

Grosse Pointe's First Settlers: From Whence Did They Come?

By Jean Dodenhoff

In the 1990 United States Census, only 6.8% of residents in the five Grosse Pointes claimed to have French ancestry. This small number reflects the changes which have occurred in the ethnic composition of these communities over the years. In the 1750s when the first Europeans settled this region, most Grosse Pointers were either French or French Canadian. Many of them had come west from the Quebec villages to which their French forefathers had emigrated 50 to 100 years before. The following is a survey of Grosse Pointe's pioneers from 1750 to 1770, where they settled along Lake St. Clair, their marital opportunities at Fort Pontchartrain, their settlement patterns in French Canada, and their family origins in Europe.

The Founders (1750)

DURING THE 1740s, France's King Louis XV became concerned about British incursions into the Great Lakes regions, which he considered to be French. He believed that increasing the number of his countrymen on the frontier would correct this situation. Thus, in May 1749, as ordered by the King, Quebec's Governor General posted the following proclamation in villages along the St. Lawrence River:

"Every man who will settle in Detroit shall receive gratuitously one spade, one axe, one ploughshare, one large and one small wagon. He will make an advance of other tools to be paid for in two years only. He will be given a cow of which he will return the increase, also a sow; seed will be advanced the first year to be returned at the third harvest. The women and

*children will be supported one year. Those will be deprived of the liberality of the King who shall give themselves up to trade in place of agriculture."*¹

The Trombley brothers, Pierre, Augustin and Ambroise, were habitants, or citizen farmers, on the lower St. Lawrence River. In 1750, they accepted the King's "invitation" to settle near Detroit. With their families, they traveled aboard royal canoes to Fort Pontchartrain, the strategic fur trading post that later became the City of Detroit. Accompanying the Trombleys on this journey was Guillaume LaForest. He had married their niece, Marguerite Trombley, in May 1746, just as several years earlier, in February 1741, Augustin Trombley had wed LaForest's older sister, Marie Judith. The other Trombley brothers had married cousins. Pierre took Magdeleine Simard as his wife in 1733 while



A view of the St. Lawrence River. Photograph by Dr. Charles F. Dodenhoff.

Ambroise became the husband of Marguerite Simard in 1744.

According to the records of Robert Navarre, Fort Pontchartrain's Royal Notary, these four men received their authorized King's Rations in August 1750 and left the Fort for homesteads on the Grand Marais, or Great Marsh. Thus, the Trombleys and LaForests became the first permanent settlers of Grosse Pointe. Located near the junction of the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, their farms, like most properties surrounding the Fort, belonged to the Crown. For use of the land, the Trombleys and LaForests, were required to pay annual "Cens et Rentes." These usage fees were adapted from the Coutume de Paris, or French common law.

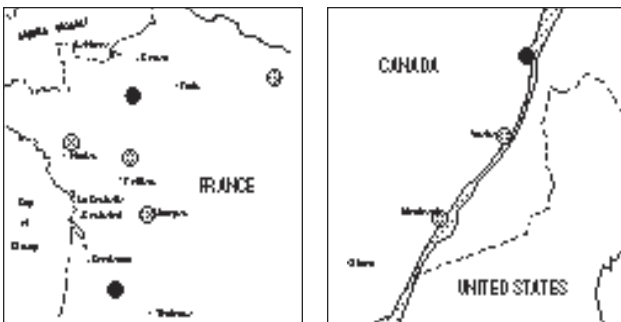
The Trombleys and LaForests came to Lake St. Clair from Baie St. Paul, a rural village on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River halfway between the City of Quebec and the

Atlantic Ocean. Though a closely-knit group after arriving in North America, they had ancestors from very different parts of France. Before the mid-seventeenth century, the first Pierre Trombley had emigrated to Canada from the small northwestern town of Tourouvre, which was located inland on the border of Lower Normandy. About the same time, in southwestern France below Bordeaux, the first Pierre LaForest dit LaBranche² had departed from Agen on the Guyonne River. Perhaps, the two men met at Beaupre near the City of Quebec. Trombley signed an "engagement," or labor contract, in that village in 1647; LaForest appeared there in 1651.

The First Wave of Settlers (1751–1758)

The 1750s were a time of considerable uncertainty on the Lower Great Lakes. To the east, clashes between the French and British over the profitable fur trade had increased. In 1754, these escalated into a full-scale conflict known in North America as "The French and Indian War." Because of its prime location, Fort Pontchartrain became a major supply post for the French participants.

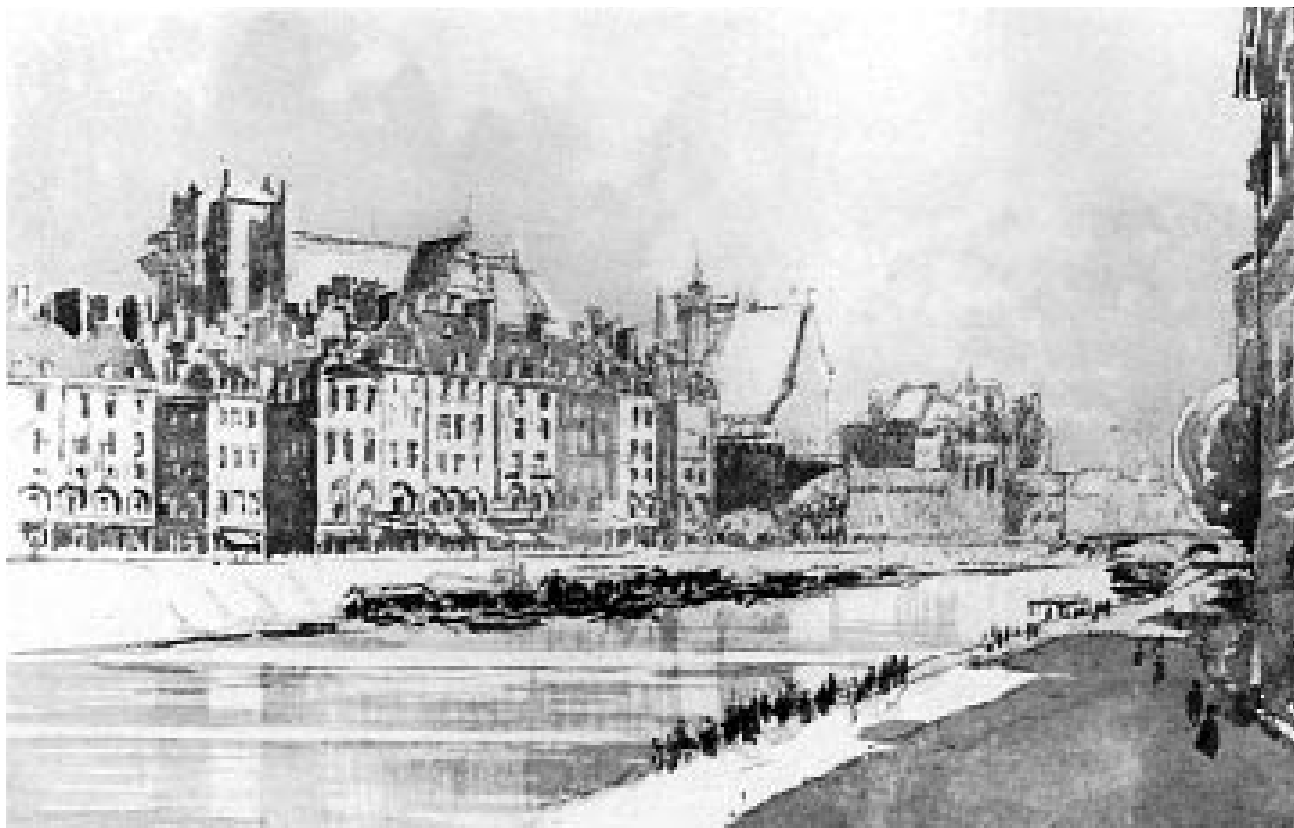
Neither the war, nor the disputes which proceeded it however, dissuaded other habitants from joining the Trombleys and LaForests in the wilderness known locally as "Grosse Pointe."³ Among the earliest to arrive was Antoine Deshêtres, a gunsmith, who had previously lived on the St. Joseph River near the future site of Niles, Michigan.



Founders (●) and 1st Wave of Settlers (○)

¹ Paré, Father George, "The Cicotte Book." Bulletin-Detroit Historical Society. Vol. XIV, No. 5 p. 10.

² French habitants were often given nicknames, or "dit" names, which were added to their surnames to distinguish them from other family members, to emphasize a predominate characteristic or to indicate their place of origin.



A view of the port city of Nantes. Illustration from Henry James' *A Little Tour in France* (1900).

In 1751, he obtained a King's Ration and moved with his Montreal wife, Charlotte Chevalier dit Chesne, and their children to Lake St. Clair. Though his ancestral home in France is unknown, his birthplace is documented. He was born in New England. How this happened remains a mystery. Perhaps, prior to his birth, Deshêtres' mother had been captured during an Iroquois Indian raid into French Canada and taken south to the British Colonies.

Joseph Davignon dit Lafeuillade married a young Fort resident, Marie Anne Lemelin in April 1754, and joined the fledgling Grosse Pointe community. Using his King's Ration, the couple settled on land below present-day Moran Road.⁴ Though from French Canada, only Lafeuillade's ancestry in the Old World is verifiable. He was a descendant of Louis Davignon dit Lafeuillade, a soldier from the diocese of Limoges. This city in west central France, was an early center

for enamel work and porcelain.

Another early pioneer, Julien Freton dit Nantais, traveled to his new home directly from France. He arrived in Grosse Pointe in 1758 from Moisdon, a Brittany village above the port city of Nantes. Located some distance from other farms, Freton's homestead was on the wooded shore west of present-day Vernier Road. A year after arriving, he married a fifteen-year-old Grosse Pointer, Marie Joseph Gastignon dit Duchene. She was the daughter of François Gastignon dit Duchene.

In 1759, according to the St. Anne Catholic Church Marriage Register, François Gastignon dit Duchene and his family had already established a farm in Grosse Pointe. Located to the east of present-day Cadieux Road, his fields were next to those of Michigan's first German residents, the Yaxs. Duchene was born in Montreal, the city to which

³ Grosse Pointe means "Big Point." In the eighteenth century at the junction of the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, there was a large point on the Grand Marais. It was this landmark from which the name of "Grosse Pointe" derived.

⁴ Approximate property locations were determined by plotting acreage noted in eighteenth century census and comparing the results with known private claims assigned by the United States government between 1808 and 1812.

⁵ The 1762 regional census shows a Dubois which some have considered to be Alexis Dubois. However, genealogical data concerning Lienard dit Durbois appears to fit the census entry more closely.

his father, Leonard, had immigrated by 1697. The elder Duchene had come from the diocese of Tours, a famous university center in north central France. By 1738, his son was at Fort Pontchartrain for there, in January 1739, he married Marie Joseph David. She, too, was born in Montreal.

A final pioneer, Jean Baptiste Lienard dit Durbois, had marital ties to Grosse Pointe. At Fort Pontchartrain in May 1754, he married Anne Deshêtres, the daughter of Antoine Deshêtres. Baptismal certificates of the Durbois children suggest that the family lived on Lake St. Clair as early as 1755. A 1762 regional census indicates that their farm was on land near present-day Kerby Road. Durbois came west from the village of St. Foy near the City of Quebec. His grandfather, Sebastian, immigrated to Canada before 1655 leaving behind a home at St. Michel in Lorraine on France's northeastern border.⁵

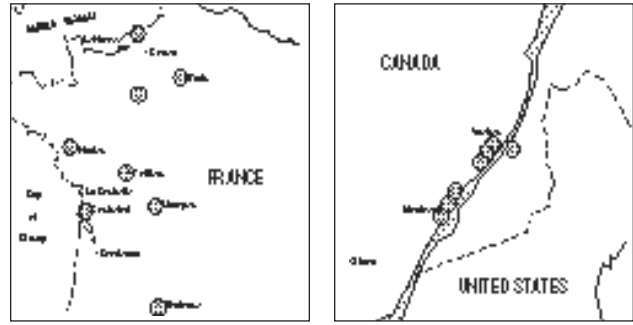
The Second Wave of Settlers (By 1762)

By 1759 the tide of "The French and Indian War" had turned in favor of the English. They captured the City of Quebec on September 13 and took Montreal the following year on September 6. Two months later, on November 29, 1760, Major Robert Rogers and his famous Rangers arrived at Fort Pontchartrain and placed it under British control. Despite a formal treaty between England and France in 1763, the frontier remained subject to a military government. Fortunately, the habitants in Grosse Pointe retained the right to occupy and cultivate lands assigned under the French regime. The fees which they paid for this privilege were used to support the British garrison at Fort Pontchartrain.

The Fort's first British Commandant, Captain Donald Campbell, was generally respected by Fort residents. But, he was required by his superiors to restrict participation in



The port of La Rochelle, Bay of Biscay.
Illustration from George Musgrave's *Nooks and Corners in Old France* (1867).



2nd Wave of Settlers (●)

the fur trade. While some habitants left the Fort in protest, most, due to the stability which came with peace, took up agriculture as an alternative to the fur trade.

By the early 1760s, much of the shore east from the Grand Marais to present-day Kerby Road was in the hands of habitants. A 1762 regional census listed at least ten new individuals with grants along the lake. Of those who actually occupied this land, the majority—Nicholas Patenaude, Jean Baptiste Aide dit Créqui, Jean Baptist Prudhomme dit Nantais and Pierre Estève dit Lajeunesse, Jr.—settled on the shore between present-day Fisher and Kerby Roads. Some, including Charles Moran dit Grimand and Luke Antoine Rivard, selected plots further west close to present-day Cadiieux Road. Though not listed in the 1762 census, Jean Baptiste Rivard, a cousin of Luke Antoine, obtained a farm next to that of the Yaxs. There, in January 1763, he became a proud father for the first time.

Three of the more affluent grantees, Guillaume St. Bernard, Claude Jean Gouin and André Charles Barthe, had homesteads closer to Fort Pontchartrain. Aware of land values, they, like Luke Antoine Rivard, acquired extra property in Grosse Pointe. They chose their sites carefully. St. Bernard preferred the Grand Marais next to fields belonging to Pierre Trombley, Gouin selected acreage between the farms of Pierre Sr. and his two sons, Pierre Jr. and Louis Michel. To the east, Rivard and Barthe chose properties near present-day Fisher and Moran Roads.

These men, Grosse Pointe's first "real estate developers", had a typical French Canadian approach to improving the land. They selected one plot as a primary farm. Since there were few nearby markets for extra wheat and corn, they treated their other properties as "summer farms" to be cleared whenever they had the time. Once suitable for cultivation, the use of the property and its buildings could be sold at a profit or bequeathed to a family member.

If land was of primary importance to the habitants, so too were families. While Prudhomme and Luke Antoine Rivard married in French Canada, their compatriots preferred to seek wives from established households on the frontier. Gouin was the first of the group to marry. At the Fort's St.

GROSSE POINTE'S FIRST SETTLERS



A typical French-Canadian village. Illustration from Beckles Willson's *Quebec: The Laurentian Province* (1913).

Anne Catholic Church, he became the husband of Marie Joseph Cuillerier dit Beaubien in 1742. Five years later, Barthe succeeded in winning the hand of Marie Theresa Campau. In 1754, her cousin, Marie Josephe Campau, became the wife of St. Bernard. The year 1762 was an important one for Grosse Pointe marriages. Neighbors, Créqui and Patenaude, wed two of Grosse Pointe's Duchene sisters, Magdeleine and Catherine, while Jean Baptiste Rivard took Michael Yax's daughter, Marie Catherine, as his wife. Moran dit Grimand, a confirmed bachelor, waited until 1767 to marry. His wife, Marguerite Simard was the widow of Grosse Pointe pioneer Ambroise Trombley. Except for the last two women, each of these brides had family from the Montreal area.

Habitant wives had much to do with the development of Grosse Pointe. They worked beside their husbands clearing the land, cultivating the fields and planting the orchards which later became so famous. Though restricted by the British, habitant men continued to prefer trading and trapping. They were frequently away for extended periods, leaving their wives to tend the fields and care for the children. Lacking a local church, women had the added responsibility of teaching their families the tenets of Catholicism, the official religion under the previous French regime.⁶

Most Grosse Pointe habitants came from Catholic settlements along the St. Lawrence River. Several of the pioneers had connections to the Montreal area. Patenaude was originally a resident at Longueuil while Barthe and Prudhomme came from the city proper. The latter married Marguerite

Bigéot dit Dumouchel there in 1758. Some habitants came from villages between Trois Rivieres and the City of Quebec. Créqui was born at Pointe aux Tremblés near Montreal, but his family had its origins downriver at Lotbinière on the South side of the St. Lawrence River. Jean Baptiste Rivard grew up on the opposite bank at Les Grondines while Luke Antoine Rivard spent his childhood further west at Bastican. Between these two villages was Ste. Anne de la Perade where Gouin and Moran dit Grimard originally lived. This hamlet was also the site of Luke Antoine Rivard's marriage to Genevieve Brisson in 1746. Only Lajeunesse, who was born at Fort Pontchartrain, and St. Bernard, who arrived there directly from Europe, were exceptions to this pattern.

Many of these early Grosse Pointe residents were descended from men whose forefathers dwelt in west central France. Until some time before 1663, Gouin's grandfather, Mathurin, lived in Angeliens, a village northeast of Poitiers. Capital for the former Duchy of Aquitaine, Poitiers was the site of considerable strife during the seventeenth century Wars of Religion. Only one progenitor from west central France lived near the Atlantic Ocean. The first Jean Aide dit Créqui was a native of St. Sornin, south of Rochefort. He left France by 1689 probably from nearby LaRochele, the port used by so many to embark for the New World. Northeast of Limoges, near the southern border of Aquitaine, St. Bernard bid good-bye to family and friends at Ambazac in the early 1750s.

Other Grosse Pointe habitants traced their families to northern France. Nicholas Rivard dit Lavigne, the ancestor of Luke Antoine and Jean Baptiste, left the inland village of Tourouvre in 1653. To the northeast, Patenaude's great grandfather, Nicholas, set forth from the Normandy hamlet of Barville on the English Channel about 1650. Pierre Mauran, the grandfather of Moran dit Grimard, was a resident of Paris until he took leave of the capital city some time before 1679. Some 78 years later, Grosse Pointe's Prudhomme embarked from his native city of Nantes, a port on Brittany's Atlantic



3rd Wave of Settlers (●)

⁶ To participate in Catholic rituals and holiday celebrations, Grosse Pointe families had to travel to St. Anne Catholic Church at Fort Pontchartrain.



The City of Quebec. Illustration from *Picturesque America*, edited by William C. Bryant (1874).

coast.

Only two in this Grosse Pointe group had family in southwestern France, and both were late arrivals in North America. A resident of Toulouse, Pierre Estève dit Lajeunesse, Sr. left for New France near the end of the seventeenth century. Barthe's father, Theophile, waited until shortly before 1721 to leave the Pyrennes town of Tarbes.

The Third Wave of Settlers (1763-1769)

In July 1762, Major Henry Gladwin became Commandant at Fort Pontchartrain. His rigid control of the fur trade quickly brought objections from both Indians and habitants. The Ottawa chief, Pontiac, rallied midwestern tribes in the hope of forcing the return of Indian hunting grounds. His conspiracy to capture Fort Pontchartrain in 1763 was thwarted by an informer, but the Indian siege which followed lasted all summer. During the standoff, Pontiac's village was on a farm across from Belle Isle. Indian activity must have frightened the habitants in nearby Grosse Pointe. They likely took refuge at Fort Pontchartrain, further straining its meager resources. With autumn, Pontiac's warriors grew restless, and the chief was compelled to seek peace. Rebuffed by the British, he capitulated and with his followers finally departed in late October. His attempts to marshal new forces proved fruitless, and in 1764, he signed an unofficial peace treaty before returning briefly to Fort

Pontchartrain. The next year, he formally accepted British authority.

Perhaps concerned for their safety, few settlers came to Grosse Pointe between 1762 and 1769. Among those who ignored the possible danger was Louis Greffard. Yet, even he waited until 1765 to bring his new wife, Marguerite, to a homestead beyond present-day Vernier Road. The daughter of Pierre Casse dit St. Aubin, she probably would have selected a location closer to other Grosse Pointers. However, Greffard apparently preferred the untrodden forest. He came to the frontier from St. François de la Riviere du Sud on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River below the City of Quebec. His great grandfather, Louis Greffard dit LeCocq, had emigrated there by 1634 from the village of Chaille sous les Ormeaux in west central France north of La Rochelle.

The next arrival in Grosse Pointe was Joseph Marie Saucier. About 1767, he settled east of the LaForest farm on property formerly developed by Luke Antoine Rivard. In August of that year, he joined the Trombley family when he wed Marie Genevieve, the third child of Ambroise Trombley. Saucier was a native of Riviere Ouelle across the St. Lawrence River from Baie St. Paul. His great grandfather, Louis Saucier, had traveled to the New World from Paris by 1671.

Alexander Blondin dit Ellair was the next to appear along Lake St. Clair. About 1768, he took over the land developed by Prudhomme. In January of that year, he married

Grosse Pointe's Earliest Settlers: From 1750-1769

	Location in Canada	Location in France
FOUNDERS		
Pierre Trombley	Baie St. Paul	Tourouvre
Augustin Trombley	Baie St. Paul	Tourouvre
Amboise Trombley	Baie St. Paul	Tourouvre
Guillaume LaForest	Baie St. Paul	Agen

FIRST WAVE OF SETTLERS 1751-1758

Antoine Deshêtres	(New England)	?
Joseph Davignon dit Lafeuillade	?	Limoges
Julien Freton	----	Moisdon
Francois Gastignon dit Duchene	Montreal	Tours
Jean Baptist Lienard dit Durbois	St. Foy	St. Michel (Lorraine)

SECOND WAVE OF SETTLERS BY 1762

Nicholas Patenaude	Longueuil	Barville
Jean Baptiste Aide dit Créqui	Point aux Tremblés (Lotbiniere)	St. Sornin (Rochefort)
Jean Baptiste Prudhomme dit Nantais	Montreal	Nantes
Pierre Estève dit Lajeunesse, Jr.	(Ft. Pontchartrain)	Toulouse
Charles Moran dit Grimard	Ste. Anne de la Perade	Paris
Luke Antoine Rivard	Bastican	Tourouvre
Jean Baptiste Rivard	Les Grondines	Tourouvre
Guillaume St. Bernard	----	Ambazac
Claude Jean Gouin	Ste Anne de la Perade	Angeliers
Andre Charles Barthe	Montreal	Tarbes

THIRD WAVE OF SETTLERS 1763 - 1769

Louis Greffard	St. François de la Riviere du Sud	Chaille sous les Ormieux
Joseph Marie Saucier	Riviere Ouelle	Paris
Alexandre Blondin dit Ellair	Terrebonne	Nouvelle
Ignatius Thibault	Chateau Richer	Rouen

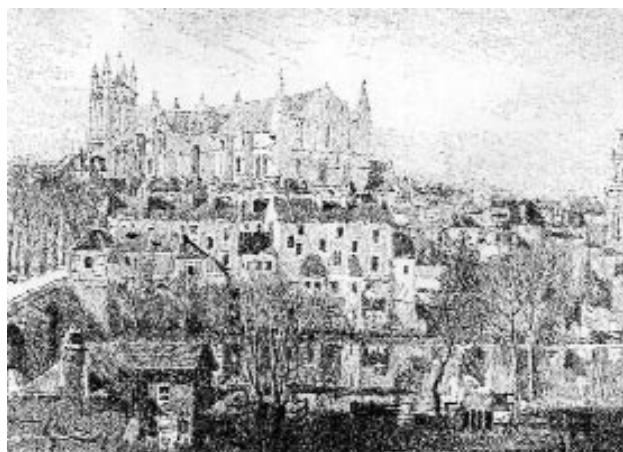
Duchene's daughter, Marie Joseph. She had lost her first husband, Julien Freton, in July of the previous year and needed a father for her three young children. Before settling in Grosse Pointe, Ellair had been a resident of Terrebonne near Montreal. His paternal grandfather, Hilaire Sureau had immigrated to Quebec by 1691 from Nouville, a small town northeast of Poitiers.

Ignatius Thibault also settled in Grosse Pointe about 1768. That same year, he married Marie Catherine St. Aubin, a cousin of Greffard's wife and the daughter of Jacques Casse dit St. Aubin. The couple's farm was on the edge of the Grand Marais near the present Detroit city limits. Thibault's childhood home had been at Chateau Richer downriver from the City of Quebec. His ancestors had come from the Normandy cathedral town of Rouen where his great grandfather, Guillaume, lived until some time before 1655.

Conclusions

In the years between 1750 and 1770, at least 23 pioneers acquired the right to develop farms in the wilderness along Lake St. Clair. While a few, like Barthe and Gouin, could be called "land speculators" since their homes were elsewhere in the region, most of Grosse Pointe's founders lived on their lands year round. In the 1750s, only a few families occupied scattered farms along the lake. The Trombleys and LaForests, as the first to arrive there, likely promoted the region, and by the 1760s homesteads lined much of the shore between the Grand Marais and present-day Kerby Road. In the later 1760s, the farms of Prudhomme and Luke Antoine Rivard changed hands, and a few isolated clearings, like that of Greffard, could be found east of the primary settlement.

Despite being some distance from Fort Pontchartrain,



The cathedral at Poitiers. Illustration from Henry James' *A Little Tour in France* (1900).

GROSSE POINTE'S FIRST SETTLERS



The Hotel de Ville, Paris, 17th century.

Illustration from Maria Lansdale's *The World's Famous Places and Peoples: Paris* (1898).

Grosse Pointers were affected by political events of the time. King Louis XV provided the initial impetus for settlement with his gifts of equipment and stock in 1750 just as, ten years later, the shift from French to British rule caused some at Fort Pontchartrain to seek less regimented opportunities in Grosse Pointe. During the 1760s, in contrast, Chief Pontiac's tribal alliances and hostile attitude had the opposite effect. Grosse Pointe experienced a slow rate of expansion for several years following Pontiac's 1763 siege of the Fort.

Out of necessity, Grosse Pointe's pioneers were quick to marry. Most selected their spouses from either Fort Pontchartrain residents or Grosse Pointe settlers. Of the 23 granted land, only six married while in French Canada. None who came directly to the frontier from France brought wives with them. Frequently, the new arrivals selected daughters from the region's most affluent households. In addition to members of the Campau and St. Aubin families, Grosse Pointe's Duchene sisters apparently were highly esteemed since four Grosse Pointers married into that family. Often habitant couples had ancestral ties to a specific locale on the St. Lawrence River. Patenaude and his wife, Catherine, for example, had connections to the Montreal area. Indeed, the families of many habitant brides came from that region.

Most of Grosse Pointe's early residents emanated from small communities along both sides of the St. Lawrence River in French Canada. While some lived for a time at Fort Pontchartrain before moving out along Lake St. Clair, only one pioneer, Lajeunesse, was actually born at the fur trading settlement. There were other exceptions as well. Deshêtres came to his new home from Michigan's St. Joseph River. Freton and St. Bernard, Grosse Pointe's only true

Frenchmen, arrived on the frontier directly from Europe.

Of those living in Quebec communities, a significant number were second or third generation French Canadians. Those arriving in Grosse Pointe during the 1750s or later 1760s had their origins in villages near or downriver from the City of Quebec. The village of Baie St. Paul was particularly well represented because of the Trombleys and LaForests, who became the founders of Grosse Pointe. Settlers who appeared by the early 1760s were often from hamlets between Trois Rivieres and the city of Quebec. Given the close proximity of villages between Bastican and Les Grondines, it seems likely that families from this region were acquainted before coming to Grosse Pointe. Certainly, both Gouin and Moran dit Grimard were originally residents of Ste. Anne de la Perade. Further upriver, Montreal and its surrounding territory were also a source of habitants such as Duchene in the late 1750s and Ellair in the 1760s.

The European ancestors of most early Grosse Pointers, except the Yaxs who were German, had their beginnings in western France with equal numbers inhabiting its northern and central regions. Most came from small villages. A few, including Thibault and Duchene, had their origins in large cities or provincial towns. In the north, the capital of Paris and the rural village of Tourouvre each were home to two Grosse Pointe forebears. Freton and Saucier had connections to the former while the Trombleys and the Rivards had family ties to the latter. Further south, the region around Poitiers and Limoges provided the ancestral source for men like Gouin and Lafeuillade. Only four, Patenaude, Prudhomme, Créqui and Greffard, had forebears who lived near the sea. A few such as LaForest and Estève had ancestors in France's south-



Rue de l'Épicerie, city of Rouen. Illustration from Ernest Peixotto's *Through the French Provinces* (1909).

western provinces, but only one, Durbois, had antecedents from its eastern border.

Descendants of pioneers, like the Trombleys and the Rivards, continue to live in Grosse Pointe today. Though all that is left of their ancestors' farms are subdivisions which follow the original property lines or streets which bear their early owners' names, the community's French tradition remains strong. New residents of Grosse Pointe, regardless of their nationality, quickly learn of the areas French origins. The tradition of French and French Canadian pioneers, who arrived between 1750 to 1770, is likely to remain a significant part of Grosse Pointe's heritage for many years to come.

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Since 1980, Jean Dodenhoff has held the position of Curator at the Grosse Pointe Historical Society. The skills learned at Smith College and at Wayne State University, combined with an interest in genealogy and local history, led Ms. Dodenhoff to the research and writing of this article.