

Francis Bosseron

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Francis Rider Bosseron,¹ the original owner of the Account Book reprinted below was one of the most prominent citizens of Vincennes when Colonel George Rogers Clark took possession of the town in 1778, and again in 1879, if we may judge by the positions of trust which he filled and his services to the Americans. Although he was only thirty years of age when he welcomed Father Gibault and helped to win over the French citizens to the American cause,² he was already Mayor of the little city and had probably held the position for several years. He was also owner of the village store, head of a successful trading company which employed most of the men of the place as *coureurs de bois* or as hunters, and a banker whose *bons* [checks], drafts, and bills of exchange were honored from Montreal and Detroit to Virginia and New Orleans.

The family of Bosseron was probably of noble rank in France as the name is commonly written *Rider de Bosseron* in the earlier records. The first representatives of the family in this country of whom we have any information were two brothers, Charles and Jean Bte Rider de Bosseron, who were well known in the French trading posts about the middle of the eighteenth century. By 1761, they were conducting such a successful trade in Kaskaskia that they decided to divide forces. They drew up a legal agreement of partnership,³ which is still interesting because of the sturdy honesty and mutual respect of the brothers, which it reveals. Charles, the father of Francis, set out for New Orleans after the partnership was formed. Sometime later he made his way to Vincennes and established a branch business there. It is possible that Francis, then a boy of thirteen, accompanied his father to far-away New Orleans and acted as his amanuensis.

¹ This sketch of the Life of Francis Bosseron has been compiled almost entirely from material found in the Lasselle Collection mentioned in the foreword to the Account Book below. A part of this collection consists of the original documents and a part of copies made by Mr. Lasselle or other members of his family.

² The age of Bosseron is established by his marriage license, preserved in the Lasselle collection of manuscripts in the Indiana State Library. He was twenty five years old at the time of his marriage in July, 1778.

³ The agreement of partnership between Charles and Jean Bte Bosseron is preserved in the Lasselle Collection. It was still in force in the seventeen-eighties as Francis Bosseron paid money at that time to the widow of his uncle.

The elder Bosseron was unable to sign his name and the handwriting of Francis appears on various business documents of the company early in the seventeen-sixties. Charles died in 1774,⁴ leaving the business to his son, then twenty-six years old and already an experienced trader.

The importance of young Bosseron was still further increased by his marriage to Francoise, the daughter of the later *Sieur Joseph Antoine Drouet de Richeville*, a man of family and ability, to whom Governor St Ange had entrusted the command of the militia when he was compelled to leave Vincennes on account of illness. The young Mayor was also appointed guardian of the two minor children of *Sieur de Richeville*, Margueritte and Antoine, at the request of the widow who wished to marry a second time.⁵ This fact probably gave rise to the story of the two orphans said to have been adopted by the Mayor, whose experiences are related in the novel, *Alice of Old Vincennes*, by Maurice Thompson.

The importance of the part played by Bosseron in the events connected with the capture of Vincennes by Colonel Clark can hardly be over-estimated. Father Gibault must have known the Bosseron family for several years prior to this time, both in Kaskaskia and Vincennes. A receipt [dated January, 1777], proves that the churchman sometimes carried small packages from town to town for the merchant [Bosseron] when he was traveling about on his pastoral duties. It is therefore probable that he was relying on his knowledge of the Mayor's friendship for the United States when he volunteered to plead the American cause for Clark in Vincennes.

It is certain that Bosseron did become a loyal ally of the new American nation, and that he gave Colonel Clark valuable assistance. He was elected Captain of the militia before Father Gibault left the town and made temporary commander of the fort; and on the 10th of August following, he received the first commission issued by Clark in the west.⁶ The records in the old Account Book prove that all through the fall he

⁴ Charles Bosseron was allowed to make his mark instead of writing his name upon his son's marriage record [mentioned above] as he claimed he was unable to write.

⁵ There are a number of papers relating to the division of the property of *Sieur de Richeville* preserved in the Lasselle collection. Among these is a complete list of all household articles, filed by the administrators of the estate. These were divided between the widow and the three children. Bosseron's bride brought to her new home a dozen hens, her own porridge bowls of blue *faience*, a complete bed, folding table, pieces of cloth, a half share in a negro servant, etc.

⁶ The Indiana State Library has several copies of Bosseron's commission. These were translated and prepared by Mr. Lasselle. The commission is labelled "No. 1."

provided for the needs of the garrison and the comfort of Captain Helm without receiving any money.⁷ Moreover, it is almost certain that this account was refused payment by the commissioners appointed by the State of Virginia to settle the Illinois claims and that the patriotic Mayor was finally compelled to bear almost the entire expense of the much-praised occupation of Vincennes in the summer of 1778 by the American forces.

When Clark appeared before Vincennes in the following February with his handful of men exhausted by hard marching and exposure, and his powder soaked with water, Bosseron was one of the first to offer hospitality to the weary men, and it was the powder and shot which he and a few other loyal Frenchmen had hidden from the British, which Clark used to capture the newly repaired fort and the strong force of Red-Coats in possession of it.

Here is Clark's own account of the event:

Amunition was scarce with us as most of our stores had been put on the galley; but fortunately at the time of its being reported that the whole of the goods in the town were to be taken for the king's use, Col. Legras, Major Bosseron and others had buried the greatest part of their powder and ball. This was immediately produced and we found ourselves well supplied by those gentlemen.

Bosseron had yet another share in the surrender of the British garrison at this time. When the fort was given up, it was necessary for the Americans to secure immediately the seven boats with supplies and reënforcements which were expected at any minute by Hamilton. Clark and his men were naturally too weary to set out on such an expedition at once and so he entrusted the important task to Helm, Legras, Bosseron, and a small party of helpers. The men "surrounded and took the whole [group] prisoners without firing a shot." Clark was greatly pleased by this feat as it not only provided much needed supplies for the soldiers and townspeople but put an end to all hopes of relief for the British. He bestowed high praise on the men who performed the exploit.

Meanwhile, Bosseron's bills for supplies and his numerous loans were not paid and were rapidly growing into an account of huge proportions for a pioneer merchant to carry. In 1780,

⁷ See memorandum of bills of exchange owed to Bosseron by the United States Government in Account Book. Also, see translation of the Account Book.

another crisis arose for the Americans and Clark was compelled to ask for the French merchant's help once more.

From various sources the Americans had learned that the British were planning a general attack against all the western settlements in order to regain possession of the country they had lost. This made it necessary for Clark to set about building a fort near the mouth of the Ohio river in order to protect American shipping interests on the Mississippi which were constantly threatened by both Spanish and English boats, and, at the same time, establish a center from which troops could be dispatched on short notice to the assistance of both the Illinois and Kentucky settlements.

Clark had received orders to build such a fort in the secret instructions given him by Governor Patrick Henry at the beginning of the western campaign, but had been unable to carry out the plan earlier because he could not secure men for the undertaking without withdrawing those on the Wabash. He knew that any weakening in that locality would invite the British to raid the Wabash valley after which they could move at will on the defenseless Kentucky settlers. Finally, on the 20th of February, he received a letter from Pierre Prevost, a Kaskaskian who was engaged in trade on the upper Mississippi, warning him that the British were stirring up the Indians about Mackinac to attack Cahokia, St. Louis, and other posts of the Illinois country. Clark realized that something must be done at once or the results of all his campaigning would be lost. Eight days later he sent the following letter to "Major Bosseron, Esqr., Aux St. Vincent's":

I have this day received by express an account of the situation of the Garrison and the probability of its being evacuated for want of Supplies of Provisions that unfortunately Perished on the Ouabash. I expected in a short time to support with what men and Provisions I pleased and could wish that the present troops could continue for a few weeks longer as the evacuation of the place at present, will be attended with bad consequences. Sensible that you have always done whatever lay within your power to support the Troops even to your own disadvantage, and would continue the same Service, had you the funds to support you, yet I must solicit you to exert yourself once more in behalf of the State, and, if possible victual the garrison for a short time longer. The Winter, now broke a few weeks, will greatly alter our circumstances; but to enable you to do it, I now enclose an order on Col. Montgomery for 1500 livres of peltry to defray present expenses. The Persons you purchase from may not doubt your payment, for you shall be enabled, if the credit of the State is sufficient, to procure it immediately, which I

expect will be as good in Illinois in the insuing year, as it was bad the last, as certain and Permanent measures is adopted for defraying Public expenses. Sixty five Thousand milled Dollars, I expect is now in Orleans for defraying the last, and a house established in France for the payment of future Bills. If the Peltry should fail, Capt. Dodge, the agent, shall pay you in goods.

I learn that there is a report of a number of Savages collected at Omi with an Intention to disturb the settlement of St. Vincents. I hope it's groundless. If not, I could only wish they Keep off for a few weeks and I think they would be more sensible of that Interest.

Capt. Bayley will give you the news none of importance.⁸

In some way Bosseron was able to accomplish the task Clark had given him to perform. He pacified the disaffected volunteers and, although the Continental Congress had not paid his other bills, found the means to provision the garrison again.

Clark was now free to build the much needed fort, which was named Fort Jefferson at Red Banks, on the Mississippi, five miles south of the mouth of the Ohio river. The work was begun in April and progressed so rapidly that in May, when word came that the British forces were marching toward Cahokia, Clark was able to leave the new Fort. He succeeded in reaching Cahokia twenty-four hours before the attack began. When the British discovered that the town had been reinforced by the leader whom they feared most of all, they made a half-hearted attack but soon withdrew to St. Louis, and not long after left the country. There were doubtless several causes for the defeat of the enemy at this time, but "the most potent reason for the precipitate retreat and the total defeat of the objects hoped for by the British officials was the opportune appearance of Clark who was supposed to be beyond striking distance at the falls of the Ohio."⁹

It is the opinion of many historians of the Northwest Territory that the relief of the Mississippi posts, while less dramatic than the capture of Fort Sackville, was the high point of Clark's career, since it secured to the United States the territory acquired by the earlier victory and established the Mississippi river as the western boundary of the nation. But what of Francis Bosseron? Should not the man whose loyal-

⁸ Clark to Bosseron, Louisville, February 28, 1780. A copy of this important letter which is endorsed by Lassalle: "The above copied by me from the original," is in the Indiana State Library collection. The writer has found no mention of it by any historian.

⁹ Canadian Archives, 1882, p.35. Quoted in James A. James, *Life of George Rogers Clark*.

ty and self sacrifice freed Clark for the task which doubled the territory of the new nation share to some extent in the honors paid the great leader?

The latter part of Bosseron's career seems to have been full of financial losses and other misfortunes. With Clark he was accused of plotting against Spanish subjects in Natchez, but the charges were dismissed when it was shown that he acted only under the orders of the General. When the French judges of the Illinois country were accused of land frauds, Bosseron was one of those indicted. The men pleaded that they had intended no wrong but had followed the old French customs which permitted such officials to assign lands. The judges were not punished but the titles to such lands were declared void and many citizens of Vincennes lost property which they had obtained in good faith.

Sadder still, the solemn promises of Clark that whatever debts Bosseron should contract would be paid, "if the credit of the State is sufficient", were not fulfilled. In the Account Book may be found a memorandum of a part of the letters of exchange which Bosseron had accepted at different times from Clark's representatives. These were sent to the Virginia Commissioners appointed to settle the Illinois claims. Finally, in 1783, the following decision was reached:

In the House of Delegates [Virginia], Saturday, June 28, 1783.

It appears that there is due to Francis Bosseron the sum of five thousand and twenty four pounds, ten shillings and six pence specie.

Resolved that the Treasurer be directed to pay to the said Francis Bosseron the sum of three hundred dollars out of any public money in his hands for his present Releaf and that the auditors issue their warrants for the Balance with an allowance of two years interest thereon, at the rate of five per centum per annum, to be paid out of such funds as shall hereafter be established for the payment of debts of similar kind.

Resolved that the Bills of Exchange numbered 9 and the certified account numbered 5 be returned to the Petitioner.

Signed and Teste.

June 28, 1783.

Agreed to by the Senate.

Also Bill of Exchange, \$220-No. 114. June 17, 1779.

"Bill of Exchange No. 9" seems to have been that given to Bosseron to pay for the supplies provided for Captain Helm during the fall of 1778, which is recorded in the old Account Book, as that is the only one we know of which has a certified account attached to it and the amounts are approximately the

same if interest be added. The discussion in regard to the bill dragged on until 1789 and then it was repudiated by the Commissioners. This is proved by the following from the *Journal*:

Bills of Bosseron.

No. 9. A Bill of Exchange first drawn by Leonard Helm in favor of Francis Bosseron for 1067 Dollars, dated November 19, 1779, on the Pay Master General of the State of Virginia. This Bill comes under the first general remark, page 148, and the Commissioners think it ought not to be charged to the State.

General Remark, page 148, is as follows, viz;

The Commissioners can by no means depart from the principle that the State is not obliged to Honor Bills drawn by Persons unauthorized but where the State has been furnished with articles to the amount, which articles have been really applied to the support of the Troops, such Bills, they are of the opinion ought to be taken at the real value of the articles when furnished.

A true extract of the Journal of the Commissioners appointed by the General Assembly to adjust claims against the Commonwealth in the Illinois department. Certified under my hand as Auditor of Public Accounts for the State of Virginia, the 26th day of March, 1789.
Virginia Auditor's office. John Pendleton.

How much Bosseron eventually received from the United States in payment for the more than twenty-six thousand dollars worth of warrants which these excerpts prove to have been due to him, we have no means of knowing, but we have proof that in 1784 he sold more than half of these warrants for a third of their value. This was possibly due in part to the fact that General Clark, who had guaranteed the payment of his claims, was removed from command in July, 1783, and was himself compelled to make the long journey to Virginia to beg the Governor for money to pay for necessary food and clothing. Moreover the paper money which the French had been compelled to receive from the Americans was practically worthless at this time and most of the people of Vincennes were greatly impoverished. Fearing that he would lose what was left of his small capital, Bosseron sold his warrants for what he could get.

The original bill of sale signed by Bosseron proves that at this time he exchanged at a great sacrifice the sum of three thousand pounds in warrants for one thousand pounds in specie, a loss of ten thousand hard-earned dollars—because of his loyalty to the country of his adoption. The document reads as follows:

I have this 20th day of February, 1784, sold unto Francis Graves & John Thompson the sum of three thousand pounds Virginia, in warrants on the Treasurer of the state of Virginia for the sum of One Thousand pounds Virginia currency in specie which is to be paid in twelve days from the date hereupon in the town of Winchester and the warrants delivered in the payment of the said sum of one thousand pounds specie. We witness our hand the day and year as above written. In case the said Francis Graves & John Thompson should not meet at Winchester according to the time above mentioned and pay the sum of one thousand pounds specie this document of writing is void.¹⁰

Below the signatures of the contracting parties, the following entries or endorsements appear on the bill of sale:

Complied with to me by virtue of a power from Mr. Graves for the sum of eleven hundred and seventy pounds in certificates.	I do certify that today the within agreement was settled and strictly complied with this 7th day of April, 1784.
H. Sparks"	J. Thompson. Test Jno Smith."

Bosseron died in 1791, at the early age of forty-three, bankrupt and, according to a tradition in the family, disillusioned. An effort was made later to have officials of the United States reconsider the findings of the Commissioners in regard to his warrants for the benefit of his family but without success. He left six daughters and one son but as the oldest was only seventeen at the time of the father's death, patriotic deeds of the parent were soon forgotten. Today, we are told, there is no one of his family living in the old town which he helped to make famous.

Historians, too, have given scant honor to Francis Bosseron and his name is often omitted from the list of those who were most helpful to Clark. This, we believe, is because his story has never been well known. For, according to Clark's own testimony [quoted above], he rendered most valuable service both in the capture and holding of Vincennes for the Americans, in 1778-1779, and he made it possible for Clark to protect the posts on the Mississippi in 1780, thus helping to preserve the great empire of the Northwest Territory for the nation.

¹⁰ The original bill of sale is in the Indiana State Library. It is signed by Bosseron, Graves, and Thompson.