

Humanities Seminar: French Roots of North America**Thursdays 10 AM -12PM****September 29, October 6, 13, 20, 27, November 3, 10, 17, December 1 and 8, 2022****Dr. Marie-Pierre Le Hir, Professor Emerita of French****Syllabus****Course Description**

Why is French still the second most-commonly taught language in the United States after Spanish? Why are Americans so interested in things French? This course suggests that answers may be found in the long and fascinating saga of the French in North America. Could it be that we are interested in France because so many of us share a (mostly invisible) French heritage? My own path of discovery of the French roots of the United States was strewn with chance encounters, just hints at first: a historical plaque explaining the name of a river, the “Cache la Poudre” in Northern Colorado; a fellow graduate student writing his PhD dissertation on the French who had come to Iowa centuries before us; a personal exploration of Cleveland’s turn-of-the century Francophile past, and last but not least, a fascinating conversation with an elderly Tucsonan who was researching his family history. The names of rivers (Poudre, Platte), cities (Saint-Louis, Baton Rouge, Louisville, Lafayette) and people (Bonneville, Crapo, Ducey, Duval, Québedeaux), several thousands of them, all evoke the French heritage of the United States. Most of the stories behind those names are forgotten but they deserve to be told, which is the purpose of this seminar.

Course Content

The course is organized chronologically and covers a long historical period, from the

Renaissance to the present. The material is presented in class through ten PowerPoint presentations that can be reviewed online. Assignments consist in reading materials of various provenances (history, criticism, fiction), related documents and films, as well as suggestions for further investigations.

September 29: Unit 1, First French Steps in America

Why did the French initially sail the oceans far away from home? What were they looking for? Did they want to leave the old continent behind? Or were they just looking for goods, such as gold, spices, fish, and fur? These questions are discussed in the first unit in a lecture that also covers the earliest French attempts to settle in North and South America in the the 16th century as well as the reasons behind these endeavors. The issue of the nature of the relations between the French and the Native Americans also addressed here is a recurring theme in the history of French America, and therefore of this seminar as well.

Main topics:

1. Historical Background: France from the Middle to the Renaissance
2. First Steps in North American: Verrazano, Cartier, Roberval
3. Escaping the Wars of Religion: French Settlements in Brazil, Carolina, Florida

Readings:

See posted bibliography for Unit 1.

October 6: Unit 2, First permanent French settlements in North America

The unit centers on the earliest permanent French settlements of Acadia, Canada and the Caribbean during the first half of the 17th century. It covers the formation and development of

private companies dedicated to the fur trade; the “discovery” of the north American continent by young explorers and missionaries; and the early French colonization of Caribbean islands at a time when buccaneers ruled at sea.

Main Topics:

1. The Founding of New France, 1600-1617
2. New France, 1617-1643
3. French Pioneers of Champlain’s Days

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 2.

October 13: Unit 3, French America, 1661–1683

In the context of fierce competition among European powers for trade supremacy, what was the impact of the King Louis XIV’s absolutist policies on his colonial empire during the first part of his reign? Examined here are the changes brought along when New France became a province of France. Was Versailles able to control its oversea subjects as it wished? Could the authorities stop the *coureurs des bois* (white Indians) explorations and adventures? Special attention is paid to the journeys that led to the “discovery” of the Mississippi Valley.

Main Topics

1. Territorial Expansion and Colonial Policies under Louis XIV
2. New France under Colbert
3. Exploring North America

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 3

October 20: Unit 4, The Sun King's Colonial Empire, 1684–1715

The second most important strand of French immigration to North America was the result of the revocation of the Edict of Toleration in 1684: it led to the exile of many Huguenot families from France and to their departure for the British colonies of north America. As we will see, the introduction and development of slavery in the French Caribbean also had a profound impact not only on the islands themselves but in the long run on the history of the United States. Finally, the wars that periodically tore Europe apart in 17th-century Europe carried over to North America, leading to France's loss of Acadia in 1713. As a result, the area became part of Great Britain although it was inhabited at the time by Acadians, i.e., French, Abenaki, or Franco-Abenaki people.

Main Topics

1. Louis XIV's Policies during the Second Half of his Reign
2. New France before 1688/La Salle's Exploration of the Mississippi River Valley
3. New France during King William's War, 1688-1697

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 4

October 27: Unit 5, France's American Colonies, 1715–1755

After Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville succeeded in reaching the mouth of the Mississippi by sea in 1698, two private and a royal trading companies made huge investments in Louisiana in terms of financial and human capital, expecting proportionate returns. Natchez and Natchitoches were founded in 1716; New Orleans, two years later. Although sparsely populated, the new colony of

Louisiana stretched all the way to the Illinois country, an area that became the most typically French region of North America and the provider of foodstuff for the colony down river.

Conflicts between the French and the Native Americans arose over navigation rights on the Mississippi River and, as plantations multiplied, over ownership of the best lands.

Main Topics:

1. John Law and the Company of the West (1717–1720)
2. Settling Louisiana: The 1720s, 1730s, and 1740s
3. Upper Louisiana: The Illinois Country
4. Trouble in Acadia, 1744–1748

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 5

November 3: *Unit 6, North America Won and Lost, 1756–1783*

As the struggle for colonial worldwide supremacy intensified, the French monarchy faced increasing challenges from within. The enlightened elite was critical of both absolutism and oversea wars that cost a lot of lives and money. Left with little military and moral support, the Franco-Americans and their Native Americans fought bravely and won early battles, but France ended up losing North America nonetheless. We examine the fate of the Franco-Americans of Louisiana, Illinois, Canada, and Acadia in the aftermath of the 1763 French defeat. We also discuss why France chose to side with the American patriots and help secure the United States' independence from Great Britain less than two decades later.

Main Topics:

1. Decline of the Absolute Monarchy in France
2. The Seven Year's War, 1756-1763

3. French North America after 1763
4. France's Role in the War of Independence, 1775-1783

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 6

November 10: Unit 7, Franco-American Relations in the Age of Revolutions

As the United States and France entered the national age, Franco-Americans played an increasing smaller role in shaping relations between the two first republics of the Western world. These relations were of a turbulent nature in the last decades of the 18th century. While the initial American reaction to the French Revolution was overwhelmingly positive, France soon became a divisive issue in American politics. By the end of the century, the friendship had turned sour to such a degree that the countries were (unofficially) at war with each other. The Federalists' rapprochement with Great Britain at the time was a source of aggravation for France, a series of diplomatic incidents for the US. But refugees from mainland France fleeing the French republic and from the Caribbean colonies escaping slave revolts also played a large role in the deterioration of a friendship that had initially been very strong.

Main Topics:

1. Friends: Franco-American Relations during the French Revolution, 1789-1792
2. Enemies of the French Republic
3. Seeking Refuge in America: French Immigration to the US
4. Foes: the Genêt Affair, the Jay Treaty, and the Quasi-War

Readings:

See bibliography for Unit 7.

November 27: Unit 8, Franco-Americans in Ante-Bellum America, 1801–1861

Taking a necessary detour through the Caribbean, we will examine the reasons behind France’s decision to sell Louisiana to the United States. What was the fate of the French, French Canadians, and Franco-Amerindians once their lands became part of United States territory? The focus is also on French-Canadian and French-Amerindian guides who helped famous U.S. explorers like Lewis and Clark “discover” the Wild West. We also bring back to memory Franco-Americans like Joseph Nicollet and John C. Frémont who were recognized as great explorers in the ante-bellum era but were forgotten later on.

Main Topics

1. Napoleon and Slavery: Prelude to the Louisiana Purchase
2. The Louisiana Purchase
3. French Guides to the Wild West
4. French Explorers and Settlers of the Wild West

Readings

See bibliography for Unit 8

December 1: Unit 9, French Idealists, Gold Seekers, & Soldiers in the Young United States

Every revolution and regime change in 19th century France sent a new wave of immigrants to the United States. We first examine the Royalist Opponents to Bonaparte before turning to the more sizeable group of veterans of the Napoleon’s armies, officers and soldiers who were banned from France after his defeat at Waterloo or chose to go into exile on their own free will. We’ll focus here on two groups of veteran-settlers, those who founded the Olive and Vine Colony in

Alabama and those who went to Texas to live in a settlement they called “Field of Azylum.” In addition to these political exiles, idealists disillusioned with their political and social circumstances and willing to start a new life also came to the United States around 1840 and later. They listened to Charles Fourier and Etienne Cabet, two social reformers who promised to create a better world in America. The Utopian communities these French immigrants founded all over the United States are presented as the second topic discussed in this unit. The two other topics covered here are French participation in the Gold Rush and the divisions among Franco-Americans during the Civil War.

Main Topics

1. French Political Refugees in Ante-Bellum America
2. Utopian Communities
3. The French and the Gold Rush
4. Franco-Americans during the Civil War

Readings

See bibliography for Unit 9

December 8: Unit 10, Franco-American Relations in the National Age

As the American nation grew stronger, the Catholic Church served as a link between the various Francophone communities in the U.S. Immigrant Franco-Canadians created new Francophone communities in the Northeast and the Midwest, but the old Franco-American communities now bereft of economic and political power were often stigmatized and progressively disappeared in the melting pot. Ironically at the same time, a new American elite that benefitted from the industrial revolution created new links directly with France during the new wave of Francophilia

that survived WWI. A brief survey of key moments in the more recent history of Franco-American relations in recent times is followed by an analysis of common national stereotypes.

Main Topics:

1. Becoming Minority Cultures: Quebec, Louisiana, the Old Illinois Country
2. American Francophilia in the 19th century: a High Society Phenomenon
3. 3. Franco-American Relations and National Stereotypes

Appendix: Creating the Nation: the Western, Facts and Fiction

Readings

See bibliography for Unit 10