

Fort Kaskaskia State Historic Site

Self-guided tour



This document gives visitors a chance to experience the site from locations and overlooks throughout the park. It is organized into six stops and offers a look into the French Colonial Period, the American Revolution, and the destruction of Old Kaskaskia. Travelers from all over the world have passed through Kaskaskia for more than 320 years. We hope you enjoy your visit.

Welcome to Fort Kaskaskia State Historic Site and the Pierre Menard Home. Kaskaskia is a unique settlement that played an important role in American history over several periods. It was established by Jesuit missionaries in 1703 after they relocated their Mission of the Immaculate Conception from a site some 250 miles north. The mission was situated on the western bank of the docile Kaskaskia River just above its confluence with the Mississippi. In this era, the Mississippi flowed a few miles west of the village. The mission was surrounded by water on three sides and connected to the rest of what is now Illinois by a piece of land just north of the site. This location was ideally adapted for the French and Native American villages that developed here. It became an important center of the French Empire in Upper Louisiana. The village later played a role in the American Revolution. In 1803, it was a vital supply point to the Lewis and Clark Expedition for men and equipment. In the early federal period, Kaskaskia attracted a variety of individuals with aspirations in the American west. Although the village population was small in a modern context, it was the regional center of trade, commerce, and government. With a high concentration of politicians, merchants, millers, trappers, and pioneers, Kaskaskia served as the Illinois territorial capital and the Illinois state government was formed here. After the constitution was adopted in 1818, Kaskaskia was briefly the first state capital. The settlement continued afterward to serve as the Randolph County seat and retained a federal land office until 1855.

Beginning in the 1810s, Kaskaskia merchants began looking to the site of Chester (only a few miles south) to develop a suitable riverport and commercial center. After devastating damage in the Flood of 1844, the Randolph County seat was moved to Chester. Kaskaskia continued as a diminished farming village until the Mississippi broke through the narrow isthmus north of the village and began to take the Kaskaskia River's channel. The Mississippi carried far more water than the Kaskaskia and quickly began to cause severe erosion around the village site. This process began in April 1881. Over time, the village was mostly consumed by the Mississippi's cutbank. In the 1890s, it was relocated to the middle of Kaskaskia Island—a unique geographic feature formed by the channel breach—where it remains today. The old French earthworks in our park and Pierre Menard's home represent the last remnants of Kaskaskia in their original locations. State ownership of this site began more than 130 years ago with the establishment of Garrison Hill Cemetery for relocated burials. The fort, home, and cemetery have been a state historic site for nearly a century. Today, the grounds encompass more than 275 acres. This site is also responsible for the grave of Shadrach Bond (Illinois' first governor) in Chester's Evergreen Cemetery and the Liberty Bell of the West on Kaskaskia Island.

Stop 1: The French Earthworks

A parking area and signage at the earthworks are the first area of interest visitors encounter after ascending the hill into the site. Kaskaskia maintained a military presence from an early date, but this earthen redoubt was constructed in 1759 to protect villagers during the French and Indian War. French officials had planned for a large stone fort here in both the 1730s and 1750s, but eventually decided to build Fort De Chartres 18 miles north, closer to the midpoint between Kaskaskia and Cahokia. Kaskaskia was spared from direct attack during the war, but its garrison was drawn down as men were needed elsewhere. When France lost the war in 1763, the Illinois Country and most other French holdings fell under command of Great Britain. When the British arrived, they did not use this site, electing instead to set up their garrison (Fort Gage) in an abandoned Jesuit compound at the village. During the American Revolution on July 4, 1778, Fort Gage was captured by George Rogers Clark.

Approaching the bluff line at the edge of the fortifications, visitors can see the remnants of Old Kaskaskia across the Mississippi. This is also the only place in the park where the present village site is visible. This small cluster of trees and the church steeple can best be seen by looking almost due south from the north-west extremity of the earthworks. The church and a few other historic buildings were moved to this site in the 1890s. The modern village also houses the 1741 Liberty Bell of the West, a gift from Louis XV that was rung by villagers in celebration of Clark's capture of Kaskaskia. The bell shrine belongs to IDNR and is a satellite site of this facility. Although the modern village is visible and only 3 miles from here, it is a 23-mile drive by automobile. Kaskaskia Island encompasses some 17,000 acres and is the largest parcel of Illinois that lies on the western bank of the Mississippi. Several thousand acres of this land were once "common fields" authorized by Louis XIV to be shared by villagers. Common ownership persisted here until the early 20th century.

Stop 2: The Menard Family Cemetery

Pierre Menard and several of his relatives are buried near the wood line behind the south shelter building. This is the first shelter along the road heading further into the park past the earthworks. Menard lived from 1766-1844 and was an important merchant and fur trader. He was an influential early Illinois politician, serving as the president of the territorial assembly and the state's first Lieutenant Governor. His home, constructed more than 220 years ago, is located at the base of the bluff and is the last stop on our tour. The old French earthworks eventually became part of Menard's estate.

Stop 3: Garrison Hill Cemetery/American Fort

Visitors will notice a large obelisk memorial ahead after leaving the Menard Cemetery. There are thousands of early Illinois settlers buried here. They were relocated to this site in 1892 from Kaskaskia's three cemeteries as the village was slowly consumed by the Mississippi. Some of these individuals may have been interred nearly 200 years when they were moved. For this reason, most of the burials here are unmarked. The State of Illinois erected the obelisk memorial at the hilltop and did little else with the cemetery grounds until 1929 when the Menard Home and Fort Kaskaskia site were purchased to create this park. There are several notable persons buried here, and a limited registry and map is available in the site office. Notable burials near the obelisk include William Morrison, a Kaskaskia merchant who supplied the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Morrison's store ledger showing these transactions and countless others is housed at the Chester Public Library. Another interesting (and more modern) burial is Louis Jungers (d. 1938). Mr. Jungers was the last private owner of the Menard Home and the first employed caretaker of the home and fort after they became a state historic site.

On the side of the parking area opposite the obelisk, archaeologists from Southern Illinois University have recently discovered evidence of the American supply garrison visited by Lewis and Clark in 1803. This was a surprise finding, as the historical record indicated the American Garrison was within the earlier French earthworks. The expedition recruited several men from Kaskaskia and took on supplies here before heading to St. Louis.

Stop 4: Overlook, Main Shelter

Next, visitors will encounter one of the Mississippi Valley's most scenic places. The overlook shelter with masonry walls and bronze interpretive plaques was constructed by the WPA in 1942 as the country struggled through the aftermath of the Great Depression and the onset of WWII. It was built to commemorate the site of Old Kaskaskia. Unfortunately, the shelter building was badly damaged by fire and had to be largely reconstructed in 2018. The interpretive plaques on the river side of the building, flagstone walkways, and much of the masonry work is original to the WPA project, however.

The remarkable panorama from this overlook allows visitors to see west over the northern boundary of Kaskaskia Island and deep into Missouri's Ozark hill country. The notable gap in the Missouri bluff straight ahead is the valley of the Saline Creek, an important source of salt for the early French settlers. To the northwest, visitors can see the modern confluence of the Kaskaskia and Mississippi Rivers. The Army Corps of Engineers operates a lock on the Kaskaskia with a campground, boat launches, and confluence trail that is just out of view behind the trees. Up the Mississippi from the confluence, visitors are looking across a stretch of water that was once the neck of land connecting Kaskaskia to Illinois. Prior to Kaskaskia's destruction, the Mississippi flowed against the Missouri bluffs before bending back to the Illinois side of the valley and meeting the Kaskaskia at Chester. On April 20, 1881, the Mississippi broke through the "Kaskaskia Narrows," cutting the village off from Illinois. Within days, steamboats were able to navigate the new river cut. The old channel of the Mississippi enters the river just upstream from the Chester Bridge. The upper reaches of the old channel are largely silted in, but because it carries the Saline Creek to the Mississippi, the lower portion can still be navigated by small boats. Much of the original village site and old Mississippi channel are now federal lands and make up part of the Middle Mississippi Wildlife Refuge. Around the river bend upstream from the mouth of the Kaskaskia is Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, an important center of French Colonial culture and architecture. Ste. Genevieve's remarkable collection of surviving French structures recently earned it designation as a national historic park. The downtown area and a large quarry/lime kiln can be seen from the overlook.

Stop 5: North Shelter Overlook

The next shelter house is located just beyond the main overlook. It offers another unique panorama of the valley and hills. This overlook provides a closer view of the confluence and the stretch of river where the channel breach occurred in 1881. The site's campground entrance is past the shelter on the right side of the main road. This area of the park was once home to a sand green golf course.

Stop 6: Pierre Menard Home

The Menard home property is located directly below the fort site. To reach the home, return to the park entrance and turn right onto Shawneetown trail. The road ends at Kaskaskia Street, and parking for the home is available on the right. As mentioned previously, Mr. Menard lived from 1766-1844. He came to this area from Canada and settled in Kaskaskia by 1790. Menard built this home around 1802 and lived in it until his death. With its characteristic hip roof, dormers, and large galerie porch raised substantially above ground level, this home is one of the finest surviving examples of French Creole architecture in the region. The main level with living quarters contains more than 4,000 square feet under roof, but nearly half of this space is occupied by the galerie and breezeway to the summer kitchen. The home, kitchen, privy, and smoke house behind the kitchen are original to the property. The functional springhouse on the north side of the home is largely a reconstruction but it is located on the site of the original. Menard once owned a large estate, but only 32 acres remained with the home when the property was acquired by the State of Illinois in 1929. This relatively small parcel included the earthworks of the fort (directly above the home).

The Menard home is open for tours during seasonal hours. Tours can also be arranged off-hours by speaking with staff in the park or contacting 618-859-3741. Please note that depending on staff scheduling, park employees may be off-duty or working at satellite sites. We will do our best to accommodate visitors, however.