

# ILL-FATED FRONTIER

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PERIL AND POSSIBILITIES IN  
THE EARLY AMERICAN WEST

SAMUEL A. FORMAN



Guilford, Connecticut

*To Clio*  
*The muse of history is a living person who propelled this book*  
*from concept to completion.*



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## Preface

“SURELY YOU MUST BE A NAMESAKE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA Formans of New Jersey and Philadelphia!” observed a solicitous reader of my biography of Dr. Joseph Warren, the early Revolutionary patriot hero. One of that old Forman clan, Samuel S. Forman, had written *Narrative of a Journey Down the Ohio and Mississippi in 1789–90*. Her observation piqued my curiosity, resulting in the quest that ultimately led to my writing *Ill-Fated Frontier*.

The answer to her genealogical question is, oddly enough, an unequivocal “no.” Although my surname is identical to the autobiographical travel narrative’s author, I am no more related to him and his clan than any early twentieth-century Eastern European Ellis Island immigrant could be kin to the seventeenth-century English immigrant Forman settlers.

Arriving by 1680, these English Formans went on to multiply and prosper in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and parts of Maryland by the late eighteenth century. Among them were a number of officers and enlistees in the Continental Army and the New Jersey militia.

As I found out more about them, I was captivated by the *Narrative* and drawn in by its richly related incidents concerning a pivotal period that bridges the American Revolution and first few years of the Early Republic. Written from the viewpoint of a young man accompanying a plantation enterprise in the role of business agent or supercargo, this rare first-person narrative chronicled the Forman pioneers’ epic 2,400-mile overland and riverine migration across virtually the entirety of the then-western frontier.

The old *Narrative* further suggested three additional, distinct human dramas: that of enslaved people in the Forman party, Native Americans encountered en route, and Spanish colonials at the destination. The

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emigration from Monmouth, New Jersey, to Natchez was the final inland passage of sixty enslaved African Americans. The group then encountered natives of the Northwest Indian Federation at a time and place where the Indians had the upper hand in their resistance to American settlers. At the Natchez destination, the key people governing the pioneers' lives were engaging and effective Spanish colonials looking out for the interests of their European homeland. This multiethnic and racially diverse cast is not some latter-day add-on, but rather in every way integral to the saga.

As I retraced their epic trek, I sought corroborating primary sources for this, one of the largest single pioneering groups of its day. I caught up on recent scholarship of the past twenty-five years addressing Indian, African American, and Hispanic experiences in the era in order to place the Forman pioneer *Narrative* into its larger context. I invite those who wish to delve deeper to consult an extensive foundation in primary sources and scholarship that is freely available on my website [Ill-FatedFrontier.com](http://Ill-FatedFrontier.com).

I seek to provide not only a rousing early frontier true adventure, but also a window into the complex issues that threatened to stifle the infant American Republic in its cradle. The title *Ill-Fated Frontier* recognizes the travails experienced by many of the book's protagonists.

Dramatic events, occurring "offstage" but contemporaneously with the Forman pioneers' immediate travels, shaped the immigrants' fates. I present chapters on them: French scientist and physician Dr. Antoine Saugrain sets the stage for the perils of immigrant flat-boating on the Ohio River; the American Army experiences setbacks during the Northwest Indian War; Chief Little Turtle and his allies seek self-determination in the Indians' Middle Ground; the Whiskey Rebels resist federal authority; Indian groups compete for hegemony in the Southeast backcountry; America confronts Spain over Mississippi River navigation, and ultimately establishes the United States' southern border.

I want to alert the reader to several textual conventions. I make frequent reference to the ethnicity and race of people in the tale, as group identities are integral to the history. Such naming can be an important and nuanced topic to modern readers. My choices balance terms that are recognizable to general readers, true to the source material, and acceptable to—if not universally endorsed by—the several groups among

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present-day Americans. I use the term *Indians*—as do most modern federally recognized nations and tribes—interchangeably with *Native Americans* and *Indigenous People*. Where the specific Indian nation or tribe is known and relevant to the history, I name it. I use *African Americans* most frequently, with *Blacks* as a synonym. Recognizing the coerced nature of their social position, I refer to bonded house servants and field hands as the *enslaved*. I use *Spanish* for Hispanic colonials, a usage following the source manuscripts precisely.

American, French, and Spanish personal names appear in their original form. For Indian leaders, I generally identify them by Anglicized name rather than with phonetic or conceptual translations, or alternative monikers according to Indian traditions. Few of the enslaved African Americans are named in the primary sources. In instances where key proto-abolitionists remain unnamed, I identify them as did the chronicler: “Two Disaffected Fellows” and the “Ladies of Lancaster.” I employ modern place names where the tale permits one to do so.

I modernize spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in direct quotations, but scrupulously preserve the intent and meaning of the original. Where quotation marks appear, these are direct quotes spoken, written, or credibly attributed to the speaker concerning the specific interactions. All source material is identified in the endnotes found on Ill-FatedFrontier.com. Where thoughts, intimations, and comments are speculative or circumstantial, I identify them as such.

I cannot and do not provide direct quotations of any of the Formans’ enslaved African Americans, for no words uttered by the Black Forman emigrants to Mississippi survive. Employing surrogate quotes from similarly situated bondsmen is not possible for this era.

I quote some Native American speeches and conversations as recorded by others. With allowances made for the prejudices of non-Indian scribes, an impressive tradition of influential and colorful oratory by Indian leaders in their own languages comes through the structural filters.

Surviving written accounts and letters by and about Spanish colonial leaders lend themselves to direct quotes. Women—Caucasian, Black, Native, and Hispanic firsthand voices—are absent due to the limitations of the source material.

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Weather is an important element of a travel account that pits adventurers against the elements. I include moon phases as derived from standard astronomical references. Meteorological data and river freeze/thaw conditions are pieced together from other travel accounts and scientifically minded diarists.

Unlike popular conceptions of American history, which tend to jump from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, with whistle stops on Broadway for a singing Alexander Hamilton and at the War of 1812, *Ill-Fated Frontier: Peril and Possibilities in the Early American West* sweeps us into the realities and challenges along the frontiers of the fledgling United States. North *becomes* South by the choice of some and the compulsion of others, in the face of fierce Indian resistance, and with the encouragement of Hispanic colonials. It is a uniquely American adventure and origin saga of a goodly portion of the United States.

Please join me in this compelling and consequential pioneering and early settlement adventure. This odyssey changed the lives of everyone involved, and manyfold more who followed. The pioneers could not have foreseen how their own experiences would turn out for themselves, their progeny, and for what would become a great nation.

## Introduction:

# Monsieur Piqué's Watch, 1788

THE OHIO AND MISSISSIPPI RIVERS, AS THEY HAD BEEN SINCE prehistoric times, were the vast riverine highways to and within the immense North American mid-continent. To Americans and immigrants from abroad the region came to be known as the trans-Allegheny West, the lands over the mountains, a contested borderland full of promise and peril. To Native American nations like the Delaware, Miami, and Shawnee, these domains were their homes and hunting grounds—their refuge from the displacement of previous generations from the eastern lands of the rising sun. The Ohio River, which early French explorers named *La Belle Rivière*, served as the gateway to this West.

By late 1783 newly independent America claimed ownership of the entire Northwest Territory by provisions of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War and rewarded the country victory. America's late-arriving ally Spain also formally gained British West Florida, legitimizing its conquest by Bernardo de Gálvez, the last conquistador and governor general of sprawling Spanish *Luisiana*.

Land companies recruited investors and settlers. Scientists were excited about reports of fossilized bones of mammoth beasts that might still roam the earth, while cryptic pyramids and earthworks loomed at the confluence of as yet unnamed rivers. Land was plentiful and fertile. Only the hard labor of clearing its forest cover, then dealing with the Indians who had not yet settled with the Americans, stood in the way of realizing a seemingly limitless range of possibilities.

The Ohio country, with its leafy forests, flowing rivers, lakefront vistas, and abundant game now beckoned a postwar torrent of land speculators



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encroaching on the Indians' "Middle Ground," that swath of land from the Great Lakes to the Upper Mississippi Basin. These hordes included impoverished veterans claiming land bounties, squatters, recent European immigrants breaking free of manorial lords in Europe, Christian evangelists, and not a few desperadoes. Reeking of backwoods whiskey, sporting stained fringed buckskins, and brandishing flintlock Pennsylvania long rifles and muskets from the war, ragtag militiamen and pioneers tangled with the Indians in an endless cycle of raids and reprisals.

From this volatile brew came a seemingly unending stream of mutilated body parts, human scalps, and atrocities committed against and by Indians, settlers, the American Army, and militiamen in almost all possible combinations. A typical incident might be triggered by an Indian raiding party attacking an isolated pioneer settlement, only to be answered by an ad hoc settler posse delivering a "mad, brutal action against the first available target."

\*

The late winter breezes of March 1788 whipped Dr. Antoine Saugrain's face as he surveyed the dark Ohio River waters urging him and his little flatboat crew westward from their embarkation at Pittsburgh. Damp and chill air charged over the river's surface, tingling and inducing shivers. All four sojourners had their stations, were on constant lookout for river hazards, and were taking turns handling the oars. So long as their small flatboat maintained the main current, all would be well. Or so they thought.

Born Antoine François Saugrain de Vigny in Paris on February 17, 1763, the doctor came from a long line of government-connected printers, people with aspirations to the minor nobility of the *ancien régime*. Apprenticed as a physician and apothecary, and educating himself further as a natural philosopher of chemistry and physics, Saugrain felt the pull of the new American land almost viscerally.

This was his second trip in North America. The first was in the employ of Governor Bernardo Gálvez prospecting for mineral wealth within Spanish *Luisiana*. With Gálvez's passing in 1785, Saugrain had lost his patron and returned to France.



Dr. Antoine François Saugrain de Vigny. Born in Paris and well connected to leading scientists, Saugrain became an American frontier pioneer and physician. 1904 engraving after an anonymous miniature oil painting in color, circa 1785, at the Missouri Historical Society.

Passing through Philadelphia on the way west, he heard and read about the wonders and opportunities on the far side of the Allegheny Mountains. Saugrain could anticipate that his medical, pharmaceutical, and chemical assaying skills would be in demand at every turn.

He found his opportunity soon enough. Thanks to a small group of Parisian investors who engaged him to travel in concert with a young botanist, M. Piqué, the pair was “destined to explore the natural products of this country.” And they had the good fortune to meet the aged Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, who penned a letter of recommendation. Franklin judged both as “young men of uncommon knowledge and most amiable manners, so that I have scarce ever met with persons for whom I had in so short acquaintance so much esteem and affection.” Saugrain held the letter close, hoping it would open doors to him on the frontier. So strong was this new connection that M. Piqué entrusted his gold and other valuables to Franklin for safekeeping while he ventured on the western American frontier.

Franklin encouraged the capable and adventurous pair to take their skills into the Ohio country, where the living legend had both land company investments and interest in advancing scientific understanding of the region. Saugrain likely knew, however, that he was following a proven avenue to scientific recognition. The ethnographer Antoine-Simone Le Page Du Pratz had sought out and documented the customs of the Natchez Indians during the French Mississippi Bubble of the 1720s. More recently the Philadelphians John and William Bartram described new species of plants to Europeans and cultivated the most promising ones for commercial agriculture in their suburban greenhouses and gardens. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose writings rhapsodized on the possibilities of the American West, included the then-exotic flora and fauna of East and West Florida in his best-selling essays. Saugrain could aspire to become, through careful observations and discoveries, one among this distinguished company.

Departing Philadelphia, the two scientists made their way west across Pennsylvania, itself a difficult journey. There were no regular overland conveyances or stagecoaches west of Lancaster, making for an arduous trip crossing the Alleghenies. Perhaps they traveled in concert with the

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ponderous Conestoga freight wagons that lumbered along the poorly maintained roads to and from Fort Pitt.

When they arrived in Pittsburgh, then a tiny town outside the decaying fort at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, it was too late in the autumn of 1787 for floating down the Ohio, since the river had frozen over early that year.

So the two commissioned the building of a small flatboat during the winter, and awaited the breaking of the ice and reopening of river traffic while assaying ore samples brought into town by speculators and settlers assessing their lands. They cooked their own food, "for the greater part venison and potatoes, for bread was scarce and dear," and made the rounds of town, engaging strangers for company and inquiring about conditions downriver. There they met and engaged a Frenchman, Monsieur Raguet, and an American surnamed Pierce, from Baltimore. Both sought passage toward Kentucky. They were probably welcomed by Saugrain and Piqué as stronger, experienced hands who could wield the oversized flatboat's oars and rudder. Surely they were more confident using firearms, should that be necessary, than were the two scientists from France. Franklin, though, had counseled that such concerns, amplified in the press, were overblown: "Travelling on the Ohio has for some years past been thought as safe as on any river in France, so that there was not the least suspicion of danger. Many thousands . . . having gone down that way to the new settlements at Kentucky."

The little band of four departed on March 19, 1788, under an incandescent moon that made for good visibility and long days of swift travel along with their horses, saddles, and bales of hay lashed onboard. The onset of astronomical springtime, the vernal equinox, of which the scientists were well aware, promised that nighttime frosts would end soon.

Hours on the river passed quickly as the Frenchmen grew accustomed to maneuvering their craft into the swift current and letting the river do the rest. They made good time those first days. Brief stops at the tiny settlements at Wheeling, Fort Harmar, and Limestone hardly registered in their memories. The sojourners probably lashed their boat to stout tree branches reaching over the shoreline, settling in for the night. Here they could let their horses stretch their legs and perhaps share a meal with the locals. "We

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continued our voyage without accident until the 24th," Saugrain wrote, "always admiring both banks of the Ohio, which in places are magnificent."

Their first encounter with Native Americans occurred opposite the mouth of the Big Miami River. They were five days departed and already 430 miles downriver from the headwaters of the Ohio River at Pittsburgh. The place struck pioneer observers as a prime area for settlement and perhaps a fort.

At half past four in the afternoon Saugrain noted that "as the wind had thrown us a little upon the shore of the Ohio on the Pennsylvania side, M. Piqué called my attention to a flatboat which was upon the same bank."

Just as the little crew maneuvered their boat away from the shore to regain the current opposite the Big Miami, Indian calls pierced the tense silence. Next followed a ragged volley of musket fire from unseen attackers.

*The Indians all went aboard the flatboat we had seen near the shore and in front of which they had put some planking to prevent their being seen. And in this same planking they made holes to put their guns through so that they might fire upon us without danger of being killed themselves. . . . To get beyond the range of the [musket] balls we all four took to the oars.*

The first shot killed Saugrain's mare, who in her death agony jostled Monsieur Piqué's horse. The gunfire, shrieking attackers, and sudden deathly collapse of the equine's companion caused the surviving horse to involuntarily kick Saugrain in the abdomen, throwing him flat.

The still unseen attackers fired a fusillade of twenty gunshots, their staccato reports echoing over the river. The Indians then ceased firing, showed themselves, and hopped into their canoes to give the flatboat chase. If they were Shawnee, painted in garish colored bear grease and traditional designs whose meanings were unknown to the Europeans, they would have presented an otherworldly and terrifying sight.

Saugrain "left my oar to see if our guns were in order. Of the three we had, I found two loaded; one of these was mine, the other, M. Raguet's carbine. I hastened to load the third as well and to prime two pistols" belonging to Raguet. Yet in the confusion either Raguet or Pierce proposed to

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Piqué to the ground, pulled open his coat and ruffled shirt, and then inflicted multiple “stabs with a knife” between his ribs. Then he proceeded methodically to scalp the expiring Piqué with the same knife. He placed the trophy into Piqué’s own pocketbook and secured it to his person.

Saugrain expected a like fate. But instead of murdering him outright, the two Indians indicated he should proceed with them toward the abandoned flatboat, now drifting slowly downstream. Saugrain surmised that they intended to take him into Indian territory as a captive once they had crossed the Ohio River to the north side in the captured boat. A “cruel fear seized” him, as he pictured being burned alive as the guest of honor at some incomprehensible Indian ritual. Or maybe he would be ransomed, enslaved, or even forcibly adopted into the tribe. Having earlier dispatched one of the Indians personally with a pistol, he anticipated the worst.

He made a violent and sudden effort that tore through the straps that bound him. “I swam away with such force that [the Indian guard] did not risk following. . . . And he did well, for my plan was, if they came after me, to seize one of them and drown with him.”

Saugrain, who had swum to what he judged a safe distance, clung to a projecting tree branch. The remaining assailants dived from their boat, boarded and captured the still drifting flatboat, and began to cross the Ohio. The Indians now seized the weapons abandoned there, fired at Saugrain, and wounded him in the neck.

He waited until the Indians had gone halfway across the river. When they showed no signs of deviating from their course, Saugrain stumbled ashore. Returning to the scene of his capture, he found Piqué “quite dead.” He also came upon Pierce, who all along “had concealed himself in the ravine.”

Together they turned over their unfortunate companion’s corpse to more closely examine the Indian’s insults. They were surprised to find that the raiders had left the man’s gold watch, a knife, and two dollars in cash. Saugrain retrieved those items, hoping they would be useful in the course of their escape into the wilderness. Pierce cut off a large swatch of M. Piqué’s greatcoat. Saugrain recalled later that he “had not the same forethought, of which I much repented.” The two survivors had neither

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strength nor tools to bury the botanist in a proper grave in this godforsaken place, so far from his native France. Nor did they want to tarry.

The two began to walk westward paralleling the river, hoping to encounter anyone other than Indian marauders. Saugrain "had nothing upon me but a shirt and a pair of large breeches," having lost his shoes while swimming. They maintained a course just inland and out of sight of the river and the Indians who rampaged freely on the other side.

Saugrain had lost blood from his neck wound. He was exhausted. Pierce had no such encumbrance. They made their way almost five miles. As the eastern sky darkened, the cold increased. A grass meadow beckoned. Pierce covered them both in the brittle high grass and saw to his companion's comfort as best he could.

They slept for several hours before resuming their walk, continuing most of the night and into the predawn hours. Pierce selected a large fallen tree. They sheltered beneath it, huddling together for warmth. As they slept insensibly, a wet snow commenced. Saugrain's feet protruded from under the tree while Pierce covered his with the rag cut from Piqué's greatcoat. "I found my feet frozen when I awoke."

Undaunted, the duo continued to follow the south bank of the Ohio River, on the Kentucky side "in the hope we might see some boat" bound for Louisville that would take them aboard. Although tens of thousands of settlers swarmed over the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia to Kentucky, most of the newcomers steered clear of the lands close to the Ohio River, where Indian war parties ranged with impunity. One could travel for days at a stretch without encountering a soul, be they white, red, or black, friend or foe.

The two survivors were obliged to ford several streams emptying into the big river. Some were large enough to require swimming, or detouring upstream and inland to find a more conducive crossing place.

Wildlife abounded. To Saugrain, the American West was a wonder. "The number of deer, of turkeys and of pheasants we saw is quite inconceivable. We saw also four or five troops of buffalos, which came so near us that with a pistol I could have killed some."

The next morning, Saugrain's feet hurt so terribly he "could hardly walk." Pierce grew impatient, ranging ahead but always returning. The

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pair continued to walk but made little progress. Hunger added to their afflictions.

Saugrain indicated to Pierce what he called a *bête puante* (stinking beast) ambling ahead. Without hesitation Pierce gave chase, and clubbed the chattering skunk to death with a heavy stick. Having skinned the carcass, Pierce could not bring himself to even try to taste the raw meat. But Saugrain's hunger induced him to overcome revulsion. "I cut off some little bits and I swallowed them like pills. This did me little good, I assure you."

They thought of improvising a fire for cooking the beast. Saugrain mused on how he would remove the crystals from two watches—his and Piqué's—to make a bi-convex lens, concentrate the emerging sun's rays, and start a fire. Pierce may have found the Frenchman's idea ingenious, but their fear of smoke betraying their location nixed the enterprise. The duo moved on.

Late in the afternoon they came upon an abandoned log cabin. They estimated it to be about fifteen miles downriver from where they had been attacked. Resting briefly, they devised a plan to escape by raft. This would entail stripping and binding together the cabin's doors and "some fence [posts] or *poteaux de barrier*." Pierce did the heavy work, while Saugrain cut cords from Pierce's buckskin breeches for binding the wooden parts together. He also fashioned crude buckskin socks for covering his feet, now turned oddly gray.

Their project proceeded apace. The duo was about to launch their makeshift raft when Indians spotted them from the other side of the river, startling them and triggering new fears.

"Then I took to my heels and never in my life do I think I made so good use of them." Although his own frostbitten feet no longer pained Saugrain, Pierce, being unimpaired but just as frightened, far outran him. "And in two minutes I lost sight of him."

Pierce fortunately retraced his steps to stay with Saugrain as the sun set. They judged that darkness would conceal them from pursuing Indians and spent the night where they were. "It was one of the worst nights I have passed in my life. I could not sleep, and at each moment I thought I saw Indians."



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The two flatboats and their providential crews negotiated the Falls of the Ohio without incident. There remained just a mile or two more to Louisville. The waters being high, they arrived there two days after the rescue, on March 29, 1788. Saugrain and Pierce reckoned on being 620 miles on the Ohio River west of Pittsburgh, and some 180 miles downriver from the ambush near the Great Miami. Once assured that his wounded traveling companion was in a situation to find aid, Pierce continued on alone with his business errand.

The next day an army surgeon at Fort Finney ministered to Saugrain's wounds. Happily, his foot's circulation and vitality gradually improved. His injured finger similarly rallied over time. And there in Louisville a most relieved Saugrain tarried for almost seven weeks until May 11.

\*

Months after the incident Benjamin Franklin heard of the disaster and relayed the melancholy news to one of the French investors, Saugrain's brother-in-law Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin in Paris. "Probably the Company may now be discourag'd and drops their project." Guillotin concurred that Saugrain's travails and Piqué's grizzly demise likely "reverses projects dear to our hearts." The enterprise had failed.

The river ambush of the Frenchman's party generated alarm throughout Kentucky and was covered widely in newspapers from Vermont to South Carolina. Print coverage muted Raguet's spirited and armed resistance, Piqué's passivity or cowardice, the American Pierce's cutting and running, and Saugrain's murky shooting of the Indian boarder who was possibly under a flag of truce. Instead, newspaper stories fed a nascent blanket hatred for the "savages" in the West, vilifying all Indians, regardless of tribal affiliation and whether or not they were allied or neutral to the United States. The Franklins and Guillotins, however, perhaps due to their own rosy ideals of *sauvages nobles* in a state of nature, combined with their continuing economic interest in Western land speculations, avoided libeling an entire race. Rather, they characterized the incident impersonally as "this melancholy event," an "unfortunate accident," and a "horrible misfortune."

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For their part, the war parties of Chief Little Turtle of the Miami nation and his allies Buckongahelas of the Delaware and Blue Jacket of the Shawnee, comprising the core of the Northwest Indian Federation, had succeeded in disrupting the aspirations of Saugrain as well as many American would-be settlers. To the Frenchman, his assailants were all simply Indians. To his credit, Saugrain, though maimed for long months by his wounds, never became hobbled by hatred of the Indians. In contrast, many of his fellow pioneers magnified Indian-hating into a genocidal mantra.

On a map, the entirety of the Northwest Territory fell within the borders of the fledgling United States. It was another matter entirely on the ground. South of the Ohio River was the Kentucky district, now on the cusp of statehood. The Ohio River itself was the gateway to the Southwest Territory of Tennessee, Spanish West Florida, and the largely unexplored lands of *Luisiana*, as well as to the mighty Mississippi River, linking these borderlands to New Orleans, the Caribbean, and to the Atlantic maritime mercantile world.

Although Monsieur Piqué's dreams had expired with him—his scalp now adorning a nameless warrior's abode at Kekiongo, principal center of the Northwest Indian Federation—his gold pocket watch tellingly remained with Dr. Saugrain. Time, numbers, and technology seemed to be on the side of the increasing numbers of settlers and adventurers going west. Their program of more "productive" use of Indian lands for permanent settlement, commercial agriculture, and industry, rather than subsistence farming, deer hunting, and fur trapping, seemed likely to prevail. But the Indians were far from passive witnesses to the encroachment on their lands. And European imperial powers and the nascent United States continued to jockey for influence. The conflicting plans and interests of all these groups were fatefully intertwined. The outcome was far from certain.