

# INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Volume XLI

March, 1945

No. 1

## Kaskaskia, "The Versailles of the West"

NATALIA M. BELTING

*"1703 Apr. 25, Ad ripam Metchigamiam dictam venimus."*

With that entry in the parish register by a Jesuit missionary the story of Kaskaskia and the villages of the Illinois Country begins. "We are come to the river called the Michigamea."<sup>1</sup> It was really the Kaskaskia River, a narrow stream that flowed lazily south through broad Illinois prairies and emptied into the Mississippi a few miles below the camp-site. The Illinois tribe from which it took its name had originally lived much farther north. Settled with the Frenchman's other allies, the Wea, Miami, Shawnee, and Piankashaw, near La Salle's fort on the Illinois River, they had left in the late fall of 1700 with their missionary for new camp grounds on the Des Pères River on the western side of the Mississippi opposite the Cahokia mission.<sup>2</sup>

It was this spot that they deserted in the early winter of 1703 with the intention of moving twenty-five leagues south, about a day's journey from the tannery that had been established on the Ohio River.<sup>3</sup> With the Kaskaskia were a number of French traders, most of them having Indian wives, and it was these French, making their new homes on the river bank, who became the founders of the French village of Kaskaskia.

For fifteen years little news concerning this settlement in the midst of the tropical luxuriance of the bottom land found its way into official correspondence. A report

---

<sup>1</sup> Régistre de la Paroisse de l'Immaculée Conception des Cascaskias, MS, Archives of St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>2</sup> Sister Mary Palm, *The Jesuit Missions of the Illinois Country, 1673-1763* (St. Louis, 1931), 86-87.

<sup>3</sup> The tannery of Charles Juchereau de St. Denys established by him on his concession near the present site of Cairo, Illinois, in 1702. The enterprise was abandoned two years later when an epidemic visited the post and killed the leader.

three years later stated that all the Canadians who were in the woods had withdrawn except for a few Frenchmen who had married at the Illinois,<sup>4</sup> and the following year there was some talk of setting up a post there in order to furnish buffalo hides to Mobile.<sup>5</sup> The fur trade was the chief concern of the habitants. The traders made trouble for the priests by inciting Indian forays in order to obtain slaves to sell to the English; in 1708, at the missionaries' request, Jean Baptiste Bienville, governor of Louisiana, sent Sieur d'Eraque with six men to Kaskaskia and Cahokia to restore order.<sup>6</sup> Once again, in 1711, Father Gabriel Marest asked for aid against the *coureur du bois*, who, he reported, were debauching the Indian women and preventing them from being converted. Twelve men under a sergeant were sent from the south, and from the pen of one of them, Jean Penicaut, comes the first glimpse of life in the village.

There was a "very large church" at Kaskaskia, built by the habitants, with three chapels, a baptismal font, a steeple and a bell. Early in the morning Indian catechumens assembled at the church for prayers and instructions. After the Mass of the Faithful, the missionary began his rounds among the sick, a physician as well as a priest. In the afternoon he held a catechism class; in the evening savages and French attended vespers.<sup>7</sup>

Habitant and Indian worked their fields together. Maize and wheat, garden vegetables, and excellent French melons were raised. Wheat was supposedly not introduced into the region until 1718 when Zebedee, a Fleming from Breda and a *donné* of the Jesuits, made the first plow, and sowed a bushel of the grain, reaping ninety bushels at the end of July.<sup>8</sup> But in the spring of 1710, five settlers on land between the Mississippi and Lake Ponchartrain in lower Louisiana each planted an "arpent of wheat which came from the Illinois."<sup>9</sup> Flour made from Illinois wheat was sent to

<sup>4</sup> Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion* (3 vols., Jackson, Mississippi, 1927-1932), II (1929), 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, III (1932), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Palm, *The Jesuit Missions of the Illinois Country*, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Margry (ed.), *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dans l'Ouest et dans le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale (1614-1754)*, (6 vols., Paris, 1879-1888), V (1887), 491.

<sup>8</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale, MSS, fr., N.A., 2552:161.

<sup>9</sup> Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion*, III, 147.

Isle Dauphine in March, 1714.<sup>10</sup> When Penicaut visited Kaskaskia, he saw three mills, a windmill built on the banks of the Little River and owned by the Jesuits, and two horsemills belonging to the Indians.<sup>11</sup> Domestic cattle were brought to the region about 1712.

Epidemics regularly ravaged the countryside; one in the summer of 1714 struck down from two to three hundred persons, four or five dying every day. Among the victims was the priest, Father Marest, who died after an eight days' illness, September 15. His requiem was sung by the French; the Indians covered his body with gifts of furs.<sup>12</sup>

But in spite of disease, the French population at Kaskaskia continued to increase. There were said to be more than seven hundred persons in the Illinois Country in 1722.<sup>13</sup> A census by M. Doren d'Artaguiette, inspector general of the colony, made in June, 1723, found 64 habitants at Kaskaskia, 41 white laborers, 37 married women, and 54 children. At the new village sixteen miles north at the new Fort de Chartres, there were 39 habitants, 42 white laborers, 28 married women, and 17 children. At Cahokia, the last settlement of the bottom land, there were 7 habitants, 1 white laborer, 1 married woman, and 3 children.<sup>14</sup> In 1721 at Kaskaskia there were 80 houses and four mills.<sup>15</sup> A census ten years later gave the following statistics for Kaskaskia.<sup>16</sup>

Legitimate children .....	87
Bastard children .....	14
Men .....	159
Women .....	39
Arpents cultivated .....	126
Land in value .....	2054
Negroes, "piece d'Inde" <sup>17</sup> .....	38

<sup>10</sup> Sister Mary Palm, "The First Illinois Wheat," *Mid-America* (Chicago, 1918- ), XIX (1937), 130n.

<sup>11</sup> Margry (ed.), *Découvertes et Établissements* . . . , V, 490.

<sup>12</sup> Palm, *The Jesuit Missions of the Illinois Country*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Archives Nationales, Ministère des Colonies, C13A 6:362<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, C13A 8:226-226<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Archives du Service Hydrographique, 115-10, no. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Archives Nationales, Ministère des Colonies, G1:464.

<sup>17</sup> "Piece d'Inde" was the standard value for a complete negro.

Negresses .....	23
Negro children .....	41
Indian slaves .....	30 men 38 women
Oxen .....	256
Cows .....	237
Pigs .....	894
Horses .....	108
Mills .....	11
Houses .....	52
Barns .....	28

Census lists for later years and memoirs by persons who visited the Illinois Country gave considerably different pictures of the population of the region. The official lists, such as the one taken by Macarty in 1752, which can be checked against the parish registers and other sources for the names of persons living there in that year, were always incomplete. On the other hand, figures in some of the memoirs such as one for the year 1752 on French forts in Louisiana were obviously grossly exaggerated. In this particular memoir the total number of habitants of the five villages on the eastern banks of the Mississippi was given as 6,000 with 5,000 negroes, 600 soldiers in garrison, and 260 houses in the country altogether.<sup>18</sup> Probably there were in the middle of the century somewhat over 1,500 persons generally residing in the area and possibly about that number of negroes. At the end of the French period most of the French removed to the Spanish side of the river or to New Orleans rather than to remain under the British.

In 1718 the Company of the Indies, which had acquired the whole of Louisiana northward to the mouth of the Missouri River under a royal charter, established a government for the region. Orders dated Paris, August 11 and 26, 1718, provided for the civil government of the new province. A council composed of the commandant, the chief clerk, the keeper of the store house or *garde magasin*, an under clerk, the engineer, the captain of the troops garrisoning the post, the lieutenant, and two second lieutenants was to be the principal administrative and judicial body.

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Pargellis (ed.), *Military Affairs in North America, 1748-1765, Selected Documents from the Cumberland Papers in Windsor Castle* (New York, 1936), 13-14.

Any instructions of the Company concerning work on the Missouri lead mines which were to be opened were to be executed by the deliberations of a smaller group made up of the commandant, the chief clerk, the clerk in charge of the mines, and the engineer. In the case of a tie vote, the commandant's voice was to count for two. The advice of each member of the council in all matters was to be kept word for word in a special register, and a separate record kept of the expenses of the mines.<sup>19</sup>

By the later edict of May 12, 1722, it was decreed that the provincial council established at the principal settlement of the Illinois was to exercise justice in all criminal and civil cases with the right of appeal to the Superior Council at New Orleans. Its jurisdiction was to extend from the posts on the Wabash to those on the Arkansas.<sup>20</sup>

The framework of the government continued much the same after the retrocession of the colony to the crown in 1731, but the judicial duties of the provincial council, which had apparently functioned only irregularly after 1726, were given over in 1734 to a new official, the *écrivain principal*, who acted as delegate of the *ordonnateur* of Louisiana and judged all disputes between the habitants.

Local governmental affairs were in the hands of the royal notary, an official appointed from among the habitants by the commandant or the chief clerk, and the syndics, elected by the habitants each year and charged with such duties as keeping the fence about the commons in repair. As in all such communities in New France, the priests played important roles in managing local affairs.

The first commandant of the Illinois Country, Pierre Duqué, Sieur de Boisbriant, a Canadian of forty-seven years, who had been with Pierre Iberville when he explored the Mississippi delta, arrived in Kaskaskia in the summer of 1718 along with the other new officials. In 1721<sup>21</sup> he built a wooden fort sixteen miles above Kaskaskia on the banks of the Mississippi, and christened it Fort de Chartres.

A short distance to the north Philippe Renault, to

---

<sup>19</sup> Archives Nationales, Ministère des Colonies, B42bis:230-232.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, B43:103.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, C13C; Archives du Service Hydrographique, 115-10, no. 29.

whom the Company had granted the privilege of working the lead mines of Missouri, established the hamlet of St. Philippe on his concession bordering the river.<sup>22</sup> To Lieutenant Melique who had accompanied him from the south, the commandant gave a large tract of land lying between Fort de Chartres and Kaskaskia; it became known as Prairie Melique and was settled by tenants who worked the land for the owner. Prairie Chassin was the concession of Nicolas Michael Chassin, first *garde magasin*. The later town of Prairie du Rocher, farther inland, was built on land granted originally to Ste. Thérèse Langloisière, by Boisbriant, his relative.

From 1712 until 1730 the Fox war kept the whole of the Illinois Country disturbed. Renault blamed his failure to make any profits from his mines on Indian hostilities, but after the terrible defeat which Fox suffered at French and Indian hands in the latter year, the country remained in comparative peace until the beginning of the unrest which culminated in the Seven Years' War. During that time Kaskaskia became the principal trading post between Quebec and New Orleans.

All sorts of people came to settle in Kaskaskia and the surrounding villages. There were the *coureur du bois*, men of loose morals and little religion, more Indian than French in their habits. Michael Aco was one of them. Apparently he was with the Kaskaskia when they left the region of LaSalle's fort and settled with them on the banks of the Kaskaskia river. His wife was Marie, daughter of the chief Rouensa, and, according to the Jesuit fathers, one of the first and best of their converts among the tribe. Michael and Marie were the parents of two sons, Pierre, who became a substantial habitant of Kaskaskia, and Michael, who was disinherited by his mother for returning to live with his grandfather's tribe.<sup>23</sup> When her first husband died, Marie married another fur trader, Michael Philippe, who eventually became captain of the militia and one of the leading citizens of the Illinois Country. Their six children married

---

<sup>22</sup> Archives du Service Hydrographique, 115-10, no. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Public Record, II, June 20, 1725.

well:—Agnes, the daughter baptized in 1708,<sup>24</sup> was first married to Nicolas Michael Chassin,<sup>25</sup> first *garde magasin* in Illinois, and then to the surgeon, René Roy.<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth, born in 1712,<sup>27</sup> married Etienne Hebert<sup>28</sup> of Fort de Chartres and then Alexander de Celle Duclos,<sup>29</sup> officer of the troops at the fort. Michael Philippe's niece, Marie Philippe *dit* Dulongpré, married François Margane, Sieur de Vincennes, founder of the post on the Wabash.<sup>30</sup>

There were young men of noble birth, mostly to be found among the officers at Fort de Chartres, but, if Grace King is correct (she cites no documents), one of the settlers at Kaskaskia, Louis Boré (or Beauré) was the grandson and great grandson of First Councillors to the French king, and his son, Jean Baptiste Etienne, born in Kaskaskia about 1740, was educated in France in the household of the King and married Marguerite Marie des Trehans des Tours, daughter of the former treasurer of Louisiana.

Ambitious young men from Canada settled in Kaskaskia and the neighboring villages and amassed considerable fortunes in the fur trade and in raising wheat for the colony. Among them were men like Jean and Raphael St. Gemme Beauvais, founders of the large and prosperous Beauvais clan of the Illinois Country; Louis Turpin whose stone house built in Kaskaskia in the 1740's was the first three-story building in the village, who was captain of the militia, and whose daughter Marie, according to the Catholic church, was the first girl born within the continental limits of the later United States who became a nun; Jean Baptiste Barrois, royal notary; Philippe Bienvenu, a carpenter who came from France, and whose children were important settlers of the country.

There were criminals in the Illinois Country; some of them perhaps only salt-smugglers, many of them thieves.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Régistre de la Paroisse* . . . .

<sup>25</sup> Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Private Papers, II, July 6, 1737.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Régistre de la Paroisse* . . . .

<sup>28</sup> Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Private Papers, VI, February 11, 1727.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Private Papers, II, November 21, 1735.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Private Papers, II, January 23, 1730.

<sup>31</sup> Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion*, II, 415.

Among the women of the settlement were deeply pious Indian converts, women like Madame Du Tisé who were of the "grande monde,"<sup>82</sup> native-born daughters of Canadian farmers and seigneurs, "casket" girls, and prostitutes from the streets of Paris and LaRochelle. Nicolas Michael Chassin wrote to Father Bobé in France in 1722 that the officers at the Illinois had determined to do without wives until the Company of the Indies furnished them more respectable girls. The officers, he said, didn't want to marry girls with such bad reputations and incurable diseases. He suggested that it would be easy to have girls sent from Canada, but that a libertine who came from there made the officers fear that other girls might be the same.<sup>83</sup> As late as 1752 Macarty, commanding at Illinois, was writing Governor Vaudreuil suggesting that the government send over wives for the soldiers.

The creoles of this country won't deign to look at a soldier. Their easy life gives them big ideas. If you could send some girls from the foundlings or the hospitals of France to give to the discharged soldiers, they might become fruitful vines, instructed in the principles of religion, who would accept their situation and would in the end make good inhabitants.<sup>84</sup>

Not all the settlers were French, either. The troops garrisoning the country were made up of Swiss and Germans and Spaniards and Italians, even a few Irish and English. Some of these men, when their terms of service were completed, settled down alongside the French as habitants.

The first houses of Kaskaskia were built three or four hundred feet back from the river's edge, along a strip of beach which at the northern limits of the town became a thick belt of timber skirting the river for many miles.<sup>85</sup> Half a mile or so above Kaskaskia, the river turned abruptly

<sup>82</sup> Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane* (3 vols., Paris, 1758), II, 297.

<sup>83</sup> Rowland (ed.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion*, II, 415.

<sup>84</sup> Huntington Manuscripts, Loudoun Collection, 412, December 7, 1752.

<sup>85</sup> For a map of Kaskaskia see Frank H. Hodder (ed.), *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi*, by Captain Philip Pittman, an exact reprint of the original edition, London, 1770 (Cleveland, 1906).



to the west and only a narrow neck of land separated the tributary from the Mississippi. At this point each year the flood waters of the Mississippi cut the channel farther and farther eastward until in the spring of 1881 they at last broke through the short distance that remained, and leaving its old bed, the Mississippi swept down over most of the old French village.

The architecture of the Illinois colonists had features similar to colonial architecture in Canada and in the West Indies, and some features similar to the peasant cottages of Normandy. Most of the houses were built of logs, but of logs set upright in the ground or upon stone foundations. The roofs were steep-hipped and sloping, and underneath the wide eaves ran porches or *galeries*, always across the two long sides of the house, and oftentimes across the gable ends as well. The rooms were laid end to end, each having its own door opening onto the porch, and in some cases there were not inside doors at all between two adjoining rooms. Sometimes there was a second floor, and in a few cases, where the houses were built of stone, there were three.<sup>36</sup>

By decree of the Superior Council of Louisiana each house and lot were enclosed with palisades. These were usually of mulberry posts, seven to ten feet high, and sharpened on the ends. The Frenchman of the Illinois Country lived in his fort.

Everyday life in Kaskaskia was much the same as it had been in seventeenth century Canada. The habitant was content to live as his fathers had lived, to hunt and trap as they had in the north country, to cultivate the fertile bottom land with a primitive wooden plow, to work the lead mines across the Mississippi with shovel and pick, and at the end of the day to gossip on the porch, to dance, or to have a mug of rum at the tavern.

Class distinctions, like the government's despotism, were mostly theoretical, and where there was a line it was between the officers of the troops and the habitants. Few persons

---

<sup>36</sup> The authority on Illinois-French architecture is Charles Peterson of the National Park Service, St. Louis, Missouri. See his article, "French Architecture," *Missouriana* (Jefferson, Missouri, 1928- ), X (August-September, 1938), no. 10, pp. 9-12.

came to Kaskaskia already well-to-do; a considerable number, prospering from the fur trade and the raising of wheat, acquired moderate wealth. Kaskaskia became a community of merchants and traders who supplied lower Louisiana with flour, meat and bear oil, which could be had in abundance in Illinois, and brought back from New Orleans luxuries as well as necessities.

Their houses varied little in style of architecture, and inside—until the latter days of the French regime, the houses of the wealthier merchants looked much like the homes of the poorer *voyageurs*. What difference there was came as much from the difference in quantity as from quality.

The inventories, carefully drawn up by the notary and the priest within a few hours after the death of a person, or upon the dissolution of a partnership give one an excellent idea of the kind of homes these French had and the clothes they wore, and even, though we get it by inference, the life they led.

The kitchen, center of family life, was generally the only room that was heated unless the chimney was a double one in the middle of the house. On the hearth under the mantle stood the iron firedogs with their curved heads, the indispensable pothook, and the spit. Arranged nearby were the iron grill, the frying pans and pipkins, the copper and iron boilers and cauldrons.

On the mantle, to use when the fire was low, stood crude iron lamps like the Betsey lamps of the American pioneers, lamps whose shape had changed little since Roman times. There were copper and wood candlesticks for holding the long tallow candles, and sometimes a pair of snuffers. On special occasions the habitant burned slender candles made from the fine wax of the candleberry myrtle of Louisiana. There were iron lanterns with pointed caps standing on the mantelpiece also, for use outside at night. And on pegs above the mantle rested the habitant's best guns; the powder horn, sometimes banded with silver, hung close by.

Probably in the middle of the room was a long, rectangular table made of walnut or oak from the Illinois forests. On the high sideboard or buffet at the side of the room the housewife displayed her pewter and crockery. Pewter

dishes were common; and the earthenware plates, created especially for the peasant classes, with their flowers, their cocks and their human figures all painted in stiff colors on a brilliant enamel<sup>37</sup> gave a gay aspect to the somber room. Glass tableware was rare, and yet there were habitants who owned crystal, and silver, and even one or two gold goblets. Some had silver cups and bowls; spoons were sometimes of silver, more often of pewter. Forks were usually of steel or iron; table knives were not common—the habitant used his hunting knife. For covering the table there were linen and cotton cloths, both plain and embroidered, with napkins of the same materials.<sup>38</sup>

The most valuable piece of furniture in the house was the bed; in the Illinois Country it was frequently the only dowry of the bride, and its ownership by the survivor of the pair was assured by the marriage contract. Six feet or so square, the bed was furnished with a straw mattress and a thick feather bed—in better homes—and curtained with hangings of green or red serge, or very rarely, of fine painted stuffs. Buffalo hides and coarse wool blankets served for covers; counterpanes were of calico and sometimes of finer, flowered materials.

A chest or so in the bedrooms and an *armoire* or wardrobe completed the furnishings of most of the habitant's houses. The wardrobe was a large affair, often eight or ten feet wide and with as many as thirty-six shelves. Made like most of the other furniture, of walnut, or perhaps of black poplar or cherry, it had two long, hinged doors, and served as a closet for storing clothing and other household goods.

There were other items which were more luxuries than necessities. Most families possessed mirrors "*a la toilette*"; a few owned larger, framed mirrors. There is no mention of any clocks or watches in any of the inventories, or even of the popular pocket sundials, yet there must have been some owned perhaps by the priests and the officers, since many documents contain references to exact hours of the day. But

---

<sup>37</sup> For a description of eighteenth century French earthenware see M. A. A. Mareschal, *La Faïence Populaire au XVIII<sup>me</sup> Siecle* . . . (Paris, 1872).

<sup>38</sup> Inventories are scattered throughout the volumes of Public and Private Papers of the Kaskaskia Manuscripts.

for most of the habitants the sun and the church bell sufficed.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> An example of the inventories is the one made of the effects of Sr. Jacques Bourdon, officer of the militia of Kaskaskia and habitant, which was made July 1-5, 1723, and is to be found in Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Public Papers, II. The following are extracts:

1 walnut wardrobe	1 spit
8 walnut chairs and 1 armchair	2 poor lanterns
1 dresser with a buffet upon it	3 trunks of clothes and other merchandise
1 cot ( <i>couchette</i> )	1 small box full of paper
14 plates and 2 pewter dishes	1 pair of tailor's shears
17 glass bottles	1 bullet mould
1 copper candlestick and 1 pair of snuffers	1 pewter (or tin ?) syringe
1 pepper-mill	1 iron ladle
1 pewter saltcellar	14 guns and 1 musket
1 old salting tub	2 miserable scythes
2 frying pans	4 hatchets
1 grill	2 adzes
1 pair of andirons	3 plates and 2 spoons of Spanish silver
1 iron shovel	2 razor boxes with 2 razors in each and 2 hones
1 old hunting horn	1 pair of pocket pistols
200 gun flints	1 old coarse blanket
9 dozen and 8 knives <i>a chien de corne</i> , 10 Flemish knives, 2 woodcutter's knives	3 cauldrons of red copper weighing 18 pounds
40 pounds of lead balls	2 yellow copper cauldrons weighing 3½ pounds
20 pewter spoons	1 cauldron weighing 14½ pounds
1 comb	1 cauldron weighing 12 pounds
16 large diaper linen napkins and 4 large tablecloths of the same	2 iron cooking pans
4 old napkins	4 Spanish vases full of oil
1 box of grained leather decorated with silver nails with 3 pairs of spectacles, and another box also with 3 pairs of spectacles	2 Natchez earthenware jugs full of oil
1 letter case	2 red copper couldrons with lids, weighing 24½ pounds, full of bear oil
1 dice box and 3 dice	2 old copper cauldrons
1 old four-legged table of black poplar	2 old covered cauldrons
2 silver cups	1 old salting tub
2 cupboards of black walnut with 36 shelves, some 8 feet long and some 10 feet	1 ladle
	3 chests
	2 barrels of powder weighing 100 pounds each.

For the inventory of Marie Catherine Baron, Indian wife of Jean Baptiste Baron, who died in July, 1748, see Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Private Papers, V. The following were among her possessions:

14 napkins	2 silver goblets
4 linen tablecloths, one of diaper linen, and two of Beaufort linen	2 crystal goblets
3 window curtains of brown linen	6 crockery plates
3 calico window curtains	1 large framed mirror
1 bed furnished with a straw mattress, a pillow, a bolster, a calico counterpane, a feather bed, a green wool blanket	1 small framed mirror
	1 small cupboard with 6 wine bottles

The distinguishing dress of the Illinois habitant in the eighteenth century like that of his brother in Canada, was the capot, a hooded jacket belted at the waist with a sash and reaching to his knees. A shirt of cotton or wool, knee-length breeches, long wool stockings and soft-soled leather shoes completed his everyday costume. The dress of his wife and daughters was equally simple, according to travelers like Peter Kalm, and consisted of a sleeveless bodice over a short-sleeved waist, ankle length skirt and Indian moccasins.

But on feast days and holy days how differently must they have dressed. Jacques Bourdon, mentioned above, owned at his death:

- 1 old dress coat of taffeta with buttons of silver wire and a jacket of silk
- 1 old waistcoat of limbourg
- 1 old belt of damask.<sup>40</sup>

Pierre Messenger, merchant and lead miner, frequently was commissioned by one or another habitant to buy clothing for him in New Orleans. Just before the convoy set out for lower Louisiana in May, 1740, he signed an agreement with Pierre Bouvier to bring back in the fall one complete outfit of "*camelot sur soye*"—a dress coat, waist coat, two pairs of breeches, one fine hat of half beaver, four shirts of the finest batiste, one pair of silk stockings in a color suitable to wear with the outfit.<sup>41</sup>

An inventory dated 1747 lists such items as

- 2 aprons, one of double calamande, the other of double satin
- 1 white cotton dress, a rose-colored quilted skirt of calico, 2 rose-colored calico skirts
- 1 pair of woman's silk stockings
- 1 cap of black gauze.<sup>42</sup>

Dame Baron, also mentioned above, owned a taffeta petticoat among other things.<sup>43</sup> Alphonse de La Buissonnière, commandant at Illinois from 1737 until his sudden death in December, 1740, was described as a poor man by the governor of Louisiana. Nevertheless, he owned such things as

---

<sup>40</sup> Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Public Papers, II.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Commercial Papers, IV.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Private Papers, V.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

1 great coat of bouracan<sup>44</sup> with gold lace and buttons  
 1 pair of breeches of scarlet cloth  
 1 dress coat and 1 waist coat both trimmed with wide gold ribbon  
 1 dress coat of English drugget and 1 pair of brown breeches  
 1 dress coat of rose-colored silk trimmed with wide gold ribbon  
 2 pairs of white silk stockings  
 2 hats embroidered with gold; one with a white feather, the other  
     with a black feather  
 3 hats embroidered with gold  
 1 dress coat of mazamet<sup>45</sup>  
 85 new, trimmed, men's shirts.<sup>46</sup>

Other inventories of the villages tell a similar story, and few of the habitants seem to have been so poor that they didn't own at least one outfit of silk or satin or a shirt or two of batiste, worked or lace-trimmed, or a pair of silk stockings.

The Illinois habitant was a farmer and a fur trader. Sometimes he was also a carpenter, a smith or a tailor, but even then he had first of all to raise his food. And when the seed was in or the crops harvested, he left farming to his wife or slaves and hired himself out to one of the village merchants to carry trade goods to the Indians.

In the common fields of Kaskaskia south and west of the settlement each habitant owned, or rented, a ribbon of land extending from the banks of the Mississippi to the pasture fence. Some held grants of land in the prairie east of the Kaskaskia River which ran back as far as the hills edging the St. Mary's River. Most of these strips were not over one or two arpents in width, but because of the meanderings of the rivers, where one farm of two arpents front might contain only ninety acres, another next to it, of the same width might include one hundred and fifty or more.

No fences, but only double furrows divided one field from another. Barns, though sometimes built on the habitant's land inside the town limits, were usually erected either on the Commons or on this cultivated land. They were of a good size, larger than many of the houses, but

---

<sup>44</sup> A coarse woolen cloth.

<sup>45</sup> Woolen cloth manufactured at Mazamet.

<sup>46</sup> Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Private Papers, III.

of similar construction. Urban Gervais' barn at Prairie du Rocher was eighty feet by thirty-five feet by fourteen feet.<sup>47</sup> A few persons had stone barns. There were other smaller buildings dotted over the fields, some of them windmills, and apparently some of them tenant houses.

Farm tools were extremely primitive. The same kind of a wooden plow that first turned the sod at Kaskaskia in 1710 was being used by the habitant's descendants a century later. The harrow was a triangular affair of wood, its two long sides each about six feet in length, while the third was about four feet; its teeth, also of wood, were about five inches long. Harvesting was accomplished with scythe and sickle, threshing with a wooden flail.

The habitant never fertilized his fields, tilled them carelessly, frequently lost entire crops by flood or drouth, and still produced enough grain year after year to send large quantities down the river to the settlements of lower Louisiana.

Wheat and maize were the principal grains raised. Wheat grew easily on the fertile bottom land, but the yield was far below that for Indian corn. Writing in 1752, Father Louis Vivier, the priest of the village, reported that while as a rule wheat yielded only five to eightfold, maize "yields a thousandfold." The fogs, sudden heats, and indifferent cultivation which the Jesuit blamed for the poor wheat crops apparently had no harmful effects on the maize, and the country produced three times as much food as it could use.<sup>48</sup>

Cattle were kept by the habitant to draw his plow and his two-wheeled carts and to supply him with meat and milk. They were undoubtedly the most useful animals he owned, and poor indeed was the Frenchman of the Illinois who did not own at least one cow. In 1721, according to L'Allemand who visited Kaskaskia that year, there were a hundred "*betes a cornes*."<sup>49</sup> In 1752 the census taker listed 757 oxen, 714 cows, 408 bull calves and 349 heifers in the whole of the country.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Commercial Papers, III.

<sup>48</sup> Reuben G. Thwaites (ed.), *Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791* (73 vols., Cleveland, 1896-1901), LXIX (1900), 219.

<sup>49</sup> Archives du Service Hydrographique, 115-10, no. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Huntington Library Manuscripts, Loudoun Collection, 426.

Most of the habitants seem also to have owned horses. By the same census of 1752, of the 519 horses counted for the country, 346 belonged to villagers of Kaskaskia. When the horses they furnished Macarty for a detachment of soldiers returned so worn out that they were useless to their owners, Sieur Bove [Bore?] and Sieur Charleville and Sieur Delisle protested to Governor Vaudreuil. The soldiers, they declared, had been sent to hunt Indians, not game.<sup>51</sup>

The food that these habitants raised and the furs that the traders brought in at the end of the hunting season were carried downstream to New Orleans by the *voyageurs* of the Illinois Country. A considerable portion of the population of Kaskaskia was composed of these transients who made the village their headquarters between trips to the Gulf and Canada or trading excursions into Indian country. Many were men born in Illinois, some were Canadians, a few were natives of lower Louisiana. Occasionally they were farmers and artisans.

Annually, in the spring of the year, these *voyageurs*, carrying the flour and meat of the Illinois merchants, joined the convoy that was sent down the river to New Orleans with the troops from the fort that were being relieved. In the late summer, bringing back merchandise for the French and Indians, they ascended the river in the king's convoy protected by the new company of soldiers. Too often, however, they took their own dangerous way alone up and down the Mississippi, running risks from attacks by the Chickasaw and other hostile Indians, and bringing down the maledictions of the government on their heads for putting French officials to the necessity of securing their release when they were captured, or avenging their deaths when they were killed.

They were hard, adventurous men—none other would have dared trust their lives in the long, narrow pirogues fashioned from cypress or cedar logs forty feet long and no more than three or four feet wide. The bigger pirogues carried thirty men; their freight capacity varied from one to fifty tons.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 414, December 9, 1752.



Batteaux were the craft used by the government and the richer merchants to carry goods. Larger than the pirogues, and built of several pieces of timber, they were flat-bottomed and pointed bow and stern. One end was covered with hoops of cloth for protecting the stores. They carried sails, and when the wind was unfavorable, they were oared or poled; after 1750 cordelling or towing came into common use for the heaviest ones.<sup>52</sup> Their sizes varied considerably. In 1737 the government let a contract for the construction of fifty batteaux each to be forty feet by nine feet by four feet of twelve tons burden, to cost 3,440 livres apiece, and to be finished by March, 1738.<sup>53</sup> *Demi-gallères*, or decked batteaux, were also employed in the Illinois traffic. Two of twenty-five tons each, with space for sixty-four men, plied between upper and lower Louisiana by 1725.<sup>54</sup> Whether the *gallères* of fifty or more tons were ever used in the annual convoy is not recorded.

The best time to leave Kaskaskia was about February 1 when the water was high and the current flowing at the rate of five miles an hour; then too the land on both sides was flooded and the Indians were hunting. Going downstream then was a short journey of from twelve to twenty days. Returning in the autumn was a different story. Against the current the best crews made only six or seven leagues rowing from dawn to dusk. Indian attacks were frequent, and many a convoy was caught by the ice and forced to winter en route, usually at the Arkansas post. Three to four months were usually counted on for the trip.

The convoys were under the command of a French officer who was allowed to carry a certain amount of freight free as a kind of bonus. There were frequent reports that he abused this privilege, carrying so much of his own that there was little room for the king's goods. Often too, when the goods were checked upon their arrival at Illinois much was found missing, presumably many times from the captain's pilfering.

---

<sup>52</sup> N. M. Miller Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana during the French Regime, 1699-1763*, *Columbia University Studies in Political Science*, LXXI, no. 1 (New York, 1916), 73.

<sup>53</sup> Archives Nationales, Ministère des Colonies, C13A 20:176-179.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, C13 8:455-455<sup>v</sup>.

At all times of the year, in spite of the edict against it, there were single pirogues of *voyageurs* and traders going to and from the sea, but the main river traffic was carried on by these convoys. At Kaskasia sales were often made with provision for payment "when the next convoy arrives."