

The Interrogation of the Talon Brothers, 1698

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

THIS ACCOUNT is a literal translation of a French manuscript that contains the questions addressed to and the replies given by two young Frenchmen who had accompanied La Salle on his ill-fated final expedition to locate the mouth of the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico. After landing on the coast of what is now Texas, La Salle was murdered in 1687 by his own men, and most of La Salle's party were massacred by Indians. Some of the younger French children were taken captive by the Indians; among these were the two brothers, Pierre and Jean Baptiste Talon, who provided the information contained in this account to an investigating body upon their return, eleven years later, to France. Their responses, as was typical of contemporary documents, were not recorded in their own voices but in the quasi-objective clerkly tones of some nameless official.

The story of how this account came to light is worth telling; it is not every day that a previously unknown manuscript of some historical significance turns up, and it is even more seldom that this occurs outside the purview of academic historians.

The basic details of the Talon brothers' life among the Indians of the Gulf Coast, and of their subsequent recapture by Spanish forces sent from Mexico, have been known to historians for over a century, primarily from the account published by Pierre Margry in his multi-volume work on the early French presence in North America.* Margry's account is based on a report dated September 14, 1698, which comprises six numbered questions and the Talon brothers' responses. It is evident that neither Margry nor later researchers were aware that this report is not the full account of the Talon brothers' interrogation, but merely the portion that describes the death of La Salle and immediately ensuing events. This fragmentary report contains less than a quarter of the complete 56-page manuscript. The full account goes into considerable detail about the country: climate, veg-

* Pierre Margry. *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dans l'Ouest et dans le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale*. 5 vols. Paris, 1876–1886. This extract appears in Vol. III, pages 609–621. See 1974 reprint by A. M. S. Press.

etation, animal life, and native inhabitants. It provides a graphic picture of the Texas wilderness and the earliest cultural contacts between Indian tribes and their first European visitors.

The complete report appears to have been discovered by a French historian, Jean Boudriot, in the French naval archives at Rochefort. In mid-1974 he sent a photocopy of the manuscript to an American friend and colleague, T. M. Hamilton, who was involved in research into early French trade with the North American Indians. Hamilton in turn sent the manuscript to me because of my prior experience translating seventeenth-century French manuscripts. In 1975-76 I prepared a draft translation but carried the project no further at that time because of other research priorities. Since my retirement in 1982, I have been able to complete this project. As far as we know the complete report has never been published, and it is accordingly with an understandable pride of priority that we present it here.

*R. T. Huntington
July 1985*

EXPEDITION TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BY WAY OF THE GULF OF MEXICO

AN ACCOUNT OF THE INTERROGATION
OF THE TWO CANADIANS WHO ARE SOLDIERS
IN THE COMPANY OF FEUGUEROLLES
AND THEIR RESPONSES
BREST, FEBRUARY 14, 1698

translated by R. T. Huntington

Questions concerning the Account forwarded by Monseigneur de Pontchartrain

These soldiers are two brothers, Pierre and Jean Baptiste Talon, born in Quebec in New France, sons of Lucien Talon, a timber worker, and his wife Isabelle (both now deceased) who were inhabitants of that place. As boys the two brothers left Canada with their father and mother to return to France; they were then quite young and are unable to state precisely