

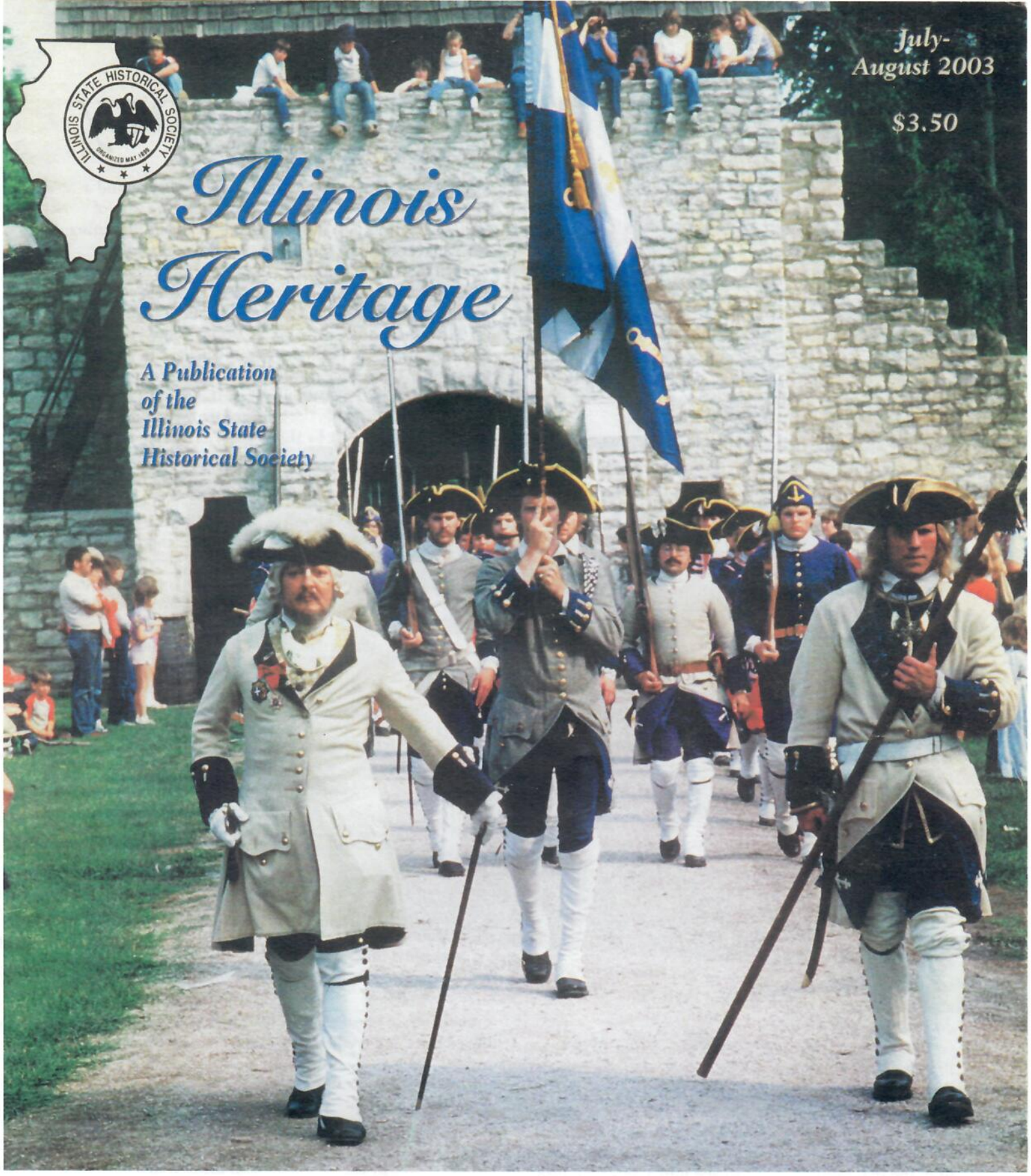


July-  
August 2003

\$3.50

# *Illinois Heritage*

A Publication  
of the  
Illinois State  
Historical Society



**A Reprint:  
"Rendezvous with History" & "The Midwest's French Roots"**

**by Charles J. Balesi**



# Rendezvous with history

**For 18th- and early 19th-century reenactors, the past is a weekend away**

Story and photos by Charles J. Balesi

I discovered the hidden historic Midwest fifteen years ago, first at Fort de Chartres when I was beginning research for a book about the region's French past. "Come to the Rendezvous on the first weekend in June," I was told, "you will be pleasantly surprised."

To reach Fort de Chartres, six hours from Chicago, two from St. Louis, you eventually must take Highway 3 and not miss the turnoff at Ruma, a few houses and a tavern grouped at an intersection. Shortly thereafter, the road goes down abruptly in tight curves through a densely forested ravine. Then a small bridge and a name—Prairie du Rocher—and you're entering a town the French founded in 1718. Prairie du Rocher—pronounced "de Roshur" by latter-day Illinoisans—is very much alive with hopes to share its revival through tourism, just as Ste. Genevieve across the Mississippi River was able to do so successfully.

You're still in Illinois, but the short descent takes one from the flat, rather dull landscape into a different, lush world, where little has changed over the years. On the horizon the western bluffs mark the ancient bed of the Mississippi and, immediately behind, are the hills of the

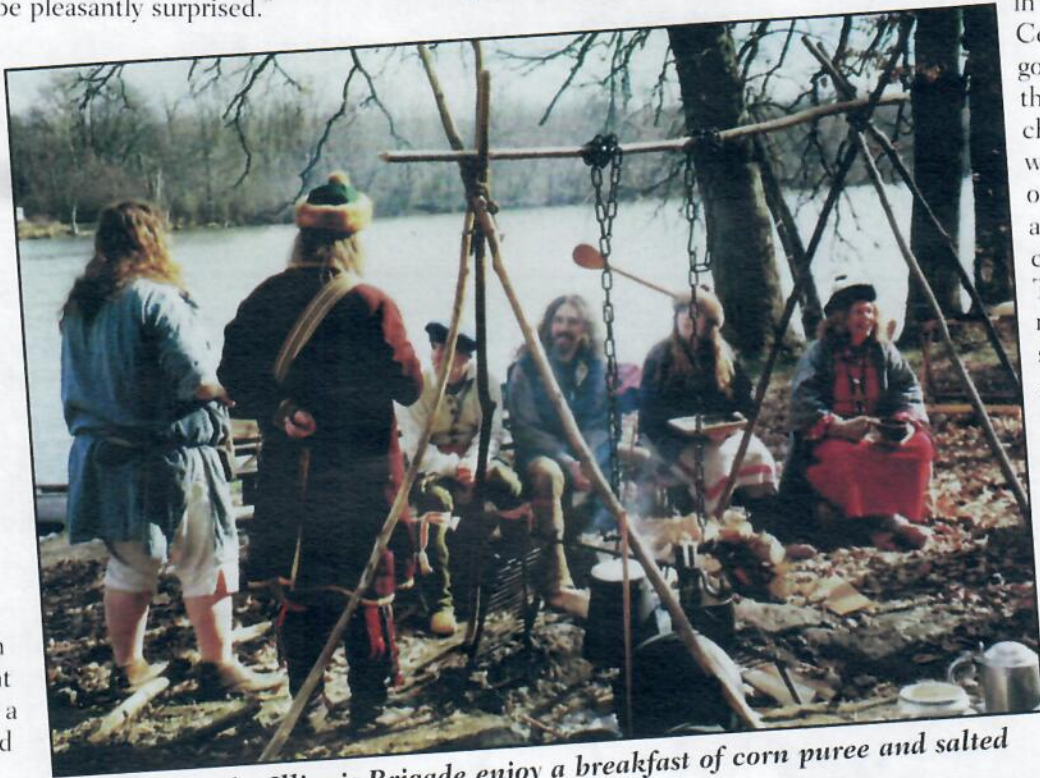
Ozarks. Two more miles past the chain of levees and a long majestic lane of oak trees lead you to the gate of Fort de Chartres, a stone fort rebuilt by the WPA during the Depression. The fort was reconstructed on the original foundations of the massive defense works the French erected at great expense in 1754 to replace an older log construction.

I remember distinctly my first time at the Fort's Rendezvous. As an historian, I firmly believe in the importance of visiting any place you intend to write about, and, here I had stumbled on the original set, alive with a cast of characters demonstrating what I meant to describe. I was struck by the number of people dressed

in Eighteenth-Century garb, going about their daily chores, cutting wood, cooking on open fires, and mending clothes. These were not actors or students on a summer following a script *a la* Williamsburgh, but people from all walks of life engaged in reenacting through their instincts and logic. Few

had blood ties with the French whose personae they assumed for the weekend; their hearts and emotions were the connection with history.

At sunset came units of French militia, *Compagnies franches de la marine*, the British Black Watch Regiment, and the American Rangers, all marching ceremoniously for the ritual of retiring the colors. The occasion was presided over by the Commandant, dressed in a resplendent, scrupulously authentic uniform of a French colonel in Louis XV's armies. His name was Marvin Hilligoss and I would come to know him well. A former



*Voyageurs of the Illinois Brigade enjoy a breakfast of corn puree and salted pork during their November outing.*



reenactor hired by the State of Illinois to supervise gun firing at the site, Hilligoss was a character; I will always remember him fondly.”

\*\*\*

A quarter century later, the Fort de Chartres Rendezvous, having survived the hiatus of the Flood of 1993, continues to take place on the first weekend of every June, and now attracts hundreds of costumed re-enactors. The cast includes merchants of period crafts with their colorful marquees, Native Americans sporting war paint and breech cloth, storytellers, minstrels, and the occasional authentic trapper. By the time most daytime visitors have returned home, the aroma of barbecued meat ranging from humble chickens to more exotic game mixes with the lingering scent of black powder and the pungent smell of burning wood. The encroaching night muffles the sound of tin tumblers and goblets. Then the first ballads, drinking songs, and bagpipe tunes of the night can be heard from campfire to campfire, the magic dissolving the tyranny of time.

### What is a Rendezvous?

Rendezvous is a French word meaning “meeting” or “date.” Every two years during the 1700s and 1800s, fur traders and trappers gathered at a pre-determined location to trade with each other and the American Indians, to catch up on news, and to enjoy their version

of a good time. At first the European participants were all French, but it wasn't long before other nationalities joined in. Still, it would be French words such as “portage,” “barbeque,” and “rendezvous” that entered the American vocabulary. Today the word describes a variety of living history activities.

Living history programs developed rapidly since the celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976, bringing together a variety of free-spirits. Some are refugees from the Hippie movement, bikers, environmentalists, military history enthusiasts, muzzle-loader aficionados, and re-enactors. Others

Authenticity, though encouraged, is not always demanded by event organizers, however, which is why academics often hold living history programs in low regard. But for the casual observer these anachronisms often go unnoticed.

Yet, one can learn much from watching the difficult art of hitting stationary target at fifty yards with a musket, or of baking bread in a old-fashioned outdoor oven, or of the patience that candle making requires.

Rendezvous can be big, even huge, as in the Feast of the Hunter's Moon in Ouiatenon, the ancient French post on the Wabash River four miles south of West Lafayette,



*A reenactment of the French Indian war at the Rendezvous on the Rouge River, near Detroit.*

are staunch herbal tea-toddlers as well as those who appreciate a good shot of whisky. Determined loners and gregarious souls carouse together at rendezvous, and all share a common love for the past.

For the purist, “rendezvous” applies only when describing to the world of re-enactors: traders, voyageurs, and Native Americans—not to historical recreations of mock battles, shoots, and military drills and parades.

in Indiana, held every weekend of October. The event has attracted thousands of re-enactors and tens of thousands of visitors in its 28-year history. Events can be small and intimate too, such as the annual Labor Day Rendezvous at Fort Bon Secours, near Eau Claire, in Wisconsin.

Organizers like to set up French-Indian War reenactments because they are always popular with visitors. They can be quite elaborate, as at the historic site of



the French Fort of Louisbourg in Canada, or at Fort de Chartres in Illinois. Even when no battles are staged there are drills and fife and drum performances.

### Hot on the trail of history

I spent a great deal of last spring, all of the summer, and most the fall traveling from rendezvous to rendezvous in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois. When I participate I wear the uniform of an officer in the Eighteenth Century French Marines.

Among my experiences that stand out was a night in the log-built tavern at White Oak Fur Post at Deer River, Minnesota, where we crowded around an improvised bluegrass jam session that lasted until dawn. The White Oak Society owns several acres of original wetlands and woods, with a rebuilt post, restored authentically down to the smallest details. From July to August, eighteen different folk groups organize and manage the entertainment, sandwiched between events such as "Shot gun shoot," "Fancy Dandy Shoot," and "Seneca Runs," the last being a timed event, with participants trying to hit targets on the run.

The Chautauqua and French Festival, sponsored by the Association of the North, also takes place in Minnesota, near Red Lake Falls, a few miles from the Canadian border. This Rendezvous is set on historic grounds, right where the cart trail to St. Paul, still very visible, forded the Red Lake River. It is an area where many residents are of French and Indian ancestry, with names such as Huot, Vaudrin,

Beauchesne. Professor Virgile Benoit, who lives only a mile from the site, is cofounder of the festival, along with Pierre and Carol Uebe. A man of imposing stature, Pierre Uebe sports a white mane and abundant beard. He and his wife now run a business aptly named "Blue Frog Traders."



Marvin Hilligoss (right), long-time reenactor, and Fort de Chartres "Commandant" par excellence.

At Chautauqua, around a huge bonfire by the bank of the river, I heard for the first time *Metis* — French-Indian descendants— sing in *Michif*, the French-Cree dialect still commonly spoken there. The singers were from the Turtle Mountains and Manitoba, across an international border that is to them an artificial nuisance. Their songs and stories brought a unique dimension to this rendezvous. The voices

rising over the cotton trees, the faces lit by burning logs told a tale of on-going struggles for cultural survival that bridged reenactment to reality.

A canoe daytrip inland from where the St. Joseph River and Lake Michigan meet, half-mile south from the town of

Niles, you find a river-front park and the nearby archaeological site of Fort St. Joseph. This fur-trade post built by the French and rebuilt over the years has seen the flags of four nations: Spanish, French, British, and American.

The annual July St. Joseph Rendezvous has a mission: To rebuild the original fort. If, and when, it is rebuilt, Fort St. Joseph would be a handsome addition to the string of reconstructions that, from northern Michigan to Kentucky, fill the double purpose of education and entertainment.

### All business and pleasure

Three major events, two in Indiana and one in Illinois, bring the essential part of the rendezvous season to a conclusion: Mississinewa 1812; the Feast of Hunter's Moon; and the Trail of History.

Mississinewa bridges the gap between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, evoking the memory of the last stand of the Miami Indian nation and allied French settlers against an overwhelming American military. The site, which includes a permanent Indian village, is, like most, hidden away on a river bank near the town of Marion, Indiana. It is one of the best organized and best-run of all events I have seen from the point



of view of the visitors, who come by the tens of thousands. At Mississinewa, you will find an imposing military encampment, Voyageur and Trapper camps, and a large village of traders. A continuous program of battle reenactments, parades, and folklore concerts lasting late into the night.

Of all the events, the Feast of the Hunters' Moon stands in a class by itself. More a rendezvous than historic encampment (military parades but no shoots), the program attracted nearly 70,000 visitors and 7,000 reenactors to Fort Ouiatenon (West Lafayette, Indiana) last October.

One year the theme was "The Women of Quiatenon," which featured unsung heroines from camp followers to historical characters such as Widow Therese Catin, a fur-trader in her own right. The theme had more than historical significance. The Feast was run efficiently for several seasons by Leslie Dotson, an historian then attached to the Tippecanoe Historical Society. Dressed in the riding clothes of a French middle-class woman, she cut a unique figure among rough-looking re-enactors; she was also the eyes and brains behind the financial success of the event; as with many living history events, the Feast of the Hunters' Moon is also a business meant to support historical projects.

The style of the Trail of History is rigorous authenticity, with cars and trucks parked a half mile away from the campgrounds, totally out of sight. Organizers keep a watchful eye out for less obtrusive anachronisms too. Nestled in McHenry County Glacial Park in northern Illinois, the camp is overlooked by a high ridge. The tradition is for the re-enactors, carrying their ancient-style lanterns, to climb for a moment of communion with nature and the past. Flickering lights, silhouettes wrapped in Eighteenth-Century garb, and the occasional "Amazing Grace," all conspire to produce a truly magical moment.

Rendezvous and historical

reenactments create their own economy. *Smoke and Fire*, a publication out of Grand Rapids, Ohio, covers all aspects of the reenactment phenomenon, listing 79 events taking place in the U.S. and Canada just for the month of July. For the whole year there were 21 medieval and 20 Scottish reenactments, 34 reenactments of the War of 1812, and 73 Native American gatherings, and 26 dates for French-Indian War devotees to gather.

During each weekend for eight months of the year, tens of thousands of visitors and re-enactors bring an appreciable revenue to many small towns. Visitors acquire crafts, hand-made jewelry, folk art, and music tapes. Re-enactors buy accessories, period clothing, including leather goods and furs. For many of the "Blanket Traders" it is a weekend hobby; they barely make enough for gas money to reach the next event. For others, the market is sizable. A good example is Ernie and Vicky "Two Bears." Their display of quality furs and skins would more than satisfy any retailer on Chicago's "Magnificent Mile."

During the cold season, some events are now taking place indoors, sheltered in the relative coziness of county fair buildings or similar structures. The Antique Arms and History Fair in Kalamazoo, Michigan,



**Spectators "drafted" in the Scottish army at "Culloden," in Ypsilanti, Michigan.**

and the Trade Fair of Greenfield, Indiana, the former in October and the latter at the end of November, are two examples. Both are far more successful as tradeshow than as rendezvous.

The economic dimension of rendezvous and historical reenactments need not be decried; to the contrary, it shows to many communities that preservation and conservation can have a viable and positive economic impact. And, if a few hundred traders, big and small, can earn an income out of living history, history itself certainly stands to profit.

*Charles J. Belesi is the author of The Time of the French in the Heart of North America, 1673-1818, published by the Alliance Francaise of Chicago, now in its third edition. A new French edition was recently printed in Quebec.*



# Exploring the Midwest's

# *French Roots*



*Detail of Henry Popple's A Map of the British Empire in North America published in London, 1733, shows portions of the present states of Illinois and Wisconsin. Courtesy of the Author.*

**F**amiliar maps of the Midwest are filled with French names; Detroit (straights), Des Moines (the place of the monks), and farther west the famous Grands Tetons. But if you ask the average American why there are towns named Fond du Lac (Wisconsin), Terre Haute (Indiana), Duluth (Minnesota), and Des Plaines, in Illinois, chances are you will draw a blank. Perhaps some reasonably well-informed person may allude to French missionaries. If one is unusually well versed in colonial history, the reader may even suggest canoes, rivers, and the fur trade.

*by Charles  
J. Balesi*

The average person's knowledge, however, is still quite blurry when it comes to the history hidden in his or her backyard.

Why don't these French names at every corner of our regional geography arouse more curiosity? One explanation might stem from the curriculum that Midwestern states mandate in their public schools. In most history books, the reader will find barely more than a paragraph or two about the French and



Native Americans. Because the French and Indian War was fought essentially in the East, the United States in the Midwest appears to have no history prior to the inauguration of the first governors or the arrival of the railroad. Political correctness has brought some change in the way women, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics are treated of late but not to the French and the Native Americans who have no direct constituency here. While political correctness is by and large a euphemism for partisan spins and re-packaging of facts, one must lament that all the rich history which occurred in the Heart of North America before the nineteenth century is not better revealed. If nothing else, it would lead to more visitors to sites often only a few hours away, and in the process, help bring about tourism to areas whose industries have often

---

***The Church of the Holy Family at Cahokia was dedicated in 1799. It is probably the oldest remaining church building west of the Alleghenies. On April 25, 1971, the church was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark. Courtesy of the Author.***

---



traveled south or even overseas.

Strangely enough, there are people who are dedicated to maintaining the true history of the Midwest. Starting in the spring and well through fall, almost every weekend, they slip out of their neighborhoods and their regular lives and reach places hidden in the countryside where they don the clothes, take on the characteristics, and adopt the lifestyle of those who lived here two centuries ago. They are the reenactors, the devotees of historical re-creations, of Rendezvous patterned after the ancient annual gatherings of fur-traders and American Indians. Their pageantries bring alive a Midwest that highways and tollways

bypass. Their sounds and gestures transport across time with an ease that no exercise of virtual perception will ever be able to emulate.

We want to acquaint you with this secret Midwest, send you to discover it in a succession of inexpensive and enjoyable weekends.

How did it all start? The French had already been in North America since 1608, when a half-century later, fur-traders, better known as "voyageurs," a word that has entered the American vocabulary, began to venture out of Montreal in canoes made of birch bark. They paddled westward to Lake Superior and Lake Michigan and continued up the myriad of rivers and smaller lakes bartering for furs. Many even

preceded the famed Jesuit missionaries nicknamed the "Black Robes"—bent on converting the whole native population of North America to the Catholic faith and who, in 1665, were already in what is now northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. But it was in 1673, when Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette travelled south, that the land that would one day become the Midwest was open to French expansion.

Applying Jolliet's and Marquette's itinerary to a modern road map, one finds that they and their small party went through Green Bay, Wisconsin, travelled on the Fox River, and carried

their canoes across the land to the Wisconsin River. They executed what the French called a portage meaning a "carrying over," a term that later became common-place, then continued down the Mississippi River all the way to Arkansas. Their return trip took them through the center of Illinois to Chicago, where they went from the Des Plaines to the Chicago River after a long portage that approximately followed the present Archer Avenue.

The Illinois Indians who numbered about ten to fifteen thousand were in fact a federation of five small tribes, among them the Kaskaskia and the Peoria, who roamed the land from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi and as far north as Lake Superior. Until the 1600s, they were the most powerful nation west of the Great Lakes. By the time they met with the French,

they were already in a fast decline, battered by both large Iroquois raiding parties all the way from New York State and by the Sioux erupting from the northwest.

The conflict was about furs, which were becoming a rare commodity in the East while still abundant in the Midwest, and in great demand in Europe, especially beaver fur for men's hats.

By then, Native Americans had been supplying French and English warehouses for nearly a hundred years, receiving in exchange tools and weapons which slowly, but surely, were supplanting their own crafts. European-made tomahawks, hatchets, muskets, blankets, and powder, not to speak of mirrors, beads, and brandy, became part of their everyday lives. Forced out of their isolation and brought unknowingly into a budding global market, they were primitive by today's standards but no less effective. American Indians were hooked on needs which brought about a fierce competition for buyers in Albany and Montreal. This was a clear case where the laws of the marketplace led the weakest players to the eventual



of the Mississippi. France had just recently entrusted her possessions west of the Mississippi to Spain.

The War had a major impact on the Territoire des Illinois. Marines, militia contingents, Indian allies who had left from Fort de Chartres, Vincennes, Michilimackinac, St. Joseph, and other posts to converge on Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh) to join the main body of the French troops suffered substantial losses. Even more traumatic, the peace treaty signed in 1763, transformed the Mississippi from the Main Street of an

---

*The British government had great hopes that it would inherit the French fur trade and through its profits more than make up for the cost of the French and Indian War.*

---

empire into a border between two alien nations—Spain and Britain—exercising sovereignty over French settlers.

The British government had great hopes that it would inherit the French fur

trade and through its profits more than make up for the cost of the French and Indian War. For the fur trade to go on, however, both French voyageurs and Indian trappers needed to be shielded from the land-hungry American farmers. The problem was that these farmers had provided the bulk of the British colonial troops, including officers like Colonel George Washington. Their disappointment and anger at the way the mother country now was protecting “papists” and “savages” became one of the major important reasons—now forgotten—for the American Revolution.

The French were quick to recognize those they should support. In spite of the hullabaloo made about George Rogers Clark and his “long-knives” liberating Kaskaskia on July 4, 1778—a task made obviously easy by the lack of an English garrison—the truth was that the French population

by and large, and the near totality of the Indian groups from the Shawnee to the Miami, remained opposed to the arrival of the Americans.

The Midwest was also home to a few hundred people of African and mixed French and African descent living along the Mississippi and the Illinois rivers as far north as Michilimackinac. Although the majority were slaves, quite a few belonged to what the French called “free people of color,” including the best known of all today, Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable, a successful independent trader and a major player in the political intrigues of the time. While this class born out of the mixing of two worlds would do relatively well west of the Mississippi under Spanish rule, it too, would be overwhelmed by the steady waves of American settlers coming in from the East. But would the growing United States stop at the Mississippi and settle for only a third of the North American continent?

When Louisiana was returned to France, Napoleon, who had little interest for overseas possessions and needed to finance his European wars, was happy to find a buyer in President Jefferson. In 1803, the United States purchased Louisiana from France, bringing an end to a French political

presence on the North American continent.

The British would hold on to northern Wisconsin and most of Michigan until 1812 and then agree to pull back to the northern shores of the Great Lakes. Going forward to its Manifest Destiny, the United States would now quickly forego any cultural tradition that did not originate in the Thirteen Colonies.

As the wigs, lace, muskets, and canoes of the eighteenth century made room for the new, vigorous nineteenth century and its smell of smokestacks, farms, and steam engines, the French in the Midwest, along with the Indians with whom more often than not they shared bloodlines, faded into a world of story-telling, romance, and myth—not always flattering. There is a great body of American literature published between the 1830s and 1860s where the French are never mentioned without being followed by the words lazy, careless, unambitious, and drunk. They shared the last adjective with the Indians, ordinarily referred to in these same books as untrustworthy savages. Not until the historian Francis Parkman’s publications first appeared in the 1880s, did the French and Indians slowly start to regain their true place in American history.

## *For Further Reading*

Alvord, Clarence W. *Illinois Country, 1673-1818*, The Centennial History of Illinois, vol. 1. Springfield: Illinois Centennial Commission, 1920.

Balesi, Charles J. *The Time of the French in the Heart of North America, 1673-1818*. Chicago: Alliance Française Chicago, 1991.

Belting, Natalia Maree. *Kaskaskia under the French Regime*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1948.

Ekberg, Carl J. *French Roots in the Illinois Country, The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Pease, Theodore C., and Raymond C. Werner, eds. *The French Foundations, 1680-1693*, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, vol. 23. Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1934.





# *Illinois Heritage*

A Publication of The Illinois State Historical Society



*Fall-Winter 1999*









At the reenactment of **L'Isle à la cache** (Romeville), on the left, the author in the *compagnie de la marine* officer's garb.