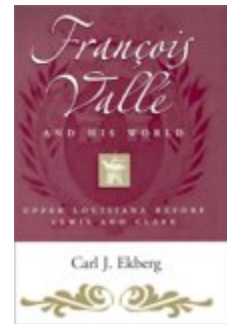


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carl J. Ekberg. *François Vallée and His World: Upper Louisiana before Lewis and Clark*. Missouri Biography Series. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. xvii + 316 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1418-8.

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A Neglected Chapter in American History

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In *François Vallée and His World*, award-winning author Carl J. Ekberg writes about what he considers a neglected chapter in American history—colonial upper Louisiana. Earlier, Ekberg painted the broad picture of this chapter in his widely acclaimed *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier* (1985). Now, in his new book, Ekberg narrows the scope by focusing on the particular, that is, on François Vallée, his family, slaves, and descendants, in drawing attention to the importance of the French colonial regime in the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West.

Writing a biography about “an unknown man living in a forgotten region as a citizen of a town long since gone” (p. xv), Ekberg argues, can result in enlarging generally accepted notions of what constitutes valid American history as well as illuminating universal human characteristics. Beyond this, the author simply desires to bring the attention of the public to the “earliest denizen of the entire American Midwest for whom such a study may be fashioned” (pp. xv-xvi). However successful Ekberg is in enlarging the study of American history or in illuminating the universal in human experience may be reasonably debated. He has, however, succeeded in writing an inspired and informative biography of the French settler and planter, François Vallée.

Professor Ekberg pieced together an engaging tale of how one settler, François Vallée, and his family laid the foundation of colonial Ste. Genevieve, a now submerged

French town site along the Mississippi River in what would become the state of Missouri. Because François Vallée was illiterate, he left no logs, journals, diaries, or personal correspondence for Ekberg’s perusal. Instead, census and other demographic records, labor contracts, notarial records, parish registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths, auction sales, government documents, and inventories provided flesh and blood to the Vallée clan and their neighbors. As anyone who has relied on materials such as these will know, it is difficult to animate such lifeless material. That Ekberg was able to do so is a tribute to his writing skills as well as to his creativity in extrapolating detail into François Vallée’s shadowy life.

Although limited by the antiseptic sources at his disposal, Ekberg nevertheless spins an engaging tale of an eighteenth-century Gallic Horatio Alger that should appeal to those who find remarkable success stories uplifting. Born fifth of twelve children in a poverty stricken family near Quebec City, François Vallée fled Lower Canada in the late-1730s for the Illinois Country and the hope of economic opportunity. He settled first in Kaskaskia on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, and later moved across the river to Ste. Genevieve in what was then French Louisiana. Working variously as a voyageur, cattle drover, and lead miner, Vallée eventually became a successful grain planter with the single largest slave holding in Upper Louisiana. As well as pursuing agriculture, François Vallée acted as the principal civil authority in Ste. Genevieve for thirteen years, and as captain of the local militia and a special lieutenant in the Spanish

army (pp. 104-105, 213). By the time of his death in 1783, François Vallé's influence was such that his power and wealth eclipsed all settlers in Upper Louisiana, not excluding the more famous Auguste Chouteau of St. Louis.

A great deal is made about the success, both material and political, attained by the illiterate François Vallé (pp. 17, 33, 105, 116, 206, 252). Ekberg's repetitiveness in this regard seems overdone. He imputes a sort of invidious distinction between François Vallé of Ste. Genevieve and Auguste and Pierre Chouteau of St. Louis. The reader is made very aware that, in his day, François Vallé was wealthier and more powerful than the better-known Chouteaus and therefore is deserving of more recognition than he has received because of that (p. 17, 206). Ekberg also appears fixated on the meaning of "success" as best measured by material or political criteria. When François' nephew, Basile, left Ste. Genevieve for St. Louis, he "took to fur trading [and] fathered several illegitimate 'metis' children" (pp. 250, 298). To Ekberg, this was not a strategy to improve one's lot in life. It apparently did not occur to the author that engaging in fur trading and establishing a metis family very well could have been Basile's definition of success.

Ekberg strives to avoid, as much as consciously possible, intoning contemporary moral standards regarding François Vallé's owning slaves. In attempting to remain

as objective as possible, Ekberg believes Vallé and his slave-holding neighbors are understood best in the context of their time and place (p. 159). The quest for historical objectivity is an elusive endeavor, but his chapter on "Missouri's Original Black Families" is a valiant attempt to treat the subject with scholarly sensitivity (pp. 158-202). Although limited by the nature of his source material, Ekberg nevertheless paints a vivid picture of individual slaves, their families, and the conditions under which they lived.

The book's subtitle, "Upper Louisiana before Lewis and Clark" is somewhat misleading. Those looking for a connection between early settlement in Upper Louisiana and American exploration and trade up the Missouri drainage might consult scholars such as A. P. Nasatir, who focuses on the generation immediately preceding the advent of Lewis and Clark.[1] I recommend the book to those with an interest in colonial and regional American history. It is well written, and adequately illustrated with photographs, maps, tables, and genealogical charts. Except for one small typo ("August" for "Auguste" on p. 206) it is well edited.

Note

[1]. A. P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

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