

ALLA CORRENTE

Henri de Tonti

Henri de Tonti (aka Henry de Tonty) helped establish the first permanent European settlement in the lower Mississippi River Valley in 1686. It was called the “Poste aux Arkansas,” or “Arkansas Post” (in Arkansas County). As a result, de Tonti is often called the “father of Arkansas.”

Although he was Italian by birth, de Tonti is associated with French exploration. He received notoriety as an explorer in the Great Lakes Region and Mississippi River Valley with his friend, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, at a time when the French were establishing trade monopolies in parts of North America to compete with the English and Spanish.

Henri was born around 1649 near Gaeta, Italy, to Lorenzo de Tonti and Isabelle di Lietto. The family moved to Paris, France soon after his birth so that his father could escape being persecuted in an unsuccessful revolt against the Spanish viceroy in Naples. In 1668, while still a youth, de Tonti enlisted in the French army and served as a cadet. During the following four years he was a midshipman at Marseilles and Toulon, participating in seven campaigns at sea, four in warships and three in galleys. Sent to Sicily, he was made captain-lieutenant to the maître de camp at Messina. At “Libisso,” during a Spanish attack, his right hand was shot away by a grenade and he was taken prisoner. He substituted a metal hook, over which he wore a glove, thus earning him the nickname, “the Iron Hand.” Conducted to “Metasse”, he was detained there six months, and then exchanged for the governor’s son. Back in France, Louis XIV granted him 300 livres. He returned to active service in Sicily as a volunteer in the galleys.



Portrait by Ben Brantly (1935), courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission.

With the conclusion of the Dutch War (1678), de Tonti returned to France, but was unable to obtain employment at court. There (probably with the help of the Sieur de Villermont) he became lieutenant to René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle, who had just been granted permission to open up the Illinois country and explore the Mississippi.

De Tonti first came to North America with La Salle in 1678 and was placed in charge of several French forts in the Great Lakes region. In 1682, de Tonti, now a lieutenant, accompanied La Salle on his famous journey south to explore the Mississippi River and its Valley region and to help establish alliances with the Native Americans of the area. On this journey, he witnessed ceremonies claiming the land in the lower Mississippi River Valley for the French king, Louis XIV. One of these ceremonies was held at the present-day site of Arkansas Post Memorial in Desha county in the presence of Quapaw Indians. Afterwards, in 1682, de Tonti received from La Salle a land grant about thirty-five miles from the mouth of the Arkansas River near the Quapaw village of Osotouy. After exploring the lower Mississippi River Valley with de Tonti by his side, La Salle left for France in order to collect colonists to settle Louisiana. He placed de Tonti at the fur trading post of Fort Saint Louis

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on the Illinois River in 1683, one of the only western forts to remain open after the French colonial government decided to concentrate their fur trade efforts in Montreal. De Tonti was not pleased with this assignment and sent La Salle letters asking him to return and assist him.

After assuming that he would meet up with La Salle as he ascended the Mississippi River when he returned from France, de Tonti left Fort Saint Louis and headed south in 1686. Instead of meeting La Salle, de Tonti went to Arkansas to establish a trading post. He left behind six Frenchmen to build a trade house and secure a permanent French settlement, engage the Quapaw in trade, serve as a way station for travelers between the Illinois country and the Gulf of Mexico, and establish a presence in the middle of North America to stop English invasion from the east. De Tonti called himself the feudal lord, or the “Seignor [sic] [of] the City of Tonti and the river of Arkansas.” As feudal lord, de Tonti held legal authority over certain cases in his territory, but it is most likely he never held court or even executed many legal decisions.

De Tonti left Arkansas in 1687 but returned several times in the 1690s to review affairs at his trading house. He found the trading post failing economically because it was hard to reach and was burdened with a moratorium that Louis XIV had placed on beaver pelt trade south of Canada. De Tonti had to enforce this royal edict in 1698, making many French hunters and traders angry with him and resulting in further desertion of the post and the area. As a result, it was not until the early 1700s that the French were able to send more settlers over to increase the population of Arkansas Post.

De Tonti did not return to Arkansas Post after the 1690s. Instead, he fought against the English and the Iroquois while helping to conduct treaties with American Indian tribes. In 1688, de Tonti returned to Fort Saint Louis, where he learned of the death of La Salle. In the 1690s, he traveled to present-day Texas to find the survivors of La Salle’s expedition, but left the area after receiving little help from the local American Indian tribes. In the early 1700s, de Tonti was chosen by Pierre Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville, who was the founder of the Louisiana colony, to make peace between the Choctaw and Chickasaw. He served under Iberville’s brother, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, as a treaty negotiator with the assignment to bring the two nations together. He also led expeditions in the Gulf Coast regions until 1704.

In September of that year, de Tonti contracted yellow fever and died at Old Mobile (present-day Mobile, Alabama). According to local lore, “de Tonti’s remains were laid to everlasting rest in an unknown grave near Mobile River, and not far from the monument erected in 1902 to commemorate the site of Old Mobile.”

*-Adapted by Dr. James J. Boitano
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<http://www.pccua.edu/keough/detonti.htm>*