Gallic Place-Names for Vermont, 1785

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In an earlier article published in *Names*[1] I had occasion to cite two letters to Ethan Allen from Michel-Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecœur, *alias* Hector St. John, written in 1785. In these letters Crèvecœur submitted to Allen a list of names he suggested for settlements and civil divisions to be established in Vermont, names that should commemorate the aid given by France to the American colonists in their struggle for independence.[2] These letters, and the names proposed in them, seem to me to be sufficiently interesting to justify a closer examination than I gave them in 1970 within the context of a general discussion. The names Crèvecœur proposed were for the most part names of persons, some with and some without suffixes; he speaks of these persons as "such french Characters as have amply deserved" the gratitude of Americans. The bestowal of these names would be a "simple tho' efficacious way of showing" this gratitude (1). Crèvecœur commended to Allen the names he suggested in the following words: "As to the different Names for the new Towns and Counties which I proposed you, I hope your Governor and his Council will find nothing very extraordinary in those names. The very appellation of the state being *Vermont* will make the names proposed more analogous, Vermont being entirely French, nor will the sound of these be in contradiction with the harmony of your language" (2).

CRÈVECŒUR AS NOMENCLATOR AND ONOMATOLOGIST

Crèvecœur's proposal to Allen was not an isolated incident in his varied career. The reader of his writings cannot avoid noting in him a recurring concern with both personal and place-names. This concern was undoubt-

[1] "New England Town Names Derived from Personal Names," *Names*, 18:3 (September, 1970), 155–174; ref. to pp. 168–170.

[2] The letters are published in E. P. Walton (ed.), *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont*, vol. 3 (Montpelier, 1875; hereafter cited as "*Records*"), pp. 386–390. The first of the two letters was written from New York, May 31, 1785, just before Crèvecœur departed for France on leave from his post as French consul there; the second on his arrival in France, dated Lorient, July 17, 1785. In referring to the letters I shall identify citations of the first by "(1)" and of the second by "(2)." Walton published them from copies in the State archives of Vermont. The whereabouts of their originals is now, and probably was in Walton's time, unknown (letter dated September 22, 1972, from Mrs. Laura P. Abbott, Librarian, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, quoting Mr. John Williams, Editor of Vermont State Papers).

edly fostered by his transplantation as a young man from France to North America, where he had to adjust himself to circumstances, including a language, far different from those in which he had grown up in Normandy. A part of this adjustment was his adoption of a name better suited to use in the English-speaking colonies than the one he had inherited. In the deed of purchase of his farm in Orange County, New York, dated December 12, 1769, he appears as Hector St. John; and when he sold the farm in 1785 he of course used the same name in the text of the deed, though he signed the receipt for payment as "St. John de Crèvecœur," in accordance with his status at the time as French consul in New York.[3] But in his marriage certificate, dated December 20, 1769, and in the certificate of baptism of his children, dated December 27, 1776, he preserved his affiliation with his family by using, in the former, "Michel-Guillaume Saint Jean de Crèvecœur, commonly called Mr. Saint John," and in the latter "Michel-Guillaume Saint John de Crèvecœur, otherwise called Mr. Saint John."[4] On the title page of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782, he prefixed an initial "J." to "Hector St. John," and in the first letter, in his guise as an American farmer, permitted his friend the minister to address him as "James."

Considering the care Crèvecœur exercised in preserving his family identity in the documents relating to his marriage and the baptism of his children, one scarcely knows what to make of parts of a letter he wrote to Benjamin Franklin (then in Paris) from Caen on September 26, 1781, after his first return to France. He had earlier addressed Franklin concerning some American prisoners of war who had escaped from England to the coast of Normandy, and whom he had helped to find passage back to America. He had signed that letter "St. John." In replying, Franklin wrote him that the countess d'Houdetot, an old friend of Crèvecœur's family though as yet unacquainted with Crèvecœur himself, who had adopted Franklin into the distinguished circle that frequented her residence, had "warmly recommended to [him] a M. Crèvecœur who had lived long in America. Please to inform me if you are the same Person." Crèvecœur wrote to Franklin, in his letter of September 26, 1781:

> Yes Sir I am the Same Person whom Madame la Comtesse de Houdetot has been so kind as to mention to you. – the Reason of this mistake proceeds from the Singularity of ye french Customs, which renders their names almost arbitrary, & often leads them to forget their Family ones; it is in consequence of *this*, that there are

[3] These documents are published in Julia Post Mitchell, *St. Jean de Crèvecœur* (New York, 1916; cited as "Mitchell"), pp. 310–312, 317–321.

[4] Published in French translation from English in Robert de Crèvecœur, *Saint John de Crèvecœur, sa vie et ses ouvrages (1735–1813)* (Paris, 1883; cited as "*V. et O.*"), pp. 285–286; and in Mitchell, pp. 309–310, 314–315.

> more alias dict[i] in this than in any other country in Europe. The name of our Family is St. Jean, in English St. John, a name as Antient as the Conquest of England by Wm. the Bastard.
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> I am so great a Stranger to the manners of this, tho' my native Country (having quitted it very young) that I never dreamt I had any other, than the old family name – I was greatly astonished when at my late return, I saw myself under the necessity of being called by that of Crèvecœur ....[5]

Whatever may have been the motive of this innocent mystification, it reflects more concern with his own name on Crèvecœur's part than is ordinarily found among men. Besides the name he used for himself in America, the names he actually gave and that became matters of record (neglecting fictitious personal names used in his narratives) include the name of his farm, "Pine Hill," a quite ordinary farm name, and the names of his children. His wife was an American lady; and his first child, a daughter born December 14, 1770, received an unusual name that commemorated both her mother's and her father's native lands: America Frances. She was called "Fanny" in the family. His two sons, younger than Fanny, were given ordinary French forenames, in part names previously used in the Crèvecœur family: Guillaume-Alexandre (b. 1772) and Philippe-Louis (b. 1774).[6]

Crèvecœur's interest in geographical names appears most distinctly, among his published writings, in the last of his works, which appeared more than a decade after his final return to France: *Voyage dans la haute Pensylvanie et dans l'État de New York*,[7] which I quote from its translation into English.[8] It is not, as its title would indicate, the record of a journey, but, like its author's other writings about America, a collection of narratives and descriptions based in part on his own experiences and in part on

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[5] The correspondence is published in the notes appended by Warren Barton Blake to his edition (Everyman's Library, 640) of Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (London and New York, 1912), pp. 243–246.

[6] The French translation of the cerificate of baptism published in *V. et O.* gives these names in the French form. In his correspondence with Ethan Allen, Crèvecœur petitioned for naturalization of himself and his children in Vermont. Here he used English forms of their names; and in the act of naturalization the names appear as "St. John de Crèvecœur ... and his three children America Frances St. John, William Alexander St. John, and Philip Lewis St. John" (*Records*, pp. 391–392). The descendants of Philippe-Louis (Guillaume-Alexandre died untimely and childless) continued to use the English form "St. John" in their family name, writing it "St. John de Crèvecœur."

[7] 3 vols. (Paris, 1801).

[8] Michel-Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecœur, *Journey into Northern Pennsylvania and the State of New York*. Translated by Clarissa Spencer Bostelman (Ann Arbor, 1964; cited as "*Journey*").

material taken from other writings, usually without acknowledgment.[9] In this work he expresses a particular preference for the preservation of Indian geographical names. One of his numerous explanatory notes, addressed, of course, to a French audience, is concerned with "New Names": "With the exception of names of towns and counties, the Government has submitted to no formality the names given to the burgs, villages, and rivers; it is to chance or to the colonists' caprice that most of the names on the map are due. Each owner of a fair-sized concession names it as he pleases and has the name registered. In general, it is to the surveyors that is due the preservation of those names by which the Indians designated the lakes, rivers, and mountains. ... It is to be hoped that [the Indian names be preserved] throughout the continent."[10]

He lets the writer of a pretended letter, a Richard Buttler, report that he had frequently recommended to the founders of the new trans-Allegheny settlements that they preserve the Indian names. "This respect for these names [should] have been prescribed by law. ..." We should "give to posterity [the] primitive names [of these regions]; then we shall prevent remembrance of these tribes from being lost to the darkness of time, and we shall immortalize the only witness of the gratitude we can give and very certainly owe to the ancient owners of this continent whom we have tricked and deceived. Besides, these names – already consecrated by the passage and imprint of many centuries – are they not more appropriate in all respects and infinitely more sonorous than those of our common nomenclature ?"[11]

Crèvecœur's most general discussion of place-names in America is found in a pretended conversation with Simeon DeWitt (1756–1834), Surveyor-General of New York State from 1784 until his death, whom he calls "Mr. Duwitt" in this passage. The conversation is presented as taking place at the time when DeWitt was engaged in surveying the military grant in western New York State that is well known for the classical names of its townships. In response to a question concerning these names, "Mr. Duwitt" explains: "Our soldiers, having a great veneration for the ancient heroes and the other great personages of Greece and Rome, sent me this list. In a few years, a traveler will be able to breakfast in Hannibal, dine with [Lysander], and sleep in the house of someone in Camillus; the next day he will be able to do the same at Fabius, Homer, and Virgil. Assuredly it would be difficult to find better company on the way."[12]

[9] The sources of a large number of Crèvecœur's borrowings in this work are identified in the "Introduction" to *Crèvecœur's Eighteenth Century Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*, translated and edited by Percy G. Adams ([Lexington, Kentucky], 1961), a partial and selective translation of Crèvecœur's *Voyage* ...; and in several articles by Adams cited there.

[10] *Journey*, p. 404. [11] *Idem*, p. 476. [12] *Idem*, p. 496.

Then he puts into the mouth of "Mr. Duwitt" a general statement concerning the giving of geographical names in the United States. "If I could transform my wishes into law, . . . it would be from ancient history, according to the appearance of the place, according to Indian lore and legend or perhaps from some local circumstance that the settlements would take their names; our language furnishes an inexhaustible variety. This would perhaps wound the pride of our little founders of towns and districts, who never miss joining to their own names some hideous sounding suffix such as that of bourg or town or ville, such as Cooper'stown, White'stown, Harrisbourg, Nashville, etc., or those who have recourse to even more trivial sounding names such as Newbourg, Newlondon, New York, etc. What will posterity think when it is obliged to add the adjective new to the name of a capital or a land which will be five hundred years old ? It was convenient to borrow some names from our old country when we were mere colonies, but today! it is time that we had a national nomenclature, just as we have laws and a Government that are strictly ours."[13]

One may glean other passages from *Journey* concerning place-names, such as the derivation of certain names in Tennessee: Hawkins, Jonesborough, Nashville, and Clarksville[14]; but enough has been cited to demonstrate Crèvecœur's abiding interest in names and the opinions he held, at least in his later years, regarding the geographical names appropriate to North America.

THE PLACE-NAMES CRÈVECŒUR PROPOSED FOR VERMONT

Several of the names Crèvecœur proposed for settlements in Vermont have suffixes he later castigated as "hideous sounding," though affixed to names more renowned than those of "little founders" of settlements. I list the names here in the order in which he wrote them in his letters to Allen. There is some duplication between the two letters; I add the parenthetical identifying numbers "(1)" and "(2)" to indicate in which letter or letters each name is proposed. The term "town" as it appears in the letters is the equivalent of French *ville*, an incorporated municipality, not of the New England "town"; the latter is rendered by "district" or "precinct."

Towns:

Vergennes or Vergennesburg (1, 2)
Castri Polis (1, 2)
Rochambeau (1)
Noaillesburg (1)

[13] *Idem*, pp. 496–497.
[14] *Idem*, p. 577.

Districts or precincts:

Targetsfield (1); Target (county), Targetsburg (county town) (2)
Fannysburg (1)
Harcourt (1); Hart Court (2)
Ludovico Polis (1)
Condorcet (1, 2)
Brothersfield (1)
Danville (1, 2)
Sophysburg (1)
St. Johnsbury (1)
Beauv(e)au (county and county town) (2)
Liancourt (county and county town) (2)
Fayette's Grove (2)
Segurnum (2)

The only one of the persons represented by the names in his list that Crèvecœur identified in his letters was the eponym of Castri Polis: "the minister of the Marine [the marquis de Castries] who had a very great share in all the naval expeditions by which final independence has been obtained" (1). He commented specifically on only one name, Target, of which he wrote parenthetically in his second letter: "(this ... name is infinitely precious and dear to me, I could wish to see it given to some Place or District)."

Writing to Crèvecœur on March 2, 1786, Allen informed him of a decision of the Governor's Council to recommend to the legislature that "on the land contiguous with the first falls on Otter Creek they would incorporate a City with certain priviledges and infranchisements, and have already named it De Vergens to perpetuate the memory of your prime minister in America to all eternity. Every other of the patriotic names you gave me will I presume be noticed in like manner and be affixed to districts of territory in Vermont, particularly your favorite *Target* alias Targetsburg, and the minister of the Marine, according to your desires."[15] A little more than a year later, on April 4, 1787, Allen sent Crèvecœur the certificates of his and his children's naturalization in Vermont, reporting the incorporation of "Devergennesburg" and the naming of two townships St. Johnsbury and Danville.[16] These three were the only ones of the 17 names Crèvecœur proposed that were actually adopted in Vermont.

The members of the state government of Vermont undoubtedly knew some of the names of "french Characters" Crèvecœur proposed to commemorate by the names he suggested, but others were in all probability unknown to them. They may all be identified from easily accessible biographical sources and from the record of Crèvecœur's life. Some of their bearers have prominent places in history; others, less prominent, were friends Crèvecœur made during his sojourn in France between his return

[15] *Records*, p. 391.

[16] Abstract in French, *V. et O.*, pp. 361–362.

to his native country in August, 1781, and his departure to take his post as consul in New York in the autumn of 1783. During this period he spent a good deal of time in Paris and Versailles, in close association with Franklin and with French officials friendly toward the United States.

The name of Charles Gravier, comte de *Vergennes* (1712–1787), foreign minister of France during the American war for independence, was undoubtedly well known in America. Castri Polis, as Crèvecœur explained to Allen, alluded to Charles-Eugène-Gabriel de la Croix, marquis de *Castries* (1727–1801), minister of marine 1781–1783.

There is no discernible order in Crèvecœur's list of names. After these two names commemorating ministers in the French government he introduces an entirely general name, Gallipolis, which refers to the French nation as a whole. The name is worth noting, since, though it did not take root in Vermont, it was used five years later for the unfortunate settlement of French immigrants on the Ohio River. No details concerning the naming of Gallipolis, Ohio, seem to have been preserved, so that it is not clear whether there is any connection between Crèvecœur's proposal of 1785 and the name a group of his countrymen gave to their settlement in 1790.

The name of Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de *Rochambeau* (1725–1807), commander of the French forces in America during the war for independence, was certainly widely known on this side of the Atlantic, though that of Emmanuel-Marie-Louis, marquis de *Noailles* (1743–1822), French ambassador in London at the beginning of the American revolution, may not have been. That of Gui-Jean-Baptiste *Target* (1733–1806), a prominent lawyer for whom Crèvecœur had a special fondness, could scarcely have been familiar.[17] Crèvecœur's next name, Fannysburg, reflects an even more personal association; it can refer to no one other than his daughter America Frances, called *Fanny*. Harcourt, or in unbound and partly anglicized form Hart Court, refers either to Anne-Pierre, fourth duc d'*Harcourt* (1701–1783), governor-general of Normandy 1761–1783, or to his son François-Henri (1726–1802), fifth duke of the title, who succeeded to his father's position in Crèvecœur's native province in 1783. Crèvecœur knew the suffix *-court* in at least one American place-name: the estate of which his farm Pine Hill had been a part bore the name Greycourt. If Americans knew the name Harcourt, their knowledge was more likely to be of the English than of the French branch of the family.

Ludovico Polis as an allusion to *Louis* XVI of France is awkward; one can not reproach the American public for rejecting it while accepting the

[17] Ninety years after Crèvecœur's letters were written, E. P. Walton, editor of *Records*, found the name so unfamiliar that he thought the copyist of the letters had made a mistake in writing it. He accordingly changed it to the better-known name Turgot (*Records*, vol. 3, p. 388, fn. 2).

equivalent Louisville (Kentucky, 1780). The name of Marie-Jean-Antoine Caritat, marquis de *Condorcet* (1743–1794) is an honored one, but not likely to have been widely known in America in 1785. Brothersfield is evidently an invention of Crèvecœur's; it might be taken as a tribute to the fraternal association of Americans and Frenchmen in achieving independence for the United States, but I suspect that Crèvecœur, having proposed a name commemorating his daughter Fanny, was here introducing an allusion to her two brothers, his sons. Danville, the most widely adopted of the names Crèvecœur proposed, is clearly derived from the name of Louis-Alexandre, duc de la Roche-Guyon et de La Rochefoucauld *d'Enville* (1743–1793), the member of the liberal circle in which Crèvecœur moved in Paris with whom he maintained the closest association.

Sophysburg alludes to another of Crèvecœur's personal associates in Paris, Elisabeth-Françoise-*Sophie*, comtesse d'Houdetot (ca. 1730–1813), mentioned earlier, who was called by the third of her forenames, Sophie. The countess d'Houdetot was the center of a circle of friends of the revolting colonies, which included Franklin and Crèvecœur; it was probably through her influence that he received his appointment as consul in New York. Fanny St. John, in marriage the countess d'Otto, perpetuated her memory by naming her own daughter Sophie. From the correspondence between Crèvecœur and Ethan Allen it would appear that Allen had contemplated naming a town in Vermont St. John in honor of Crèvecœur, but St. Johnsbury rather than St. John was Crèvecœur's own suggestion. It is the third and last of the names from his list accepted by the government of Vermont.

Beauvau, misspelled "Beauveau" in the letter as published, commemorates Charles-Juste de *Beauvau* (1720–1793), the incumbent of several administrative posts in France during the latter part of his career. He was another of Crèvecœur's influential associates in Paris, but probably utterly unknown in Vermont. Liancourt is the distinguishing title of François-Alexandre-Frédéric, duc de La Rochefoucauld-*Liancourt* (1747–1827), usually referred to as La Rochefoucauld, humanitarian and agricultural reformer, in exile during a part of the revolutionary disorders in France. He visited the United States in the 1790's, but was probably not widely known here in 1785.

Place-names derived from the name of Marie-Joseph du Motier, marquis de La *Fayette* (1757–1834) and from that of his estate, La Grange, are the most numerous ones in the United States that commemorate French friends of the American cause. They are few, however, in New England; in these states one finds only two, both in Maine: Fayette (1795) and La Grange (1832). This showing is meager in comparison with New York's Fayette, Fayetteville, Lafayette, Lafayetteville, La Grange, and Lagrangeville; or with Pennsylvania's Fayette, Fayette City, Fayetteville, La Fayette,

Lafayette Hill, and La Fayette Station. The unbound generic suffix "Grove" that Crèvecœur combined with Fayette was familiar to him from his earlier years in America: his farm in Orange County, New York, was in Chester township close to its boundary with Blooming Grove.

Segurnum is a pseudo-Latin coinage by Crèvecœur from the name of Louis-Philippe, comte de *Ségur* (1753–1830), friend of La Fayette and commander of a regiment in America under Rochambeau, and his father, Philippe-Henri, marquis de Ségur (1724–1801), French minister of war from 1780 to 1787. Segurnum is a solid name, easily pronounced by speakers of English, but probably having too strong a flavor of classical learning for the taste of Vermonters. The Latin root of the name of the castles called Ségur, from one of which this family had its name, is the adjective *securus*. Crèvecœur was pardonably ignorant of the etymology of the name, and made of it a construction in Latin form that is preferable as a place-name to any form of *securus*.

There is more than a little naïveté in Crèvecœur's assertion that "the sound of all these names agrees very well with the American language, therefore it cannot on that hand be objected to" (2). His sojourn in France from 1781 to 1783 after his years in America had accustomed him again to his native language, and he greatly overestimated the hospitality of Vermont ears, in spite of the French name of the state, to French names. What would a Vermont frontiersman make of Noaillesburg, Beauvau, or Liancourt ? He could understand Target in writing, but probably not when spoken, and would not recognize it as a name. The three names adopted, Vergennes, Danville, and St. Johnsbury, were given promptly after Crèvecœur suggested them. Vergennes was the first on his list, proposed for a specific site, and immediately given to the city incorporated on that site. Danville was easy to pronounce, however unfamiliar its source might be; and St. Johnsbury was wholly in accordance with the established custom of adding a habitational suffix to a family name to form a place-name; the family name in this instance is, moreover, English.

The one unchanged French name among those accepted, Vergennes, by no means the most forbidding one in Crèvecœur's list, evidently caused difficulty. Ethan Allen, writing to Crèvecœur in March, 1786, called it "De Vergens."[18] In his letter of April 4, 1787, he wrote it "Devergennesburg."[19] If one follows the occurrence of the name through the *Records* of the Governor and Council of Vermont one finds it written variously as Devergeens, Vargeens, and – most frequently – Vergeens; these spellings seem to reflect fumbling attempts to pronounce a troublesome name. Not until 1794 does the correct spelling, Vergennes, appear consistently,

[18] *Records*, p. 391.

[19] *V. et O.*, pp. 361–362.

associated, one may suppose, with the general adoption of the present pronunciation, [vər-djenz']. Other names in Crèvecœur's list would certainly have presented more difficulty than Vergennes did.

The name Vermont was a deliberate coinage, a euphonious translation into French of Green Mountain. It has been ridiculed as bad French by persons as ignorant of the existence of a genuine French counterpart, the name of the village Le Vermont, situated in the Vosges some 15 kilometers NNE of St. Dié, as were the Green Mountain people who reinvented it. Its pronunciation was not French, however, except in stress, since the spelling easily permitted a pronunciation according to English usage. Vermont had another French place-name, Montpelier, given in 1780. Here the adaptation of the French original, Montpellier, involved a shift in stress to the penultimate syllable and a modification of that syllable by a lengthening of its vowel and a concomitant dropping of one of the geminated *l*'s following it. A similar treatment of the stressed syllable is seen in the early, awkward handling of the name Vergennes. The fact that Vermont had a French name was not, as Crèvecœur argued, evidence that its inhabitants could pronounce other French names.

By 1785 the inhabitants of the eastern United States had behind them a long history of naming new settlements and firmly-established precedents for such name-giving. Only special circumstances could modify these fixed customs sufficiently to secure the adoption of names that did not conform to them. Crèvecœur's correspondence with Ethan Allen, perhaps the most influential man in Vermont at the time, was a special circumstance, but it was potent enough to ensure the adoption of only three of the 17 names he proposed, one of which, St. Johnsbury, was strictly in the American tradition, and another, Danville, could be construed as being in it. Perhaps, considering the weight of precedent, the acceptance of just one French name in its original form was more than might reasonably have been expected.

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COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE OF *NAMES*

The September 1973 number of *Names* will honor the late Kemp Malone, formerly professor emeritus of English at The Johns Hopkins University and president of the American Name Society in 1956. It will contain articles on Anglo-Saxon onomastics, place nicknames, personal names in Chaucer, dialectology and toponymy. Special editor of the issue will be Professor Thos. Pyles.