

Antoine Cadillac

Antoine Laumet was born in 1658 in southern France. At the age of 25, he arrived in the New World and, as a coastal trader, soon became an expert on the continent's Atlantic coast. He performed reconnaissance – and perhaps engaged in some privateering – that earned the respect of government ministers back in France. Laumet eventually married Marie Therese Guyon, the niece of his trading partner, and adopted the name La Mothe Cadillac.

After commanding the fort at Michilimackinac, he convinced King Louis XIV of the strategic advantages offered by a location to the south, closer to advancing British interests. With official approval, Cadillac founded the village of “deTroit” – meaning “of the Strait” – in 1701, but within a few years was transferred to Louisiana to serve as governor. After 30 years of adventuring in North America, he returned to France.

Cadillac and his wife had 13 children, several of them born in Detroit. Fewer than half reached adulthood. Upon his return to France, Cadillac retained a local governorship in Castelsarrasin, where he died in 1730.



Antoine Cadillac's Detroit

In 1700 the city of Detroit did not exist. Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac and a band of more than 100 men arrived at the future site of Detroit in the summer of the following year. On a low bluff, they constructed a small log fort (Fort Pontchartrain) – roughly where Jefferson Avenue and Shelby Street intersect today. Several homes, warehouses and Ste. Anne's Church were built quickly by standing logs on end and crafting roofs out of board or thatch.

A fire in 1703 destroyed several buildings, yet Detroit continued to grow. By 1708 the stockade was five times larger and housed 270 residents. In addition, there were four villages nearby with native populations totaling a peak of several thousand in the autumn.

By law the King of France held all land and the governor – Cadillac – granted leases, trading and trapping rights. Residents survived by planting wheat and grapes, harvesting fruits and nuts, and trapping animals for meat. Luxuries came by canoe from Quebec.



Hero?

Visionary. Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac was a visionary leader. His drive, daring and capacity for innovation modeled the dynamism that has distinguished the city he founded under the French flag more than 300 years ago.

Cadillac made the perilous journey from home to escape stagnation and a rigid class system, as well as to build new possibilities for freedom, creativity, and, yes, profit in the largely untapped wilderness of “New France.” As commander of Fort Michilimackinac (now Mackinaw City), he encouraged a thriving Jesuit mission and robust, mutually beneficial trade with the neighboring Native American tribes. The French utilized the Great Lakes for the fur trade, which required cooperation and co-existence with native peoples.

It was Cadillac’s genius to see the strategic and economic potential of what would become the Detroit region and he advocated for establishing a presence here as a crossroads for trade and as protection against the English and their Iroquois allies. On July 24, 1701, after a long expedition on canoes, with a group of about 100 men, Cadillac identified the spot along the narrows of the Detroit River where his Fort Pontchartrain would rise. During its first decade, Ste. Anne’s Church was constructed, and Ottawa, Huron, Potawatomi, Miami and Wyandotte natives were encouraged to settle near the fort for joint protection.



Villain?

Invader. To some, Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac was an invader, pure and simple. In their minds, he is remembered and glorified today only because, as the saying goes, “history is written by the victors.”

Cadillac represents the arrogance, greed and brutality of the European invasion of the so-called “New World” that started with Columbus. He is credited with being the “founder” of Detroit, but this action was taken without the consent of those who were already here. Within the territories that he governed, he set a tone of injustice and disregard of human rights. Cadillac’s goals were the advancement of French interests in the great-power imperial game, which had nothing to do with the indigenous peoples who had already settled the region and hurt them grievously.

Undoubtedly his worst offense was his use of a “weapon of mass destruction”— alcohol, in the form of brandy exchanged for animal pelts — to disrupt and subdue the local tribes. Even the Jesuit priests and officials of the French crown condemned him for this practice.

