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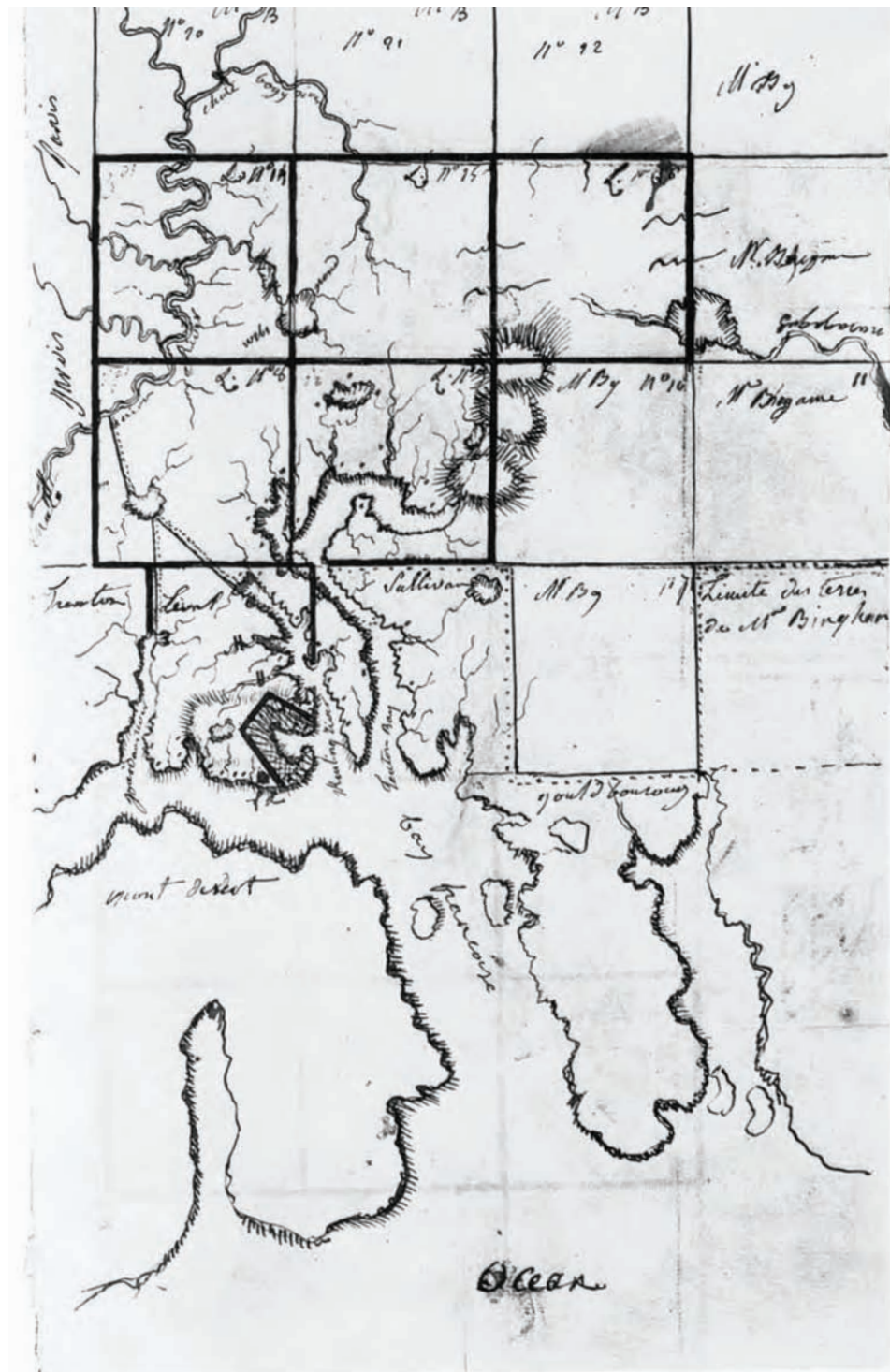
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Map drawn by Mme de Leval of Fontaine Leval. Courtesy of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts

Fontaine Leval: A Revolutionary Story

By Darcy Stevens

In the late eighteenth century, the newly independent United States was grappling with the question of how to settle the vast lands gained with the defeat of the British and how to pay for that victory. Federal land sales provided the opportunity for Americans to achieve the personal independence of land ownership while the sales helped to replenish the depleted national coffers.

At the same time, France was about to crumble under massive social and economic turmoil. French expenditures in the Seven Years War and the American Revolution left France with significant debt, which in turn led to unpopular taxation. The influence of the Enlightenment and American independence inspired the French to topple the feudal system. By 1789, revolution was in the air.

These concurrent events on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean led to a remarkable chain of events. An effort to create a haven for French émigrés in Ohio was waylaid by unscrupulous American land speculators, shackled by French investors with no funds, and ended with the settlement of a handful of French nationals settled on Frenchman's Bay at Fontaine Leval.

Independence cleared the way for infinite possibilities. Americans spread throughout the country, reaping the rewards of both national and personal

independence while investors seized the opportunity to accumulate wealth. Fontaine Leval illustrates how French admiration of American independence coupled with romantic notions about the untamed wilderness motivated aristocrats and tradespeople alike to set sail for American shores when the French Revolution shook their society to its core. In this way, Fontaine Leval is the story of opportunity and optimism in the wake of the chaos of revolution.

Fontaine Leval is also the story of how the powerful and politically connected exploited that opportunity and optimism. The nascent and largely unregulated American economic system allowed speculators to further their personal financial interests by any means possible. Their greed went unchecked as they overextended themselves with reckless abandon to the detriment of themselves, their business associates, and the entire nation. For French aristocrats looking to settle in America, the American Revolution created an environment which made their personal and financial goals possible when the French Revolution made them necessary. Investors were able to seal deals with nothing more than utopian dreams in their pockets. Speculation in American lands was so convoluted it created a tangled web that contributed to the financial ruin of multiple individuals and the first economic panic in America.

When the Northwest territory opened, founders like Thomas Jefferson envisioned it would be settled by hard-working yeoman farmers. Powerful and influential businessmen had other ideas.¹ One such group of businessmen was the Scioto Company, led by the notoriously unscrupulous William Duer, a Revolutionary era politician who used his positions, often illegally, to further his

own interests. Jefferson referred to him as "the King of the Alley" due to his deceptive financial dealings.² Yet, despite his reputation, Duer secured an option on one million acres in Ohio in 1787.³

The political unrest in France gave the Scioto associates an opportunity to entice investors to the peaceful American shores. In May 1788 they sent the poet and diplomat Joel Barlow to France to market the territory of Ohio to the French. His prospectus overflowed with enchanting, but exaggerated, descriptions of the land's fertility, beauty, and mild climate.⁴ In Paris, Barlow created the French *Compagnie du Scioto*, which "purchased" three million acres from the American Scioto Company. Here the web of speculation becomes tangled. As François Furstenberg explains:

Alas, Barlow's plan had a crucial flaw. The Scioto Company did not actually own the lands it sold to the *Compagnie du Scioto*; it owned only preemption rights, or rights to acquire the land at a future date. As if that were not bad enough, Barlow was selling lands the *Compagnie du Scioto* had not even bought from the Scioto Company!⁵

Compagnie du Scioto's business was slow until the Bastille was stormed in July 1789. Shortly thereafter Barlow reported sales of 150,000 acres.⁶ Yet, he failed to make payment to the American Scioto Company, which in turn failed to make payments to the Ohio Company. In April 1790 the directors of the Ohio Company petitioned to reclaim shares extended to the Scioto associates.⁷ Meanwhile, a handful of major investors in *Compagnie du Scioto*, known as the *Société des Vingt-Quatre* (Society of Twenty-four) had set sail from France. Led by Madame Rosalie Baclar de Leval, the investors arrived in Philadelphia in the fall of 1790 to learn

of the Scioto Company failure.⁸ De Leval immediately began negotiations to secure a new location for her French colony.

With the Scioto Company undone, Henry Knox entered the story. Already the legal owner of vast tracts of land in Maine (inherited by his wife when her Loyalist parents fled during the Revolution), he was hungry for more. Knox was eagerly watching as the Commission on Eastern Lands surveyed and divided lots in the district of Maine.⁹ He would seize the opportunity to increase his land holdings and, he expected, his wealth.

The land Knox and Duer planned to sell to the French would ostensibly replace the lost Scioto lands. But more enticing for the speculators was the opportunity to corner the market. In June 1791 Knox instructed his agents to purchase two million acres of Maine land which "would operate as a monopoly ... and enable us to fix the price."¹⁰

To circumvent the limitations imposed by Congress on the amount of acreage owned by an individual, Knox and Duer enlisted Henry Jackson and Royal Flint to do their bidding. The agents secured an option on 2 million acres for \$.10 per acre with only \$5,000 as a down payment and the rest payable over eight years. Jackson and Flint quietly transferred the options to Knox and Duer two weeks later. In August, they began negotiations with de Leval for the creation of a French colony on the coast of Maine.¹¹ This was coveted land, and as the prospective French colonists would learn, largely already occupied.



Political cartoon entitled "Vente des deserts du Scioto, par des Anglo-americains," 1798, illustrating the frenzied and fraudulent sale of Scioto lands to the French. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

De Leval's secretary, Jean Baptiste de la Roche, recorded some details of the agreement concerning the French settlement in his "Journal of our Travel to the East Country."¹² De la Roche wrote that the Scioto company was in a "state of confusion" and that the Ohio land had been reclaimed by Congress. He lamented that the fate of the French emigrants was covered by "a veil of obscurity." Yet, the Société des Vingt-Quatre believed that securing a place where their compatriots could gather was a worthy undertaking, so they were seeking new arrangements. They had heard positive things about Maine but "thought it prudent not to complete any acquisition until visiting the site." Clearly, they learned their lesson from the Scioto ordeal. De Leval and de la Roche would travel to Maine to personally select a new location for their French colony. They would be accompanied by a few French investors whose firsthand accounts of the land would hopefully attract their countrymen as colonists. A contract stipulated that Duer and Knox were responsible for transportation, a guide, and surveyors. They would also provide meat, flour, tools, and building supplies for the first year on credit and hire workers to construct cabins for the first settlers. Duer and Knox were selling five townships at \$1.12 an acre with half down and yearly payments for the remainder. With a profit margin of 112 percent, Duer and Knox expected to make a vast fortune in Maine.¹³

De La Roche registered some concern about the lateness in the season for travel but wrote that the party was determined to inspect the territory. So, on September 24, 1791, they set sail from "New York with the help of a faint breeze on the passenger ship *Providence* with seventeen passengers. Among them were "a dozen workers that we could leave on the spot" to establish the colony.¹⁴ These employees would be the first settlers in what they hoped would be a flourishing place of reunion

for their countrymen. From that day forward, de la Roche carefully recorded locations, duration of travel between places, and made special notes regarding the land and weather in the journal.

The party sailed up the coast from New York to Boston where Jackson and their well-appointed ship were waiting. Eager to impress the French investors, Jackson ensured the beds were comfortable, the food was good, and the captain and crew were experienced. They sailed from Boston on October 1 and after some delays due to "contrary winds" reached Bucks Harbor six days later. De la Roche wrote of celebrating that evening with a dinner and bonfire. The next day the party continued past Eggemoggin to Little Deer Island where they stopped for the day. They were impressed by the land that included pastures for "a few sheep and two or three cows" as well as good fishing. Some of the group hunted, and they enjoyed "fat rabbits" for dinner that evening around a great fire. When the landowner announced he would charge them three shillings for each tree cut down for firewood, the party ended. This foreshadowed the difficulty they would encounter finding unclaimed land. Indeed, the next day they passed Great Deer Island and de la Roche observed the houses were "fairly close together."¹⁵

Maine experienced a population boom following the American Revolution. Driven in part by a stagnant economy, common men and women searched out a place where they could freely appropriate the natural resources they needed. Maine

was such a place. It is true that some "Great Proprietors" held vast claims to the land dating back to the early 1700s. But many of those men had been loyalists and by rights their property should be forfeited, or so the settlers believed. They argued that Tory property was a reward for those who defeated the British. True independence, they knew, was only possible through land ownership, and impossible as tenants at the mercy of powerful landlords. Fueled by such sentiment, Maine's population tripled between 1775 and 1790, despite the nearly constant conflict between settlers and the Great Proprietors, including Henry Knox.¹⁶ The observations of de la Roche regarding the settlement of Maine was accurate. Finding unsettled land would be a challenge.

On Saturday, October 8, passing Naskeag Point, de la Roche noted seeing Mount Desert Island for the first time. As they sailed for Union River Bay the party was particularly impressed by the area surrounding Weymouth Point and its bay capable of carrying big sloops. De la Roche wrote "we will find no more favorable place" for their city and port. But they circled the bay and found that the coast was mostly settled.¹⁷

On Monday, October 10, they met Colonel Nathan Jones at Gouldsbrough. Jackson confided to him about "the embarrassment they were in," of trying to fulfill the promises made to the French for coastal land. Jones believed there was available land on Taunton Bay and led the party there the next day. But here, too, La Roche recorded "always" seeing

houses on the coast. In search of a clear view of the territory, they anchored near Schoodic Mountain, hired a guide and took the "inconvenient roads" to the summit.¹⁸ The party observed Hancock and Franklin townships' occupied land with meadows, lakes, and streams.¹⁹ It was also partly bordered by Gouldsboro Bay, which could serve as a "door to the open lands" in the interior. This would be an ideal location for their colony. The party hiked the afternoon on the mountain and returned that evening exhausted but optimistic about their prospects.²⁰

Traveling towards Hancock and Franklin, de la Roche wrote, "we are always busy looking for a place on the shore where we can place ourselves." Finally, on October 13, they did. Trenton township had three dwellings, but it was the closest thing to unoccupied land they would find. Jackson assured the party he could buy out the owners by the next spring. De la Roche described the land as two townships joined by Taunton Narrows, which would offer the colonists access to the bay. They had breathtaking views of Mount Desert Island and Schoodic Mountain. He noted the ground was rocky and would be inconvenient for construction, but they would "put our farm on the Trenton township."²¹

They still needed a place immediately available for the workers who would stay in Maine over the winter. Colonel Jones led them to a farm about a mile outside Trenton with 116 acres, four of which were under cultivation with another twenty cleared. Jones conducted the negotiations and secured the farm for \$140.²² De la Roche wrote; "our situation on Frenchman's Bay is beautiful," and that they immediately named their new home after "our Amazon," calling it Fontaine Leval. They celebrated with a big fire where they "danced all around, sung, drank, and everybody was happy."²³

They worked all the next day, through the rain, closing in the barn for a temporary storehouse.

Within four days it was finished, and another building had been erected. The next few days were spent creating order for the small community at Fontaine Leval. Provisions were inventoried and a manager assigned to the storehouse. "Articles of regulation for the conduct" of the settlers were drafted so that "those who come to join it will find the establishment orderly." Rules were enacted for the employees and contracts signed. On Sunday, October 23, the regulations for the colony were read aloud and the next morning de la Roche and de Leval set sail for Boston in the first snowfall.²⁴

Things seemed promising for Fontaine Leval in the fall of 1791. De Leval's opinion of Maine and the colony's prospects were optimistic but realistic. Yet, the French colony was not to be. For the next five years, de Leval would bombard Knox and Duer with letters demanding titles to the land, all while providing excuses as to why she had not paid them. It turned out that Knox and Duer were not the only ones guilty of speculation. They intended to pay Congress for the Maine land from money received from de Leval. She expected to pay Knox and Duer with money collected from French settlers to the colony, settlers who never came in large numbers.²⁵ In the end, none of them had the funds to meet their overly ambitious commitments.

In March 1792, Duer went bankrupt. His business dealings were so extensive that some historians cite his failure as the cause of the Panic of 1792. He was imprisoned for his debts, yet even from behind bars he continued to scheme and dabble in land speculation.²⁶ Duer's insolvency put the French Colony in jeopardy. If he and Knox could not make their payments, no deeds would be released to them, and by extension to de Leval, who therefore would not make payments to Knox and Duer. De Leval was persistent. She wrote long, aggressively nagging letters about how important it was to provide deeds to those already settled at Fontaine

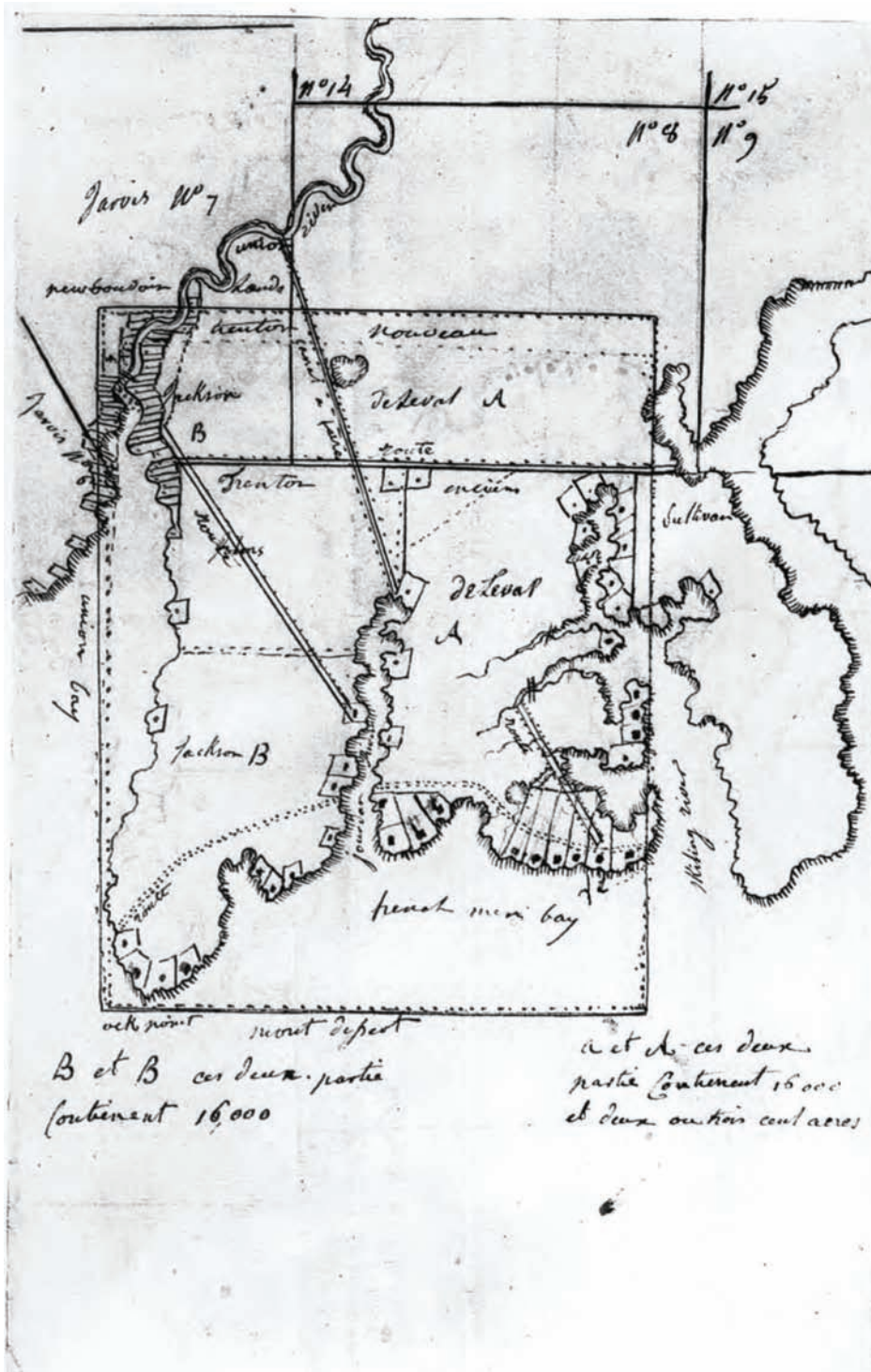
Leval in order to instill confidence in prospective settlers. Knox and Jackson were exasperated by her efforts. In May 1792, on her way to Maine, she stopped in Boston to complain to Jackson in person. He subsequently wrote to Knox; "Madame Laval is yet here, I wish her gone."²⁷

In October, de Leval threatened legal action if the deeds to lands with clear titles were not delivered. This got Knox's attention and he released the deed to Trenton township.²⁸ By Christmas, Knox received news which made him less inclined to accommodate de Leval any further. In a letter to Knox, Jackson relayed a warning he received from a friend living in Europe:

With regard to Madame L. V., I must tell you that at present she has no resources beyond herself, nor any means of making good her contracts but from the lands. She does not represent a company nor has she any combinations of persons or property to support the enterprise. Her friends appear astonished at the boldness of her undertaking and the confidence which the Americans have placed in her.

Jackson advised Knox to void all contracts with her, stating, somewhat ironically, she was "artfull and cunning ... and will take any and every advantage of you."²⁹

By the end of 1792, Duer was in debtor's prison and de Leval was exposed as penniless. With his own finances seriously strained, Knox needed a bailout.



Map drawn by Mme de Leval of her Trenton holdings. Courtesy of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts



Sunset view of Cadillac Mountain on Mount Desert Island from Lamoine Beach, ME. *Courtesy of Carolyn Holland*

In December, he convinced wealthy Philadelphian William Bingham to buy out Duer's interests and manage the Maine enterprise. Although he immediately began receiving urgent requests from de Leval for meetings, Bingham, unlike Duer and Knox, would not yield to her insistent demands.³⁰ He waited until February 1793 to acknowledge her. He coolly wrote that he would not discuss her contract with Knox and Duer and was under no obligation to honor those previous agreements. In his dealings with her Bingham wrote that he expected "an assurance that may be relied on." Loans and extended credit were out of the question. Bingham deftly called out de Leval, stating "you doubtless cannot have undertaken a project, which must necessarily involve a considerable expenditure, without having formed an association possessed of sufficient capital to carry it into complete execution."³¹

Although Bingham stood his ground with de Leval, he found her demands annoying. Within a month he attempted to rid himself of her nagging by selling the French lands to a trustee and placing the deeds in escrow. De Leval was not deterred. She persisted in writing to him, arguing that others would not purchase tracts in the colony unless she could provide them with clear titles. He finally informed her it was no longer his business and pawned her off on the trustee. So, de Leval resumed pestering Knox, writing him long letters complaining of the "cruel" treatment she'd

received. She proposed detailed plans for her and Knox to work exclusively together on the land deal. However, Knox, having never repaid the advances Bingham made to him, had no influence by then.³²

In November 1793 de Leval somehow purchased the 116 acres of Fontaine Leval and transferred it to de la Roche soon after.³³ The next year, she married Peter Frances van Berckel, a diplomat of the Netherlands to the United States.³⁴ She continued to write angry letters in her "bad english" to Knox through 1796.³⁵ It was that year when de Leval and de la Roche divided their interests in Trenton and she and van Berckel left America for good, leaving behind her dream of a French colony on the Maine coast.³⁶ De la Roche purchased the rest of the land held in escrow and bought additional land from Jackson. He eventually owned almost nine thousand acres surrounding Fontaine Leval, where he continued to live. In 1827, de la Roche sold his lands to another Frenchman, Andre LeMoyne, after whom the current town of Lamoine is named.³⁷

In the end, the French colony on the coast of Maine never came to be. Only the relatively small homestead of Fontaine Leval with a dozen or so Frenchmen was settled. Yet Fontaine Leval is more than an interesting footnote in the history of Maine. Revolutions, an ocean apart, opened the door to great success and crippling disaster. They provided the promise of a secure future for settlers and prosperity for investors on the Maine coast. The American and French Revolutions also allowed unscrupulous and fiscally irresponsible speculators to engage in reckless land deals, which financially devastated individuals and the national economy. Fontaine Leval is therefore a story of both the promise and peril of revolution.

Darcy Stevens is a doctoral student and graduate assistant at the University of Maine. A native of Kansas, Stevens earned a master's degree in American History, concentrating on the Progressive Era, from Emporia State University. Her true passion is the history of the American Revolution, so she abandoned the wheat fields for New England, where she hopes to stay. Stevens' research focuses on neutrality in the Northeastern borderlands during the Revolutionary Era. She is the book review editor of the Maine History Journal and a Mount Desert Island Historical Society Visiting History Scholar.

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