Artist Karl Bodmer’s combined sketches of an Oto and Missouri Indian, and a Ponca chief, circa 1833-34. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
In late 1724, Mitchigamea, Otoe, Missouria, and Osage ambassadors left their homes in the American Midwest and embarked on an eighteen-month journey through the French Atlantic empire. Along the way, they endured meager rations, a shipwreck in the Gulf of Mexico, and illness while crossing the Atlantic. They intended to meet with the “Great Chief” of the French, fifteen-year-old King Louis XV, in order to affirm an alliance with him and to outline their expectations of their French neighbors in the Illinois Country. “I came here to see the King on behalf of my Nation and my people,” one of the diplomats stated in a speech to imperial officials in Paris. “If I do not hear from him then I will go back to my people.” They received their wish: by the time they returned home in early 1726, the four Native American emissaries had conducted a diplomatic ceremony with the king, who had promised to “see to the needs of [their] Nations.”

The Native delegation to France offers a different perspective on the history of the early modern Atlantic world. Histories of coastal American societies tend to focus on the incorporation of indigenous peoples into Atlantic networks of exchange and diplomacy, either through direct colonization or the indirect flow of European trade goods. Such incorporation was far from one-sided, of course, and Native peoples living near coastal European empires often resisted and subverted imperial goals. Yet Atlantic histories largely follow the westward movement of people, ideas, and trade goods from Europe and Africa to the Americas. This study instead follows Native individuals who lived far from the centers of any European empire as they traveled eastward to discover a new world and establish relationships that would benefit their respective nations back home in North America. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that highlights the power of Native nations vis-à-vis European empires in the continental interior.
A history of Native diplomacy in the 1720s reveals the layered nature of American history. The Mitchigameas, Otoes, Missourias, and Osages lived and thrived in the midcontinent long before they sent representatives to France, and they would do so long after the diplomats returned home. The delegation to France provides a glimpse into one moment of cross-cultural diplomacy in which Native peoples seized upon an alliance with the French to further their own interests within their respective territories. Analysis of the delegation therefore extends the history of the continental interior back in time, long before the westward expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, to underscore the region’s vibrant, long-ago past.3

Such American Indian expeditions to European territories were not uncommon in the early modern era. Native American delegations from nations across the continent often visited the empires encroaching on their borders and beyond. In meetings with imperial officials, Native diplomats sought to render European newcomers useful as purveyors of goods, neutral diplomatic mediators, or proxy warriors in conflicts with other Native nations. Historians have recently begun to reveal the quantity and breadth of these expeditions, with a primary focus on American Indians’ travels through the British empire.4 Few historians have analyzed the Mitchigamea, Otoe, Missouria, and Osage delegation to France in detail, and in older narratives, the Native ambassadors tend to be portrayed as passive travelers following French guides and piquing the curiosity of cosmopolitan Europeans rather than as ambassadors with motivations rooted in their respective nations’ interests.5 This article argues that the Native emissaries who traversed the Atlantic Ocean did so to assert their territorial sovereignty and to incorporate the French empire into their network of allies in North America. As such, they were treated as legitimate diplomatic representatives by agents of the French empire—not as mere novelties.6

French officials organized and funded the delegation with one goal in mind: impressing the Native American ambassadors. The prospects for France’s North American holdings appeared grim in the early eighteenth century. After years of land speculation fueled by Scottish economist John Law’s exaggerated marketing, the so-called Mississippi Bubble burst in 1720, exposing the fragility of the paper money liberally distributed by the Banque Royale. With little financial backing and few settlers, Louisiana appeared to be on the brink of collapse. French settlers and officials frequently complained about scarce food, shoddy settlements, and little protection against Native populations demanding tribute from invasive French settlers. Many colonial officials believed that Louisiana’s future hinged upon the success of garrisons in the Illinois Country, where Frenchmen believed they would find precious minerals that might give Louisiana a more stable source of financial support. The Illinois Country also had great potential for intraimperial trade with France’s former enemies in Spanish New Mexico, an opportunity made possible by the end of the Quadruple Alliance (1717–1720). Such commerce would give French colonists access to Spanish merchandise, namely, minerals and horses.7

The success of European imperial projects in the Illinois Country hinged upon the support of Native nations who lived nearby in Illinois and the Great Plains. Yet French officials recognized that their sparse settlements and lack of supplies in the Illinois Country would do little to convince strong Native nations to ally with the French. To this end, officials conceived a plan to fund a Native delegation to Paris, where the Indians might witness France’s cultural, demographic, and military power that was so lacking in North America. Louisiana’s governor,

3. J. Frederick Fausz similarly extended the history of one western city, St. Louis, far beyond the scope of traditional narratives to include the eighteenth-century context for the region. See Fausz, 


6. In Ellis and Steen, “An Indian Delegation in France, 1725,” the authors state that the Native diplomats came from “the wilderness” and were treated as “a novelty and not as representatives of a legitimate culture.” Ellis and Steen insist that the diplomats “said what was expected” and accomplished little.

Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, admitted this objective in a meeting with the colony’s Superior Council, arguing that the trip might “inspire these barbarians with an advantageous idea of the French and thereby to attach them to that nation.”

The Native ambassadors who accepted the French offer to travel to Paris in 1724 made the dangerous journey “to the other side of the Sun” as representatives of their respective nations and, as such, traveled to France for different reasons. The Mitchigamea representative, Chicagou, aimed to assert his people’s territorial sovereignty in the face of increasing French encroachment, while the Otoe, Missouria, and Osage delegates hoped to convince the French to build trading posts near their towns. In the 1710s, the Otoes and Missourias had struck an alliance with two nations on the Central Plains, the Kaws and the Pawnees. In traveling thousands of miles to meet with Company and royal officials at the highest

levels, the ambassadors for the Otoes (Aguiguida) and Missourias (Ignon Ouaconisen and Mensperé) aimed to incorporate the French empire into their growing network of allies. The Osages, on the other hand, were less enthusiastic about the new confederacy between Lower Missouri Valley and Central Plains nations, as it would increase access to French manufactured goods and undercuts the Osages’ own commercial leverage over their neighbors. Though all of the ambassadors had different reasons for making the long journey, they all agreed to travel to France in order to outline their expectations of the French empire to officials at the highest levels, as they made clear in speeches to imperial officials and Louis XV.¹⁰

Plans for the delegation to France began in 1722, when the Company of the Indies sent Étienne de Veniard, Sieur de Bourgmont, to North America with instructions to facilitate trade between the Illinois Country and Spanish New Mexico. To do so, Bourgmont had three orders: to “establish a post” on the Missouri River, to “make peace” with all Native American nations living between Illinois and New Mexico, and to “convince some leaders of the main Indian tribes to go to France to give them an idea of the power of the French.”¹¹

Bourgmont had lived in the Great Plains for years, making him the ideal candidate for the job. He fled to North America sometime after 1698, when he was caught poaching at the Monastery of Belle-Etoile and fined 100 livres. In Canada, he served as a soldier in the Troupes de la Marine in Canada, a fur trader with the Mascoutens, and an ensign at Fort Pontchartrain (Detroit). After mishandling a dispute among feuding Ottawas and Miamis in 1706, Bourgmont deserted his post and remained on the lam for over a decade, escaping French authorities, who assigned severe punishment to deserters. One man who fled Fort Pontchartrain with Bourgmont in 1706 was captured and sentenced to “having his head broken till death follows, by eight soldiers.”¹¹ For nearly fifteen years, Bourgmont lived and traded with the Osages, Missourias, and other Native nations in and near the Great Plains. He wrote about his experience in two treatises, Exact Description of Louisiana and The Route to Be Taken to Ascend the Missouri River.¹²

Around 1720, Bourgmont brought his treatises back to France, perhaps hoping to gain the favor of French authorities after his repeated transgressions. Both works were immensely useful to the Company of the Indies, as they described the populations, character, and locations of Native towns throughout Louisiana and charted the course of the Missouri River, which Company officials hoped would lead to the famed Mer de l’Ouest.¹³ If Bourgmont did, in fact, intend to leverage his knowledge of North America to obtain absolution for his past crimes, then his plan worked. Company officials designated him commandant of the Missouri and ordered him to return to North America to construct a garrison on the Missouri River, which he would christen Fort d’Orleans. Bourgmont would then embark on an expedition across the Great Plains to meet with the Plains Apaches, who controlled the roads to Santa Fe. His superiors promised that upon completion of his mission, he would be able “to return to France without difficulty,” presumably absolved of his crimes. Louis XV vowed to “grant him Letters of Nobility” for his service to Louisiana. Bourgmont traveled to the Central Plains by way of Lorient in Brittany, New Orleans, and Fort de Chartres in the Illinois Country, arriving at the latter in late 1723.¹⁴

All of Bourgmont’s plans hinged upon the support of Native nations in the Central Great Plains. Luckily for him, these nations’ goals aligned with his own—namely, peace with the Plains Apaches and increased access to European trade goods. The Pawnees and Kaws were particularly interested in peace negotiations with the Plains Apaches,

¹² Étienne de Veniard, Sieur de Bourgmont, Exact Description of Louisiana, of Its Harbors, Lands and Rivers, and Names of the Indian Tribes That Occupy It, and the Commerce and Advantages to Be Derived Therefrom for the Establishment of a Colony, Archives Nationales, Archives des Colonies, C13C1, folios 346–56, in Norall, Bourgmont, 99–112; Étienne de Veniard, Sieur de Bourgmont, The Route to Be Taken to Ascend the Missouri River, Archives Nationales, Archives de la Marine 3JF 277, 2, in Norall, Bourgmont, 112–123.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ “Conditions Set by Sieur de Bourgmont for making peace with the tribes bordering New Mexico, memorandum for Sieur de Bourgmont, approved by His Royal Highness,” AN Cols, B 43; fol. 90,
with whom they had been at war for nearly a decade. One Pawnee leader celebrated an alliance with their former enemies because it would allow his people to “go on our hunts in peace.” Making peace with their former enemies would likewise provide Pawnees with access to Spanish trade goods, especially horses, which would benefit all of the Native nations involved. The Pawnee leader extolled the benefits of Spanish horses, which he said would “help us to carry our equipment when we go into winter quarters, because our women and children are terribly overburdened on our return.”15 Peace with the Apaches would provide access to Spanish horses, and Bourgmont’s garrison on the Missouri River would increase the availability of French firearms. Given these two benefits, Pawnee, Kaw, Otoe, Iowa, and Missouria leaders supported Bourgmont’s plans and traveled with him to a Plains Apache town in what is now western Kansas.

15. October 6, 1724, Bourgmont’s Journal.

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On October 18, 1724, at least fifty Missourias, Kaws, Otoes, Iowas, Pawnees, and Frenchmen camped “a pistol-shot away” from the Apache town. For the next two days, diplomats from each nation joined one another to smoke the calumet (a ceremonial pipe), feast, and give speeches outlining the benefits of their new alliance. Bourgmont acted as a neutral mediator between the previously warring nations, physically placing himself between them and imploring them to “live in peace and harmony from now on.” To cement the Plains Apaches’ alliance with the French, Bourgmont distributed muskets, gunpowder, swords, knives, dyed cloth, mirrors, needles, and other goods that he had brought with him from the Illinois Country. A Plains Apache leader promised that his former enemies “may come to visit us, and we will also go to visit them carrying the peace calumet.” On the penultimate day of the ceremony in Apache territory, Apache women and girls served to their guests a feast of stewed bison meat, pounded jerky, dried plums, and maize. The negotiations were successful. Diplomats ended a prolonged and devastating war, increased the flow of trade goods in the region, and ensured the safe passage of Indian and European travelers across the Great Plains.16

Bourgmont then set his sights on his third instruction: to “convince some leaders of the main Indian tribes to go to France . . . to give them an idea of the power of the French.” He invited representatives from the Otoes, Missourias, and Osages to travel with him back to France. Neither Bourgmont nor his superiors recorded why these three nations were chosen to travel to France. All three, however, had long-standing alliances with the French that appeared tenuous in 1724. The Otoes, who frequently traded with French colonists in the 1710s, had forged an alliance with the Dakota Sioux and Meskwakis (Foxes), whom Bourgmont described as “our enemies,” in part because they had felt abandoned by the French due to a lack of sustained trade. Bourgmont explained to his superiors that “misery, and faulty merchandise, committed [the Otoes] to the alliance [with the Sioux and Meskwakis], having been five years since they saw a Frenchman in their village.”17 Bourgmont’s fears were amplified when one Missouri leader explained that “if we were abandoned by the French, we fear that our young people would be corrupted by the Foxes . . . [who] have been trying to bring us over to their side.” The Osages concurred, with one leader promising to “send four leaders from our nation [to France] under the same conditions as the Missouri.”18 An alliance with these three nations was vital both to intraimperial trade with New Mexico and, more importantly, to the security of French settlers in the Illinois Country. As Bourgmont explained, if France’s Indian allies “lifted the mask against us” and joined the Meskwakis, then it would be impossible to maintain a French presence in the Illinois Country.19

In November 1724, Otoe, Missouri, and Osage leaders joined Bourgmont at a council at Fort d’Orleans and sent representatives with him to Fort de Chartres. The Missourias sent five people, including Ignon Ouacounisen, “the daughter of the head chief of our tribe.” The Osages sent four. The Otoes sent only one, Aguiguida, explaining that they wished to risk only “one of our people” because, ten years prior, one of their own had traveled “to the seaboard to take the calumet of peace” and had “died there.” The expedition down the Mississippi—to say nothing of the transatlantic journey to France—was in fact dangerous to Indians and Europeans alike.20

At Fort de Chartres, the emissaries were joined by Nicolas-Ignace de Beaubois, the vicar general of the Jesuit diocese of Quebec, and twelve representatives from the Illinois Confederacy. Beaubois had been recalled to France due to a quarrel among French religious sects in Louisiana, and the Illinois men intended to register complaints with French officials regarding French encroachment on their territory. Twenty-two Native representatives eventually joined the party by the time it left Fort de Chartres for New Orleans, where colonial magistrates began arranging the logistics of the transatlantic delegation. Bienville, governor of Louisiana, bemoaned the cost of the voyage but ultimately valued its opportunity to convince Indians of the benefits of an alliance with the French. Since the Otoes, Missourias, and Osages were “such distant nations,” Bienville worried that “we are not in a position to retain them.” Traveling through the French empire, he and other Company officials thought, would allow the Native diplomats to see just how powerful and

magnificent their allies were—and might encourage them
to urge their respective nations to continue their alliance
with the French empire.21

The Indians’ stay in New Orleans was far from
magnificent, however. They arrived in the city
on January 9, 1725, and stayed there for three
weeks. New Orleans was only seven years old at
the time, and by all accounts, it was a fairly miserable place
to live during its early years. Residents lacked fresh meat
and produce, the hospital was overfilled and understaffed
due to rampant illness, and many colonial troops slept “in
the open air” because the city had no barracks. “In short,”
one Company of the Indies commissioner reported to his
superiors, “everything is of extraordinary high cost.”22

Even the administrative center of Louisiana revealed the
vulnerability of France’s imperial ambitions in North
America.

Bourgmont did his best to satisfy the needs of his
Indian guests despite the destitution of New Orleans. In
June 1725, he wrote to the directors of the Company of the
Indies requesting a reimbursement of 3,000 livres. Because
colonial officials in Louisiana could not afford to provide
the Native ambassadors with more than a “sailor’s ration
each day”—probably salted pork or fish with hardtack—
Bourgmont purchased beef, chicken, deer, wine, and
generally the necessaries which are of high value in this
country” from local American Indian and French vendors.
The delegation to France was important enough to the
Company’s interest to pay for these expenses. Indeed, the
poverty of New Orleans drove home the necessity of the
overseas delegation in order to cement France’s alliances
with Native nations near the Illinois Country.23

In late January, the Indian ambassadors, along with
Bourgmont, Beaubois, and Governor Bienville (who
was returning to France to report to his superiors), left
New Orleans and traveled one hundred miles down
the Mississippi River to La Balize (“the beacon”), the
main harbor at the mouth of the Mississippi. There they
boarded a ship called the Bellone with provisions to last
approximately three and a half months, gifts for Company
officials and Louis XV, and their personal belongings.

They underwent a long wait in La Balize due to “contrary
winds” and the delay of additional inventory for the ship.

The Bellone did not set sail along the Gulf Coast until late
March.24

During the initial days of the voyage, the Bellone
 collision with numerous logs and sandbars, resulting
in leaks and a damaged rudder.25 On April 1, the ship
anchored at Dauphin Island, off the coast of what is now
Alabama, for repairs and to pick up a stock of pitch and
tobacco, which was meant to prove to Company officials
the profitability of Louisiana. Before dawn, the Bellone’s
keel burst, and the vessel promptly sank to the bottom of
the Gulf. One person on the ship later wrote that the ship
“sunk in so little time that they did not have the leisure
to give themselves breathing time.” Captain Beauchamp
fired two cannon shots to alert the crew of a nearby ship,
who rescued most of the Bellone’s occupants. Two men
(one of whom was either a Missouria or Osage) and two
children drowned in the Gulf. All of the cargo onboard—
including the Native ambassadors’ rations, supplies, and
gifts for their French counterparts—was lost with the
ship.26

The shipwreck caused quite a stir among the passengers,
who waited at Dauphin Island for the departure of
another ship. Many of the Indian travelers decided that
the voyage to France was no longer worth making. Four
of them left the coast and returned to their homes on
the plains, leaving only Ignon Ouaconisen (Missouria),
Mensperé (Missouria), Aguiguida (Otoe), Boganienhin
(Grand Osage), and Chicagou (Mitchigamea Illinois) to

make the long journey.27

The passengers of the Bellone eventually boarded
another ship, the Gironde, in late April. Five months later,
they landed in Lorient, France. After traveling roughly
three hundred miles through the French countryside in

21. Minutes of the Superior Council of Louisiana, January 20,
1725, C13A9, bobine 14, folios 13–21, HNOC; Analysis of the Superior
Council’s Minutes, January 20, 1725, C13A9, bobine 14, folios 23–25,
HNOC; Minutes of the Superior Council of Louisiana, January 10, 1725,
MPAFD 476–8.

22. La Chaise to the Company, September 10, 1723, MPAFD, 2:312–
18; Shannon Lee Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial

23. Bourmont to the directors and the comptroller-general of the
Company of the Indies, C13C4, fols. 107, 109, bobine 68, HNOC; Norall,
Bourgmont, 176.

24. Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire, 111–112, 122; The Superior
Council of Louisiana to the General Directors of the Company of the
Indies, July 27, 1725, C13A9, bobine 14, folios 51–74, HNOC.

25. Louis Chaduteau’s Testimony on Wrecked La Bellone, April
17, 1725, Records of the Louisiana Superior Council, no. 110, Louisiana
Historical Quarterly 2, nos. 1 and 2 (1919): 197; Antoine Sorignet’s
Testimony on Wrecked La Bellone, April 20, 1725, Records of the Superior

26. Raphael to Abbe Raguet, May 25, 1725, C13A8, bobine 12, 399–
406, HNOC; “Relation de l’arrivée en France de quatre Sauvages de
Mississippi,” 2835.

27. “Relation de l’arrivée en France de quatre Sauvages de Mississippi,”
2835–6.
what Chicagou described as “moving cabins of leather,” they arrived in Paris to much fanfare on September 20, 1725—nearly a year after leaving their homes in North America.

In meetings with Company officials, members of the French nobility as well as King Louis XV, Aguiguida, Mensperé, Ignon Ouaconisen, Boganienhin, and Chicagou outlined their expectations of their new allies and requested support in North America. Records of their delegation are unfortunately slim: a brief Mercure de France article from 1725 is the only known documentation of the ambassadors’ actions and words while in France. An ethnohistorical reading of this lone source, firmly situated within the historical context of the Central Great Plains during the 1720s, reveals that these Native ambassadors used their power and influence in North America as leverage in diplomatic proceedings in the heart of the French empire.

The ambassadors followed their own diplomatic customs in meetings with French officials. Shortly after arriving in Paris, they entered a Company building together wearing “red loin cloth[s],” “feather head-piece[s],” and body paint of “different colors.” The red cloth was a visible reminder of the represented nations’ close relationship with the French, for they had obtained it from Bourgmont during the 1724 peace ceremony on the plains. Each emissary also carried a bow and quiver of arrows, and one carried a calumet (ceremonial pipe), “from which hung an ornament made of different colored feathers resembling the pennants on trumpets.” Speaking through sign language and Bourgmont’s translation, the calumet-carrying diplomat spoke to Company officials for so long that he “suddenly lost his voice.” He explained that the party had not hesitated to “abandon [their] lands” to visit “the Great Chief of the French” and that the troubles they had encountered along the way had “not aroused fear” in the travelers. Then, he praised the French, saying he was “pleased with what he had already seen in France.” In the minds of Company officials and colonial magistrates, this speech would have been seen as proof of the expedition’s success: Paris was


29. Bourgmont’s Journal, October 19, 1724. In 1719, a group of Paloma or Carlana Apaches were attacked by a Kaw raiding party. An Apache chief later insisted to New Mexico’s governor, Antonio Valverde y Cosio, that the warriors were supported by the French—likely to appeal to Valverde’s imperial anxieties. As evidence, the Apache leader explained that the Kaws had “long guns” and “were all dressed in red” (Valverde diary, fol.26v). Limbourg cloth was central to French-Indian alliances throughout North America; in 1701, one colonial magistrate appealed to his superiors to send more for “presents to Indian chiefs.” See Diana DiPaolo Loren, “Material Manipulations: Beads and Cloth in the French Colonies,” in The Materiality of Individuality: Archaeological Studies of Native Lives, edited by Carolyn L. White (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2009), 115; James Axtell, The Indians’ New South: Cultural Change in the Colonial Southeast (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 61.
indeed making a strong impression upon these Indians.\textsuperscript{30}

In the following weeks, Company officials took their guests on tours of Paris and Versailles in a grand display of French infrastructure, society, and culture. The Company ordered that the ambassadors be treated (and fed) “as though at the captain’s table”—a vast improvement over their experience in New Orleans and onboard French ships.\textsuperscript{31} They visited the Hôtel des Invalides, where they were particularly impressed by the “great copper vats” and “roasting spits” on which cooks prepared meat for the hospital staff and patients. A performance at the opera reportedly filled them with “joy” and “amazement,” and they reportedly asked if they could “see the same thing the following day.” They also traveled to Versailles and Marly, where they expressed great interest in “the elaborate fountains and pumps that made them work.” At Versailles, they mingled with Voltaire and other prominent French nobles and artists, many of whom had traveled to the palace for Louis XV’s marriage to Marie Leszczyńska in September. Compared to the French settlements they had visited in North America, metropolitan France must have been an overwhelming experience for the Native ambassadors.\textsuperscript{32}

Though Company officials invited these Native Americans to Paris to be impressed with French imperial wealth and power, the diplomats expressed their own power by demanding and securing a peace ceremony with King Louis XV. In another meeting with the Company, the Otoe, Missouria, and Osage ambassadors expressed confusion about their journey. The sights and sounds of Paris were lovely, they explained, but they had made their dangerous months-long journey for diplomatic reasons—not to be wooed by French culture. “We were given to understand that the King and the Company required someone from each of our Nations,” they stated to Company officials, “but we are here before you without knowing what you desire of us.” They made their own desires quite clear, however, in a “petition” on behalf of their respective nations, in which they requested that the French not “abandon” their new alliance. More “Frenchmen,” they hoped, would travel to the periphery of the plains with “goods and enterprises.” Perhaps appealing to the officials’ colonialist religiosity, they also promised that increased interactions among Frenchmen and their respective nations could help “instruct them in prayer.”\textsuperscript{33}

Chicagou, the Michigamea ambassador, was captured by France but demanded an audience with Louis XV in a speech to Company officials. “I have come here to see the King on behalf of my nation,” he explained. “When will I be able to see him? All the pretty things that I have seen will be meaningless if I do not see the King . . . and if I do not hear his words to report to my young people.” Chicagou was more explicit than the others in his expressions of territorial sovereignty, given that his people had already “ceded to [the French] the lands we [the Michigamea Illinois] occupy in Kaskaskia.” He demanded that the Company and the king order their agents to cease “install[ing] themselves in the midst of our village” so that the Michigameas could “remain masters of the lands where we have placed our hearths.” He presented a letter from the principal chief of the Michigameas, who echoed Chicagou’s demands to hold French settlers accountable.\textsuperscript{34}

The secretary of the Company issued a response by the director general, which was written before the guests’ arrival and therefore contained only boilerplate about fealty and peace. “The Company will always have you in its thoughts,” the director general had written, “and will bear your requests in mind.” Perhaps hoping to intimidate the ambassadors, the director general boasted of “the number of men the Great Onontio [Louis XV] has under his command” and reminded his guests of the “wealth and magnificence” that they had already witnessed. The secretary gave the delegates gifts of tobacco to keep them “happy until your departure” and “clothing so that you may be properly attired here, as well as other garments in the style of your own nation.” After exchanging speeches and gifts, Company officials and the duke of Bourbon arranged an audience with the king, recognizing that they would be unable to satisfy the ambassadors without one.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} “Relation de l’arrivée en France de quatre Sauvages,” 2835–7.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 2832–3.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 2836–8.
Finally, on November 25, the ambassadors met with Louis XV at Fontainebleau. The Otoes, Missourias, and Osages gave a speech primarily filled with diplomatic mainstays, praising the king’s “magnificence” and promising to tell their respective peoples of the “beauty of your dwellings, of your villages, of your lands and the manner in which we have been treated.” Promising to “plant the tree of peace,” they placed their headdresses and calumets at Louis’s feet “as a pledge of alliance.” Afterward, the Native diplomats who had traveled to Paris spoke with the king for over an hour “in the presence of all the nobles of the court.” The writer for the Mercure de France who observed the ceremony believed that the “audience would have lasted even longer” had the king not had a meeting with his council. Two days later, Louis took the Indian ambassadors with him on a hare hunt in the king’s private forests. Before they departed for North America by way of Lorient, queen consort Marie Leszczyńska gifted Chicagou with a “snuffbox of black tortoise shell with a gold-embossed lid” that was “adorned with several precious gems.” Louis gave multiple gifts to each of the guests: “the royal medallion on a gold chain; a rifle; a game-bag; a sword; a watch; and a painting” that depicted their meeting with the king. With these gifts, the French met the ambassadors’ earlier demand that they not return to their homelands empty-handed and fulfilled an essential component of both European and Native diplomacy.

Though short and twice-filtered through Europeans (Bourgmont, as translator, and the unnamed Mercure de France author), these speeches and interactions indicate the necessity of alliances with Native nations to the success of the French colonial enterprise. That the Company financed such an expedition speaks volumes about the importance of such an alliance with the Otoes, Missourias, Osages, and Mitchigamea Illinois. Considering the unfinished, isolated, and underpopulated state of French towns and posts in North America, Company officials desperately needed alliances with American Indians living on the Great Plains. Friendly relations would allow free movement of French traders, engineers, miners, and settlers, which would in turn facilitate the self-sufficiency of Louisiana and open trade with the presumably mineral-rich Spaniards in New Mexico. French engineers had already begun surveying the plains for profitable mines of their own, which would also require friendly relations with nearby Indian nations. Furthermore, peace with these Indian nations would assist in the ongoing war against the Meskwakis. In other words, the French needed the Otoes, Missourias, and Osages much more than these Indian nations needed the French.

Still, a relationship with the French empire did offer advantages to these Indian nations. The ambassadors would not have made the arduous journey if they had not expected to benefit from it, and their speeches to Company officials and Louis XV indicate as much. Aguiguuida, Mensperé, and Boganienhin did not emphasize territorial sovereignty in their speeches, as Chicagou did, because as representatives of distant and powerful nations, they had little to fear regarding French encroachment. Having traveled through the Illinois Country, Lower Louisiana, and France, Aguiguuida, Mensperé, Ignon Ouaconisen, and Boganienhin likely did not fear the loss of or encroachment on their homelands by the French. Perhaps more than any American Indians, these travelers had witnessed firsthand the vulnerability of France’s holdings in North America. In Paris, however, they reaffirmed what they had hoped to achieve in an alliance with the French: the continued (and perhaps expanded) availability of useful trade goods.

The Native diplomats fondly remembered their stay in France in the following years. In 1730, Chicagou and a group of Mitchigamea and Kaskaskia ambassadors traveled to New Orleans after hearing that Natchez warriors had killed over two hundred French colonists in the Natchez revolt. “We have come here from a great distance to weep with you for the death of the French,” Chicagou said, “and to offer our Warriors to strike those hostile Na...” to weep with you for the death of the French,” Chicagou remembered, “the King promised me his protection . . . I will always remember it.” In traveling to New Orleans and pledging...

36. Ibid., 2839–59; Deliberations of Council between Bourgmont and Missouri Chiefs, January 10, 1725, C13A8, bobine 12, folios 171–2, HNOC; General Council of the Missouria, Osage, and Oto Nations, November 19, 1724, in Margry, ed., Découvertes et Établissements, 6:451–452.

37. La Renaudiere to the Minister, August 3, 1724, C13C4, folios 105–07, bobine 68, HNOC; La Renaudiere to M. Perry, September 1, 1723, in Margry, ed., Découvertes et Établissements, 6:392–6.

military support, Chicagou upheld his end of the reciprocal promise of protection.  

Decades after returning home from France, the Native ambassadors continued to speak of their delegation to French and Indian audiences. In the 1750s, Ignon Ouaconisen and Mensperé welcomed French traveler Jean-Bernard Bossu to their town and regaled him with stories about their trip to the “great village of the French,” recalling the “beautiful . . . quantity of meat” found at the Rue de Boucheries and the opera, “where all of the men were magicians and sorcerers.” Chicagou, too, recalled seeing Parisian buildings “as high as the tallest trees” and people as numerous as “blades of grass in the prairies, or mosquitoes in the woods”—some of whom, he remembered, “smelled like alligators” because of their perfume. Their gifts from Louis XV and Marie Leszczyńska provided proof of their journey to visitors: Chicagou displayed his gilded tortoiseshell snuffbox when describing the delegation in New Orleans, and Ignon Ouaconisen showed off a diamond-set repeater watch to Bossu. In the minds of French officials who hoped to impress their Native guests, the delegation was obviously a success.

Perhaps the Otoes, Missourias, and Osages had fond memories of the delegation because they got what they wanted out of an alliance with the French: increased availability of French trade goods, which in turn strengthened their position as intermediaries for their western neighbors. In the late 1720s and early 1730s, the French fulfilled their end of the bargain by sending new traders to their new allies’ towns on the plains. Indeed, Fort d’Orleans, established by Bourmont in 1724, was only five miles from Missouria territory and a few days’ journey to Otoe, Iowa, Kaw, Pawnee, and Osage towns, making it an entrepôt on the Central Plains. Its success was short-lived, however, and French officials abandoned the post in 1726. One French official described commercial efforts on the plains as “absolutely useless” and insisted that missionaries who “preach the gospel among the sauvages” would do more to aid French-Indian alliances near the Illinois Country. He was wrong: in late 1732, Missouria and Osage warriors killed eleven Canadian voyageurs in retaliation for what they perceived as the French abandonment of the alliance forged in 1724–1725. This attack served its purpose, for French traders again increased their activity in the Lower Missouri Valley and the Central Plains in the 1730s and would continue to trade with these nations even after the Spanish formally claimed control of Louisiana in 1763.

The alliance benefited French colonists, too. In 1728, French officials refused to return Meskwaki slaves to


41. The Company Directors to Perrier and La Chaise, October 27, 1727, C13A11, folios 91–92, HNOC; Perier to La Chaise, April 9, 1728, C13A11, folios 34–36, HNOC; The Superior Council to the Directors of the Company, February 27, 1725, C13A9, folio 14, folios 59–61, 67, HNOC; A. P. Nasatir, ed., Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785–1804 (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 23–24; Perier to Maurepas, April 1, 1729, AN C13A12, folio 18, folios 15–17, HNOC; Instructions for Perier, September 30, 1726, in Margry, ed., Découvertes et Établissements, 6:452.
For a brief moment, it seemed as though the French would also achieve their primary goal in allying with the Otoes, Missourias, and Osages: safe passage across the Great Plains to New Mexico in order to establish intraimperial commerce with Spanish colonists. In 1739, nine Frenchmen led by Pierre and Paul Mallet traveled from Fort de Chartres along the Missouri, Platte, and Arkansas Rivers and various Indian roads to Santa Fe, where they stayed until 1740. French traders led two more expeditions toward New Mexico in 1740 and 1750; the former never reached the Spanish colony, however, and members of the latter were captured and sent to jail in Mexico City. Trade between Louisiana and New Mexico remained elusive even after 1763, when Louisiana formally became a Spanish colony (albeit one that was culturally French and supported by the activities of French traders). Yet the alliance between the Otoes, Missourias, Osages, and French had made it a real possibility—even if it never came to fruition.43

After the Treaty of Paris (1763) and the Louisiana Purchase (1803), Spanish and U.S. officials hoped to inherit their French predecessors’ alliances with Native nations. The continued dominance of French traders well into the nineteenth century helped to reduce the potentially disruptive nature of regime change in Louisiana. During the Spanish and American periods, Otoes, Missourias, and Osages frequently traveled to St. Louis to reaffirm their friendship with colonial officials and to trade for gunpowder, bullets, rifles, wool, and other merchandise. Thomas Jefferson even assumed the role of the European monarch during his presidency by inviting Native ambassadors to visit him in Washington. In 1805, a group of Otoes, Missourias, and Osages embarked on one such expedition to meet with Jefferson in Washington, D.C.44


The Kaw Indians of Kansas used diplomatic channels and skills in communicating their desires and grievances to U.S. authorities as represented in this 1857 engraving of their conference with the U.S. Commission of Indian Affairs which appeared in a London newspaper. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
delegation that was remarkably similar to their ancestors’ delegation to France eighty years earlier. Understanding the long history of cross-cultural diplomacy in this region challenges historians to see instances of interaction with the United States in the nineteenth century as continuities in Native American history rather than singular moments of U.S.-initiated change.44

The Native delegation to Paris highlights the degree to which European imperial schemes relied on the support of American Indian allies. The primary objectives of French officials in the Illinois Country in the 1720s—safe passage for traders traveling to Spanish New Mexico and the enrichment of the colony through the exploitation of mines on the plains—hinged upon alliances with Indians living on and near the Great Plains. Without the aid and protection of Native guides and hosts, no French trader or engineer could successfully penetrate (much less cross) the plains. Such dependence on Native allies was by no means limited to the Missouri River Valley and Great Plains. Across North America, European travelers and settlers from all empires required Native support for the survival of their colonies. The vast majority of the continent was controlled by Native nations; eighteenth-century Europeans recognized this reality and did their best to ensure that those nations were their allies rather than those of their imperial rivals.45

The power of the Mitchigameas, Otoes, Missourias, and Osages vis-à-vis their French counterparts gave them significant leverage as they traveled through the French Atlantic. They visited France not as exotic curiosities or pawns in imperial schemes but agreed “to cross the oceans” only to outline their expectations of their French allies.46 In exchange for peace and their support of French travelers in the plains, these Indian ambassadors expected consistent access to French merchandise (namely, rifles, gunpowder, and bullets) and the support of French soldiers against their Indian and European rivals on the plains.

Long-forgotten events such as the 1724–1725 delegation to France display the impressive mobility and powerful connections of American Indians in the eighteenth century. Native peoples traveled far and wide to forge and maintain vast, entangled networks of trade and diplomacy, which in turn linked distant empires, nations, and markets in the center of North America. By taking seriously the mobility and political power of Native nations west of the Mississippi River, historians may counter traditional depictions of wandering, nomadic indigenous peoples who responded to, rather than shaped, North American history only to disappear after the westward expansion of the United States. Nearly a century prior to the travels of Lewis and Clark and the imperial expansion of the United States, travelers such as Aguiguida, Mensperé, Ignon Ouaconisen, Boganienhen, and Chicagou shaped the trans-Mississippi West.47

These Native travelers’ experiences therefore highlight the long history of the western half of the continent. This region existed in ways often ignored by scholars who focus on American history as the history of westward-moving settlers. It was a space dominated by Native nations and empires, where European imperial success was fraught with contingency and unpredictability—and wholly reliant on relationships with Native allies. By focusing on Native diplomats who engaged with the early modern world, we can see how Native peoples shaped the borders and policies of European empires and maintained their territorial sovereignty long before the creation of the United States. Instances of this kind of cross-cultural diplomacy underscore that European (and, later, American) imperialism was far from inevitable and often occurred on the terms of Native nations.48

47. The most notorious examples of this harmful stereotype of Native Americans in history come from the works of Francis Parkman and Frederick Jackson Turner.