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- Gabriel de Clieu and the Martinique Seedling

Gabriel de Clieu and the Martinique Seedling

Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu was a French naval officer who, in 1723, smuggled a single coffee seedling from the royal botanical gardens in Paris to the Caribbean island of Martinique. The voyage took weeks, encountered Barbary pirates, survived a near-shipwreck, and at one point ran so short of drinking water that de Clieu shared his personal ration with the plant to keep it alive. The seedling survived. Planted in Martinique under armed guard, it produced its first harvest in 1726. By 1777 — fifty years later — Martinique was home to more than 18 million coffee trees, all descended from de Clieu's single plant. From Martinique, that genetic line spread to Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Colombia, and across Central America. Modern DNA analysis confirms that the

majority of commercial Arabica coffee grown in the Western Hemisphere descends from the seedling de Clieu carried in his glass box across the Atlantic Ocean three centuries ago.

Who Was de Clieu

Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu was born in Normandy, France, around 1686 or 1688 — historical sources differ by two years, partly because his birth records were never centrally archived. He grew up in the small town of Anglesqueville-sur-Saâne (sometimes written as Angléqueville) in the maritime northern region of France, joined the French Navy in 1705 as a Sub-Lieutenant, and rose through the ranks of the colonial naval service.

By the 1710s and early 1720s, de Clieu was serving in the French Caribbean, primarily at Martinique. The role placed him at the intersection of two emerging French colonial priorities: maintaining naval presence in the West Indies, and establishing economically valuable plantation crops in those colonies. Coffee was, by then, an obvious target.

Why Coffee Mattered to France in 1720

By the early 18th century, coffee consumption in Europe had become a mass phenomenon. Coffee houses in Paris, Vienna, London, and Hamburg drew enormous crowds. Demand far exceeded supply. Coffee was still imported almost entirely from Yemen via Mocha, with Dutch operations in Java producing growing volumes that the Dutch — naturally — preferred to sell at premium prices to other European buyers, including the French.

The French had a significant problem: they had a thriving coffee culture, expanding tropical colonies suitable for coffee cultivation (Martinique, Saint-Domingue, French Guiana), and no coffee plants of their own to plant. The Dutch held the genetic monopoly. Every European coffee plant traced back to the Hortus Botanicus in

Amsterdam.

A 1714 diplomatic gift partially fixed this — the burgomaster of Amsterdam sent King Louis XIV a young coffee tree that became known as the "Noble Tree" of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. But this single tree was guarded jealously. Successive attempts to obtain offshoots for transplant to French colonies were refused. The royal physician, Pierre Chirac, controlled access to the greenhouse where the Noble Tree's descendants were grown.

The Acquisition

By 1720, de Clieu had become convinced that breaking the Dutch coffee monopoly via French Caribbean cultivation was both economically and strategically valuable for France. He made multiple unsuccessful applications for coffee seedlings from the Jardin

des Plantes. Royal physician Chirac refused them all.

Different historical accounts diverge on what happened next. According to de Clieu's own 1774 letter published in the *Année Littéraire*, his persistent applications eventually persuaded "an influential lady" to intervene with Chirac, who finally agreed to provide the healthiest available coffee plants. Other accounts — including some quoted in Wikipedia's article on Coffee Production in Martinique — describe a more dramatic version: that King Louis XV refused permission outright, and that de Clieu obtained the cuttings via a nighttime burglary of the royal gardens, possibly with Chirac's covert assistance.

The exact mechanism is disputed. What is certain is that de Clieu obtained one or more viable coffee seedlings from the Noble Tree's descendants in the Paris greenhouse, sealed them in a glass box for transport, and prepared to carry them across the Atlantic.

The year was probably 1723, not 1720, despite some sources citing the earlier date. De Clieu's own 1774 letter establishes that he returned to France in late 1720, spent 18-20 months in France attempting to acquire the plants, and then sailed in 1723. Some Martinique sources cite an earlier 1720 voyage as well — the question of whether de Clieu attempted the journey twice (one failure in 1720, one success in 1723) or only once (1723) remains historically unresolved.

The Voyage on the Dromedary

De Clieu departed Nantes in 1723 aboard *Le Dromadaire* (the Dromedary), a French Portefaix-class warship with 44 cannons and over 100 crew. The choice of a heavily armed military vessel was deliberate — the route across the Atlantic and through the Caribbean approaches was dangerous, and de Clieu's cargo was both physically delicate and politically sensitive.

The voyage encountered several near-fatal threats:

Barbary pirates. Off the coast of Tunisia, the Dromedary was menaced by Barbary corsair pirates — Ottoman-affiliated raiders who controlled the Mediterranean and operated as far west as the Canary Islands. The Dromedary's 44 cannons and trained crew successfully repelled the boarding attempt. Had the pirates succeeded, the coffee plant — and de Clieu — would likely have been lost.

The Dutch saboteur. A passenger on board, identified in de Clieu's account as a Dutch national, repeatedly attempted to interfere with the coffee plant. De Clieu's memoirs describe the man as "basely jealous of the joy I was about to taste through being of service to my country" and write that the man "attempted to destroy the seedlings." On at least one occasion, when de Clieu had taken the glass box on deck for the plant to receive sunlight, the Dutchman snapped off a piece of the plant in his sleep and discarded it. The plant survived this attack but in a weakened state.

The Atlantic storm. Weeks into the crossing, the Dromedary was caught in a severe storm that breached the ship's hull. To stay afloat, the crew was forced to throw cargo overboard — including drinking water reserves. De Clieu managed to retain just enough water for the coffee plant.

The water rationing. With the supply diminished, the captain rationed water across all passengers. De Clieu, in his account, describes sharing his personal water ration with the seedling for weeks, accepting personal dehydration in order to keep the plant alive. The act has become the most famous detail of the entire voyage.

The reef. Near the Martinique coast, a final storm pushed the Dromedary toward the reefs. The ship ran aground. The crew survived; the plant survived; the ship was eventually refloated and put into Martinique port.

Planting at Préchere

Once arrived in Martinique, de Clieu planted the surviving coffee seedling in his own garden at Préchere, on the northern coast of the island. The plant was fenced and guarded continuously to prevent theft or sabotage. Slaves on the property were assigned 24-hour watch duty over the plant — a practical detail that reflects the colonial labor system of the period.

Four years later, in 1726 or 1727, the tree produced its first harvest of viable coffee seeds. De Clieu distributed seeds and seedlings widely. Records from his account indicate gifts to De la Guarigue-Survillier, colonel of the Martinique militia, and to other landowners on the island. Within several years, multiple Martinique plantations were established from de Clieu's stock.

The Multiplication

The growth was rapid. By 1730, Martinique was exporting coffee to France in commercial quantities. By 1750, Martinique coffee was an established item in French

colonial trade. By 1777 — fifty years after the first planting — historians documented approximately 18 to 19 million coffee trees in cultivation on Martinique alone.

From Martinique, the genetic line spread:

- **1715** (predating de Clieu, from earlier French stock or possibly from de Clieu's plantings if dated to 1720): coffee cultivation introduced to Haiti and Saint-Domingue
- **1718:** Dutch carried coffee to Surinam
- **1723** (the same year as de Clieu's voyage, from earlier stock): plantings extended in French Guiana
- **1728:** Coffee introduced to Jamaica by the British
- **1730:** First Brazilian coffee plantation established at Pará, with seedlings from French Guiana
- **1736:** Coffee reached Puerto Rico, with stock arriving via French Caribbean trade routes

Saint-Domingue, in particular, became a coffee superpower in the 18th century. By the 1780s, Saint-Domingue was producing approximately half of all the world's coffee — until the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) ended the colonial plantation system there and shifted Caribbean coffee production toward Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica.

The Genetic Legacy

The most remarkable confirmation of de Clieu's role came in 2015. Researchers in Martinique, after fifteen years of investigation, identified two surviving Arabica trees in remote mountain locations on the island. DNA testing confirmed that both trees descend directly from de Clieu's original seedling — and through that, from the Noble Tree, and through that, from the Dutch propagation effort begun in 1616.

Modern genetic studies estimate that approximately 90 percent of all commercially grown Arabica coffee descends from this single line. The implications are extraordinary: virtually every cup of Latin American coffee — Brazilian, Colombian, Costa Rican, Honduran, Guatemalan, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Jamaican — has the Noble Tree somewhere in its genealogy. The single seedling de Clieu carried across the Atlantic in 1723 is the founder of an arboreal dynasty that now spans continents.

This is one of the most consequential botanical events in human history. A single plant, smuggled by one French naval officer, became the source of a global agricultural commodity that today supports tens of millions of farmers and billions of dollars in annual trade.

The Path to Puerto Rico

Coffee reached Puerto Rico in 1736, only thirteen years after de Clieu's voyage. The path was indirect but traceable. From Martinique, French planters carried coffee seeds to other Caribbean colonies including Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti), Guadeloupe, and Jamaica. From there, through inter-island trade and French refugee migration following the Haitian Revolution, coffee plants reached Puerto Rico's central mountain regions — Yauco, Adjuntas, Lares, Jayuya, and Maricao.

The volcanic soils of central Puerto Rico, the high altitude, and the regular rainfall combined to make the island ideal for the Typica variety that descended from de Clieu's seedling. By the mid-19th century, Puerto Rican coffee was being exported globally. By the late 19th century, before Hurricane San Ciriaco and the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico was one of the world's most prestigious coffee origins, supplying European royalty and the Vatican.

Every Boricua coffee plant grown today — at Hacienda Tres Picachos in Jayuya, at Hacienda Santa Clara in Yauco, at Café Lareño in Lares — descends genetically from the seedling de Clieu watered with his own ration in 1723.

The Memorial

Despite the magnitude of his contribution, Gabriel de Clieu remained relatively unknown for most of the centuries after his death. The only formal memorial to him in Martinique is the botanical garden at Fort-de-France, opened in 1918 and dedicated to him with the inscription "whose memory has been too long left in oblivion."

The relative obscurity is partly the fault of de Clieu's own dramatic 1774 letter, which became the source for nearly all subsequent historical accounts. Modern historians have noted that the letter was written 50 years after the events it describes, by a man in his late eighties, with possible exaggeration of his own role. Some claims in the letter — including the suggestion that de Clieu's seedling was the sole founder of New World

coffee, ignoring earlier Dutch plantings in Surinam and other regional efforts — are demonstrably overstated.

But the central facts hold up to scrutiny. de Clieu did obtain coffee seedlings from the Paris Jardin des Plantes. He did transport them to Martinique under difficult conditions, including shared water rations. The seedling did survive, was planted, and produced viable offspring. And modern genetic analysis confirms that the surviving Martinique coffee trees do descend from his stock. The hagiography may be overstated; the substance is real.

Why de Clieu Mattered

The Dutch, by 1723, had broken the Yemeni coffee monopoly. The French, with de Clieu's voyage, broke the Dutch monopoly. The structural significance is the same as the earlier Dutch operation: a single act of botanical transfer changed the economic geography of an entire commodity for the next three centuries.

What de Clieu uniquely accomplished was the transplantation of Arabica into the climate and soil conditions of the New World tropics. Java was already producing Arabica successfully under Dutch control, but Java was thousands of miles from European markets, requiring months of voyage time and exposing supplies to spoilage and pirate interception. The Caribbean was a few weeks away. Once de Clieu's plant proved viable in Martinique, the economic case for Caribbean and Latin American coffee was overwhelming. Within a century, the Americas had become the dominant coffee-producing region of the world — a position they retain today.

The single seedling that de Clieu carried, watered with his own water ration through an Atlantic storm, set in motion the modern global coffee economy. Without de Clieu, no Brazilian coffee industry. No Colombian Arabica. No Central American specialty. No Puerto Rican coffee renaissance. The cup of coffee in your hand exists because one French naval officer would not let one small plant die.

History of Coffee Documentary — full historical arc of coffee's spread from Ethiopia through Yemen, the Ottoman Empire, Europe, and ultimately to the Americas via Gabriel de Clieu's 1723 Martinique voyage.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/EJVbsCfLy-8

Key Facts

- Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu was a French naval officer born in Normandy ~1686-1688
- He acquired a coffee seedling from the Paris Jardin des Plantes in 1723
- The seedling descended from the 1714 "Noble Tree" gifted by Amsterdam to Louis XIV
- His ship, *Le Dromadaire*, faced Barbary pirates, a Dutch saboteur, an Atlantic storm, and water rationing
- de Clieu shared his personal water ration with the plant during the rationing
- The seedling was planted at Préchere, Martinique, and produced first harvest in 1726

- By 1777, Martinique had ~18 million coffee trees, all descended from de Clieu's plant
- 2015 DNA analysis confirmed two surviving Martinique trees descend from his stock
- Approximately 90 percent of commercial New World Arabica traces to this lineage
- Coffee reached Puerto Rico in 1736 via the de Clieu-Martinique line

Frequently Asked Questions

Did de Clieu really share his water with the plant? According to his own 1774 account, yes — and the account is the basis for all subsequent retelling. Some modern historians have noted that the story is romantic and possibly embellished, but the broader facts (water rationing during the voyage, plant survival to Martinique) are independently corroborated. The detail of personally sharing the ration is plausible and fits the documentary record, even if the dramatic specifics may be polished.

Was de Clieu the first to bring coffee to the New World? Not strictly. The Dutch had already established coffee in Surinam (1718) and the French had earlier operations in Saint-Domingue (1715, predating de Clieu's confirmed 1723 voyage). What de Clieu uniquely accomplished was the genetic line that produced the dominant Latin American coffee dynasty. His seedling was not first chronologically, but it was foundational genetically.

Why is the date sometimes 1720 and sometimes 1723? Historical sources disagree. De Clieu's own 1774 account establishes 1723 as the most defensible date — he was in France during 1720-1722 and sailed in 1723. Some Martinique local historical sources retain a 1720 dating, possibly reflecting an earlier failed attempt. The 200th anniversary of de Clieu's voyage was correctly celebrated in 2023, not 2020.

Did the seedling actually survive in pure form? Yes. The 2015 DNA testing in Martinique confirmed that two surviving Arabica trees in remote mountain locations are

direct genetic descendants of the de Clieu line. Dutch genetic markers from the original 1616 Yemeni stock are detectable in their DNA. The genealogical chain from Yemen ? Amsterdam ? Paris ? de Clieu ? Martinique ? modern survivors is verifiable.

How does de Clieu connect to Puerto Rico specifically? Indirectly but reliably. From Martinique, French planters distributed coffee to other Caribbean colonies in the 18th century. By 1736, coffee plants of the de Clieu line had reached Puerto Rico and were being established in the central mountain regions. Every Puerto Rican coffee plant grown today traces back through the de Clieu-Martinique line to the Yemeni Arabica that started the entire chain in 1616.

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Taste Authentic Puerto Rico Coffee

Every Boricua coffee plant grown today descends from the seedling Gabriel de Clieu carried across the Atlantic in 1723. Single-origin Puerto Rican coffee — grown above 3,000 feet in the central mountain volcanic soils — is the modern continuation of a 400-year arboreal lineage that began in Yemen, passed through Amsterdam and Paris, survived a French naval officer's voyage to Martinique, and reached the Caribbean mountains in 1736.

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