

The French at French Lick: Fact or Fiction?

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For over a hundred years, since William Bowles built the first French Lick Springs Hotel in 1840, French Lick, Indiana, has been a mecca for thousands of seekers of health and pleasure. Few of these, however, know the history associated with this famous valley in southern Indiana. The early Indians, George Rogers Clark, the pioneers, the War of 1812, William Bowles and the Knights of the Golden Circle, and, in a later era, national business and political conventions—all have made this playground of society a microcosm of American history.

An interesting aspect of the history of French Lick is that which deals with the origins of its name. When or how it received the name French Lick has not been established; a clue exists, however, which may indicate that the place was known by that name in 1786.

On September 19, 1786, a group of soldiers clad in buckskin moved along a woodland trail. Some of the men rode horses, but most were on foot. At the head of this small army was General George Rogers Clark, the hero of Vincennes and Kaskaskia. The soldiers with him this time, however, were not those who had followed him through flooded river bottoms to capture Vincennes from the British in 1779; this army of 1786 was composed for the most part of drafted and unwilling Kentucky militiamen. Clark was leading them from the Falls of the Ohio to Vincennes, in order to attack the Indians of the upper Wabash, who, aroused by the Yankee settlers' activities and high-handed ways, were threatening to wipe out the post of Vincennes. Early in the expedition, trouble began among the troops.¹ An incident which occurred on the march was described years later in a letter written by Captain B. Gaines, commander of the volunteer troops of horse from Fayette,

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¹ Though Clark eventually arrived at Vincennes and started up the Wabash, a great many of his men deserted before they made contact with the Indians, and were soon hastening back to Kentucky the way they had come. Leonard G. Helderman, "The Wabash Expedition of 1786," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914-), XXV (December, 1938), 317-328.

Kentucky. In 1833, Gaines wrote: "During the march at a place called French Lick there was a Mutiny of the whole of Col. James Barnet's command respecting a horse which had been taken for the Adjutant-General to Ride. The Whole of them fired off their guns, in defiance of the orders of the Genl, by which the horse had been taken; the Colonel however was arrested tried and Repremanded, which delayed us for a few hours; we then marched on. . . ."²

The place Gaines mentioned in this letter was probably what is now French Lick, Indiana, for it is situated near the site of the ancient overland trail that Clark and his army were following, about midway between Clarksville, at the Falls of the Ohio, and Vincennes. Still, this does not prove that the place was actually called French Lick in 1786, when the incident of which Gaines wrote occurred there. Perhaps Gaines, writing years later, used the name that was in well-established use by 1833, when he wrote his account.³

How did this famous resort town, nestled among the rugged hills of southern Indiana, get its name? The term "lick" comes from the fact that long before the advent of the white man to the area, wild animals, especially deer and buffalo, came in great numbers to what is now the French Lick Valley, attracted by the same springs that were one day to bring thousands of health-seekers to the famous hotels in the valley. "Pluto" and "Sprudel," with their high salt content, gushed out of the earth and spread over the rocks and ground surrounding the springs. The mineral waters evaporated, leaving the salt encrusted on the ground; this deposit the animals licked—thus the area was called a "lick."

The buffalo that frequented the springs were part of the great herds of buffalo that roamed the territory east of the Mississippi before 1800. Thousands of the shaggy beasts spent the summer pasturing in the prairies of Illinois. By fall the pasture was exhausted and the cold was coming on, so the

² Captain B. Gaines, Woodford County, Kentucky, to Mann Butler, City of Lewisville, Kentucky, December 17, 1833, Draper Manuscript Collection, 9J238, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. The word "Mutiny" in this quotation from the letter has been interpreted as "Meeting" by Temple Bodley, *George Rogers Clark* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1926), 287, which has since been quoted by George R. Wilson and Gayle Thornbrough, "The Buffalo Trace," *Indiana Historical Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), XV (1946), 198.

³ Gaines, elsewhere in his letter of 1833, writes that he has been fifty years "in Kentucky and Ohio."

herds migrated to warmer climates. They crossed the Wabash where the city of Vincennes now stands, pounded in an almost straight line across southern Indiana past French Lick, and forded the Ohio River at the place where the bridge now stands between New Albany, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky. They then went on to the Big Bone Lick, Blue Licks, and other licks and pasture lands of the Bluegrass Country in Kentucky.

In the spring, the herds, now accompanied by the newborn calves, made their way back to the Illinois prairies along the same route by which they had gone in the fall, stopping at the southern Indiana lick for salt and for rest. They stayed in the vicinity of the lick for several days or more, while satisfying their need for salt, and their bellows reverberated in the very hills and hollows where now are West Baden and French Lick.

Many of the first roads used by the pioneer settlers in the French Lick vicinity were buffalo trails. Whether the numerous trails through the hills near the lick were also made by the buffalo who came to the springs, has not been positively determined. Yet it is quite likely that they were; for these trails were here, worn deep into the ground, when the first settlers came.⁴

Some early travelers recorded their impressions of the lick. When General Josiah Harmar, Commander of the Army of the Ohio, passed this way on a march from Vincennes to the Falls of the Ohio in October, 1787, he wrote in his diary for October 4: "march'd to the Lick about 16 miles where we Encamped. Great Quantity of Buffalo at this Lick—"⁵

⁴ In the course of their semi-annual migrations, the buffalo beat out a path from ten to twelve feet wide, which came to be called a variety of names after those who followed it. Thus, it was known as Clark's Trace and the General Harrison Trail; but it is now most commonly called the Buffalo Trace or Trail after its makers. The main Buffalo Trace can still be seen in many places running east and west through the fields and forests of Dubois, Orange, and Harrison counties. The main trace, which runs south of French Lick, has definitely been mapped and identified as a buffalo trail. This trail, made by the buffalo in their migrations, became the highway over which the conquerers and the settlers of the Midwest were to come. The buffalo were last seen at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a terrible winter combined with destructive slaughter by the white man wiped out forever the great herds east of the Mississippi. George R. Wilson, "Early Indiana Trails and Surveys," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), VI (1919), 364-372; Wilson and Thornbrough, "The Buffalo Trace," *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, XV, 184-187.

⁵ Harmar Papers, V, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. There is a strong tradition that George Rogers Clark, in his journal, mentioned French Lick as a great resort for deer and buffalo. However, no mention of French Lick can be found in Clark's

Major Ebenezer Denny, who was in the same group, in his "Journal" wrote: "[October] 4th.—Reached the Great Lick, . . . Fourth day's march, passed over a great deal of good land, particularly near the Great Lick, which is not far distant from the road. When within a few miles of the Lick, our hunters had leave to go ahead. Presently heard the report of both their guns, and in a few minutes five buffaloes made their appearance, bearing furiously toward the head of the column. When within fifty paces, the men in front were permitted to fire; this turned the heads of the animals; they passed along and received the fire of the whole line. Three only were shot down, near the rear, where they approached within twenty paces."⁶

Another who traveled the Buffalo Trace and left a description of the lick was John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary. In 1792 he went from Vincennes to the Falls of the Ohio with a party of Indians. The group left Vincennes on October 6. The next day, near the east fork of the White River, the members of the party shot an eight hundred pound buffalo. "On the 9th we reached the so-called Buffalo Salt Lick where it is said 500 buffaloes may sometimes be seen at one time, especially during the months of June, July and August." Shortly after, the hunters fired into a herd of buffalo that bore down on them; they killed one animal and wounded another. In the evening the party encamped to feast on buffalo meat. Heckewelder wrote that the "salt spot, several acres in size, is so much trodden down and grubbed up, that not a blade of grass can grow and the entire woods are for miles around quite bare. Many heads and skeletons of these animals are to be found which were either shot from time to time, or had died there. From here a great many buffalo trails lead out. . . ."

The question of why the lick came to be called "French Lick" remains. Were the French ever in fact at the place?

memoirs; perhaps it was Harmar's observation that has erroneously been attributed to Clark.

⁶ "Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny," *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, (Philadelphia, 1826-1895), VII (1860), 313.

⁷ Heckewelder had accompanied General Rufus Putnam to Vincennes in that year to meet with the Indians of the Wabash. Putnam had planned to escort several of the chiefs to Philadelphia to meet the President. When the time to leave came, Putnam was too ill to go, so Heckewelder was commissioned to accompany the Indians to Marietta, Ohio, via the Falls, where they were to wait for Putnam. "Narrative of John Heckewelder's Journey to the Wabash," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Philadelphia, 1877-), XII (1888), 173-174.

Local tradition takes their presence for granted. Local historians repeat the story. Booklets advertising the hotels and the mineral waters always try to bring in some mention of the French. But a search into the matter reveals a strange array of legend, tradition, and sheer imagination. Snatches of the story in local history turn out, upon investigation, to be repetitions of long-accepted tradition, completely lacking any supporting evidence.

According to tradition, it was from Vincennes that the first white people came to French Lick. In 1732, Sieur Francois Marie de Vincennes of the French colonial army came down the Wabash River from Ouiatenon, site of the present Lafayette, Indiana, and at the place where the Buffalo Trace crossed the Wabash, founded the military and trading post which was to bear his name.⁸ The French who supposedly came out to the lick from Vincennes are said to have been salt hunters. At Vincennes, however, there is no record that a group of settlers from that town went at any time into the interior to make salt.⁹ Still the French Lick local legend maintains that a group of French came out from Vincennes late in the eighteenth century to make salt and set up their camp near the lick, on or near the spot where the French Lick Springs Hotel now stands.¹⁰

There is reason to believe that the French at one time owned the area in which the lick was located. While the United States government was settling land claims in Indiana in 1794, the French living at Vincennes laid claim to an area of 1,600,000 acres surrounding their town. The north-south lines of the tract proved to be forty miles long and the east-west lines seventy-two. The northeast corner of the district was near present-day Orleans, fifty-seven miles due east of Vincennes. The eastern boundary of the claim included French Lick. The French claimed this land on the grounds that it had been given to the first settlers at Vincennes by the Piankeshaws. The traditional date of the Indian grant is said to have been 1742.¹¹

⁸ Pierre-Georges Roy, "Sieur de Vincennes Identified," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), VII (1923), 91-92.

⁹ Another source of salt for the Vincennes settlers would have been the Saline River in Illinois, near modern Shawneetown, which could have been reached by water, an easier trip than the fifty-mile overland journey would have been into the interior to French Lick.

¹⁰ Weston A., Leroy C., and Charles L. Goodspeed, *History of Lawrence, Orange and Washington Counties*, (Chicago, 1884), 390-391.

¹¹ Leonard Lux, O.S.B., "The Vincennes Donation Lands," *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, XV, 428-429, 466; George R. Wilson,

Among people around French Lick the tradition has been that the French were driven out of the lick by hostile Indians and that the last of the fleeing French threw a large number of kettles and other articles into the river. It has been said that search was several times made for these kettles by the first settlers. But there is no reliable account of this story.¹²

A discovery made on the site of the French Lick Springs Hotel some years ago caused quite a flurry of excitement locally and added the detail of a French and Indian battle to the legend. Foundations for a new section of the hotel were being dug about 1900. On the spot where the bathhouse now stands, the workmen found some skeletons in the ground. At once someone deduced that these skeletons were the remains of the French and Indians who had fought in the "Battle of French Lick." This detail was part of the legend until investigation showed that the workmen had merely broken into a pioneer cemetery which had been located near the Ranger fort, built at the lick as a protection for frontier settlers.

Thus, the reason the principal lick in Indiana, called variously the "Great Lick," and the "Buffalo Salt Lick," came to be known as French Lick still has not been established. The origins of the name remain a patchwork of tradition and circumstantial evidence. Until more substantial evidence is found, the question of whether the French were ever at French Lick must remain unanswered.¹³

"Early Indiana Trails and Surveys," Indiana Historical Society *Publications*, VI, 363; "The grant of the land is said to have been made to Monsieur De Vincennes . . . for use of the French settlers, and although the instrument of conveyance (if there ever was one in writing) is lost, the fact is ascertained . . . by the testimony of all the old French inhabitants." Territorial Governor William Henry Harrison to the Secretary of War, February 26, 1802, Logan Esarey (ed.), *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1922), I, 41. This is volume VII of the *Indiana Historical Collections* (Indianapolis, 1916-); John B. Dillon, *A History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1859), 104-109.

¹² Goodspeed, *History of Lawrence, Orange and Washington Counties*, 390-391.

¹³ This conclusion is supported by investigations in the Vincennes Public Library, city hall, court house, and D.A.R. Library. No records from the eighteenth century are kept in Vincennes. The Indiana State Library was helpful in suggesting the use of the publication on the Buffalo Trace, and Goodspeed's history. The Library at Indiana University supplied me with some material, but neither it nor the University of Notre Dame Archives has any original documents pertinent to this point of history. The Illinois Historical Survey at Urbana has a complete photostatic file of correspondence, official reports, etc., from the period of French rule in Vincennes. Village public records are not included in the collection, and, according to Natalia M. Belting, any mention of a salt lick would probably be made in village records. If mention were made at all, it would probably be more or less of a parenthetical matter. No references to French Lick are to be found in the Survey index, and Miss Belting thinks the possibility of finding anything of this sort is highly unlikely.