

## FRENCH COLONIZATION

The French, with their stronghold in Quebec, were the first Europeans to realize the strategic importance of the Mississippi River stretching south to the Gulf of Mexico. Having lost the contest for the Atlantic coast to the English and Spanish, France hoped that control of the major north-south artery of the continent would help to further their commercial ventures in fur trading as well as provide a base for their Jesuit missionary efforts among the Indians. France faced only nominal competition for the river valley since the English were still trying to consolidate their gains on the east coast. Spain, though claiming title to the Mississippi Valley under a technicality in Columbus' proclamation, had never explored the river, and at this time were preoccupied in Florida and Mexico (Beard et al.1960:15-25).

In a ceremony at Sault Ste. Marie on the St. Mary's River, the French officially claimed title to the Illinois area in 1671. Following reconnaissance missions by Jolliet and Marquette in 1673 and LaSalle and Tonti in the 1680s, French settlements were planted along the Mississippi in the late 17th century. In the American Bottoms, settlements such as Kaskaskia, Fort de Chartres, Prairie du Rocher, St. Phillippe, Ste. Genevieve, and Cahokia succeeded as bases for the lucrative fur trade and evangelizing efforts, and began a concentration of settlement and flow of goods south to the Gulf. The founding of New Orleans in 1718 marked the beginning of an economic dependency on this gulf city by the French in the American Bottoms (Howard 1972:23-39).

The town of Cahokia was established in 1699 at a village of the Tamaroa Indians. At first it was more a base of operations for merchant traders, trappers, and missionaries than a full time settlement. It was not until 1731 that the missionaries at Tamaroa purchased land from the Indians for purposes of laying out a town and commonfields. The commonfields, narrow lots extending from the river to the bluffs, included the environs of present day East St. Louis. By 1752 a census revealed the French population of Cahokia to be about 136 people (Belting 1948:13-39). In 1766, the population had grown to about 500 people (Beck 1823:95).

The method of French settlement at Cahokia into compact villages was both traditional and practical. Traditionally, it conformed to the system of villages with commonfields that was transplanted from France. It allowed the immigrants to share in a common culture and religion, and in its practical aspect provided a modicum of safety from other Europeans and Indians by strategically concentrating settlement into a more defensible position than would be possible through dispersed settlement (Howard 1972:41).

The distinct French style of the Cahokia houses illustrates this preservation of cultural traditions even within the context of the alien New World. Governor Ford, who lived in Monroe County in 1805, gives this description:

"The French houses were mostly built of hewn timber set upright in the ground, or upon plates laid upon a wall, the intervals between the upright pieces being filled with stone and mortar.

Scarcely any of them were more than one story high with a porch on one or two sides, and sometimes all around, with low roofs extending with slopes of different steepness from the comb in the centre to the lowest part of the porch.

These houses were generally placed in gardens, surrounded by fruit trees of apples, pears, cherries, and peaches; and in the villages each enclosure for a house and garden occupied a whole block or square, or the greater part of one. Each village had its Catholic Church and priest. The church was the great place of gay resort on Sundays and holidays, and the priest was the advisor and director and companion of all his flock" (Beck 1967:95-96).

Cahokia, like many other French villages, was situated on a slough (described as an arm of the river) rather than directly on the banks of the river. However, this may not have been their original intent. Father Charlevoix observed in 1721:

"I was astonished that they had pitched upon so inconvenient a situation, being so far from the river, especially as they had so many better places in their choice; but I was told the Mississippi washed the foot of that village when it was built; that in three years it has lost half a league of its breadth..." (Beck 1823:95).

The harsh environment of the American Bottoms was Inhospitable in many ways. The town of Cahokia was described as damp and disagreeable and, frequently inundated in high water. The creek of Cahokia, backed up into lakes and marshes by mill dams in the American Bottoms, was sluggish and pestiferous. The French inhabitants noted that outbreaks of fever, which invariably followed flooding, became more common with the advent of the mill dams, a lesson not heeded by the Americans in the 19th century (Beck 1823:94).

Ever since European nations had laid claim to the New World, the interior between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River had been an area of contention. French, British, and Spanish claims and interests mingled and crossed, and intrigue for the possession of each other's land never ceased (Wade 1959:1). In 1756 the uneasy peace between the three European powers broke out into the global Seven Years War. In North America, the war had been preceded during the 1750s by small conflicts between the English and the French over control of the Ohio River valley. By 1754 the French and Indian War had erupted in the New World engulfing the English and the French and their Indian allies. After some initial defeats, the British managed to capture the French strongholds at Louisburg, Fort Duquesne, Quebec, and other important territories in the Great Lakes region (McReynolds 1962:18; Roseboom. and Weisenburger 1976:26).

Peace was made with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. As a result England ,acquired control of Canada and all of the territory east of the Mississippi River from France, as well as control of Florida from Spain. Spain received control of former French territory west of the Mississippi and Louisiana. The Spanish control of former French land was seen by most to be only nominal as the French were expelled from the Mississippi Valley only politically (McReynolds 1962:19).

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