

AmeriQuests, et quoy plus¹

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Where is home?

Universities are generally populated by those who find home in ideas rather than places.² Teachers, students, and even administrators are often displaced—making “home” far from the places they were born or have family. In this sense, *home* is a space unrelated to geography—a space that lives in the imagination and is devoid of dirt and sky. Those of us who call universities our home are often unaware of our dislocation, or our distance from the place that *is* the university. We become migrant workers whose connection to the state and the city where we work is nominal at best.

Robert Barsky, the founder of *AmeriQuests*, challenges us to consider issues related to the geographical, psychological, and social displacement of people. In this first issue of the journal, I would like us to consider the location of *AmeriQuests* at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Clearly, if one accepts the notion that ideas have their home in abstract spaces rather than particular places, it would make no difference where the journal “lives.” Regardless of its geographical location, the journal would offer a space for ideas about displacement and relocation that are conjured, shared, shaped, and reshaped. Bob Barsky could be sitting at his computer anywhere besides 227 Furman Hall on the Vanderbilt campus! The virtual nature of the journal could mirror the subject of homelessness and displacement that it purports to address.

The fact is, however, that *AmeriQuests* lives at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and I believe we have an obligation to consider its home place. I want to begin my quest by confronting one of the great elitist notions that many of us academicians cherish: our intentional disconnection from the place where we work. I want to explore my reluctance to say “I am from Nashville, Tennessee”; I want to challenge myself to rethink my elaborate narratives about where I come from, who my people are, and why I say I am *not* a Nashvillian. To enact this challenge, I went out to discover a local legend—a French Canadian fur trader who embarked on a quest—an adventurous journey—and put



¹ Inscribed on a tombstone commemorating the life of Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, the words “ET QUOY PLUS” mean “and much more.” Because the phrase is not posed as a question, the words “quoy plus” suggest that the person did many more things in his life than what is mentioned on the monument. It further suggests that his achievements and personal qualities cannot be summed up in such a limited space.

² This notion of people who root themselves in ideas rather than places is taken from Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands*, cited in Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 104.

down roots in the land on which Vanderbilt University now sits. I believe my story creates a *space* for discussing displacement and relocation, while also providing a *place* for *AmeriQuests* (and me) to call home.

Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun

A story is born at the intersection of fact and fiction; the storyteller is free to create a text that constitutes the past in order to enlighten the present. Most stories are fantasy, or a fantastical echo of sensations and memories, both distorted and clear; they are often a flicker of “the truth” designed to please, to sway, to bring the listener inside. I found myself at just such an intersection when I saw a photocopy of a picture featured in the Arts and Leisure section of *The Tennessean* from January 5, 1986. Clouded with black and gray smudges, the picture shows a tombstone from both the front and the back:

Jacques Timothé
Boucher
Sieur de Mont Brun
1747-1826

French Canadian Fur
Trader of French Lick
Officer of the
American Revolution
Governor-in-Command of
The Illinois Country
Early Resident and
Merchant of Nashville
ET QUOY PLUS

A French Canadian fur trader, with the noble title “sieur,” once lived here where I now teach French at Vanderbilt University! I imagined an exotic, wild place filled with deer and fox, and bear and raccoon, all living in a dense forest of oak and cedar and walnut trees. Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, had been on a quest in this wild place. Who was he? Why did he come? What was he looking for? Was he welcomed by Native Americans from many tribes—Shawnee, Chickasaw, Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw—who whispered through the undergrowth in this sacred hunting ground? I needed to find local informants.

My first source, Senator Douglas Henry, came to my office in the Department of French and Italian at Vanderbilt. I had once heard him speak in flawless French, his rich and fluid Southern accent barely hidden beneath his formal recitation of the history of Franco-Tennessee relations in the *passé simple*. A graduate of Vanderbilt University, class of 1949, with a major in French, the Senator was even more intense and venerable than I remembered. “Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, traffiqua en peaux d’animaux près de la lèche saline, ou la lèche française, où se trouve aujourd’hui le Bi-

Centennial Mall,”³ he began. He then asked for the Nashville phone book and turned to Demonbreun. “These are the descendants of De Mont Brun, most of them members of the Timothy Demonbreun Historical Society, that raised funds to have a statue of Timothy placed close to Riverfront Park overlooking the Cumberland River.”⁴ He smiled noting the deformation of the French “de Mont Brun” to Demonbreun, and added that the French had called the Cumberland River the “Chauvanon” after the Shawnee they had met here.

Senator Henry continued in French his account of Jacques Timothé Boucher, born on March 23, 1747, at Boucherville in the province of Québec, Canada. The town, Boucherville, was named for his titled great-grandfather, Pierre Boucher, who came to New France in 1635 and served as Governor of Trois Rivières. Jacques Timothé did not choose a military career, as might have been expected of the son of Etienne Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, who served in the French and Indian War in the 1750s. All that had been New France became British, and rather than support the British forces, Jacques Timothé looked toward the early French outposts in the Illinois country. At the age of nineteen, Jacques Timothé married Margeurite Thérèse Archange Gibault. The young couple followed Père Gibault, a priest and cousin of Margeurite Thérèse, to the Illinois country where Catholics had begun missionary work when it was a French territory. Because of a shortage of food in the Illinois territory, Jacques Timothé left in 1769 and headed south on the Mississippi River, to the Ohio River and then the Cumberland River to what is now Tennessee.⁵ Senator Henry’s story was coming to a close : “Ce voyageur établit le premier poste permanent dans le Tennessee.”⁶ Then, in his most senatorial voice, he proclaimed “Ci failt la geste que Tuoldus declinet.” My memory struggled to reclaim these once familiar final words of the medieval epic poem, *La Chanson de Roland* (the story of another quest). I found an old volume of the work in my office and together the Senator and I read these final words of the epic: “Here endeth the story that Tuoldus told.”

Un coureur des bois⁷

With those final words from the *Song of Roland*, the Senator claimed his own heritage in the legend of Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun; he seemed to be both witness and storyteller. On a blustery winter day, I went in search of the statue of Timothy. When I found him near Fort Nashborough on the riverfront, I saw the Senator’s name engraved on a red brick at the foot of the statue. Douglas Henry’s



³ “Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur De Mont Brun, trafficked in animal skins at the salt lick, or French lick where the Bi-Centennial Mall now stands.”

⁴ This eight-foot bronze statue, sculpted by Alan Lequire, was raised in 1996. It stands near Fort Nashborough on a bluff overlooking the Cumberland River.

⁵ Many of these details about Demonbreun’s life come from an eloquent paper authored by Loiette Hampton Hume Henry, wife of Senator Douglas Henry.

⁶ “This voyager established the first permanent (trading) post in Tennessee.”

⁷ The term “coureur des bois” means hunter or trapper.

engraved brick was one of many—all descendants of Timothy Demonbreun. I read the names and birthdates on more than 50 bricks surrounding the Senator's, and I saw several names I recognized.

As I looked up at Timothy against the blue winter sky, images surrounding his life emerged. He is dressed in a cavalry officer's coat from the French Canadian militia (a coat that would have belonged to his father), deerskin leggings and a fox skin cap with the tail hanging down the back. A knife and a hatchet hang from his belt, and in his right hand he holds a rifle like those used in the battle on the Plains of Abraham in Québec in 1759. I could see why he was described by those who remembered him as "a tall, athletic, dark-skinned man with a large head, broad shoulders and chest, small legs, and an eagle eye."⁸



This statue conjured in my mind all the well-known legends associated with the American frontier. I imagined Timothy to be a solitary, Daniel Boone-like fearless hunter and fur trapper, roaming the frontier from Montreal to Tennessee. This "coureur des bois" had been called away from the comforts of his prosperous and educated family home in Québec by a spirit of discovery and adventure. He was a free trader, working independently, helping to supply a far-away Europe eager for bison and deer skins and small animal pelts from America to make clothing and shoes.⁹ My sense of kinship with Timothy was growing by the minute, and I found myself clambering onto the rock (rather ungracefully) to get a closer look. As I stood next to him, I was aware that this larger-than-life statue was a metaphor for the larger-than-life dreams that send us on quests to new places.

Conversations about Timothy Demonbreun with my Nashville friends and acquaintances, my local informants, brought into focus the varying stories about his life. Ann Toplovich, Director of the Tennessee Historical Society noted: "A bit of warning about Timothy Demonbreun. There are hundreds of his descendants in the Nashville area, and they take their filiopeity seriously, including the myths. For example, it is said he lived in a cave by the Cumberland and that his wife gave birth to the 'first white child' in Nashville. There's no evidence to support either claim, but many of his descendants swear it's all true."¹⁰ Legends are a genre that evoke excitement and inspire courage for the quest; I savored the legends and didn't care about historical facts.

⁸ This description, and other interesting bits of lore, are taken from a delightful paper written by Celeste Casey Reed, a descendant of Timothy Demonbreun. See Reed, "The Frenchman, the Indian Woman, and the Civil War Soldier," presented to the Friday Literary Club of Nashville, April 4, 2003.

⁹ Reed notes in her paper that in 1731 250,000 deer skins were shipped to Europe from Charleston, SC, and between 1774 and 1781 pelts valued at 200,000 English pounds a year passed through the port of Montreal. Beaver skin tall hats were the fashion for men across Europe and in America.

¹⁰ This quotation comes from an e-mail sent to me by Ann Toplovich, Director of the Tennessee Historical Society, February 2004.

Timothy first came to this area in 1769. Or was it 1788? He befriended the Indians and agreed not to settle on this sacred hunting land; he stayed in a cave on the bluffs above the Cumberland River where he couldn't be seen. He reached the cave by boat and climbed a ladder up into the cave, drawing it up after himself. With the arrival of more white settlers, there were increasing hostilities and Timothy's Québécois wife, Thérèse, was kidnapped by Dakota Indians. (Kidnapped by Indians?) He then married an Indian woman (or was it a local woman known as Elizabeth?) after his wife disappeared; their first son was born in Demonbreun's Cave. His infant daughter, Marie Louise, was scalped and killed by Indians. After ten years, his first wife returned and Timothy supported both women and their many children in Nashville. He became a prosperous merchant and owned a tavern and several slaves. In Celeste Casey Reed's words, he built a "big cedar log house, with some pretensions for comfort,' and this was home for many of his children from both wives who seemed to be giving birth concurrently." In 1812, when Catholic Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget of the Diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky visited, Timothy hosted mass in his home. He later helped establish the first Catholic church of Nashville. In 1825, the Marquis de Lafayette visited Nashville, and the elderly Timothy donned his old silver-buckled knee breeches and drank fine wines with his fellow Frenchman.

Fact or legend? Regardless, Timothy was being invented for me and by me. History does confirm that Timothy had two sets of children by two different wives. We also know that he divorced Elizabeth, who is said to have lived to be 116 years old. Most of the Demonbreun descendants in the area today are likely to be from children born to Timothy and Elizabeth. Celeste Casey Reed, one of those descendants, writes, "we are descended from the illegitimate branch and perhaps that is the reason my father, nineteenth century Southern Baptist gentleman that he was, chose not to mention our ancestry."

Timothy is said to have had all his teeth when he died at 79—a sure sign of a strong and healthy pioneer. His death was published in the Nashville Banner & Nashville Whig newspaper on November 4, 1826, stating "there had died in this town, on Monday evening last, Capt. Timothy DeMumbrane, a venerable citizen of Nashville, and the first white man that ever emigrated to this vicinity."¹¹ In the end, stories are shaped by the teller and the listener. Timothy had carved out a space in my imagination—his story became a new feature in my own psychic landscape.

Et quoy plus ...

I don't believe we can understand displacement—the forced dislocation and relocation of so many peoples in our world—until we intentionally make home in a place. I have lived in many places—from Indiana, where I was born, to New York, Paris, Nairobi, Madagascar, Copenhagen, St. Louis, Atlanta, and now Nashville. I have been at Vanderbilt University for sixteen years, and I will now stop saying that I am from somewhere else. My home will no longer be exclusively in "the academy"; I refuse to be an intellectual migrant, not touching or being touched by the land. I am tired of being "homeless," and will now claim the history of this place, its people, and the land. I want to wonder if, when I am walking my dogs in Sevier Park, I am treading on ground where

¹¹ *The Tennessean*, "DeMonbreun burial spot still a mystery, " (January 5, 1986).

another immigrant, my Canadian fur trapper, Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, once hunted.

AmeriQuests is a journal that seeks to explore issues of migration, displacement, homelessness, border crossing, storytelling, and much more. It can best achieve these admirable goals by recognizing its own home place. I am glad that *AmeriQuests* lives at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee—a place, like all others, that has stories to tell us about discovery and displacement, wandering and staying put. Moreover, I am grateful to Bob Barsky for bringing his ideas to this place and creating a forum for exploration and understanding ... *et quoy plus*.

Acknowledgments

When I first decided to find Jacques Timothé Boucher, Sieur de Mont Brun, I didn't have any idea where the quest would lead me. Beth Smith, in her inimitable way, began an internet search on the French in Tennessee history. She presented me with a stack of printed web sites, highlighted to catch my interest. I thank Beth for playing along with me and reading the first draft. Senator Douglas Henry was gracious enough to visit me in my office and charm me with his eloquent French. His wife, Loiette Hampton Hume Henry, generously gave me a paper she had presented on the life of Timothy Demonbreun. Ann Toplovich, Director of the Tennessee Historical Association, sent me additional sources—and served as a reality check regarding the legends surrounding this historical figure. A conversation with Carol Bucy, a friend and Professor of History at Volunteer State Community College, helped set the historical context for Timothy's arrival in Tennessee in the eighteenth century. Finally, Celeste Casey Reed, was kind enough to pass on to me a paper she wrote about her ancestors and permit me to quote from it here.

The process of compiling the information, of talking to my “native informants,” and of visiting the statue of Timothy Demonbreun has bound me to the local landscape. I feel my roots growing. After sixteen years it's time to feel rooted here, in Nashville, Tennessee. And, these roots of mine have gently but surely entwined themselves around those of Gay Welch, my partner, who was born at Vanderbilt University Hospital, and who has taught me what it means to come home.