

Henri de Tonti – the Founder of Peoria

A biographical summary

Henrico de Tonty (Italian spelling) was born into a Sicilian family in 1649 or 1650 near Gaeta, Italy. His father, Lorenzo, the former governor of Gaeta, was involved in a revolt against the Spanish Viceroy in Naples, Italy. The family was forced to seek political asylum and moved to Paris, France around the time of Henri's birth. Although born into an Italian family, as the family adapted to their new French surroundings, the French adaptation of his name of Henri de Tonti was soon accepted.

In 1668, at the age of 18 or 19, Henri joined the French Army. He also later served in the French Navy. During the Third Anglo-Dutch War in 1676, Henri fought with the French Navy forces against the Spanish at the battle of the Messina Revolt. He lost his right hand in a grenade explosion and, from that time on, wore a prosthetic hook covered by a glove, thus earning the nickname "Iron Hand." His skillful use of the appliance with which his hand was replaced was later to lead Native American Indians to believe that he possessed special powers.



***Gaeta, Italy
birthplace of Enrico de Tonty***



***Henri de Tonti (French spelling)
La Salle's Lieutenant
the founder of Peoria***

Two years later, in 1678, at the approximate age of 28, Tonti first traveled to North America with Robert Rene Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle. Over the next twenty six years, until his death, Tonti would become one of the most significant French explorers and developers of the mid-continent of North America. While largely ignored by traditional historical narratives, because his exploits occurred far from the political and business centers of New France, Tonti directed a significant portion of the French fur trade in the Mississippi River valley. Tonti was extremely loyal and grateful to La Salle. He once saved La Salle's life when a member of La Salle's expedition attempted to shoot the expedition leader in the back. Tonti continually exhibited characteristics of bravery and leadership. When he became aware that a band of Iroquois warriors were prepared to attack the Illinois villages at Starved Rock where he was living, he attempted to single-handedly negotiate a truce between the two parties, although he was stabbed by an Iroquois warrior. Tonti became the first European businessman in the Illinois Territory when he managed a widespread trading operation

based first at Starved Rock and later at Lake Pimiteoui. His peaceful co-existence with the various tribes of the Illinois Confederacy of Native Americans served as an example of tolerance as well as his ability to arbitrate complex and emotional disputes. Most importantly, under Tonti's direction, his trading company established the first European outpost along the western shores of Lake Pimiteoui which became the foundation for the development of the City of Peoria. He is therefore, recognized as the founder of Peoria.

Once in the New World, Tonti quickly gained the trust of La Salle and was placed in charge of several forts under La Salle's control in the eastern Great Lakes region. By the following year, Tonti had become LaSalle's principle lieutenant and accompanied the explorer on a voyage intended to explore the Mississippi River. In August 1679, LaSalle's expedition departed from Fort Frontenac on the northern bank of Lake Ontario. By September, they had reached the French outpost at Green Bay. After pausing at the mouth of the St. Joseph River in Michigan to construct a fort, the expedition set out with thirty Frenchmen and one Mohegan Indian hunter and guide in eight canoes.

The band arrived at Lake Pimiteoui on the 5th of January, 1680 and several weeks later began construction of the first European structure in the present state of Illinois, Fort Crevecoeur. In addition to the fort, LaSalle also began construction of a large wooden sailing vessel which was to be used to continue the voyage down the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. Within six weeks the fort was basically completed and construction of the vessel was well underway. LaSalle decided to depart on a return trek to Canada to obtain additional supplies for the vessel. He left Tonti in charge of the remaining fourteen members of the expedition who were suffering from a serious lack of food supplies.

While on his return trip up the Illinois River, LaSalle concluded that Starved Rock might provide an ideal location for another fortification and sent word downriver to Tonti regarding this idea. Following La Salle's instructions, Tonti took five men and departed up the river to evaluate the suitability of the Starved Rock site. Shortly after Tonti's departure, the members of the expedition who remained at Fort Crevecoeur ransacked and abandoned the fort and began their own march back to Canada. To this day, the exact location of Fort Crevecoeur has not been determined.

At Starved Rock, Tonti learned of the desertion of Fort Crevecoeur. He asked two voyageurs passing up the Illinois River to deliver a letter to LaSalle reporting that the fort had been ransacked and deserted. Tonti, along with two Recollect priests and three loyal Frenchmen spent the summer at Starved Rock awaiting the return of LaSalle. Finally in September, 1680, he grew frustrated and decided to return to Michilimackinac to obtain news about the explorer. Before he departed however, the Illinois Indian village at Starved Rock was attacked by a force of approximately 600 Iroquois warriors. While trying to negotiate peace, Tonti was stabbed and nearly killed. Severely wounded, Tonti and the other five Frenchmen escaped and set out northward for Green Bay.

Meanwhile, in August, 1680, LaSalle, along with twenty-five men had set out on a return voyage to the Illinois country. Somehow, apparently in the vastness of Lake Michigan, with Tonti's party traveling north, probably along the western shore of the Lake, and LaSalle's party traveling south, probably along the eastern shore of the lake, the two explorers bypassed each other and remained unaware of the other's situation.

LaSalle's party traveling down the Illinois River, where they discovered evidence of the horrendous brutality of the Iroquois in their attacks on the Illinois villages, "heads and entire bodies of women and children skewered on poles and roasted." He passed by the site of Fort Crevecoeur and search for evidence of Tonti until he arrived at the junction with the Mississippi River. It was not until the following June, 1681, that LaSalle finally arrived at Michilimackinac when to his relief and delight was finally reunited with Tonti.

Several months later, in August, 1681, LaSalle and Tonti again departed Fort Frontenac to explore the Mississippi River. Again, they arrived at Lake Pimiteoui and again visited the site of Fort Crevecoeur. They then continued downstream, reaching the Mississippi River on the 6th of February. Continuing on down the Mississippi River, LaSalle finally achieved his goal on April 9th, 1682 and with Tonti erected a cross at the mouth of the Mississippi River and claimed the entire river drainage system for France.

On their return to Canada, the expedition reached Starved Rock in December, 1682 and began construction of Fort St. Louis on the top of the rock formation alongside the Illinois River. Tonti remained in charge of the fort's operation when LaSalle returned to Canada and eventually France to take credit for their great discoveries and land claims for the King of France. Tonti did leave a record of his experiences during these explorations with LaSalle. The document is titled, "Relation of Henri De Tonti Concerning the Explorations of La Salle from 1678 to 1683." The document, translated from the original French to English is a remarkable account of their experiences with Native Americans during their voyages through the heart of the North American wilderness.

For the next eight years, Tonti managed the fur trading operation for LaSalle from Fort St. Louis at Starved Rock. Few details concerning his specific activities during this period exist.

After LaSalle's death in July 1690, during an expedition that sailed through the Gulf of Mexico and eventually ended on the Texas coast, the King of France granted Tonti and his cousin, Francois Dauphin de La Forest exclusive rights to trade in the Illinois Country. In exchange for these rights, they were to maintain Fort St. Louis at Starved Rock, "*with the charge to set the Illinois and neighboring nations against the Iroquois.*" Unlike LaSalle, Tonti possessed the arts of patience and conciliation, and even the Jesuit fathers, including Father Allouez, so often suspected of intrigue by LaSalle, lived at peace with him. This characteristic made it possible for him to attract to his side many of the wandering *coureurs de bois* to strengthen his fur trading operation.

Helping Tonti supervise the fur trading activities from Fort St. Louis were two other Frenchmen, Pierre de Liette, and the explorer and trader, Michel Accault. Pierre de Liette is believed to have been a relative of Tonti and plays an important role in the establishment of a French outpost at Lake Pimiteoui. Accault had previous experience along the Illinois River valley as he had accompanied Tonti on La Salle's original expedition to the Illinois River when Fort Crevecoeur had been constructed.

The Indian villages in the vicinity of the French trading outpost and fort at Starved Rock eventually grew until the population was well over 15,000 inhabitants. The ability to trade furs and food for European sourced goods as well as the notion that the French offered protection from the Iroquois was a great attraction for the Native Americans. However, this concentrated Indian population was unsustainable. As it became increasingly difficult to obtain

wood for their fires and game for food, the chiefs of the various tribes began to discuss moving their villages to less populated locations.

In 1691, nine years after LaSalle and Tonti had constructed Fort St. Louis, the French moved their post from Le Rocher (Starved Rock) to Lake Pimiteoui. The evidence for this beginning of the development of a French presence at the lake and the eventual outpost of Peoria, is a document known as the "De Gannes Memoir". Based on the content of the document, it is known to have been written in the year 1702. The only surviving copy of the document, however, is dated October 20, 1721 in Montreal, Canada, and is signed by "De Gannes". While this signature has caused some confusion over the document, the actual author is believed to have been Pierre de Liette.

The relationship between Pierre de Liette and Tonti was researched by Earnest E. East. East was a journalist at the Peoria Journal Star who researched and wrote extensively on subjects relating to Peoria history. He later became a director of the Illinois State Historical Society for fifteen years and served as its President in 1944-1945. Ultimately through correspondence with the chief librarian of the Public Library of the City of Montreal, a marriage document was discovered which contained evidence that Pierre de Liette was most likely a cousin of Tonti. In 1687, while still quite young he had followed both Henri and Henri's younger brother Pierre Alphonse de Tonti to the Illinois Territory. For the next forty years, he served either as trader or army officer in the Mississippi River Valley. He spent many years among the Illinois, first at Fort St. Louis at Starved Rock and then later at Lake Pimiteoui. It is now believed that the memoir was written at the conclusion of Liette's four year station at the Chicago outpost from 1698 to 1702. The memoir is generally regarded as the best depiction of Illinois and of its native inhabitants at the close of the seventeenth century.

Pierre de Liette describes the move of the French outpost from Starved Rock to Lake Pimiteoui as follows:

"In 1691, Monsieur de Tonti left for some business which he had at Michilimackinac, leaving me to take command in his place. Before his departure he assembled all the principal Illinois and told them that he was leaving me in his place, and that in case any matters turned up regarding the service of the king or the well-being of their village they had only to apply to me – he would approve whatever I might do.

In September I received a letter from Monsieur de Tonti, dated at Michilimackinac, informing me that he had learned that Monsieur de la Forest was returning from France and that the Court had granted them the country of the Illinois with the same prerogatives as the late Monsieur de la Salle. He said he was returning with a large number of engages, and that I should therefore sound the Illinois regarding the abandonment of their village, for which they had shown a desire because their firewood was so remote and because it was so difficult to get water upon the Rock if they were attacked by the enemy.

I assembled the chiefs and, having learned that they had not changed their minds, I bade them to choose such places as suited them best. They choose the end of Lake Pimiteoui which means "Fat Lake," so called because of the abundance of game there. This is where the Illinois are at present and where I

was for seven years. Monsieur de Tonti arrived in the winter [1691-1692] and started the building of a large fort to which the savages might return in case of alarm. The following spring, Monsieur de la Forest arrived also with a considerable number of engages and of soldiers who completed the work.

As the Indian village developed along the shores of Lake Pimiteoui, six of the eight Illinois tribes, including about 800 warriors, occupied about 260 cabins in a village extending about 500 yards along the river. The Indians had named the village Ke-Kauk-Kem-Ke, which meant a strait or narrows connecting two bodies of water. The general supposition is that this village was located in the area currently referred to as "The Narrows" where Upper Peoria Lake empties into Peoria Lake. There is evidence that the Indians actually maintained villages on both sides of the river in this area.

The fort that Tonti and his men built in the winter of 1691-1692 at Lake Pimiteoui was surrounded by 1,800 pickets. It enclosed two large log buildings - one was a lodging and the other was a warehouse - and two houses built of uprights for the soldiers. This event is generally recognized as the origin of the city of Peoria. The 300th anniversary of the event was celebrated in 1991 under the direction of an organization named the Peoria 1691 Foundation.



***Henri de Tonti, founder of Peoria, at Lake Pimiteoui, 1691 - 1693
Lonnie Eugene Stewart, 1990, Peoria 1691 Foundation***

The trading concession at Lake Pimiteoui was owned by Tonti, La Forest and Accault and was managed during their frequent absences by de Liette. Liette documented the six villages of Indians near the French fort, namely the Kaskaskia, Peoria, Moingwena, Coircoentanon, Tamaroa, and Tapouara. In inter-village games, the Peoria usually joined with the Coircoentanon against the other four, this division making a fair balance in numbers. Liette described the Illinois as follows:

"You can see no finer looking people. Usually they are neither tall nor short; there are some you could encompass with your two hands. They have legs that

seem drawn with an artist's pen. They carry their load of wood gracefully, with a proud gait, as finely as the best dancer. They have faces as beautiful as white milk, in so far as this is possible for Indians of that country. They have the most regular and the whitest teeth imaginable. . . . They are proud and vain and all call themselves sons or relatives of chiefs; but in spite of this they are given to begging, are cowardly, licentious, and entirely given up to their senses. They always take advantage of the weakness of those they deal with. They dress their best when they appear in public."

Tonti was the primary figure in the fur trade in the Illinois Country for 20 years, doing everything possible to develop an efficient and profitable trade. He traveled some 85,000 miles by canoe and on foot negotiating with Indian tribes, discovering new sources of supply, hiring and supervising voyageurs, and struggling with the regulations and restrictions of the French bureaucracy.



A summer's dance at the Lake Pimiteoui outpost involved both French and Indian participants.

Documents still exist of engagement contracts with voyageurs as evidence of the efforts Tonti and La Forrest made to build their trade business in Illinois. The terms of engagement were generally quite simple: the employer provided canoes, trade goods, food and other supplies, plus a salary payable in beaver skins.

In addition to the Illinois tribes and the new French Fort St. Louis, the Lake Pimiteoui location also became the home of a new Jesuit Mission. At the same time that the fort was relocated, Father Jacques Gravier, the French missionary at Starved Rock moved with the French traders, trappers and the Illinois tribe to Lake Pimiteoui where he established a second Mission of the Immaculate Conception.

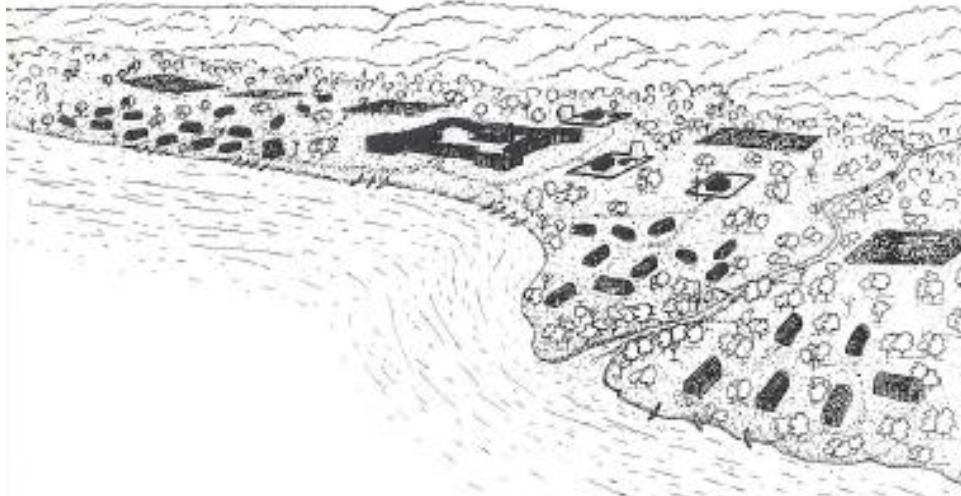
"I blessed the new chapel, which is built outside the fort, at a spot very convenient for the savages. On the eve before blessing the chapel and the cross, which is nearly 35 feet high, I invited the French to be good enough to be

present. They promised to be there, and to manifest in public the honor in which they held it. They showed the savages by four volleys from their guns their veneration for this symbol of salvation."

The seven years which followed the establishment of the new Fort St. Louis were years of real prosperity in the Illinois country, in spite of the continuance of war with the Iroquois and the British. Count Frontenac, the Governor General of New France, realizing fully the importance of upholding the French power in this distant land, maintained garrisons at all the posts, sending additional soldiers to Tonti and LaForest in 1693.

Life at the remote outpost was quite difficult. Many of the voyageurs and traders took Native American wives and in general cultivated friendly relationships with the Illinois tribes. They cultivated small plots of land adjacent to the settlement, but existed primarily on hunting and fishing. While their lives were in constant danger, they enjoyed both music and dance and a fiddle player was a valuable member of the settlement.

Although the fur trade appeared successful, the costs of trade goods, insurance, and shipping were too high for the trade to be consistently profitable. In 1698, the King issued orders forbidding all trade at Quebec's western posts, with the exception that two canoe loads of goods could be shipped to Tonti's fortified trading post at Lake Pimiteoui. Enforcing the King's moratorium on beaver pelt trade made many French trappers and traders angry with Tonti and he began to look southward to the colony of Louisiana for opportunities. He transferred his remaining shares in the Lake Pimiteoui trading operations to his brother in 1698.



This reconstruction depicts the French outpost at Lake Pimiteoui, including Fort St. Louis II, the Mission of the Immaculate Conception and the Indian village. Dickson Mounds Museum

In the fall of 1700, crowded conditions at the Lake Pimiteoui outpost and tribal unrest prompted several of the Illinois tribes (especially the Kaskaskia) to begin moving further south. Father Gravier accompanied them. This move meant that the mission at Lake Pimiteoui was abandoned after only nine years.

Once the mission at Lake Pimiteoui was abandoned, the trading outpost continued to decline. In 1700, Pierre de Liette had moved north to oversee the operation of the trading outpost at Chicago. Two years later, in 1702, a continued lack of profits from the trading operation had brought failure to the Illinois company and Tonti left the outpost he had started eleven years earlier for the last time later that year.

Tonti traveled south to New Orleans. He accepted the King's offer of a lieutenancy and was chosen by officials of French Louisiana in Old Mobile (north of present day Mobile, Alabama) as an ambassador to the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian tribes. He continued in this position until August of 1704 when the founding father of Peoria contracted yellow fever and died at Old Mobile. According to local lore, the founder of Peoria, the remains of Henri de Tonti "were laid to everlasting rest in an unknown grave near Mobile River, and not far from the monument erected in 1902 to commemorate the site of old Mobile."

Tonti was not a prolific writer. There have been only two major documents printed which are attributed to him. The first is the "Relation of Henri de Tonty concerning the Explorations of La Salle from 1678 to 1683." It is believed this document was written from Quebec in November, 1684. The letter is believed to be written by Tonti to the Abbé renaudot, who was his patron near the Prince de Conti, and who introduced him to M. de La Salle. This document was translated from French into English was originally published in 1898 by the Caxston Club. It is widely available through Internet sources as an reprint of the original publication.

The second document attributed to Tonti is a Memoir written in 1693 which is addressed to the Comte de Pontchartrain. It is printed in a book published in 1867 by Margry titled, *"Unpublished Narratives and Memoirs relating to the History of France in the Countries over Sea."*