

4-1-1942

Jacques Clamorgan: Colonial Promoter of the Northern Border of New Spain

A. P. Nasatir

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Nasatir, A. P.. "Jacques Clamorgan: Colonial Promoter of the Northern Border of New Spain." *New Mexico Historical Review* 17, 2 (). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol17/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOL. XVII

APRIL, 1942

No. 2

JACQUES CLAMORGAN: COLONIAL PROMOTER OF THE NORTHERN BORDER OF NEW SPAIN

By A. P. NASATIR

IN DEFENSE of its vast empire in North America, Spain was forced to occupy both California and Louisiana in the latter part of the 18th century.

British aggression on the Pacific coast culminated in the Nootka Sound Controversy. This affair was part and parcel of, and intimately linked with, the Anglo-Spanish economic rivalry in the upper Mississippi and Missouri valleys. In this colony (Louisiana), rivalry between the Spaniards and the British reached its climax in intense economic warfare between rival traders of the two nations. Here on the northeastern frontier of colonial New Spain, merchants from St. Louis bore the brunt of aggression from the British posts.

Rich treasures in furs from the upper reaches of the Mississippi and Missouri valleys as well as the precious metals of New Mexico were an irresistible attraction to the enterprising British and Scotch traders from Canada. From Montreal, Detroit, Chicago, Mackinac, Prairie du Chien, and the Lake of the Woods, British merchandise was carried by resourceful British traders deep into Spanish domain. Not only were the British agents aggressive, but they carried with them desirable, superior goods. Moreover, this merchandise could be sold at a very reasonable price. British traders were also British agents who were

backed in their penetrations of Spanish territory by a trade-conscious home government. Literally hundreds of British merchants plied the rivers and streams to the west of the Mississippi. Hence the great bulk of furs extracted from the upper valleys above the Des Moines and Platte rivers found their way to the Great Lakes posts rather than to Spanish New Orleans.

In marked contrast, the profits-starved merchants of the Spanish posts were neglected, hampered and bound by the rigid stupidity of their own government. Spain never discarded paternalism in her control of the colonies. Although anxious for wealth and for domination of the Indian tribes, Spain adhered to classical mercantilism. The outmoded Spanish economic system was already crushed under a great weight of taxes, poor merchandise highly priced, involved, complicated and expensive transportation routes, a cumbersome organization and a paternalistic hierarchy. To these ills must be added the evils of nepotism, graft, inefficiency, ignorance, and shortsightedness.

In the face of such a burden, trade could survive only in an empire which was in fact a closed corporation. A rigidly enforced monopoly and strict control of the Indians were necessary features of the Spanish economic system. Down to the period of the American Revolution, Spain had been highly successful in holding the savages of her northeastern frontier to allegiance and had been able to exclude all foreigners. In fact the Spaniards took the aggressive and held a part of the Indian trade to the east of the Mississippi. When Spain, however, became involved in costly wars, she always found it necessary to withdraw support from this remote frontier. Although Louisiana was prized as a key to the wealth of New Mexico, Spain naturally forsook the defense of this exposed frontier in favor of more highly prized possessions.

Left to their own devices, the Spaniards of the Mississippi valley were unable, on account of the lack of money and merchandise, to maintain their advantage in the

struggle with the Britishers for the control of the Indians and profitable trade with them. Therefore it is not surprising to find that at the close of the American Revolution the Spanish traders had not only lost their trade east of the Mississippi river, but that as well within territory distinctly under their own jurisdiction west of the river.

Thus Spain had the difficult task of defending a long frontier line and an immense territory against an aggressive and well equipped rival. The province could expect neither troops, nor aid from the decadent court of Charles IV. Furthermore the Americans were becoming a menace to Spanish sovereignty in the tremendous surge of their westward movement, and the insidious propaganda of the French Revolution created fear throughout Spanish America. The situation of the Spaniards in the Mississippi valley was critical indeed as the last decade of the eighteenth century opened.

Under Governor Estéban Miró at New Orleans and his lieutenant at St. Louis, Manuel Pérez, half-hearted and time worn methods were applied for the relief of this desperate situation. One or two or three small forts were planned to be erected at strategic entrances used by the wily British. The idea was simply to keep the English out. But as Godoy was later very aptly to describe the situation, "you cannot lock up an open field." Intrigues with the American Westerners and counter-colonization of Americans, Germans, Flemings and even Britons failed to add any real security.

Into this dismal and desperate situation stepped the Baron de Carondelet appointed governor of Louisiana in 1791. Carondelet was a nepotistic appointee with a French accent and a female handwriting, with a fear for any slight rumor, but with a facile pen that tires the researcher who plows through the thousands of lengthy letters: in writing, Carondelet made a vain effort to arouse the Spanish government into a vigorous defense of its own empire. The genial Zenon Trudeau was appointed to the commandancy

of Upper Louisiana. Trudeau, who had many fine qualities and a fund of common sense unusual in such appointees, succeeded where others had failed miserably.

Under these two leaders, the business elements of St. Louis and New Orleans were given renewed heartening and the Spaniards assumed an aggressive role. A workable plan was needed: Spain had to act to preserve its empire. To oust the foreigners, to garner in renewed profits, to gain the friendship of the Indians, to explore the domain and carry the Spanish flag to the uttermost limits of its jurisdiction—these were the prime objectives of Lieutenant-Governor Trudeau.

Into this desperate situation stepped also an aggressive, capable, enterprising, and far-sighted promoter—Jacques Philippe Clamorgan. Clamorgan, Clarmorgan, Glenmorgan, Clenmorgan, Claimorgan, Morgan (all variations of the same name, Jacques or Santiago Clamorgan) indicate the obscurity of his birth and nationality. Furthermore, the fact that he was either born or spent his early life in Guadelupe Island and the West Indies gives some credence to the belief that he was of Portuguese stock. Quite probably he was of mixed Welsh, Portuguese, and French blood. He may have carried a trace of Negro blood as well.

Of his early life, little is known. In the present documentation he emerges into history as a merchant in the West Indies. As early as 1780 he became associated with Thompson and Company of Kingston, Jamaica, probably in the slave trade between that island and New Orleans. He was also associated with Marmillion and Company of New Orleans.

He seemed to have enjoyed a good reputation, for in the records of the court at New Orleans no doubt is indicated about collecting 2,500 dollars in debts from him even though he was out of the country at the time. He was back in Spanish Louisiana by 1783, and in the latter part of that year, or very early in 1784, he ascended to Upper Louisiana in company with his friend and associate, Francois Marmillion,

merchant of St. Louis. Clamorgan himself tells us in 1793 that he had been a resident of Illinois for more than ten years.

Because of his business acumen, past reputation, and perhaps some money, Clamorgan quickly came to be a well-known and respected merchant in the Spanish Illinois country. His interests soon spread into many parts of the upper Mississippi valley. In 1783 he was empowered to act as proxy for, and was given power of attorney for, Gabriel Cerré, of one of the best known families in St. Geneviève. Four years later he instituted court proceedings against Pierre La Coste of Michilimacinac for the sum of 15,947 livres and 14 sous. Many other financial transactions could be cited, but Clamorgan was interested in real estate as well. He purchased some property soon after settling in Upper Louisiana. This acquisition was but the beginning of his land and real estate speculation which eventually topped the million arpent figure. He early took an interest in civic affairs and made donations to, and became a warden of, the church in Ste. Geneviève.

Thus we see Jacques Clamorgan as a slave dealer, fur-trader, merchant, financier, land speculator; and although he never married, he was father of four children. He was to become known in Louisiana as a statesman, an explorer and a promoter.

Clamorgan was endowed with a tremendous imagination, together with an illusive pen and a glib tongue. His ability to put vast dreams onto paper and persuade all of their reality was envied by everyone. He was respected by all but he was not accepted socially by the aristocratic French creoles of the province. This was less a reflection upon his charming personality than upon his well-stocked harem of colored beauties. He was known to be intriguing and at times his probity was somewhat doubted. Usually he was found to be pliant and even servile, but he was accustomed to conducting great operations.

He cultivated the friendship of the important merchants

of New Orleans, Cahokia, Kashkaskia, Michilimackinac, and Montreal. He never failed to get what he wanted from the Spanish officials; if not directly, he achieved his purpose indirectly.

He was engaged in, or dreamed of engaging in, cattle-raising, salt refining, lead mining, agriculture, and he envisaged a strong and populous Spanish frontier in the Mississippi valley. He was the precursor of Lewis and Clark; he traversed Texas; and he engaged in the Santa Fé trade, long before his successors made those trails famous. This island "creole" managed his affairs in such a manner that even his enemies (and they were not few in number) could not fail to recognize his talents.

In 1793 his fellow merchants unanimously chose him as syndic to represent the merchants of St. Louis. Soon afterwards he became the driving force in the movement to restore commerce in the Spanish Illinois and to regain for the king of Spain sovereignty over the Spanish dominions in the Mississippi valley.

But of all his work Clamorgan is best known for his activities in connection with the Mississippi Company. This company was formed for the purpose of ousting the British from Spanish territory and trade; for capturing the trade with the Indians; for discovering a route to the Pacific and joining the Missouri with Mexico and California; to give Clamorgan a chance to get rich while at the same time it offered an opportunity of defending the Spanish against the onrush of the British and Americans, whom the Spanish lived in dread of; and to defend the Spanish empire on its long but undefended and unexplored northernmost frontier; and to protect rich Santa Fé.

It was Clamorgan who suggested the formation of the renowned "Company of the Discoverers and Explorers of the Missouri." In addition, he persuaded a number of merchants of Illinois to take part in the company. Although he was but one of nine members of the company, it was Clamorgan who became its director and managed the bold

schemes of his fertile imagination. In carrying them out he succeeded in financially ruining not only himself but his associates.

The company sent three costly expeditions up the Missouri in an effort to drive the British from Spanish territory, develop the valuable trade of the Upper Missouri Valley, and discover a route to the Pacific Ocean. The first two efforts were complete failures. The third, headed by James Mackay and John Evans, hauled down the British flag from a small fort among the Mandans. Part of this group then began the long trek to the Pacific coast. Had they continued on their planned route they might very well have been successful. This expedition, like the first two was a financial failure. No profits accrued from any of these ventures, which fact, while not forcing Clamorgan to give up hope, melted the financial hearts of his colleagues.

Although he ruined himself in the company, Clamorgan made use of intrigue for personal gain. From the jealousies and envy of the merchants, his associates, and by cleverly rewriting the articles of incorporation of the company, he acquired all but one of the original shares. He petitioned, in the name of the company, for large land grants which were conceded. Eventually these holdings came into his hands. Whenever any individual asked the government for trades which would endanger his bold schemes, Clamorgan not only successfully opposed them but usually got the concessions for the company and for himself. Those who continued to oppose the company found themselves controlled through Clamorgan's ability to advance and furnish merchandise.

He befriended and won to his side Regis Loisel, and more important for a time at least, the wealthy British merchant, Andrew Todd. Backed by the wealth, reputation and recognized ability of Todd, Clamorgan boldly plunged ahead with his schemes. A complete monopoly of the trades of the entire Upper Mississippi valley as well as those of the Upper Missouri valley would bring him wealth and

most certainly would assure the Spanish sovereignty. Believing in this vast plan, he persuaded Todd to back him completely. He then persuaded the Spanish officials to accept Todd. Although in disrepute himself, he persuaded Governor General Carondelet to grant to Todd the exclusive trade of the Upper Mississippi along with reduced import and export duties and other commercial concessions.

Clamorgan got Carondelet to grant further exclusive grants of trade to the Missouri Company as well as a subsidy of 10,000 pesos for 100 militiamen who were to guard forts which Clamorgan envisaged as established along a great arc reaching from the Mississippi river to the Pacific ocean. Moreover he persuaded Carondelet to make several important exceptions to the by-laws of the company.

As a result, Todd, who as a foreigner was specifically excluded, was given an equal share in the company. Carondelet ordered that all merchandise should be purchased through Todd, while Clamorgan revised the by-laws so that he could receive a $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ commission on all transactions of the company. In addition he arranged a contract with Todd whereby he received a high commission on all goods purchased by the company. Thus despite the opposition of the other merchants of St. Louis. Clamorgan grasped into his own hands the monopoly of the Indian trade in both the Upper Missouri and Upper Mississippi valleys. To take care of these advantages and to press for more, Clamorgan reorganized his own affairs and formed "Clamorgan, Loisel and Company" which made the arrangements and asked for concessions when not permitted to, or by, the Missouri Company—Clamorgan thus acting in a dual capacity.

Clamorgan succeeded in this enterprise, in part because he appeared to be fully supported by the resources of Todd, and because the governor was most anxious to oust the British from Spanish domain and to establish a route to the Pacific coast. Needless to say, Clamorgan made the most of Mackay's and Evans' explorations.

But these dreams toppled when Todd died during the yellow fever epidemic at New Orleans in 1796. Todd's heirs and creditors besieged St. Louis and New Orleans to get all they could. They made no effort to continue Todd's enterprise nor his contracts. This was one time that Clamorgan overshot his mark. He was heavily indebted to the Briton, whose heirs and agents forced Clamorgan to the brink of bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, by sheer personality, by long flattering dreamy letters, and by visits to New Orleans, Clamorgan held on to all of the government concessions granted to the company. In fact, he gained more. He was bold enough to propose continuing efforts to defend the Spanish Empire and to discover a route to the Pacific, even in the face of financial ruin.

Clamorgan successfully opposed all of his opponents and kept them from taking advantage of his reverses. When any of his many opponents made claims against him, the results were meagre as no one would ever testify against him. He took advantage of this situation, knowing that if his creditors pressed him he would have to foreclose on his debtors and thereby ruin many of the inhabitants of St. Louis.

Hence even Trudeau supported him. This, to Clamorgan, was the cue to ask for more. He again petitioned for 10,000 pesos, 2,000 pounds of gunpowder a year, and one-half million arpents of land.

At the same time, Clamorgan owed 25,000 pesos to Todd's estate, and another 74,000 pesos to Daniel Clark of New Orleans. The latter brought suit but Clamorgan hurried to the capital and effected a settlement. An agreement was made in 1799, and Clark as well as Chouteau of St. Louis, both of whom previously opposed Clamorgan, now aided him, protected his property, and gave him financial support and credit.

With the accession of weak governors in the colony, the gains of the company were wiped out in the main.

Clamorgan's opponents began to get trades which previously had been reserved for the company. The British were greatly strengthened on the Upper Missouri and were descending as far as the Mahas. On the Mississippi, they nearly usurped the trade north of St. Louis.

Again Clamorgan descended to New Orleans, this time supported by Charles Dehault Delassus, lieutenant governor at St. Louis. Daniel Clark Jr., advanced credits and reasserted his bold schemes after a lapse of activity for some time. In order to claim a new offer of a reward, he sent Heney to discover the route to the Pacific. He was thwarted by the British on the Upper Missouri.

Stripped of everything but a measly trade privilege with the Panis republic, Clamorgan asked and obtained the exclusive trade of the Otos, Mahas, and Poncas, all speculative trades on account of the British influence and intrusions. He also received the Kansas trade which was sure and profitable. Moreover, he renewed his request for 10,000 pesos, for 100 militiamen and 2,000 pounds of gunpowder. In this he was thwarted by the intendent of Louisiana and the state of war between Spain and England, and the consequent lack of support and the usual negligence of Spain.

Soon, however, Clamorgan's competitors prevailed upon the weak-willed Governor Casa Calvo and he was again stripped of all privileges except the trade of the Panis. Again he resorted to making money by backing the efforts of others. He obtained a one-third interest in the Loisel-Heney contract and company. By this device, Clamorgan's plans for the Spanish frontier were carried on until the occupation of Louisiana by the Americans. Another thrust was made towards the Pacific and Clamorgan again descended to New Orleans to solicit the aid of the government. Conflicting exclusive grants made by favoritism of the governor and the need of arranging his business affairs also caused this descent to New Orleans.

Clamorgan returned to St. Louis carrying orders for

aid to be given to the Missouri Company and to promote its interests for resistance to British aggression. Furthermore, the company was granted the exclusive trade of the entire Missouri valley beginning with the Kansas Indians with but one exception, and that exception—to Chauvin—was probably backed by Clamorgan himself. In fact, Lieutenant-Governor Delassus was ordered explicitly to support Clamorgan as director of the company.

Clamorgan backed all experienced men in the Upper Missouri. He gave nearly 38,000 pesos in goods to Jacques D'Eglise who was to explore to the Pacific and perhaps to Santa Fé as well. Loisel and Company actually led the activities on the Upper Missouri, keeping in mind Clamorgan's schemes to establish Spanish dominion in all of that vast area; and Clamorgan, now even supported by his former enemies and competitors, used Loisel's work as a basis for acquiring more land grants from the Spanish officials.

With the advent of the American acquisition of Louisiana, Clamorgan did not stop his activities even though he no longer possessed the advantages of his intimate friendship with the government officials. Despite his earlier hatred for the Americans and despite his many enemies, he was a respected citizen. In 1804 he was appointed by Governor W. H. Harrison as one of the first judges of the common pleas and quarter sessions in St. Louis, and he rented his house to the government to be used for a jail.

However the life of a judge and a plain American citizen was not the life for this promoter *par excellence*. He continued as an active merchant but never again engaged in vast promotional schemes as he had done under the Spaniards. He could not, however, resist the lure of high profits and the speculation on which easy money devolved. Despite his advanced age he again entered into business. In 1807 Clamorgan requested and was granted an American license to trade with the Pawnee Republic, thereby giving him a ruse to enter upon his larger scheme of trade with Santa Fé. A few days later he and Manuel Lisa formed a

company and bought goods to trade on the frontiers of New Mexico. List, now interested in his larger schemes of the Missouri river trade, probably declined to continue operations with Clamorgan. Clamorgan ascended to the Platte river and entered the Pawnee villages under his trading license. He then set out for Santa Fé where he arrived with three others, a slave and four cargoes of goods. He was sent to Chihuahua but in the next year returned to Missouri, traversing Texas without difficulty and bringing back maps and other materials.

Thus this intriguing adventurer who repeatedly failed to blaze the trail later made famous by Lewis and Clark was actually the first to make a trading venture into Santa Fé and return to Missouri with his profits, however little they probably were. Old man that he was, Clamorgan did not repeat his venture. Always the promoter, he offered to the public information on the trade with Spanish New Mexico. It does not appear that he himself had any opportunity to profit from this idea.

Clamorgan fell ill and on October 30, 1814, made out his will, in which he asked first that his debts be paid and that \$150.00 be distributed to the poor. His goods were to go to his four natural children. His principal assets had dwindled to a few accounts which amounted to perhaps only six or seven hundred dollars.

At his death, Clamorgan was more than eighty years old. He had made and lost fortunes through his sheer business acumen, facile pen, and servile attitude. That he was an economic promoter *par excellence* is not to be doubted. Although never admitted to the social set of St. Louis, he looms large as an outstanding figure in the history of the northeastern frontier of New Spain. During the last decade of the Spanish regime in the Mississippi valley, this obscure, visionary island creole earned the gratitude of the decrepit, helpless Spanish government in the defense of whose frontier, Spain in no small part owed a debt of gratitude to Jacques Clamorgan. Can one be blamed for dreaming grandiose schemes?