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French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West

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In his own time, Baronet Vasquez was well-known, and deservedly so. His was an old and respected St. Louis family – even when its fortunes declined, it remained important in the fur trade as long as the city itself did. He was interpreter for Zebulon Pike's expedition to the sources of the Arkansas in 1806; an infantry officer in the War of 1812 and hero of several battles; an Indian trader who made at least one and perhaps several journeys to the Rocky Mountains. And finally, as United States Indian Agent for six years, he had the rare reputation of being invaluable both to his employers and to the Indians.

Baronet's father was Benito Vasquez, born in 1738 in the ancient city of Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain. He came to St. Louis as a soldier with Captain Pedro Piernas who established Spanish authority in the heretofore French colony. Because of his integrity, enterprise and deep piety, Don Benito was quickly accepted in the habitant village and became a successful Indian trader. In 1774 he married nineteen-year-old Julie Papin from Canada, a gentle lady with a magnificent singing voice. She bore him twelve children, of whom all but two reached maturity. Their warm and tender love for one another and their parents is reflected in their letters, preserved in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. 2

Baronet was the fifth of these children, born in St. Louis on September 11, 1783. Although baptized Antoine François Vasquez, he was usually called Baronet, a dit or nickname of his mother's family. He grew up in a typical creole house of posts facing the Mississippi River, and for a time at a country house on the Meramec River where his father cultivated land, kept cattle and ran a salt works. In 1796, when he was thirteen, Baronet began making trips with his father to the Kansas Indians and probably to the Pawnee Loups as well, for his father traded these years with both tribes.

By 1803, Don Benito Vasquez had lost most of his fortune in an unsuccessful trading company, and his sons were obliged to earn their own livings. Their choice of employers was far from popular: Baronet's older brother Benito took service in 1806 or 1807 with Manuel Lisa, an aggressive fur trader on the Missouri who was hated by other traders. Even Baronet advised his brother to stop working for the "Society" (Missouri Fur Company) in 1811, for "Manuel appropriates everything" and is "so jew."

Baronet's employer – the United States Army – was anathema to old St. Louisans so soon after the Louisiana Purchase. In 1806 Baronet joined Zebulon Pike's expedi-

¹ Sworn testimony of Benito Vasquez, June 22, 1787, in Lawrence Kinnaird, Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794, in Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1845 (Washington, D.C., 1946), III, pp. 214, 218.

² Vasquez papers, Missouri Hist. Soc., St. Louis. Julie Papin Vasquez was seventy when she died in 1825 (Letters of Baronet Vasquez, St. Louis, March 7,

^{1825,} and August 24, 1825, to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers). A list of the twelve children may be found in Frederick L. Billon, *Annals of St. Louis in Its Early Days* (St. Louis, 1886), 445.

³ Old Cathedral Register, St. Louis, copy courtesy of LeRoy Hafen.

⁴ J. Thomas Scharf, History of Saint Louis City and County (Philadelphia, 1883), 1, pp. 144, 148; John L. Thomas and A. G. Morgan, "Historical Landmarks of Jefferson County," in Missouri Historical Review, 1 (1907), 142, 280-83.

⁵ A. P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark* (St. Louis, 1952), 135, 531. Baronet wrote in 1825 that he had been engaged "in trade with the Kansas tribe of Indians nineteen years, between the years 1796 and 1824," *North American Review*, XXII (1826), 105.

⁶ Richard Oglesby, Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade (Norman, 1963), 59, 62, 66, 67, 85.

⁷ Letters of Baronet Vasquez, St. Louis, March 20, 1811 and Nov. 21, 1811, to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers. All letters of the Vasquez clan quoted herein are translated from the French.

tion to visit the Osage and Pawnees and explore the sources of the Arkansas and Red rivers. Pike wrote that Baronet "has entirely renounced all his Saint Louis connections, and is as firm an American as if born one; he of course is entirely discarded by the people of Saint Louis. . ."8 Discarded he might be, but the salary was \$500 a year and the position of interpreter was congenial to a young man who spoke French and Spanish and several Indian languages as well.

The expedition of twenty-three men set out from Belle Fontaine on July 15, 1806. At St. Charles, a few miles upriver, Baronet was arrested for a debt owed Manuel Lisa and taken back to St. Louis. General James Wilkinson, sponsor of the expedition, went bond for him and sent him back to Pike. (The insult was avenged at the Grand Osage village where Pike arrested one of Lisa's traders for having no passport.) As Pike and his men traveled among the Osage, Pawnee and Kansas Indians, returning chiefs who had visited St. Louis and making peace and alliances, Baronet did his work as interpreter. He proved to be just as useful as hunter and messenger; in fact, Pike wrote that "I have found [him] to be one of the finest young men I ever knew in his situation." 9

As they marched up the Arkansas, the winter deepened and they became cold and hungry. Near present Cañon City, Colorado, Pike left Baronet and Patrick Smith in a block house with the baggage and horses, and set off on foot through the snow to look for Red River on the other side of the mountains. Crossing the Sangre de Cristos, Pike and his men arrived finally on the Conejos near the Rio Grande where they built a stockade. Here they were captured by Spaniards and taken to New Mexico. Pike was allowed to send two men back for Baronet and Smith and for two other

men who had been left with frozen feet at a mountain camp.¹⁰

Baronet is not again mentioned in Pike's journal, but other documents show that he had reached Santa Fe by the middle of April 1807. There he was treated with "extreme affection and hospitality" by the populace, to the great annoyance of Mexican officials. In May 1807, Baronet and other prisoners were taken to Chihuahua. On the way Sergeant William Meek murdered Private Theodore Miller during a drinking bout. At the investigation of the murder Baronet was interpreter, and a poor one at that, for the defendant and witnesses spoke only English in which Baronet was incompetent. Baronet was dismissed from the case in October. 11 It is a pity we have no account of Baronet's two years at Chihuahua, but if we may judge by the experiences of other American prisoners in Mexico, he was allowed a good deal of freedom by authorities and was pampered royally by the kind-hearted Mexican women.

In July 1809, Captain Daniel Hughes of the United States Army arrived at Chihuahua and brought Baronet and his fellow-prisoners back to Natchitoches in October. On February 1, 1810, Baronet wrote the secretary of war from New Orleans, saying that he would accept a commission in the Second United States Infantry, obtained for him by Wilkinson and Pike. Pike also wrote the secretary of war asking that Baronet be furloughed to St. Louis because he had not seen his aged parents for four years, and suggesting that he be assigned, because of his knowledge of French and Spanish, to the "Spanish frontier." 12

⁸ Donald Jackson, ed., The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike with Letters and Related Documents (Norman, 1966), I, p. 144.
9 Ibid., II, p. 144.

¹⁰ Ibid., I, pp. 285-384.

¹¹ Ibid., II, pp. 209-24.

¹² Ibid., II, pp. 363-64. A bill before Congress to compensate Pike and his men with land warrants failed (Ibid., II, p. 357). There is nothing to support Scharf's statement that Baronet attended the United States Military Academy at West Point (Scharf, History of Saint Louis, I, p. 824), nor has a search of records in the National Archives by its staff turned up any documents testifying to Baronet's four years of military service.

During the years Baronet spent in Mexico, the people of St. Louis had adjusted themselves to United States sovereignty, and Baronet was probably welcomed back as a hero. One, at least, did not turn her back on him. On June 29, 1810, Baronet, then twenty-seven, married Emilie Faustin dit Parent, aged twenty-six, daughter of François and Rosalie Kiercereau Faustin. They were married in a civil ceremony, perhaps because Baronet's family was in mourning for his father who had died early in the year.¹³

Baronet and his bride appear to have had many months together in St. Louis before he was called into military service. On October 31, 1810, he was transferred to the First Infantry, in which he would spend the rest of his army career. He was promoted to second lieutenant on March 4, 1811, several weeks before he left his pregnant wife for duty at Fort Madison on the Mississippi River (now the town of Fort Madison, Iowa).¹⁴

From Fort Madison, Baronet was sent east six months later to become part of General William Henry Harrison's troops camped near the Shawnee village of The Prophet. In the ensuing battle with these Indians, Baronet led his soldiers into the very thick of it, breaking the enemy defenses in a wild, close fight—"my poor soldiers falling on every side," he wrote, "and I without a scratch, my map pierced with balls, my hat knocked off, but no serious injury, thank God!" ¹⁵ So ended the Battle of Tippecanoe, an affair remembered chiefly for being the origin of William Henry Harrison's famous slogan in the 1840 presidential campaign, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too!"

After the battle Baronet joined his family again at St. Louis, where he had some precious time with Emilie and

their new baby daughter, Ophilia, before returning to Fort Madison in February 1812. In September, when all was quiet at Fort Madison, Baronet felt it safe to send for Emilie and the baby, who came up-river in the boat of the provisions contractor. Wrote Baronet, "You can imagine my happiness at being with her, except for those devils of Indians!" 18 Emilie and Ophilia had been there only two days when the Indians showed what devils they could be. Late in the afternoon of September 5, a soldier who had ventured outside the stockade walls was killed and scalped by Winnebagos lurking around the fort. From the top of the bluffs behind the post, the Indians began to sweep the parade ground with small-arms fire; from gullies that nearly surrounded the fort they threw burning brands and fiery arrows onto the wooden roofs of the buildings. The soldiers scurried about with casks of water to soak the roofs and syringes made of gun barrels to douse the blazes, all the while dodging Indian gunfire. In two days the Indians had burned every building outside Fort Madison except for the big wooden factory or warehouse for Indian goods adjacent to the post. The soldiers surmised that the Indians were saving this building to fire when a favorable breeze would blow its flames into the fort. On the calm and windless evening of September 7, soldiers crept out and set fire to the factory, which burned to the ground in less than three hours, not a spark threatening the fort.17

The Indians had lost their seige. In desperation, several of them hid in an old stable and began shooting at the fort, but a ball from a cannon fired by Baronet "soon made their yellow jackets fly." Shortly afterwards they crossed the river in their canoes and were out of sight.¹⁸

Emilie stayed at Fort Madison with Baronet that winter

¹³ Old Cathedral Register, St. Louis.

¹⁴ Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army (Washington, 1903), I, p. 985.

¹⁶ Letter of Baronet Vasquez, Vincennes, Nov. 21, 1811, to Benito Vasquez, St. Louis, Vasquez papers.

¹⁶ Letter of Baronet Vasquez, Fort Madison, Sept. 16, 1812, to Benito Vasquez, St. Louis, Vasquez papers.
17 Ibid.

^{18 (}St. Louis) Missouri Gazette, Sept. 26, 1812, p. 3, c. 4.

- and a hard winter it was. Provisions were scarce, rumors of danger from Indians and British were abundant. Worst of all, their little Ophilia appears to have died, for she did not survive infancy and is not mentioned in Baronet's letter describing his arrangements to get Emilie down to St. Louis in the spring.¹⁹

By June, Baronet and Emilie were together again at St. Louis. During the year another baby was born to them, whom they named Auguste Pike, in memory of Baronet's old commander, killed April 27, 1813, at the Battle of York.20 At the end of March 1814, Baronet, now a first lieutenant, received orders to leave for Canada by the first of May. He was at Niagara on July 24, where he wrote a letter the evening before a battle, begging his brother Benito to protect his "dear Emilie" and make certain that if he died she would receive the fifteen piastres due him as a veteran of Pike's expedition.21 The next day at Lundy's Lane, Americans and British engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand conflict with appalling casualties on both sides. For two weary months afterwards, Baronet's regiment defended Fort Erie. On October 1, as the seige drew to a close, Baronet resigned from the army and returned to St. Louis.22

On October 29, 1814, Baronet and Emilie were finally wed in the St. Louis Cathedral with all the trappings that their solid and loving marriage had long merited. Another child, Rosalie, was born to them on September 17, 1815; a third, Emilie (called Amelina) was born on March 19, 1818, to complete their family.²³

For the next eight or nine years Baronet, his brother Benito, and a younger brother Joseph ("Pepe") were trad-

ing with Indians, sometimes together, sometimes with other partners or employers. On his way to the mountains with a trading expedition, Jules DeMun met Baronet near the junction of the Osage and Missouri rivers on September 21, 1815. Baronet spent the day in DeMun's camp, then went on his way. In the spring of 1816, DeMun appears to have hired Baronet at St. Louis to accompany a new expedition to the headwaters of the Arkansas. Baronet was along at least to the mouth of the Kansas, where DeMun was to meet Auguste P. Chouteau Jr. with the last season's furs. Whether Baronet returned to St. Louis with the furs or accompanied the expedition to the mountains we cannot say, for DeMun's diary ends abruptly. If Baronet went to the mountains, he was captured with the rest of the expedition, imprisoned in Santa Fe and released in the middle of July to return to St. Louis in September.24

If Baronet was not at the time a prisoner in Santa Fe, he might have been the "B. Vasquez" who witnessed a treaty on June 25, 1817, between Auguste P. Chouteau and Ponca Indians brought to St. Louis by Manuel Lisa. A search of records in the National Archives fails to disclose whether this Vasquez was Baronet or Benito.²⁵ A similar uncertainty exists as to which of the brothers was the "B. Vasquez" trading for John Campbell with the Sacs and Foxes when one of Campbell's traders was caught selling liquor to the Indians in the spring of 1818.²⁶

Trading arrangements between the brothers did not pre-

¹⁹ Letter of Baronet Vasquez, Fort Madison, March 29, 1813, to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers. I have found no record of Ophilia's birth or death.

²⁰ Obituary of Pike Vasquez, Colorado Chieftain, Feb. 4, 1869, p. 3, c. 2.

²¹ Letter of Baronet Vasquez, Niagara, July 24, 1814, to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers.

22 Heitman, op. cit., I, p. 985; II, p. 393.

²³ Old Cathedral Church Register, St. Louis.

²⁴ Thomas Maitland Marshall, "The Journals of Jules DeMun," translated by Nettie H. Beauregard, in *Collections*, Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis), v (Feb., 1928), 187, and v (June, 1928), 321-25. Baronet's name was not among those of eleven engages signing a statement of their employer's losses at St. Louis on September 25, 1817, which proves little, for there were 21 men arrested and imprisoned.

²⁵ Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties* (Washington, 1904), ¹¹, p. 140; Letter of Richard S. Maxwell, National Archives, Oct. 31, 1968, to writer.

²⁶ Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., The Territorial Papers of the United States, XV (Washington, 1951), 381-83, 393-94, 417.

vent them from forming other partnerships, limited in time and purpose. One of them – which we cannot say – went into partnership with a man named Carson for trade with the Otos in 1819 and 1820.²⁷ Baronet formed a partnership for trade on the Upper Missouri with Sylvestre Pratte, son of Bernard Pratte whom Baronet's letters frequently mention as a buyer of his furs. According to H. M. Chittenden, Pratte and Vasquez had a trading post at the Omaha village far above Council Bluffs. Chittenden tenatively locates the post at the old village above Blackbird Hill, nearly opposite the town of Onawa, Iowa.²⁸

On May 21, 1820, Baronet and Sylvestre Pratte were camped on the Missouri two or three miles below the "old town of the Mahas" with their hired hands Louis Bissonette dit Bijou, Baptiste Ticio, Charles Lamalie and Louis Lecompte (the first two had been members of the Chouteau-DeMun party imprisoned at Santa Fe). At two in the morning they were attacked by Sac Indians who fired four or five rounds, killing Lecompte and wounding the other hired hands, and making off with five horses, three mules, saddles, blankets, kettles, furs, etc. Two Sacs were later apprehended, tried and acquitted; the horses and mules were recovered. The total amount ordered to be paid to Vasquez and Pratte was \$464, which had not been paid at the time of Baronet's death.²⁹

The survivors of the Sac attack fled in their boat to Council Bluffs, where Major Stephen H. Long's expedition

stopped nine days later. A member of the expedition, Captain John R. Bell, remarked after meeting Baronet that "he does not seem to be now the active and enterprising man, he was when with Pike," an opinion apparently untempered by knowledge of the shocking experience Baronet had just survived. Captain Bell's commander, Major Long, got the whole story from Baronet, along with a warning of the hostility of the Indians.³⁰

Two years later Baronet was again the victim of Indian hostility. On a trip in the fall and winter of 1822 to the upper Missouri and Rocky Mountains, the Crows stole all the horses of Baronet's party. After cacheing their goods, the men set out on foot across the open prairie in the bitter cold of winter. For six days they had nothing to eat until they came upon a carcass of a young mare, whose rotting flesh saved them from starvation. Baronet intended to return to the mountains to raise the cache, but if he did there is no record of it.³¹

On November 5, 1822, Baronet was appointed interpreter and acting sub-agent for the Iowa Indians at a salary of \$500 a year. He probably learned of his appointment as he returned down the Missouri from his unfortunate expedition to the Rocky Mountains. In December he visited his new agency, but returned to St. Louis and did not take up his duties until July 1823. It was the beginning of a prom-

²⁷ Charles E. Peterson, "Manuel Lisa's Warehouse," in Bulletin, Missouri Historical Society, 1v (January 1948), 78, 80.

²⁸ The American Fur Trade of the Far West (N.Y., 1902), III, p. 951-52.

²⁹ The statement of loss is signed by "B. Vasquez." This time there is no doubt who he is, for another report of the depredation calls him "Anthony Vasquez," and later letters of Baronet mention the incident. "Relief to citizens of the U.S. for Indian Depredations," House Doc. 38, 22 Cong., 1 sess. (Ser. 217), 29; Claim no. 81, "Record of Claims," Records of the Superintendency of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, Book XI, p. 17, Kansas State Hist. Soc., Topeka; "Indian Depredations," House Exec. Doc. 26, 23 Cong., 1 sess. (Ser. 254), 29-31.

³⁰ Harlin M. Fuller and LeRoy R. Hafen, eds., The Journal of Captain John R. Bell (Glendale, Calif., 1957), 92; Edwin James, Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, performed in the years 1819, 1820 (London, 1832), reprinted in R. G. Thwaites, Early Western Travels 1748-1846 (Cleveland, 1905), xv, p. 193.

³¹ Letter of Julie Papin Vasquez, St. Louis, Feb. 27, 1823, to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers.

³² Letter of William Clark, St. Louis, April 13, 1825, to the Hon. James Barbour, Secretary of War, Letters Received by The Office of Indian Affairs from the St. Louis Superintendency, National Archives.

³³ Letter of William Clark, St. Louis, Dec. 18, 1823, to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, copy in the Vasquez papers; Letter of Baronet Vasquez, St. Louis, Jan. 22, 1822 [apparently an error for 1823], to Benito Vasquez, Vasquez papers.

ising career for Baronet, one that would engage all his talent for languages, his deep knowledge of Indians, and his compassion and honesty. Had death not overtaken him six years later, his name would surely have been a bright one on the murky records of the Indian service.

Baronet's most important duty as Iowa sub-agent was taking some chiefs of the Iowa, Sac, Fox and Piankeshaw tribes to Washington to meet the president and sign a treaty relinquishing their lands. At the end of an arduous trip, the Indians were showered with presents (flags, medals, elegant coats with epaulettes, plumed hats, guns, swords, silver jewelry – and twenty-six small trunks for hauling the treasures back home). After meeting the president, the chiefs were herded around the city to impress them with the power of the white man. Properly awed and thoroughly exhausted, they signed a treaty on August 4, 1824, ceding their lands in Missouri. Baronet witnessed the treaty; on the same day he wrote the secretary of war that his salary did not cover the extra expense of the Washington trip, and he asked for a larger salary or for traveling expenses.³⁴

Baronet did not receive traveling expenses, but he had done his work well. William Clark, superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, characterized him as "an active and usefull man." He was rewarded with a post among the much larger Kansas tribe, at a salary of \$600 a year (Congress had appropriated \$1000 a year for this position, but Baronet never received it.) His main duty was, again, to effect a sale of Indian lands to the United States. He collected his Kansas chiefs and brought them to St. Louis

where they signed a treaty on June 3, 1825.³⁶ By fall the Indians had located a reservation on the Kansas River sixty-five miles above its mouth, and Baronet brought up their annuity goods, landing them on a sand bar on the present site of Kansas City, Kansas.³⁷ Later, perhaps the next spring, Baronet built himself a house—"a good-sized, comfortable sort of building"—to which he brought Emilie and the children. The house, one of the first in present Kansas City, Missouri, was situated on the south bank of the Missouri just below the mouth of the Kansas.³⁸ In the spring of 1827 he planted fourteen arpents of land and was well pleased with his location. With prophetic wisdom he wrote his brother, "I would be very much mistaken if there were not a good deal of money to be made here." ³⁹

In the summer of 1828, Baronet went to St. Louis to buy annuity goods. He started back to his agency at the end of July with two young men – Father Joseph Lutz who intended to open a mission among the Kansas, and Dunning McNair who was to serve as Baronet's clerk. On August 5, Baronet contracted cholera and died. At what point in the journey his death occurred or where he was buried we cannot say.⁴⁰

When Lutz and McNair arrived at Baronet's house with their tragic news, Emilie was distraught. "I find it difficult to express the bitter anguish my dear husband's death causes me, now alone, deprived of a man I can trust," she wrote

³⁴ Various documents among the Letters Received from the St. Louis Superintendency, especially "Capt. Kennerly's Estimate of Expenses . . . in collecting and bringing on a Deputation of . . . Chiefs from St. Louis to Washington [1824]," and lists of articles to be presented to the Indians, July, 1824; Letter of A. Baronet Vasquez, Washington City, August 4, 1824, to Hon. J. C. Calhoun, Letters Received, St. Louis Superintendency; Kappler, op. cit., II, pp. 207-209.

³⁵ Letter of William Clark, St. Louis, April 13, 1824, to the Secretary of War, Letters Received, St. Louis Superintendency.

³⁶ Kappler, op. cit., II, pp. 222-25.

^{37 &}quot;Reminiscences of Frederick Chouteau," Transactions, Kansas State Hist. Soc. (1903-1904), VIII, p. 423.

³⁸ Gilbert J. Garraghan, s.J., Catholic Beginnings in Kansas City, Missouri (Chicago, 1920), 28.

³⁹ Letter of Baronet Vasquez, Kansas River, June 7, 1827, to Benito Vasquez, Portage des Sioux, Vasquez papers.

⁴⁰ Letter of William Clark, St. Louis, August 13, 1828, to the Secretary of War, Letters Received, St. Louis Superintendency; Garraghan, Catholic Beginnings, 28. Clark gives the date of Baroner's death as August 3, but Garraghan's date of August 5 would seem better, since his account is based on Father Lutz's journal.

Benito, begging him to come to her.41 The two young men stayed with her for a week before going up-river to the agency. They returned at the end of September and remained with the widow until December, when Lutz, his mission a failure, wrote of his distress at having to leave "this virtuous family" with its fervently Catholic mother and carefully reared children.42

Emilie appointed Samuel C. Owens of Independence, Missouri, as her agent to settle her husband's affairs. By spring she had sold Baronet's possessions and she and the children started down the river to St. Louis, nearly drowning when the boat they were on capsized.48

Emilie lived in St. Louis until her death on August 7, 1846; 44 Rosalie married a man named Mignault; Amelina married Eleazar Blanchard.45 And young Pike, true to the family tradition, went to the mountains with his father's youngest brother Louis and became an Indian trader.

⁴¹ Letter of Emilie Baronette Vasquez, Kansas River, August 13, 1828, Vasquez papers.

⁴² Garraghan, op. cit., 30-32.

⁴³ Letter of Samuel C. Owens, Independence, Mo., Nov. 5, 1829, to Pierre Chouteau Jr., St. Louis, Vasquez papers; "Reminiscences of Frederick Chouteau," 423.

^{44 (}St. Louis) Missouri Republican, August 10, 1846.

⁴⁵ Oscar W. Collet, Index to Instruments Affecting Real Estate, Recorded in the Office of Recorder of Deeds, in the County of St. Louis, Mo. Grantors, Vol. 1 (St. Louis, 1874), pt. 3, p. 1038.