

Fort Massac Legends and Facts

Officially dedicated November 5, 1908, Fort Massac was chosen as **Illinois' first state park** largely for its historical associations. It overlooks the Ohio River a few miles downstream below where the Tennessee River enters from Kentucky. On Illinois Route 45, it is located in the city limits of Metropolis and two and a half miles west of Interstate 24 which divides the park into 2 sections. The park and historic site encompasses 1,450 acres.

Several legends are told about Massac's beginnings. Common practice, however, includes legend as a part of history. Three first-class traditions exist concerning Fort Massac:

1542	Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto and his soldiers constructed a fortification here for protection from hostile Indians.
1702	Father Mermet, a Jesuit priest, accompanied Charles Juchereau de St. Denys, a Frenchman, on his expedition to erect a trading post used in conjunction with the extensive hunting of buffalo and hide tanning. The actual location was near Mounds City.
1721	Supposedly at this time many French soldiers were massacred by Indians, which some people think explains why the fort was named Fort Massac, (the fort was named for the French Minister of Colonial Affairs, M. de Massiac.

It is difficult to take the step from legend to fact. Good stories are gathered from fancies. Facts are assembled from records from the past. It is hoped that a phrase or a sentence will generate a spark of new interest in the minds of school children. Listed below are a few fundamental facts to help create an attitude in which to enjoy the fort's early history:

1745	The French drew up plans for a stone fort. It was never erected because of the lack of funds and no nearby source of stone.
1745	France and Great Britain became embroiled in one great final conflict which lasted until 1763.
1757	A small wooden four-bastioned fort was begun on the Roman Catholic Holy Day of Ascension. Under the direction of Charles Phillippe Aubry the post was named Fort De L' Ascension.
1758	The fort had to be rebuilt because of rotting timbers.
1759	Major Makarty ordered the fort strengthened and refortified. It had fallen into serious disrepair. Also, it was fired upon by the Cherokee Indians. The Fort was renamed Fort Massiac.
1761	A moat and outer works were added.
1763	The British won the French and Indian War. Fort Massiac was ceded to them by the Treaty of Paris.
1764	The French garrison was directed to give up the fort by special orders. Later, the Chickasaw Indians burned the empty stockade.
1765	The British took possession but never maintained nor garrisoned the fort. The British changed the name to Fort Massiac.
1778	George Rogers Clark and his men landed at Massac creek. Legend says Clark raised the first American flag over Illinois country.
1794	President George Washington ordered Fort Massac rebuilt.
1795	Captain Zebulon Pike was given command of Fort Massac by General Wayne.
1796	Captain Pike's son, Zebulon Montgomery Pike, was ordered to Fort Massac as a subaltern by General Wayne. Later in life, he discovered Colorado's Pike's Peak.
1799	The U.S. Treasury Department ordered a customs office through 1807 which was responsible for levying and collecting taxes on commercial cargo carried on the Ohio river.
1803	The Lewis and Clark expedition briefly stopped at Fort Massac in November. George Drouillard, French hunter and interpreter, joined the Corps of Discovery at Fort Massac.
1804	Aaron Burr visited the fort.
1806	The Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy was planned at Fort Massac.
1811	Fort Massac was badly damaged by the New Madrid Earthquake, mid-December 1811 to February 1812.
1812	The War of 1812 - The British were planning an invasion of the Mississippi Valley. Fort Massac was used as a training base for recruits in defense of the western frontier.

1813	General Andrew Jackson and his army briefly visited the fort. He was the only man known to have visited Fort Massac who in later life became a U.S. President.
1814	The American troops were ordered to abandon Fort Massac in the spring. The caretaker and local civilians quickly dismantled the fort.
1861	The final time United States troops were stationed in the area was when Civil War soldiers were garrisoned at the fort.
1896	The story Massac State Park was begun by Joseph Cullen Blair, "Father of Illinois State Park".
1903	The Daughters of the American Revolution petitioned the Illinois State Legislature to purchase and set aside the site of Fort Massac as a park. Twenty two acres were purchased for Illinois first state park
1908	Fort Massac was dedicated on November 5th.
1932	The statue of George Rogers Clark was erected.
1939	WPA labor continued through 1942. 4,265 sacks of artifacts were collected.
1954	Howard H. Hays, Sr. gave freely of his time, talents and resources to make the restoration of Fort Massac possible.
1966	More excavations were done by Southern Illinois University students.
1970	Further excavations were done by S. I. U. students.
1971	Archaeological excavations began. Actual reconstruction of the fort and accompanying museum began in the fall.
1973	The fort and museum were completed in late summer.
1974	The first two-day special event, "Fort Massac Encampment", was held.

Fort Massac State Park is open for picnicking, camping, sightseeing, fishing, boating, hunting, walking trails and touring the fort and museum. The interpretive center surveys the history of the fort. A representative sample of what was recovered from the fort's site is now on display in the museum. Analysis of the artifacts has helped show the major characteristics of the fort, as well as something about the soldiers' lives.