Before the French arrival, what had been another farming activity now became an esteemed endeavor, an artistic (poetic?) engagement, a cultural act. Through the French example an occupation became a calling, the tasks of planting, pruning and pressing, a way of life. The new world began to learn from the old. We can imagine conversations between French and American vignerons in which knowledge and techniques were imparted, a particular region's grape-growing prospects were assessed, and legends and traditions were conveyed. But word of mouth was not the only form of communication. As not a few of the French viticulturalists wrote manuals and catalogues,

and were not shy of divulging their views to the press, their ideas were able to reach large parts of the rural world with far reaching implications for American wine making.