The Mystery of the Vaugondy Maps

By Martin West
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Two maps in the collection of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania present somewhat of a mystery. The pair, both labeled Partie de l'Amerique Septentrionale, portray the mid-18th century American frontier. They're so similar that they seem to be based on a single original, but one shows French colonies while the other shows British.

The maps were the result of a collaboration between two eminent French mapmakers, Gilles Robert Vaugondy (1688 – 1766) and his son, Didier Robert de Vaugondy (1725 – 1786). The father's work is recognized by the autograph Gilles Robert, as he dropped his surname, Vaugondy, in favor of his mother's maiden name, Robert. So maps signed Robert de Vaugondy refer to his son Didier. The Sr. preceding the name Robert de Vaugondy on Partie de l'Amerique Septentrionale is an abbreviation of Sieur, a form of address denoting respect.

The final line, "With Privilege 1755," gave evidence that the Vaugondys had paid for print privilege in France in order to protect to some degree their image from copyists. The engraver of the elegant cartouche is identified by the line, M.C. haussard[,] Fecit, or Marie Catherine Haussard (fl. 1750 – 1775), who probably etched the intricate design rather than incised it. The Latin Fecit translates as "made, drawn or engraved," and indicates that the accompanying signature is that of the engraver, or etcher.

Gilles Robert (the father) entered the field of cartography in 1731 when he jointly inherited a map business complete with stock-in-trade, a roller press for copperplate engraving, and a shop in Paris from Pierre Moullart-Sanson (d. 1730), grandson of the eminent French geographer, Nicholas Sanson (1600 – 1667). His subsequent publication of maps was extremely productive and successful, culminating in the 1748 Atlas Portatif Universel et Militaire (Universal and Military Portable Atlas), and an expanded edition the following year. The atlas contained 209 maps made by both father and son.

Even before this important atlas was published, Didier Robert de Vaugondy achieved prominence with a successful venture into another category of cartography, globes. For that enterprise, he was given the title, Géographe ordinaire du Roi, "Geographer in ordinary to the King," a status similar to that realized through a royal warrant in which a mapmaker would present a masterpiece to the reigning monarch — in this instance King Louis XV (1710 – 1774) — in hopes of receiving official approval and possibly an annual pension. If successful, the words Géographe ordinaire du Roi were permitted to be added to the artist's finished works, as can be seen in the cartouche of Partie de l'Amerique Septentrionale. Both the elder and the younger Vaugondy received this honor during their separate careers.
In 1755, *Partie de l’Amerique Septentrionale* was one of the maps produced for the *Atlas Universel*, a world atlas published by the Vaugondys in conjunction with the bookseller Antoine Boudet (d. 1787), a shrewd businessman. Between 1749 and 1758, the maps in this atlas, similarly sized, appeared consecutively; subscribers received individual portfolios of 10 to 15 finished maps at a time until the *Atlas Universel* was complete. They could determine their choice of bindings, or use the maps as they were issued, in unbound condition. Non-subscribers also could purchase the maps and select various types of bindings.

The *Atlas Universel* was destined to become the Vaugondys’ most famous work. Issued in a large folio format, it contained 108 maps, one of which, hand-numbered 99, was *Partie de l’Amerique Septentrionale*. This map, as with the others, was probably sold separately from the atlas. Father and son commissioned the finest engravers in Paris to reproduce the maps and the cartouches, which were designed to enhance them.

The *Atlas Universel* was marketed initially by subscription. Among the more than 1,000 subscribers was Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour (1721 – 1764), indicating patronage by the royal court. In acknowledgment of this association, Didier Robert de Vaugondy created two globes for the Marquise, a celestial and a terrestrial, both of which today are in the collections of the Municipal Museum of Chartres, France. The cost of the atlas was determined by its two sizes; one version in *petit papier* was set at 96 livres, and the other, in *grand papier*, which had larger margins, at 120. Subscriptions resulted in the vending of more than 1,100 copies, 601 of which were *grand papier* and 517 *petit papier*.

Almost half of the subscribers were booksellers who made large orders for retail distribution. Comparatively few French geographers can be found on the subscription list, perhaps because those who were located in Paris could purchase the atlas directly from the Vaugondy family, or the joint publisher, Boudet. Two noted geographers in London, Jean Rocque (fl. 1734 – 1762) and Thomas Jefferys (c. 1720 – 1771), bought 16 and four copies of the publication respectively.

The *Atlas Universel* boasted a preface, an important feature which cited the geographical sources for all the maps in the atlas. For the cartographical source material to create the *Partie de

The *Atlas Universel* was a notable achievement by Gilles Robert and Robert de Vaugondy, the latter proudly describing it as a “grand enterprise.” According to one historian, the *Atlas Universel*, in combination with the earlier *Atlas Portatif Universel et Militaire*, represented an evolution from speculation in mapmaking to a precise, exact observation made on the ground.

The map, *Partie de l’Amerique Septentrionale*, was produced in two versions. The first version, State One, issued in 1755, had a dotted border extending from the 45th parallel south along the Appalachian Mountain chain; “Louisiane” defines the vast western frontier. These borders were in effect until the signing and ratification of the Treaty of the Peace of Paris in 1763, which ended the Seven Years’ War, the global conflict of 1756 – 1763. The American phase of this struggle for empire between France and Britain traditionally has been called the French and Indian War.

The second version, State Two, dating to 1768, reflects the new cartographical realities in the wake of the French defeat in North America as understood from the terms of the Treaty of Paris five years earlier. Virginia and Carolina stretch west to the Mississippi River, and Pennsylvania extends west into Lake Erie, even entering a small portion of Canada. The 45th parallel demarcation has been removed and the limits of the province of Quebec incorporated. “Louisiane” is missing, and “New-Hamp-Shire” and “Prov. De Sagadahock” are added. These changes, having been engraved on the plate, probably were the work of either Didier Robert de Vaugondy, or perhaps his publisher, Antoine Boudet. In either case, the alterations were made in accordance with the perceived official policy, and were not a mere modification of tinting, which could be made by anyone and at any time.

*Partie de l’Amerique Septentrionale* is an interesting document of history from the French perspective, since the publication of State One closely coincided with the onset of the Seven Years’ War, and that of State Two appeared five years after the conclusion of the conflict. Prominently seen on the map is the region of western Pennsylvania, where the war commenced in 1754 and where much of the American phase was fought, until General John Forbes (1707 or 1710 – 1759) and his British-American army seized French Fort Duquesne at the headwaters of the Ohio River in late November 1758. Forbes designated this site “Pittsburgh” in honor of the Secretary of State for the Southern Department in London, William Pitt (1708 – 1778). He named the British post at Loyalhanna, recently built as a vital base and communication link east, “Fort Ligonier,” after the army commander in chief in England, Field Marshall John Ligonier (1680 – 1770).

State One shows Fort Duquesne and Loyalhanna as being in French territory, whereas Raystown, or Fort Bedford, named by Forbes for the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford (1710 – 1771), located east of the Allegheny watershed, is considered British. In State Two, published almost a decade after the expulsion of the French from the upper Ohio Valley, all three sites are officially recognized as part of Pennsylvania and the domain of Britain. Viewing the maps side-by-side provides wonderful insight into the period’s rapidly changing frontier.

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1 The use of “fl” is an abbreviation of the Latin floruit, “flourished,” denoting a period when an artist is known to have been active. It is employed when dates of birth and death are unknown.
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