

Jean-François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny (1696 - @1755)

from Verse poem on the establishment of the province of Louisiana or Mississippi, with all that occurred there from 1716 to 1741: The Massacre of the French at the post at Natchez, the Manners and Customs of the Indians, their dances, religions, etc.; and all that concerns that land in general.

Jean-François Benjamin Dumont was born in Paris and educated in Jesuit grammar schools there. His father was a lawyer and the family was rising into the minor aristocracy. As a younger son, however, he was destined for a career in the military. He went to Quebec in 1715, and then after a brief spell in France got a commission as a sub-lieutenant and engineer in Louisiana. At this moment in 1719, investment and emigration in Louisiana, which was controlled by the financier John Law and his Company of the Indies, had reached a fever pitch, and it collapsed soon after in the infamous Mississippi Bubble. Many new colonists died before they could clear land, build shelter and grow food along the swampy, malarial bayous. Dumont, however, lived in Louisiana until 1737, shifting between New Orleans, Pascagoula, Natchez, and the Yazoo River area. He did not acquire a large plantation, and did not rise through the military ranks. In fact, his manuscript memoirs reveal how his defiant behavior toward Bienville, the governor of Louisiana during much of this period, and Chépart, the commandant at Natchez during the cataclysmic revolt described below, led to demotions and brief periods of incarceration.

Dumont the author is known for a two-volume history of the colony, *Mémoires Historiques sur la Louisiane* (1753). But that book, edited by a hack writer, is only loosely based on the manuscripts that Dumont composed and that survive today. These include a prose autobiography penned in 1747 detailing many colorful adventures omitted from the published *Mémoires*, and a 4692-line mock-epic poem in four cantos, which he began writing while still in America. This excerpt from the first canto recounts the 1729 uprising of the Natchez Indians, in which more than 250 French were killed. The translation is based in part upon one by Henri Delville de Sinclair done as part of the WPA writers project in 1940.

And now, dear reader, has come the moment,
To describe the loss of this post, a grievous event.
Dear Lord, if I could purge from my memory,
That fatal misfortune, and silence its history,
I would believe myself happy. If I could see
The planters at home and the fort on its feet.
But it must have been written that this post would be
Destroyed from top to bottom as it came to be.
Through the great favors of that fine commandant,
Natchez had begun to look luxuriant.

And through steady labors, that fertile country
Grew many crops, and seemed to please everybody.
But by great misfortune, this land so charming,
Was ruled by Chépart, who thought himself a king.
When we say as a king, we mean he was a tyrant.
Remote from New Orleans, a hundred leagues distant,
From court of justice and the head commandant,
He became, in two words, tyrannic and arrogant,
Ill treating the bourgeois and even the savages,
Ordering the latter to vacate their villages.
Lands of fine quality, pleasing to his sight.
He vowed to seize them, though he lacked the right.
He did not wish to have to clear new land,
As others had done, when they arrived on the strand.
Blacks he had in plenty, and had he succeeded
He would have, at one stroke, made himself settled,
His cabins built, his storehouse erected,
His lands all plowed and cultivated.
It was a worthy plan for a wealthy French man
But his power had made him too proud and too vain.
And sadly, dear reader, it was to prove fatal,
Not only for himself but also for us all.
The Natchez, meanwhile, obtained two months' postponement,
Before fleeing to the forests and giving up all they owned there.
They were taxed, however, for this period of grace,
Paying poultry and corn that they raised on the place.
Alas, such injustice and rank condemnation
Inspired in these people the firm resolution
To kill all the French and to seize all they owned,
This they did, and here's how it was done.
In November one thousand seven hundred twenty-nine
Just days before the fatal reversal
A galley arrived, fresh from the capital
Packed with wine and goods with which to make merry.
And so Chépart, Commandant, and Bailly, Commissary,
Along with Ricard, who was merely a sentry,
Repaired to the home of the local Natchez gentry.
They were made welcome there by the Sun of the savages,
Who welcomed as guests any man who brought beverages
Namely wine and brandy, which they poured in profusion.
After this, and some supper, they asked, for some reason,
That the chief give them girls to spend the night with.
Such were soon selected and granted forthwith.
They went to bed together, and then slept, it seems,

In sumptuous pleasure, their danger unforeseen.
When there came a new dawn, to the fort they repaired,
Where planters, and officers, and interpreters demanded
That orders be issued to load all the cannon
And to have the soldiers armed in case there was treason.
For several friends from among the Savages,
Had come to warn of the impending outrages.
Yet for the soldiers' trouble they were put in prison.
Chépart would not listen to rhyme nor to reason:
"What do you mean?" he told them, "I've come from the village
Where I saw with my eyes the love on their visages
How can you prove to me that what you say is true?
You're all cry-babies, and will be made to rue
Having cried wolf to me, and warned me for my soul
I've no use for men with no courage at all
In irons you'll be clapped, and you'll see by the morning
If the Indians hatch the plot of which you've been warning."

At ten in the morning, twenty-ninth of November
A few from the village at the fort did appear,
While others later spread out on every side,
With evil in their minds, and weapons at their sides.
The Sun and all his band were at that time rejoicing,
Calumet in the air, stomping and prancing.
They came to Sieur Chépart, as if in friendly greeting.
But they were really wolves in sheeps' clothing!
"I come," said their chief "to pay you reverence
And share a pipe with you, full of benevolence.
Please accept, Great Chief, these ceremonial presents
That to you I am bringing, my good will to evidence."
These gifts were delivered, bears' grease and poultry,
And pelts of some roebucks, as per the treaty
That stated this day for the payment for privilege
Of remaining two months in the huts of their villages.
No sooner had Chépart seen this abundance
Of such pretty gifts, than he issued new ordinances.
That the men held in irons, and those in the prison,
Be set free immediately, with just one condition:
That they come to his house where those they called enemies
Stood with tokens of loyalty. Their warnings were folly!
The orders scarcely issued, down by the river, the savages
Were attacking a galley there, and wreaking their ravages.
This was the signal for the general onslaught,
The French would be slain wherever they were caught.

Chépart heard this noise, and jumped up, alert,
He shot out of his house, in just his nightshirt,
Ran into his garden, begging loudly for help.
It was too late, of course, for the Natchez now enveloped
Him, engaged in disputes over who would strike his deathblow
None wanted the honor, for no courage did it show,
To kill the man of whom they all said "He's a dog!
Unworthy to be stricken with a warrior's tomahawk."
Nonetheless, he was, for the lowest of the Natchez,
A stinkard among them, got this dubious privilege.

[I omitted next 30 lines, down to bottom of p318, top of p49 in the English]

It will never be known how barbaric ferocity
Alone moved these savages to such great depravity,
To take so many lives, of those they had called friends.
They had arranged with the other tribes who lived in those lands
To all strike together. But through mighty good fortune,
they fell short of their goal, and God it must have been
Who caused some to be spared. Women and children,
Negroes, the goods, all came to be taken,
But of all the French, they kept alive only two men,
Whom they did not harm at all. The late Sun of White Apple,
Who in a previous peace had been decapitated
By this blow could find his death retaliated.
The two men kept alive were used, in recompence
To serve the Suns for work of great importance;
The loot that was pillaged needed transporting
You must know, to the villages' own chiefs' dwellings
And so one of the prisoners, a carter, did labor
To satisfy captors, who paid nothing for his efforts.
The other was a tailor, who with the clothes of the French
Taken from the dead, now habited men and wenches.
He altered the garments to fit these new wearers
Who fashioned themselves as gentry and warriors.
In a word, one could say, with frankness and truth
That the Indians had carefully planned it forsooth.
Retaining for later, amid all the carnage,
Those whose skilled labor might be to their advantage.
For with the help of the carts they hauled away cannons
Booty, and victuals, and powder in profusion,
And also wine and brandy to their own villages.
A few days had passed since the dreadful carnage,
When they once more returned and set fire to all,

As much the houses as the fort. Having thus, as a whole,
Contrived to reduce all the buildings to cinders
They built up their own fort, now turning defenders
Should the French then attack them. And such a precaution,
Seems to me well suited to match the occasion.
That is not all, dear reader. Our women, in the villages
Were made slaves to labor for all the cruel savages,
Who with nought else to do were engaging in pranks
Such as burning the prisoners or firing at them blanks.
When I say French, you must know that I am referring
Only to those yet desirous of reaching
Our capital, and who, uninformed of the news
Had arrived at the Natchez, put ashore their canoes,
And been seized as prisoners by the enemy forces,
Who led them now quickly into the fort, as
They trembled with fear, awaiting their fate.
Some other French settlers, who escaped in a bark
Reached the city soon after and told of the attack,
The massacre and cruel fate the Natchez meted out
To the soldiers in the fort and the settlers round about.
They proclaimed that, for them, it must be a miracle,
To be thus preserved, overcoming all obstacles
Be thanks unto God, they had now reached the place
Where He could protect them, for this they thanked grace
And praised Him that His mercy did not let all be lost
Among the victims of this dreadful holocaust.
For this they blessed smoke upon the sacred altars,
Lit votive candles, and burned incense immortal;
Many vows were spoken and also many prayers
For the poor French victims who by hands of murderers
Had met their cruel deaths, as well as for the martyrs
The men who were killed as religious sufferers.
In short, there was seen in New Orleans nothing but sadness
While upstream the mood was all joy and gladness.
No sooner did they learn of all these sad events
Than their hearts were seized with darkest despondence.
But illustrious Perier, whom nothing could frighten
Gave orders immediately, that drums should be beaten
For soldiers and habitants to gather together
And meet on the plaza, marching shoulder to shoulder.
Men were soon chosen to form a militia
They were all too glad to be mustered into service.
To these were added the boats and the soldiers
So those in need of help might soon have our succor.

The King's lieutenant, Loubois, at the head of this army
Left the city at once, making forced marches daily.
He arrived at the Tonicas just a few days later
Where he built a fort and installed his soldiers.
Next he dispatched four men to travel overland
And contact the Frenchwomen held in Natchez hands.
They set out, these four, traveling through the woods
As pilgrims might, but as only spies would.
At the end of four days, according to their plan
They reached, well armed, the enemy's lands.
Sneaking clandestinely, they set out to catch
One of the Frenchwomen, to engage her in speech
To instill new courage and advise patience,
Thus giving her reasons for further forbearance.
The spies were recognized, and fired upon.
Although brave in defense they were at last taken,
Seized bodily and bound, escorted by savages,
Displayed in triumph to the chief of the villages.
Of the four, one was killed, and but three reached the place
Where the Sun soon addressed them in very loud voice:
"Why did you come so well armed upon my land?
Was not making war upon us your sinister plan?"
This barbarian, who thought only his words were true,
Said he'd free the one Frenchman who'd would carry across
The lines a letter to lieutenant Loubois,
Ordered one female prisoner to take his dictation
And write down precisely his best cogitations.
When the soldier got the note you may be sure he made tracks
To the Tonica village, thanking God for his luck!
When the message was read, fullsome was the surprise
That the Natchez, as ransom, required merchandise,
To pay for the hostages and conclude a cease fire.
The Sun soon grew weary at the lack of an answer,
And gave up the two Frenchmen to the hands of assassins
Who stripped off their clothes and blackened them with ashes.
With heart-rending cries, the two men, tied together
Were dragged to a plaza in the temple enclosure,
Where stakes formed, for their God, a sacrificial altar.
Nearby others built the square for torture by fire.
The Natchez came to fetch and drag the poor men
Tying both spread-eagle on the frame built for them.
The Frenchmen were burned slowly, tortured with embers,
What had they done wrong save be taken prisoner?

Meanwhile our soldiers, in flatboats and pirogues
Set out with Loubois, up streams and bayous
On the way to the place that we called the Tonicas.
A man also was sent to visit the Choctaws.
To give them many presents so to join us in the wars
To look to us as friends and not as adversaries
The messenger arrived, and in his discourse said
That Perier, knowing the tribe to be close friends
Had sent him as an envoy to bring them linen shirts,
And balls and lead, merchandise of all sorts
On condition that the Choctaws reply and assist
In a manner that would show their love and friendship.
He said also that he bade them make great diligence
To go to the Natchez with us to seek vengeance
Upon the warriors of that great Nation
Who had been guilty of such a terrible action.
The Choctaws were surprised at the hasty impudence
Of the Natchez who had struck the fatal blows in advance
And were furious with them. For as you know of yore,
Throughout the country, the Natchez had urged all warriors,
To strike us at once, and the day of their choosing,
Was the second of December. The plot's loss of timing,
By grace of the Most High, saved the French from total killing.
Here's how it happened: it was a stroke of good luck
That these nations know neither the month nor the week
To keep time by, and it is only with greatest pains
That they count days at all. They must use the means
Of a token or marker. And in cases like this
They send out to their villages bundles of sticks,
Small faggots of twigs, made like our matchsticks.
It was agreed in their planning that for this massacre
They would stike near the time of the moon's first quarter
And all would attack, in their own place, the enemy
(As we would now be known); and according to the scheme,
They prepared the matchstick bundles, for the number sixty three.
The sticks were like a calender, that each morning would be
Consulted by a chief, who at the temple took in hand
One of the matchsticks, to throw in the smoking stand
Of the fire that they worshipped as a sacred flame
And each nation, at each temple, would henceforth do the same.
But God, who guides all things with goodness supreme
Determined that the killing would not reach such extremes.
Thus four days in advance they committed this mistake
The chief of the Natchez, when he went to burn the stick

Took with him to the temple his young Sun-in-waiting
Who, believing that his father found burning sticks amusing
Threw some in himself, which his father failed to notice.
Don't we see here the hand of the Almighty most gracious?
In the outcome the Natchez attacked us four days early
Which led the Choctaw warriors, who had sworn to be allies
To react with fury and hatred; as if taken for fools.
They perceived a Natchez plot to sieze the Frenchmen's loot
And keep it all for themselves, without having to share.
Hence after the discourse of Loubois' emissary
They promised assistance, and took the merchandise
To be shared among the warriors, who agreed to risk their lives.
The twentieth day of February, as snow covered the ground,
The Choctaw were ready, their battle cries did sound,
To fall upon the Natchez, and they marched in two bands
Following with good hearts, as if we were true friends,
One party toward the fort, the other toward the dwellings.
We found there some Natchez, who had been left guarding
The women and infants, all with mournful expressions
For their children, and parents, and for their own possessions.
For their husbands too they grieved, since the Natchez depraved
Had taken all their liberty, and made them all here slaves.
No sooner did they see the party of Choctaws,
Than they rushed from the house, to welcome with applause
Their sudden deliverance, an end to their bondage.
The warcries resounded, from the two bands of savages,
But one party of Choctaws now chose a quick retirement.
And one of the Frenchwomen received an unkind present
A ball from a rifle passing straight into her thigh,
She stopped to have it dressed, she did not even cry.
The night, at last the night, and one heard without cease
The shots of the rifles, that the Natchez released.
I'll explain why they did this; we should make no mistake
The Natchez kept their watch, their vigilance did not shake.
Our allies the Choctaws, now united their two parties
For victory, they told us, over our cruel enemies.
Yet for eight long days they showed us only vain bluster,
They came and they went, but never did one warrior
Come back with a scalp, until at last Loubois
Came with his men, and made encampment quite close
In a forest near the enemy, and marching upon the plains
Began to dig some trenches, which was done with great pains.
Against the enemy fort, we fired all our cannon
But they defended it in rather good fashion.

One morning, at dawn, a sergent, quite facile
In the ruses of war, whose name was Brinville
Was chosen for the job of aiming the cannon
And met with great misfortune on that one occasion.
He wanted the enemy to be mocked and harrassed
So he lowered his britches and showed them his ass.
But in answer, the Natchez, they shot back a ball
Which lodged between his buttocks, a wound that was fatal.
For bravado, in short, he suffered mortally,
Which should warn us how deadly are the wages of folly,
And that the safest course on all such occasions,
Is to have a strong heart without losing one's reason.
But just at the moment we had come to believe
That we could not force a victory, they sued us for peace.
And it may well be guessed that we quickly agreed,
Our slaves were returned to us; the women too were freed.
All were put aboard the flatboats, and floated down to New Orleans.
Our soldiers still were hoping at the sun's first light dawning,
To make the Natchez pay, but after nightfall the savages,
Took advantage of darkness and abandoned their villages,
Transporting the weapons that might be of use to them
And leaving behind only canons and culverins.
The soldiers and sailors, who came forth to request
To be allowed to attack them, shoot them down in their steps,
Were given orders to stand down, let the Natchez slip away,
And when they cried out in anger, their wrath they did allay
By razing the fort, so that when they were done,
Nowhere in sight did stone rest upon stone.

translated by Gordon M. Sayre, University of Oregon