

# AN UNCANNY NIAGARA CONNECTION: Joncaire & d'Youville

By John H. Conlin

**L**ouis-Thomas Joncaire (c. 1670-1739) is a little-known but vastly important, nearly mythical, figure of the Niagara Frontier's French era. Frank Severance remarked in his *The Story of Joncaire*, 1906: "with the passing of La Salle from the pages of our regional history we come to the Dark Decades on the Niagara." At the time there was a figure "which is at best but dimly seen. Yet it is around this illusive figure that the story of Niagara centers for forty years."

Joncaire was born in France and came to Canada around 1687. He was a soldier captured in the Iroquois Wars following the infamous Lachine Massacre of 1689. He survived torture and captivity to become a well-respected, adopted son of the Seneca, fluent in their language. After 1694 he was an interpreter and diplomat to the Iroquois, helping to secure the Peace of 1701 ("Mme. Cadillac's Remarkable Journey," Summer 2002). Joncaire married in 1706 and established a family in Montreal. His wife Marie-Madeline LeGuay, daughter of the widow Madeline LeGuay, bore him 10 children between the years 1707 and 1723. It was Joncaire who in 1720 established a fortified trading post on the Niagara portage called the *Magazine Royale*. Between 1720 and 1730 Joncaire was commandant at Niagara.

One direct connection exists between the earlier era of La Salle's expedition (1678-1682) and that of Joncaire in the person of Pierre You. You was one of the loyal companions of La Salle who constructed *Le Griffon*, and accompanied the explorer in his expedition to the mouth of the Mississippi in 1682. You was rewarded for his service with two plots of land near Montreal. One he called

*La Decouverte*, The Discovery, and the other he named after himself, *Youville*. He became a fur trader intercepting Indian pelts headed for Montreal. In 1697 he married a widow with several children, Madeline LeGuay. The eldest of those children was the eight-year-old Marie-Madeline, born in 1689, the

future wife of Louis-Thomas Joncaire. Pierre You was an *engageur Ouest* in 1704, which meant that he sent, and probably accompanied, voyageurs west to gather furs. At that time they would have used the Niagara River passage. In 1706 this veteran of La Salle's adventures became the step-father-in-law of



Saint Marie-Marguerite d'Youville (1701-1771)

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Joncaire. One can imagine the stories that might have been exchanged between Joncaire and You at family gatherings.

Joncaire had ready access to a first-hand participant account of the entire epic La Salle adventure. No historian has previously made this connection. Pierre You would have been able to give Joncaire precise details of the building of *Le Griffon*, including the location of the shipyard. Pierre You was one of the two trusted companions of La Salle who made the arduous winter overland trek with him, from Ft. Crevecoeur in Illinois back to Niagara.

Pierre You died in Montreal in 1718 at age 60. Francois-Madeline You, Pierre's son born in 1700, followed his father as a fur trader. He inherited the property called *Youville* and called himself Francois d'Youville. Both before and after construction of the Stone French Castle at Fort Niagara (1726), Francois d'Youville, the half-brother of Joncaire's wife (Marie-Madeline LeGuay), was an *engag ur Owest*. In 1722 d'Youville married the daughter of a respected family, Marie-Marguerite DuFrost. Marguerite's father, Christopher DuFrost, had been a soldier with Father Millet in the famous rescue of the besieged Niagara garrison at Ft. Denonville in 1689. Francois d'Youville was a notorious fur trader engaged in the illegal sale of liquor to the Indians. Simply put, he and his mother did not treat Marguerite well. The couple lived in the mother's house. He was often away while his mother ruled the household. When Francois died at age 30, apparently as a result of his dissipated living, he left Marguerite pregnant with their sixth child in the home of an oppressive and demanding mother-in-law – Madeline LeGuay – who was also the mother-in-law of Thomas Joncaire.

Marie-Marguerite d'Youville devoted her subsequent life to works of charity, eventually becoming founder of the Order of Grey Nuns. In 1990 Pope John Paul II declared her a saint of the Catholic Church. Although she never visited the Niagara region herself, her family connections contain a wealth of allusions to important events in our regional history. ❧



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