

‘Muskrat French’: Origins of a Culture, a Language, and a People

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ABSTRACT

The continuity of the French culture of the Detroit River region and the shorelines of Lake St. Clair reveals that in the face of marginalization and the inevitable changes which occur through integration or assimilation, a culture can survive, presenting a sub-narrative of history and culture often at odds with dominant historical and genealogical views. The “Muskrat” French Canadian culture of the Detroit River region exists with such a dichotomy and warrants further study as a creole or metis culture rooted in early North American history. This paper presents evidence of the continuous presence of this culture from the 18th century onwards and examines some of the issues arising out of its unique place in North American societies.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly every year, usually in late Winter or early Spring, local and national media pick up on a story about a culinary tradition found in the Detroit River region: the eating of muskrat as a Lenten custom. Generally the stories focus on the area of Monroe (part of an area known as Frenchtown) and other Downriver Detroit communities where the custom is observed. The tradition is explained in two ways: that the early French Canadian trappers lived off it, learning from the Indians that it was ok to eat; and/or that Father Gabriel Richard granted a dispensation to the local habitants to eat muskrat during Lent. The stories then continue with a description of the meal itself, the taste of the meat, and assurances that it is safe and legal to eat. See for example stories in The New York Times (April 1, 1988), USA Today (March 1, 2013), Catholic News (March 8, 2007), and the Detroit Free Press (November 25, 2012).¹

¹ Stories accessed January 2014:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/01/us/wyandotte-journal-where-the-muskrat-is-a-delicacy-for-lent.html>
<http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/nation/2013/03/01/1955841/>
<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0701338.htm>

Historians of the Detroit River Region have provided more in-depth research on the topic. Ralph Naveaux, former director of the Monroe County Historical Museums and a member of the Michigan Commission for the Bicentennial of the War of 1812, has described the eating of muskrat in the context of a much broader regional cuisine. Naveaux writes that this regional French Canadian cuisine emanated from the metis culture of the area that developed out of the fur trade.²

Dennis Au, Historic Preservation Officer of the city of Evansville, Indiana, has written extensively on Michigan's French Canadian culture. In a 1988 article, Au reported on a controversy that erupted the year before in southeast Michigan. Media coverage of the annual muskrat dinners reached officials at the Archdiocese of Detroit and the Department of Agriculture precipitating a ban by the latter on the public sale of muskrat meat. The Archbishop, appalled by the thought of muskrat as meat, declared the legendary dispensation void. What followed these actions was a groundswell in support for the local custom and ultimately a reversal of the decisions.³

These accounts demonstrate that the annual stories about muskrat dinners during Lent describe a tradition that is part of a much broader regional culture, which is known as 'Muskrat French' (also known as Mushrat French.) As Marcel Beneteau of Sudbury

<http://www.freep.com/article/20121125/NEWS06/311250180/You-haven-t-lived-here-until-you-eat-muskrat>

² Ralph Naveaux, "Remnants of 'Mushrat French' Cuisine in Monroe County, Michigan," *Repast*, Spring 2007, 3-6.

³ Dennis Au, "Let Them Eat Muskrat: Marie Antoinette 1987" *The Digest: A Review for the Interdisciplinary Study of Food* Champlain college, Spring 1988, 4-6.

University writes, this term refers both to a living culture and to the French dialect that was widespread in the area at one time.⁴

While we know generally from the popular press and from academic articles *who* the term Muskrat French refers to today (Detroit River region French Canadians), what is less well established is when this term came into being, why, and how it has been used over time. In this article I present research offering a new perspective on the term as it has been used for two centuries and attempt to place the ‘Muskrat French’ in historical and social context. I describe the Muskrat French as a unique regional culture that can and should be understood by its origins, development, and experience rather than by one element of its cuisine, which nonetheless retains a unique importance.

Copyright © James LaForest 2014 **BRITISH AND ANGLO-AMERICAN VIEWS**

In order to understand the development of the term ‘Muskrat French’ and the culture it evokes, it is necessary to look briefly at some examples of how the early French Canadians of Detroit and the *Pays d'en Haut* were viewed by British and Anglo American officials who came to dominate the region beginning in the late 18th century. British General Thomas Gage referred to the French of Detroit as “a People . . . as wild as the Country they go in, or the (Indian) People they deal with, and are far more vicious and wicked.” He wrote that the French were "vagabonds" and "a terrible set of people who stick at nothing true or false" and "roving in the Desarts [sic] and seating themselves

⁴ Marcel Beneteau, “Detroit: A Special Place in French North American History” *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America*, <http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-453/Detroit%20River:%20A%20Special%20Place%20in%20French%20North%20American%20History>.

among the Indians," living with "different Tribes, moving from one to another as fancy leads them."⁵

Many more such examples are easily found. Jonathan Carver wrote of Detroit, "The land is very good, producing all the necessaries of life in abundance, but by reason of inactivity and idleness of the French inhabitants . . . they themselves (are) living little better than the Indians" and they "withdrew into Indian Country where they intermarried with the natives and underwent voluntary banishment." George Croghan called the 'inland French' a "parcel of renegades from Canada," and "a lazy, idle people, depending chiefly upon the savages for their subsistence." William Johnson wrote of the Detroit French: a "Toublesome [sic] Set . . . of Lawless Disaffected People." Major Robert Rogers summed them up as "an Indolent Slothful Set of Vagabonds" and a people "lurking and walking up and down" the backcountry "having great influence on the Savages . . . (and) exciting their Jealousys and Stirring up their hatred."⁶

These views were not just a matter of seeing the French as subservient to the British by fate of war. The British explicitly arrogated to themselves a moral superiority over the Detroit French that was based partly on the understanding that the French of the Detroit region were a creole people — that they were metis relatives of the Indians underpins their statements.

⁵ Kerry Trask, "A Loose and Disorderly People: British Views of the French Canadians of the Upper Great Lakes, 1760-1774" *Voyageur Magazine; The Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin*, Vol. 5, Number 2, Winter, 1988/89.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Major Henry Gladwin of Detroit and George Turnbull articulated a solution to what they saw as a French problem: forced removal of all the French inhabitants between Detroit and the Mississippi. A plan never materialized, but some French residents such as the Chevalier family of St. Joseph did face forced removal from their communities on military orders.⁷

Likewise, the American William Hull saw the French this way: The “French inhabitants who form much of the greater part of the settlements of this Territory appear friendly to our government. It is however necessary to consider their character... From their infancy they have been in the habit of friendship with the Indians. A great part of them, indeed, are alied [sic] to them by blood. The greatest part of them speak their language, and in a variety of respects there is a great similarity and connection between them. The Indians are as familiar and as much at home, in the homes of these people, as the people themselves... The French people are indeed organized into a militi[a]... but considering their character and situation, I ask you what dependence could be placed on them, in the event of Indian War?”⁸ And finally, Thomas Clark, an early immigrant, observed much later that “there were no white inhabitants west of ten miles of Monroe... The few settlers were mostly French, and dressed more like Indians than white people.”⁹

⁷ Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Woman and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 64-67.

⁸ Guillaume Teasdale “Old Friends, New Foes: French Settlers in the Detroit River Border Region” *Michigan Historical Review* (Fall 2012), 56; Dennis M. Au, “Best Troops in the World”: The Michigan Territorial Militia in the Detroit River Theater during the War of 1812,” Selected Papers for the 1991 and 1992 George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conference, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/gero/papers/1991-1992/sec7.htm.

⁹ Thomas Clark to the Pioneer Society of Lenawee County, June 10, 1878, Michigan Pioneer Collections, II (1880) 423-424; Russell E. Bidlack, *The Yankee Meets the Frenchman: River Raisin, 1817-1830, social, political, military* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Historical Society, 1965), 16-17.

These examples show that for the British and the Americans, the character of the French was fundamentally suspect because it was formed in part through cultural and familial ties with the Indians. They were not seen as another, equal, European ethnic group, but rather a creole race composed of “worthless and abandoned Fellows.”¹⁰

These views reflect a colonialist mentality that had no interest in the shades of grey that the Detroit French, metis, and Indian peoples represented. Although it is not the purpose of this paper, there are many examples of the way the foreign concept of race was imposed by the British and American authorities to divide communities and even families. Statements such as those above would ultimately lead to cultural fragmentation and a low socio-economic status among ‘French Canadians’ that continues to reverberate today effecting issues such as personal identity, health, and educational attainment.¹¹

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DETROIT FRENCH VIEWS

Is it here, in the aftermath of the French exit from the colonial scene, where we can begin to see the roots of the “Muskrat French”? The French certainly saw themselves and their culture as differentiated from the British and Americans. The Detroit Gazette published a letter in 1817 from “Vieux Phillippe” who exhorted his fellow French residents to increase their productivity and educate their children because their culture was in danger of disappearing due to the resourcefulness of the ‘Yankees.’¹² But, as Marie Hamlin notes

¹⁰ Sleeper-Smith, 64.

¹¹ Gregory Davis, “Your Ancestors, Your Fate” New York Times, February 21, 2014 <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/your-fate-thank-your-ancestors/?hp&rref=opinion>

¹² James LaForest, “A Miscellany of Michigan’s French Newspapers,” *Voyageur Heritage*, French Canadian Cultural Alliance of the Great Lakes, 2013. <http://voyageurheritage.wordpress.com/2013/10/29/a-miscellany-of-michigans-french-newspapers-1817-1891/>

in her 1871 essay, such evidence of the thoughts of the French of that era depended largely on the “pen of the Englishman” making the task of finding the true voice of the French all the more difficult.¹³

But it is far from impossible. For example, the local French inhabitants were faced with a governor in the person of Lewis Cass who served as governor from 1813-1831. His attempt to force some form of government on them “made no headway against the intransigence of the habitants...In fact they evinced no desire for self-government, spurning the establishment of a legislature and the higher taxes that would ensue.” The French preferred life on their own terms. This may have been unsustainable in the urban center of Detroit, but it continued on in the areas where the French Canadians found themselves as the Americans took root – the waterways of the Detroit River region.¹⁴

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LATE 19th CENTURY

Evidence of the social, cultural, and political differentiation of the Detroit River French is not necessarily contemporaneous to the late 18th or early 19th centuries however, nor is it entirely negative. Writing in 1891, Jacob Farrand reminisced about his youth, having relocated to Detroit with his family in 1825. He wrote, “All the old inhabitants were people of a social nature, inviting to each other’s houses and living along in an enjoyable way” and “It was one of the most social towns that I ever know of, or had any knowledge of personally or ever heard of.”¹⁵ Bela Hubbard, a 19th century Detroit naturalist and

¹³ M. Carrie W. Hamlin, “Old French Traditions” *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, IV, 70-78, 1879 accessed January 2014 via <http://archive.org/stream/michiganhistoric04mich#page/70/mode/2up>

¹⁴ Willard Carl Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation* (Kent State University Press) 1996, 41.

¹⁵ Jacob S. Farrand, *Detroit in History and Commerce* (1891), 12-14.

surveyor whose studies provide extensive detail about the character and landscape of early Michigan wrote in 1877 that even as [fur] trade declined, the French of Detroit “retained ... the practice of inhabiting only the banks of streams, accessible from the great lakes. I know of no original French settlement which is not so situated.”

It is Hubbard who provides the first documentary usage known to date of the term “Muskrat Frenchmen.” In this same 1877 essay he writes, “Like the beaver and the muskrat, the [French] Canadian not unfrequently [sic] lived almost in the water of his favorite streams and marshes, and built his cabin in a spot which could be approached only by canoe. The dwellers in habitations so little superior in architecture and site to the houses which these ingenious little architects [muskrats] contrive for their accommodation in their native marshes, deserved the sobriquet, bestowed upon them by the contemptuous Yankee, of ‘Muskrat Frenchmen.’”¹⁶

Hubbard’s use of the term in the original publication contains quotation marks and it is unclear if he is actually quoting another document or setting the term off as one might any other nickname. In any event, it is sufficiently clear that the name was not invented by him in 1877 but rather must have been known in the vernacular of 19th century Michigan. Hubbard indicates that the term was used in a pejorative manner. He does not appear to hold a similar view, in fact he goes on to describe Detroit’s French culture in detail and ends with a lament for the passing of “French gaiety” and “many joyous hours” as “the careless, laughter-loving Frenchman’s day is over.”

¹⁶ Bela Hubbard, “The Early Colonization of Detroit” *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, Pioneer Society of Michigan, I 1877, 352, accessed January 2014 via <https://archive.org/stream/michiganhistoric01mich#page/n369/mode/2up>

It is not without irony that this same sense of finality is found in early 21st century narratives of the Muskrat French as well, such as in Philip Marchand's, *Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America*. Marchand asserts that the “old culture” of French Detroit is gone. He then describes the nickname Muskrat French as an outgrowth of the culinary use of the animal.¹⁷ Yet this common analysis is clearly not a complete analysis. Hubbard's use of the term and his explanation of it places ‘Muskrat French’ far more compellingly in the realm of ‘ethnicity’ than as merely a culinary folkway, a claim which is bolstered by the existence of its own unique French dialect.¹⁸

With the publication of Hubbard's essay in 1877, we have the first known instance of the term ‘Muskrat French’ in documentary form. Just as the Detroit French faced both negative and positive appraisals from British and American officials and residents, this term is employed with a similar dichotomy. As Hubbard notes it was used by the “contemptuous Yankee” to describe a French populace found by officials to be inferior and untrustworthy. In the late 19th century other examples underscore its negative connotations.

NEWSPAPER STORIES

In the 1890's a newspaper story was in syndication that portrays the “Mushrat French” of Detroit as an exotic, marsh-dwelling tribe whose language is unintelligible whether in English or French. The articles are written from the perspective of a “guileless” Easterner

¹⁷ Phillip Marchand, *Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America* (Praeger, 2007), 207-213.

¹⁸ See Marcel Beneteau, AF; Marcel Beneteau and Peter W. Halford, *Mots choisis : Trois cents ans de francophonie au Détroit du lac Érié*.

who describes the “mushrat Frenchman” as small in stature, “in complexion like to his native mud, in habits simple and – uncleanly” with a wild imagination fueled with “whiskey little better than raw alcohol.” These descriptions of the people and lifestyle are then followed by a parody of a Muskrat Frenchman telling a story in pidgin English meant to echo the local French dialect. The same article is picked up again in syndication in the *Reading Eagle* of Reading, Pennsylvania, January 20, 1918.¹⁹

Were these attempts at humor, to be explained as typical for the times – harmless folk stories that reflect nothing more than a writer’s vivid imagination? An understanding of the wider racial and ethnic conflicts, the virulent racism of the 1890s in America, suggests that they were not simply human-interest stories for a general readership.

Imagine for a moment how these same stories would be viewed if the subjects were African-American sharecroppers? They would be rightly interpreted as racist parodies of people treated as second-class illiterates. Racial and ethnic stereotypes are similarly employed here with regard to the Muskrat French, reflecting a legacy of intergroup relations that began in the 18th century.

¹⁹ See May 7, 1896 Philipsburg Mail (Montana); January 26, 1898 Dalles Weekly Chronicle (Oregon) accessed via <http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/2003260222/1898-01-26/ed-1/seq-1/>; April 2, 1899 New York Sun; January 20, 1918 Reading Eagle (Pennsylvania) accessed via <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19180120&id=bI8jAAAAIABJ&sjid=4Z0FAAAAIBAJ&pg=1964,2360294>.

TOLD BY MUSKRAT FRENCHMEN.

A Big Catfish Caught with the Nose and a Bigger Sturgeon with an Anchor.

DETROIT, March 30.—The muskrat Frenchman is to be found dwelling in the flats along the Detroit River. In stature he is small, in complexion like to his native mud, in habits simple and—uncleanly, in appetite satisfying himself with roast “muskrat shtuff wiz onyan,” washed down with whiskey little better than raw alcohol. In imagination he is wild, vivid, fanciful, extravagant.

On Monday Antoine Boudie, a true type of the muskrat Frenchman, came into Jean Baptiste Montie's saloon at Ecorse with a red and swollen nose. There was considerable excitement in the saloon. The two Cicottes of Detroit were playing a match game of pedro with the two Montie brothers. Thedo Cicotte was winning, and playing every card with a yell of triumph and a thump of the knuckles that made the table dance. “Fourteen time!” he shrieked, as he played on the last trick and chalked the score down on the table top, while the crowd, composed of unkempt, unwashed, but sympathetic muskrat Frenchmen, pressed closely around the players. The triumphant Thedo turned and beheld Antoine Boudie's nasal beacon.

“Haylo, Antoine. Comment ça va. Hal Ze red nose. Ware you get him?”

Excerpt from the New York Sun, April 2, 1899

The newspaper stories echo a similar view of the Detroit River French as found in the Henry Ford Archives. A letter from a Ford friend, dated 1897 and unsigned, describes how some local young men spent the day: After buying whiskey in Walkerville, Ontario, they would “catch fish and take them where a fine French lady cooked them free if we would buy her beer for ten cents a bottle.” And “[We] sported around with the Muskrat

Frenchmen seeking furs and froglegs...in the morning I had to swim across the Detroit River to Cicottes for my cup of coffee...the Cicottes were famous river folk.”²⁰

What do we make of this description, which seems to be in the same vein as the contemporaneous stories in syndication? It is not as extreme as the parodies found in the newspapers, but it does appear that the young men of Detroit who were Ford’s friends and colleagues saw the Muskrat French as ‘local color’ at best, but more likely as social inferiors meant to be “sporting with” and regarded as entertainment. The evidence suggests that such views were indeed part of a culture clash that began over a century earlier, corroborated in the writings of British and American officials, and described by writers including Hamlin and Hubbard in which the French of the Detroit River Region were second class citizens, dwelling in places no civilized person would approach except for a laugh.

This is not how the Muskrat French saw themselves or how they were regarded by at least some of their neighbors from the East. Through the pens of ‘Vieux Philippe,’ Hubbard, Hamlin, and Farrand a different image comes into focus, one of a proud people, full of laughter, joy, gaiety, and with a strong attachment to their way of life and their ancestral lands. And beginning in the early 20th century (at the latest), the French Canadian community began to enact the local culture on a more visible level.

²⁰ Sidney Olson, *Young Henry Ford: A Picture History of the First Forty Years*, Wayne State University Press, 1963, 91-93.

20th CENTURY

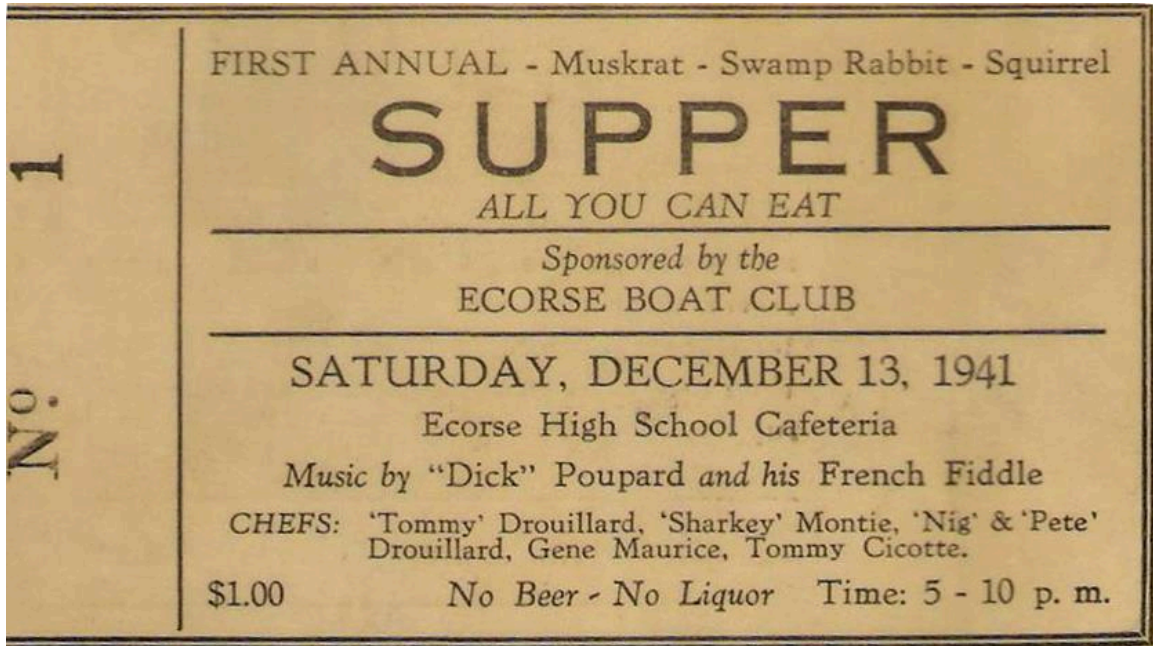
A 1906 carnival sponsored by the Monroe Yacht Club at which muskrat was served proved to be a popular event with the local population.²¹ Muskrat dinners as a public event were held throughout the following century to great fanfare. They became events to which people (“Old Frenchmen”) from throughout the Midwest journeyed to take part in cultural celebrations.

Unlike the stories from the 1890s, newspapers ran stories about the muskrat feasts in other years, such as 1924. These stories were largely straightforward accounts of the festivities which then included up to 4000 guests, "high-class bartenders" and a vaudeville show as entertainment. Ethnic descriptions in these articles were limited to a few lines of an "Old Frenchman" speaking in pidgin French-accented English.²²

In 1941 the Ecorse Boat Club Supper included not only muskrat (or swamp rabbit as it is also known) as prepared by chefs with names common to the local French Canadian population (Drouillard and Cicotte), but also French Canadian entertainment in the form of fiddle music. The name Cicotte is also found in both the newspaper story of 1899 and the letter from the Ford Archives. But while Thedo Cicotte and friends (of the 1899 newspaper parody) were dirty, unkempt, semi-literate (but sympathetic) Muskrat Frenchmen, the Cicotte of 1941 is integral to the celebration of a proud local culture.

²¹ Elaine Raymo, *Detroit's Holy Cross Cemetery*, Arcadia Publishing, 2009, 35-36.

²² January 20, 1924 Buffalo Courier; Milwaukee Journal, January 18, 1924.



Ticket for a supper in Ecorse, Michigan featuring muskrat and other game.

As noted at the outset, newspaper coverage of the annual muskrat dinners continues into the 21st century in the form of human-interest stories that generally convey an unbiased attitude toward the custom. Aside from the local scholars whose work on Muskrat French culture provides the most comprehensive background, very few scholars have published on any element of this regional culture in any depth or on its own terms. Philip Perlmutter loosely ties the anti-French sentiment of 18th/19th century Detroit to a broader coupling of American expansionism and prejudice after the Revolutionary War.²³ According to Melvin G. Holli, the “feudal values” of the *seigneurial* system found in pre-American Detroit was to blame for the culture clash which doomed the French of the area from the

²³ Philip Perlmutter, *Legacy of Hate: A Short History of Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Prejudice in America* M.E. Sharpe, 1999, 78-80.

start because they simply did not have the tools or “economic ethic” to compete in the new age of American industry.²⁴

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

One element of this subject that is often wrongly conveyed is the geographic distribution of the Muskrat French. While Monroe, Michigan (downriver from Detroit on the far western shore of Lake Erie) is strongly identified with the Muskrat French culture, there is a much more widespread articulation of the culture than found in that small area. Hubbard for example does not place the “Muskrat Frenchmen” in a particular locale but rather throughout the area, along any river that flows into the larger bodies of water.

The newspaper ‘folk stories’ of the 1890s make mention of the ‘Mushrats’ living on the St. Clair Flats, found on the northeast corner of Lake St. Clair on Anchor Bay. A Windsor-area rumrunner of the prohibition era was one Arthur “Muskrat” Laframboise, a nickname undoubtedly tied to his ethnic background. Family traditions and oral accounts from people throughout the Detroit and Windsor area up to and including the present day place the Muskrat French culture throughout the Detroit River region and along the shores of Lake St. Clair in its entirety.

There are even suggestions that this is too narrow. In a 1948 essay published by the State of Wisconsin, Edgar Doudna quite obviously draws on Hubbard’s 1877 essay in

²⁴ Marvin G. Holli “French Detroit: The Clash of Feudal and Yankee Values” in *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest* Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977, 75ff.

identifying the French Canadian metis of Green Bay as “Muskrat Frenchmen.”²⁵ M. J. Morgan also makes use of the term as formulated in reference to the Detroit French writing that it was a “sense of the French that would cling to them, reinforced by settlement patterns in watery areas like Cahokia.”²⁶ She made this association again in a 2012 address at the Waterloo Museum Society entitled “Muskrat Frenchmen and Their Livelihood: The Riverine Economy of the Southern Illinois French” as a way to emphasize the French way of life along rivers that was characteristic of the Detroit French.²⁷

These rare associations of the Muskrat French to areas outside the Detroit River region and Lake St. Clair connect the Detroit French to places and peoples identified as having creole (Cahokia) and metis (Green Bay) cultures and populations. Alone these references do not serve to define the Muskrat French, but in the context of a broader study of the culture, these examples reinforce the view that the Muskrat French constitute something other than a largely faded, local, and purely French culture.

Conclusion

From the late 18th century onward, accounts of the French of the Detroit River region are imbued with ethnic and racial qualities and stereotypes based on assumed or actual intermarriage with indigenous peoples. Derogatory terminology referring to

²⁵ Edgar Doudna, “Wisconsin – The Thirtieth Star” *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1948*. Wisconsin, 1948, 157.

²⁶ M.J. Morgan, *Land of Big Rivers: French and Indian Illinois, 1699-1778*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, 58-59.

²⁷ Illinois Humanities Council, <http://www.prairie.org/events/25768/muskrat-frenchmen-and-their-livelihood-riverine-economy-southern-illinois-french>; M.J. Morgan, email message to author, January 23, 2014.

characteristics such as tribe, color, intelligence, moral qualities, work habits, and reliability as middlemen served to distinguish an extant population of French-speaking people living on the wide periphery of Detroit and its rural shore lands. While a few later writers counter this array with more positive portrayals, these negative qualities and stereotypes were frequently used to describe the French-speaking people and culture of the Detroit River region, the culture which came to be known by 1877 at the latest as “Muskrat French.” These negative portrayals persisted at least through the 1920s in the popular press.

Despite numerous indications that the Detroit River French are culturally similar if not indistinct from the metis and creole cultures found in other areas of the ‘French River World’ little scholarly research has been conducted to fully understand the development of this culture or its legacy. On the contrary, most modern commentary denies it any significant continuity of culture at all with the exception of one culinary tradition.

It can be argued however that the Muskrat French culture is linked to a metis or creole worldview. This formulation seems to be self-evident to observers from the 18th century onwards, but has been denied by modern scholars who claim that elements of “ethno-genesis” are missing and therefore the community of old Detroit River region French Canadian families cannot be considered a distinct metis people or culture. Yet the term Muskrat French itself seems to be unknown to most contemporary scholars as evidenced

by its near universal absence in the most important discussions of Great Lakes metis or French Canadian communities in scholarly literature.²⁸

The nature of the initial contact between the Detroit French and the British followed by the Anglo-Americans, the terms by which the Detroit French came to be known, how they were described by colonial officials and later writers, how they understood themselves, the longevity of this local culture, the presence of racial and ethnic characteristics that are inherent to the discussion, the continued existence of pockets of Muskrat French speakers on the Ontario side of the Detroit River, the wealth of material available to researchers, the ongoing debate over Metis identity in Canada and the United States, and advances in decoding the human genome²⁹ provide ample rationale and a compelling context that warrants a deeper scholarly engagement with this culture. It is a culture that continues to exist today not only throughout the historic region of its origins, but also among a ‘diaspora’ who continue to identify themselves and their ancestors with the term Muskrat French.

²⁸ See for example, Jacqueline Peterson, “Red River Redux: Métis Ethnogenesis and the Great Lakes Region” in *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History* University of Oklahoma Press, 2012, 22-58.

²⁹ New DNA evidence suggests a much greater metissage in the Great Lakes area than has previously been described.

See for example: “Les détails du patrimoine génétique métissé des Québécois”; <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-soleil/actualites/societe/201306/29/01-4666372-les-details-du-patrimoine-genetique-metisse-des-quebecois.php>;

“Native American Admixture in the Quebec Founder Population”

<http://www.plosone.org/article/authors/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0065507;jsessionid=E3F7D19FFC32BD37EE8339BFF5E40620>;

and “French Canadians are Genetically Special (not that that’s a good thing)”
<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/gnxp/2013/09/exome/#.UvzXFPb7V-U>

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