





French traces in the oldest town in Illinois - Cahokia

In 1699, only seventeen years after La Salle claimed the Louisiana Territory for France, French Canadian missionaries from Québec traveled down the Mississippi and established an outpost among the Tamaroa and Cahokia Illini Indians in a remote spot near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. At the time there were around two thousand Native Americans living in the area, and the missionaries built a chapel outpost and went about the job of Christianizing the natives. The settlement, Cahokia, grew up around the mission; its name is derived from the Cahokian Indian tribe and means “wild geese”.

The oldest town in the state of Illinois, Cahokia became the first of several forts and villages in the “bottom region” of the “Pays des Illinois” (the Illinois Country). From these modest beginnings, the settlement later became a major trading center and the focal point of political activity in the Northwest Territory. It remained so throughout much of the eighteenth century until the growth of its neighbor, St. Louis, founded in 1764, outstripped it in population and influence.

Cahokia exercised a political and economic influence that belied its modest size. As a trading post, the village served as a way station for goods traveling downriver to New Orleans and upriver to Canada. Its courthouse was an administrative center for justice on the western frontier. And a number of prominent figures in early American history – including Auguste Chouteau, who co-founded St. Louis – made their homes here. From December 1803 to May 1804, Lewis and

Clark established their base in Cahokia and trained their recruits for their voyage to the West.

In July 1778, during the Revolutionary War, George Rogers Clark and his Virginians occupied the town, and the Illinois French were drawn into the American Revolution. Even after the war, the French influence remained. In the mid-nineteenth century, one observer wrote: “The lapse of nearly two centuries has not entirely destroyed the original impress upon this people of the manners, customs and language of Old France.”

Now a sleepy hamlet across the Mississippi south of St. Louis, Cahokia is notable for having preserved and maintained some of the most remarkable French structures in the continental United States. The Cahokia Courthouse is one of the most impressive. At the height of its influence, around 1801, the court decided cases from as far north as the Canadian border.

Constantly threatened by Mississippi floods, the courthouse saw its influence diminish after the county seat was shifted to Belleville in 1814. After a number of transformations, the building had deteriorated badly and was used only to store farm machinery. Dismantled and then rebuilt, in a reduced form, for an exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, the courthouse was again dismantled before being rebuilt in 1940 at its original site.

A short distance from the Cahokia Courthouse stands one of the most significant religious buildings in the continental



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Holy Family Church.
This jewel of a structure (1799) is one of the treasures of French architecture in the Middle West. Not a nail is used in the structure, only wooden pegs. The walls of the church contain most of the original vertical walnut logs.

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Built around 1740, the Cahokia Courthouse is a prized example of early French log construction known as *poteaux-sur-sole* (post-on-sill foundation). Initially constructed as a private dwelling, it was transformed into a courtroom, schoolroom and offices for attorneys and clerks. The American judges who sat here held jurisdiction over a vast tract of land covering what is now four states.

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Cahokia Courthouse.
The spaces between the upright logs were filled with stone and mortar chinking (*pierrotage*).



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Holy Family Church. This exquisitely carved wooden figure of the Virgin is one of the fine carvings in the church. Tradition has it that the vertical log timbers in the church were harvested from Cahokia's commons.

building underwent a restoration, at which time the exterior was encased with clapboard siding. In 1950, the siding was removed to expose the original oak timber construction, the *pierrotage* stonework was repaired and the roof of cypress clapboard with sycamore covering was restored. The *oeil-de-boeuf* (bull's eye) window, with frame and hinges intact, a characteristic of early French architecture in the U.S., was rediscovered.

Entrepreneur, landowner, slaveowner, farmer, merchant, philanthropist, Nicholas Jarrot was a man of many parts. Born in the small French village of Vesoul in Franche-Comté, Jarrot came to Baltimore, the center of colonial American Catholicism, in 1791. In 1793, he made his permanent home in Cahokia. Blessed with business acumen, he established a series of businesses in Cahokia, including stores, mills, even a ferry to St. Louis. But the

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The Jarrot House, built from 1807-1810, in contrast to the vertical log construction of other Cahokia historic structures, is an imposing two-story brick house in the Federal Style more suited to Baltimore, Jarrot's port of entry to America. The Federal Style was a unique expression of the American identity. It transformed Georgian architecture by stripping it of all embellishments to create a style that was both lean and massive.

United States. The vertical log Church of the Holy Family was dedicated in 1799. Its antecedent dates from 1699 when its first pastor, Father St. Cosme, and two workmen erected a missionary cross, a chapel and a log rectory.

The early chapel of the Holy Family Church was replaced in the 1730s, then again in 1785. In 1913, the

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The majestic wood-carved staircase would have been the envy of Jarrot's neighbors. It is likely that the large center hall, with doors front and back, had a multi-purpose use – as a reception hall and work space.





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The oldest known residence in Illinois, the Martin-Boismenu House, built around 1790 by Pierre Martin, is a superb example of French Creole architecture. The restoration involved tearing off subsequent additions and pulling up the whole building and rebuilding from the foundation up. The resulting house is around 80 per cent original.

real source of his wealth was land speculation. Jarrot sold land he had bought from veterans of the American Revolution for pennies on the dollar. In time, he accumulated a vast domain of more than 25,000 acres.

He first lived in a *poteaux-sur-sole* frame house, but as his wealth grew, so did his aspirations. The Nicholas Jarrot House, Jarrot's brick showplace second house, was first started in 1807. Because it was built by local artisans unfamiliar with brick, it has its share of architectural idiosyncrasies. But it retains almost all of its original features, including plaster, flooring, millwork and even some window sashes.

The Martin-Boismenu House, a remarkable French Creole dwelling, is located in Dupon, adjacent to Cahokia. It was saved in 1980 by the action of the local fire chief who knew how to read old houses and had a passion for preserving them. At that time, after the building had been bought by a local owner, it was a run-down apartment



building. The buyer, thinking it useless, wanted to tear it down and put up a car wash. But the fire chief, an avid researcher of old houses, suspected that underneath the siding the house had historic value. After stripping off the siding, he discovered the vertical log timbers beneath. Within twenty-four hours, a group of interested local citizens organized themselves, secured a bank loan, bought the house and obtained grant money to restore it. It has been acquired by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and refurbished with attractive rustic period furnishings.



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“French Habitation in the Country of the Illinois” from Collot, *A Journey in North America*. Paris, 1826. (St. Louis Mercantile Library)

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The restored Martin-Boismenu House has the original fireplace and floors and is furnished with rustic furniture of the period.