

## Missionaries in Warren County 1698 -1729

By

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In early January 1698 three parish priests were sent by the Bishop of Quebec to establish missions in the Lower Mississippi Valley. The priests were sponsored by the Seminary of Quebec under the auspices of the Society of Foreign Missions in Paris. Few people realize that these priests were the first European settlements in the entire Mississippi Delta (Memphis to Vicksburg) and the Gulf Coast. These missionaries arrived even before the first French colonists disembarked from their ships that sailed from France in 1699 to establish the first permanent French colony on the Gulf Coast.

Father Antoine (Albert) Davion, chose to establish a mission with the Tunica, the most powerful and numerous Indian group in the Yazoo Bluff area of northern Warren County. The Tunica were selected because of their loyalty to the French. The Yazoo Bluff area was at this time also occupied by several less numerous and less powerful groups including the Yazoo, Koroa and Offogulas. The former two groups were allied with the Chickasaw and British.

The missionaries sought to bring Christ to the Indians, share a common religion, as well as economic and social ties. They reasoned that they would weaken the traditional Indian culture too often involved in intertribal warfare, technological inferiority, susceptibility to diseases and virtual poverty. The missionaries sincerely thought that if they could relieve the wretchedness of Indian life with a more secure, sedentary existence, that would improve their lives. Missionaries played a role as middle men for reciprocal trade with the French and served as a check to greedy French traders. The English had no missionaries to counter the greed of, usually illiterate, English and Scots- Irish traders.

All the French missionaries were noted for idealism, zeal and dedication to improve the lives of their Indian converts. Missionaries often gave their lives as martyrs. In the period from 1702 to 1729, at least five missionaries were killed between Fort St. Pierre and Fort Rosalie alone.

There were differences between the missionaries. By the time Fort St. Pierre was established in 1719, the Jesuits had lost favor with the King's court and were restricted to the area of New France north of the Ohio River. The Jesuits protested their exclusion from the Lower Mississippi Valley, where the Recollect order had been assigned. The Recollects looked upon Indians as worthy of being converted only after being fully assimilated within the French culture. Intermarriage between French and Indians was encouraged but the Recollects saw Indian culture as antithetical to Catholicism. The Recollect priests saw the Jesuits as entirely too accommodating and permissive.

The Jesuits had a different strategy. They were famous for emphasizing the necessity to learn the native language first, then proceed with conversion in ways that recognized the value of those Indian lifeways that were compatible with Catholicism. Rather than full French acculturation, the Jesuits looked selectively for features of the Indian culture that should be preserved and built upon.

Neither strategy was significantly successful. Both sides recognized that fervent converts were rare and accepted the reality that they could be more effective focusing on the education of children. Missionaries realized that adult conversions were mainly a way for Indians to acquire material things the

French had and they desperately needed. The Indians were generally unwilling to abandon the spiritual aspects of their culture.

Father Davion, in the face of increased threats and the murder of father Foucault in 1702 was forced to abandon the mission at Yazoo Bluff. After his absence the Tunica, who had moved closer to the French for protection, begged Davion's return. He returned to the new Tunica mission and served faithfully until 1720 when he retired and returned to France. The Tunica never received a replacement for Davion.

With the departure of Father Davion and the Tunica, missionary activity at Yazoo Bluffs with the few remaining Indians basically ceased and was replaced with military and economic activities corresponding to the occupation of Fort St. Pierre 1719 to 1729. In 1723 Jesuit Father Beauvois visited France and persuaded the authorities to again open Louisiana to Jesuit missionaries.

In 1727 Jesuit Father John Souel arrived at Ft. St. Pierre to serve as priest to the military, the colonists and the few remaining Indians. About mid December 1729 he and his black servant were murdered by Yazoo and Koroa Indians who on the next morning murdered all the French military and most civilians at Ft. St. Pierre. Only nine women and children were spared and ultimately rescued by Choctaw and Chakchiuma Indians and returned to the French.