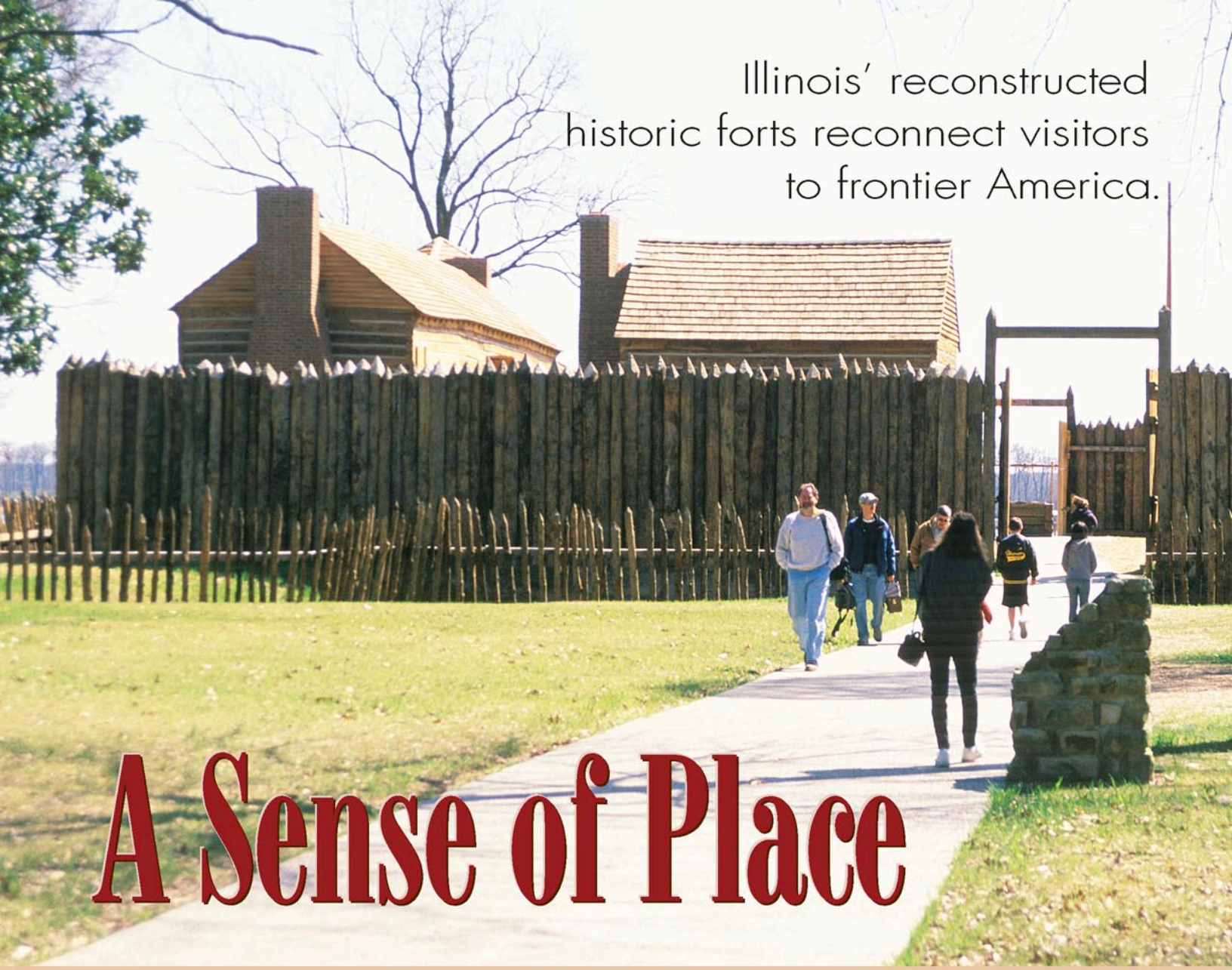


Illinois' reconstructed historic forts reconnect visitors to frontier America.

A Sense of Place

Story By Hal Hassen and Kathy Andrews

Exploring the American frontier was exciting—discovering new plants and animals, standing in awe of new landscapes, learning the ways of native peoples. At the same time, the unexplored regions brought uncertainty in several areas; personal security, availability of goods and services, and communication with loved ones and employers back east.

As more people ventured into the new country, elaborate buildings—forts—were constructed to house military personnel, provide protection for local settlers and serve as trading hubs.

Forts were scattered along the major riverways of the Illinois territory. Most have passed by the wayside—Campbell's Blockhouse, 19 miles above the mouth of the Illinois River in Calhoun County; Fort Crevecouer, the first European-built structure in Illinois and positioned across the Illinois River from present-day Peoria; Fort Saint Louis, built atop Starved Rock because of its commanding position above the last rapids on the Illinois River; Tom Jordon's Fort, providing security for the valuable salt works near Equalilty in Gallatin County; and, Fort Dearborn, memorialized with markers embedded in the sidewalks at the corners of Wacker Drive and Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

But four forts—Fort Massac, Fort de Chartres, Apple River and Fort Kaskaskia—have been reconstructed, using the best historical and archaeological information available and replicating the original materials and techniques as closely as possible. These historical reconstructions stand today to instill into visitors a sense of the American frontier.

Fort Massac State Park

Situated along the lower stretch of the Ohio River in current-day Metropolis, Fort Massac consisted of a series of forts and improvements constructed by the French and Americans between 1757 and 1812.

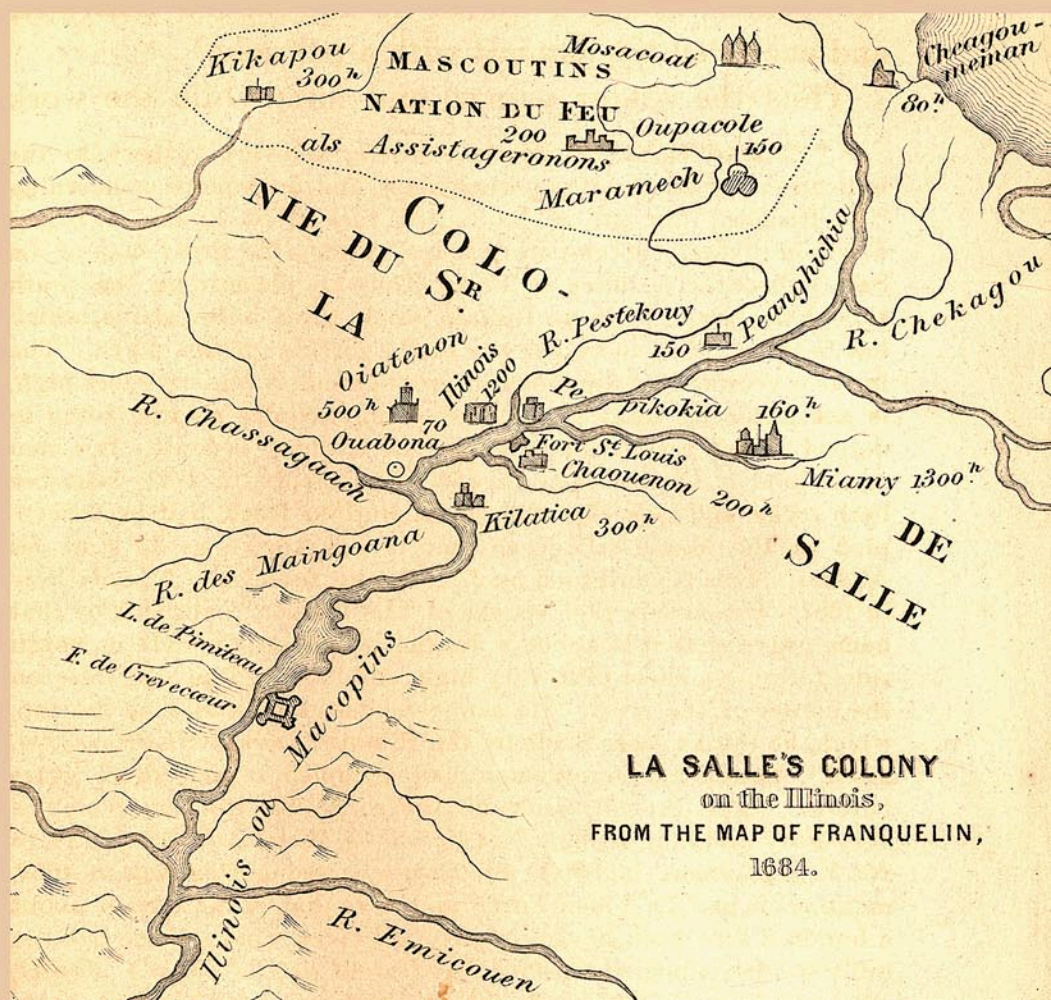
In the 1970s, the American fort was reconstructed to replicate the one that stood in 1794. By the early 1990s, serious structural decay led the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to undertake extensive improvements to the fort. Using information obtained during archaeological investigations conducted

(Photos by Gary Andrashko.)

Review of archaeological and historical information resulted in changing the popular Fort Massac State Park's circa 1970s structures (top) to the layout completed in late 2003.

in the early 1940s and additional historical research, experts determined that the 1970s construction plan used design elements from a variety of time periods and forts. The decision was made to replace the deteriorating reconstruction with one replicating the 1803 Fort Massac—one of the most strategic centers along the American frontier.

Archaeological information played a significant role in determining the size and arrangement of the rebuilt fort and its various structures. The traditional four blockhouses were replaced with three, now joined to the stockade walls rather than surrounded by bastions. The fort's interior, previously vacant, contains two enlisted men's barracks and one officer's quarters—located and sized from information provided from archaeological excavations and historical research. The height and appearance of each building was based on knowledge of other period forts and structures in Illinois and other states.



This 1684 Franquelin map shows the locations of French forts and the Grand Village of the Illinois (see "Illinois 1200" about mid-point of map) on the upper reach of the Illinois River. As reproduced by Sara Jones Tucker in the 1942 publication, *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*.

(Photos courtesy of Historic Preservation Agency.)

Fort de Chartres State Historic Site

Fort de Chartres State Historic Site, in Randolph County, commemorates a series of three forts constructed over a 40-year period by France's colonial government. The original wooden stockades were built in 1720—a "stone's throw" from the Mississippi River—with a new stockade built inland in 1725.

In the 1750s, construction began on a stone fort. Limestone was quarried from the bluffs north of Prairie du Rocher, transported across a small lake by raft then hauled to the site by oxen; quite a feat considering the fort had walls 15 feet high by 3 feet thick and that it enclosed approximately 4 acres. Transferred to Great Britain in 1765, by 1771 the fort was determined to be of little practical value and was abandoned.

Today, visitors to this Historic Preservation Agency facility will find a partially rebuilt fort, complete with bastions, a gatehouse, an original powder magazine and a guard's house. The reconstructed king's storehouse contains the Piethman Museum, home to artifacts discovered during archaeological excavations.

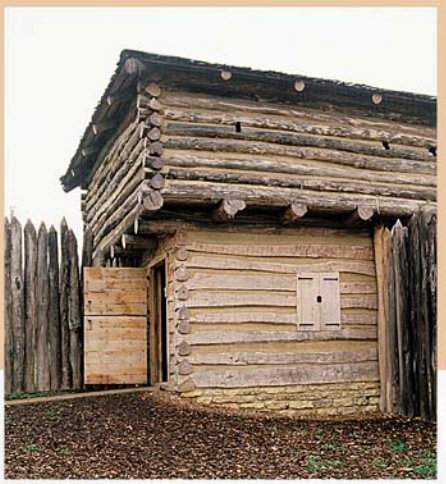
The Fort de Chartres reconstruction replicates the last of three forts that stood near the Mississippi River in Randolph County.

Apple River Fort

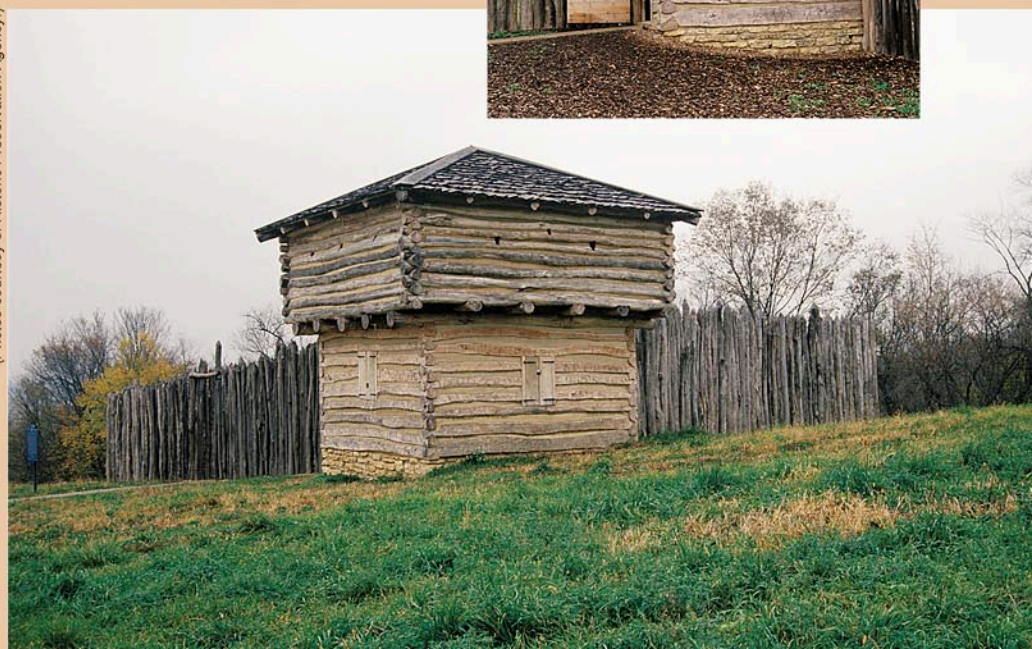
Dating to the Black Hawk War—a 16-week war during the summer of 1832—the Apple River Fort served pioneers settling the Galena area after the discovery of lead.

Torn down in 1847, the Jo Daviess County fort's footprint remained buried until archaeologists working for the Apple River Fort Historic Foundation unearthed it in 1995. The following year, volunteers began the painstaking task of reconstructing the fort's cabins—using similar materials and tools as the original settlers. Now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the fort is open for self-guided tours and exhibits recount the history of the Sauk and Fox, the early settlers and the Black Hawk War.

Volunteers reconstructed the Apple River Fort in 1996, duplicating, to the extent possible, the materials and tools used when the original fort was built in the 1830s.



(Photos courtesy of Historic Preservation Agency.)



Special events at Illinois' forts

Fort Massac State Park: Fort Massac Encampment, two days each October; living history weekends, several times throughout the year; antique car show, one weekend in June.

Fort de Chartres State Historic Site: Kids' Day, first weekend in May; Rendezvous, first weekend in June; French and Indian War Assemblage, first weekend in October.

Apple River Fort: A themed weekend and a living history weekend each month.

Fort Kaskaskia: George Rogers Clark Encampment, Sept. 11; annual traditional music festival, September.

Fort Kaskaskia

High atop a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River stand the earthen-work remnants, parapets and dry moat of the mid-1700s French-built Fort Kaskaskia. Now preserved for the ages as Fort Kaskaskia State Historic Site, the original fort played a role in the 1803 expedition by Lewis and Clark.

The state historic site also contains Garrison Hill Cemetery, where nearly 3,000 grave sites were re-interred after the 1881 flood destroyed Illinois' first state capital, Kaskaskia, and its many cemeteries.

A small brick building across the Mississippi River, in the only portion of Illinois west of the river, contains the Kaskaskia Bell, a gift from King Louis XV of France to the people of the Illinois Country. Eleven years older, but slightly smaller in size and weight, than Philadelphia's Liberty Bell, the bell was dubbed the "Liberty Bell of the West" after George Rogers Clark captured Kaskaskia during the American Revolution. Visitors may take a self-guided tour of the building.

Day visitors will find picnic grounds, complete with water, electricity, pit restrooms and modern playground equipment. Overnight accommodations include a campground with 32 electrical hook-ups and ample room for individual and group tent camping.

(Photos courtesy of Historic Preservation Agency.)

In addition to remnants of Fort Kaskaskia (above), visitors to this State Historic Site will find the historic Garrison Hill Cemetery (right) and a building housing the "Liberty Bell of the West."

A Sense of Place

Though historical reconstructions are never perfect, they do provide visitors valuable experiences that otherwise cannot be replicated. Striking a balance between historical authenticity and public recreation can be accomplished, as evidenced in Illinois' four historical fort reconstructions—resources that continue to be important destinations for vacationers and history buffs.

Facts at a glance

Fort Massac State Park: 1308 E. 5th Street, Metropolis, IL 62960.
Telephone: (618) 524-4712.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R5/frmindex.htm.
Hours: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.
Directions: Take Exit 37 off Interstate 24 into Metropolis. Follow the signs.

Ft. de Chartres: R.R. 2, Prairie du Rocher, IL 62277.
Telephone: (618) 284-7230.
Website: www.state.il.us/hpa/hs/DeChartres.htm.
Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday, Presidents' Day.
Directions: Travel 4 miles west of Prairie du Rocher on State Route 155, or 37 miles south of Belleville.

Apple River Fort State Historic Site: P.O. Box 206, 311 E. Myrtle, Elizabeth, IL 61028.
Telephone: (815) 858-2028.
Website: www.appleriverfort.org or www.state.il.us/hpa/hs/Apple.htm.
Hours: March thru October, Wednesday-Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; November thru February, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday, Presidents' Day.
Directions: Take Highway 20 to Elizabeth. Go east on Myrtle/Apple River road. Watch for signs.

Fort Kaskaskia: 4372 Park Road, Ellis Grove, IL 62241.
Telephone: (618) 859-3741.
Website: www.state.il.us/hpa/hs/Kaskaskia.htm.
Hours: 8 a.m to 4 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday, Presidents' Day.
Directions: Located 6 miles north of Chester on Route 3. Turn west on Fort Kaskaskia Road and go approximately 2 miles.