

The Kaskaskia Manuscripts:
Documenting 18th-Century Life in the Pays des Illinois

by William Thompson

The history of the French presence in North America is well documented and familiar to a wide audience, particularly one that has an interest in France and the Francophone world. Certainly the enduring French cultural and linguistic legacies of Québec, Acadie, and the state of Louisiana are considered an integral component of any discussion of French language and culture and their global heritage. Far less prominent, however, is the story of the Pays des Illinois—referring to that region explored and settled by the French between the Great Lakes and what is now the state of Louisiana, and encompassing much of present-day Illinois and Missouri—a region that played an important role in France’s colonial efforts in North America for nearly 100 years. Within the field of French studies in the United States, Louisiana and Québec have long captured the interest of scholars and students alike. The French presence across Canada, around the Great Lakes, and in New England has also received due attention, especially as an increased level of cognizance of the broader French heritage of North America has become more commonplace in the field at conferences, in scholarly works, and in the curriculum.

Yet the Pays des Illinois, which served several critical functions during much of the 18th century, and lingering traces of which can be found throughout southern Illinois and southeastern Missouri well into the 21st century, remains infrequently acknowledged. Over the course of the 20th century, a number of dedicated scholars in the fields of history and archaeology (including Clarence Alvord, Carl Ekberg, and Margaret Kimball Brown, to name just a few of the most prominent and prolific of these writers) succeeded in making the story of the this region better known and understood. Nevertheless, one might suggest that the Pays des Illinois has suffered in a sort of limbo; never fully part of discussions of Louisiana or New France, and pre-dating the arrival of the British and, subsequently, Americans, thus becoming over the course of time marginalized in any examination of early American (and for the most part English-speaking) history and culture.

Several factors contributed to the establishment of a French presence along the upper Mississippi. When the French village of Cahokia was established in 1699 near the river in present-day Illinois, the major motivation was the conversion of the indigenous population to Christianity. French missionaries had been present in the region for several years; perhaps most famously le Père Marquette travelled down the Mississippi with Joliet in 1673. Yet the founding of Cahokia marks the beginning of a true French colonial presence in the area, quickly followed by Kaskaskia further south in 1703, and later by other settlements such as Prairie du Rocher, Fort de Chartres, Old Mines, and Ste. Genevieve, all of which continue to exist to the present day. Although missionary work

would always be of importance, other factors, political and economic in nature, would take precedence. The settlements in the Pays des Illinois guaranteed a connection between Nouvelle France and Louisiana, and ensured an official French presence between the Spanish to the west and the British to the east, who both had their eyes on this part of the continent. Over the years, the region would also gain considerable economic importance, as fur trading, mining (principally of lead), and farming would ensure the livelihoods of the people who called the Pays des Illinois their home.

The French population never experienced substantial growth as did the English-speaking population to the east, and French officials on the other side of the ocean showed little interest in the development of the region, especially when rumors of gold and silver mines proved to be false. After the defeat at the hands of the British and the loss of virtually all of New France in 1763, the French story in central North America seemed to be drawing to a close. Yet, remarkably, this heritage continues to survive into the 21st century, the consequence of the fact that many of the French living in the Pays des Illinois never left, and continued on with their lives, albeit under different flags.

One of the great ironies of the history of the Pays des Illinois is that, although this history is very well documented, the written record that does exist has been largely neglected. Two factors explain this: first, the relatively short French reign over the region is often considered a minor detail in the complicated history of the United States; and second, most of the material is in French, and consequently accessible to a limited number of researchers of American history. Among these documents, the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* are perhaps the largest untapped resource for understanding what life was like for the French who lived along the Mississippi River during the 18th century. The manuscripts are composed of more than 6,000 notarial documents—wills, inventories of possessions, employment contracts, petitions, marriage contracts, sales and exchanges of property—all hand-written and dating from 1708 up until the early years of the 19th century. Most of the originals are now preserved in the Randolph County Courthouse in Chester, Illinois. A microfilm version, prepared in the 1970s, is available at just a handful of institutions. Most of the documents have never been published or translated, except for some composed after the British takeover in 1765 (and edited by the historian Clarence Alvord early in the 20th century) and those few cited by Natalia Belting in her work *Kaskaskia Under the French Regime*, published in 1948.

Attempting to do justice to the entirety of the contents of the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* would require (with little exaggeration) more than a lifetime of dedication. A presentation of just some of these thousands of documents can nonetheless provide us with an intriguing glimpse into the lives (and deaths) of the French who lived along the Mississippi River in the Pays des Illinois. The documents included here have been chosen either for the insight they provide into the composition of everyday life in the Pays des Illinois, or for the interest of the story they relate. They provide merely a brief introduction to both the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* themselves, and the society of which these documents are the official (albeit incomplete) record.

Who, exactly, were the inhabitants of Kaskaskia during the French period (1703-1763) whose lives are chronicled in the manuscripts? Although some came directly from France, many others traced their immediate origins to Québec where, in some cases, their families had already been living for several generations. Some (soldiers and priests in particular) had not chosen to live here and were never intending to stay, but most probably came to consider themselves as permanent or semi-permanent inhabitants, dedicated to farming, trading, and mining in the early years, and to an increasingly diverse list of professions as the community grew and became increasingly self-reliant. An inventory of the professions mentioned in the manuscripts reveals that many different skills were needed to support Kaskaskian society, which was very much at the center of lines of trade and communication in the Pays des Illinois. Even a partial list of the professions specifically mentioned in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* reveals a tremendous variety of activities: baker, barber and wigmaker, billiard hall keeper, blacksmith, carpenter, carter, clerk, cooper, director of the mines, gunsmith, hunter, innkeeper, interpreter, locksmith, mason, merchant, miller, miner, notary, sawyer, schoolmaster, servant, soldier, stonecutter, surgeon, tanner, voyageur. Many of these may not have been full-time occupations, but they do indicate the presence of a complex, and in some regards sophisticated, society of French speakers living in what is now southern Illinois, and under the French flag, for much of the 18th century.

With a basic understanding of who these people were, and when and why they had settled in this part of the continent, one can begin to explore what life must have been like in such an isolated location. Unfortunately there are very few personal accounts of life in the Pays des Illinois before the arrival of the British and then the Americans in the latter part of the 18th century. The *Jesuit Relations* do offer considerable insight into the lives of the clergy whose duty it was to serve and convert in often difficult circumstances, but such accounts do not adequately address the events affecting the majority of the population, whether French, Native American, or of mixed heritage. Fortunately, the meticulous documentation of the milestones and transactions of life in the region was of considerable importance in this society. Those church registers which have survived allow us to trace the births, marriages, and deaths that occurred within the parishes. Most critically (especially for the purposes of this study), the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* from this early period allow us to trace those events worthy of being recorded, and which also provide a glimpse into the basic aspects of life during the French period of colonial American history.¹

Inventaire des effets de feu Sr. Jaques Leprevost (KM 22:9:19:1)²

The documents in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* that provide the most intimate insight into the nature of the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Illinois Country are undoubtedly the numerous inventories of the belongings of recently deceased men and (less frequently) women who resided in Kaskaskia and the neighboring settlements. The meticulous composition of these lists was a necessary exercise, since nothing of value could go to waste in a community so isolated from the rest of the world.

Jacques Leprevost was the *médecin général* at Kaskaskia in the early years of the settlement, and the inventory of his belongings after his death is revealing not only about his lifestyle, but about the use of the French language in the manuscripts themselves. One noteworthy detail in this document is the fact that his name is spelled three different ways within this one document: Leprevost, Le Prevost, and Prevost (with no article). Even a casual reading of the documents reveals that spelling and punctuation were, to say the least, inconsistent, and reflected the education levels, styles, and perhaps whims of each individual notary, who may or may not have had much training in performing this duty. Among Leprevost's possession at the time of his death and as listed in the inventory are the following:

- Manteau
- Gillet
- Veste
- Bonnet piqué
- Etui de poche
- Deux chemises grosses
- Chapeau
- Pipe
- Paire de pistolets
- Paire de culottes
- Une nappe
- Bottines de cuir
- Deux peignes
- Drap³

These inventories were exhaustive for several reasons. Items imported from France were extremely expensive; indeed virtually everything had to be imported, complicated by the fact that those in power in France did not want a competing economy being developed in the new world. In addition, the inventories were a necessary exercise in order to determine proper distribution of the inheritance, and to pay off any debts that the deceased may have owed. In Leprevost's case, there are few items indicative of vanity or frivolity, which could indicate either his modest financial means or the brevity of his time in Kaskaskia. Leprevost is only mentioned one other time in the manuscripts when he makes his will on his sick bed, one week prior to his death.

Inventaire des effets de feu Jacques Bourdon de Kaskaskia (KM 23:7:1:1)

The inventory of the belongings of Jacques Bourdon, *capitaine de la milice*, differs significantly from that of Leprevost. Bourdon was obviously a man of some importance in the community, in both social and economic terms. Indeed, this inventory is one of the first to describe a house as one of the deceased's possessions:

Une maison de collombage de quarante pieds... avec du bouzillage, la cheminée double de pierre... plombée haus en bas en double cloison. Couverte de paille, avec l'emplacement entourée de pierres...

The description is that of a typical Kaskaskia house, in what is commonly referred to as the French Creole style, in other words a vertical log structure with a mixture of mud and straw used to fill the cracks and cover the wood, and with a straw roof. Later examples of this architecture are still evident today in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, just across the Mississippi River from where Kaskaskia was located. What is intriguing to note here is

the fact that such a detailed description of the house would be necessary. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the purpose of the inventory was partially to establish the value of the deceased's possessions and to record this in writing. In the case of his house, the description may well have been in preparation for its eventual sale. Apart from the house Bourdon's possessions, according to the inventory, also included the following:

- Une armoire de bois de noyer
- Six chaises de noyer, et un fauteuil
- Quatorze assietes et deux plats d'étain
- Dix chemises partagées
- Une paire de bas de fil
- Une paire de mitasse de Limbourg
- Une seinture
- Seize grosses serviettes
- Une vieille paire de bas de laine
- Deux piastres en argen
- Un morceau de terre situé au nord du village
- Partage des nègres parmi les héritiers
- Partage des esclaves sauvages

Most striking in this list is the inclusion of slaves, who composed a significant percentage of the population of the French Pays des Illinois. There are numerous documents in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* describing the sale or exchange of slaves, their manumission, marriages, and on rare occasion their involvement in legal matters. As is evident in the list above, there were both African and Native American slaves, and they were considered property to be distributed upon the owner's death. In fact, little time was wasted after the inventory was made; there was a sale of some of Bourdon's possessions just six days later, with the proceeds to be added to the estate. Subsequent documents reveal numerous claims to items in the inventory, hardly unusual in the case of a man with considerable wealth and extensive connections in the community.

Testament de Marie Rouensa (KM 25:6:13:1)

The will of Marie Rouensa is one of the most extensive documents in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts*, hardly surprising in that she was one of the richest and most influential women of her era. The daughter of a Kaskaskia Illinois of some importance (often described as a chief), she was the first Native American woman in the Pays des Illinois to marry a French man—Michel Acco or Accault—a marriage to which she only agreed after considerable pressure from her father, and after Acco agreed to settle down and live as a good Catholic. After Acco's death Marie remarried, and at her death left behind a large estate and several children, including a son Michel, whom she had previously disinherited due to his decision to live as a "sauvage" rather than adopt European manners and customs as had the rest of the family. Among the many documents pertaining to Marie Rouensa is a codicil to her will regarding Michel and his inheritance.

Marie Rouensa étant au lit malade saine néanmoins d'esprit... connaissant que sa dernière heure approche nous a déclaré quelle vouloit adjouter quelque chose au testament quelle a fait et pour cela nous a dicté ce qui suit par forme et manière de codicile. Mon fils Michel a ce qui m'a donné du chagrin par sa folie et sa fuite me fait pitié et ma pensée n'est plus de le priver absolument et pour toujours des prétentions qu'il a sur mes biens. Il se pourroit faire qu'il se repentit, qu'il revinst et en ce cas ma volonté est qu'il jouisse de ses biens et rentre dans ses droits: il est [assez] malheureux pour persister dans sa folie et ne se repentir jamais et demeurer parmi des nations sauvages.

As Sophie White has summarized so well in her work *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians*, in which Marie Rouensa's story figures prominently, Michel would in fact fulfill the requirements to receive his inheritance three years later, only to return again to his "savage" ways, although a document from 1739 composed after his death suggests that he had returned to Kaskaskia to live out his final days (White 113, 231-232). Had he resorted to deceit to gain his inheritance, or was his intent to "repent" sincere, and he simply became dissatisfied with life among the French and returned once again to the "savage nations"?

Testament de Bertrand Cardinal (KM 23.9.12.1)

Life in the Pays des Illinois could be treacherous, especially for those men who ventured out into the surrounding countryside, where they frequently fell victim to accidents (including drowning in particular), inclement weather, and even violent deaths at the hands of unfriendly indigenous tribes. The will of Bertrand Cardinal is one of many examples of men wanting to put their affairs in order before leaving Kaskaskia, since their return was something that could not be guaranteed.

Je soussigné Bertrand Cardinal de mon propre assentiment et de ma pleine volonté déclare et prétends que si dans mon voyage il m'arrive un accident, mes dettes seront payées exactement...

1. Je donne l'emplacement et la maison que j'ai aux Cascaskias... faire prier dieu pour moi ce faire... laisser à la disposition du Sr. de Beaubois
2. Au petit Baptiste Alleman, que j'ai adopté les deux taureaux que j'ai aux Cascaskias, et le coffre que j'ai laissée chez le Sr. Lalande et ce qui est dedans...
3. Je donne à l'Eglise Paroissiale de Ne De des Cascaskias ma vache à condition qu'elle payera au Sr. Boisseau tout ce que je lui dois suivant le mémoire de l'autre part, et les petites dettes qui pourraient être réclamées.

Debts are frequently mentioned in the wills of the time; in such a small community, the fair distribution of the deceased's property to creditors (and the redirection of debts owed

him or her) was undoubtedly necessary to maintain order and good relations. Donations to the parish church were another common feature, although often with conditions attached, making one wonder how welcome some of these legacies may have been.

Pétition d'Antoine Bienvenus (KM 79:10:14:1)

As seen earlier in the case of Marie Rouensa, parents held considerable control over their children's lives in 18th-century Illinois. Receiving one's inheritance was a key component in an individual's ability to obtain property, material possessions and, to a certain extent, social status. In addition, children remained dependents of their parents according to the French concept of the age of majority, meaning, for example, that until the age of 25 (for women) or 30 (for men) they could not marry without the authorization of a parent or guardian.

Antoine Bienvenu's 1779 petition to the local magistrates demonstrates how, even long after the French loss of Nouvelle France, French laws continued to be followed, and the resulting parental control could lead to considerable heartache:

Messieurs,

C'est avec le dernier des espoirs que le plus soumis de toutes les enfants est obligé d'avoir recour à votre assemblé respectable pour l'autorizer affin qu'il puisse contracter une aliance avec une demoiselle de ce pays qui a autant de merite que de vertue à qui il a donné sa foi. Depuis plusieurs années ses soumissions reiterées et les plus respectueuses n'ont jamais [tiré?] plaisir du coeur d'un père inexorable, toujours en lutte contre son intention, sans autres raisons que Je ny consentiré jamais.

Beyond the compelling story, this document is also remarkable for the fact that it is in French, more than fifteen years after the end of the French and Indian War. Indeed, until the end of the period covered by the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* in the first years of the 19th century, French continues to be utilized in an official capacity, a usage insisted upon by the *habitants*, as we will see later.

Antoine Bienvenu's desire to marry Thérèse Pelltier *dit* Antaya, who came from a family established in North America for several generations, was in fact satisfied, as there is a marriage contract in the manuscripts dating from the same year as his petition. Subsequent documents do confirm, however, that his father never did consent, and in fact did his best to avoid the authorities who came to interview him about his objections. Bienvenu Sr. also opposed his daughter's marriage in 1782, and refused to provide an accounting of her property to her husband, a requirement for any marriage contract in those times.

**A Monsieur Mathurin Bouvet Juge Civile Et Criminal de la ville des KasKasKias
(KM 86:10:17:1)**

Another unfortunate consequence of the often harsh conditions in the Pays des Illinois was the frequent necessity of determining the fate of those minor children who had lost one or both parents. A widow (especially one with children) did not remain unmarried for long, frequently less than a year, with the new husband usually agreeing to provide for her children, but orphaned children faced more unpredictable futures. Many documents refer to meetings of friends and relatives of the deceased at which a guardian was to be appointed. Others describe the inability of the guardian to continue in this function, as was the case with Joseph Dupuis:

Monsieur,
Joseph Dupuis, à l'honneur de vous exposée quil Est dans le sentiment de sorty de cette ville, Enfin de pouvoir gagnier sa vie dans un autre Lieu, Et quil auroit Eté nomée tuteur Des mineurs de feu M. gabriel hobuchon [Aubuchon], Cest pourquoy quil vous Suplie tres humblement luy permettre de Convoque une assemblee de parens Et amis des dits mineurs, pour La nomination D'un tuteur, à son Lieu Et àfin de luy rendre Compt de sa gestion de tuteur afin de ce retirer sans que nul personne puis luy imputer de negligance...

Dupuis' request was granted, and a document signed some six months later concluded the affair, but with no indication of the actual fate of the minors. Given the wording of his petition, it is difficult to ascertain if Dupuis was more concerned with the fate of the minor children or with his own reputation. One wonders if he feared the contempt of the local population were he to leave without settling the matter of the care of the orphaned children. The documents do not provide us with much insight into the nature of the personal relationships between many of the guardians and their wards. In Dupuis' case, it is known that he was related to the Aubuchon minors by marriage, but beyond that little is known. At the very least one might find in his petition evidence that the bonds between him and the children could not have been terribly strong, since he had no intention of taking them with him.

Pétition de Marie Morice Medard (KM 25:5:17:1)

As the examples above attest, many of the documents in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* chronicle those events with legal implications that any family would have to face: marriages and dowries, deaths and wills. Yet there are also numerous examples of disputes between unrelated individuals, some apparently serious enough to warrant official complaints by one if not both of the parties involved.

Messieurs,
Supplie Marie Morice Medar epouse d'Henry Biron demeurante au fort de chartre vous remontrant tres humblement quelle auroit esté insultée, d'une maniere innouie et prejudiciable de la nommée Blanche femme d'Antoine

tambour et comme l'insulte et en meme temps la calomnie rejallise et rejalliroit, non seulement contre la suppliante, mais mesme encore contre [illisible] et contre tout cequil luy appartient, elle a recours a l'autorité dela justice pour que laditte Blanche ait a luy prouver le reproche quelle a fait a la suppliante quelle avoit esté fustigée par l'exécution des sentences criminelles.

The eloquent language does not, unfortunately, provide much detail about what actually transpired between the two women, and what was said. Equally regrettable is the fact that the outcome of the complaint is unknown, as it was not recorded in writing or has been lost. Perhaps the case was not considered significant enough to pursue. The insult was evidently made in public, since the few subsequent documents pertaining to the case reveal that several people were called as witnesses to the event.

One wonders if the fact that they are women explains the lack of subsequent references to the case. It certainly makes it less likely that any other documentation mentioning them would exist. Blanche, who has no last name in the documents pertaining to this case, appears only one other time in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts*, where her name is listed in the will of one Claude Gouin (and where she is referred to as the wife of the fort's drummer). Marie Medard herself is mentioned in only four other documents (all dating from 1724-1726): two pertaining to her remarriage after the death of her first husband, and two concerning financial matters in which she was involved with one of her husbands.

Public notice by John Dodge (KM 87:4:21:1)

As is to be expected, the number of documents written in English to be found in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* grew and eventually surpassed in number those written in French in the years after the arrival of the Americans in the Illinois Country in 1778. Relationships between the well-established French and the American newcomers could be tense, especially as the latter exerted increasing political and economic control over the former. John Dodge, the petitioner in the document below, was perhaps the man most vilified by the French due to his bullying about numerous financial matters. His dispute with Marguerite Ste. Gemme Bauvais, a member of one of the most prominent French families in the history of the region, was just one of many confrontations of the period:

Whereas Margret Beauvais alias Mrs Bentley has by her infamous Conduct and Whoredom dissipated & squander'd away great part of the Estate of Mr Thomas Bentley diseased & has forfeited & lost all Right Title Claim & Pretention to any part of said Estate except one dollar according to his express Will... I do hereby forwarn all & every Person or Persons whomsoever from harbouring concealing or detaining on any Pretence whatsoever a Certain Mallattoe Woman named Genvié with four Children also a Negro Man named Pereault as well as any other part of said Estate on pain of suffering the Rigour of the Law...

I inform Madame Bentleys Scribbler or Clerk who takes it on himself to dictate translate &c her infamous Lies & Untruths that he had better mind his own Business & have a little more Respect to the Cloth which some oversighted Clergy may have given him...

Dodge's lust for wealth was the cause of this and many other disputes. Using a tactic not unlike those used today, Dodge attempted to portray Marguerite in the most negative light possible in order to strengthen his claim to her late husband's (and, not coincidentally, his business partner's) property. He in fact would repeat remarks that Thomas Bentley himself made about his wife in an attempt to convince the authorities of her unworthiness. Marguerite Beauvais even admitted to marital troubles between herself and her husband (which may or may not have been the reason for his decision to leave Kaskaskia for Detroit without her), but her primary complaint was that Dodge was keeping her from her rightful inheritance. Whatever the truth may have been, the dispute was complicated enough and lasted long enough for it to be concluded not in Kaskaskia, but across the Mississippi in Ste. Genevieve, which was under Spanish jurisdiction at the time.

Jean Girault au magistrats de la cour de Kaskaskia (KM 79:8:24:1)

The final documents included here illustrate the greatest concerns of the French who remained on the east side of the Mississippi River after the British and then American takeover of the region: the increasing lawlessness in the territory and the desire for the establishment of a working government. Although many of the complaints made by the French were directed at the behavior of American soldiers and private businessmen, in the document below it is a fellow Frenchman whose activities concern the petitioner.

C'est avec une Mortification bien Particuliere, que Je voit execer dans ce village Journallem^t des Choses bien nuisible au Repos Public. Ma surprise est grande que messieurs les Magistrats permettent que des maisons qui ne Cause que du Danger a tous les habitants et est une nuisace publique, subsite dans le Cœur dun Village.

Je vous prens Messieurs a Temoins des Choses qui sonts Journallement Commise chez le nommé Jarret, qui ne ce Contente point de Traffiquer des Liquers enivrantes a toutes sortes de Personnes, sans reserve et sans permission mais qui permet aussy que les Personnes qui sont Ivre Chez luy tire et décharge frequemment des Coups des fusils dont les Balles passent travers des Cours et meme des maisons de plusieurs des habitants qui sont situé auprès de cette Malheureux Maison....

The matter must have been serious enough; the course did order Jarret to cease selling alcohol without permission, with possible banishment from the settlement as punishment for further transgressions. Public safety was a frequent concern, but much changed from the early years of the French presence in the region, when attacks by Native Americans and accidents in the wild were the greatest dangers.

Les habitants de Kaskaskia aux Magistrats, 25 mai 1782 (KM 82:5:25:1)

Three years later, the French residents of Kaskaskia submitted to the local magistrates of the district court a lengthy petition composed of eighteen articles and addressing a variety of concerns pertaining to the maintenance of law and order in the town, and illustrating a collective frustration with governance under the new American administration.

Les Soussignes habitants de cette comté de La Ville des KasKasKias ont
L'honneur de vous Exposer comme Sujets Des Etats Unis de Lamerique
qu'il vous Plaise que Les Suppliants vous fassent Une Juste
Representation Pour maintenir Le bon ordre Et Soutenir La Respectable
Cour Et Les droits des Citoyens de cette contré.

Some individual articles of particular interest:

- 1er: Les Etrangers Etablis Et arivant dans ce Pays ayent a Preter Le serment Pardevant vous, tous au nom des Etats Unis...
- 10me: Que toute Personne Etablis dans cette contrée ou qui sy Etabliront suivront la Loix française que nous avons eu Pouvoir de suivre
- 11me: Que toute Pieces de Procedure Et autre Seront faites en français.
- 14me: Que la traite d'Eudevie aux Sauvages soit exclu, que les contrevenants Soient Puny Par une amande qu'il Plaira a La Cour de taxer, Et En cas de Recedive Pour la troisieme fois Soient chasé de Lendroit comme Pertubateur Public.⁴

Perhaps the most striking feature of this petition is the declared loyalty of the French-speaking Kaskaskians to the new American government. The articles illustrate both their own allegiance, and their insistence that any newcomers, who would have been numerous at the time, would act similarly, at risk of expulsion from the community. Engagement in illegal behavior could also lead to banishment. Although maintaining their customs, laws, and language were of considerable importance to the French-speaking population, claiming these rights in no way made them less committed to the establishment of peace and order in the new country of which they were now citizens.

In spite of the demands of the Kaskaskians in this last document, French would gradually cease to be the language of choice for official use as the town and the surrounding areas became more and more Americanized, and certainly by the time Illinois became a state in 1818. As the French language gradually left the public sphere in Illinois, the documents chronicling the early years of Kaskaskia and its residents were largely forgotten.⁵ Hopefully this presentation of just a small sampling of the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* will inspire future endeavors to bring the manuscripts to life for a new audience. The fields of history and French cultural studies will be greatly enriched by the

inclusion of these documents into the corpus of materials available to researchers and those wishing to gain greater insight into life along the Mississippi River in the Pays des Illinois of the 18th century.

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Notes

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² The numbering system for the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts*, developed by Margaret Kimball Brown and Lawrie Dean, is simple to interpret. There are four numbers that together identify each document. The first three indicate the year, month, and day, while the fourth differentiates documents that were composed on the same day. For example, the first document cited in this article is numbered 22.9.19.1, indicating that it was written on September 19, 1722, and is the first (and perhaps only) document in the manuscripts from that date.

³ Transcription of the individual documents in the *Kaskaskia Manuscripts* has proven to be challenging, to say the least. Given the fragile condition of the originals, only a microfilm version is available for consultation in the Randolph County (Illinois) courthouse and at a handful of other locations. Further complicating the process is the fact that many of the originals were damaged or had become so fragile over time that they are virtually unreadable. In addition, the penmanship of the various notaries varies widely, and punctuation and capitalization are inconsistent, if used at all. The transcriptions included here are, to the greatest extent possible, an exact reproduction of the language of the original document.

⁴ Original and translation can be found in Alvord, ed. *Kaskaskia Records, 1778-1790*, p. 284-291.

⁵ See Dean and Brown's introduction to their calendar of the manuscripts for the intriguing story of the fate of the manuscripts.