

Henri de Tonti – the Founder of Peoria

A brief 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 Henrico'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.



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

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.



***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. 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 their expedition attempted to shoot La Salle 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. In 1679, La Salle and Tonti set out on an expedition with the intended target of reaching the mouth of the Mississippi River. They arrived at Lake Pimiteoui for the first time on the 5th of January, 1680 and proceeded to construct Fort Crevecoeur. The exact location of this fort, the first structure built by Europeans in the state of Illinois continues to be a mystery over 300 years later.

On another expedition in 1682, La Salle and Tonti did finally reach the mouth of the Mississippi River and claimed the entire river drainage system in the name of the King of France. On their return trip, they constructed a fort atop Starved Rock along the Illinois River and directed a trading operation from this location for eight years. After the death of La Salle in 1690, the King of France granted Tonti and his cousin exclusive trading rights for the entire Illinois Country. The following year, under Tonti's direction, his trading company relocated their trading operation from Starved Rock to a new outpost along the western shores of Lake Pimiteoui. This trading outpost, along with a Jesuit mission, would serve as the foundation for the future development of the modern city of Peoria.



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

Tonti was the primary figure in the fur trade in the Illinois County for twenty years, doing everything possible to develop an efficient and profitable trade. It is estimated he traveled over 85,000 miles by canoe and on foot, negotiating with Indian tribes, discovering new sources of supply, hiring and supervising voyageurs, while struggling with the regulations and restrictions of the French bureaucracy. Tonti left the Illinois Country in 1702, traveling south to New Orleans where he served as an ambassador to the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian tribes. He contracted yellow fever, died and was buried in August of 1704 at Old Mobile.