

Colonists and Colonizing in the Illinois Country

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In the final years of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, a French colony developed in the middle Mississippi Valley. This colony, les pais des Illinois, the country of the Illinois Indians had rather vague boundaries. It extended east to the Alleghenies, west towards the Rocky Mountains, north up to Peoria, Illinois and south down the river to above the Arkansas Post. Although the Illinois included the part of Missouri we are now in, the center of activity was around Fort de Chartres in present southwestern Illinois. The Illinois settlement was an outpost of the colony of Louisiana.

Today when we look back at the 18th century colony in the Mississippi Valley and see this small island of settlement in a vast wilderness, life there appears to be as distant from the civilized world as it was for the pioneers moving into the western frontier. But this is only our retrospective view accustomed as we are to be connected by highways, TV and Internet. In the eyes of the 18th century people the colony in the Illinois was an integral part of European civilization. First and foremost, the inhabitants considered themselves French; they had not left their homeland to be separate, indeed many intended to return. This was an extension of France into a new land. Unlike many of their British counterparts on the East coast they were not escaping religious persecution. The dissenting group in France, the Huguenots were forbidden by law to come to the New World, so the religious aspects that played such a strong role in the settlement of the New England colonies did not influence the people here. The settlers came from a Catholic parish in France and they were in a Catholic parish in the New World.

It was difficult to motivate people to emigrate from France to the Mississippi Valley. The French peasants were not particularly eager to travel off on a three month long sea voyage into the unknown. Canada was already settled and the Jesuit priests there did not greatly encourage immigration through the reports they sent back to France. Their annual accounts told wondrous tales of conversion among the Indians; these appealed to the religious sensibilities of the populace. However, they also spoke of horrible cases of torture, burning, scalping, and death at the hands of the natives. The French people were both fascinated and repelled by these tales of the wilderness and the dangers to be

encountered, and that did not inspire many to come. Martyrdom was something they preferred to read about, not to experience personally.

The people who found the Illinois country attractive for settlement first were the Canadians themselves. They were originally from France of course, but many families had been in Canada for 2 or 3 generations. They knew at first hand the horrors the Jesuits related, but the land was home now.

The major industry in Canada was, of course the fur trade. As the traders opened up new areas for furs, the missionaries followed converting the Indians. The traders were attracted to the Indian settlements for trade, women and sometimes even for the religious services. This was how movement began to the Illinois. The Kaskaskia, one of the Illinois groups was converted. A few of the fur traders married Christian Indian women and settled with the Indians between voyages.

The Kaskaskia mission originally was located in northern Illinois; it made several shifts in location and finally the Indians settled in southern Illinois along the river that bears their name. The Kaskaskia settlement there was ideally situated for a trading post. It had access to all the major rivers draining the interior- the Mississippi, Illinois, Missouri and Ohio- and their tributaries as well. The number of inhabitants at Kaskaskia increased as more Canadian relatives of the traders joined this new village and as the families produced children.

What were these colonists like? Although we cannot relate to many of their experiences ourselves, a couple of brief biographies will give you a feeling of the time. One of the Canadians who came to Kaskaskia was Etienne Philippe called Dulongpré. While he was trading out of Canada in 1717, he was captured by hostile Indians along the Wabash River. Somehow he escaped from the Indians and fled to a British post in the Carolinas. The British were trade rivals, but apparently they could sympathize with a fellow trader; Etienne was taken by them to Sainte Domingo. From there he was able to obtain passage on a ship back to Louisiana. This brief account probably hides adventures that could be made into an action movie, but there are no details available. Shortly after his return he went to Kaskaskia. There he married a Christian Indian woman, settled and raised a family. His brother Michel also was a resident of Kaskaskia; Michel was married to the daughter of the Kaskaskia chief Rouensa, but that's another story; Carl Ekberg has written about it in an interesting article.

Another Canadian, Jean Jacques Brunet called Bourbonnais was born in Montreal in 1673, the year that Jolliet and Marquette explored the Mississippi River. Nothing is known about his early life but when he was 32 years old he was in lower Louisiana at Mobile when a boat arrived from France carrying a shipload of 20 marriageable girls. These young ladies had been selected in France by the Bishop of Quebec and were said to have been "reared in virtue and piety".

Jean Jacques married one of these girls, Elisabeth Deshayes; they and their three daughters eventually ended up at Kaskaskia and lived out their lives there. He was 66 years old when he died.

This cargo of women was one of several attempts to bring women to the colony as there was a predominantly male population here. This importation was not always successful. Elisabeth Deshayes had been carefully picked, but others were women taken from prisons and orphanages whose morals and health were dubious.

Endeavors were made in France to attract craftsmen and laborers to immigrate, particularly those with families in order to help develop and solidify the colony. Many of these came as hired workers with a contract to work for three years for the government; after this they could receive a grant of land to farm on their own. These people were recruited from various places in France, but most heavily from the ports of La Rochelle and Rochefort and from the environs of Paris. Life for a small craftsman in the French urban centers could be precarious economically; this may have been an influence for them to seek a new livelihood in the colony. Undoubtedly a few persons came looking to better themselves, to seek their fortune in the New World . Perhaps they originally intended to return to France, but most ended up staying permanently in the colony.

One of the craftsmen was Jean Jacques Catherine. He married a girl who came on a shipload of women deported from France, and sent to Louisiana as punishment. However it seems to have been a happy marriage. Catherine was a carpenter. One of the contracts he received from the government was for a very diverse group of items: a sawhorse, a wheelbarrow, a cart and a fifty-foot-long porch on the front of a building.

Another craftsman was Jean Baptiste Nicolas Becquet a blacksmith and locksmith and the son of a locksmith in Paris. He was married and his wife Catherine was listed on the ship's manifest as a laundress from Poitou. The story of his coming to Illinois has been created into letter format to give a better picture of what it was like to come as a settler in the 18th century.

A letter from Jean Francois Nicolas Becquet at Fort de Chartres, 1722 to Françoise Masse, widow Becquet in Paris.

Chere mama, The convoy will be leaving for New Orleans in a few days and I will take advantage of it to send this letter downriver. I hope that a ship will be returning home soon and bear this to you. I trust that you received my last which I sent back 4 months ago with La Loire telling you of our safe arrival.

We were fortunate in arriving at New Orleans only a few days before the convoy of the king left for Fort de Chartres. The trip up the Mississippi was arduous, and Catherine was ill much of the way. She is now recovered and sends you her fond

greetings.

We are now at the village of Fort de Chartres, a small settlement located by the fort. The largest village in the area is Kaskaskia 6 leagues downstream; there they have a church where the Illinois Indians, the French and Canadians worship. We have only a small chapel here at present outside the fort, dedicated to the mother of our blessed Virgin, Ste. Anne. The Jesuit fathers provide our priest who is also chaplain for the troops.

We have received an excellent grant of land, 2 arpents wide and stretching back towards the high rock bluffs at least 50 arpents. Some of this is in marsh and woods; there is also a goodly amount of arable land which I have begun clearing.

We have a lot in the village also where we will be building a house in the autumn. I have already made an agreement with La Plume to cut the boards necessary. I will pay him by making some ironwork for the house he now has. So by winter we shall be well settled in our new home.

I think fondly of you, Pierre Henri and little Magdalene. Your devoted son,

Another letter from Jean Baptiste Nicolas Becquet, this time to his brother Pierre Henri.

In Mama's letter you will hear the general outline of our trip and present situation. For your information alone I will give a more accurate account.

The sea voyage itself was arduous. The ship ill fitted and poorly manned. Although we had somewhat better accommodations than the laborers, we were crowded below decks with only the space of our thin and worn pallet to ourselves. Many of the laborers contracted a violent fever, and a number died on the way or after reaching Mobile.

My dear Catherine came down with the fever, and I greatly feared to lose her.

Thanks be to the Holy Virgin that she recovered.

The trip up the Mississippi was the worse journey I have ever known. I am convinced that the rain, the waters of the Mississippi and the endless biting and stinging insects that abound there, could provide a more accurate image of hell than any fire. We were buffeted by storms most of the way and the river was so swift with all the water that often the men were only able to make 3 or 4 leagues a day. There was so much rain we could not dry anything or sometimes even make a fire.

We arrived here three months after the start of our journey up the river. If the hazards of nature were not sufficient, there also was the constant threat of hostile Indians attacking us on the river. We once exchanged shots with a band, but fortunately the river took us out too far from land for them to reach us.

Within the villages it is quite safe, but in the fields surrounding them or in the woods in particular, there have been men killed by Indians, mainly the Chickasaw Indians. The local Illinois are friendly.

The land is good, and I hope to obtain the contract with the Company for maintaining the guns of the troops. There is much work for a blacksmith. I think we shall prosper here.

Your devoted brother,

These letters are a fictionalized version of real people and events that occurred in their lives. And indeed it would have been possible for Becquet to write letters as he was literate. There are documents written in his own hand.

The French officers who came to Fort de Chartres intended to return to France after their tour of duty. The new world was seen by them as an opportunity for financial advancement and concomitant upward mobility within the French society. A few succeeded in this plan but others were, literally, buried here. Military officers also were Canadians. In the French court it was felt their background in Canada gave them more knowledge, more experience of the wilderness and of the type of warfare required than the French officers had.

One of the Canadian military families was that of the St. Anges. The father, Robert de Groston de St. Ange served as commandant at Fort de Chartres for a few years and one of his sons, Louis de Bellerive, was the acting commandant who at the end of the French regime had to turn Fort de Chartres over to the British. Louis de Bellerive then came to St. Louis and was a prominent leader here under the Spanish for many years.

The government was not able to create much interest in France for immigration, so it had to resort to other measures. There were shiploads of convicts sent—thieves, vagabonds, prostitutes, smugglers and sometimes merely the urban unemployed. Their sentence to the galleys was commuted to shipment to Louisiana, but the transportation of convicts was not a success and it ended shortly. Not only were the convicts themselves not always beneficial to the colony, but their very presence was a deterrent to immigration. A favorite topic for plays in the Italian and French theatre was that of criminals exiled to the Mississippi; this reinforced the disinclination of honest peasants to go to Louisiana.

The convicts were considered in France as dangerous and undesirable. But if one recalls the types of crimes for which people could be condemned to the galleys (Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables* is the best known example) it is clear that they might not all have been hardened criminals. At least fifteen convicts can be identified as having settled in the Illinois; with one exception all of these seem to have become exemplary citizens. They married other settlers and their children married in the colony. For them there was a new life where more opportunities abounded for them than in the urban poverty they had left in France.

There was another unwilling group of emigrants, the black slaves whose origin was on the African coasts. They generally were treated well in the colony since they were economically valuable; there was always a shortage of labor. The Black Code in the Louisiana colony afforded them some protection too; the separation of families with small children was forbidden. The slaves were baptized, married

and buried by the church, giving them some status in the eyes of the Catholic population. There were also free blacks who lived in the colony and they held the same rights and had the same responsibilities as any other Frenchman.

The Mississippi Valley in the 18th century was a quite cosmopolitan area. Because so few people wanted to emigrate from France, propaganda about the supposed charms of the Louisiana colony were published in other countries. As a consequence settlements of Germans developed on the lower Mississippi; none of these became very successful, so a scattering of Germans came up to the Illinois. Spanish workers were here also. Antoine L'Espagnol who had been captured in the siege of Pensacola in Spanish Florida was brought to work in the lead mines as he had mining experience.

A couple of Italians came. One known to the French as Jean Montare called Toussaint signed his name as Giovanni Montari Tutti Santi. A number of Swiss settled in Illinois too. One, Francois Hennet, was a roofer and his son followed in his father's trade. The son constructed and shingled the roofs on the buildings of the stone Fort de Chartres in the 1750s.

As you can see the Illinois settlement was diverse ethnically and culturally. Besides the various European nationalities there were the Indians. Marriages to Indian women were common particularly in the early days of the colony. The majority of the women were from the local Illinois groups, but marriages were made also with Missouri, Pawnee and Arikara Indians. These marriages led to cultural variations within the French society as the Indian wives incorporated elements from their society into the homes.

There were even a few religious differences. Although Huguenots were not allowed in the colony, among the Germans who came were Lutherans; this included an officer at Fort de Chartres. A couple of Jews were in the colony too.

Such diversity was not common in the more populous eastern colonies where fairly rigid standards were set up. The Massachusetts colony where my ancestors lived is known for its narrow views. The French colony was a so-called melting pot long before the east. But all of this is little known to the general public in the United States. Indeed when someone speaks of settlers along the Mississippi, it is the later American pioneers that are visualized not the colonial French. Because the British colonies became the dominant culture across the country, it is often difficult to see beyond that. But each national group of colonists brought with them their own traditions and customs. The French had cultural differences that were expressed in various ways including in their legal practices, land holding and settlement pattern.

The cultural landscape reflected these elements. The French settlers built compact villages near the river with fields stretching back towards the hills. There

were no individual farmsteads instead houses in the villages were grouped on lots separated by streets. It was a sociable place that suited their temperament. Here the women could gather and gossip and the men go out in a group to the fields. Generally, they were surrounded with a network of relatives- brothers, sisters, cousins- who had come to the Illinois to join them and all could participate in work, gatherings and activities.

The French colonists brought their laws and civilization with them. In general they were a law abiding people- at least in the villages. Some of the voyageurs out on the rivers tended to be less fond of rules. For the village inhabitants the most important aspect of law was the inheritance of property. Land was one element that drew people to the area despite the problems and dangers. Even the soldiers, the French Marines who came for a six year tour of duty could receive a grant of land for their own if they wished to stay after their enlistment was up. Land was abundant and free in the Illinois colony. This was not like the situation in France where division and sub-division of property among heirs sometimes had left people without sufficient land to support themselves.

Inheritance of property was controlled through marriage contracts drawn up prior to marriage by the prospective partners. Under its provisions by law when a man died his wife would inherit the whole estate, except if there were children; then she would receive half of the community property and the other half would be divided between the children. The marriage contract gave women more rights than they would have again under law until the late nineteenth century. Under British law at the time a woman's property became her husband's when she married; hence the many stories of wealthy heiresses being forced to marry very unsuitable men so they could acquire her property. For the French women this was not the case; the property that she held remained her own.

Despite their adherence to the Catholic Church and its rules, not all marriages were successful and permanent; there were legal separations and this necessitated the division of the community property. A French woman was said to have left her husband and moved in with an Indian in a nearby town. One man had to sell his stone house in order to settle the property question, but then he rented another house and his wife and children moved in there with him! Strange things happened in those days too.

Other related problems, one might say, were paternity cases. In one Jacques Bernard came before the judge requesting that Pierre Hullin claim and support the child born to Bernard's wife that had been conceived during Bernard's absence on a voyage. Voyages might last for several months, and Mme. Bernard may have been lonely.

Supposedly under the rules an erring wife such as Mme. Bernard was to be put in a convent for two years, perhaps for enforced celibacy, but this was difficult to do in the Illinois where there were no convents.

Of the many legal papers that remain from the French regime most of these concern property in some way or another- management of estates, leases & sales of land, and inventories. Inventories of property, both real estate and personal belongings were made upon the death of a spouse. These are interesting as they show the quality of life in the 18th century colony.

The French architecture is described in these too, as the homes on the village lots were examined. Most houses were constructed of wood with upright posts set in the ground or on wood sills, but there were stone houses constructed of the local limestone also. One home was described as having a main room, a hall, a double stone chimney, two bed closets, a cellar and a gallery all around. A bed closet was exactly what it sounds like, a very small room partitioned off for sleeping quarters. The house described had a wood shingled roof; on the lot also were a garden, a separate kitchen house, a shed, a hen house, a barn and a well.

The interiors of the homes had furniture made by local craftsmen- armchairs, side chairs, tables- with and without leaves, armoires and chests; frequently these were made of walnut which was very plentiful. The houses did not just hold the bare necessities for life, nor were they plain and primitive. Mullioned casement windows with small panes of glass let light into the interior. Glass was shipped from France. The interior walls were plastered and white washed. Although most furnishings were made in the colony, all clothing, dishes, cooking utensils and other household goods were imported from France.

In the more prosperous homes the windows were curtained and the plastered wall might have a framed mirror hung on it. The table could be set with a tablecloth and napkins, a candelabra, goblets in silver or crystal, and earthenware or pewter plates.

Cloth and clothing were imported from France; no homespun or locally woven fabrics were used other than Indian sashes or ties. Fine dress was important to the inhabitants; one officer purchased for his wife:

A woman's outfit of striped satin lined with taffeta, rose colored, with one pair of silk hose, shoes, socks and mitts.

Another man requested to have purchased for himself:

A complete suit of camleteen (woolen cloth woven with mohair or silk) with a silk lining. The suit was to be composed of: a green coat and 2 pairs of breeches, one fine half beaver hat, 4 good shirts trimmed with cambric, and a pair of silk hose of a color suitable to the rest

This inhabitant with his knee breeches, matching silk stockings, ruffled shirt, coat and hat, and the lady in silk satin, taffeta and high-heeled shoes are not the usual picture of frontier life. The quality of life for the French colonists was different from that of the later pioneers.

The settlers came from a hierarchical society in France where there were three distinct classes- clergy, nobles, and everybody else. Detached from this society the colonists found themselves in an environment that allowed for advancement for all. Day laborers could become land holders; voyageurs could become traders and merchants.

It was a fairly egalitarian community; officers, voyageurs, merchants, slaves, convicts and Indians interacted in the settlements. For instance, in one court case the commandant gave as background to his testimony that he had learned that Chetivau, one of the convicts, had a feather bed to sell. When he saw Chetivau on the street, he stopped and inquired about it. Now in France at the time a commandant would not have chatted with a convict on a street corner. He would have sent a servant with an inquiry. Things worked a little differently in the Illinois.

Living in the Illinois had its dangers and problems, but in general the inhabitants saw it as a secure life. They were content in a colony of France, tied to the homeland by family, church, law and government. Unlike the citizens of the British colonies, they had no interest in separating from France; their French citizenship was important to them. But there was one great difference between the eastern colonies and the Illinois-- population. After the 1720s there were few immigrants coming from France; growth in numbers came from births almost entirely. In 1746 a census of the whole colony of Louisiana counted 41 hundred persons including the military. At the same time the New England colonies had a population of over 900 thousand.

A young colonist growing up in the 1740s was looking forward to a good life in the Illinois. But no one could have expected within that generation Britain's victories in the Seven Year's War would sweep away all French rule from North America. The French did not all leave, of course, nor did all their influence on the area end, as we well know. The colonists were tenacious and their descendants continue to live in the area but the colony with such a promising beginning was no longer an outpost of France.