Greatest Contribution of French to Nation

NEW ORLEANS (UPI) -- The United States, which paid less than three pennies per acre for the Louisiana Territory, ultimately reaped incalculable billions in land and other resources.

For the Louisiana Purchase, negotiated when Thomas Jefferson was president of the United States, Napoleon Bonaparte was ruler of France, added up to the greatest single contribution of the French to this nation.

The purchase doubled its territory when the purchase went through in 1803.

What it got for the $15 million interest eventually ran the bill to the United States the $15 million paid Peter Minuit's $24 purchase of Manhattan Island from the Indians look like small.

The French contributions from colonial times to the twentieth century are immeasurable. But their ways of doing it differed from almost any other national group, say the English-Speaking-Irish, Germans, Italians and Scandinavians.

What it boiled down to in the case of the French was a matter of either of Americans going to France to study, to absorb their culture, to bring it home, or the French came here for specific reasons and then returned to their homeland.

Monsieur de la Ferroniere, for instance, was a Francophile, and as George Washington's minister to France, absorbed their food and wine tastes, their architecture and arts. It was Jefferson, the truly Renaissance man, who dispatched James Monroe as minister plenipotentiary to France to complete what Louisianans deal with Napoleon's ministry.

Among the French who came here were the early explorers and the Marquis de Lafayette and the Count de Rochambeau who led the French armies that came to this nation's aid in the American Revolution, in which some 2,000 Frenchmen died. Lafayette went home to promote further American-French friendship and cooperation.

There was Maj. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a young French engineer who also had served with the American Revolutionary forces, and was chosen to plan Washington, D.C., the new national capital.

L'Enfant's innovative spoke layout of streets from a center core made him a pioneer in urban planning. He too went home — after a run-in with bureaucracy, but the plans he had made were carried through.

There's the statute of Liberty originally conceived as a memorial to international friendship, but was, of course, to the broader significance, as the symbol to all immigrants ad to the world those ideas of human liberty on which the United States was founded.

The French had the idea for the statue, French citizens underwrote it, and French sculptor Frederic August Bartholdi came to the United States to discuss details and the site. On the visit, he hit upon New York harbor as the ideal location.

Then he returned to his Paris studio to sculpt what ultimately would be a 251-foot monument. Americans raised the funds for the pedestal.

One master contributor to the world of letters was Alexis de Tocqueville. He spent a year in the United States, a friend, Gustave de Beaumont, to study the penal system, and returned home where the two produced a masterpiece on the U.S. system and how it could be applied to France.

But his classic work was a book about American Democracy, "De la Democratie en Amerique".

...if ... you are of the opinion that the greatest degree of enjoyment and the least degree of misery to each of the individuals who compose it a nation — you can have no surer means of judging them than by the relative conditions of men, and establishing, democratic institutions," he wrote.

Louisianian-French migrations to America through the centuries, it seems fair to say that to a Frenchman there's no place like home.

It had no direct affect on American culture, but Mary Stuart, of the Scottish royal family, sent to France to grow up, didn't want to leave when ordered home.

Mary supposedly said of her sadness at departing her adopted land, "Adieu, pleasant land of France, Oh my country, you are the dearest place in the world." And that was in the 16th century.

So far as resettlement in great masses, as with other groups who came to stay, the French — with few exceptions — did not.

The French came early to American, originally either prompted by trade with the Indians, the thrill of exploration, and in the case of the Louisiana territory, land acquisition for the real.

Unlike other ethnic and national groups, they were not driven from their homelands by religious or political persecution, or both. Two exceptions were the Acadians and the Huguenots, a small portion of all migration — and more about them later.

Thiers was not an intended melding of what made America. To this day, the French or those of French ancestry make up a small portion of the U.S. population. No wonder.

As George Godefro, an international music conductor, put it, "There has been no special reason to leave France... no famine, no persecution.

Godefro, a Frenchman living in New York, holder of the Legion of Honor, is president of Guerlain Perfumes, and is active in the French-American Chamber of Commerce.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates population of eight national groups in the United States today, based on a 1972 sampling.

The French are way down on the list. The sampling showed 5.4 million French ancestry, or about 2.6 per cent of our total population of nearly 220 million.

Only the Polish and Russian groups are lower — 2.5 and 1.1 per cent respectively.

In contrast, there an estimated 29.5 million of English-Speaking-Welsh descent, the highest number at 14.4 per cent. They are followed by the Germans with 25.8 million or 12.5 per cent.

But small numbers don't diminish the contributions to America's society, whether the United States went to France or the French came to America.

The French have helped shape our way of life. They've influenced our literature, the arts, architecture, food, language, fashion, law — the Napoleonic code, a liberalization of civil law, entertainment from opera and symphony to the can-can and Folies Bergere.

"It is in the fields of manners, fashions and cooking that the French have exercised their greatest influence on American culture," write Carl Willette, historian, in "We Who Built America; the Saga of the Immigrant.

"This influence was apparent as early as 1800, as a result of the great interest on the part of American Republicans in the progress of the French Revolution," Willette continues.

"French dancing, language and fencing schools, dishes, customs, dress, became fashionable. Inns and taverns were renamed hotels and ordinary American cooks and bakers borrowed French Koches who ran French and in American newspapers.

"Philadelphia had a circulating library of 1,250 volumes in French and French newspapers appeared in leading cities..." But it was not culture so much as the great real estate bargain this country got with the Louisiana Purchase.

Out of this original $15 million empire ultimately the nation carved out by agreement the states of Louisiana named for Louis XIV, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Nebraska and Oklahoma. In addition, the area included most of the land in Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Minnesota.