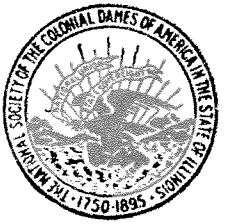
WHY ILLINOIS WAS FRENCH



WHY ILLINOIS WAS FRENCH

by

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From the discovery of the St. Lawrence River in 1535 to the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763, Canada was called New France. Together with the French territory of Louisiana, it covered a huge area from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico and included Illinois.*

The history of New France is the history of the fur trade. Beaver played the same role in Canada that gold played in the exploitation of Peru by Spain. It was the lure that seemed to justify danger, loneliness, and savagery. Although the Crown of France recognized the necessity of agricultural settlements if permanent colonization were to be effected, the temptation of an easy profit in Indian trade continued to hinder the growth of the settlements throughout the French Régime. The French villages of Kaskaskia, Cahokia, Prairie du Rocher, St. Philippe and Ste. Anne de Fort de Chartres, situated on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River in southern Illinois, were important because they commanded the waterway from Quebec to New Orleans and also because they grew wheat for all the settlements on the Gulf of Mexico.

Besides fur trading and farming, there was another factor in French exploration and the development of the western settlements of New France. It was the wave of missionary zeal which swept France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The fervor of the Recollects and later, to an even greater extent, of the Jesuits, did much to mold New France and the Indian tribes whose Christianization was their chief concern.

The history of New France began when sailors from Normandy, Brittany and the Basque country developed a small trade in furs as a supplementary activity to fishing for cod off Nova Scotia in the Sixteenth Century. Francis the 1st equipped several expeditions to the New World in search of a short route to China. For him, Jacques Cartier discovered the St. Lawrence. But Henry of Navarre, the Protestant Prince, who fought for ten years from 1588 to 1598 against the powerful Catholic family of Guise and the Spanish League, was the first to found a colony in New France. Henry's Protestant forces defeated the combined Catholic armies of Europe but paradoxically he was obliged to embrace the Roman Catholic religion in order to accept the Crown of France as Henry IVth. However, he issued the Edict of Nantes in 1599 which insured freedom of worship to Protestants in France for almost a hundred years.

Henry of Navarre organized a group of his old comrades at arms for the triple purpose of colonization in New France, exploration for a short route to China, and exploitation of the fur trade. To these noblemen, two Protestants and two Catholics, he added an outstanding man, Samuel de Champlain. Champlain had already made

*See map page 10

a voyage to the Antilles, Mexico and Panama and had come home advocating the Panama Canal – a project which did not materialize for three hundred years.

The first voyage of this company took place in 1603. Champlain and the great navigator, Pontgravé, returned to France with furs to pay for the expedition and the new company seemed to be in business. But then arose a faction which was to plague New France throughout the French Regime – the hatters. Hats, which grew larger and larger as the century progressed, were made of beaver fur and the hatters wanted to stabilize the price of the skins. They looked about for means to break the company's monopoly and incited members of a Parliament* from Normandy to form a cabal against the president of the company, the Sieur de Monts, a Protestant.

"They denounced, with pious fervor, the horrid sin of entrusting Indian souls to a heretic. Navarre, himself, stilled the storm with the promise to export priests for the salvation of the savages.**

The following year, 1604, they sailed again with one hundred and thirty colonists and spent a miserable winter in Acadia, suffering from scurvy. In 1605 they moved to a better location called Port Royal by Champlain, who instituted a game that kept the colony in good health and spirits throughout the winter. It was called "The Order of the Good Time," and is described in great detail by one of the company, Marc Lescarbot, in his book, "Nova Francia," published in Paris in 1609. In turn, each of the fifteen men at the Commandant's table became chief steward for a day. For several days before his turn came up, he went hunting and fishing and held conferences with the cook. A keen competitive spirit produced culinary masterpieces from the raw materials of the forest. On his appointed day, the chief steward lead a procession to the table; a wand of office in his hand and the collar of the order – a gorgeous ornament worth four crowns – around his neck. Even breakfast was a feast. Unimportant as this detail is, it shows the contrast in viewpoint between the first French colonizers and the Pilgrims who settled further south in New England fifteen years later.

In 1608 Champlain founded the city of Quebec. Henry of Navarre was assassinated in 1610 and his wife, Marie de Medici, became regent for her son, Louis XIIIth. The next important development was the accession to power of Cardinal Richelieu in 1627. The British and the French were becoming strong competitors in the New World not only in the fur trade but also as colonizers. Cardinal Richelieu felt that the self interest of the fur monopoly would jeopardize the existence of New France, and persuaded Louis XIIIth

*In France before the Revolution, parliaments were not legislative bodies but certain high courts of justice.

**Beavers, Kings and Cabins, by Constance Lindsay Skinner p. 52

to rescind it. He formed in its place the Company of the Hundred Associates in which he, himself, became a stockholder.

The new company was organized for colonization as well as trading. It had vast powers, exercising all the functions of government, even the right to bestow titles of nobility. By destroying the feudal system in France, Cardinal Richelieu sowed the seed which blossomed into the absolute power of Louis the XIVth. He did this by making the feudal barons live at court. As absentee landlords their power was transferred to the King. But feudalism must have had its appeal for the Cardinal. He felt that in the new world such a system would not endanger the Crown. The difficulty was that he could not get the French nobility to stay in Canada. And so he ennobled the officers of the Carignan Regiment which had gone to Quebec to defend the colonists. These officers were not only given titles. They also received seigniories or manorial estates. These, however, were so handicapped by unrealistic regulations designed to safeguard the interests of the peasants employed to farm them, that they could not be managed at a profit to the owner. Thus the newly created aristocracy was obliged to hunt and fish for survival. The Canadian 'gentilhomme' mimicked the fashions of Versailles while fighting battles with the Indians or trampling in the mud of Kaskaskia. He imported beautiful silks and brocades to make his clothes while he put up with furniture more rustic than that of the peasants of France.

But the principal duty of the Company of the Hundred Associates to the Crown was the transportation of no less than two hundred settlers yearly to Canada. And following in the footsteps of the hatters of Paris, it was decreed that such settlers must be Roman Catholic. This law, combined with the temporal power of the Church which developed from the arrival of Bishop Laval in 1659, had a profound effect on the molding of New France.

Time proved that the Company of the Hundred Associates was not as successful in colonial administration as were the rival English, Dutch and Portuguese companies; and as a system of government it was at variance with the policy of centralized power as practiced by Louis XIVth. So in 1663, the Company of the Hundred Associates was dissolved and New France became a Crown Colony. The King's minister, Colbert, organized the Company of the West Indies in 1664, giving it many of the political and commercial rights of the former company, but the entire administration was left to the King.

It is hard to realize what this meant unless you take the trouble to read the correspondence from the royal residences of Versailles and Marly to the Governors and Intendants of Canada and Louisiana. An important source book, "The Calendar of Manuscripts in the Paris Archives relating to the History of the Mississippi Valley to 1803," edited by N. M. Miller Surrey, lists by date all the documents relative to the French Illinois Country filed on microfilm in the Library of Congress. These documents are directives

which go into the most minute detail concerning matters in the forest wilderness. Louis the XIVth and Louis the XVth did not hesitate to give the most explicit orders to commandants, who were not only thousands of miles away but from three to six months away in point of time. However well-informed the King might be, by the time his dispatches reached Fort de Chartres, all the surrounding Indians might have changed allegiance; and in respect to the neighboring competitors—the English and the Spanish—the political climate in Europe might have entirely altered. Yet the King would brook no disobeying of his orders.

The correspondence between the government of France and her representatives in New France relative to the Illinois Country in Canadian and American archives, is easily available in the Illinois State Historical Library Collections. It has been published in its original form and supplemented with an English translation. These volumes are, The French Foundations, 1680-1693, Anglo-French Boundary Disputes 1749-1763 and Illinois on the Eve of the Seven Years War, 1747-1755. Unfortunately the period from 1693 to 1747 is not covered by this series. This was the period of French success and expansion in the middle west. It was the period when Louisiana was settled and French expeditions of exploration were being made west of the Mississippi and when Louis XIVth's dream of empire in the new world was still alive.

This dream had sprung from La Salle's journeys to the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, where he built Fort Crèvecoeur in 1680 and Fort St. Louis in 1682, and his subsequent journey to the mouth of the Mississippi where he lost his life. The King gave La Salle the trading and colonization rights to the Illinois country and the earliest days of Illinois settlement come to life in reading the memoirs, contracts and letters of La Salle and his remarkable partner, Tonti. A contract, still extant, called a 'concession in fief,' granted by La Salle to one of his men, Pierre Prudhomme, in 1683 at Fort St. Louis, specified everything the said Prudhomme and his successors could do and could not do with this property including "the rights of dovecote and winepress, of fortification and of low justice." The rights of dovecote and winepress, in particular, conjure up a picture of good living which the French settlers envisioned as the future of the rich and fertile Mississippi Valley.*

La Salle named Louisiana after his King and the great river after the King's Minister. He always referred to the Mississippi in his dispatches as Le Fleuve Colbert. After his death, Louis the XIVth realized that he who held the river held the heart of America; and in October 1698 he equipped four ships and placed them under the command of the Canadian born Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville. This commander had acquitted himself well in a battle against the English on Hudson's Bay in 1694, an excellent eye witness account of which is given by Father Marest in the Jesuit Relations (Vol.

*The French Foundations p. 28

LXVI). As the commander of the French ship Pelican, he had sunk a British Man-of-War and had captured a second in a sea battle the previous year, 1697. Iberville's brothers, Sauvole and Bienville and his cousin, Boisbriand, sailed with him from Brest in search of the mouth of the Mississippi where they were instructed to build a fort to insure France's claim to the Mississippi Valley. After finding the mouth of the river, they built a fort on the Gulf of Mexico (Fort Maurepas). The next year they built two more: one on the Mississippi about fifty-four miles from the mouth, and the other where the city of Mobile now stands. (Fort St. Louis de la Louisiane.)

A Canadian, Charles Juchereau de St. Denis, conceived a plan to set up tanneries on the Mississippi. With letters patent signed by Louis XIVth in 1701, he journeyed by the inland water route to the mouth of the Ohio. He established two tanneries, one at Michillimackinac and the other probably near Cairo, Illinois. At Iberville's behest, he planted the Fleur-de-Lis which was later the basis of France's claim to the Ohio. Thirteen years later, the then Governor of Louisiana, La Mothe-Cadillac, sent Louis Juchereau de St. Denis to the southwest to barter with the Indians and to make contact with the Spanish who were moving northward from Mexico.

These preliminary efforts toward establishment in Louisiana were carried out to secure the central area of the North American continent. Louis the XIVth's dream of empire included control of the three great rivers – the St. Lawrence, the Ohio and the Mississippi; the three great gulfs – Hudson's Bay, the Gulf of the St. Lawrence and the Gulf of Mexico, and the five Great Lakes.

Meanwhile the Illinois settlements were growing apace. The village of Kaskaskia was founded in 1703 by the Jesuit, Father Marest, who had come as a missionary to the Kaskaskia Indians. By 1715 France had set up a government there. The Kaskaskia Court Records which were re-discovered by Clarence Alvord in the Chester Court House in 1906, demonstrate that from the date of the first Fort de Chartres built by Boisbriand in 1723 "the civil officials of an orderly French government performed their duties with a regularity and precision that reminds us of the system and care of their contemporaries in a royal jurisdiction in France. Their minutes and records were carefully kept and when law demanded it, deposited in the archives of the fort which stood for so many years as the most western sentinel of the King's domain."*

At this period, from 1703 to 1730, Kaskaskia was a paradise compared to the poverty and unhealthiness of swampy lower Louisiana.

Bienville reported to France:

"The males of the colony begin through habit to be reconciled to corn as an article of nourishment but the women, who are mostly

*The Old Kaskaskia Records by Clarence Alvord p. 36

This map by J. H. Schlarman is reproduced from his book on the French in America, From Quebec to New Orleans, 1929.

Parisians, have for this kind of food a dogged aversion which has not yet been subdued."*

In fact the women threatened to leave the colony of Mobile although they had not thought out any means of doing so and their declaration to that effect was called the 'Petticoat Rebellion.'

Pontchartrain, the Minister of State in France, decided to turn the colony over to a banker, Antoine Crozat, who formed a company to aid it. This company was obligated to send twenty-five men and girls and two ships a year to Louisiana and it was permitted to send one ship a year to Africa for slaves.

Louis XIVth died in 1715 leaving France in financial difficulties. His successor was his great grandson, Louis XVth, who was only five years old. A dilettante, the Duc d'Orleans, became regent. And now a most extraordinary man whom Louis the XIVth had discouraged, came into prominence at the French Court. He was a Scottish financial genius called John Law. After failing to interest several European countries in his schemes, he obtained letters patent in 1716 to establish a national bank (banque generale) which circulated paper money. So successful was this undertaking that he won the Regent's complete confidence and was permitted to proceed with a Mississippi scheme. In August, 1717 he founded the Compagnie d'Occident which absorbed the earlier Crozat company and the Compagnie de Canada. Executive powers over the area drained by the Mississippi, the Ohio and the Missouri were granted. By 1719 a further consolidation took place when the Compagnie d'Occident absorbed the Compagnie Orientales et de la Chine and the Compagnie des Indes, retaining the name of the latter. All this sudden growth did not take place without opposition and misgivings on the part of conservative Frenchmen. But speculation in Mississippi shares reached an unparalleled height. People of all classes participated and Louisiana was advertised as the land of milk and honey. When in 1720, the government bank of France and the Compagnie des Indes amalgamated, the investors panicked and the whole house of cards collapsed, leaving France in a state of financial ruin. Law's books were in order but his banking theories were unsound.

But the Compagnie des Indes survived for a few years and attempted to populate Upper and Lower Louisiana. All classes of people, some far from desirable, were transported from France. It was difficult to get farmers to emigrate. Few of the new arrivals were interested in leaving New Orleans to take up agriculture at Kaskaskia. The 'habitants,' the traders, and the commandants of the Illinois country were chiefly Canadians whose farming and fur trading prospered. They danced and sang together to the music of a fiddle after Mass on Sunday under the eye of the priest. Only occasional raids by the Fox Indians disturbed their pastoral life.

*Gayarré p. 93

From 1720 to 1740 competition between the French and the Spanish for the southwest began. Besides Juchereau de St. Denis' journeys in the direction of Mexico, two other French expeditions were undertaken. One led by de Bourgmont in 1724 nearly reached Colorado and another led by the Mallet brothers in 1739 followed a trail through Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado to Santa Fe.*

It isn't possible here to examine all the causes of the Seven Years War and France's defeat which banished her from North America. From 1740 onward the British Fur Trader became a serious competitor. The French Trader had to sell his beaver at a government agency in Montreal at a fixed price. He was obliged to receive part of his payment in inferior goods for barter with the Indians. Once more we find the intrigues of the hatters behind these restrictions. The British Trader, on the other hand, suffered from no such regulations. Once he had smuggled or paid duty on his furs he was free to go where his market led him — usually to Albany. There he could haggle about price or undersell to drive out a competitor. In France skilled craftsmen created the most beautiful fabrics of the period but they could not compete with the British in producing hundred bolt lots of relatively inexpensive woolen goods such as that used for Indian blankets.**

To add to this difficulty the French Government, in a mood of ill timed parsimony, was prepared to spend no more on western outposts than the pay of the officers and soldiers attached to the garrisons. Imagine the dismay of a governor of New France, the able Comte de la Galissonière, when he received a letter from the King's Minister, the Comte de Maurepas, in April 1748 which put forward the suggestion that the post of the Illinois (Fort de Chartres) be returned to the immediate jurisdiction of Canada. It had been placed under Louisiana in 1717 to augment the revenues of the Compagnie des Indes. But now the King had decided to return it to Canada to save money. The Minister gives many cogent reasons but the crux of the matter is in this paragraph:

"In effect, the post of the Illinois can only by a forced interpretation be considered as one of the settlements of Louisiana . . It occasions considerable expense to the King for the maintenance of the two companies which are in garrison . . The product of the Fur Trade of the Indians goes for the most part to Canada . . From reuniting this post with Canada, Louisiana first of all would gain the two companies of troops . . And the King would save the expenses which the garrison occasions. It would suffice to send from Canada a detachment of some soldiers with an officer to command them.***

*See Colorado Magazine, The State of Colorado Historical Society July 1937 and September 1939 for articles by Henry Folmer on these expeditions.

**For the British French competition in the Fur Trade see Illinois on the Eve of the Seven Years War. Illinois Historical Library Collections P. XVI

***Illinois on the Eve of the Seven Years War pp. 61-66

As usual the French treasury was being drained by the Monarch's building program. As this letter was written, the Chevalier de Bertet, Commandant at Fort de Chartres, was reporting to Galissoniere that he was receiving constant warnings from his Indian friends, particularly the Miami chieftain, Le Pied Froid, of the disaffection of the Indian tribes formerly friendly to the French. No matter how clever the diplomacy of the commandants, who had won the respect of the Indians as warriors and gentlemen, English presents, and, to a lesser extent, English eloquence, eventually won the day. A conspiracy among the tribes close to Fort de Chartres to destroy the French settlements was discovered by Bertet and he brought the villages together into a fortified place for safety. In his memoir to the King of September 6, 1748, Governor Vaudreuil of Louisiana reported without hesitation that this Indian conspiracy was ascribed only to the weakness of the French garrison.*

The French pioneer in the American wilderness was something of a paradox. The 'habitant' who tilled the soil about the Illinois settlements, lived in a little world of his own, as far as possible a duplicate of the village life of France or Canada from which he came. His life was regulated. He sowed his grain on a day designated by the village government and he reaped it on another such day. He lived a life of constant squabbling and legal processes which one would expect in an old world community entrenched in tradition. But the coureur de bois and the voyageur or canoeman who roamed the woods and streams, living with the Indians and often marrying into the tribes, was an extraordinary man. Illiterate, like most men of peasant origin in the Eighteenth Century, he could even shock the Indians with his wildness. And yet inheritance was so strong in him and his respect for authority so great that he preferred to take his quarrels to court at Kaskaskia or to the Commandant at Fort de Chartres to fighting it out in the woods as the American pioneer did. Here lies a fundamental difference between French and British settlers. The French had no desire to have a hand in the formulation of the laws by which their lives were regulated as did the British settlers.

The people of the Eighteenth Century were not particularly humorous according to our notions but the French woodsman took pleasure in exercising a satiric sort of wit. Nearly everybody in New France had a variety of names. The nobility, of course, had surnames to which were attached the place names of their family estates in France or Canada. The woodsman had a surname too, no doubt, which nobody was familiar with. Instead of 'de' and a place name after his surname, he had 'dit' (called) and a soubriquet added to his Christian name. The soubriquet was all that usually stuck to him. These were such names as 'La Tulippe' and 'Le Violet.' They were used in the legal contracts made with the licensed Fur Traders of Montreal. La Tulippe and Le Violet were real men who appear on the census rolls of Kaskaskia. When you think how these

*Illinois on the Eve of The Seven Years War p. 74

men must have looked, such names are really absurd. They rarely shaved and probably never washed. The villagers had soubriquets too. Leonard Billeron, the royal notary at Kaskaskia, was called Le Fatigué. It doesn't take much imagination to see how he came by that nickname but it is harder to understand why the most belligerent chieftain of the Miamis was referred to by Kings and councilmen alike as 'La Demoiselle.'

The Canadian 'gentilhomme' was also a paradox.* He was the victim of Cardinal Richelieu's ill-advised feudal system for New France. When the Intendant Talon came to Quebec in 1667, there were four noble families in the colony. But frequent requests by governors and Intendants in behalf of the more prosperous families of Quebec and Montreal created a titled society and soon all Canada was infatuated with noblesse. In France noblemen considered trade beneath them. Likewise in Canada the gentilhomme considered it beneath his dignity. But he had to live so he sent his children into the forest secretly to barter for furs with the Indians. Opportunities to gain a livelihood were so few that the western posts were sought after in spite of the loneliness and hardship of the life, especially for the wives of the commanders. Sometimes fur trading could be carried on by the commanders of the posts though often the license to trade had already been assigned to someone else, known as a farmer, though we would call him an agent. Not all the Governors, Intendants and Commandants were born in Canada. A great number were younger sons of prominent families in France.

Among the French commandants there were rough customers like Barthelmy de Macarty who put his own interests above those of the colony, but there were many remarkable men who had their hearts set on a glorious future for the French in the New World. They must have suffered as they saw greed, incompetence and restrictions stifle that dream. Besides such well known men as Champlain, La Salle, Tonti, Iberville and Bienville, we might mention the explorers, du Tisné, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis and La Verendrye. The latter was the first white man to reach the foothills of the Rockies in the Northwest. There were capable and honest commanders at Fort de Chartres such as Boisbriand, Bertet, and Pierre d'Artaquiette, who was taken prisoner by the Chickasaws in 1736 and burnt at the stake. We are indebted to many officers who chronicled their times. Diron d'Artaquiette, Inspector General of the Compagnie des Indes, made a tour of inspection in 1722 and 1723. His report to the company is full of precise information about the Illinois country at that time.** Bossu, one of Macarty's officers at Fort de Chartres, has left us many interesting details of conditions in southern Illinois just before the Seven Years War and d'Abbadie,

*For the Canadian Noblesse see The Old Régime in Canada by Francis Parkman.

**Mereness, Newton D. Travels in the American Colonies, N. Y. 1916

the Governor of Louisiana at the end of the French Régime, gives us a clear picture of his times.*

After the British won Canada, there were no posts for the Canadian noblesse and most of them returned to France. The traders of the Illinois country stayed on; moved to the west bank of the Mississippi and founded the city of St. Louis. They were slightly less aristocratic than the noblesse but they were educated men and deserve to be called gentry. Examples of this group were Jean Batiste Barbau of Prairie du Rocher, the members of the Bauvais and Charlesville families of Kaskaskia – the Viviats, the Lachances and the Janis. Some of these families went across the river to Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. At Cahokia were the Sauciers, François Trottier and Antoine Girardin. Next to the Commandant, the most important man in French Illinois was Gabriel Cerré. These were the men and others like them to whom the British Commissioner to the Indians, Sir William Johnson, referred when he wrote that the French Traders were gentlemen in character, manners and dress and "men of abilities, influence and address."**

The French Mid-Eighteenth Century Illinois house on exhibit at the Chicago Historical Society represents the home of such a trader. Much smaller and less elegant than those built by the same traders in St. Louis thirty to forty years later, it had the construction of a Normandy farm house. It had cedar posts planted upright and filled with a mixture of clay and stone, and the pitch of a French-Canadian roof, somewhat altered in line by the addition of a 'gallerie' or porch. The 'gallerie' was a feature borrowed from the tropical plantation houses of French San Domingo (Haiti) at which ships from Canada and France stopped on their way to New Orleans. There are few houses left of this charming and unique architecture. The Bolduc house at St. Geneviève, Missouri, is an example. The Menard house near Chester, Illinois, is of later date but its roof line and gallery are typical of French Illinois. The furniture, designed from Louis XIIIth styles still popular in Mid-Eighteenth Century Quebec, was often made on the spot and was inferior to the textiles, china, silver and pewter imported from France.

Hugh McClennan has pointed out that "Canada possessed one asset the Americans lacked: the St. Lawrence River . . While the Americans remained penned between the mountains and the sea, it was the high honor of the French Canadians that their boldest spirits sallied out from the St. Lawrence to explore and map nearly all of the continental interior which Americans and English speaking Canadians now occupy."***

*Bossu, Nouveaux voyages aux Indes Occidentales, trans. London 1771 Villiers du Terrâge, Les dernières Années de la Louisiane Française; (for d'Abbadie-Aubry)

**New York Col. Doc. VII p. 965

***The American Heritage, October 1961

This was accomplished by adopting the birch bark canoe of the Indians which was light enough to portage. The Illinois traders journeyed through the Great Lakes to the Chicago portage; thence via the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

The French have gone from Illinois leaving almost no trace. Of the five villages in the southern part of the State, only Prairie du Rocher keeps a faint character. Kaskaskia was swallowed up by the Mississippi when it changed course in the late Nineteenth Century. Cahokia has been equally swallowed up by the growth of East St. Louis. When Fort de Chartres was abandonned, its village of Ste. Anne disappeared also. St. Philippe, a mining village was the first to vanish. For a time, people travelling through the west, especially near the Canadian border, employed Canadian guides and boatmen. They, too, have gone. All that remains are the letters and documents that attest to the events that took place during one hundred years of Illinois history and a few songs sung by the voyageurs and the villagers.

The French Canadians loved to sing and they sang as they paddled on the Illinois streams, perhaps as much in protest against the intense silence of the forests as anything else. Mrs. Kinzie wrote after a trip in Wisconsin in 1828:*

"The Canadian boatmen always sing while rowing or paddling and nothing encourages them so much as to hear their bourgeois (or boss as we would call him) take the lead in music. If the passengers, more especially those of the fair sex, join in the refrain, the compliment is all the greater. Their songs are of a light cheerful character, generally embodying some little satire or witticism calculated to produce a spirited – sometimes an uproarious chorus.

"The Canadian melodies are sometimes very beautiful, and a more exhilarating mode of travel can hardly be imagined than a voyage over these waters, amid all the wild magnificence of nature, with the measured strokes of the oar keeping time to the strains of 'Le rosier blanc,' 'En roulant ma Boule' or 'Lève ton pied, ma jolie Bergère.' "

*Wau-bun by Juliette M. Kinzie, republished by the Colonial Dames of Wisconsin in 1930

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