

Du Luth's Birthplace

A Footnote to History

James Taylor Dunn

EDITOR'S PREFACE — Three hundred years ago — in the spring of 1679 — French soldier-explorer Daniel Greysolon, Sieur Du Luth (also spelled Du Lhut or Duluth), traveled along the south shore of Lake Superior to the Keweenaw Peninsula with seven other Frenchmen and an escort of three Chippewa (Ojibway) Indians with whom the white visitors had wintered at Sault Ste. Marie. The party had left Montreal on September 1, 1678, "to attempt," in Du Luth's own words, "the exploration of the Nadouecioux [Sioux, or Dakota] and the Assenipoulaks [Assiniboin] who were unknown to us, and to cause them to make peace with all the nations around Lake Superior who dwell in the dominion of our invincible monarch." Such a peace would aid French fur-trading efforts.

In his frustratingly brief account, Du Luth then wrote that, on July 2, 1679, he "set up the arms of his Majesty" at the great Sioux village of "Izatys" (Kathio) on what is now Mille Laes Lake and also where other Sioux lived "distant 26 leagues from the first." He then said that, on September 15, 1679, he made with the Assiniboin "and all the other nations of the North a rendezvous at the extremity of Lake Superior to cause them to make peace with the Nadouecioux their common enemy." ¹

Du Luth's brief account leaves many questions. By what route, for example, did he travel from the Keweenaw to the Head of the Lakes? If he portaged through the Keweenaw, as Radisson apparently did nineteen years earlier, and, as some historians (Folwell for one) say, continued along the south shore, he probably entered St. Louis Bay by what is now known as the Superior Entry. This way he would not have portaged across Minnesota Point. Others conjecture that Du Luth probably crossed from the Keweenaw Peninsula in what is now Michigan to the North Shore of Lake Superior and then continued west to portage across Minnesota Point about where the Duluth Ship Canal is today.² If this happened, at least two paintings of Du Luth's landing would be better substantiated and so would details of recent observances in Duluth of the tercentenary of that event. More will be mentioned later, but one observance was the unveiling of a tercentenary plaque at Canal Point.

We also do not know how Du Luth got to Izatys on Mille Laes Lake. He apparently went by land but did not indicate his route. We are not sure, either, of the exact location of the Indian "rendezvous" of September 15, but it is reasonable to assume it was at or near Fond du Lac, now part of the city of Duluth. Regardless, there can be little doubt that Du Luth traveled at one time or another over the site of the city that is now the greatest monument to him.

Another mystery is where Du Luth spent the winter of 1679–80. He did say that, during the following winter, he caused the Indians "to hold meetings in the forest, at which I was present, in order to hunt together, feast, and thus draw closer the bonds of friendship." But he was no more definite than that. Some sources have Du Luth wintering at Chequamegon Bay, which would tie in well with the trip he said he took in June, 1680, to the Mississippi River by way of the St. Croix. But others hold that Du Luth spent the winter at Kaministiquia and thus might argue that he had a familiarity with the North Shore from having traveled there in 1679. Until more original source material surfaces, if it ever does, we will not have definitive answers to these various questions about the Minnesota travels of an important French explorer who was unfortunately given to few words about himself, contrary to the tendency of some of his contemporaries.³

¹ Du Luth's account of his Minnesota visit was in the form of a report to the Marquis de Seignelay, French minister of marine from 1683 to 1690. It is published in full under the title, "Mémorial de Duluth sur le pays des Sioux, 1678–1682," in Louise Phelps Kellogg, ed., *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634–1699*, 329–334 (New York, 1917).

² For general information on Du Luth, and for varying viewpoints of his routes, see: Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, 207–217 (Madison, Wis., 1925); Kellogg, *Early Narratives*, 325–328; the same author's sketch of Du Luth in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 5:500–501 (New York, 1930); Dwight E. Woodbridge and John S. Pardee, eds., *History of Duluth and St. Louis County Past and Present*, 1:37–39 (Chicago, 1910); Grace Lee Nute, *Lake Superior*, 29–31 (Indianapolis, 1944); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:22–24, 29–39 (Reprint edition, St. Paul, 1956).

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IF THE questions raised in the foregoing paragraphs have to go without being answered authoritatively, another one at least has been settled — the whereabouts of Du Luth's birthplace. In the following article, James Taylor Dunn sets the record straight, but now we need more background about his role. Back in 1963, Dr. At-tale Boël of Roanne, France, read that the city of Duluth, Minnesota, proposed to honor its namesake by having famed sculptor Jacques Lipchitz produce a statue of the explorer, although no portrait of Du Luth was known. Dr. Boël set in motion a chain of investigation by writing Mayor George D. Johnson of Duluth that he had located the explorer's birthplace in Saint-Germain-Laval near Roanne, and also sent a photograph of a portrait he thought was of Du Luth. (The portrait was not authenticated, and a symbolic sculpture by Lipchitz was dedicated on the campus of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, on November 5, 1965.) Johnson gave Boël's letter to Mrs. Josiah E. Greene, then executive secretary of the St. Louis County Historical Society. Mrs. Greene tried hard, but in vain, to verify the photograph and then learned that historian James Taylor Dunn, who at the time was head librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society and author of *The St. Croix: Midwest Border River* and other works, was going to Europe for an extended stay with his wife, Maria, a native of Luxembourg who is fluent in the French language. Dunn also speaks French. Mrs. Greene arranged for the St. Louis County Historical Society and the University of Minnesota to commission the Duns to visit Saint-Germain-Laval in order to track down the matter of the portrait and also Du Luth's birthplace. With the considerable help of Boël, the Duns visited Saint-Germain-Laval during the summer of 1966, studying documents, interviewing townspeople, and taking pictures. They became convinced that the town was indeed Du Luth's birthplace but found that the portrait was probably of the explorer's grandfather, Claude Greysolon.

Early in 1967, Dunn gave a slide talk on his findings to the forty-fifth annual meeting of the St. Louis County Historical Society. That talk, updated somewhat, is what follows. Dunn also proposed that Duluth and Saint-Germain-Laval set up a "sister city" arrangement. They effected, among other things, exchange of artifacts for respective museums. Last June 26, present Mayor Edouard

Pradier of Saint-Germain-Laval was honored, along with French Consul General Georges Fieschi of Chicago, at a tercentenary banquet sponsored by the St. Louis County Historical Society at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. The society also recently published Daniel Greysolon, Sieur duLhut: A Tercentenary Tribute, a 24-page booklet edited by the society's present director, Laurence J. Sommer.

DANIEL GREYSOLON, Sieur Du Luth, was an enterprising French officer and intrepid explorer and trader who roamed the Lake Superior region from 1678 to 1687. In 1679 he canoed the waters of Lake Superior to its west end on an exploring and trading expedition and then traveled to the great village of the Sioux on Mille Lacs Lake and took possession of the area for King Louis XIV of France. In 1680 he became the first white man to leave any record of a visit into the wilderness fastnesses of the pine-clad St. Croix River. When he reached the Mississippi he heard the Sioux had broken their treaty and captured three white men. Du Luth rescued them, discovering one to be Father Louis Hennepin. By 1690 Du Luth was in command at Fort Frontenac on Lake Ontario, and historians generally agree that he was largely responsible for establishing French control over the Northwest.

Most historians accept these and a few other facts pertaining to Du Luth's American experience. However, history and legend — almost indistinguishable one from the other — have combined to make of Daniel Greysolon's French origin a hodgepodge of misinformation. This is especially true in regard to his birthplace.

If you read any school textbook, consult the works of such scholars as Henry Harris, Reuben Gold Thwaites, Louise Phelps Kellogg, and others, or look even at the 1966 publication, John A. Caruso's *The Mississippi Valley Frontier*, you will discover that Saint-Germain-en-Laye — a forested suburb of Paris — is almost always erroneously credited with being the birthplace of Greysolon. Exactly how this myth started is not known. In the past, though, a few historians of the caliber of Francis Parkman and Minnesota's Theodore C. Blegen have tried to make a case for Greysolon's birthplace being the industrial city of Lyons on the Loire River in central France.⁴

The first assumption, we now know, is completely false. The latter one is a far more logical guess, or what could be called a "calculated risk," since Daniel later lived as a soldier in the garrison at Lyons before joining the King's Guards, and the Baron de Lahontan (who was personally acquainted with Du Luth) stated in 1703 that he was from Lions (Lyons) or the surrounding district, which would certainly include Saint-Germain-Laval, the correct birthplace.⁵

But apparently (to leave the door slightly ajar for any

³The editor wishes to thank Curtis L. Roy, a Minneapolis attorney and a student of fur-trade history, for his assistance in locating material on Du Luth.

⁴See John A. Caruso, *The Mississippi Valley Frontier: The Age of French Exploration and Settlement*, 197 (Indianapolis, 1966); Francis Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West*, 5:274-275 (Boston, 1907); Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 46 (Minneapolis, 1963).

⁵See Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Baron de Lahontan's New Voyages to North-America*, 1:33 (Chicago, 1905).



A PORTRAIT (left) that was at first thought to be of Daniel Greysolon, the explorer, is probably of his grandfather, Claude Greysolon. It is in Le Château de Pommiers en Forez, near Saint-Germain-Laval, France.

At right: The controversial sculpture, by Jacques Lipchitz, of explorer Du Luth on the University of Minnesota, Duluth, campus.



additional error) no one until recent years has searched out the facts in the Canadian Archives at Ottawa where the papers of Louis-Hector, Chevalier de Callières, governor general at the beginning of the eighteenth century, are housed. Or, if these documents have been studied, then the error has been one of interpretation. On October 15, 1701, Governor De Callières sent to his superior a list of French officers then serving in Canada. Included were very brief biographies. Of the man he called Daniel Greysolon Duluth ("a good officer," he said), the governor reported: "Native of Saint-Germain la Vallée en Forêt, age 62," which can be literally translated as "Saint-Germain the valley in the forest."⁶

SAINT-GERMAIN-LAVAL, site of Du Luth's birthplace, is a French "perched village" crowned by the decaying bell tower of La Madelaine church.



Here, then, is the key to our problem — a key which, by the way, has been in print and easily available since 1920. And here, too, is an example of how a layman like the author of this article can dare to figure out the thinking (or lack of it) of dedicated scholars: Saint-Germain-Laval (a shortened form of la Vallée, the valley) should have been easily interpreted as the place it was, and is. Researchers, however, were perhaps seeking an actual forest, or *forêt* (such as those surrounding Paris, for example) rather than looking for a larger region of the country many miles away. I refer, of course, to the particular district in which Saint-Germain-Laval is located — the plateau of Forez, which is the old French word for *forêt*, or forest. To confound the confusion in their attempt to justify the choice of Saint-Germain-en-Laye as Greysolon's birthplace, scholars must have linked their mistake with the verb *layer*, meaning "to lay out a road in a forest."

IT HAS BEEN only in recent years that anyone has bothered to investigate the birthplace problem instead of blindly accepting the opinions of HARRISSE, THWAITES, KELLOGG, and others. The result of one inquiry was featured in the 1951 edition of *Les Cahiers des Dix*, a historical journal published in Montreal. In this article of major historical importance, the late Canadian historian Gérard Malchelosse presented the results of his study of the Saint-Germain-Laval parish records. Almost simultaneously, a dedicated local historian in France, a Saint-Germain-born medical doctor living and practicing in the nearby industrial city of Roanne, also became in-

⁶See "Ce que le gouverneur de Callières pensait de nos officiers militaires en 1701," in *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, 26:324 (November, 1920). This is a French-Canadian publication.

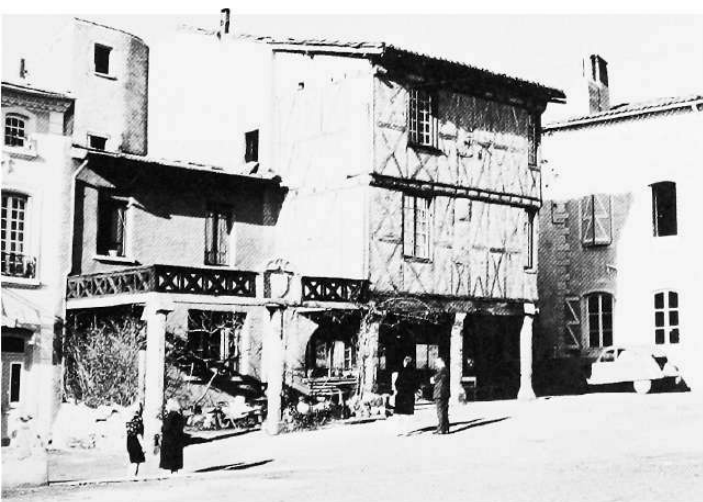
terested in the story of his village's most celebrated son.⁷

Dr. Attale Boël, whose birthplace lies only about one hundred feet across the marketplace (Place du Marché) from the one-time Greysolon home in Saint-Germain-Laval, became the explorer's enthusiastic champion. Boël, too, thoroughly researched the parish registers and was almost solely responsible for the June, 1954, dedication of a historic plaque affixed to the ancient timbered building where Daniel Greysolon was born.

"In France," Boël said in an interview with the author in 1966, "history has been unjust toward Daniel Greysolon." He added: "My country knows him solely as a *coureur de bois*, nothing else." [*Coureur de bois*, usually refers to one who traded without a license, and Du Luth indignantly denied doing unlicensed trading in spite of charges that he did. — Ed.] The doctor, a most pleasant, soft-spoken, cordial gentleman, strongly believes that Du Luth's odyssey is an important and neglected page in the history of the French conquest of America. For this reason, which all should applaud,

⁷ Gérard Malchelosse, "Un gentilhomme coureur de bois: Daniel Greysolon, sieur Du Luth," in *Les Cahiers des Dix*, 195-232 (No. 16, 1951). Additional data of importance have been gleaned from *Registre Paroissial de Saint-Germain-Laval 1604-1624*, transcribed by Dr. Boël, and a 32-page manuscript written by Boël, detailing the results of his years of research. A portion of this manuscript is in the possession of James Taylor Dunn. Copies of all the Dunns' research are also in the St. Louis County Historical Society, Duluth. See also, Robert Lugnier, "Et La Cloche Sonne Toujours", *Saint-Germain-Laval-en-Foréz*, 143-144 (Givors, France, 1959).

THIS IS Du Luth's birthplace on Place du Marché in Saint-Germain-Laval. The plaque on the building credits Du Luth with being an explorer of Minnesota, a peacemaker with the Indians, and, erroneously, the discoverer of the source of the Mississippi River.



Saint-Germain's amateur history buff has tried, as best he could, to rectify the neglect — at least in his home town.

Much of what both Boël and Malchelosse learned from the French and Canadian archives concerning the Greysolons will perhaps come as a surprise for some and even a shock to a few. Modern interpretations, based on these findings, will certainly not agree with hitherto accepted "facts." Yet these interpretations are the only logical conclusions that can be made.

The Greysolon name, according to the Saint-Germain parish records, was well rooted in the Forez region. It dated back more than 200 years to 1300 when Etienne Greysolon of Saint-Germain-Laval married Elisabeth Chalon des Salles. Among the Greysolon ranks can be counted judges, lawyers, civil servants, farmers, merchants, priests, and ordinary citizens — what the French called *bourgeois*. The family, therefore, was definitely not titled, nor did wealthy estates enter at any time into its inheritances. Most of the Greysolons were of the upper middle class — the *petite noblesse*, or gentry. They owned their own land and held definite positions of trust and esteem in the community.

Daniel's grandfather, Claude Greysolon, for example, was a civil magistrate in the district of Forez. He was killed on New Year's Eve, 1622, when thrown from his horse. Daniel's father, also named Claude, married into the Patron family of well-established lacemakers in the Lyonnais region. His wife's brother was Jean-Jacques Patron, the Lyons merchant who in about 1674 established himself as a fur trader at Montreal. The marriage produced several children, of whom four are known — two sons and two daughters. Daniel, it appears, was born at Saint-Germain-Laval between 1636 and 1640. Historians have given equal preference to the first date and 1639. Daniel's brother Claude, or "de la Tourette," who later also traveled into Canada, was born in nearby Lyons



in 1659 or 1660. At Saint-Germain during the early part of 1656, sister Anne married Jean Radisson of nearby Tarare. He was a nephew of famed fur trader and explorer Pierre Esprit Radisson. And the husband of the other sister was Louis Tacon de Lussigny, who later became an officer under Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac, at Quebec. These, then, were among the adventurers of the Greysolon family who heeded the call of the American continent, the lure of the fur trade, and unlimited opportunities for wealth. All of them must at one time or another have exerted considerable influence on young Daniel to help determine his future.

As we have seen, the available evidence points to Saint-Germain-Laval as the definite birthplace of Daniel Greysolon. But there is an unfortunate lacuna in the parish registers — the records from 1623 to 1644 are missing. It is doubtful, then, that any actual baptismal evidence for these important years will ever be found to give us the final, definitive clue and pinpoint once and for all the exact birth date — and place — of Du Luth.

The parish records now housed in the village's town hall prove that the Greysolons were of the *petite noblesse* — the landed gentry of the Forez region. The "Sieur Du Luth" name by which Daniel, the explorer, became better known in this country comes from the French word, *sieur*, a shortened form of *monsieur*, or "mister." It was a term of respect once in general use, and it always preceded the names of army officers, whether they did or did not hold titles. What the word, *luth*, signified is not known, and perhaps even the wildest of guesses might approach the right answer. Maybe at some time in his life he became efficient on the lute, an ancient stringed instrument. We simply do not know. Daniel's brother Claude also was referred to as "sieur" — Sieur de la Tourette, which literally translated means "mister from La Tourette," the name of a small market town nearby where he perhaps once lived or with which he had some association.

And now, what of the place where Daniel Greysolon was born? Saint-Germain-Laval, a name that dates back at least to 1183, is a small town of tile-roofed homes and narrow, winding streets which rise precipitously in tightly packed terraces up the one prominent hill that for miles around dominates the fertile plains of Forez. The village is attractively located in what appears to be good agricultural land, whose gently rolling countryside is reminiscent of parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Topped by the decaying bell tower of La Madelaine, the once-elegant church and last vestige of the area's chateau, the compact, rounded silhouette of Saint-Germain is indeed what current guidebooks call a *village perché*, or "perched village."

Today Saint-Germain is a town of some 1,600 inhabitants. Its sole industry, silent today, used to be textiles, but the present economy has improved with the

installation of a manufacturer of heavy road equipment. The community is now mainly a marketplace for the surrounding farm area.⁸ It is a sleepy old village in a forgotten region. Saint-Germain lies off the more heavily traveled routes, its nearest neighbor being the industrial city of Roanne. It is neglected by tourists because it lacks great historic monuments to draw visitors and help the economy. The village can but boast in a feeble way of its antique charm and its ancient, crumbling landmarks. For the history buff it is well worth a visit.

At the foot of this picturesque hill town, the narrow, meandering Aix River sweeps in a wide semicircle and then heads across the plateau of Forez to join the waters of the Loire River some nine miles to the east. The Aix is a laughing river, rock-filled, swift, and a little-known haven for trout and crayfish. To the west, where this shadowy stream is bordered by a grove of linden trees, stands the ancient chapel of Notre-Dame de Laval. According to tradition, the chapel was constructed on the site of a seventh-century building. The present structure dates from the 1200s and since that time has been especially venerated for its Black Virgin made of Holy Land olive wood, a trophy of the Crusades and presented by King Louis IX (Saint Louis) to the then feudal lord of Saint-Germain.

But perhaps of more direct importance to the Daniel Greysolon story than the chapel of Notre-Dame de Laval is the religious structure founded at Saint-Germain in 1627 as a cloister for a group of Franciscan Recollects. This vast, solidly constructed monastery of severe architecture was established by yet another Greysolon relative, Jean du Crozet, a prominent resident of Forez province and the author of a pastoral novel of the Aix River, *La Philocalie*. "The monks themselves," stated Dr. Boël at the 1954 dedication of the Du Luth plaque, "did not arrive until 1644, eight years after the birth of Daniel. It is very likely that these priests, excited by the experiences of their brothers in Canada, told many a thrilling tale to this lively boy which perhaps went a long way toward deciding his adventurous future." Dr. Boël concluded: "Their influence on him is quite obvious because throughout his life Du Luth held that order in good esteem, and when it came time for him to think of death, it was in the Recollect chapel at Montreal that he asked to be buried." He died February 25, 1710, in Montreal.

The stories told by these fathers and the letters written in the far-off American wilderness by Daniel's relatives may have contributed much toward shaping the destiny of this impressionable youngster of Saint-Germain-Laval, eventually leading him to the land and waters that were later to become Minnesota.

⁸ Letter from Dr. Boël to James Taylor Dunn, January 6, 1979, in the possession of Dunn.

THE PICTURE of the Du Luth statue on p. 230 is from the MHS audio-visual library. The others are by James Taylor Dunn.



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