From French soldiers to Lewis and Clark, Illinois history can be traced to our very first state park.

Fort Massac— The Best Story You Never Heard

The site of Fort Massac may have been a refuge for Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto in the mid 1500s. The French built the first fort there in 1756, ceding it to the British in 1763.

Fort Massac was dedicated as Illinois' first state park on Nov. 5, 1908.

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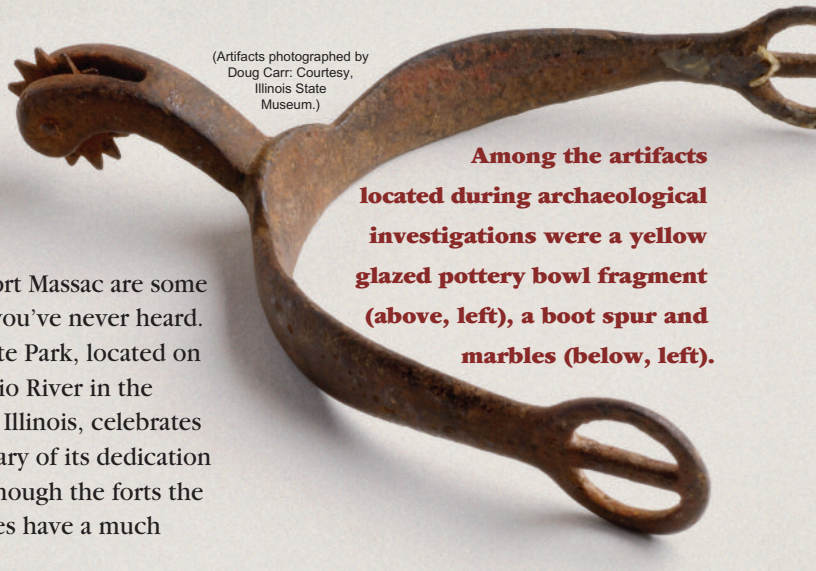
(Artifacts photographed by Doug Carr: Courtesy, Illinois State Museum.)



Among the artifacts located during archaeological investigations were a yellow glazed pottery bowl fragment (above, left), a boot spur and marbles (below, left).

If you are one of the 1.7 million visitors to Fort Massac State Park near Metropolis this year, imagine yourself standing in the steps of soldiers, explorers and settlers who experienced everything from encounters with Native Americans and pirates to political intrigue and earthquakes.

The stories of Fort Massac are some of the best stories you've never heard.

Fort Massac State Park, located on the bank of the Ohio River in the southeastern tip of Illinois, celebrates the 100th anniversary of its dedication this November, although the forts the park commemorates have a much longer history.

When you visit Fort Massac State Park these days, you can stop by the new Visitors Center, explore the reconstructed fort, or meet re-enactors who frequent the park. You'll have access to playgrounds, picnic and camping areas as well as neatly groomed walking trails with extended views of the Ohio River.

According to local folklore, the site of Fort Massac may have been a refuge for Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto and his men in 1542. Beginning in 1757, the French built two forts there.

After the French and Indian War (1763), Fort Massac was ceded to British forces by the Treaty of Paris, but was never occupied by British troops. Still later, American forces won control, and in 1794 were ordered by President George Washington to rebuild over the original sites of the French forts. In 1811, Fort Massac was badly damaged by the New Madrid Earthquake.

By 1828, the abandoned fort had fallen into disrepair. It was used only one time more, during the Civil War, as a site for troop training.

By 1903, the Daughters of the American Revolution had purchased 24 acres surrounding Fort Massac and successfully lobbied the state legislature to have the area declared Illinois' first state park.

The site was dedicated November 5, 1908, with an exuberant celebration. More than 5,000 people attended the ceremony, including state officials who arrived in Metropolis by train early that morning. The Woman's Club of Metropolis served an elegant dinner in the Masonic Lodge, followed by a parade through town to Fort Massac.

Professor Joseph Blair, instrumental in persuading others of the potential of the Fort Massac site and who helped plan and landscape the new state park, was an honored guest. Also present were Julia Scott and Letitia Green Stevenson, the wife of Adlai Stevenson. These sisters were instrumental in encouraging the DAR to raise money for a monument to George Rogers Clark to be erected on the grounds.

The 1908 dedication ceremony included presentation of a monument to George Rogers Clark. The present-day monument (right) replaced the original in 1932.

(Photo by Holly Schurter.)

The replica 1802 American fort contains two barracks, three block houses, an officers quarters, a well and stockade along with a fraise fence.

Verna Mae Helm, whose father was an Illinois State Senator at the time, was a Metropolis third-grader that day. Now 108 years old, she remembers that "finally the parade started, led by the Metropolis City Band, then the horse-drawn cabs, only used for funerals before this day, with the mayor and Governor Deneen in a special carriage, then the DAR and my father with Professor Joseph Blair, who did the planning and landscaping, in several more carriages."

The George Rogers Clark monument dedicated that day later developed a crack that caused park officials to fear it would break off and fall. The first monument was replaced in 1932 with a bronze figure of Clark, his long rifle at his side.

The park became a favorite recreational area for local residents, but the possibility of documenting and highlighting the area's historical significance remained a priority for many citizens, particularly Metropolis civic leader Howard H. Hays. He worked with officials at Southern Illinois University to plan park improvements, including the reconstruction of a fort modeled on the 1794 American fort. Dedicated in 1973,

(Photo by Holly Schurter.)

that fort stood almost 30 years, attracting both re-enactors and curious visitors, but was torn down in 2002-2003 because of decaying timbers.

The Department of Natural Resources, now charged with oversight of the park's 1,450 acres, began researching the possibility of rebuilding

Living history weekends offer visitors insights into life at the fort.

For more information about Fort Massac, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/orep/nrrc/cultural/cultural.htm and www.dnr.state.il.us/publications/pdf/00000583.pdf

the fort as it might have looked in 1802. Beginning with the work of archaeologist Paul Maynard, the long process of reconstructing the fort began.

Maynard, who also was involved in the excavation of Dickson Mounds, began excavating the site of Fort Massac in 1939. He utilized a three-dimensional grid for finding, examining, and systematically removing artifacts for safekeeping and further investigation.

World War II interrupted Maynard's work. His notes and artifacts, stored for several years in a locked shed on park grounds, were damaged by weather and rodents. Once recovered from the shed, the artifacts were stored at New Salem State Park, then transferred in 1966 to Southern Illinois University where they were later damaged during a fire amid student unrest.

Start your visit at the new Visitors Center to view a video about the history of Fort Massac and see artifact displays.

From there, the artifacts were taken to the Illinois State Museum in Springfield where they remain as a resource for researchers.

The reconstructed fort, based in large part on what later researchers gleaned from Maynard's notes, was dedicated in October 2003.

Hal Hassen, DNR cultural resource coordinator, said the reconstructed fort "is based on careful re-analysis of Maynard's notes and maps as well as details about contemporary forts and regional architecture. The quality of architectural detail reflects development and refinement of 'frontier' architecture."

Those architectural details include period-specific stone foundations and cedar shingles, window glass and hand-forged hardware based on archival research and recovered artifacts. Visi-

Visitors Center displays highlight some of the trades practiced at the fort, including blacksmithing. Perhaps the key found during an investigation was made at the fort.

(Photo by Holly Schurter.)

Re-enactment groups offer living history lessons and family fun at Fort Massac. The Massiac Marines, a 1750 French-Indian War re-enactment group, meets the second weekend of each month on the grounds of Fort Massac. Dressed in accurately detailed period costume, the re-enactors talk with visitors to describe customs and habits of people from that period.

The Annual Fort Massac Encampment, held each year one weekend in October, commemorates the history of Fort Massac, with crafts, music, children's games, military drills, even a mock battle. The commemoration covers the early French period at Fort Massac through 1814, when the fort was essentially abandoned. No admission fee is charged to attend.

Other events are held at Fort Massac throughout the year, including meetings of the Southern Illinois Spinners and Weavers Guild, an Olde Tyme Christmas celebration, and other re-enactment weekend observances. For more information, call (618) 524-9321, or visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/PARKS/R5/frmindex.htm#Events.

Popular in the late 1700s, pearlware pottery was created as an inexpensive imitation of porcelain and commonly was decorated to resemble English and Chinese pottery.

tors can walk through officers' quarters with brick fireplaces and built-in bunks up to the second floor, or climb a ladder in one of the blockhouses for a birds-eye view of the surrounding area through tiny windows and gunports.

Site Superintendent Terry Johnson is proud of the park, especially the restored fort.

"You can look at the historic area and see the way it used to be," he said, adding "It's the most spectacular area."

Spectacular is a fitting word for a place that holds so many historic stories.

While some stories associated with the fort are not well documented, it is clear Fort Massac was strategically important during pivotal moments in American history.

If there had been one guest book registering all the notable people who've passed through, it would include names like: George Rogers Clark and his Long Knives Regiment, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, George Pierre Drouillard, Aaron Burr, Zebulon Pike, Charles Lesueur and others.

Each of those names represents a story.

■ George Rogers Clark and his Long Knives Regiment secured the Illinois Territory for American forces during the Revolutionary War. The British acquired control of Fort Massac as part of the Treaty of Paris, but ignored its strategic position on the Ohio River, failing to rebuild or occupy the fort. Clark and his Long Knives slipped into the Illinois Territory through Fort Massac, then marched 100 miles north, capturing Kaskaskia without firing a shot. This turned control of the Illinois Territory (including territory from the Mississippi River to Detroit) over to the colonies. Clark persuaded Native American tribes to stop helping British troops. With the Illinois Territory under American control, the British were denied access to land and resources that might have helped them win the American Revolution. By 1802, the Americans had modified the 1794 American fort built over the ruins of French forts which had stood there before. Commissioned as a customs house, soldiers at the fort collected taxes from travelers on the Ohio River, warning them to keep to the middle of the river from that point on in order to avoid thieving and sometimes murderous pirates, notably at Cave-in-the-Rock, a short distance upriver.

Fort Massac offers fascinating insights into U.S. history and frontier life.

(Photo by Holly Schurter.)

A model of a member of George Rogers Clark's Long Knives Regiment is on display in the Visitors Center.

■ In 1803, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark stopped at Fort Massac on their way west. While at Fort Massac, they hired George Pierre Drouillard as a scout for their expedition. Drouillard, whose father was French Canadian and whose mother was Shawnee, was engaged as an Indian interpreter for $25 a month.

■ In 1804, former Vice President Aaron Burr met with General James Wilkinson at Fort Massac to furtively share plans for separating western territories from the United States, conquering Mexico and forming a new country which Burr would rule. He promised General Wilkinson a powerful position in the newly formed country as a reward for his assistance. Burr was later tried for treason for this plan and, although he was not convicted, the stain of the charges remains on his reputation.

■ Explorer—and spy? Zebulon Montgomery Pike served at Fort Massac under his father, Captain Zebulon Pike. During that time, General Wilkinson sent him on the first of many expeditions for which Pike would be noted. Captured by the Spanish, Pike reported back to Wilkinson about Spanish settlements and defenses.

■ The New Madrid earthquake in late 1811 severely damaged Fort Massac. Aftershocks which continued into 1812 delayed repairs; the fort was abandoned in 1814.

■ In 1828, noted French naturalist Charles Lesueur sketched what remained of Fort Massac on a trip down the Ohio River. His careful renditions of the area were used when work began on the fort's reconstruction in 2002.

■ Used as a training camp for Union forces during the early years of the Civil War, Fort Massac closed for good after a deadly measles epidemic in 1861-62.