

THE NEW THEORY OF THE LEADEN PLATE – EFFORTS OF THE
FRENCH TO ESTABLISH THEIR CLAIM – DEPOSITION OF
STEPHEN COFFEN

It will be observed by the preceding chapter that a different account is given of the burial of the leaden plate in Venango than that which had been the previously understood version. The belief had been entertained that the plate was buried at or near the mouth of French creek, and had been taken up and conveyed to the Governor of New York by the *Seneca* Indians, who were more friendly to the English than to the French. Rev. Dr. Eaton, of Franklin, in his history of Venango county, published in 1876, gives the account as it had been understood from tradition and such other sources from which information on the subject could be obtained. On the first page of the pamphlet, he says:

“The French based their claims on the original discoveries of Marquette and La Salle, together with their construction of the treaties of Ryswick, Utrecht, and Aix la Chapelle. As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, Bancroft tell us that, ‘Not a fountain bubbled on the west of the Allegheny, but was claimed as belonging to the French Empire.’ Later they seem to have claimed all west of the Allegheny Mountains. In pursuance of this claim, in the year 1749, Gallisoniere, Governor of Canada, sent Celoron to bury leaden plates at different points, along the line from Lake Erie to the Mississippi, as evidence of this claim. One of the plates was buried at this place, near the mouth of French creek. It bore an inscription in the French language, stating that they had ‘buried this plate at the confluence of the TO-RA-DA-KOIN, this 20th July, near the river Ohio, otherwise Beautiful River, as a monument of the renewal of possession.’

“This plate was not permitted to remain long in its little bed, as it was stolen by the Indians and taking to the State of New York, that, ‘the devilish writing,’ as they called it, might be interpreted to them.”

The statement is made in *Western Annals*, that “one of these plates was found at the mouth of the Muskingum; another at Venango.

All the accounts upon the subject conveyed the information that the plates were deposited along the river “at all important places, such as the mouths of the most considerable streams.” This, in connection with the event that a fort was erected at the mouth of French creek, may have served to convey the original impression, that one of the plates was buried at this point. In Sherman Day’s “*Historical Collections of Pennsylvania*” published in 1843, and other works, the opinion is advanced that TO-RA-DA-KOIN was the Indian name for French creek, but Mr. Marshall, in his able paper on Celoron’s expedition, makes it plain that the word, more properly copied TCHA-DA-KOIN, in the ancient Indian form of the modern name Chataqua.

While Celoron was engaged in this expedition he sent the following letter to the Governor of Pennsylvania:

TRANSLATION.

“From our camp on the Beautiful River (Ohio), at an ancient village of the *Chouanons*, 6th of August, 1749.

“SIR: – Having been sent with the Detachment into these quarters by M. the Marquis de la Gallissoniere, Commandant-General of New France, to reconcile among themselves certain savage nations, who are ever at variance on account of the war just terminated, I have been much surprised to find some traders of your government in a country to which England never had any pretensions. It even appears that the same opinion is entertained in New England, since in many of the villages which I have passed through, the English who were trading there, have mostly taken flight.

“Those I have fallen in with, and by whom I wrote you, were treated with all the mildness possible, although I would have been justified in treating them as interlopers, and men without design, their enterprise being contrary to the preliminaries of peace, signed five months ago.

“I hope, sir, you will carefully prohibit for the future this trade, which is contrary to treaties; and I give notice to your traders that they will expose themselves to great risks in returning to these countries, and they must impute only to themselves the misfortunes they may meet with.

“I know that our Commandant-General would be very sorry to resort to violence; but he has orders not to permit foreign traders in this government.

“I have the honor to be, with great respect, sir, your humble servant.

“CELORON.”

From these letters and documents, it appears that the French claimed all the countries situated on the Mississippi and all its tributaries, by virtue of original discoveries, and supplemented these reasons with the conditions made at various treaties. The English claimed the same region, or portions of it, by virtue of a grant of King James the First to sundry of his subjects, which covered all the territory between the thirty-fourth and forty-eighth parallels of latitude and thence to the Great South Sea. They also claimed the country on the headwaters of the Ohio, by virtue of the treaty of Lancaster with the *Six Nations*, though the latter denied having sold any lands west of the mountains.

In the spring or summer of 1749, the Assembly of Pennsylvania received intelligence that a force of one thousand French was preparing to leave Canada for the Ohio.

Startled by these rumors, they sent an agent, Mr. George Croghan, to the Ohio, for the purpose of gaining all possible intelligence of the movements of the French. On his arrival at *Logstown*, an Indian village on the right bank of the Ohio, about twenty-two miles below the forks, he learned that a French officer, named Jean Coeur, or Joncaire, was on the Allegheny, about one hundred and fifty miles above, with a strong party, for the purpose of erecting trading posts and fortifications.

This party was either Celoron's expedition or a part of it, as Joncaire, with a portion of the force, was frequently sent in advance to make overtures to the Indians along the river.

To make good their title to the lands which they had claimed in this manner, the French not only made vigorous efforts to occupy the territory, but proceeded to fortify themselves along a line from the lakes to the Allegheny and Ohio valleys. The nature and extent of these efforts are so well set forth in a deposition of one Stephen Coffen, who was for a time a prisoner among them, made on the 10th of January, 1754, to Colonel, afterwards Sir William Johnson at New York, that we append it entire. The document is an interesting specimen of the style of the olden time, aside from the information it contains:

DEPOSITION OF STEPHEN COFFEN

STEPHEN Coffen of full age being duly sworn deposeth and saith: that he was taken Prisoner by the French and Indians of Canada at Menis, in the Year 1747, under the Command of Major Noble, from whence he was brought to an Indian Village called Actagouche about Fifteen Leagues to the Westward of Chebucta, where he was kept three Weeks Prisoner; from thence was carried to a French Settlement called Beaubasin, where the French had a Wooden Fort then Garrisoned with Twenty-Five Men; remained there Two Months; from thence they took him to Gaspey, a considerable Fishing place in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, near to the Entrance of the River; there about Three Hundred Families settled there; they kept him there working near Four Years; then he was brought to a place called Ramouski, inhabited by about Twenty-Five French Families, from which Place he sailed two years to and from Quebec in a Sloop carrying Beaver and Furrs, Salmon, &ca, to Quebec, and in return brought back Brandy, Dry Goods, &ca; during the Time of the Deponent's residing at Quebec he said it was commonly talked and reported that they the French intended to settle as many Families as they could to the Westward, to make up for the Loss of Two of their Towns sunk in the West Indies by an Earthquake. The Deponent further saith that the Navigation up the River Saint Lawrence is very dangerous, particularly so at the Isle aux Coudres and the Isle Orleans; the North Side of the former is the best Navigation, the South Side being very rapid and rocky, and the Channel not above Two Hundred Yards wide, about six Fathom Water, whereas in the North Channel there is Fifteen Fathom; at the North East End of the latter begin two Sand Banks, which extend a League down the said River; the Channel is between both Banks, and pretty near the Middle of the river, from thence to the Town of Quebec good Navigation, being Fifteen Fathom all the way. The Deponent says there is no possibility of going up said River without the Tide serves of a strong North East Wind, especially at the Two aforementioned Islands. In September, 1752, the Deponent was in Quebec and endeavoring to agree with some Indians to convey to him his own country, New England, which the Indians acquainted the Governor of, who immediately ordered him to Goal, where he lay three Months. At the Time of his Releasment the French were preparing for a March to Belle Riviere, or Ohio, when he offered his services, but was rejected by the Governor General Le Cain. He the said General setting out for Mount Real about the Third of January, 1753, to view and forward the Forces; the Deponent applied to Major Ramsey of Liberty to go with the Army to the Ohio, who told him he would ask Lieutenant De Rouy, who agreed to it, upon which he was equipped as a Soldier and sent with a Detachment of three Hundred Men to Montreal, under the Commandor Monsieur Babeer, who set off immediately with said Command by Land and Ice for Lake Erie; they in their Way stopped a couple of Days to refresh themselves at Cadarahqui Fort, also at Taranto, on the North side of Lake Ontario, then at Niagara Fort Fifteen Days;

from thence set off by Water, being April, and arrived at Chadakoin, on Lake Erie, where they were ordered to fell Timber, and prepare it for building a Fort there according to the Governor's Instructions; but Mr. Morang, coming up with Five Hundred Men and Twenty Indians put a Stop to the erecting a Fort at that Place by reason of his not liking the Situation, and the River of Chadakoins being too shallow to carry any Craft with Provisions, &ca., to Belle Riviere. The deponent says there arose a warm Debate between Messieurs Baber and Morang thereon, the first insisting on building a Fort there agreeable to his Instructions, otherwise on Morang's giving him an Instrument in Writing to satisfy the Governor in that Point, which Morang did, and then ordered Monsieur Mercie, who was both Commissary and Engineer, to go along said Lake and look for a good Situation, which he found and returned in three days, it being Fifteen Leagues to the South-West of Chadakoin; they were then all ordered to repair thither; when they arrived there were about Twenty Indians fishing in the Lake, who immediately quit it on seeing the French; they fell to Work and built square Fort of Chestnut Logs, squared and lapped over each other to the Height of Fifteen Feet, it is about one hundred and twenty square – a Log House in each square – a Gate to the Southward and another to the Northward, not one Port Hole cut in any part of it when finished – they called it Fort *La Presque Isle*.

“The Indian who came from Canada with them returned very much out of Temper, owing as it was said among the Army to Morang's dogged Behavior and Ill Usage of them (but they the Indians said at Oswego it was owing to the French's misleading them by telling them Falsehoods, which they said they had now found out) and left them. As soon as the Fort was finished they marched Southward, cutting a Wagon Road through a fine level Country twenty-one Miles to the River Aux Boeufs (leaving Captain Derponteny with an hundred Men to garrison the Fort La Briske Isle); they fell to work cutting Timber, Boards, &ca., for another Fort, while Mr. Morang ordered Monsieur Bite with Fifty Men to a Place called by the Indians Ganagarahhare,* or the Banks of Belle Riviere, where the Riviere Aux Boeufs empties into it; in the meantime Morang had Ninety large Boats of Battoes made to carry down the Baggage and Provisions, &ca., to said Place. Monsieur Bite on coming to said Indian Place was asked what he wanted or intended. He, upon answering it was their Father the Governor of Canada's Intention to build a Trading House for their and all their Brethren's Convenience, was told by the Indians that the Lands were their's, and that they would not have them build upon it. The said Monsieur Bite returning, met two Englishmen, Traders, with their Horses and Goods, whom they Bound and brought Prisoners to Morang, who ordered them to Canada in Irons.† The said Brite reported to Morang the Situation was good, but the Water in the Riviere aux Boeuf to low at the time to carry down any Craft with Provisions, &ca.; a few Days after the deponent says that about one hundred Indians called by the French the Loos,‡ came to the Fort La Riviere aux Boeuf to see what the French was doing; that Monsieur Morang treated them very kindly, and then asked them to carry down some Stores, &ca., to the Belle Riviere on Horseback for Payment, which he immediately advanced them on their undertaking to do it. They set off with full Loads, but never delivered them to the French which incensed them very much, being not only a Loss but a great Disappointment. Morang, a man of a very peevish, choleric Disposition, meeting with those and other Crosses, and finding the Season of the Year too far advanced to build the Third Fort, called all his Officers together and told them that as he had engaged and firmly promised the Governor to finish the Three Forts that Season, and not being able to fulfill the same was both Afraid and Ashamed to return to Canada, being sensible he had now forfeited the Governor's Favour forever; wherefore rather than live in Disgrace he begged they would take him (as he then sat in a Carriage made for him, being very Sick some time) and seat him in the middle of the Fort and then set Fire to it and let him perish in the Flames, which was rejected by the Officers, who, (the Deponent says) had not the least regard for him, as he had behaved very ill to them all in general. The Deponent further saith that about eight Days before he left the Fort La Briske Isle, Chevalier La Crake arrived Express from Canada in a birch Canoe worked by Ten Men, with orders (as the Deponent afterwards heard) from the Governor Le Cain to Morang to make all the Preparation possible against the Spring of the year to build them two Forts as Chadokoin one of them by Lake Erie and the other at the End of the Carrying Place at Lake Chadokoin, which Carrying Place is Fifteen Miles from one Lake to the Other. The said Chevalier brought for Monsieur Morang a Cross of St. Louis which the Rest of the

* This is the original name of the ancient Indian village of Venango, now Franklin. See Chapter on History of Franklin.

† These are the two men spoken of in Washington's journal, given in a subsequent chapter, named by him John Trotter and James McClocklan.

‡ Spelled by the French, Pousps. See Chapter XII.

Officers would not allow hi to take until the Governor was acquainted of his Conduct and Behavior. The Chevalier returned immediately of Canada. After which, the Deponent saith, when the Fort La Riviere aux Boeuifs was finished, (which is built of Wood Stockaded Triangularwise and has Two Log Houses in the inside), Monsieur Morang ordered all the Party to return to Canada for the Winter Season except Three Hundred Men which he kept to Garrison both Forts and Prepare Materials against the Spring for the building other Forts. He also sent Jean Coeur, an Officer and Interpreter, to stay the Winter among the Indians on Ohio, in order to prevail with them not only to allow the Building Forts on their Lands, but also persuade them if possible to join the French Interest against the English. The Deponent further saith that on the twenty-eighth of October last, he set off for Canada under the command of Captain Deman, who had the command of twenty-two Battoes with Twenty Men in each Battoe, the Remainder being Seven Hundred and Sixty Men followed in a few Days, the thirtieth avvived at Chadokoin, where they staid four Days, during which time Monsieur Peon with Two Hundered Men, cut a Wagon Road over the Carrying Place from Lake Erie to Lake Chadakoin being Fifteen Miles, viewed the Situation, which proved to their liking, so set of November the Third for Niagara where We arrived the Sixth. It is a very poor rotten old Wooden Fort with Twenty-Five Men in it, they talked of rebuilding it next Summer. We left Fifty Men there to build Battoes for the Army against the Spring, also a Store House for Provisions, Stores, &ca.; staid here two Days, then set off for Canada. All Hands being fatigued with rowing all night they were ordered to put ashore to Breakfast within a Mile of Oswego Garrison. At which time the Deponent saith that He with a Frenchman slipped off and got to the Fort where they were both concealed until the Army passed; from thence he came here.

“The Deponent further saith that besides the Three Hundred Men with which he went up first under the command of Monsieur Babeer, and the Five Hundred Men Morang brought up afterwards, there came a different Times with Stores, &ca., Seven Hundred more, which made in all Fifteen Hundred Men, Three Hundred of which remained to Garrison the Two Forts, Fifty at Niagara, the Rest all returned to Canada, and talked of Going up again this winter, so as to be there the beginning of April. They had Two Six Pounders and Seven Four Pounders which they intended to have planted in the Fort at Ganagarahhare, which was to have been called the Governor’s Fort, but as that was not built they left the Guns in the Fort La Riviere aux Boeuifs, where Morang commands; further the Deponent saith not.