

## THE CHOUTEAUS

The historical articles pertaining to the Chouteau family and their contribution to the history of the West, by Harriette Johnson Westbrook, published in the June and September number of the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 1933, has attracted more than ordinary interest. There are streams, mountains, forts and towns throughout the western country that bear the name Chouteau, and the family name is not extinct. It is an old and honored name and one that anyone might well be proud to claim. We have a letter from Mr. A. B. Chouteau, San Francisco, California, in which, he writes, "I wish to thank you for publishing the account of the Chouteau family, also, to thank Mrs. Harriette Johnson Westbrook for her pleasing work in arranging the articles, as she certainly must have spent a lot of time to perfect same." Mr. Chouteau had only words of praise for Mrs. Westbrook's contribution to the history of his family.

However, we have a letter from Mr. C. E. Chouteau<sup>1</sup> of Oklahoma City, who is a real friend of the Oklahoma Historical Society, in which, he dissents very emphatically from the story concerning the marital relations that were said to have existed between Madame Marie Therese Chouteau and Pierre Laclède Liguest. Mr. Chouteau is not in any way censuring the author of this series of articles for reproducing this old Chouteau-Laclède story as it has been printed time and again by recognized biographical historians, to which, reference is made in the foot notes. It is quite certain, however, that the Chouteau family have never conceded the truthfulness of the story, but have denounced it through several generations as gross libel on the fair name of a woman who ranks among the first in American history.

For many years the descendants of this distinguished pioneer family have been making extended research to disprove this story which they seem to think has done a great injustice to the name.

It is the mission of the *Chronicles* to publish history and not romance, and in matters where there may be doubt, give both

<sup>1</sup>Mr. C. E. Chouteau has recently presented to the Oklahoma Historical Society a framed picture that now hangs on the wall of the north gallery and bears the following inscription:

"Jean Pierre Chouteau—1758-1849

The first white settler in what is now Oklahoma 1796—Gift of his great-great-granddaughter—Myra Yvonne Chouteau.

sides and lets the reader draw his own conclusions. This was the Plutarch method of writing history, when there was more than one story concerning the same event.

Mr. C. E. Chouteau has requested the publication of the following:

Dr. A. N. De Menil Writes on History of Early St. Louisans.  
Editor of the *Globe-Democrat*:

I write to vindicate the most infamously belied woman in the history of St. Louis and rescue her memory from the damning stain that has sullied its purity since almost a century. I speak in no uncertain terms to the alleged historians who have written and published purely fictitious and libelous statements against a true, honest and respectable wife and mother, Marie Theresa Bourgeois Chouteau, legitimate wife of Rene Auguste Chouteau and mother of his five legitimate children.

I have always believed, and frequently asserted, that it bordered on idiocy to believe that in an intensely Catholic city as New Orleans was in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Marie Theresa Bourgeois, orphan, brought up by the Ursuline nuns, and under the guidance of her uncle and the protection of the bishop, while the wife of Rene Auguste Chouteau lived in open, notorious adultery with Pierre Laclède Liguist, in the face of her husband and the entire city, and bore the said Liguist four illegitimate children, which were all baptized in the St. Louis Cathedral, and in each case certified to by the officiating priest and two witnesses as the legitimate children of Rene Auguste Chouteau, born in lawful wedlock with Marie Theresa Chouteau—and that she, at the same time, was permitted to attend mass in a Catholic church and perform her other religious duties—as all testimony bears out the tradition that she was a practical Catholic in New Orleans, as also, later on, in St. Louis.

#### SEPARATED IN 1750

The truth is that she left her husband in 1750, for alleged cruelties on his part, but returned to him in 1757. Mark that there were no children born to her from September 17, 1750, to October 10, 1758.

History and popular belief have, since nearly a century, held that:

---

(From The St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* of October 18, 1921.)

1. Marie Therese Chouteau left her husband, Rene Auguste Chouteau, in 1751, on which date she had only one legitimate child, Auguste Chouteau, born in 1750.

2. That her second son, Jean Pierre Chouteau, born in New Orleans in 1758, was the child of Pierre Laclède Ligest.

3. That her three daughters, Victoire, Marie Pelagie and Marie Louise, were born, the first two in New Orleans and the last one in St. Louis, and were the children of Pierre Laclède Ligest.

4. That Madame Chouteau contracted a common law marriage with Pierre Laclède Ligest. How could Madame Chouteau contract a religious, civil or common law marriage with Pierre Laclède Ligest? There was no divorce law in France and the French colonies until the French Republic of 1870 established one. She therefore could not have been divorced from Rene Auguste Chouteau. There was no common law marriage law in existence in France and the French colonies during the life of Madame Chouteau. She therefore could not have contracted a common law marriage with Pierre Laclède Ligest.

Furthermore, she could not have married Laclède Ligest after the death of her husband in the summer of 1776. Ligest died in 1778, near the mouth of the Arkansas River, while on his way back to St. Louis from New Orleans. I can find no evidence that he was in St. Louis after the death of Rene Auguste Chouteau. At any rate, the archives of Old Cathedral on Walnut Street do not show any such marriage, and they could have been married in no other church.

#### LIGEST OWNED HIS HOME

Did Laclède Ligest reside at Madame Chouteau's house when he was occasionally in St. Louis? Some time between 1880 and 1885 I examined the books at the Recorder's office; they show that Madame Chouteau had a residence house and lot, and Laclède Ligest owned a house and the lots (an entire block) on which it was situated. This property of Ligest's was bought in 1779 by Auguste Chouteau, the year after Ligest's death, and he enlarged and altered it, and it was thereafter known as the Chouteau mansion.

When I was in New Orleans in 1874, I obtained from the baptismal records in the old St. Louis Cathedral the dates of

the births and baptisms of the first four children of Madame Chouteau: Auguste, Jean Pierre, Victoire and Marie Pelagie. The records certify that they were "the legitimate children of Rene Auguste Chouteau and Marie Therese," his wife. These records extend from 1750 (Auguste) to 1760, inclusive (Marie Pelagie)." Somehow I did not get the date of the birth and baptism of the fifth child, Marie Louise Chouteau. Paul Beckwith, in his abominable "Creoles of St. Louis," says that she was born in St. Louis in 1764. This date in universally accepted. On account of it, and my respect for, and good will toward, several of the descendants of Marie Louise Chouteau, this article did not appear in print in 1874. Last September, somehow, I turned my attention again to the subject. Believing that perhaps less attention might be paid to me, a mere private citizen, than to the authorized representative of an historical society, I asked Mrs. Nettie H. Beauregard, the archivist of the Missouri Historical Society, to write for me and try to obtain the date of the birth of Marie Louise Chouteau, if she was born in New Orleans.

#### RECEIVES COPY OF RECORD.

On October 6, Mrs. Beauregard received a certified copy of the birth and baptism record of Marie Louise Chouteau, signed by G. Lugano, archivist of the St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans, with the attached official seal. It recites that Marie Louise Chouteau was born on December 4, 1762, in New Orleans, in legitimate marriage of her father and her mother, Rene Auguste Chouteau and Marie Therese, his wife, and was baptized on December 21, 1762. The names of the officiating priest and the godfather and godmother are signed to the document. This was the last of Madame Chouteau's children.

Some time back in the early 80s, I took a copy of the will of Madame Chouteau at the Recorder's office (St. Louis). It, the will, is dated January 13, 1813, is duly signed, attested and executed before M. P. Leduc, Judge of Probate. In it she recites that she was legally married to Rene Auguste Chouteau, "now deceased," and by the said Rene Auguste Chouteau she had two sons, Auguste and Pierre, and also three daughters, Victoire, Pelagie and Marie Louise. She was 80 years of age when

she executed this will, which she signed "VEUVE (widow) CHOUTEAU." She died the following year.

When Rene Auguste Chouteau died in the summer of 1776, Madame Chouteau and her five children inherited from him. When Pierre Laclède Liguist died on June 20, 1778, they did not inherit from him (See the records of the St. Louis Probate Court.)

The descendants of Pierre, Victoire, Marie Pelagie and Marie Louise Chouteau should not have placidly accepted popular rumors and ungrounded beliefs fostered and recorded by ignorant closet historians, who, instead of investigating, consulting official documents and records, gave forth to the world barefaced falsehoods and smirched the character of an honorable, respectable and unordinarily gifted woman, and cast the odium of illegitimate descent on 1,500 or 2,000 respectable, law-abiding and, in many cases, prominent descendants, male and female, of Marie Therese Bourgeois Chouteau and Rene Auguste Chouteau, her husband.

In conclusion: Adieu to the illegitimacy of Madame Chouteau's children! Adieu to the myth of her marriage to Pierre Laclède Liguist! St. Louis history must be rewritten.

ALEXANDER N. DEMENIL

St. Louis, October 13, 1921.

ST. LOUIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

St. Louis, Mo. October 17, 1921

WHEREAS, Doctor Alexander N. De Menil, through his letter of October 13, 1921, to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, has done and will do more than the mere setting forth of historical records, as it is an expression from one universally recognized as an authority; and

WHEREAS, through the citation of records, including the Baptismal Record of Auguste Chouteau, dated September 7, 1749, proving him the legitimate son of Rene Auguste Chouteau and Dame Marie Therese Bourgeois, his wife and the marriage record of Marie Louise Chouteau to Joseph Papin, in the Old Cathedral Register of Baptisms, page 53, there ought to, and will be, removed any vestige of insinuation upon the character and life of one of Missouri's foremost women:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by this Society in spe-

cial meeting assembled this 17th day of October, 1921, that we extend to Doctor DeMenil, on behalf of all interested in a correct presentation of the history of our city and of its people, our sincere thanks for his thorough study and complete defense of those whose endeavors made this city possible; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, THAT a copy hereof be sent to Doctor DeMenil in token of our appreciation of his services so rendered towards a conscientious preservation and presentation of the truths of history.

(Signed) H. Chouteau Dyer, President.

Attest:

(Signed) A. R. A. Garesche, Secretary.

The above Resolution was unanimously adopted this 17th day of October, 1921, as above recited.

(Signed) A. R. A. Garesche, Secretary.