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1. Introduction

*How Deep Is (Ethno-)History?
Archives, Written History,
Oral Tradition*

In the Beginning Was *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion*

In 1979 I came to Mississippi to revive a ghost: I was hired to edit and take through production the final two volumes of *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion* (MPA:FD), a collection of translated French documents pertaining to the eighteenth-century colonization of the lands that would become Mississippi.¹ The project had been prepared in typescript in 1932 and then set aside and eventually misplaced for forty years; the decision was made to publish it after it was rediscovered in 1974.² My qualifications for this job ostensibly included an undergraduate degree in French, an MA in comparative literature specializing in the eighteenth century, plus some rigorous exposure to textual criticism and historiography as a result of a PhD in comparative literature/medieval studies that nevertheless did not seem immediately relevant at the outset. What I found, however, was that, as is axiomatic of the multifarious qualifications of archivists in carrying out their jobs, this task of historical documentary editing and the path it started me on would call on everything I had learned to that point and would require the expansion of my theoretical and subject-area knowledge and of several areas of practice as well. In addition, the project itself was situated in the intellectual history of archival practice, historiography, ethnography, and ethnohistory, and the state of research in all of these fields would frame it and provide a starting point for all the ethnohistorical work that would flow from it. In a very substantive sense the essays here, covering some twenty years of my work in ethnohistory, track my intellectual autobiography; hence, in this introduction I will attempt to make that frame visible.

I knew next to nothing about the history of the French colony of Louisiana or of those of its inhabitants who lived in what would become the state of

Mississippi. I was also unaware that the *MPA:FD* project itself represented the continuation of an early-twentieth-century effort by Dunbar Rowland and the board members of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) designed to prove the depth and duration of early European involvement in the state's history and to make available to the public a selection of documents portraying Mississippi's French colonial history. But I apparently seemed intelligent enough to be up to the job of editing for publication two volumes of French documents that had already been translated and documented with scholarly comment. It didn't hurt that my great-grandfather had served on the founding board of trustees of the MDAH and had known Dunbar Rowland well. There was a poetic closure in the return to Mississippi of a "daughter of the regiment."

The original estimate was that, working with an excellent typist with a vast experience in preparing materials for publication, the task would take me six months. That estimate would not have been correct even had the task as defined not been problematic, but it soon became clear that there was nothing simple about the project. First and axiomatically to me, the very texts from which the original translator had had to work were inadequate simply as a consequence of the time in which he worked. The department had acquired twenty-six volumes of handwritten copies of French colonial documents about the region, dating from the 1680s to 1763, from the French Archives nationales on the basis of a protocol devised by Dunbar Rowland, the director of the department, when he visited the French archives in 1904. Although at that time the freelance copyists who made a living at the Archives nationales doing this work were very good at their jobs, were familiar with the material, and wrote in very clear scribal hands, they were subject to the same problems that medieval copyists had experienced. That at least was something I was qualified to detect, and it soon became obvious to me when I began comparing the handwritten copies with microfilm copies of the original documents, which had been obtained in 1970 as part of a consortium effort that included the Library of Congress. So initially it was clear that the underlying French text versions would have to be checked very carefully.

Nor could I trust the translations as they stood, not because they were not competent but because they were competent with respect to the standards of their time, and standards were not the same fifty years later. The translator, Albert Godfrey Sanders, a very scholarly professor of French language and literature at Millsaps College and the father of one of my own father's lifelong

friends, had aimed for a sober literal translation, but there were numerous characteristics of the subject matter and its presentation that he did not and, in the state of knowledge at the time, could not know. We forget just how little was known from original documents at the turn of the twentieth century, but that very time was the one that saw the significant work done on calendaring the French documents by Nancy M. Miller Surrey (whose calendar, never properly published, remains the best brief description of what must be nearly all the relevant documents) and the acquisition of copies of the documents for the first time by American repositories, all thanks to the organizational work of the Carnegie Institution.³ During that time also ethnographer John R. Swanton was in the process of laying the foundations for the ethnohistorical study of Indians of the greater Southeast, including those who appeared in the documents to be edited. In fact, in the person of Dunbar Rowland the original project interacted directly with both of these historical and ethnographic projects and participated in this first flush of work that opened up the European archives to American historical and ethnographic study.

Since that time, unfortunately, little more had been done with the French colonial history of the Southeast, at least not in the region itself. The first third of the century had indeed seen the editing and publication of a considerable body of primary source material from the period, but in a region still obsessed by the Civil War and the economic changes that followed, the major topics of discussion had been the Confederacy and the New South, not that which was very old. Several periodicals, most notably the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, had nevertheless published a mine of primary materials. There were a few excellent secondary studies, but they were a tiny handful and in general either inaccessible due to language reasons or not considered “mainstream” enough to affect the writing of Louisiana colonial history significantly.⁴ The chapter on the French colonial history of Mississippi in the two-volume set brought out with such fanfare by the MDAH in 1973 (“the first comprehensive history of Mississippi in fifty years”) was written by a nonspecialist.

On the anthropological side, Swanton’s work from 1932, when the typescript of the materials I was working with seemed to have been completed as it stood, to his death in 1958 had added significantly to the foundation ethnography of the southeastern Indians, although his work had also been so exhaustive that it had daunted further researchers. In addition, the emergence of an interdisciplinary practice of ethnohistory had taken place in connection with research done under the Indian Claims Act of 1946 and had crystallized in the

formation of the precursor to the American Society for Ethnohistory in the 1950s; its journal *Ethnohistory* had existed since 1954. There was therefore a body of ethnographic work and perhaps more relevant ethnohistorical practice to draw on.

Clearly, it would be necessary to do additional work over and above copy-editing the existing typescript. I would need to do some serious research, because in the light of current editorial practice and historical trends in the direction of social history it was evident that the scholarly apparatus provided in the Rowland/Sanders typescript was quite inadequate, especially in view of one extremely salient fact: most of the people who resided on the lands that would later become the state of Mississippi during the period 1699–1763 were not Europeans but Indians. I therefore set for myself the goal of expanding the biographical notes already provided, which had been confined to the leading French figures in the colony and a very few Great Red Men. I would attempt to identify everyone (Indian, African, Englishman, and Spaniard as well as Frenchman), drawing on the documents themselves and the various censuses and service records that were available either in the collection or published elsewhere. In addition I would try to elucidate references in the documents that were not explained by other documents in the published *MPA:FD* collection so that the reader would not be obliged to look elsewhere in order to make sense of what was on the page. The resources already mentioned could be drawn upon, and in addition I could seek out archival sources in Mississippi and the surrounding states, notably Louisiana and Alabama; in fact, I made visits to archives in both states in pursuit of original materials. Finally, I would attempt to represent more equitably the actual population of the region by seeking out and publishing additional documents pertaining to the Indian history of the period.⁵

Tanselle and the Text

“Historical editing” was the rubric under which my work would fall, and it was obvious to me that even though I was preparing translations I would need to investigate the state of historical editing to see if there was anything that I needed to know beyond what I already understood as a result of my acquaintance with literary editing. To my amazement, I found that I had stepped into the field just in time to encounter a major scandal of historical editing, then being exposed by G. Thomas Tanselle. Tanselle wrote a very influential essay in which he described the common practices of the many editing projects, mostly sponsored by the National Historical Publications and Records Com-

mission (NHPRC), producing modern editions of the papers of Great White Men Important in Political History in which the editors chose to clean up the spelling and even the language of these admired gentlemen without concern for faithfulness to the original manuscripts or the fact that people who used the editions would be unlikely ever to consult the originals. Tanselle compared this kind of practice, for a discipline that was ostensibly concerned with accuracy and truth, to the literary editing that had been going on at the same time under the aegis of the Center for Editions of American [literary] Authors, where common practice was if anything punctilious to a fault in reproducing the texts of the original manuscripts, warts and all. Tanselle pointed out the significant work of twentieth-century literary editors in building upon the long toil of classical and biblical textual criticism and the failure of historical editors to profit from this example. Having surveyed historical editing practice in the major NHPRC projects, he concluded that “the difference between the way American statesmen and American literary figures have recently been edited is a striking illustration of how two closely related fields can approach the basic scholarly task of establishing dependable texts in two very different ways, one of which [historical editing] seems superficial and naive in comparison to the other [literary editing].”⁶

With a background in medieval literary history, I was certainly predisposed to be persuaded by Tanselle’s argument that the literalist literary standard was far preferable to what seemed to be the Whiggish bias of the historical standard.⁷ My most recent background had included work on computer-aided medieval manuscript filiation, which was essentially invented by Dom Froger in the late 1960s to take advantage of the computer in order to establish relationships among manuscript copies with the intention of establishing authoritative texts with variants.⁸ I was well acquainted not only with the literature pertaining to this new approach (some of which I had myself created) but with the underlying theory about information transfer *before* the age of mechanical reproduction that informed this literature: that of codicology, or the making of manuscripts and books, and that of diplomatics, or the establishment of authenticity in manuscript sources. This neighborhood of textual criticism was especially relevant to the French colonial documents, I believed, because, first, they were in fact manuscript documents, and, second, many of the “original” documents were not originals at all but official copies made under specific circumstances and for specific purposes. Ignoring those purposes would prune significant meaning from the text.⁹

In addition to the discipline of textual criticism per se I also drew upon long-honed practices of comparative literature. The subdivisions of that discipline that had occupied me were, first of all, the establishment of sources for written material. I had the good fortune to be trained by Werner P. Friederich, the doyen of comparative literature studies in the United States, and Papa Friederich brought intertextuality to life (*avant la lettre*—or at least he never used the term) by first showing his students how interlaced and interdependent all the literatures of Europe were and then requiring us to track down every last allusion and influence we could find, drawing upon information about the author's education and biography, his friends and enemies, people who might have been his friends and enemies, lists of books in his library, lists of books in his friends' libraries, and so on.¹⁰ Working as a scholar primarily in the period from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, I had also fortuitously studied the gradual emergence of the genre of history in European writing as separate from fiction and was therefore aware of the degree to which this was still a matter of serious debate in the eighteenth century.¹¹ Finally, having sat in on courses given by the eminent twentieth-century specialist Eugene Falk, I had read reader-response theory and imbibed the beginning of a concern with the author's intention for the work, the reader's reception of the work, and the notion of a text as something mutually constructed between author and reader; this approach had partly informed my 1974 dissertation and became an important part of my computational work with texts.¹²

One other element was blended into this mix: in 1966, before I went off to become a comparatist, I spent the summer at Indiana University as a Summer Folklore Fellow, and I was introduced to the study of folklore and the mysteries of tracing oral traditions in the spirit of the gatherers and classifiers of encyclopedic collections of folktales and traditions who had worked under the leadership of Stith Thompson.¹³ Under the supervision of Linda Degh we all fanned out to gather folk traditions from informants in the region to add to the local collection, and I not only had the opportunity to see an entirely different side of my grandparents' lives as country people (they formed the key informants of the snowball sample I pursued) but gained a first understanding of how an official literate discourse can mask a world of tradition and practices unrepresented in the literate culture. Just gaining the attention of students at that time were the work of Marshall McLuhan on alterations in communication, the first translated writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss on oral tradition and its structural analysis, and the structural linguistics of Ferdi-

nand de Saussure, the latter two of which influenced my dissertation powerfully and would continue to provide a frame for my understanding of positive evidence.¹⁴

In short, I was bound to be concerned with presenting through my translation and editing activities something as close to the original as I could get (knowing only too well that most of my readers would never read the original French) and with contextualizing those texts as well as I could, given what I could learn of the people who wrote the texts, the people the writers wrote about, and what all of their situations were. And naive though that hope now seems and unprepared as I then was, *MPA:FD* was the gateway through which I stepped to practicing ethnohistory.

Part I: Taking Historical Text Production Seriously

Building on the bases just discussed, always aware of the production process behind any text, I have always been concerned with the contingency of the historical sources I had to deal with, and I have struggled—some would say too hard—with trying to wring blood from the stones of European incomprehension and representation of Native behavior and testimony. This position has not been unusual in the context of contemporary developments in historiography. The influence of the French *Annales* school of structural history has been especially important, with Fernand Braudel's distinctions among temporal scales: the very long term of geological and climatic change; eras of the medium term shaped by the evolution of human systems like government and demography; and the small-scale events consisting of the actions of individuals (generally only of interest to *Annales* if they included all classes and ranks and could be summed to larger patterns of social, economic, and cultural history).¹⁵ *Annales* structural methods offered to the ethnohistorian the tools of the eighteenth-century mathesis of counting and classifying in their focus on repetitive records that allow statistical treatment to discern especially economic patterns over the long term.¹⁶ They were also helpful in addressing with some effectiveness the clashes and mis-fits of culture contact as they expressed themselves in structural patterns.¹⁷ *Annales* methods are positive in their conviction that in the reductive treatment of the record—documentary, material—an adequate account of the shape of what happened can be found.

At the same time, through decades of development of the social history that *Annales* work reinforced and sometimes inspired, the doubt that history itself could be seen as an objective positive science emerged along with the Marxist

critique of capitalist liberal democracy as the universal goal of human striving.¹⁸ As history writing was critiqued in this same vein, and with a significant four-hundred-year *longue durée* to serve as perspective, it was observed by Hayden White and others that historical *representation* was always of its time, not only in terms of writing style but also in choice of subject and manner of presentation. Whether presented as moral discourse or not, postmodern historiographical critique has shown how history always *was* moral discourse.¹⁹

Ironically, this in fact represents the only answer to Keith Jenkins's question "Why history?"—stripped of pretension to universalizing (Orientalizing) objectivity written from a "nowhere" standpoint, history can honestly be what it of necessity is and take its moral discourse seriously and reflexively.²⁰ This is especially important when it comes to the writing of ethnohistory, by definition written by people (even people sharing the same *ethnos* as their subjects) who experience themselves as "in history" about people who may not, or at least not in the same sense. From the outset the writing of ethnohistory was a moral/ethical exercise, and over its own history of practice ethnohistorians have grappled with such problems. How to deal with biased-observer sources? Such sources are always all there is, and even for externally observable fact they see what they look for. How to understand and perceive thoughts and intentions absent verbal externalization in text or spoken word? For that matter, what might count as externalization of thought in verbal production or in deeds? Assigning significance to events rests on constructing an understanding of what is going on from the perspective of now; thus even understanding European intentions as recently as a generation ago is a nontrivial exercise.

Here anthropology enters the picture. As the study of such Others by Western European Selves, anthropology itself has had an increasingly contested history. But for the ethnohistorian its power lies in providing a way of "defining the situation" in which events and interactions took place using its social, political, and cultural constructs.²¹ For a long time anthropology has had increasing influence on the writing of ethnohistory precisely because it made this kind of contextualizing possible. Anthropology, however, was just as much a "noble dream" (or perhaps "colonialist nightmare," depending on perspective) as was "objective" history. From the beginning of European writing about indigenous people, those same people have objected to being misrepresented or even represented at all, and at the end of the twentieth century strong indigenous voices began to be heard not only on the political stage but in the academy.²²

I have, as I said, spent a lot of time worrying about the usefulness of Euro-American texts for writing the history of Native American people. My interest in ethnohistory was piqued in the first place because as I edited French documents of the eighteenth century it simply became plain that the social and political activities of Native people represented the most important things going on in that time and place, the poorly described ground against which the more familiar figure of European colonization was constructed. Even where the Native population had been seriously damaged by the effects of European disease, until the very end of the eighteenth century in the interior of the Southeast, Native people dominated in every way, and Europeans had to behave with circumspection or achieve none of their ends at all. This was very frustrating to some, while others were oblivious, but in general Native people and their affairs were not known in detail because the only Europeans they welcomed to live among them frequently “went native” themselves and began to practice the same reticence about their affairs as the hosts who had often reared them.²³

Nevertheless, these partial views are the only ones we now have, and so we need to devise better ways of interrogating them to try to understand at least what the witnesses thought they saw. The first step in this direction is achieving usable texts to work with, and especially attempting to establish the context in which the texts were written so as to be able to weigh them. As I was editing the documents in *MPA:FD* I realized that while the standard of documentation that the original editors thought adequate worked well enough for the writing of French colonial political history, they were inadequate to support the social and economic history of the French colony and sometimes worse than useless to support the writing of ethnohistory. Without special efforts in supplying background and context, it seemed to me, historians using these materials would continue to concentrate on the French part of Louisiana colonial history and miss such complexity and detail as did begin to emerge when adequate context was presented. Although since I was editing and producing translations I was not in a position to do nuanced textual work, I attempted to bring the importance of this kind of practice to the attention of historical editors in general in the essay “Dearth and Bias: Issues in the Editing of Ethnohistorical Materials.”

I was also especially interested in finding some way of discovering the completeness status of the record we now have at our disposal, because we have also learned from the historiographers that the historical record itself is

and has been manipulated and constructed at several levels and that construction constrains what can be done with it. The appearance in print of Bill Barron's calendar of the correspondence in the Vaudreuil Papers at the Huntington Library provided the occasion to investigate such lacunae in detail in the context of a carefully maintained eighteenth-century gubernatorial letter-book.²⁴ This analysis, written up as "Louisiana Post Letters, 1700–1763: The Missing Evidence for Indian Diplomacy," allowed me to explore a method influenced by Western archival practice that I have come to use with all kinds of evidence that can be seen as a body constrained by some kind of unity of provenance, namely, always making a preliminary attempt at inventorying and describing the whole original body of evidence as defined in terms of a specific record-keeping practice, looking for any principles of exclusion operating alongside principles of inclusion.

This issue of principles of exclusion operates *within* sources as much as it does in the process of making up groups of sources, and it requires no less understanding of the context of creation. In the early 1990s I investigated examples of this issue in terms of what voices were being articulated in any source we might use and how authoritative for the purpose in hand the identified voice might make the information to be found in the source. In the course of analyzing the evidentiary value of the sources used to write the history of early Spanish exploration in the Southeast I kept encountering what I felt was, all around, an extremely uncritical use of a source written for an entirely different purpose, and I investigated it in "Agustín Dávila Padilla's Fabulous History of the Luna Expedition: Ideology in Two Centuries." I also had occasion to examine one of the most revered sources for eighteenth-century Louisiana history, the *Histoire de la Louisiane* of Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, in beginning to prepare a translation.²⁵ I found that Du Pratz's apparently straightforward account of things he witnessed must have been profoundly influenced, particularly in matters pertaining to women (for which Du Pratz is unusually helpful for a patriarchal colonizing male of the eighteenth century), by the testimony of a young Chitimacha woman who was his servant, first as a slave and then as a sort of adoptee. I treated part of that analysis in "Natchez Matrilineal Kinship: Du Pratz and the Woman's Touch."

Finally, I was especially interested in what we might be able to do as historians to understand what European observers would not be likely to notice at all (and therefore would not report) and how anthropological methods might