

# Fort Saint Louis des Illinois

1682-1691

Fort Saint Louis des Illinois, built by Rene-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, exerted a profound effect on early American history. In its nine-year life, this western-most outpost of New France became a linch pin of a vast French-Indian alliance, turned back an Iroquois invasion, and served as a staging area for a series of counter-thrusts against them. Together with the French fort at Michilimackinac, Fort Saint Louis made good France's claim to the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley.

The 1680's marked a crucial change in colonial history. Both England and France had recently emerged from a long period of internal disorder and had just begun to consider what they intended to do with North America. France, long reluctant to commit itself to an overseas empire, saw no sense in investing resources in a colony the English navy could capture relatively easily. For its part, too, England had taken little interest in America. Her colonies consisted of a hodge-podge of religious experiments and private joint-stock companies. With growing stability at home, both countries had now begun to turn their attention overseas.

It is here that La Salle and his Fort Saint Louis played such a crucial role. Despite France's relative indifference, he intended to build a colonial empire in the New World. However, the explorer saw Canada as a dead-end. Ultimately a poor country, it exported only furs. The Mississippi Valley, however, possessed rich land which could produce the sort of products which drove the growth of the English colonies: tobacco, grain, etc. France's future in the New World, then, lay on the Mississippi not the Saint Lawrence. This new colony, moreover, would prevent the English from expanding westward. Fort Saint Louis, built in the winter of 1682 would become the bulwark of this new empire.

The Iroquois Indian Confederacy of upper New York State understood La Salle's plan clearly. For years, they had watched with mounting alarm as the French built a network of alliances with the Great Lakes Indian nations. To counter this, they had sought to push their own influence west into Illinois. However, they found their way blocked. Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette had explored the Illinois River Valley in 1673 and by 1675 Canadian traders had arrived with their wares. The Iroquois then launched a devastating attack on the Illinois to break up this new commercial alliance. Striking in September of 1680, they surprised the great village of the Illinois on the north bank of the river opposite Starved Rock. The stunned defenders abandoned the town and fled downriver toward the Mississippi for a time. To check this treat, La Salle built his Fort Saint Louis.

Just as the Illinois found an ally in La Salle, the Iroquois had a powerful friend as well: Thomas Dongan, the royal governor of New York. An Irish soldier of fortune, he had served in the French army and then with the English. The king saw something in him and sent him to the colonies. Tough, aggressive, and energetic, Dongan urged the merchants of Albany to outfit trading voyages into the Great Lakes, denied French claims to the region and the Mississippi, and encouraged Iroquois aims in the Illinois country. With his apparent support, the Iroquois resolved on a second invasion.

They set out probably in January of 1684 and reached Starved Rock at the end of February. Scooping up a supply convoy bound for Illinois along the way, they attacked the fort itself on the 28th. La Salle had returned to France the previous September to defend his western plan before the king, and his lieutenant Henry Tonti and a regular officer, the Chavalier Baugy, shared command of the fort. The two now set out to hold it against perhaps five hundred Iroquois, a difficult task. They had had no previous warning and the morning of the attack had sold off most of their gunpowder to the Illinois for a buffalo hunt. Hearing gunfire from the direction of the Vermilion River, Tonti and Baugy tried to get the men with the powder to return, but these had to abandon the barrels to get back across the river. Equally serious, they had little in the way of provisions. With their winter stores nearly gone, they had twenty-two men to feed. Worse, before they closed the gates twenty-four Shawnee, Miami, and Loup warriors and their families had arrived seeking protection. With little to eat and less to shoot, the French had a serious problem.

However, the Iroquois had problems too. Perched atop Starved Rock, Fort Saint Louis could not be taken by assault. They tried, but the French and their allies drove them off with loss. The invaders now had to besiege the place. However, Iroquois armies traveled on foot and could not carry provisions. As soon as they halted, they quickly hunted off the local game and soon the besiegers as little to eat as the besieged. Nevertheless for eight days they hung on, sniping and probing the defenses. Growing desperate, they paraded captured Shawnee beneath the foot of the Rock and had them sing to their relatives on the ramparts above. However heartbreaking, the defenders could not risk a sortie to rescue them. Eventually the Iroquois led the prisoners away and resumed their siege. Finally, a party asked permission to enter the fort and parley. What they wanted, no one will ever know. As soon as they entered the allied Indians killed them, either retaliation for the treatment of the Shawnee prisoners or from fear that the French might abandon them. Though outraged, the siege had failed and the Iroquois had little choice but to withdraw.

The siege of Fort Saint Louis had profound consequences. For the Indian nations allied to the French, it had tested Iroquois power. Most had little love for the Canadians and the alliance actually rested on commercial and military expedience. Had the fort fallen, they would have taken it as a sign of French

weakness and the shaky alliance would have come unraveled. For the Canadians, the battle had fateful consequences as well. The King's flag had been fired on, and His prestige required a response. Before this, the Iroquois had robbed, beaten, even killed traders. In the 17th century, however, merchants accounted robbery and piracy a business expense and no concern of the state. Attacking a fort was a different matter. France now found itself committed to defending an Middle Western empire it had not really wanted.

Over the next 16 years the French made war on the Iroquois, supported by fur traders and Indians from Fort Saint Louis and Michilimackinac and in 1701 the Iroquois sued for peace. The French had won the first round, but the English had not given up. A half-century later, the two would clash again over the Mississippi Valley in the French and Indian War. This conflict would cost France her North American colonies, but would also drive Britain into a fiscal crisis which produced the Stamp Act, the Townshend Duties, and the American Revolution.

The diorama (small scaled replica) shown in the Exhibit Hall of the IDNR Visitor Center at Starved Rock State Park was researched and built by the History/Social Science Department and students of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, Illinois. No drawings or diagrams of the fort survive. This reconstruction grew out of descriptions of the fort by LaSalle and Henri Joutel, property deeds, and a variety of business and French army documents relating to the post.

These sources, though often contradictory, describe a fort of upright logs and earthworks some six hundred feet in circumference which housed between eleven and fifty men and contained seven bastions, a storehouse, a forge, officers' quarters, a chapel, and at least three traders' cabins. It would seem that, over time, the natural strength of Starved Rock made the earthworks and bastions unnecessary. By 1687 they were gone, apparently replaced with additional housing and storage facilities. The fort as presented here attempts to present what it might have looked like in February, 1684 at the beginning of the siege.

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### Starved Rock-Starved Rock State Park

