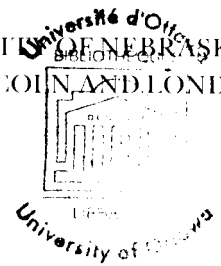
French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West

Edited by
LeRoy R. Hafen

Selected, with an introduction, by
Janet Lecompte

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON



Pierre Menard

by RICHARD E. OGLESBY
University of California, Santa Barbara

Among the not inconsiderable number of French-Canadians who migrated southward to sample the economic opportunities offered by the American frontier was Pierre Menard, the ambitious and talented son of Jean Baptiste Menard and Marie Françoise Cirée. From St. Antoine, Quebec, where he had been born in 1766,[1] young Menard had come, sometime in the mid-1780s, to Vincennes, then still essentially a French village on the banks of the Wabash River in the territory newly acquired by the United States government from the state of Virginia. He had quickly gone to work for the eminent trader and esteemed American patriot, Francisco Vigo, and also had become associated with his compatriot, Touissant Dubois. Menard's abilities soon made themselves manifest, and he achieved some local prominence, not only as a merchant and businessman, but as an individual interested in the general development of the area. He involved himself in local affairs and accompanied Vigo eastward in 1789 to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for a conference on frontier defense with President George Washington.[2] The following year, with the help of Dubois, the young Canadian moved to another predominately French community, Kaskaskia, on the Mississippi, where he opened a frontier store.[3]

[1] Baptismal Certificate, Menard Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

[2] Edward G. Mason, "Pierre Menard and Pierre Menard Papers," Chicago Historical Society *Collections*, IV (Chicago, 1890), 143.

[3] Menard maintained his partnership with Dubois for some 16 years. Helen L. Allen, "A Sketch of the Dubois Family, Pioneers of Indiana and Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, V (April 1912), 55.

Kaskaskia was just then beginning to develop as the major trading center on the American side of the Mississippi, and from there Menard had access to markets from the Falls of St. Anthony to New Orleans, and he soon extended his sphere of influence to include both of those places.[4] He enjoyed a special advantage over his American competitors as his French background gave him ready access to the French trading groups in St. Louis and Ste. Genevieve, across the river in Spanish Louisiana. In Ste. Genevieve, Menard formed a profitable and long lasting friendship with Francois Vallé, and the firm of Menard and Vallé did business along the river for many years.

In 1792, Pierre Menard married Therèse Godin[5] and settled down to develop his business and involve himself in Illinois country affairs. He was appointed major in the Randolph County militia in 1795,[6] and rose to the rank of colonel, a title which he retained to the end of his life. The business, largely derived from Indian trade at which Menard was a master, prospered from the start, and it was reported that in 1800 he sent out of Kaskaskia a single boatload of furs worth $30,000.[7] His interest in local affairs and reputation for honesty and fair dealing caused Governor William Henry Harrison to appoint him judge of the Court of Common Pleas. Menard had a chance to repay that favor as he was elected as one of the representatives of Randolph County to the newly organized Indiana Territorial Legislature. In that body, Menard joined the group which supported Governor Harrison and his program in the sometimes violent, always rough and tumble politics of Indiana Territory. Factionalism was rife in the legislature

[4] Sarah B. Hanley, "Pierre Menard, Pioneer," *Illinois Blue Book* (Springfield, 1928).

[5] W. J. Ghent, "Pierre Menard," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XII.

[6] Certificate of Appointment, Menard Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

[7] John W. Allen, *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois* (Carbondale, Ill., 1963), 300.

and Menard, together with the other Illinois representative, Shadrach Bond, resigned in 1804 in protest against the situation, and although the Kaskaskian kept up his interest in public office, it was always with the notion of being simply a public servant, and he never associated himself with party again.[8]

Although the vicious factionalism evidenced at Vincennes disturbed the sensitive Menard, another compelling reason for his resignation was the sudden and tragic death of his wife in that same year. In the true spirit of the frontier, however, Menard did not mourn long, and 1806 found him again at the altar, taking to wife Angelique Saucier, daughter of one of the oldest French families in Illinois. The new Mrs. Menard also was related by marriage to the powerful Chouteau family of St. Louis, and Menard found himself a brother-in-law to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., a connection which served them both to good advantage.[9]

Among the witnesses to the wedding was the Spanish trader from across the river, Manuel Lisa, a farsighted and daring individual with whom Menard was shortly to form a partnership. Menard apparently had known Lisa for some time previously, perhaps through the good offices of their mutual friends in Vincennes, Francisco Vigo and Touissant Dubois. The two peerless Indian traders agreed on the feasibility of sending a trading and trapping expedition to the headwaters of the Missouri River, pending the return of the Lewis and Clark people and their report on the area. As it proved favorable, Lisa and Menard, in company with another Kaskaskian, William Morrison, put together an expedition worth some $16,000, which Lisa took north in the spring of 1807. Though not without its difficulties, the voyage proved a success. Lisa returned in the summer of

[8] Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1818* (Springfield, 1917), 187, 200.

[9] Deposition, 23 August 1806, Pierre Menard Collection, Book IV, Illinois State Historical Society.

1808 with a modest profit in furs and a full crew still upriver working out of the permanent post he had constructed at the mouth of the Bighorn River.[10] His was a heartening report for the future. The Crow Indians, into the heart of whose country he had penetrated, were good fur gatherers, friendly, and willing to trade. The partners decided to expand, bringing George Drouillard into the organization, and prepared to send a new expedition up the Missouri.[11]

There were even larger stirrings in St. Louis that winter, the outcome of which was the creation of the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, a much larger organization capitalized at about $40,000. It included Pierre Chouteau, William Clark, Sylvestre Labbadie, A. P. Chouteau, Jr., Reuben Lewis, Benjamin Wilkinson, and Andrew Henry, as well as Lisa, Menard and Morrison. The Articles of Co-partnership which outlined the care and feeding of this new corporate beast required that each of the co-partners participate in the first upriver voyage of the company in the spring of 1809.[12] Menard, though a frontiersman, had never contended with the actual wilderness, and was anxious to go. He spent the spring in St. Louis, aiding in the preparations, and also providing for the operation of his own business in Kaskaskia by appointing Adrien Langlois as his agent, with full powers to act during his absence. As preparations progressed, the company contracted with Governor Meriwether Lewis to return the Mandan chief, Shahaka, to his village, and Menard was appointed by the governor as a captain in the militia guard which was to accompany the traders to insure the chief's safe passage.[13]

[10] Richard E. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman, 1963), p. 40ff has the story of that early fur trading organization. The details of the voyage are in Burton Harris, *John Colter: His Years in the Rockies* (New York, 1952).

[11] Bryan and Morrison Store, Kaskaskia Ledger D, p. 438, microfilm of William Morrison Papers, Illinois Historical Survey, Urbana, Illinois.

[12] Oglesby, *Lisa,* 68ff.

[13] Commission, Menard Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

Pierre Menard went up the Missouri with Lisa and the last contingent of the large party which left St. Louis on June 17, about a month after the main group had departed. It was very late to be starting, and Lisa pushed the men hard, too hard for comfort, and too hard for Menard's taste. He quickly began to regret his part in the proceedings, although homesickness prompted him to paint a bleaker picture than was warranted. But by any standard, the trip was a poor one. Desertions were too common and mutinies were constantly threatened,[14] all of which distressed the even tempered, fair minded Menard. "It is not long since I became resigned to suffer in order to gain money," he wrote to Langlois shortly after arriving at company headquarters at Ft. Mandan, "but the manner of some of my associates displeases me. I love to see things done frankly, which is not at all the case here. . . ."[15] Although he did not know it then, he was to suffer still more before reaching the safety and comforts of home once again.

At the meeting of the partners held at Ft. Mandan, Menard was given the task of moving the boats and equipment on the long haul by water to Lisa's old post at the mouth of the Bighorn. This was a tribute to the Kaskaskian's capabilities, for few men were able to perform efficiently the Herculean labor of moving a fleet of boats upstream and getting them to their destination in good time and in one piece. He made it, and spent the winter at Ft. Raymond, directing the few forays made by the men in the vicinity of the post, and thinking about the possibilities of the enterprise into which he had invested so much. His qualms about the future were strengthened by the arrival of a letter from Sylvestre Labbadie, lamenting his own isolated position at Ft. Mandan. He requested Menard, as one of the more

[14] The agonies of that voyage are well depicted in Thomas James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans* (Waterloo, Illinois, 1846).

[15] Letter, Pierre Menard to Adrien Langlois, October 7, 1809, Kaskaskia Papers, Missouri Historical Society.

compassionate of the leaders, to see if something could be done about it, and about the futility, as he saw it, of the whole operation. While not happy with the organization, Menard could, at least, see the possibilities in the region, and preferred to withhold judgement.[16]

The following spring, Menard set off with Andrew Henry and the majority of the men for the Three Forks of the Missouri, where they built a post and began to trap. The Blackfeet Indians appeared, unremittingly hostile, and severely limited the operations of the trappers. It was discouraging, and Menard noted that unless the Indians were pacified nothing could be done in that, the richest fur area in the Rockies. He proposed a plan whereby he hoped an approach to peace could be made, and trade opened with the Blackfeet as well, but nothing came of it.[17] As spring turned into summer and the trappers had yet to make any significant catch, decisions had to be made. Menard had been commissioned to bring in a report to St. Louis during the summer, so he took the majority of the company with him as he started downstream. Andrew Henry took the rest, some sixty men possessed of more bravery than common sense, and moved across the divide to hunt and spend the winter on the Columbia's waters.

Menard's return to St. Louis and his pessimistic report of the year's activities depressed the directors of the company even more than the reported loss of $12,000 in a fire on Cedar Island,[18] and they began to talk seriously of a curtailment of operations. For his own part, one wilderness experience had been enough for the home and comfort loving Kaskaskian, and he wanted no more of it. Menard

[16] Letter, Sylvestre Labbadie to Pierre Menard, February 3, 1810, Pierre Menard Collection, IV, Illinois State Historical Society.

[17] Letter, Pierre Menard to Pierre Chouteau, April 21, 1810, printed in Hiram M. Chittenden, *American Fur Trade of the Far West* (2 vols., Stanford, 1954), II, p. 898.

[18] Missouri *Gazette,* May 10, 1810.

would maintain his financial interest in the Missouri Fur Company throughout its various vicissitudes until the final dissolution in 1814, but would not again take personal part in the assault on river and mountains.

The Illinois country, to which he quickly returned, was seething with excitement. Not only were Indian problems becoming acute during the summer of 1810 due to the machinations of Tecumseh and The Prophet, but settlement was increasing rapidly and Illinois residents were looking forward to the creation of a territory of their own. Menard resigned his judgeship in 1811,[19] in part so that he would not have to determine the fates of so many of his neighbors in land claims cases, but largely because he was preparing to run again for public office. The following year he was elected to the first Illinois Legislative Council, the government of the newly formed territory, and that body, in turn, selected him as its president.[20] The latter development was an acknowledgment of Menard's integrity and honesty, as the first task he had to perform as president was to lead the investigation of the qualifications and election of one of the council members, William Biggs.[21] Menard retained the presidency of the Legislative Council throughout the state's territorial apprenticeship, enhancing his reputation to the point where he was expected to become the state's first lieutenant governor, regardless of which party won the state house, or which candidate the governor's chair.[22]

The citizens of the new state paid Menard one of the greatest tributes ever accorded any public figure during the process of creating the Illinois constitution. Menard had

[19] Henry S. Baker, "The First Lieutenant Governor of Illinois," Chicago Historical Society *Collections*, IV (Chicago, 1890), 156.

[20] John Reynolds, *Pioneer History of Illinois* (Belleville, Ill., 1852), 244.

[21] Edmund J. James, ed., *Territorial Records of Illinois*, Illinois State Historical Society Publications, III (Springfield, 1901), 64.

[22] Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois* (Chicago, 1859), 26.

not taken out citizenship papers until 1816, and therefore was not eligible, under the thirty year citizenship rule of the Illinois constitution, for any high state office. But the constitution writers, aware of this disability, and anxious to have the Frenchman as lieutenant governor, appended a final paragraph to the document stating, "Any person thirty years of age who is a citizen of the United States and has resided within the limits of this state two years, next preceding his election, shall be eligible to the office of lieutenant governor – anything in the thirteenth section of the third article of this constitution contained to the contrary notwithstanding."[23] Pierre Menard was elected first lieutenant governor of the state of Illinois.

He presided over the state senate with common sense, dignity, and a respect for the law all too rare on the frontier, but his administration was not unleavened by a touch of backwoods humor. Illinois, desperately short of cash, created a bank entirely on credit, and then proposed a resolution calling upon the federal land office to accept the bank's paper in payment for land. In an apocryphal story reported by Governor Thomas Ford, this is the way Menard is reputed to have handled the situation. "Gentlemen of *de* Senate, it is moved and seconded *dat de* notes of *dis* bank be made land office money. All in favor of *dat* motion, say aye; all against it, say no. It is decided in *de* affirmative. And now, gentlemen, *I bet you one hundred dollar he never be made land office money.*"[24]

Menard served out his full term as lieutenant governor, but retired from elective public life thereafter to devote himself to his large family (it would eventually consist of ten children), his personal business, and the care of the hundreds of Indians who looked to him as their advisor and protector. Long interested in Indian affairs, Menard spent

[23] Emil J. Verlie, ed., *Illinois Constitutions*, Illinois State Historical Library, Collections, XIII (Springfield, 1919), 46. [24] Ford, *History*, 45-46.

much of his own time and money in giving aid to the distressed red men in his area. William Clark appointed him sub-agent for the Indians of Illinois in 1813 at a salary of $600 per year,[25] but the money did him little good as the following year found him supporting the remnants of the Kaskaskia tribe out of his own pocket.[26] Governor Ninian Edwards appointed him translator for the Kaskaskia and Piankashaw tribes at the salary of $1 and one ration per day, a service the governor considered so vital he promised to pay Menard out of pocket if the federal government refused the appointment and its accompanying compensation.[27] Always looking out for Indian welfare, Menard constantly complained to the government about the injustices perpetrated against the tribes. In 1817, for example, he pointed out to the Illinois territorial representative in Congress, Nathaniel Pope, that the Piankashaws had failed to receive the $1,000 annuity due them in 1812. His persistence in the matter paid off, as Pope was able to obtain payment.[28] In 1828, Menard was appointed, along with Lewis Cass, by President John Quincy Adams, to treat with the Winnebagoes and other tribes at the grand gathering of Indians at Prairie du Chien that summer, a clear indication of the government's confidence in Menard's ability to deal with Indians. The following year he received from President Jackson a similar appointment.[29] On the trip to the former meeting, Menard gave to an Iowa river town the name Keokuk, after the famous Sac chief.[30] As late as 1831 his services as mediator were in demand, as Governor John

[25] Commission, Menard Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

[26] Joseph Gillespie, *Recollections of Early Illinois and Her Noted Men* (Chicago, 1880), 33; Clarence E. Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States,* XVII, Territory of Illinois, 1814-1818 (Washington, 1950), 34.

[27] Carter, *Territorial Papers,* XVII, p. 254.

[28] Paul M. Angle, "Nathaniel Pope, 1784-1850, A Memoir," Illinois State Historical Society, *Transactions,* XLIII (Springfield, 1936), 143.

[29] Both Commissions are in Menard Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

[30] Reynolds, *Pioneer History,* 243.

Reynolds called upon him to put down the Indian unrest brewing in Shelby County just prior to the final removal of the natives from Illinois.[31]

Pierre Menard was a devotee of the "good life." His spacious house, built in 1802 and still standing as a memento of the historic past, possessed luxuries unusual on the frontier. Such things as hand-pressed glass window panes imported from France, and solid mahogany interior appointments made it a sumptuous residence, a fact no doubt appreciated by the Marquis de Lafayette during his visit to Kaskaskia in 1825.[32] The Menard doors were always open to his many friends and acquaintances, and his hospitality and good works became almost legend. At the time of his death, Menard's papers were found to contain hundreds of accounts, mounting into thousands of dollars, representing loans to insolvent friends, payment of notes which he had signed for still other friends, and all, of course, uncollectable.[33]

Although his health seemed to slip somewhat in later years, Menard's mind remained clear and sharp.[34] As an old man of seventy-seven, in 1843, looking back over a long and full life, Menard had cause to reflect that while conditions had changed considerably in Kaskaskia since the day of his arrival, one thing, at least, remained constant: the frontier desire for adventure. A letter from his son, Ciprien, then in St. Louis, arrived in the spring of that year and no doubt loosed a flood of memories. "I have been seized by fever called Rocky Mountain Fever," it read, "that is to say I have got it into my head that a trip to the Rocky Moun-

[31] Clarence W. Alvord and E. B. Greene, *Governors Letter Books, 1818-1834*, Illinois State Historical Library, *Collections*, IV (Springfield, 1909), 176.

[32] John Drury, *Old Illinois Houses* (Springfield, 1948), 8-9.

[33] Inventory of Menard Estate, Menard Collection, Illinois Historical Survey, Urbana, Illinois.

[34] Clyde C. Walton, ed., *John Francis Snyder: Selected Writings* (Springfield, 1962), 85.

tains in company with Sir William Drummond Stewart and his band, would be the best thing that I could do at the present time. . ."[35] The indulgent father granted his permission for the expedition, and probably chuckled heartily at his son's misfortunes, recalling similar events of a bygone day. The old trader passed away on June 13, 1844, secure in the knowledge that his fine family would carry on the rich tradition of adventure and public service that was its greatest legacy from one of Illinois' finest early citizens.[36]

Pierre Menard was a most unusual man. Unlike the vast majority of French-Canadians in the Illinois (he was almost the only exception), Menard was vitally active in local and state affairs, and pursued a course in business rather than the common French pursuit of farming. He acquired a modest fortune through sound mercantile practice and the usual frontier land speculation. Yet while there was much fraud and deceit involved in Illinois land dealing, not one of Menard's claims was ever challenged or denied.[37] Always alert to any enterprise which promised improvement for his state, Menard was even one of the early promoters of the Illinois Central Railroad, and served on its board of directors.[38] His truly remarkable qualities were recognized by his fellow citizens and honors and eulogies were showered upon him. The state had named a county after him in 1839, and a statue donated by the Chouteau family still stands on the capitol grounds as a reminder of Illinois' French heritage as well as of a great man. His character was well summed up by Governor John Reynolds

[35] L. C. Menard to Pierre Menard, April 7, 1843, Pierre Menard Collection, VI, Illinois State Historical Society.

[36] Not only were his sons adventuresome and public spirited, but Edmund even followed his father's footsteps into politics, serving in the state legislature. *History of Randolph, Monroe and Perry Counties, Illinois* (Philadelphia, 1883), 310.

[37] Francis S. Philbrick, ed., *Laws of Indiana Territory, 1801-1809* (Springfield, 1930), ccii.

[38] Howard G. Bronson, "Early Illinois Railroads," Illinois State Historical Society, *Transactions*, XIII (Springfield, 1909), 174.

who wrote, "Few men in Illinois ever enjoyed the honest and sincere affections of the people in such degree as Col. Menard did. Not only did the white population admire, and respect his character, but the Indian almost worshipped him, as they did the Great Spirit."[39] The Belleville *Advocate* commented in an obituary, "In his death the country has lost a patriarch, and the poor a kind and good friend."[40]

The frontier had been good to Pierre Menard, and he, in turn, had grown with and substantially aided in the improvement of his region. Few men could claim greater accomplishment.

[39] Reynolds, *Pioneer History*, 243.

[40] Belleville *Advocate*, June 20, 1844, typescript copy, Menard Collections, Illinois Historical Survey.