

## AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY

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CÉLORON DE BLAINVILLE, Pierre Joseph (29 Dec. 1693-12 Apr. 1759), explorer, was born in Montreal, Canada, the son of Captain Jean Baptiste Céloron de Blainville of the French colonial regulars and Hélène Picoté de Belestre. Pursuing the usual career path of a Canadian noble, Céloron de Blainville followed his father into the *Compagnies franches de la Marine*, the colonial garrison troops of the French Ministry of the Navy and Colonies. Granted the rank of cadet in 1707 at the age of thirteen, he was promoted to first ensign in 1715, commissioned a lieutenant in 1731, and promoted to captain, the highest official rank in his corps, in 1738, a few months after his appointment as commander of Fort Michilimackinac (Mackinaw City, Mich.). In 1724 he married Marie-Madeleine Blondeau (1704-1733); they had six children.

In 1739-1740 Governor Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville of Louisiana organized a campaign against the Chickasaws, who were undermining France's position in the Mississippi Valley. On orders from Canada, Céloron de Blainville descended the Mississippi with a contingent of 200 Canadians and 300 Great Lakes Aborigines to rendezvous with the Louisianians at Fort Assomption (Memphis, Tenn.). Delays in advancing on the Chickasaw stronghold (Tupelo, Miss.) nearly resulted in the campaign ending in a humiliating failure. Fortunately for Bienville, Céloron's success in a battle on 22 February 1740 helped to persuade the Chickasaws to negotiate for peace. The following year Louis XV awarded the Canadian nobleman the coveted cross of the military order of Saint-Louis. Céloron's first wife died in 1733, and in 1743 he married Catherine Eury de La Pérelle (1722/23-1797); they had seven children.

In 1742 Governor General the Marquis de Beauharnois placed Céloron in command of Fort Pontchartrain or Detroit, and in 1744 transferred him to Fort Niagara (Youngstown, N.Y.), where he remained until late in 1745. Although Céloron gained the esteem of the Ottawa chiefs at Michilimackinac, at Detroit and Niagara he angered the Canadian fur traders, who claimed that he interfered with their business. In 1747, during the War of the Austrian Succession, Beauharnois appointed Céloron to command Fort Saint-Frédéric (Crown Point, N.Y.) on Lake Champlain. In the spring of 1748, however, Governor General the Marquis de La Galissonnière gave Céloron command of troops sent to quell France's native allies in the Great Lakes region, who were furious about the rising cost and increasing shortage of trade goods and La Galissonnière's tactless assertions of authority.

La Galissonnière then ordered Céloron to mount a show of force on the Ohio, where the Aboriginal nations, many former allies, openly traded with the Pennsylvanians and Virginians. The captain was to intimidate the local peoples into allying themselves with France, expel British traders, map the area more accurately, and bury a series of engraved lead plates proclaiming French sovereignty. On 15 June 1749 Céloron left Montreal for the Ohio in command of about 200 Canadian militia and colonial regulars and thirty Mission Iroquois and Abenaki. After a stop at Fort Niagara, the small force landed on the south shore of Lake Erie (Westfield, N.Y.), portaged to Lake Chautauqua, and paddled down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers. It quickly became apparent that the French were too

weak to make much of an impression on the Aborigines or even the traders, whose goods Céloron did not dare to confiscate in the face of native opposition. He gave one group of traders a letter to the governor of Pennsylvania informing him that Pennsylvanians were trespassing on French soil, but the pro-British stance of the Mingo, Shawnee, and Miami peoples made French claims illusory. At the end of August Céloron turned north, meeting the hostile Miami chief Memeskia or La Demoiselle at Pickawillany (Piqua, Ohio). The French force stopped for a short while at Fort des Miamis (Fort Wayne, Ind.) before returning to Montreal, arriving there on 9 November 1749. The Jesuit professor Joseph Pierre de Bonnécamps, who accompanied the expedition as chaplain, cartographer, and secretary, called Céloron "a man born to command," a statement borne out by the officer's success in traveling over 3,000 miles (5 000 km) through unmapped and unfriendly territory with the loss of only one man drowned. Nevertheless, Céloron was only too conscious that instead of overawing the Ohio Indians, they had humiliated him. Although he feared that a further show of force might drive the Ohio nations further into the arms of the British, he recommended in his report that an expensive chain of military posts be built linking Lake Erie and the upper Ohio, a project that La Galissonnière strongly supported.

La Galissonnière's successor, the Marquis de La Jonquière, appointed Céloron town major of the Canadian settlement of Detroit, and in 1751 La Jonquière ordered him to attack and destroy the pro-British Miamis. Céloron, however, failed to muster any native support for the expedition and declined to follow orders, claiming that 1,800 colonial regulars and militia were necessary for success, and that failure would destroy French prestige in the entire West. In 1753 the next governor general, the Marquis Duquesne, recalled the now elderly Céloron and gave him the less rigorous post of town major of Montreal. Duquesne and others characterized Céloron as a courageous and intelligent military leader, but also haughty, injudicious, and poorly suited to routine administrative duties.

Céloron did not take an active part in the Seven Years' War, and died in Montreal near the end of the conflict, leaving his family little money. His eldest son by his first marriage, a captain also named Pierre Joseph, moved to France after the British conquest, but Céloron's widow remained in Canada, joining the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity, or Gray Nuns.

Céloron de Blainville played a significant role in maintaining French power in the Great Lakes region during the mid-eighteenth century. His expedition and report of 1749 paved the way for the French occupation of the upper Ohio in 1753, which precipitated the Seven Years' War.

Correspondence relating to Céloron de Blainville can be found at the Archives Nationales in Paris, Fonds des Colonies C11A, D2C, D2D, and F3; much of this material is also on microfilm at the National Archives in Ottawa, Canada. A biography of Céloron de Blainville has not yet been published. The most detailed sources concerning his career are Céloron's and Bonnécamps's journals of 1749, Céloron de Blainville, "Journal de la campagne," in *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale*, ed. Pierre Margry (1879-1888), vol. 6, pp. 666-726, and Joseph Pierre de Bonnécamps, "Relation du voyage de la Belle Rivière faite en 1749, sous les ordres de M. de Céloron," in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, ed. Reuben G. Thwaites (1898), vol. 69, pp. 150-98. Also important are O. H. Marshall, "De

Céloron's Expedition to the Ohio in 1749," *Magazine of American History* 2 (1878): 129-50; an account of Céloron's family in Pierre G. Roy, *La famille Céloron de Blainville* (1909); and a detailed reference biography, William J. Eccles, "Céloron de Blainville, Pierre-Joseph," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 3, pp. 99-101.

A number of secondary works place Céloron's activities in their historical context. Michael J. Foret, "The Failure of Administration: The Chickasaw Campaign of 1739-1740," *Revue de Louisiane/Louisiana Review* 11 (1982): 49-60; Joseph L. Peyser, "The Chickasaw Wars of 1736 and 1740: French Military Drawings and Plans Document the Struggle for the Lower Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 44 (1982): 1-25; and Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (1992), deal with the Chickasaw campaigns. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (1991), and George F. G. Stanley, *New France: The Last Phase, 1744-1760* (1968), provide an overview of Céloron's activities in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, and D. Dale Standen, *Charles, Marquis de Beauharnois de la Boische, Governor General of New France, 1726-1747* (1975), examines Céloron's relationship with Beauharnois.