

Frenchmen of America

Following the drama of September 11, 2001 the President of France was the first Head of State to bow, with tears in his eyes, and offer his condolences to the victims of the United States. The attack struck France in the heart as the historic links between the two countries run deep dating back to the purchase of Manhattan island as well as the generous and significant gift of the Statue of Liberty in 1971.

The French were among the first to colonize the New World. In 1504, Louis XII sent fishermen from Brittany to explore the new lands. Francois I sent Jacques Cartier, a sailor from Saint Malo, to find a shorter route to Canada and Samuel de Champlain, under the orders of Henri VI, founded what was then known as New France and Acadie. Traders from France bought beaver furs from the Indians of the Great Lakes region and explorers blazed new trails to this extraordinary land.

Louis Joliet and Father Marquette explored the Mississippi River and reading André Maurois's History of the United States, it is clear why the Jesuits risked their lives to evangelize the various Indian tribes. The nun, Marie de l' Incarnation, coming from the city of Tours in the Loire Vallée, worked to establish a hospital in Quebec following the purchase of the island of Montreal in the Spring of 1640. Pious souls joined this project and created the Ville Marie foundation under the auspices of Louis XIII and Richelieu.

The French empire

It was under the administration of Louis XIV that France began to build its American empire. Colbert, then Head of the French Navy dedicated himself successfully to the business of New France. Frontenac was appointed Governor of the colony and Cavalier de la Salle was the founder of Louisiana. Regrettably, under Louis XV, Choiseul and Voltaire laughed at " these acres of snow in Canada " and as a result France relinquished its hold on Quebec. And, despite the sale of the Louisiana territory by Napoleon to U.S. President Thomas Jefferson in 1803 (see map) and the complete abandonment of the continent, even today French is spoken from Quebec to New Orleans.

The French obstinacy

However, notwithstanding the departure of the French governance, America remained fashionable. Madam de Stael, Talleyrand, Le Ray de Chaumont, Joseph Bonaparte invested to the New World. James John Audobon, born to a French Naval Officer and his Haitian wife, drew the " birds of America " and Degas painted a part of his work in New Orleans where from his mother was born. The architect l'Enfant had drawn the plans of Washington, D.C. and Manigault those of Charleston. The botanist Michaux created gardens there and brought back to Europe the mimosa, the camellia and the azaleas. Dupont de Nemours created a powder magazine at the instigation of the widow of Lavoisier in Delaware. His descendants created an empire and launched a new product called nylon. Not forgetting their roots, Americans spilled their blood for France during the World War II beginning on D-Day. In the crazy years following World War I, Montparnasse developed an American character and under the influence of Saint John Perse, Yves Tanguy, André Breton and his surrealist friends New York

City began to hear the voice of French art. Chased out of France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Calvinistic or Reformed French Protestants came to America and called themselves Huguenots. Many well known American figures are of French origin. But what would France and Europe be without the Marshall plan? Nowadays, Cavalier de la Salle motto “be successful or die” is very actual in America still fighting for freedom.

The French-American friendship

The French-American friendship was especially sealed during the American War for Independence. France was the first country to recognize the new state and thanks to the benevolence of Louis XVI, Beaumarchais, Le Ray de Chaumont helped the insurgents. Believing strongly in the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, many came to the aid of the American colonial efforts, including La Fayette, Rochambeau, de Grasse and other “volunteers of freedom”. After the death of Louis XVI, Georges Washington hung his portrait in the dining room of his country estate, Mount Vernon, in homage to this king for his invaluable assistance during the American cause.

Geneviève M. TANGUY