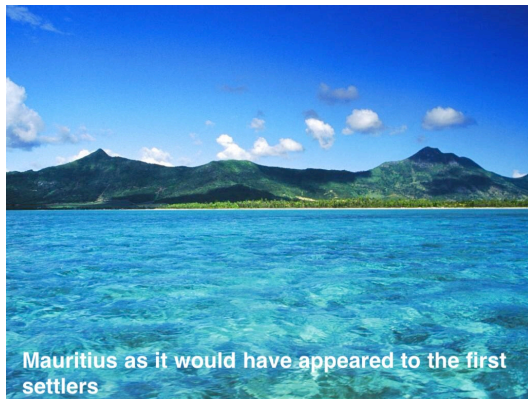




## Early Days

The story of our Mauritian ancestors starts on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1729. After a five month journey from St Malo in France, the wooden sailing ship “Royal Philip” was at last about to arrive in Mauritius (then known as the Ile de France). On board were the first 30 volunteer French settlers, on their way to new lives in the new colony. And amongst them was Jean Toussaint Jocet de la Porte, his wife Jeanne Thérèse Thomas, and their two young children, aged three and five.



Mauritius as it would have appeared to the first settlers

The colony on Ile de France was only eight years old. It was a private sector colony – established by the French East India Company to act as a base for their trading ships in the Indian Ocean. They had already settled the nearby island of Bourbon (now called Reunion), but it had no good harbour. Mauritius, in contrast, had two excellent harbours, Port Royal (which is where Jean and his family arrived) and Port Louis (which is where they spent most of their lives).

The French East India Company was engaged in a fierce commercial (and occasionally violent) trade war against the British and Dutch. The British were based in India, and the Dutch had bases at the Cape and at Batavia (Jakarta): the French felt that they too needed a secure naval base of their own. They had therefore landed a small party on Mauritius in December 1721, and taken possession in the name of King Louis XV of France.

Mauritius had been uninhabited prior to the arrival of the first European settlers. Its dense forests had been roamed by dodos, their close relation the solitaire, and by tortoises so large that eight people could stand on the back of one. All these had, however, been wiped out by the Dutch, who had established a number of abortive colonies on the island during the seventeenth century, before abandoning the island in 1710. They had left behind feral monkeys and rats. Without natural predators, the rats had overrun the island and grown to the size of rabbits.



*Native Forests of Mauritius.*

In 1729, when Jean and Jeanne arrived, the colony had about 100 French settlers (employees of the company), 100 soldiers, and several hundred black slaves who had been brought over from Madagascar. Farming was well established in a few places around the island. But people, even including the governor, lived in makeshift straw-roofed huts, and the main occupations were drinking, gambling and fighting. Many slaves had run away into the hinterland, and a few disgruntled soldiers had joined them. These large groups of fugitives occasionally attacked outlying settlements. In 1728 and again in 1734 the soldiers rebelled against the governor. They objected to being forced to farm, clear forests and build huts.

Jean was 37 years old and his wife 27. The both came from the famous trading

port and pirate lair of Saint Malo, in Brittany, France. Jean had been an Ensign (a very junior naval officer), but had volunteered to come in the very first batch of voluntary settlers (as opposed to company employees). He soon started work as a pilot – sailing out in a small boat to meet incoming sailing ships, and guide them through the maze of coral reefs that surrounded Mauritius and into the safe harbour within. This was no easy job – the French East India company believed that the reefs were so dangerous that they alone would prevent the British from attacking the island.



Soon after Jean and Jeanne arrived, the governor decided to move the main settlement across to the other side of the Island at Port Louis, which had more favourable winds. It was here at Port Louis that Jean and Jeanne occupied a 235 acre concession close to town (it's now a suburban cemetery) and set up home. Most likely Jeanne would have supervised the slaves at home while Jean was working down at the port.

Another ancestor, Jacquette Lelay had also arrived in Mauritius by 1730, accompanying her first husband, Charles Dagrón. They both came from Port Louis, a small sea-port on the other side of Brittany from St Malo. He was a barber, though it's not known if he actually practiced this trade in Mauritius.

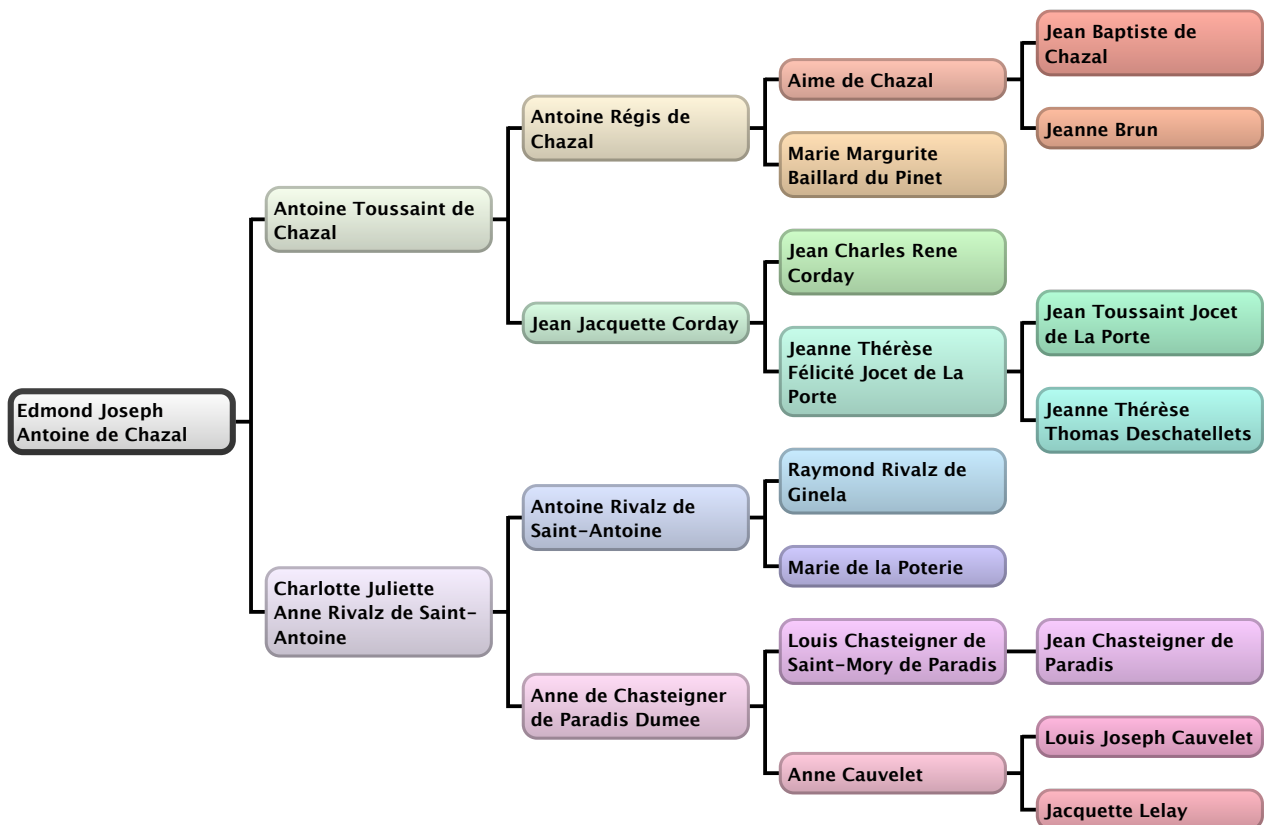
Life was difficult and full of tragedies.

Jean and Jeanne buried both of their young children before they turned five. They went on to have twelve more children, five of whom died before reaching adulthood. Jacquette and Charles had three children before Charles himself died in 1734, but only one of the children survived. Three months later, she remarried an East India Company sailor from Paris, Louis Cauvelet, with whom she had five more children, two of whom survived to adulthood. Louis too died young, in 1742, but Jacquette herself lived to the ripe old age of 74, and lived to see her grandchildren grow up.

In addition to the raids by escaped slaves, rebellions from the soldiers and constant depredations of the giant rats, a cyclone of extraordinary violence hit the island on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1731, followed by three days of heavy rain, which damaged every hut on the island and washed away most of the plantations.

In 1735 the first really able governor, Bertrand François Mahé, Lord Labourdonnais arrived. He found, apparently, an island without commerce, the inhabitants discouraged and constantly fighting the escaped slaves. But over the next few years he tracked down and captured the slaves, and established a fine harbor and model village at Port Louis, supplied with clean water via an aqueduct.

Over the next thirty years, the colony thrived, the population rising from less than 1000 in 1729 to over 18,000 in 1767 (3163 Europeans, 587 people of mixed race, and over 15,000 black slaves). On average about 30 East India Company ships each year would call in at the islands on their way to or from India. At Port Louis, a ship-building yard was established, trained slaves built and repaired ships. During the war of the Austrian Succession (1741-1748) and again during the Seven Years war (1756-1763), Mauritius-built ships



defeated English squadrons in Indian waters, saving France's Indian colonies. The profits were immense – between 1725 and 1759 the French East India company made a net profit of over 250 million Livres.

Jean became Lieutenant of the port, presumably managing all the comings and goings, both of warships and merchant ships. Many of these ships brought new settlers, including one who married his daughter Jeanne:

- Jean Corday, a ship master with the company and minor squire from the seaport of Lorient in Brittany, who married in 1747.

And another who married Jacquette's daughter Anne...

- Louis Chasteigner de Saint-Mory de Paradis, an East India Company marine originally from the little town of Amboise, on the Loire in Central France, who arrived in 1755, and married Anne Cauvelet three years later.

## Antoine de Rivalz de Saint-Antoine and the Royal Take-over.

In the early days, visitors to Mauritius were struck by the lack of class distinctions between the different French settlers. This contrasted strongly with the situation back in France, still decades away from the revolution, where lords feasted while peasants starved. The most famous book set in Mauritius, "Paul et Virginie", by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, drew a strong contrast between the idyllic life close to nature in the islands and the diseased class-ridden life in France (the narrator in the story is thought to be based on Jean Jocet de la Porte). But even on the islands, class counted.

Antoine Rivalz de Saint-Antoine benefited from this. He was aristocracy – very very minor aristocracy, but he definitely came from a noble family in the south of France. Born in Carcassonne in 1739, he sailed to Mauritius on the ship "Prudent" in

1767, and was immediately appointed to the governing council of the island. Within a few months he had somehow acquired vast plantations run by gangs of slaves, and was one of the leading magnates of the island.

But he was in for a rude surprise. At this point, Mauritius was owned not by the French Government, but privately by the French East India Company. But bankrupted by its losses in India during the seven years war, the company sold Mauritius to the French Throne, and on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1767, the new royal governor arrived from Paris to take command. His name was Daniel Dumas – a blunt and abrupt military veteran of the Canadian war, who was determined to take the unruly colonials in hand.

Dumas was bitterly opposed by many of the old company magnates, accustomed to having their own way. Dumas tried to declare martial law, but the council (on which Antoine Rivalz was still a member) refused to sign it. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1768, Antoine was stripped of his position on the council, and on 27<sup>th</sup> February, Dumas marched into the council chamber with a platoon of soldiers and had his order signed at gun-point.

Worse was to come. Antoine had apparently used very intemperate language at various meetings with Dumas (he resolved at one meeting to “pay the last drop of his blood to keep [the islands] laws pure and strong...”), and continued to agitate against Dumas after being sacked. So on 9<sup>th</sup> of March, a squad of soldiers took Antoine by force from his house, marched him down to the harbour and placed him on the ship “l'Etoile du Matin”, which took him to the tiny island of Rodrigues and left him there.

Rodriguez was a tiny, almost uninhabited desert island, several hundred kilometres from Mauritius, occupied only by a handful of slaves

and two or three white overseers mostly engaged in harvesting the giant tortoises that roamed the island, as a source of meat for Mauritius. Antoine was to spend eight months on this island, during which time his health was apparently shattered, he lost an eye and became deaf.

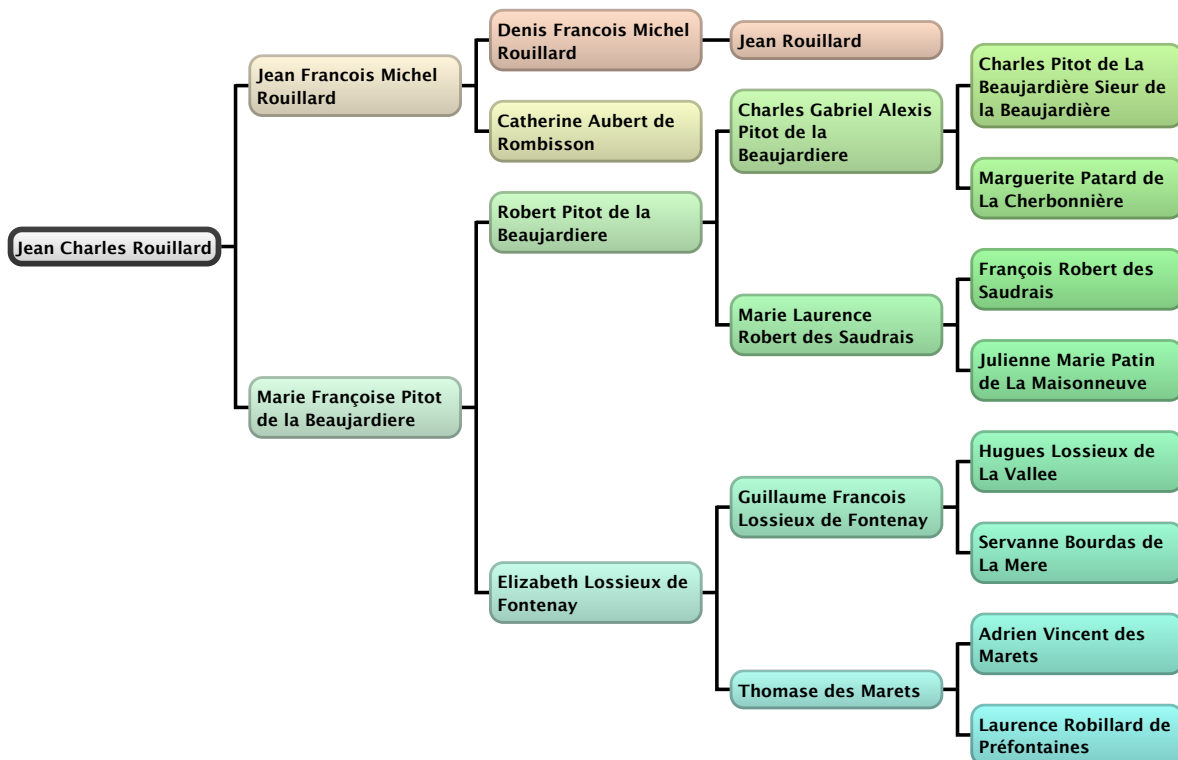


Meanwhile back in Mauritius the power-struggle continued, and after a few months, a secret letter writing campaign by Dumas' opponents succeeded and Dumas was recalled to France. A ship (the “Massiac”) was immediately despatched to Rodrigues, and Antoine was rescued, arriving back in Mauritius on 27<sup>th</sup> November, only to find that his slaves had run away, his plantations were in ruins, and his house had been looted.

He pursued Dumas back to France seeking redress, but was eventually persuaded to a reconciliation. By April 1771 he was back in Mauritius, and by 1792 he was President of the Colonial Assembly and possessor of extensive lands. His second wife was Anne de Chasteigner de Paradis Dumeé – granddaughter of Jacqueline Lelay.

## The De Chazal Family and the French Revolution

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Mauritius was a wealthy base for merchant traders. Many visitors and locals complained about the get-rich-



quick mentality. Mauritius was quite different from the plantation colonies in the West Indies – it was seldom self-sufficient in food, importing what it needed from Madagascar, and was primarily a trading base – a bit like Hong Kong was to be for the British a hundred years later.

The ancestors of a second branch of the family (the Rouillards) arrived during this period.

- Guillaume Lossieux de Fontenay, a ship captain, arrived in 1755 with his wife Thomase, who was herself the daughter of a ship master. Both were from St Malo. Their daughter Elizabeth married:
- Robert Pitot de la Beaujardiere, a ship-owner and trader also from St Malo, who was based in Mauritius on or before 1776. Their daughter Marie married:
- Jean Francois Michel Rouillard, a sailor and merchant, also from St Malo, who arrived in Mauritius on the ship “Georges” on 18 May 1783.

People from more noble backgrounds also continued to arrived. Two brothers, Francois Chazal de la Geneste and

Antoine Regis de Chazal arrived from their ancestral home – the little town of Montbrison, Loire, where their ancestors had been the local squires and magistrates since at least 1624. Francois had worked for the East India company for 25 years, visiting Mauritius several times before settling permanently in 1763, in the region known as Pamplemousses, where he acquired a great fortune and large estates. He was one of the members of the Supreme Council of the island when Dumas took over in the name of the King, but unlike his fellow council member Antoine de Rivalz de Saint-Antoine, he managed to remain on good terms with everyone. He was apparently a keen naturalist, and introduced many useful plants to the island.

His younger brother Antoine-Regis had made a career in the army, retiring with the rank of captain in 1763. On retiring from the army, he moved to Paris to stay with another brother Pierre, who had a young wife from Brittany. He ended up marrying one of her acquaintances, Jean Jacquette Corday, the grand-daughter of Jean Jocet de la Porte. She must have been visiting the mother country with her father, who was a ship-master. The

young couple then came out to join her parents and his brother in Mauritius in 1770, where two boys, Antoine and Charles were born in quick succession. Antoine-Regis then died on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1772, having been on the island for only two years.

In 1787 the two boys Antoine and Charles, still in their teens, set sail for France on the ship "La Consolateur", not realising that they were about to sail into the midst of the French Revolution. When they got to France, they stayed with their uncle Pierre, who set them up in rented accommodation in Paris, and engaged tutors for them.

Uncle Pierre decried the influence of Paris as destructive of youth - advised that they be taken home, commenting on the unrest in the country, the bankruptcy of the government, and advising against military careers for them given the state of the army and likely retrenchments.

Antoine considered becoming a naval engineer and prepared for the exam but was talked out of it by his uncle due to the low pay. The revolution then engulfed France - they were temporarily evacuated from Paris for their safety. They arrived back in Paris on 17th March 1790. Charles was trying to join the army - but it was hard in the state of chaos. Antoine had desired to join the clergy but had his hopes dashed when it was abolished by the Estates General. Their uncle continued to look after them well and introduced them into all sorts of good society.

In September 1870, Uncle Pierre wrote to his brother Francois that "The eldest is a boy without passion, hard working, reasonable as an old man, he loves spending, but at least he made good use of it and is capable of learning through experience of his spending. He is loved by all, a pretty face and very friendly. He is full of talent." He certainly wrote to ask for more money from his uncle in

Mauritius. He was studying hard at art, music and weapons.

Charles was another kettle of fish - wild and unruly. Pierre advised getting him home at once. He never listened to his brother's advice and had moved out. He eventually succeeded in joining the army, and must have served in many of Napoleon's battles.



*In 1792 Antoine was living at the house of M Magnier, Rue de la Harpe, No 128, College de Justice, Paris, on the left bank of Paris, shown here today.*

Antoine had plans to travel around several European countries. I don't know what happened to him over the next few years and whether he made the trip - we hear of him next in 1800, when he is back in Mauritius, married to the daughter of Antoine Rivalz de Saint Antoine, and in possession of the large estates inherited from his uncle.

## Corsairs

Soon after the revolution, war broke out between Britain and France - a war that would last on-and-off for twenty years, culminating in the Battle of Waterloo. During the war, Britain blockaded France, cutting off most of its maritime trade and putting the many merchants based in Mauritius out of work. Some took to trading with neutral countries (such as the brand new United States), but most turned to a much more lucrative trade - piracy. Over 50 ships, warships and armed merchant ships,

most of them built in Mauritius, ranged out across the Indian ocean in search of British merchant ships. Almost the whole population was involved in some way or another in this piracy, which brought immense wealth to the islands, and kept them well supplied despite the blockade.

Joachim Drieux was one such corsair – a St Malo seaman cut off in Mauritius when the war began, he turned to piracy. But by far the most famous corsair was Robert Surcouf – not a direct ancestor but closely related to many of our ancestors, and known as the “king of the corsairs”



*Statue of Robert Surcouf in St Malo.*

Born in St Malo, he ran away from a religious school aged 13 and stole a small craft to prove his ability to sail (he was caught in a storm and had to be rescued).

He was reputed to be a rowdy young man, prone to fighting, and he was packed off to sea in March, 1789, aboard the slaver *Aurore*. In February, 1789,

*Aurore* with a load of slaves was caught in a tropical cyclone and wrecked in East Africa. The ship was repairable and Surcouf came to the captain's attention through his energy and perseverance while removing the rapidly decomposing bodies of 400 dead slaves from the hold of the ship so it could be made seaworthy. He was hired on as first mate in that captain's next ship. That ship was also wrecked and Surcouf signed onto the French corvette *Bienvenue* which was bound for Lorient to be paid off. He arrived back in Brittany in January 1792.

After only a short stay at home, Surcouf signed on as the first mate of another slaver, this one bound for Mauritius. When the War of the First Coalition broke out Mauritius found itself blockaded and an unemployed Surcouf signed onto a corvette and was commissioned an ensign. He worked for a time on the illegal slave trade between Africa and Reunion, before turning to piracy (though he didn't have a letter of marque). According to the “Age of Sail” web site -

“He quickly took three small prizes, two ships carrying rice accompanied by a pilot brig. He sent Emilie and the two rice ships back to Mauritius and continued to cruise in the pilot brig. Soon afterwards he captured another rice ship.

On the morning of January 29, 1796, Surcouf passed into legend.

It began when lookouts aboard the pilot brig, which Surcouf had named *Cartier* spotted a three masted ship in the Bay of Bengal heading towards India. The rice ship he'd captured the previous day was close by and he took several of her prize crew back aboard *Cartier* to attack this new ship. He now had a crew of 19.

As Surcouf closed on the target he

hoisted the Union Jack. The ship, taking him for a pilot brig, hove to and waited. It was then that Surcouf discovered that his intended prey was the East Indiaman Triton carrying 26 guns and a crew of 150. Emilie had 19 men and no guns.



Having discovered too late the size of his prey, Surcouf could not run because the Triton was a faster ship. He decided to attack. Surcouf laid Emilie alongside Triton and boarded her. The British crew was surprised but the determined assault succeeded in driving the crew below decks where Surcouf had the hatches secured.

He ransomed the captured rice boat back to its owner and put Triton's crew aboard and set sail for Mauritius. When he arrived back in Mauritius he found the governor wasn't terribly amused by his freelancing. All of his prizes were confiscated and sold with the proceeds going to the government. Surcouf took his case to the Directory in Paris, a cause in which he was supported by several leading citizens of Mauritius, and the decision was reversed. The decision took fourteen months in which time Surcouf was beached."

He continued his exploits in a variety of ships, on several occasions taking British ships much larger and better armed than his – the most famous example being his capture of the Kent,

described by the "Age of Sail" web site as follows:

"In May 1800, Surcouf took command of Confiance, a fast 18-gun ship from Bordeaux undergoing repairs in Île de France. Beginning in March, he led a brilliant campaign which resulted in the capture of nine British ships. On 7 October 1800, in the Bay of Bengal, off Sand Heads, Confiance met the 38-gun Kent, a 820-ton East Indiaman, under Captain Robert Rivington, with 400 men and a company of naval riflemen. Despite being outnumbered three to one, the French managed to seize control of the Kent. He became a living legend in France and, in England, a public enemy whose capture was valued at 5 million francs, although he was noted for the discipline of his crew and his humane treatment of prisoners."



*Robert Surcouf*

He continued raiding until the Peace of Amiens, at which point he settled back in St Malo and married. But when war

broke out again in 1803 he was back at sea, outfitting a small fleet of Corsairs.

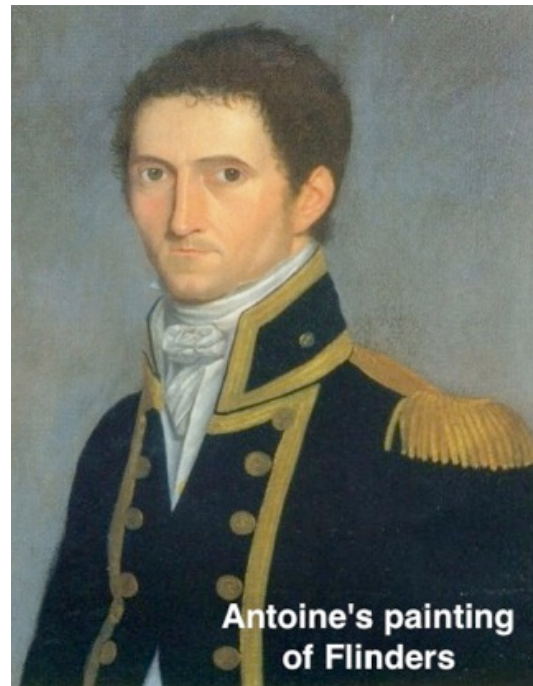
As a privateer, Surcouf used tactics to compensate being out-gunned by larger British ships: he would use small, fast ships to make the huge ships think he was either not enough of a threat to consider firing at, a vessel on the verge of sinking, or a fishing vessel. Even if the enemy did fire at him, his ships were often too fast for the British behemoths to catch. When alongside an enemy ship, elite marines waited below decks until an order was given to board. When the men sprang forth, the British ship cannons could not depress enough to fire directly on the French ship.

Through Surcouf's actions he brought incredible wealth to St. Malo, it was said that Napoleon himself borrowed from the city's treasury to pay for his campaigns. Surcouf naturally had amassed a great deal of wealth in his escapades and wanted to make a terrace out of coins. He went to the Emperor himself and requested permission. Of course all currency had Napoleon's face on it and he disapproved of people treading over his visage. The great corsair then clarified his plan with; "No my lord, they will not be treading upon your face."

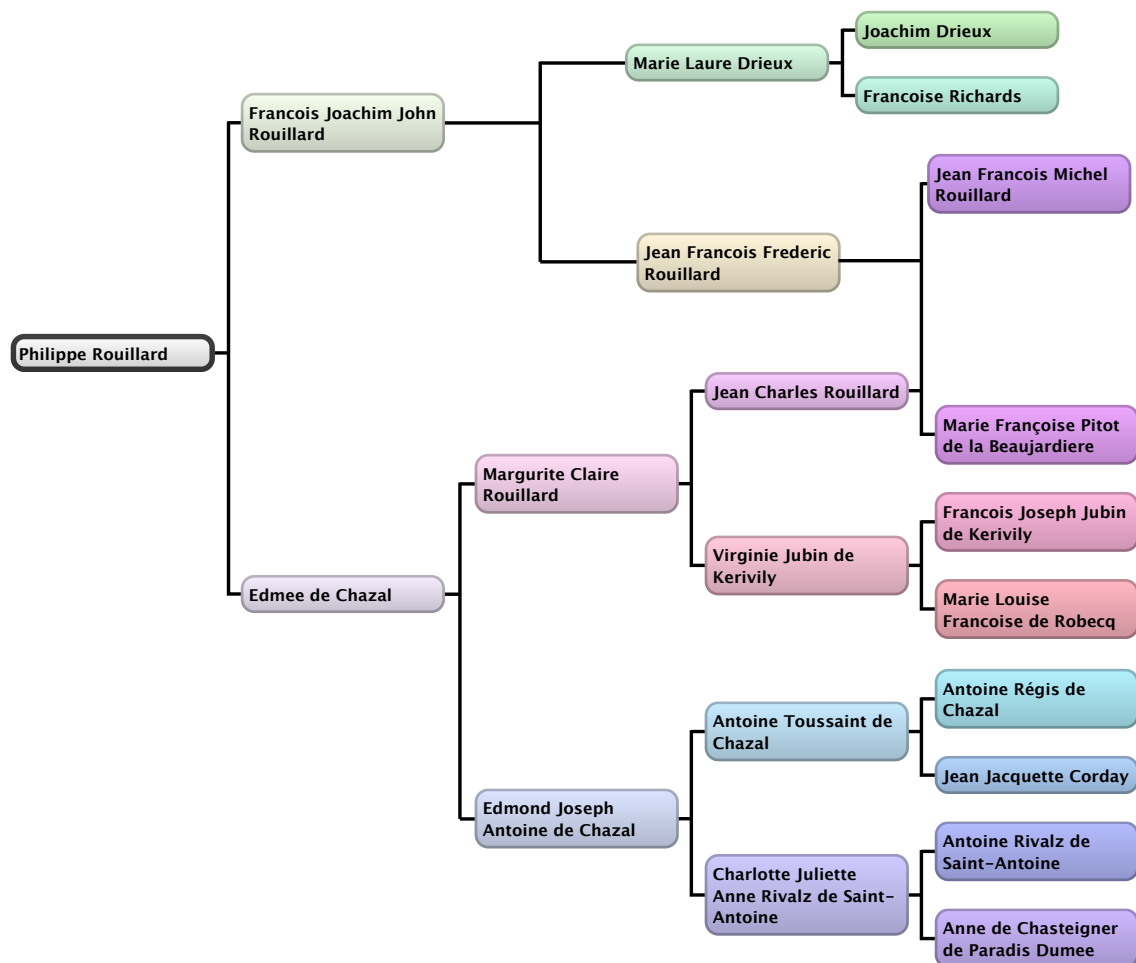
The large terrace was constructed with the coins stacked and then laid sideways so that the thin edge acted as the surface on which people walked.

It is said that Surcouf was so feared by the British that ships would capitulate without a fight as soon as they learned that he was the captain.

## The Painting of Matthew Flinders



In 1803, the noted explorer of Australia, Matthew Flinders, was on his way back to England from his second great exploring trip around Australia when he called in at Mauritius for repairs, and despite his scientific passport was imprisoned. He was to spend seven years as a captive on the island. Initially he was kept in close confinement, but after a year and a half was allowed to freely explore the island. He learned to speak French fluently, and became good friends with Antoine de Chazal – frequently visiting his great house and plantations up on the plateau. Flinders' diary notes many long walks with Antoine around his estate, and musical evenings. Antoine's wife Charlotte (Daughter of Antoine Rivalz de St Antoine – the man who was abandoned on the nearly deserted island of Rodriguez) was apparently an excellent musician, playing upon a harpsichord which had been taken by corsairs from a captured British merchant ship. There were many dances at Antoine's house, and Matthew Flinders noted with some disapproval the scanty clothes of the



ladies and how much they exposed themselves while dancing.

Antoine, in addition to being a successful landowner and farmer, still used the painting skills he'd acquired in Paris, and painted the only surviving portrait of Matthew Flinders.

This painting has had a curious recent history. It was purchased by shady Australian billionaire Alan Bond in 1987 at auction in Melbourne. It vanished in mysterious circumstances in the late 1980s, just as Bond's corporate empire began to collapse. Its whereabouts were unknown for several years, until it was discovered in a packing crate in a London security warehouse. It turned out that it had been illegally flown out of Australia to Switzerland in December 1989, strapped to the floor of one of the Bond corporate jets and wrapped in a blanket. It now hangs in the Art Gallery of South Australia.

During the period of Flinders' captivity,

the depredations of the various corsairs caused the British so much trouble that they resolved to conquer Mauritius. The first attempt in 1810 led to the Battle of Grand Port – the only major naval battle in the whole Napoleonic wars that the French won. The battle subsequently attracted the attention of authors from both Britain and France, featuring in the 1843 novel *Georges* by Alexandre Dumas, and the 1977 novel *The Mauritius Command* by Patrick O'Brian.

Later that year the British tried again, landing in overwhelming force, and after a brief one-sided battle, receiving the surrender of the French forces, in return for agreeing that the French could keep their language, religion and customs. Mauritius was now a British Colony, and would remain as such until independence in 1968.

## The 19th Century

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was far less eventful than the 18<sup>th</sup> in Mauritius. Antoine died of an Opium overdose in 1822 (apparently taken for medicinal purposes) leaving his plantations to his eldest son Edmond.

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, fortunes were made in the sugar trade. Hundreds of thousands of indentured labourers from India were imported to run the huge sugar plantations, of which Edmond's was one. The descendants of these labourers are today the dominant ethnic group in Mauritius, greatly outnumbering both the French and the descendants of the black slaves (few English people ever settled on the island). Edmond expanded his plantations, and was noted for taking good care of his workers, creating for them a hospital and a school. He also set up one of the largest sugar factories in Mauritius.

One son of the Merchant Jean Francois Michel Rouillard married a daughter of the Corsair Joachim Drieux, and another ended up as Commandant of one of the major districts of Mauritius.

Edmond's daughter Edmee married Jean Rouillard's grandson Francois Joachim John Rouillard, a noted lawyer who ended up as chief justice of the island's supreme court.

## Leaving Mauritius

By the 1890s, Mauritius had long forgotten the sugar-fuelled prosperity of the 1840s. The opening of the Suez Canal meant that it was no longer near any major trade routes. The price of sugar had fallen due to increased competition. The island was badly overpopulated, subject to frequent epidemics of Cholera and other diseases, which ran wild through the slums in which many of the former slaves and indentured labourers lived.

Several particularly severe cyclones battered the island in the 1890s, causing great damage to crops and buildings.

The French (Franco-Mauritian) community remained wealthy and tight-knit, and exercised tight control over almost all aspects of the government and business of Mauritius. They tended to move out of the crowded and unhealthy cities and up to their estates on the plateau. But even here there was trouble – large families were the norm, and there was no spare land and few suitable jobs for younger sons and daughters. Edmee and Francois had eleven children, ten of whom lived to adulthood. The eldest inherited, but what were the rest to do?

The result was a huge migration of Franco-Mauritians around the world in search of new opportunities. Some went to France or England, some to Argentina, and some to Australia. But most went to nearby South Africa, including four of the younger children of Francois and Edmee.

The 4<sup>th</sup> son, Richard Anthony was the pioneer. After training at the London School of Mines, he moved to the Cape Colony, fought in the Boer War, and then was one of the first pioneers in the Pongola – indeed he was known as the “man who tamed the Pongola” (the Pongola being a river in far north Kwazulu-Natal, close to the Swaziland border.. His younger brother (and my great grandfather) Philippe, also a mining engineer by training, joined him there.

He met Nancy Thompson (daughter of Francis “Matebili” Thompson) on a ship out from England and married her. He died young “of a disease now easily treatable”, aged 51, in 1932, but was survived by his daughter Margaret Nancy Rouillard, known to us as Gogo. For more on this see the South Africa section.

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