

Adventures on the American Frontier

Resolute Men of the Illinois Country

Part One

La Salle and Tonti
Build Forts in the Illinois Country



A Royal Fireworks Production

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York



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ISBN: 978-0-88092-945-5

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book and cover designer: Christopher Tice
Audio and narration: Christopher Tice



10Jun21



The dark-haired young man frowned as he tried to see through the powdery snow that had begun to fall on a December day in 1679. He was with a group of about thirty men who were huddled around eight canoes on the bank of the St. Joseph River at about where South Bend, Indiana, is today.



As he walked along the bank of the river, the young man struck a gloved hand against a bare one. The glove hid an iron hook, for he had lost his right hand when he had been a soldier in the Italian army and a grenade had exploded as he held it. The young man's name was Henri de Tonti, but people called him "Tonti of the Iron Hand."

"Tonti!" he heard, and he looked back. A large man was hurrying after him, pulling a gray robe close around his body to keep out the cold. It was Father Hennepin, one



of the three priests who had come into this wilderness to teach the Native Americans about Christianity. Father Hennepin nearly slipped on the muddy riverbank in his hurry to catch up with Tonti. "Tonti, don't you disappear, too," he said. "It's enough that La Salle has been gone for many hours now."

Tonti turned back. "I'm worried, Father," he said. "La Salle should have been back long ago. Something must have happened to him. I want to look for him, but the snow has covered his tracks."

Father Hennepin tried to peer into the wilderness as the daylight faded. “Don’t go. If you leave the men, they’ll turn and go back. All that La Salle has done so far will be wasted. Surely he’ll find his way back any minute now with news that he has found the path to the rivers that flow into the Illinois Country.” The Illinois Country was a vast region in what is now the Midwestern United States, mainly the area around the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in the present states of Illinois and Missouri.



Tonti turned and walked back toward the canoes and the men who sat nearby wrapped in blankets. The slender boats were heavily loaded. Along with blankets, cloth, and other goods for trading with Native Americans, they held an iron forge and blacksmith's tools; saws, hammers, and other carpenter's tools; guns, lead, and gunpowder. All had been brought almost the full length of Lake Michigan from a French outpost at Green Bay in what is now Wisconsin.