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Sources and Interpretations
The French Intrigue of
James Cole Mountflorence

Wesley J. Campbell

In July 1793, less than three months after President George Washington had declared the United States impartial toward the conflict raging in Europe, French Minister Edmond-Charles-Édouard Genet tested America's incipient neutrality. With instructions from his government, Genet armed a French privateer in Philadelphia and simultaneously launched an offensive against Spanish Louisiana using disaffected American pioneers. The episode began on July 5, when Genet shared the French plans for western invasion in a private meeting with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Ten days later Genet's agents departed for Kentucky to rendezvous with American Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark. The effort, though ultimately unsuccessful, was to be one of the most intriguing and contentious affairs in the history of the young Republic.

As Washington's cabinet grappled with Genet's privateering escapades, details of French interest in the Spanish southwest also came to light. Following a meeting of the cabinet on July 18, 1793, Jefferson recorded: "Genl. Knox tells us Govr. Blount (now in town) has informed him that when Mt. florence was in France, certain members of the Execve. council enquired of him what were the dispositions of Cumbld. settlemt. &c. towards Spain? Mt. florece. told them unfriendly. They then offered him a commission to embody troops there, to give him a quantity of blank commissions to be filled up by him making officers of the republic of France those who should command, and undertaking to pay the expences. Mt. florece. desired his name might not be used." James Cole Mountflorence, the subject of Jefferson's note, had been sent to Paris in 1792 as a commercial and land agent for William Blount, governor of the

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territory that would soon become Tennessee. Jefferson's representation of the cabinet meeting, which has been cited by several historians of the American West, indicates that France approached an unreceptive Mountflorence in an attempt to gauge western opinion and gain his support for an effort to wrest Louisiana from Spanish control.1 A recently uncovered document in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, shows that Mountflorence approached French authorities with plans for western intrigue, not vice versa.

The proposal Mountflorence presented to the French government came at an opportune time. Already embroiled in war against Austria and Prussia in the fall of 1792, France faced a possible conflict with Spain as well. Mountflorence's letter to the French foreign minister called for French intrigue in Spanish Louisiana and a new treaty with the United States. Within a fortnight French leaders decided to send Genet on a strikingly similar mission. The resemblance and timing of this decision suggest that Mountflorence's proposal had an influence on French policy. The document also raises questions about Mountflorence's motivations. Why did a man who fought for American independence take steps that might have risked the neutrality of his government? The evidence suggests that Mountflorence was economically interested in freeing the Mississippi River from Spanish control, a move that would potentially have increased the value of his western land investments (Figure I). His self-interested scheme was, in this way, quite similar to other prominent western conspiracies. There is also a possibility that Mountflorence had accomplices. Particularly, Mountflorence's activity warrants a reexamination of Blount's role in the Genet affair.

Though the 1783 Treaty of Paris granted the former colonies land extending to the Mississippi River, much of western Georgia and Southern Tennessee was the domain of Indian tribes. Adapted from Marshall Sprague, *So Vast, So Beautiful a Land: Louisiana and the Purchase* (Boston, 1974), 182, by Rebecca Wrenn. A color version is available on http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm.65.4/campbell.html.

Mountflorence was born in the middle of the eighteenth century to an English father and an Irish mother. His parents, having fled from Ireland, lived in Paris, where Mountflorence grew up, attended university, and served in the French military. At the beginning of the American Revolution, he unsuccessfully petitioned Benjamin Franklin—the American representative in Paris—for a commission in the American forces. After multiple requests Mountflorence finally sailed in 1778 to North Carolina to join a French regiment. Though the regiment never materialized, he remained in North Carolina and served the American cause as a quartermaster until the end of the war.²

² James Cole Mountflorence to Benjamin Franklin, May 18, 1778, in Benjamin Franklin Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Mountflorence to Richard Caswell,
Mountflorence settled for a brief time in Warren County, North Carolina. He attempted to join the local Masonic lodge but was turned away, seemingly for his European pretensions. About this time he began making trips to Tennessee (then a part of North Carolina) as a deputy surveyor and land agent. His western experiences were formative, and in 1786 he published several letters in the newspapers criticizing Spain, which at that time controlled the Louisiana territory and frequently prevented American access to the port of New Orleans. Writing in the *Columbian Herald*, Mountflorence stated: "the inhabitants of the Illinois, Kentucky, Cumberland, and the Natchez, can have no trade, and consequently no market . . . without a free navigation of that beautiful [Mississippi] river." He continued in language foretelling future intrigues: "In a very short time, the western inhabitants alone will have strength enough to emancipate themselves from the tyrannical pretensions of Spain and should they obtain at present this navigation, even with innumerable restrictions, it would nevertheless accelerate the moment when this great event is to take place . . . The Two Floridas and Louisiana must in time, by their situation, by the weakness of Spain in population, and their deficiency in husbandry, fall under the dominion of the United States." Mountflorence wrote again three days later in even stronger language:

A war with Spain, to which we would have been compelled, in vindication of our rights, must be of great advantage to America . . . Two thousand brave Americans, under experienced officers, animated with resentment against those troublesome neighbours, and having in object the conquest of the richest country in the world, would compleat in a few weeks from their arrival at the Natchez, the reduction of West-Florida and Louisiana, in spite of all the Spanish efforts to resist us. Another army of about the same number of men, leaving the first conquerors to defend their new acquisitions at the expense of the same, would carry the war into the very heart of Mexico.

Despite his grandiose designs, Mountflorence ended his epistle more soberly: "it would perhaps be more political to postpone to a more remote time, all thoughts of conquest." Only six years later, on a journey to Paris, Mountflorence’s dreams of conquest resurfaced.

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In 1792 Mountflorence sailed for Europe as an agent for the firm of "John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants," in which William Blount was a silent partner. Mountflorence's business ties to the Blount brothers dated to the mid-1780s, and he probably had aided them in land deals throughout the Cumberland territory. In 1791 William Blount—governor of the Territory South of the River Ohio, which five years later became Tennessee—appointed Mountflorence to assist Secretary of State Jefferson with a report on the western territories. While in Philadelphia Mountflorence drafted plans to sell western property in Paris as an agent for the Blounts, who quickly assented to the idea.  

Mountflorence arrived in Paris in late May 1792. He found selling property to be extremely difficult, mainly because of the tumultuous character of the French Revolution. Nevertheless he quickly befriended many Americans in Paris and acquainted himself with several prominent legislators. In early September Mountflorence finally effected a sale of Cumberland property to a Frenchman named Nicholas Fournier. He made plans to return to the United States with Fournier to finalize the transaction.  


insurrectionary Paris Commune, attacked the Tuileries and invaded the royal palace. The royal family was arrested and placed under the custody of the Legislative Assembly. An Executive Council convened to handle the affairs of state. The Girondists—led by Jacques-Pierre Brissot and commonly referred to as the Brissotins—controlled the six-minister executive council. Though by no means unified in their political views, the Girondist leaders generally advocated spreading the revolution abroad. Earlier in the year, they had forced the king to agree to the invasion of Austria. But after the suspension of the monarchy, they became especially concerned with Bourbon Spain, and they considered an attack on Spanish colonies as key to undermining the regime. On October 13, 1792, Brissot outlined a proposal for Francisco de Miranda, a Venezuelan expatriate serving in the French military, to invade the Spanish American colonies using Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti) as a base of operations.\(^6\)

Just two weeks after Brissot offered his plan for vast Spanish American conquest, Mountflorence submitted a proposal to the French government. Mountflorence's letter, dated October 26, 1792, and probably directed to Minister of Foreign Affairs Pierre-Henri-Hélène-Marie Lebrun-Tondu, described a plan for revolution in Spanish Louisiana. “It is in the universal interest of the people as well as the French Republic to annihilate the despotism of the crowned tyrants,” Mountflorence began, “and especially those of the house of Bourbon who will always find most lethal displeasure in the abolition of royalty in France.”

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revolutionary language fit perfectly with the aims of Lebrun and the other Girondists in charge of foreign affairs. Identifying himself as an authority on western affairs, Mountflorence wrote, "the inhabitants of Kentucky, of Cumberland, and of all the settlements built west of the Appalachian Mountains, desire nothing more than to be allowed to destroy Spanish tyranny in Louisiana and Florida, in order to restore freedom to the inhabitants of these two provinces and obtain for themselves the free navigation of the Mississippi River."  

Mountflorence continued his letter by describing a plan for an invasion of Spanish Louisiana using a legion, led by himself, "comprised of American hunters, Canadians and inhabitants of Illinois, all sworn enemies of Spanish despotism." From the French he asked for field artillery, gunpowder, lead, cannonballs, and military commissions. Mountflorence proclaimed the opportunity for success and glory yet also warned that "the most inviolable secret [must] be preserved, in order to hide from the Spanish the knowledge of the planned expedition, and to spare the United States government the inconvenience of having to oppose this plan of operations." He further suggested a new treaty of alliance with the United States. In a brief postscript, Mountflorence wrote, "It is of course understood that I will allow the inhabitants of the conquered territory the freedom to form a republican government that they judge appropriate, entirely independent from the despots of Europe."  

There is little record of how or why Mountflorence created this fascinating proposal. Animated with hostility toward Spain since his first visits to the Cumberland territory, Mountflorence seems to have been specifically interested in securing access to the Mississippi River. But in a broader sense, Mountflorence's attitude was likely shaped by his position as a land speculator and agent. His land was in Tennessee, not Louisiana, yet his actions reflect the pervasive frontier disillusionment with federal authority, and this discontent undoubtedly shaped his views toward the propriety of western intrigue. Land speculators, as Andrew R. L. Cayton has argued, needed a strong governmental presence in the undeveloped and unprotected frontier, which held the key to their financial success or failure. Efforts to secure the territory against Indian attacks were of primary importance, but frontiersmen also wanted settlement programs and investments in land clearing and transportation.

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8 Ibid., 93v ("comprised of American hunters"), 94r ("most inviolable secret").
With the newly created federal government failing to furnish the security and infrastructure the western territories required, speculators repeatedly turned to foreign governments. As Buckner F. Melton Jr. states, "conspiracy in the Old Southwest was something of a cultural phenomenon."9

Mountflorence owned large landholdings and surrounded himself with powerful speculators, such as the Blount brothers, who helped shape his political dispositions. Other actors in the Genet affair seem to have been propelled by similar motives. Clark and his agent, James O'Fallon, had long histories of land speculation and foreign intrigue. American expatriate promoters of French planning included land speculators Gilbert Imlay and Joel Barlow. Even Brissot had been involved in 1788 with William Duer of the Scioto Land Company.10 The Mountflorence proposal adds further evidence to this significant body of scholarship on land speculation as a root cause of western intrigue.

Though the underlying motives for Mountflorence's actions are relatively clear, questions remain about how he conceived the project and


who else may have been involved. Jefferson's personal note of July 18, 1793, claimed the French had solicited Mountflorence to raise a body of troops and invade Spanish Louisiana but that Mountflorence had declined. Jefferson wrote that he had received this information from Secretary of War Henry Knox during a cabinet meeting. Knox reportedly had conversed on the subject with William Blount, who had apparently spoken with Mountflorence. Yet Mountflorence's letter of October 26, 1792, proves that disinformation existed somewhere in the chain of communication.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to reconstruct exactly how the story evolved. Mountflorence had arrived in Norfolk in January 1793, stayed for some time in Richmond, briefly repaired to Nashville, and then went to Philadelphia in the summer. Blount was also in Philadelphia, and they undoubtedly met regularly. As Jefferson's note indicates, Blount and Mountflorence apparently discussed French designs toward Spanish Louisiana. Though inconclusive, there is some evidence to suggest Blount's involvement in Mountflorence's proposal to the French.

Blount was a notorious schemer. He may have plotted in the late 1780s to bring Tennessee under Spanish control. Blount's activity with the Spanish is only a matter of speculation, but the complicity of many of his closest political allies has been well documented. If nothing else the episode shows the independent and self-interested motives of western frontier politicians and speculators. In 1797 Blount was implicated in a conspiracy with the British to emancipate Spanish Louisiana. The scandal rapidly led to Blount's impeachment from the United States Senate. He died shortly thereafter.

Though nothing to date has explicitly implicated Blount in the Genet affair, his close relationship with Mountflorence raises questions about his possible role in Mountflorence's proposal to the French. Francisco Luis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, the Spanish governor of Louisiana, apparently accused Blount of involvement in the Genet affair, though the substance of that accusation is unknown. Further circumstantial evidence comes from Blount's connection to Samuel Fulton. A native of North Carolina, Fulton lived for a time in West Florida and then traveled to Knoxville, Tennessee, in the winter of 1793. Later, writing to French Minister Jean Antoine Joseph Fauchet, Fulton stated, "thare [in Knoxville] hearing of an expedition from Kentucky against the

\[11\] Keith, North Carolina Historical Review 14: 254, 279.

\[12\] Thomas Perkins Abernethy, From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy (1932; repr., University, Ala., 1967), 92–102. Abernethy speculates that these schemes were used as leverage to coerce the United States into annexing Tennessee. For further details of the Blount affair, see Frederick J. Turner, ed., "Documents on the Blount Conspiracy, 1795–1797," American Historical Review 10, no. 3 (April 1905): 574–606; Melton, First Impeachment, 60–103.
Spannards by order of Mr Genett I being then in hopes of releaving some
of my Destressed Fellow Cityans was happy to imbrace so good a Caus.
And with Some letters of recommendations from Governor Blount went
forward to Kentucky to Joyn Genl. Clark and Shortly after my arival
thare he thought Fit to Give me the appointment of a Major." Though
impersonal letters of recommendation were quite common, one wonders
how a merely cursory recommendation would have earned Fulton one of
the highest ranks in Clark's militia. Blount's letter is lost, but if it was
indeed a direct recommendation of Fulton to Clark, that would suggest
Blount was at least supportive of Clark and his operations. In the sum-
mer of 1794, Fulton returned to Knoxville, apparently on business for
Clark, and reported disappointment "by the Abstance of Govenor
Blount." 13

When the Genet affair was exposed to the public, however, Blount
reacted with hostility. In an indignant tone, he wrote in January 1794: "I
am surprised and mortified at the information that a part of the Citizens
of Mero District, who have so repeatedly complained, that a sufficient
degree of defensive Protection is not extended to them, should be about to
engage in an offensive War against their peaceful neighbors." Continuing
in language that seems clearly hypocritical in light of his later conspiracy,
Blount stated, "Should these inconsiderate Persons actually carry their
scheme so far into execution . . . they will unquestionably involve the
United States, in a general War, and lay themselves liable to heavy Pains
and penalties, both pecuniary and corporal." Previous historians have
taken Blount's protestations at face value, concluding that Blount
opposed Genet's actions. 14

13 Samuel Fulton to Jean Antoine Joseph Fauchet, [1794], in Lyman C. Draper
Manuscripts, Series J: George Rogers Clark Papers, 55: 15, Library of Congress
("thare [in Knoxville]"); Fulton to George Rogers Clark, Aug. 28, 1794, ibid., 55: 23
("Abstance of Govenor Blount"). Using Samuel Fulton's letters, Samuel C. Williams
argues, "It is apparent that Clark was solicitous to draw Blount and others in the
Territory into cooperation through Fulton." See Williams, East Tennessee Historical
Society's Publications 13: 29. The reference to the accusation by Francisco Luis
Hector, Baron de Carondelet, appears in John Haywood, The Civil and Political
History of the State of Tennessee from Its Earliest Settlement up to the Year 1796,
Including the Boundaries of the State (1823; repr., Nashville, Tenn., 1891), 424. Brief
biographical details for Fulton appear in Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Policy of
France toward the Mississippi Valley in the Period of Washington and Adams,"
14 William Blount to James Robertson, Jan. 18, 1794, in Jameson et al.,
also, with slight variations, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., The Territorial Papers of the
United States, Volume IV: The Territory South of the River Ohio, 1790-1796
(Washington, D.C., 1936), 324-26. Mero was a judicial district in central Tennessee
that included Nashville. Andrew R. L. Cayton argues that Blount, as a Federalist
Blount’s actual involvement with Genet’s plans remains mysterious. Clearly, he and Mountflorence spoke of the communication between Mountflorence and the French government. Mountflorence might have claimed that the French approached him, thus leading the governor to report in good faith to Knox information he believed to be true. But why would Mountflorence have had reason to deceive Blount about his interaction with the French ministry? And why did he not just remain silent? Mountflorence is known to have sent Blount letters during his sojourn in Paris, but none survive. Blount’s infamous letter of April 21, 1797, which implicated him in a conspiracy with the British, was later exposed to Congress only by virtue of its recipient’s failure to follow Blount’s ending instructions: “When you have read this letter over three times, then burn it.”15 In the world of western intrigue, much remains unknown.

According to Jefferson the information from Blount passed through Secretary of War Knox. Mountflorence’s connection to Knox seems to have been limited, and it is unlikely that Knox was involved in the Mountflorence proposal either before or after the fact. Knox had been associated with Miranda in the mid-1780s and had apparently professed support for Miranda’s dreams of Latin American liberation. On November 4, 1792, Miranda—who was in Paris actively pursuing his own designs with the French government—wrote again to Knox asking for support.16

opponent of France at the time of the Genet affair, was opposed to French influence in the American Southwest. Cayton’s argument, however, is not strong enough to exclude the possibility of Blount’s involvement in James Cole Mountflorence’s proposal. If partisan affiliations had a controlling influence on Blount, then as a solid Republican in 1796 he should have been fearful of British influence, not actively seeking it. Also, French designs were notably less imperialist in 1792 than later. Finally, Mountflorence was as critical as anyone about the chaotic events of the French Revolution, yet this distaste did not stop him from trying to gain French assistance. As Cayton’s essay argues, it was the attitudes of frontiersmen toward the lack of a federal presence that molded their desire for foreign intervention, not any particular affinity for the foreign governments. See Cayton, “When Shall We Cease,” 177–80. For Blount’s political change, see William H. Masterson, William Blount (Baton Rouge, La., 1954); Ray, Tennessee Historical Quarterly 61: 161–81. On Mountflorence’s attitudes toward the French Revolution, see Mountflorence, “James Cole Mountflorence’s Account of the French Revolution,” in Catanzariti et al., Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 25: 120–33; Keith, North Carolina Historical Review 14: 251–87.


16 James Cole Mountflorence’s only known communication with Henry Knox came in a letter Mountflorence wrote warning Knox of the ill effects a proposed Georgia settlement would have in prompting Indian hostility. See Mountflorence to Knox, Sept. 23, 1790, in Henry Knox Papers, 27: 14, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. For Francisco de Miranda’s communications with Knox, see Robertson, Life of Miranda, 1: 53–55, 126–27.
Nonetheless there is no evidence that Knox was involved in any aspect of the French scheme.

Jefferson has been the focus of much attention regarding his behavior during the Genet affair. When informed of Genet's western intrigues in a private meeting on July 5, 1793, Jefferson supposedly gave Genet his qualified support. Nothing, however, indicates Jefferson had any role in Mountflorence's proposal to the French government. Having met Mountflorence in Philadelphia in 1791, Jefferson wrote a letter of introduction for Mountflorence to use in Paris. He also asked Mountflorence for a report on the activities of the French Revolution. No more seems to have existed of their relationship.

There is also no evidence implying any connection between Mountflorence and either Clark or Genet. Clark seems to have originated his plot during the winter of 1792, independent of French designs, and found the timing of Genet's arrival the next spring fortuitous. And though Mountflorence and Genet were in Philadelphia in the summer of 1793, Mountflorence seemingly knew nothing of the western operation initiated by the French. Additionally, there is no evidence that Mountflorence had any connection to French expatriates in the American West prior to 1792. Though Mountflorence grew up in Paris, it seems that he quickly learned to shun his French past and to deal with others only as an American. It is telling that in his proposal to Lebrun,


19 In 1790 James Cole Mountflorence had a minor business relationship with William Duer, whose Scioto Land Company had brought hundreds of French immigrants to Gallipolis, Ohio. There is no indication, however, that Mountflorence had any contact with these or any other French expatriates before 1792. Mountflorence wrote to Duer:

You intimated to me an Intention of purchasing Some Lands within the ceded Territory South of the Ohio; as you mentioned at the same time that your Views were to promote the Settling of a French Colony in those parts, under those Circumstances wishing earnestly to contribute all in my power to the Increase of population in the Cumberland Settlements, which
Mountflorence identified himself only as an American veteran and frontiersman, not as a former French army officer.

Despite the captivating possibility of broader intrigue, a considerable body of evidence attests to Mountflorence's independent ambition and relentless self-promotion. As such, and with the evidence presently known, Mountflorence probably was merely being opportunistic and had not arrived in Paris already determined to make such an offer. His connections to members of the French government and active interest in politics meant that he likely knew of the proactive revolutionary foreign policy the Girondists wished to pursue. Furthermore he had little success as a land agent when in Paris, and his financial situation was quite precarious.20 Never one to appreciate his own limitations, Mountflorence perhaps thought he could seize an opportunity to journey yet again from France to America to fight for a revolutionary cause. Without more evidence, however, the reasons for Mountflorence's proposal remain speculative.

would necessarily tend to raise more rapidly the Value of our Lands, I would dispose in very reasonable Terms to the amount of 40,000 acres... As there is appearance of our being connected in some other Business [of goods trading], I had rather negociate that matter with your Company than any body else, tho' I had Some thoughts of sending Proposals to my friends in france.

See Mountflorence to William Duer, Oct. 7, 1790, in William Duer Papers, New-York Historical Society. When Mountflorence returned from France with Nicholas Fournier in 1793, he attempted to employ Fournier as his agent. One letter, written from Richmond, Va., states that Mountflorence attempted to sell one slave to Mr. Lefebvre and two to Madame Chartier. It is presumed that these figures were of French extraction, but their relationship to Mountflorence is unknown. See Mountflorence to Fournier, Mar. 26, 30, 1793, in Miscellaneous Files, I-D-i, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. Mountflorence differed from most French emigrants at this time, since his family background was British, not French. He seems to have mentioned his growing up in France only when it was politically expedient. See Campbell, Tennessee Historical Quarterly 66: 211–12.

20 In Paris in the summer of 1792, James Cole Mountflorence concocted a misguided plan to join the Marquis de Lafayette's forces. On Gouverneur Morris's counsel, he decided against the idea. See Latimer, My Scrap-book of the Revolution, 22. In another episode demonstrating his contrived view of propriety, Mountflorence proposed to Thomas Jefferson that he might travel to seek the release of Lafayette, who was then in an Austrian prison. Jefferson ignored the offer. See Mountflorence to Jefferson, Feb. 1, 1793, in Catanzariti et al., Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 25: 119–20. For further details of Mountflorence's lifelong pursuit of status, wealth, and regard, see Campbell, Tennessee Historical Quarterly 66: 210–35. Mountflorence later claimed that he ingratiated himself with prominent members of the National Convention. See Mountflorence, Short Sketch of the Public Life, 7. Jefferson's note of July 18, 1793, concludes by saying: "Blount added that Mt.florce. while in France pretended to be a great friend to their revolution tho an enemy to it in his heart." See Catanzariti et al., Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 26: 522. For Mountflorence's debt problems, see Keith, North Carolina Historical Review 14: 254, 270.
Did Mountflorence influence French thinking? The possibilities are intriguing. The letter is never mentioned in any of the existing primary or secondary literature. Yet Mountflorence’s proposal bears striking resemblance to the French plan to send Genet to America to recruit disaffected American soldiers under French commissions to invade Spanish Louisiana. The specifics and consequences of this affair are well documented elsewhere, but the details of its origins remain elusive. The most frequently cited work on this topic remains Frederick J. Turner’s 1898 article titled “The Origin of Genet’s Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas,” in which Turner identifies the genesis of the Genet proposal as taking place November 6, 1792. Other evidence indicates the plan may have materialized just before November 4. Thus, within about ten days of Mountflorence’s letter, the French had decided on a course of action remarkably similar to the Tennessean’s proposal.

Mountflorence’s personal influence within the French ministry was, if anything, limited. There is no evidence that Lebrun even responded to his proposal. By late November Mountflorence was aboard a ship to the United States, contemplating further business deals with the Blounts. Furthermore the Girondists had already espoused ideas for revolutionary action against the Spanish colonies. Just four years earlier, Brissot had traveled to the United States and written on western affairs: “Westerners...”

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are convinced that navigation on the Mississippi cannot remain closed for long. They are determined to get it, either amicably or by force; they will succeed, even if they have to preach a crusade to do so. Even Congress will not be able to check their will... A small quarrel will be enough to inflame men's minds, and if ever the Americans march on New Orleans, it will fall before them." Clearly, the French leaders had formed opinions on Spanish Louisiana and the attitudes of western Americans long before Mountflorence's arrival in Paris.

Nonetheless the timing of the Mountflorence letter is suggestive. Before the proposal was submitted, French officials were considering a broader scheme of Spanish American conquest. Brissot wrote in mid-October 1792 that the ministers supported Miranda as the leader of this expansive project. Then, little more than a week after Mountflorence's proposal was delivered, the French ministry modified its course and embarked on a more limited plan in line with the Tennessean's ideas. On November 5 Lebrun inquired with the Bureau of the Colonies for documents on Louisiana. By November 6 he had decided on Genet to lead the expedition. The timing indicates Mountflorence's plan may have struck a chord with the French ministry and motivated it to action. Turner's article identifies several Americans who possibly influenced the French decision, but he supplies no evidence to show that any of these figures discussed policy with Lebrun or Brissot prior to the time Genet was named ambassador. As such Mountflorence's letter is the only documented communication between the American frontier and the Girondist government before the inception of the Genet affair.


23 Jacques-Pierre Brissot to Francisco de Miranda, Oct. 13, 1792, in Perroud, J.-P. Brissot, 303-4, esp. 304. French General Charles-François Dumouriez apparently opposed the expansiveness of the operation. For details of Lebrun's inquiry and the subsequent reply, see Mildred Stahl Fletcher, "Louisiana as a Factor in French Diplomacy from 1763 to 1800," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 17, no. 3 (December 1930): 367-76, esp. 369-70 n. 16. For Frederick J. Turner's suggestion of possible Americans involved in the affair, see Turner, American Historical Review 3: 655-56. Many later proposals were submitted by Americans after the trajectory of the Genet mission had already been established. See Jameson et al., “Selections from the Draper Collection,” 1: 930-1107.

[fol. 93r] Memorandum

26 [October] 1792

It is in the universal interest of the people as well as the French Republic to annihilate the despotism of the crowned tyrants, and especially those of the house of Bourbon who will always find most lethal displeasure in the abolition of royalty in France. In case there is a rupture with Spain, there is an easy and inexpensive way to restore liberty to the inhabitants of Louisiana and Florida, which would be more than a small contribution to the general emancipation of all southern America from Castille's tyrannical yoke, under which millions of men moan, hoping for their independence, for which they have made several useless and vain attempts. It is now incumbent upon the magnanimity of the French Republic to begin the emancipation of these peoples; and she will have the glory of having deployed her invincible banners for the freedom of northern and southern America as well as for that of many nations of Europe.

I, the undersigned former officer of the United States of America and citizen of the Territory South of the River Ohio—which borders Louisiana—have been constantly employed in public affairs in this part of the United States since the War of Independence, either in the legislature or other positions. With great knowledge of the facts, I can assure

24 Punctuation, capitalization, and place names have been changed for clarity. All paragraph breaks are original, and folios appear in brackets. Beginning on fol. 93r, important information such as place names had been underlined, possibly by someone reading the document in 1792. These underlines are included in the online transcription only.

25 The Bourbon family had been deposed from the throne in France with the suspension of the monarchy on Aug. 10, 1792, and its elimination on Sept. 21, 1792 (Louis XVI was executed Jan. 21, 1793). The Bourbons, however, still controlled the Spanish throne under Charles IV. In addition Charles IV and Louis XVI were first cousins on their maternal sides.


27 James Cole Mountflorence seems to have been aware of previous western plots, which were no doubt a topic of conversation in Nashville.


29 Though Kentucky lies immediately south of the Ohio River, the Territory South of the River Ohio, or Southwest Territory, constituted what is now Tennessee. In his proposal, James Cole Mountflorence referred to this territory as "dits Etats au Sud de la rivière Ohio, ou Belle riviere."

30 James Cole Mountflorence seems never to have been a legislator, though he apparently waged an unsuccessful bid for Congress shortly after North Carolina rati-
you that the inhabitants of Kentucky, of Cumberland, and of all the settlements built west of the Appalachian Mountains, desire nothing more than to be allowed to destroy Spanish tyranny in Louisiana and Florida, in order to restore freedom to the inhabitants of these two provinces and obtain for themselves the free navigation of the Mississippi River, to which Spain claims exclusive rights. The disposition of the inhabitants of these Spanish colonies, composed of Frenchmen or French descendants, who still remember with horror the unbelievable cruelties of the treacherous Spanish ministers at the time of the transfer of Louisiana in 1763, will remarkably simplify the plan presented herein; these colonies are mainly inhabited by French, English, [fol. 93v] and Americans of the United States; the inhabitants detest the slavery to which they are subjected, and with the arrival of French forces they will act indubitably in the same way as the Allobroges and the Mayençois.

I therefore offer to raise a legion in the name of the French Republic, on the shores of the Mississippi River and the surrounding lands, populated by aggressive men who are greatly feared by the government of Spanish Louisiana. This legion would be comprised of American hunters, Canadians and inhabitants of Illinois, all sworn enemies of Spanish despotism. I do not want an enlistment, a uniform, or a salary. I only want to reserve the right to nominate the officers, to ensure that each has public spiritedness and courage and is trusted by the legion. I propose that this legion not exceed ten thousand men, leaving the decision up to the officers as to the number they believe necessary within this limitation. Once the conquest is finished, we will only take goods from the royals, the clergy, and officers of the Spanish government, one share of which would be transferred to the French Republic and one share to the legion to compensate and reward them for their efforts and losses. New Orleans, the key to the Mississippi, would be the first great object in sight, and for its retention some French frigates would cooperate with the troops of the legion,

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31 The French army "was received enthusiastically" by the local population known as the Allobroges when the French invaded the area around Savoy and Geneva in September 1792. See Nupur Chaudhuri, "Montesquiou-Fezensac, Anne-Pierre, Marquis De," in Samuel F. Scott and Barry Rothaus, eds., Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution, 1789–1799 (Westport, Conn., 1984), 2: 677.


33 James Cole Mountflorence struck here de Guerriers, or of warriors. The proposal is not written in the first person but rather uses the personal pronoun "on," which most often means "one," or "we," but in this case clearly refers to Mountflorence himself.
which would descend the Mississippi. Indians\textsuperscript{34} could even be used in this expedition, and all the Indians of these territories are entirely devoted to the French, whom they call their older brothers. The only expense to France would be some field artillery that could be loaded at Le Havre for Alexandria,\textsuperscript{35} and that would be transported further to the former Fort Duquesne, now Pittsburgh, where they would be loaded for Kentucky; we would also need gunpowder, lead and cannonballs; and it would be necessary to provide for the subsistence of the troops from the moment they assemble. The seizures that would be made would amply compensate the Republic for her small advance, not to mention the glory that would come to France for having done so much in the old and the new world for the total destruction [fol. 94r] of tyranny and despotism.

I would only need to be endowed with appropriate power from the Republic to raise this legion, which would be regarded as French troops, and the most inviolable secret be preserved, in order to hide from the Spanish the knowledge of the planned expedition, and to spare the United States government the inconvenience of having to oppose this plan of operations. However, it would be essential to inform the French minister in Philadelphia, so that he might thwart any claims made by the court of Madrid. Perhaps it would even be expedient to negotiate a new treaty of alliance with the United States, while I work on the plan's execution.\textsuperscript{36}

I propose marching upon Louisiana at the beginning of next spring. I leave for the United States in three or four days; therefore, it is the matter of the moment, if the plan is tempting. I can go into greater detail and give a better explanation if the government finds it necessary.

The 26th of October, 1st year of the Republic

J.C. Mountflorence
Former Major in the Service of United States, hôtel de Nismer, Grenelle-St. Honoré Street, Paris

It is of course understood that I will allow the inhabitants of the conquered territory the freedom to form a republican government that they judge appropriate, entirely independent from the despots of Europe.

\textsuperscript{34} James Cole Mountflorence used the word Sauvages to refer to the local Indian population.

\textsuperscript{35} Alexandria, Va.

\textsuperscript{36} Edmond-Charles-Édouard Genet's instructions stated that he should negotiate a new treaty of alliance with the United States. For a full copy of his instructions in French, see Jameson et al., "Selections from the Draper Collection," 1: 957–67.