

THE FRONTIER EXCHANGE ECONOMY OF THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY BEFORE 1783

by Daniel J. Usner

Even the most devoted historians of Louisiana are quick to point out that the colony in the Mississippi Valley constitutes “a study in failure” or “a holding action” in comparison with the English colonies along the Atlantic seaboard. Louisiana suffered from a low priority in the mercantile designs of both France and Spain. Immigration and population growth proceeded slowly, exportation of staple products to Europe fluctuated, and subsistence agriculture predominated over production of cash crops. But Louisiana’s sparse populace and tentative transatlantic commerce can actually be used to the historian’s advantage, allowing one to turn more attentively to dimensions of economic life that have been neglected in the lower Mississippi Valley as well as in other colonial regions of North America. Studies of economic change in North American colonies concentrated for a long time on linkages with home countries and with each other through the exportation of staple commodities. Historians are now turning to economic relationships that developed within regions, with greater attention to activities not totally dependent upon production for the Atlantic market.

Here I will examine the formation of a regional economy that connected Indian villagers across the lower Mississippi Valley with European settlers and African slaves along the Gulf Coast and lower banks of the Mississippi. The term *frontier exchange* is meant to capture the form and content of economic interactions among these groups, with a view to replacing the notion of frontier

From *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (April 1987): 166–192. Used by permission of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

as an interracial boundary with that of a cross-cultural network. . . . Small-scale face-to-face marketing must be taken seriously, especially for understanding how peoples of different cultures related to and influenced each other in daily life.

. . . [T]he lower Mississippi Valley is here defined as an economic region that was shaped by common means of production and by regular forms of trade among its diverse inhabitants. . . . In 1763 the lower Mississippi Valley was partitioned into the Spanish province of Louisiana and the English province of West Florida. The latter colony, therefore, must be included in any study of the region's economy. The persistence of frontier exchange across the political boundary can too easily be overlooked when Louisiana and West Florida are treated separately.

The focus of this study falls not directly on familiar economic settings—the fur trade for Indians and plantation agriculture for blacks—but rather on the interstices in which people exchanged small quantities of goods in pursuit of their livelihood. A brief summary of how the formal network of towns and outposts took shape is accompanied by an outline of population changes in the lower Mississippi Valley. Then the reader is asked to follow more closely the multiple directions of interaction through which deerskins and foods circulated from group to group. Over most of the eighteenth century, exchanges of these two kinds of products contributed strongly to the notable fluidity of social relations among lower Mississippi Valley inhabitants. It must be emphasized, however, that exchanges occurred under, and often despite, very unequal social conditions because a colonial elite worked steadily to enforce bondage upon black Louisianians and West Floridians, dependency upon Indians, and subordination upon a mixed lot of white settlers. . . .

I

Sent by France late in 1698 to establish a military post near the mouth of the Mississippi River and to forestall Spanish and English advances in the region, naval captain Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville encountered dismal prospects for what he hoped would become a colony. Already overextended imperially and facing shortages of food at home, France was not prepared to deliver supplies

with any regularity to the Gulf Coast. Like many other nascent colonial ventures before it, Iberville's isolated outpost therefore depended heavily upon trade with neighboring Indian villages for its survival. Soldiers and sailors either purchased food directly from Indians or acquired peltry from them to exchange for imported grains and meats. During the second decade of the eighteenth century, this trade expanded from localized exchange with villages near the Gulf into an extensive network of interior posts that not only facilitated the movement of deerskins to the coast but functioned as marketplaces for the exchange of food. . . .

To advance trade up the Red River, a French garrison occupied a post near the Caddo village of Natchitoches in 1716, and a subsidiary trade station was established at an upriver Indian town called Upper Nasoni in 1719. Only twenty miles southwest of Natchitoches, the Spanish, who had been gradually edging toward the Red River, constructed a military post at Los Adaes in 1721. Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, who became commandant of French Natchitoches in 1719, had already been trading in this area for several years—with both Spaniards and Indians. In 1721 a small detachment of soldiers from the Yazoo River garrison joined a group of about one hundred settlers at the lower Arkansas River. . . .

A decade of immigration and slave trading to Louisiana, attended by death for hundreds of Europeans and Africans, resulted by 1732 in a population of only about 2,000 settlers and soldiers with some 3,800 slaves, at a time when the number of Indians of the lower Mississippi Valley, though rapidly declining from disease and war, was still in the range of 30,000. Large-scale immigration from Europe stopped by the mid-1720s, and only about 400 black slaves reached the colony between 1732 and the 1760s. This slow growth of population—to approximately 5,000 slaves, 4,000 settlers, and 100 free people of color—meant minimal encroachment on Indian lands: most settlers and slaves lived along the Gulf Coast and the Mississippi River below its junction with the Red River. Trade relations with the Indians developed more freely because, for a time at least, the region's tribes were not markedly agitated by French Pressure on their territory.

At first, given the scanty and erratic supply of trade goods from France, Louisiana officials relied on distribution of merchandise among Indian leaders in the form of annual gifts. In doing so, they accommodated by neces-

sity to Indian protocols of trade and diplomacy. For the Indians, exchanges of material goods represented political reciprocity between autonomous groups, while absence of trade was synonymous with a state of war. Because commerce could not operate independently from ritual expressions of allegiance, such formal ceremonies as gift giving and smoking the calumet had to accompany economic transactions between Indians and Europeans. Conformity to these conventions recognized the leverage of such large tribes as the Choctaws and Caddoes on Louisiana's commerce and defense. They were essential to the initiation of the network of trade for deerskins and food—both items important to the success of Louisiana—against the threat of English competition from South Carolina and Georgia.

Even so, the formation of this network did not occur without costly conflict. Only after a long war against the Chitimachas, which provided Louisiana with many of its first slaves, did the French secure the alliance of all Indian tribes in the Mississippi delta. While small tribes like the Chitimachas confronted French power directly, conflict between larger Indian nations was fueled by intercolonial competition. In the 1720s Choctaw and Upper Creek villagers helped the French thwart British expansion to the Mississippi River, while the Chickasaws and Lower Creeks fought against them to protect English traders still operating within the Louisiana hinterland. The most explosive crisis came in 1729 when, after a decade of deteriorating relations with encroaching settlers, the Natchez Indians waged a desperate war against the French. Meanwhile, a push by Louisiana officials and planters for the production of tobacco and indigo provoked resistance within: as the volume of these exports rose during the late 1720s, so did the level of slave rebelliousness. A Negro plot was discovered in New Orleans shortly after the Indians destroyed the French plantations at Natchez, and many of the slaves taken captive there assisted the Natchez in their ensuing, but losing, defense against the Louisiana army. Dealing with a black majority within the colonial settlements, and living in the midst of an even larger Indian population, officials employed greater vigilance and harsher coercion as time went on.

Toward mid-century, chronic shortages of merchandise and English intervention nearly turned the Choctaw nation, a bulwark of Louisiana's security, against the French. The benign policy of gift giving could go only so far in mitigating the effects of unreliable imports upon the deerskin trade with

Indians. Unable to divert the powerful Chickasaw nation from the English because of inadequate quantities of trade goods, French officials resorted to a strategy of intimidation and debilitation, employing Choctaw warriors on major campaigns and in continuous guerrilla raids against Chickasaw villages. Participation in this conflict through the 1740s, which was motivated by the need to avenge enemy hostilities as well as to fulfill obligations to the French, took its toll on the Choctaws. Rebellion by a pro-English party within the nation broke out in 1746, costing the Choctaw people much suffering and death in what became a violent civil war waged to preserve their alliance with French Louisiana.

Louisiana's frontier exchange economy survived the Choctaw revolt, with the exportation of deerskins steadily increasing alongside that of tobacco and indigo. Demographic and geopolitical changes that began in the 1760s, however, portended greater challenges to the trade-alliance network. Immigration into the lower Mississippi Valley resumed after Great Britain drove French settlers from Nova Scotia in 1755. By 1767, seven years after Spain obtained Louisiana from France, more than a thousand of these Acadian refugees reached the colony, forming new settlements along the Mississippi about seventy miles above New Orleans and at Atakapas and Opelousas on Bayou Teche. From 1778 to 1780, two thousand "Islenos" migrated from the Canary Islands and established their own communities, along the Mississippi and Bayou Lafourche below New Orleans. In 1785 seven ships carried another 1,600 Acadians from France to Louisiana. Meanwhile Great Britain was accelerating colonization on the eastern side of the river, having acquired West Florida by the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Settlers from the Atlantic seaboard, many with slaves, increased the colonial population of West Florida to nearly 4,000 whites and 1,500 blacks by 1774. An even larger influx occurred after the outbreak of the American Revolution as loyalist refugees sought asylum in the Florida colony and settled mainly in the Natchez area. By 1783, when Spain gained sovereignty over West Florida and control over both sides of the Mississippi, the colonial population of the lower Mississippi Valley approached 16,000 Negro slaves, 13,000 whites, and over 1,000 free people of color.

By the 1780s, the Indian population in the region was, for the first time, becoming outnumbered by colonial inhabitants, while the colonial economy shifted toward greater dependence upon expanding commercial agriculture.

Consequently, Louisiana officials exerted tighter political control over interethnic exchange in order to concentrate slave labor on cash crops and to reduce the mobility of Indian villagers. The frontier exchange economy did not fade from the lower Mississippi Valley, however, for efforts continued to be made into the nineteenth century by many old and new inhabitants to perpetuate small-scale trade across heightening racial divides.

II

Before 1783 the deerskin trade . . . encouraged widespread participation in a network of diffuse exchange from Indian villages to colonial port towns. Indian customs and French commercial weaknesses, as already seen, required a formal sphere of trade-alliance relations, but many people across the region also relied upon informal and intimate forms of cross-cultural trade. . . .

[T]he Indian trade in lower Louisiana was shaped by a complex of . . . circumstances. A small number of colonial troops with minimal support from the crown had to be dispersed among a few select posts. Intertribal conflicts and English trade with Indians in the region determined when and where French stations were constructed and, furthermore, continued to be destabilizing influences on Louisiana's trade. The irrepressible eastward flow of beaver skins from the upper Mississippi Valley to Canada also affected the trade network in Louisiana, making the Lower valley a separate, predominantly deerskin-producing, trade region.

The economic and political importance of the Indian trade to Louisiana is evidenced by the close attention that officials paid to the details of its operation. The overall interest of colonial administrators centered upon the interference and competition of English traders, but particular measures were required for regulation of the region's internal commerce as well. In order to maintain stable relations between traders and villagers, governments in all North American colonies administered tariffs or rates of exchange. In 1721 the Choctaws and the French agreed to trade at the following prices: a quarter of an ell (one meter) of woolen cloth called *limbourg* or one axe for four dressed deerskins; one blanket or tomahawk for two dressed deerskins; and two-thirds of a pound of gunpowder or twenty gun flints for one dressed deerskin. As the cost of European manufactures rose and additional goods entered the regional

economy, new tariffs were negotiated from time to time by colonial and tribal leaders. Although much of the trading occurred at varying rates, depending upon local conditions and individual circumstances, official tariffs represented colonial accommodation to Indian insistence that trade be contained within the political sphere of relations. Once it established rates of exchange, the Superior Council of Louisiana had to contend with complaints from traders and Indians alike about inadequate supplies or inappropriate prices. Operating between a fixed ceiling of rates set between tribal and colonial governments and a rising floor of costs charged by import merchants, the traders tended to have, as noted in the minutes of a meeting in December 1728, "a greater share in the complaints that have been made about the high price of the goods than the Indians themselves." For their part, Indian representatives bargained for better exchange rates by repeatedly comparing the expense and quality of French and English merchandise.

Despite attempts by groups of merchants and officials to monopolize Indian commerce, the deerskin trade involved many colonial inhabitants as well as Indians. Even during the demographic and agricultural expansion of Louisiana in the 1720s, settlers relied upon deerskins, acquired directly or indirectly from Indian villagers, as a means of buying imported goods. . . . Many settlers and even slaves exchanged something for deerskins once in a while, and innumerable colonists passed in and out of the deerskin trade as a temporary means of livelihood. Others made a lifetime occupation from seasonally trading imported merchandise for peltry and other native products. The identities of some professional traders among the Choctaws offer informative glimpses into the business. Marc Antoine Huché grew up among the Choctaws, was hired in 1721 as interpreter for the company at "five hundred livres per year with two rations for himself and his wife," and traded for Mobile commandant-entrepreneur Bernard Diron d'Artaquette. . . .

After 1762 the number of traders operating in Indian villages increased with the growth of the colonial population, and their ethnic composition became more English. By the mid-1780s, Spanish officials estimated that five hundred traders, employees, and transients were living in and around Choctaw and Chickasaw towns, while nearly three hundred more operated in Creek towns. Considered "vagabonds and villains" by colonial administrators interested in orderly commerce, many of these men married Indian women

and became affiliated with specific villages. . . . The children born to this generation of traders and their Indian wives belonged to the clans of their mothers, and some became important tribal leaders by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Most deerskin traders learned to speak the language of the tribe with whom they dealt. As emphasized by an anonymous chronicler of the Choctaws' trade with Louisiana, who may have been a trader sometime before the mid-1730s, "it is necessary to know their language well." Many traders probably spoke Mobilian, a trade language or lingua franca, instead of or in addition to distinct tribal languages: "when one knows it," noted Lt. Jean François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, "one can travel through all this province without needing an interpreter." Antecedents of Mobilian may have existed in the region before European contact, but economic relations with the colonial populace of Louisiana undoubtedly accelerated and expanded its usage. . . . Based upon the western Muskogean grammar of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Alibamon languages—all mutually unintelligible—Mobilian served as a second language, mixing with wide variation lexicon and phonology derived from both Indian and European speech. Well before the mid-eighteenth century, Mobilian became familiar to colonists and Indians west of the Mississippi River. All Caddo villages, as reported by Antoine Le Page du Pratz, contained someone who could speak this "Langue vulgaire." Mobilian was a convenient second language for many settlers and slaves as well as traders to use among Indians, and through the nineteenth century it continued to be spoken by Indians, Negroes, and whites in southern Louisiana and eastern Texas.

Among the goods exchanged for deerskins, liquor was the most volatile item. As in other colonial regions, alcoholic beverages in Louisiana functioned both as a lubricant for expanding Indian commerce and as a stimulant for satisfying military and other colonial personnel. Louisiana and West Florida governments tried to control this commerce, but the very frequency of ordinances regulating trade in liquor reveals its ever-widening use among Indians, settlers, and slaves. In 1725 the Louisiana Superior Council attempted to remedy abuses caused by the "many persons here who have no other trade than that of selling brandy and other drinks at exorbitant prices and even grant credit to all the soldiers, workmen, and sailors." Beginning in 1717, innumerable orders were issued prohibiting the unauthorized sale of liquor to

Indians and slaves, whose consumption of it, officials feared, would increase chances of violent rebellion. By mid-century a cheap rum called *tafia* became the region's most popular drink and a convenient medium of exchange. The English government in Pensacola attempted to restrict Indian traders to fifteen gallons every three months, which was considered a necessary amount for their purchase of food from Indian villagers. But in 1772 several Choctaw chiefs bitterly complained about the quantity of rum that "pours in upon our nation like a great Sea from Mobile and from all the Plantations and Settlements round about." Traders sometimes watered their rum, four kegs of which could buy a Choctaw pony during the 1770s, and encouraged excessive consumption among Indians in order to make more profitable bargains for their deerskins. Peddlers and tavernkeepers persistently violated their licenses by selling *tafia* and *eau de vie* to soldiers and slaves as well as to Indians.

Deerskin traders and other peddlers played a dynamic role in the frontier exchange economy. While immediately helping distribute the produce of Indians, slaves, and settlers, they performed a long-term economic function. Indian hunters required an advance in goods before they pursued the winter season's thickly furred animals, forcing traders to wait until spring for their pay. In response to this seasonal pattern, traders acquired goods on credit from town merchants and obliged themselves to pay with interest within a year. By extending larger amounts of credit to more inhabitants of the area and by dealing more frequently in dry goods and export commodities, itinerant traders contributed to the commercialization of marketing in the lower Mississippi Valley. . . .

III

The frontier exchange economy also involved trade in foodstuffs. Colonists in Louisiana, though ill supplied from home, were at first reluctant to labor to feed themselves by growing crops; fortunately for them, Indians were able to produce more than they needed for their own use. Thus there developed a lively trade, though one less visible to historians even than the diffuse trade in deerskins. While sailors and soldiers from France, with some Canadian *coureurs de bois*, were constructing the colony's first fort at Biloxi Bay, the Pascagoulas, Mobilians, and other coastal Indians eagerly swapped surpluses

of corn, beans, and meat for axes, beads, and other useful items of European manufacture. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, colonial officials regularly sent parties up the Mobile and Mississippi rivers to purchase maize from Indians. In order to facilitate their trade with the French, some villages relocated closer to the coast and planted larger volumes of grain. The Houmas, for example, abandoned their town several miles east of the Mississippi and settled downriver along the west bank near Bayou Lafourche, where they became reliable suppliers of food to both travelers and settlers. In 1708, when the colony consisted of 122 military men, 80 Indian slaves, and only 77 settlers (24 men, 28 women, and 25 children), “everybody,” according to special commissioner Martin d’Artaquette, was asking for gunpowder “to trade with the Indians for the things we need.” Through sales of venison to these people, Indians who hunted around Fort St. Louis were acquiring guns, each musket worth ten deer by 1710.

The availability of Indian produce tempted some officials and colonists to profiteer in the sale of food. Louisiana’s first political conflict, in fact, centered upon accusations—not entirely false—that the Le Moyne brothers engrossed “the meat and other produce that the Indians have brought to Mobile,” trading with the king’s merchandise and marking up the price of food for their own profit. Far away from France, where local governments and traditional constraints still protected buyers of food from profiteering middlemen, colonial merchants and administrators tried to intercept corn and game from Indian suppliers and resell the food to consumers at exorbitant prices. The Superior Council assumed responsibility for fixing the price of basic food items beginning in 1722, when buffalo beef was set at eight sous per pound, cattle beef at ten sous per pound, a quarter of a deer at four livres, poultry at three livres apiece, and eggs at fifty sous per dozen. Such regulations, however, never stopped commandants of military posts from attempting to monopolize food supplies and other goods delivered by neighboring Indian villagers.

Many *habitants*¹ of Louisiana preferred direct exchange with Indians for their subsistence, which proved easier than learning how to produce their own food from the soil and wildlife of an unfamiliar land. Trade with Indians for food also allowed a degree of freedom from the pressures inherent in colonial

¹ *Habitants* refers to Louisiana’s colonists.

agriculture, causing alarm among colonial officials and merchants who hoped to build a colony that would export some profitable staple. Although general commissioner Marc-Antoine Hubert found the soil along the rivers and bayous to be “of surprising fertility,” he lamented in 1716 that “the colonists of the present time will never be satisfied with this infallible resource, accustomed as they are to the trade with the Indians the easy profit from which supports them, giving them what they need day by day like the Indians who find their happiness in an idle and lazy life.” Another observer found in France’s feeble commitment to colonizing the lower Mississippi Valley the reason why inhabitants had for two decades “done nothing else than try to get a little trading merchandise to obtain from the savages their sustenance, consisting of Indian corn, beans, pumpkins, or small round pumpkins, game and bear grease.” The Indian trade, by deflecting colonists from agriculture, thus helped frustrate early efforts to integrate the region into the world market for the benefit of both the colony and the mother country. What looked to officials like laziness was really a testimony to the vitality of the exchange economy.

When the Company of the Indies sent a flood of immigrants to Louisiana between 1717 and 1721, dependence on Indian supplies of food actually expanded. A food crisis was created as seven thousand settlers and two thousand slaves disembarked on the Gulf Coast without adequate provisions. Malarial fevers, dysentery, and scurvy combined with hunger to kill hundreds of French and German immigrants and Bambara and Wolof² captives. Soldiers and workers employed by the company were sent to live in nearby Indian villages, and shipments of corn were sought from interior tribes.

Like the deerskin trade, food marketing followed a more open and diffuse pattern than colonial administrators desired. Although France treated Louisiana as an importer of flour, alcohol, and a few more luxurious foodstuffs, supply lines were too tenuous and shipments always too small or spoiled for habitants to rely upon external sources for grain and meat. Colonists accused merchants who exported flour from France of shipping inedible and short-measured supplies. The Illinois country also proved to be an unreliable source of wheat for the colonists downriver. Therefore, Indian villages and colonial settlements within the lower valley came to depend upon a regional network of

² Bambara and Wolof refers to West African peoples who arrived as slaves during the eighteenth century.

exchange, in which food surpluses were periodically traded in bulk to areas in short supply, and smaller-scale transactions regularly occurred among Indians, settlers, and slaves.

The generous system of distributing land to settlers in Louisiana helped stimulate a domestic market in corn, rice, and other produce. In order to keep colonists in the colony and to encourage agriculture, France offered settlers moderately sized tracts of free land, usually with five arpents of river frontage and forty arpents deep from the bank (200 square arpents or 170 acres). “A man with his wife or his partner,” wrote Father Paul du Poisson in 1727, “clears a little ground, builds himself a house on four piles, covers it with sheets of bark, and plants corn and rice for his provisions; the next year he raises a little more for food, and has also a field of tobacco; if at last he succeed[s] in having three or four Negroes, then he is out of his difficulties. This is what is called a habitation, a habitant; but how many of them are as nearly beggars as when they began!” Settlers who failed to make their habitation productive depended upon food shared by kin or distributed through the market, while those who succeeded in farming maintained a diversity of crops that helped minimize their dependency upon the export-import economy.

The presence of numerous military personnel in the region and the fact that about 25 percent of Louisiana’s colonial populace lived in New Orleans by mid-century especially stimulated cross-cultural food marketing. Corn, game, and other provisions consumed at interior posts like Natchitoches and Tombeché came from neighboring Indian villagers who bartered for such trade goods as metalware, brandy, and cloth either directly with the soldiers or more formally through their officers. The government also purchased large quantities of grain for its troops from settlers along the Mississippi River. The Choctaws not only sold foodstuffs to the garrison stationed at Fort Tombeché, beginning in 1736, but also carried corn, vegetables, and poultry to the Mobile market.

New Orleans and Mobile benefited from food crops and meats and even from such prepared items as persimmon bread, cornmeal, and bear oil that were sold by Indian communities in their vicinity. During the 1720s those Acolapissas, Chitimachas, and Houmas who had resettled closer to New Orleans continued to produce corn, fish, and game for city dwellers and travelers. On the Pearl River, between New Orleans and Biloxi, the Pensacolas, Biloxi, Pascagoulas, and Capinas furnished “an abundance of meat to all the

French who are near enough to trade for it.” Of a group of Chaouachas who migrated from the lower Mississippi to the Mobile River outside the town of Mobile, Bienville declared that “their sole occupation is to produce corn by means of which they obtain from the French what they need.” Other “*petite nations*”—the Alibamons, Biloxis, Pascagoulas, and Chahtas—migrated during the 1760s to the lower Mississippi, where they participated in riverside trade and the New Orleans market. In 1776 there were ten Indian villages, over 1,000 people altogether, interspersed among plantations along the Mississippi upriver between New Orleans and the mouth of the Red River.

Many of the several thousand African slaves shipped to Louisiana during the 1720s to expand commercial agriculture turned to small-scale cultivating and marketing of foodstuffs. As in other plantation colonies, the autonomous production and distribution of foodstuffs by slaves resulted from more than the economic interests of slaveowners. In addition to producing such export staples as tobacco, indigo, and timber, black Louisianians on both small and large grants of land, called *concessions*, grew food crops for their own consumption and occasionally for their owners to sell to other colonists. On their own time slaves attended to their personal subsistence needs and eating tastes. As director of a large plantation at Chapitoulas owned by the Company of the Indies (its population in 1731 included 230 slaves), Antoine Le Page du Pratz recognized this inclination and recommended that owners give “a small piece of waste ground” to their slaves, “engage them to cultivate it for their own profit,” and purchase their produce “upon fair and just terms.” He also prescribed this arrangement as an alternative to the dances and assemblies held by slaves on Sundays, where he suspected they traded stolen goods and plotted rebellion.

Afro-Americans became aggressive traders in the food market of Louisiana. Many slaves were sent from plantations to the towns of Mobile, New Orleans, Natchez, and Natchitoches to sell poultry, meats, vegetables, and milk on their owners’ behalf. They also sold foodstuffs and other items independently of their owners whenever and wherever possible. Although the colonial government intermittently enforced regulations upon slave peddlers, requiring them by 1751 to carry written permits from their owners, the open marketing of goods by slaves benefited too many people to be forcibly prohibited during the first half of the eighteenth century. The

limited self-determination for slaves that stemmed from the production and trading of food had several advantages. It helped owners to maintain their slaves at a level of subsistence minimizing hardship, death, and rebellion; it provided consumers with a larger quantity and wider array of foods than would otherwise have been available; and it gained for slaves some means of autonomy from their masters. From these circumstances in the marketplace, not to mention those in colonial kitchens, came the heavy African influence upon Louisiana's famous creole cuisine.

Many slaves moved food in and out of the market with great resourcefulness. Pilferage became a means of protest against slaveowners, of supplemental nutrition within the slave community, and even of escape from bondage. . . . Throughout the eighteenth century, small fugitive camps fed themselves from plantation herds and storehouses, traded leftovers with other slaves, and even channeled goods into the open market. The fifteen or more inhabitants of one camp, discovered behind the Bienvenu estate in 1781, survived by killing stray cattle, by growing patches of corn and vegetables, and by making "baskets, sifters and other articles made of willow," which slaves on a nearby plantation sold for them in New Orleans.

Most day-to-day pilferage on plantations and in towns occurred without much official notice, but cases in which theft led to arrest and prosecution reveal the variety of ways that slaves illicitly exchanged food with other Louisianians. After Alexandre Boré discovered one hundred chickens and five quarters of rice missing from his plantation at Cannes Bruslées in 1753, one of his many slaves was flogged into admitting that he had traded them away for tafia. The settler who bartered with him, one Faussier of Chapitoulas, was sentenced to pay fifty livres indemnity to Boré as well as a fine of one hundred livres. Meanwhile, the pilferer managed to break his chains, steal a gun, and flee into the forest. On June 3, 1782, a twenty-six-year-old slave named Juan was arrested in New Orleans; his interrogation disclosed an ambitious flight financed by theft. He crossed Lake Pontchartrain to the city after raking from his owner a pirogue, a gun and ammunition, a shirt, and some sweet potatoes. On the way he stole turkeys and hens from the De La Chaise plantation and, after selling them in New Orleans, stole five more hens from a courtyard in town. Juan sold the hens to a Frenchman named La Rochelle for cash, with which he had intended to buy gunpowder.

Farmers as well as slaves from the surrounding countryside brought grains, vegetables, fruits, and poultry to the multiethnic market at New Orleans. German immigrants who settled above the city during the 1720s, numbering about fifty families in 1726, became a notable group of food provisioners. "They bring every day to the market," observed one contemporary, "all kinds of produce to the city." When raids by Choctaw rebels caused them to flee from the "German Coast" to the city in 1748, New Orleans became, as Gov. Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil reported, "deprived of the comforts that those settlers provided for it by their industry and their thrift." These very independent farmers, who eventually returned to their settlement, were later joined by Acadian refugees who settled just north of them and proved especially active in growing corn and rice for the colonial market. Many French, free Negro, and Canary Island families also provisioned the New Orleans vicinity from their gardens and fields. While individual transactions were usually small, collectively they amounted to a substantial volume of provisions. In August 1770, Spanish officials complained that New Orleans was suffering corn and rice shortages because upriver farmers found it more profitable to sell their produce to the English in West Florida. The marketing of both food and deerskins defied trade barriers that were being raised by officials along new political boundaries.

Venison, wild fowl, and other products of hunting, fishing, and gathering made up another set of widely marketed foods. Slaves hunted, fished, and collected edible plants both for their own use and for their owners' kitchens. The Houma, Chitimacha, and other Indian communities dispersed among the plantations, as noticed by Bernard Romans in the 1770s, "serve as hunters, and for some other laborious uses, something similar to subdued tribes in New England." Within the colonial towns lived professional hunters and fishermen who like Aouguist Savan, a free mulatto of New Orleans, supported their families by selling food on the levees and streets. In 1770 a traveler observed that along Lake Pontchartrain behind New Orleans, at the mouth of Bayou St. John, there were "Fishermen and Fowlers and when unemploy'd in that Business they gather Wood & burn it into Charcoal." During the winter months Indian villagers dispersed into small hunting camps of ten or so families. . . . These Indian camps, spread along the Alabama, Mississippi, and Red river drainages, were principally occupied with producing for the deerskin trade,

but they rarely neglected to exchange venison, bear meat, and tallow for ammunition, cloth, and drink with settlers and travelers whom they encountered during the hunting season.

For a long time domestic beef was scarce and expensive in Louisiana; early attempts to build herds from imported livestock proved fruitless. But a regional network of cattle trading gradually developed and, like other kinds of food exchange and the deerskin trade, involved extensive interethnic participation. In the 1720s French traders and Indian villagers around Natchitoches began moving horses and cattle eastward, down the Red River. The Caddoes, experienced horsemen since the mid-seventeenth century, when Spanish livestock herded by other Indians began to reach their villages, exchanged cattle and horses with the French and other Indians. The Tunicas and Avoyelles, situated near the junction of the Red and Mississippi rivers, became important middlemen in the livestock trade; Le Page du Pratz praised the latter group “for the services they have done the colony by the horses, oxen, and cows they have brought from New Mexico.” The amount of beef available to Louisianians was increasing by the mid-eighteenth century, and some settlers were operating meat and dairy farms at Pointe Coupée, Barataria, and other places near New Orleans. By 1766 the average number of cattle on each farm along the lower Mississippi River was approaching fourteen head. Meanwhile the settlement of Bayou Teche by Acadian farmers also expanded the livestock trade. Along with Atakapa and Opelousa Indians in southwest Louisiana, Acadians acquired cattle from the Trinity River area and started raising their own herds on open grazing lands.

Slaves participated in this livestock network as drovers, herders, and dairy producers. When Joseph LeKintrek and Daniel Bopfé formed a livestock-raising partnership at the German settlements in 1741, seven of LeKintrek’s slaves—three men, two women, and two children—accompanied his cattle to the new *vacherie*, where they also tended sheep, hogs, and poultry. In 1783, when New Orleans merchant Jean Baptiste Macarty purchased 180 head of oxen from the settlement of Atakapas, he employed a crew of one Indian, one Negro slave, and a few whites to drive and ferry the animals over the tricky drainage of the Atchafalaya Basin. As in the case of hunting and peddling foodstuffs, bringing beef to the colonial market provided slaves with greater

freedom of movement and closer contact with colonists and Indians than existed in plantation labor.

IV

The participation of Indian villagers, black slaves, and white colonists in fur and food marketing discloses closer interaction and greater cultural exchange among them than historians of colonial regions have generally portrayed. In this respect, trade in the lower Mississippi Valley generated economic roles and ethnic relations similar in flexibility and fluidity to those recently discovered for blacks in early South Carolina and Virginia. Clearly, Indians did not just hunt, blacks did not just grow crops for export, and whites did not merely choose to become either subsistence farmers or staple planters. However, a complex of forces circumscribed economic and ethnic relations and minimized the leveling potential of frontier exchange. The institution of slavery, European class divisions, racism, colonial policy, and violent conflict all contributed to the building of racial barriers in Louisiana and West Florida, especially after the demographic scale tipped unfavorably for Indians. The transformation of the lower Mississippi Valley into an agricultural export economy, which accelerated during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, further intensified the hierarchical stratification of both race and class.

Changes in the deerskin trade implemented by Spain after 1783 signaled that the network of frontier exchange stitched by inhabitants over the previous decades was beginning to ravel. Indians of the large interior nations, who had close ties to many traders, entered this period with high expectations of further commerce. Following the withdrawal of Great Britain from West Florida, the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Upper Creeks negotiated new trade tariffs with the Spanish government in June 1784. The deerskin trade, however, rapidly slipped under the control of a few merchant houses. The English firm of Pantton, Leslie and Company, with Spanish authorization, began to monopolize trade with Indian villages east of the Mississippi. On the other side of the river, Natchitoches traders and settlers likewise gave way to better-financed and more-organized merchants. Accelerated commercialization of the frontier

exchange economy inexorably upset its traditional customs and patterns. Most notably, traders carried ever-larger quantities of rum into Indian villages, the distribution of gifts occurred less often, and the tribes fell into chronic debt to merchant houses and thereby became more vulnerable to pressure against their land.

Sheer demographic force explains the gradual marginalization of Indians in the regional food market. As settlers increased in number and grew their own crops, the volume and variety of foodstuffs provided by Indian communities declined. Scattered bands of Louisiana Indians concentrated on bartering venison and bear oil with travelers and settlers mostly during winter months. The declining political power and economic importance of Indians also manifested itself in the formal sphere of relations, where gifts of food had customarily bound parties into a reciprocal relationship. A reduction in the level of inter-colonial rivalry for Indian allegiance after 1783 diminished the willingness of Louisiana officials to share food with visiting Indians. Food thus became more strictly a market commodity just as the role of Indians in the marketplace was diminishing. Indians responded to this breakdown in food-giving protocol by committing acts of banditry against the livestock and crops of settlers.

The role of slaves in food exchange was threatened by general changes in the region's economy. By the 1780s a large number of people in New Orleans had become professional peddlers or *marchands* who bought foodstuffs from producers and resold them to consumers. Increasing commercialization and the growing volume of trade made traditional price tariffs issued by the government less effective. "The peddlers are moving around in different parts of the City," reported the Cabildo, "and their wares cannot be inspected by the officials and for this reason they sell the goods as well as the spoiled commodities at an arbitrary price so they will not lose anything in their business." Accordingly, in September 1784 the government established a marketplace and required food marchands, both free and slave, to rent stalls. Slaves sent daily to sell "vegetables, milk, wild fowl, quartered venison and mutton" for their owners continued "to enjoy the liberty to sell their commodities in the City as they did before." Farmers bringing their own produce to town were allowed to sell directly to the public for three hours, after which their goods had to be sold at wholesale to the licensed traders. The formation of an institutionalized marketplace in New Orleans, with fees to be paid and goods

closely watched, contributed to the gradual relegation of black producers and peddlers to a subordinate status in the food market. Without either an owner's permit or an official license, slaves found it more difficult to trade openly. One visitor to New Orleans in 1797 observed that blacks vended "to raise a scanty pittance" from small stalls located between the levee and the first row of houses. But he found that most "were obliged to account to the master for the profits of the day."

By the end of the eighteenth century, the frontier exchange network was rapidly being superseded by the commercial production of cotton and sugar. Even so, people living in the region did not wholly relinquish older forms of economic exchange. Even after the large tribes of the deep South were removed, Indians continued to peddle foodstuffs and other goods along the Mississippi and in Mobile, Natchez, and New Orleans. Hundreds of Louisiana Indians—Choctaws, Houmas, Chitimachas, Tunicas, and others—camped on the outskirts of New Orleans, usually during the late winter, and peddled in the city an array of foods and food-related items: venison, water fowl, and other game; such manufactures as baskets, sieves, and cane blowguns; and kindling wood, wild fruits, medicinal herbs, and such culinary spices as *filé*, a powder ground from sassafras leaves and used by Louisianians to make *filé gumbo*. Indian families also seasonally traveled Louisiana's waterways during the nineteenth century, trading the same kinds of goods with both planters and slaves.

Afro-Americans resorted to surreptitious forms of exchange to compensate for their deteriorating trade opportunities. In violation of ordinances adopted in the early nineteenth century by the Orleans and Mississippi territories, many residents continued to exchange goods with slaves as well as Indians. Some of the very middlemen whose appearance marked the marginalization of slaves in the food market were willing to buy items from them. Peddlers called *caboteurs*, who traveled the waterways in pirogues and bought all kinds of produce for the New Orleans market, became infamous for their illicit trade with slaves. They were frequently accused of encouraging Negroes to steal from their owners, but pilferage by slaves had long been part of their resistance and survival under bondage. Observing the plight of the marketer who was also treated as marketable property, Charles Robin aptly explained why slaves bartered with *caboteurs*: "True, the Negroes do have chickens and pigs of their own, but

they can sell nothing without the permission of their masters. It is better for both the buyer and seller to do without permission.”

Economic life in the lower Mississippi Valley during the eighteenth century, in which many later subsistence activities and adaptive strategies were rooted, evades historians who seek only strong commercial institutions and growing export values for their evidence. Within an extensive network of coastal towns and interior posts stretching from the Alabama River to the Red River, the region's inhabitants participated in a cross-cultural web of economic relations. When one follows the movement of deerskins and foodstuffs through this network, the importance of small-scale trade among diverse groups of people comes into focus. Louisiana was indeed an extraordinary North American colony, imposing even less demographic and commercial pressure upon the continent than did French Canada. But the backcountry of England's Atlantic seaboard provinces, as well as Canada and New Mexico, also passed through a long period of frontier exchange. The form and content of interethnic relations discussed here, and made more visible by Louisiana's history, can be profitably explored at the obscure crossroads and marketplaces of other colonial regions.

Questions

1. Usner uses the term “frontier exchange economy” throughout his essay. What is the “frontier exchange economy,” and why is it significant?
2. What effects did the relatively slow growth of European and African populations during the first half of the eighteenth century have on the relations between those groups and American Indians in the lower Mississippi Valley?
3. What were the cultural and economic effects of the deerskin and foodstuff trades?
4. What effects did the end of the “frontier exchange economy” have on slaves, American Indians, and Europeans in Louisiana?