

This durable North American explorer was the son of Lorenzo di Tonty, a political exile to France from Naples, Italy, known for his 'tontian' scheme of insurance. Two

other sons and several of their cousins also served in New France, with less acclaim.

Henri enlisted in the French military in the Mediterranean area where he lost an arm to an exploding grenade, to be replaced by a metal hook, accounting for the moniker 'bras de fer'. He came to New France in 1678 as La Salle's lieutenant and was shortly at Niagara where he was engaged in construction of Fort Conti below the falls and the barque 'Griffon' above. In collaboration with La Salle, he set out for the Mississippi via the Illinois River, on the way establishing Forts Miami and Crevecoeur (1680). Two years later, Tonty accompanied La Salle down the Mississippi, reaching the Gulf of Mexico on the 7th of April. They erected a cross at Venice to claim the territory for France as Louisiana. On the return Tonty began construction of Fort Saint-Louis at Le Rocher, which he administered in defence against the Iroquois. In recognition of his loyal and valuable service, La Salle granted him Ile Tonti (Amherst Island) as his seigneurie.

In 1686, on hearing that La Salle was in the Gulf of Mexico by sea, he set out with a party hoping to make contact at the mouth of the Mississippi, but could not locate La Salle's colony which had unfortunately been sited further west at Matagorda Bay, Texas. In spite of scouting east and west of the Mississippi, he could not locate La Salle and was forced to return north for want of supplies. Later, in 1689, when word of La Salle's expedition and murder was received, Tonty with a small party went to the aid of the colony at Matagorda but was forced back after reaching Texas.

Tonty now turned his efforts to the fur trade on the Illinois River in partnership with La Salle's manager, Francois La Forest, and at one time served well with Governor Denonville in a campaign against the

Senecas. His ultimate career involved collaboration with the famous Le Moyne brothers, d'Iberville and de Bienville, in establishing relations with the native tribes in the Louisiana colony. Here he caught yellow fever brought on a cargo vessel from Havana; he died at Fort St. Louis de la Louisiane (now Mobile).

Without doubt, Henri di Tonty was a tough survivor: loyal, brave and extremely practical, and effective in relations with the natives who respected his character and authority. It has been said that: "While La Salle conceived, Tonty achieved."



ISLAND HISTORY

[Staff: Phil Quattrocchi is an Italian Canadian booster (along with other causes) who has taken an interest in Henri Tonty. He has produced a booklet in which W.G. Breck writes a short history of Tonty which in some cases conflicts with what Tom Sylvester has managed to uncover.]