Although damaged during the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-1812, Fort Massac was repaired as the headquarters for the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, who stayed until the spring of 1813. However, the outpost was less important to the military after the war of 1812 and was abandoned in 1814. Timber and brick were soon scavenged by settlers in the area. During the Civil War, Union soldiers used the grounds for an encampment.

The Daughters of the American Revolution purchased the 24 acres surrounding the fort in 1903. This land was officially dedicated as the first State Park of Illinois in 1908.

Under the direction of Paul Maynard and sponsored by the State of Illinois Division of Parks and Memorials, a team of archaeologists started excavations at Fort Massac in 1939. Maynard's team excavated both French and American forts. However, Maynard's efforts were interrupted by World War II, and he was never able to return to the site. The copious notes he made were used by archaeologists working with the State during the planning of the 1802 fort replica.

Protecting Archaeological Sites

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources owns and manages thousands of archaeological sites on land it oversees. The Archaeological and Paleontological Resources Protection Act protects these sites and the artifacts contained within them from looting and vandalism. It is illegal for anyone to either collect from or engage in digging into an archaeological site on public land. Although prohibited by law, the looting of sites is a serious problem. If you notice illicit digging at an archaeological site or witness someone collecting artifacts on a site at a state park, the Department of Natural Resources asks you to contact either the park superintendent or the IDNR Cultural Resources Coordinator at (217) 782-3715 so that measures can be taken to protect the site.

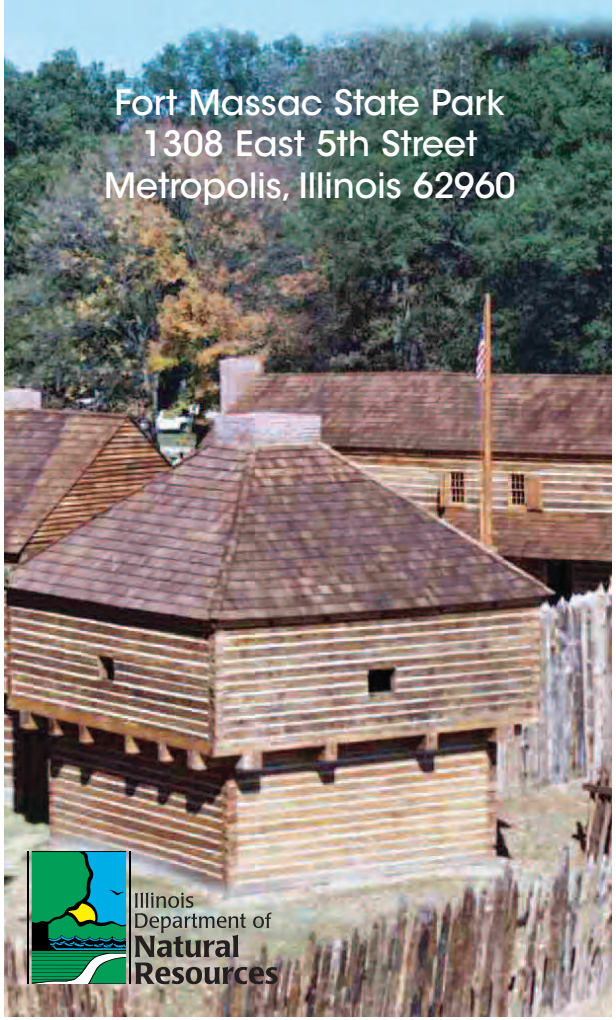
For information about Fort Massac facilities and hours, contact the park office at (618) 524-4712.

Officers' quarters. Photo by R. Kuenneke.

State of Illinois
Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Fort Massac State Park

A Self-Guided Tour of a Replica of an 1802 American Fort



Fort Massac State Park
1308 East 5th Street
Metropolis, Illinois 62960

Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Fort Massac State Park Historic Site

Southwest blockhouse. Photo by R. Kuenneke

In 1757 the French built Fort de L'Ascension (Fort Ascension) on this low bluff top site in order to protect their route to forts along the upper Ohio River. This first fort was described as "in ruins" by 1760, but was rebuilt that spring by the French and renamed Fort Massiac in honor of Monsieur Massiac, French Minister of Colonial Affairs for the New World. Under the treaty of 1763, the French surrendered the fort to the British. After being abandoned, it was burned to the ground in 1765. The British did not rebuild the fort. In June 1778 the location was visited by George Rogers Clark, enroute to capture the British garrisoned at Vincennes. The Americans erected their first Fort Massac (the Anglicized spelling) on top of the French fort site in 1794. Fort Massac soon became a major entry point on the Ohio River for settlers entering the Illinois country from the east and south. The stockade walls were rebuilt by the Americans four or five times between 1794 and 1814. Each fort was built atop the ruins of the former fort, but each was larger than its predecessor.

The establishment in 1801 of Cantonment Wilkinson, overlooking the Ohio River some 16 miles down river from Massac, shifted military emphasis away from Fort Massac. "Wilkinsonville" was, for a short time, a major encampment for militia. The troops from Massac were stationed at the cantonment for several months during 1801 and possibly in early 1802. However, the camp, which had upwards of 800 military men in May of 1801 and perhaps as many as 1,500 by midsummer, was almost immediately beset with sickness. Fevers and dysentery, possibly due to malaria, forced the camp closure, and Cantonment Wilkinson was abandoned in 1802.

The garrison returned to Fort Massac in 1802 and, under the command of Captain Daniel Bissell, repaired the old fortification. They added a new stockade, barracks, three blockhouses, two officers' quarters, and a powder magazine. The replica of this 1802 fort, completed in October 2003, has most of these buildings as well as the stockade wall and a dry moat with pickets.

Recruiting soldiers from among the settlers appears to have been an ongoing activity for the militia at Fort Massac. While the fort itself never came under fire from Europeans, the soldiers did engage in conflicts with nearby Indians during its history.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark stopped at the fort November 11 through 13, 1803, with the intention of collecting non-commissioned officers and privates to accompany them on their westward explorations. While at the fort, Lewis hired local hunter/ scout/interpreter George Pierre Drouillard, whose mother was a Shawnee and father a French Canadian agent for the British Indian Agency in Detroit. Drouillard's expertise was so valued that Lewis hired him away from Bissell at the monthly rate accorded a second lieutenant, $25. He also promised Drouillard a warrant for land when they returned from the west.

The replicated fort looks much today as it would have at the time of Lewis and Clark's visit. However, to protect archaeological remains in the ground, the entire site plan for the replica was shifted just to the east of the footprint of all the original forts.

As you enter the replica 1802 fort site, you will cross over a dry moat (#1 on the plan map) via a wooden bridge (#2). Wooden pickets (#3) made of oak logs 13 feet in length are set on an 85-degree angle along the moat to form the fraise, an added defense for the stockade wall (#6). The stockade wall is made of oak logs 16 feet in length. You are entering the fort from the "back door" (#4). This entrance would originally have been narrower, but has been enlarged in the reconstruction to allow passage of modern maintenance vehicles. The river side would have been the front of the fort (#5), as rivers were the highways of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The first building you approach on entering the fort from the north is the officers' quarters (#7). Another officers' quarters (#8), not yet replicated, would have been just west of this building. These quarters would have housed the officer and his family, if they had accompanied him to the frontier, or several officers. The replica officers' quarters is 16' x 22' and is made with a stone foundation, white oak timbers, poplar flooring, and cedar shingles. The building has two floors, each with a brick fireplace. The bricks are a reproduction of the type of bricks made at the fort in the early 1800s. The windows and hardware are also custom-made reproductions. The windows show the flown character of the original glass, and the hardware is hand forged. The original windows were made in the eastern states and carefully shipped down the Ohio River to the fort.

With the exception of the powder magazine, the other buildings in the fort were built of these same construction materials. The powder magazine (#9)—not yet replicated on site—would have been built of stone.

The fort has two barracks, which were the living quarters for the soldiers. One or two of the rooms with fireplaces would have been kitchens. There could also have been a room for the quartermaster and a room for the sergeant. The east barracks (#10) is 18' x 75' and has two stories. There are four rooms on each floor and a fireplace on both floors at each end of the barracks. The east barracks has a porch. The west barracks (#11) is 22' x 75' and has four rooms on each floor. The fireplaces are in the center of this building.

Barracks, flagppole, and central well. DNR Photo.

There are three blockhouses on three corners of the fort. The northeast corner of the 1802 fort did not have a blockhouse. The northwest blockhouse (#12) is 16' x 16' and has two stories. There is a cellar door, but the building replica does not include a cellar excavation. This blockhouse was used for storage. The southwest blockhouse (#13) is 20' x 24' and also has two stories, each with a fireplace. This blockhouse may have housed the medical doctor, the civilian storekeeper, or a quartermaster. To illustrate the dynamic aspect of the fort's architecture, in the reconstruction this blockhouse has been replicated in a pre-1802 style as regards angle of the blockhouse to the stockade wall. The southeast blockhouse (#14), which was set at a 45-degree angle to the stockade walls, is 16' x 16' and has three floors. The third floor is a lookout tower over the Ohio River. All blockhouses have ladders to the next floor. The ladders are a line of defense: if the enemy invades the fort, the soldiers and civilians can go to the second story of the blockhouse, pull up the ladders, and shoot from the gun ports.

A well surround (#15) is reconstructed in the center of the fort; another well was present in 1802 in the northeastern part of the fort. A trash pit and possibly a privy were located in the extreme northeastern corner. The brass-capped wooden flagpole (#16) is 35' tall. A rock drainage system (#17) was present within the northern half of the fort.

The relative placement of structures and fireplaces is based on archaeological evidence. Details such as window glass, door hardware, and flagpole construction are based on either archival research or recovered artifacts.

Guide to the 1802 fort replication:

#1 dry moat with pickets

#2 wooden bridge over dry moat

#3 pickets or fraising

#4 north gate: "back door" of the fort

#5 south gate:
Ohio River side and "front" of the fort

#6 stockade wall

#7 officers' quarters

#8 foundation of officers' quarter (*to be built*)

#9 foundation of powder magazine (*to be built*)

#10 east soldiers' barracks (with porch)

#11 west soldiers' barracks

#12 northwest blockhouse

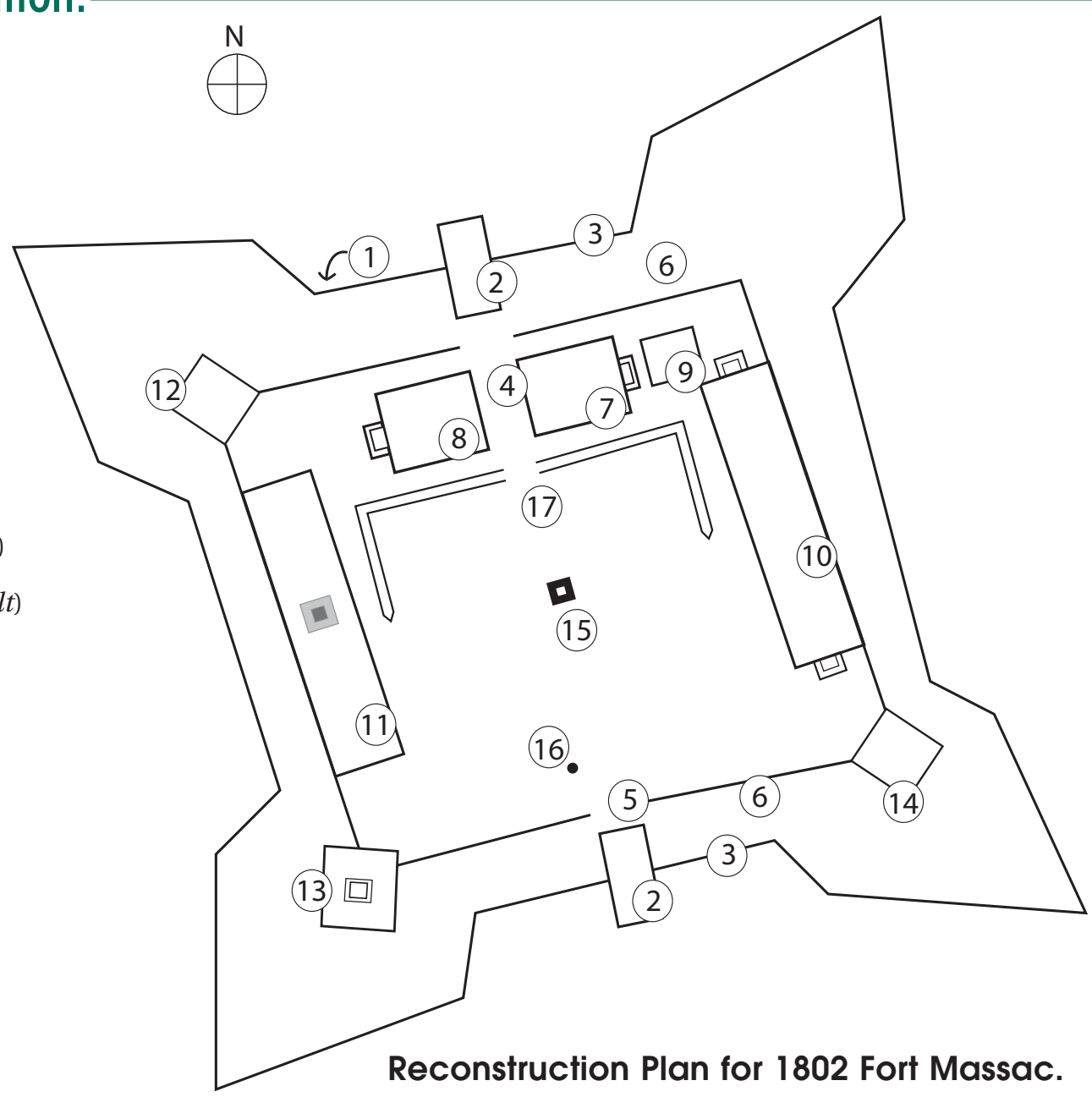
#13 southwest blockhouse* with fireplaces

#14 southeast blockhouse with lookout tower

#15 well

#16 flagpole

#17 drainage ditch



Reconstruction Plan for 1802 Fort Massac.

** has a pre-1802 building orientation*

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