French Knives in North America: Part II

siamois and “two-pin” knives

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At the very close of the seventeenth century, a new type of jambette folding knife appeared in French colonial records. These knives were originally termed couteau à la siamoise (knife in the Siamese manner or style) and later frequently documented simply as couteau siamois or couteau siamois (Siamese knife) by French colonial merchants and seaboard wholesalers. By the 1720s, according to archival records, this new jambette had become the most widespread type of knife exported from France for its French colonies of North America and its commercial dealings in the fur trade. Indeed, the Siamese folding knife was so popular, that even five years after the surrender of Canada, English fur trade merchants not only still imported French folding knives for their Native customers, including three sizes of horn handled “Folding Siamois knives,” but started making English copies of them, possibly as early as 1765.1

This new knife style seems to have been the perfect product for the North American wilderness, being both inexpensive and sharp-pointed. Consequently, they frequently far outnumber shear knives in several Great Lakes Native archaeological sites.2 Furthermore, sharp pointed siamois blades are, from an archaeological perspective, representative of the “Early to Middle Historic period.”3 This date range fits neatly with French Colonial records which describe this exact style of knife. A particular entry made in a Montreal merchant ledger book dated to 1744 provides ample evidence in showing that these knives were, in fact, of the folding type since they were listed as: “2 dozen folding siamois [knives].”4 More importantly, this new style of folding knife would come to supersede the earlier à la dauphine and Platin folding knives discussed in part one, published in Volume I, Issue IV, Journal of the Early Americas.

Fortunately for us today, descriptive records found in a number of colonial merchant outfitters’ ledger books and notarized accounts inform us that the blades on the siamois knives displayed either a “pointed” or “round” tip.5 These descriptions, therefore, correspond with only one type of folding knife blade profile identified from an assemblage of blades excavated at numerous mid-century French and Native-associated archaeological sites. These presumed à la siamoise blades exhibit either a long, sloping back edge (both curved and straight), moving downward towards an upturned point (frequently called a “sabre point” or “lazy S” by earlier archaeologists), or a rounded tip with a slightly convex cutting edge. They were not, however, “…Knives, double bladed…” as claimed by one English-speaking historian, because he unfortunately projected his modern bias that the siamois knives were synonymous with the famous “Siamese Twins” Chang and Eng. (1811-74) …a hundred years too late!6 While the vast majority of these blades are of the one-pin type, having a lentil on the back of the blade, there are a few archaeological examples that are of the two-pin type which will be discussed later in this article.

Although we cannot determine the exact origin of the term couteau siamois (Siamese knife) as far as the history of French cutlery is concerned, we have discovered that these were available in France as early as the second quarter of the seventeenth century. For example, one of the earliest mentions of siamois knives in France can be dated to 1647, the year Blaise Pleuronceau of Saint-Savin sur Gartempe, France (a town located near the city of Châtellerault) had at his home a variety of knives which included “Ones with boxwood handles said à la Siamoise (in the Siamese fashion)...”7

Since France and Siam had relations that date back to the sixteenth century, we may believe that these types of knives may have indirectly adopted this name through popular culture, due their resemblance to the “exotic” shapes of the long knives or short sabres used by the Siamese people: “The Siamese knives, that aren’t looked upon as a weapon, although they can be used as one if needed, have a blade measuring 1 pied in length and a width of three or four fingers.”8 Additionally, this term may have been popularized even further after the “other-worldly” visit by the Ambassadors of Siam, who visited the French King Louis XIV in 1686, who were depicted in an engraving with saber-like weapons worn in their sashes. Gifts provided by these ambassadors apparently had such a profound impact on the King that even certain types of cloth took on the name of “Siamese cloth” in France soon thereafter.9

Image © Probable French folding knife of the one-pin construction mounted with a siamois-type unmarked blade with its original beechwood handle and brass rosettes at the pin area. Overall length: 24 cm. (Private collection, Canada).

Images © Siamese embassy to Louis XIV led by Kosa Pan in 1686, by Nicolas Larmessin. (b): Detail showing the exotic looking sabres worn by the Siamese delegates. Take note of the shape of the sheath indicating blades which likely had upturned pointed tips.
Regarding the source of production for the siamois knives in France destined for its colonies, evidence from historical documents as well as markings found on excavated blades from North American archaeological sites point to the town of Saint-Étienne as their main manufacturing center. For example, an invoice written in the town of Lyon in 1714, through which many Saint-Étienne products were purchased for the colonies, noted that Monsieur de Ramezay, then acting Governor of New France from 1714 to 1716, owed the Lyon-based merchant Pierre Torrent for goods which included 576 mid-sized and 1,008 large Couteau Siamois (Siamese knives). A few decades later, these were also supplied through the Thiollière cutlers working out of the town of Saint-Étienne as their main manufacturing center. For example, a merchant-outfitter Monière noted that “…during the 1740s and 1750s, the Bizaillon knife seemed to be the most popular around Montreal. Many people who were not involved in the fur trade purchased them as well as voyageurs.” Interestingly enough, these may have also been offered in a very small size, considering that Monière noted “3 dozen Bizaillons knives for children” in his 1752 ledger book.

Other than these commercial records, references to the term siamois is seldom found in period cutters’ inventory lists or product catalogues at Saint-Étienne itself. This probably means that cutters were likely using other denominations or appellations for the knives. For instance, in 1763 Fougeroux de Bondaroy likely referenced siamois knives when he enumerated a wide range of pointed-tip knives available from the Saint-Étienne-based cutter named Lafforge. Some one-pin folding knives were described as “Pointed-tip knives, yellow handles also of boxwood…” whereas two-pin ones were listed as “Two-pin knives, polished black sheep horn handles, pointed blades…” and “Knives from Chambon [a suburb of Saint-Étienne] bull’s horn handles, not moulded or polished, pointed blades, with two pins…” A few decades earlier, Pierre Reynaud, a merchant-cutter from the town of Thiers in business with cutters at Saint-Étienne, included a variety of couteaux à la siamoise in an inventory list dated 1738. The small, medium, and large sizes were listed as having horn handles, whereas another lot of mid-sized ones presumably had wood handles.

In New France, however, historical documents of a military, trade, and civilian nature abound with references to siamois knives from which descriptive records have allowed us to divide them into two distinct sub-categories: the common type ones and those described as having a handle showing a “dog head.”

The earliest known reference regarding rounded blade tip siamois folding knives can be dated to 1707. That year, 864 of these knives described as “…yellow handle knives and their rounded tips in the Siamese style…” were documented as loaded aboard the ship Le Héros to be sent to Quebec. A few decades later, Lemoine-Monière and Pierre Guy, merchants at Montreal, made note of “siamois knives with rounded tips.” Siamois knives were also occasionally described with pointed-tip blades. During the 1740s, two of the later merchants along with Brouaghe, a merchant from Quebec, had recorded small, mid-sized and large siamois knives with pointed tips. From an archaeological standpoint, excavations from French and Native-associated sites reveal that the pointed-tip version were much more common than the round-tip ones. The materials used for handles on siamois knives shipped to New France were recorded as horn or wood, and occasionally, ivory. For example, certain knives or bundles of knives were specified as having boxwood or “yellow boxwood,” plain black wooden handles, (likely the color beechwood or boxwood took on after being treated in hot iron handle molds presses), or plain wooden ones.

It is also interesting to note that certain pointed-tip siamois knives may have come to be referred to as Bizaillon or Bitalon knives, the name of a famous family of cutters working out of the town of Saint-Étienne. For example, a general inventory list of goods and merchandise belonging to the colonial merchants Désauniers and Brouaghe included “4 gross of large siamois knives, pointed, Bizaillon…” whereas in 1758, the merchant-outfitter Monière recorded two dozen “siamois Bizaillon.” Gérin-Lajoie stated that “…during the 1740s and 1750s, the Bizaillon knife seemed to be the most popular around Montreal. Many people who were not involved in the fur trade purchased them as well as voyageurs.” Interestingly enough, these may have also been offered in a very small size, considering that Monière noted “3 dozen Bizaillons knives for children” in his 1752 ledger book.

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Along with common siamois knives, we also find a more expensive and specifically named type, described as couteaux siamois à manche de corne et tête de chien (siamois knives having a horn handle with a dog head) or simply labeled couteaux à tête de chien (knives with a dog head). These knives begin turning up on records at the very end of second decade of the eighteenth century and thereafter up to the 1750s. In 1719, 4,320 knives described as “siamois knives, half with boxwood handles, half with horn handles with dog’s heads, and of no other quality…” were to be sent to Quebec from the port of Rochefort.35

These fancier grade siamois folding knives were apparently manufactured both with pointed and round tip blades, considering that in 1742, the Quebec merchant named Cugnet listed small, mid-sized and large knives with horn handles having a dog head mounted with round-tip blades (bout rond) along with small and mid-sized knives with dog heads having unspecified blade tips, suggesting in this case that the blades may have been pointed.36 Several records pertaining to New France dating from 1733 to 1742 reveal that many of these particular knives were manufactured by the Saint-Étienne based cutler family named Perrin providing further evidence that these knives were coming out of Saint-Étienne workshops.37

Of all the records compiled in reference to these particular siamois knives having a handle with the shape of a dog head on the tail end, the only material listed for the handles seems to be horn.38 This dog head decorative ornament on the handle’s tip was likely created by a design located in the cavity of certain knife handle mold press at the factory. Fougeroux de Bondazay stated the following while observing workers at Saint-Étienne fashioning common folding knife handles: “Some of these molds are more fashioned. Some have grooves that add a small ornament on the handles they are intended to shape. Rarely does one add this small perfection for the molds meant for molding the wooden handle…horn lends itself more easily to receive the impressions of the mold than wood.”39

A rare surviving one-pin Saint-Étienne–marked knife has recently surfaced from a private collection in the United States exhibiting what initially appears to be a ‘carved’ zoomorphic effigy on the end of its horn handle. Although probably molded and not carved, the well-worn effigy clearly represents the head of an animal (complete with eyes, mouth and teeth), and is one that could easily be the one known by actual contemporary designs. Oriental ‘grottesque’ animal effigy sword pommels, then popular on European short, fancy hunting swords and hangers, often featured animals. Specifically, the ‘exotic lion’ ivory hilts imported from Stuhal40 and perhaps from Siarn itself were very popular. While many ambiguous dragon/lion head hilted swords exist, and were imported from Asia, especially by the Dutch, many more were cast in brass by various European sword smiths. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, many of these popular cast hilts sported easily recognizable English lion, horse and dog’s heads,41 the last of which was an ancient symbol of ‘the hunt’. How appropriate for a trade knife! Nevertheless, whatever the origin of the form, the idea that this figure is actually that of a tête de chien rings especially true when considered in conjunction with the numerous, similar excavated siamois blades, the specific descriptions of their horn handles, and this specific Saint-Étienne cutler’s mark, all of which correspond perfectly with all the tête de chien knives described in archival documents.

### Date range of New France related records consulted for this article

- Known recorded sizes as specified in New France related records: large, medium, small.
- Known recorded material used for handles as specified in New France related records: horn.
- Sampling of records referring to these knives in relation to the following locations: Fort Frontenac, Montreal, Fort Ticonderoga, Fond du lac, Bâle de Kényt, Fort Niagara, Fond du lac, Bâle de Kényt, and Quebec.42

### Archaeological sites where pointed-tip siamois blades of the one-pin construction were found:
- Maison Bissot site Sept-île (Quebec), Le Sourire site (Quebec), Michilimackinac (Michigan), Fort St. Joseph (Michigan), Nassoue post (Texas), River L’Atte mission site (Illinois), Fort Tionadega (Alabama), Zimmerman site (Illinois), Hotel Plaza site (Iliinois), Summer Islandsite (Michigan), Rock Island (Wisconsin), Fatherland site (Mississippi), Mesquakie Fort site 11-M1-6 (Illinois), Fort Niagara (New York), Chota-Overhill Cherokee site (Tennessee), Fort Meductic (New Brunswick), Fort Ticonderoga Collection (New York).

### Archaeological sites where rounded-tip siamois blades of the one-pin construction were found:
- Michilimackinac (Michigan), Guarbert site (Illinois), c.1700 Onondaga graves (New York), Chota-Overhill Cherokee site (Tennessee), Fort Meductic (New Brunswick), Fort Ticonderoga Collection (New York).

### Sampling of records referring to these knives in relation to the following locations:
- Québec, Fort Frontenac, Fort Niagara, Fond du lac, Bâle de Kényt, and Quebec.42

### Known recorded sizes as specified in New France related records: large, medium, small.

### Known recorded material used for handles as specified in New France related records: horn.

### Sampling of records referring to these knives in relation to the following locations:
- Fort Frontenac, Montreal, Fort Ticonderoga, Fond du lac, Bâle de Kényt, and Quebec.42
The two-pin blade construction was well documented by Bondaroy in relation to the one-pin knives: “Others have two pins in the area where the blades is held to the handle; one that forms, like the others, a pin upon which the blade rotates, and the other serves as a stop on which rests the heel of the blade when it is open. These knives are called couteaux à la capucine, or “two-pin” knives; and as they require more work than the others, they are a little more expensive.” The term à la capucine was probably given to these knives because of the shape of their handle’s tip that likely resembled a capuche or cowl, a pointed hood attached to the coats of the Franciscan order of monks called Capucins in French.

While these were known in France as couteaux à la capucine or couteaux à deux clous (two-pin knives) these terms are, up to the present time, nonexistent in archival documents relating to New France. This may leave us to believe that they may have been identified in colonial records on the basis of their blade shapes (i.e., siamois or à la dauphine) and can therefore likely be identified due to their higher price on inventory lists than a one-pin knife.

**Two-Pin Folding Knives**

While apparently uncommon in North America, several folding knife blades displaying a distinctive profile at the heel of the blade which accommodated two transverse pins on the handle have been found archaeologically within the historical French sphere of influence, at both French and Native sites. These excavated blades display at least three varieties of blade profiles with a deux clous (two pin) heel. For example, one two-pin specimen found at Fort Chambly (Québec) and two others from Louisbourg display the à la dauphine style blade profile, whereas another four examples from Fort Ticonderoga, Michilimackinac, Fort St. Joseph, and Sept-îles display the siamois pointed knife blade profile. There is even one fascinating specimen collected at the Rock Island Site (Potowatomi, ca. 1670–1730) which shows a rounded-tip siamois blade with what seems to be a two-pin type construction.46
Characteristics Of Siamois Knives

Considering the popularity that the siamois-shaped blade gained during the eighteenth century as much in Europe as in North America, it is not surprising that folding knives with sharp pointed tips were widespread all over the Mediterranean* and are still made in France today. While this blade profile can be found on the legendary Laguiole knife and frequently called a Yatagan blade (a type of Ottoman knife or short sabre which originated from Turkey), this traditional blade shape, which has persisted for centuries in French knife-making, may have been initially commercialized on a large scale by Saint-Étienne-based cutlers. This may also hold true for the common two-pin knives, also called à la capucine, which were still turned out in small cutler’s shops in France at the turn of the twentieth century, many of them nearly identical to those illustrated by Bondaroy some 150 years prior.

Alongside the siamois, Flatin and à la dauphine types of jambettes discussed within these two articles, a wide assortment of additional French folding knife types have also been found in a number of historical documents with regards to New France. These include penknives (canifs), pruning knives (serpettes), spring-knives (couteaux à ressort), and many other presumed folding knives inventoried on various occasions using cutler or merchant’s symbol and/or name. These names and symbols, mostly coming from cutlers working at or around the town of Saint-Étienne, were generally impressed on the blade and/or the handle (i.e., Esperon, Jolivet, Berte (Berthet), Chapelon, Perrin, Bizallion (Bizalillon), and Marcelin (Marcelin)).

Supplementary research and analysis will be required to gain a better understanding of these other varieties of folding knives within the historical context of French colonial North America.

* Guide for those readers who wish to pronounce key words used in the article