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# On the conflation of Tonty and Delliette careers in Illinois Country history

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Pierre-Charles Delliette is especially important to Illinois Country anthropologists and historians as the author of the so-called "DeGannes" memoir which is contained in an anonymously compiled manuscript in the Ayer Collection at the Newberry Library (Anonymous 1727). The portion of this manuscript attributed to Pierre-Charles Delliette is entitled *Mémoire concernant le pays des Illinois* and is by far the most authoritative source on Illinois Indian culture (Pease and Werner 1934:302-395; Quaipe 1947). This manuscript was written by Delliette between ca. 1705 (the terminal date when he was at Chicago as described in the memoir) and 1709-1710 (when it was used by Antoine-Denis Raudot (Kinietz 1940, Horton 1969:554). Because of the memoir and the high level of documentation typical of the period of the initial French exploration and establishment in Illinois, Delliette's early career in the Illinois Country (from 1687 until ca. 1715) is well known. Less is known about the final years of Delliette's life and few realize that his name was passed on to other individuals, including one whose career has become conflated with Delliette's own.

Various members of the Tonty family in New France also have prominent places in Illinois Country history, but confusion has been generated by at least two Tonty descendants assuming Pierre-Charles Delliette's surname. The vagaries of this transfer have caused Illinois Country historians to combine distinct individuals into a single career and elsewhere divorce sequential parts of subsequent careers at the point of the name's adoption. Several vexing gaps plague our ability to untangle these careers.

Confusion derives from four sources. Firstly, early treatments of Illinois Country history (e.g., Alvord 1920) set the stage for misunderstanding by typically not perceiving the significance of suddenly changed appellations within period correspondence. Secondly, the inaccessibility of the exact genealogical connection and history of Pierre-Charles Delliette's family relative to the Tonty family (that is, the descendants of the marriage of Lorenzo de Tonty and Isabelle de Liette) has made the circumstances surrounding the passing of this surname even more problematical than it is. Thirdly, there have been difficulties in ascertaining the date and circumstances of Pierre-Charles Delliette's death—the event that triggers the transfer of the surname. Lastly, the logical basis of the transfer of this "title" is inscrutable itself. That is, the Tonty descendants appear to use the Delliette name as if it were a title, but as best as can be understood, Delliette is not a title but merely a surname (Liette) with an affixed particle (de).

What were the Tonty descendants' justifications and mode of adoption for using this surname as a surname? Given all these difficulties, although a suggestion is made here as to the probable parameters of this problem, the main purpose of this note is to urge Illinois Country historians to exercise caution dealing with extant treatments of the involved parties. The following discussion elaborates upon information previously presented by Franke (1995a, 1995b) and Esarey

(1997:208-210, fn 7).

Both the Tonty and de Liette families were Italians, although the sons of Lorenzo and Isabella were born in France (Russ 1969a, Osler 1969). It has been proposed that Pierre-Charles Delliette was also born in France (ca. 1670) and came to New France at about the time Alphonse Tonty emigrated in 1685, but on neither point is anything definitively known (Russ 1969b). The succeeding generation of Tonty descendants were born between 1690 to 1713 in Montreal and Detroit. The spellings used here for the surnames of the Tonty men and Pierre-Charles Delliette are as they wrote their own signatures in New France (Winsor 1884:18; Franke 1995a:19, 28-29).

The two primary Tonty figures in North America are the brothers Henri and Alphonse (also known as Alphonse de Tonty, Baron de Paludy) who were born mid-seventeenth-century in France. A third brother, the youngest, remained in France. Pierre-Charles Delliette's exact relationship to Isabelle (the mother of these brothers) was probably nephew or great-nephew, but is unknown since exact genealogical details are not authoritatively presented. The elder Tonty brother was LaSalle's famous "right hand man" and the latter was a primary associate of Cadillac and prominent in the founding of Detroit. Their fame is sufficient that no detailing of their careers is needed beyond reference to their biographies (Russ 1969a and Osler 1969).

The confusion mentioned above surrounds the sequence of transfers of the Delliette surname upon his death to certain male progeny of Alphonse Tonty. Eight of Alphonse Tonty's children were male. At least two of them (the first and fourth son) died before attaining a career (Tanguay 1871:1:568-569, 1890:7:320-321). We also have no details of the lives of two others listed by Tanguay – Philippe Tonty (second son, b. 1689) and Henri-Hector Tonty (fifth son, b.1695) so it may well be they also died young. Some details are known of the lives of four other male Tonty children. Tanguay lists these as Alphonse (third son, b. 1691), Charles-Henri (sixth son, b. 1697), Claude-Joseph (seventh son, b. 1700), and Pierre-Antoine (eighth son, b. 1710).

Although Pierre-Charles Delliette's early career is relatively well-known, beginning circa 1721 many historians have conflated Pierre-Charles Delliette with one of his "cousins." To illustrate this problem in a non-exhaustive fashion compare Alvord (1920:135, 157-158), Quaipe (1947:xxvi), and Balesi (1991:174-175) versus Thwaites (1906:3), Russ (1969a and 1969b), and Edmunds and Peyser (1993:109). The conclusion that individuals have been conflated is inescapable.

Russ (1969b and 1974) seems to partially correct and partially further confuse the Liette/Tonty descendants in New France with his biographies of Pierre-Charles Delliette and "Charles-Henri Joseph Tonty, Sieur Delliette" (for whom Russ gives life dates of 1697-1749). These biographies do provide affirmation that Tonty progeny were in fact adding the Liette surname to their name, but Russ seems to make a vital

wrong turn in rejecting Charlevoix's (1744:2:235) mention of the death of "de Liette" in 1721 (Russ 1969b). The argument presented here is that Russ thereby assigned the last of Charles-Henri Tonty's career (when he was commandant at Fort de Chartres) to Pierre-Charles Delliette, and then assigns the death date of the former to the latter. Thereafter, apparently following Tanguay (1890:7:321), Russ perpetuates Charles-Henri Tonty conflating him with his next younger brother Claude-Joseph Tonty to come up with only a second, rather than third, *Sieur Desliettes*.

It is important to note that Tanguay lists the two Tonty brothers in question as separate names and dates in their birth record, but gives no further information on the life of Claude-Joseph Tonty. Importantly, the 1725 death date of Charles-Henri Tonty at Fort de Chartres on the Mississippi River would indeed probably be missing from Tanguay's Canadian church records. Instead Tanguay lists the death of only one Tonty – who he refers to as "Charles-Henri-Joseph de Tonty de Liette" who has the 1697 birth date of Charles-Henri Tonty, as well as his marriage in 1722, but impossibly provides him with a July 9, 1749 death at Montreal.

Russ (1974) notes that Charles-Henri-Joseph de Tonty was commissioned in the Louisiana troops in March 1720. Rowland and Sanders (1929: 382, 411, 633, 669; and 1932:368-370) and Giraud (1987:394-395, 487) make it clear that this same "Charles-Henri Tonty" was the, in fact, the "*Sieur Desliettes*" who was serving at Natchez in 1722 (the year following Charlevoix's report of Delliette dying) and 1723. These references further make it clear that this same officer was subsequently assigned to Fort de Chartres in 1724, and that he served as commandant there from 1725 through his death, which occurred in late 1729. Following the Louisiana career of Charles-Henri Tonty inevitably leads one to the conclusion that he died in 1729.

But if Charles-Henri Tonty took the name "*Desliettes*" in 1722 and perished in 1729, then who is the figure "Joseph Tonty *Desliettes*" who was second in command at Green Bay in 1737 and 1738 (Kellogg 1925:339)? Most likely this is the next youngest brother, Claude-Joseph Tonty, who is attested as having received an ensigncy in 1730 in Canada (Russ 1974). The youngest brother, presumably next in line for the Delliette name after Claude-Joseph Tonty, was Pierre-Antoine Tonty, born 1710, who was listed as "officer of the troops" when he was killed in the Chickasaw campaign of 1736 (Belting 1948:49). This proposed scenario leaves only the question why Alphonse Tonty, Jr., born 1691 and pursuing an active military career further east until at least 1725 (Russ 1974), did not have a prior claim to the Delliette name over all three of these younger brothers. Most likely, although his father and namesake did not die until 1727, the family's primary name, Baron de Paludy, was reserved for Alphonse, Jr. as the eldest surviving son. It may be that even the youngest son, Pierre-Antoine was not without the obsessively desired title typical of his time and place. A May 1733 letter by Beauharnois (Thwaites 1906:181) mentions that "*Sieur Chevalier de Tonty*" (a "possibly hereditary" surname previously used by Henri Tonty, who died in 1704 without legitimate male descendants) was among those wounded by the Chickasaw in a detachment going from New Orleans to the Wabash.

Charles-Henri Tonty was dead by this date, and Claude-Joseph Tonty apparently was using the Delliette surname

from then on. Thus the then-23-year-old Pierre-Antoine Tonty, who was already active in the theater of operations where he met his death three years later may have been already using this alternate, but presumably also suspect, surname available to the Tonty sons.

To summarize, it is proposed that Pierre-Charles Delliette's death took place in the months following June 1721, when he signed a notarial deed on the eve of his departure to the west (Russ 1969b). He was stationed at Pimiteoui, Le Rocher, and Chicago, but as far as can be told, never at Fort de Chartres. Subsequently, Charles-Henri Tonty, born in 1697, adopted "*Sieur Desliettes*" and used it until his death in 1729. Then the surname was apparently adopted by the next youngest Tonty son, Claude-Joseph Tonty, who died in Montreal in 1749. This reconstruction hinges not only on Charlevoix's documentation of Delliette's death in 1721 (Pierre-Charles being the only Delliette known in the historical record up to that time), but on the firm evidence that the "*Sieur Desliettes*" serving at Natchez, and then transferred to Fort de Chartres, was Charles-Henri Tonty. The sequence of events proposed by Russ (1974) hinges only on the dismissal of the former piece of evidence. The few attestation dates offered by Russ for the various sons of Alphonse Tonty are all in line with this scenario.

Finally, we need to make some brief consideration of the question of the nature of titles and title transfers. Goubert (1974: 154) speaks of how arduously the particle "de" was sought for "hinting at greater things" than a scrutiny the bearer's modest origin could withstand, since true titles belonged to estates. Thus, although the Delliette descent came disadvantageously (e.g. Goubert 1974:161) through the female line of the Tonty men, it was at least not of French origin.

It may well be that this second generation of Tonty men in North America were using their less easily examined Italian lineage to its best possible use to imply inheritable status. Further opening a route for such a pretense was the fact that these young men were active in military roles and thus much more able to put on the required airs in service of pretended noble lineage, since they were in no way derogating that status (Goubert 1974:166; Eccles 1983:100-102). This was an age of pretense, especially in the matter of lineage, and the practice of appropriating misleading appellations was especially widespread in New France and Louisiana. Those with actual rank could hardly be brought to countenance derogations of their precedence and those without noble origin missed no opportunity to augment appearances to the contrary (Giraud 1974:244; 1987:279, 312). In fact, it was exactly in the years when Charles-Henri Tonty first took the Delliette name that cadets in military service in Louisiana were most open to accusations of lacking requisite social status to advance via their careers (Giraud 1987:283-284). Charles-Henri's success in being named commandant at the Illinois is all the more indication that his qualifications, absolutely by needs tempered with at least the appearance of inherited social distinction, were deemed adequate. All in all, in both Canada and Louisiana, pretensions of hereditary status in this context were very frequently allowed to stand, in as much as officials questioning credentials could be directly counter-productive to the ardor with which young men in the military would pursue the needs of the colony (Eccles 1983:101).