Fort Massac State Park

Experience the scenic splendor of Southern Illinois with plenty of outdoor fun and time-telling events at Fort Massac State Park. Overlooking the mighty Ohio River from the southern tip of Illinois, this majestic location has been preserved and maintained since 1908, when it became Illinois’ first state park.

Today, Fort Massac is a captivating reminder of days gone by, a fascinating excursion through the entire course of American history, and the perfect place to relax in soothing natural surroundings and explore life as it was lived when our country was young.

The reconstructed timber fortification—a replica of an 1802 American fort sits next to the original fort site. The original site is the location where both the French and American forts were built at Massac. What remains of the original site are the earthen walls with the outline of the first French fort. Since the original site is on the National Register of Historic Places, the replica is built to the east of the site.

With all this, and the picnicking, camping, hiking, boating and hunting opportunities available in the rest of the 1,450-acre area, Fort Massac State Park is an alluring, complete and self-contained family vacation spot.

History

The rich history of this site begins before recorded history, when native Americans undoubtedly took advantage of its strategic location overlooking the Ohio River. The French were interested in building a fortification as early as 1745 because of the location on the Ohio River near the mouths of the Tennessee River and Cumberland Rivers. But it was not until 1757, during the French and Indian War, that the French built the first fort, Fort De L’Assenior.

The French built Fort De L’Ascension on the site in 1757, during the French and Indian War, when France and Great Britain were fighting for ultimate control of central North America. Rebuilt in 1759-60, the structure was renamed Massac in honor of the then French Minister of Colonial Affairs, and came under fire only once, when unsuccessfully attacked by a group of Cherokee.

Following the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the French abandoned the fort and a band of Chickasaws burned it to the ground. When Captain Thomas Stirling, commander of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, arrived to take possession, all he found was a charred ruin.

The British anglicized the name to “Massac” but, despite the counsel of their military advisers, they neither rebuilt nor reoccupied the fort. This oversight left them vulnerable and commercial interests in the Ohio Valley.

In 1778, during the Revolutionary War, Colonel George Rogers Clark led his “Long Knives” regiment into Illinois at Massac Creek and was able to capture Kaskaskia, 100 miles to the north, without firing a shot—thus taking the entire Illinois Territory for the State of Virginia and the fledgling United States.

In 1794, President George Washington ordered the fort rebuilt, and for the next 20 years it protected U.S. military and commercial interests in the Ohio Valley.

U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr and Gen. James Wilkinson, who allegedly drew up plans to personally conquer Mexico and the American southwest, met at Fort Massac during the summer of 1805. Edward Everett Hale later used the setting of Fort Massac and the Burr-Wilkinson plot as basis for his classic historical novel, “The Man Without a Country.”

Although ravaged by the New Madrid earthquake in 1811-12, the fort was again rebuilt in time to play a minor role in the War of 1812, only to be abandoned again in 1814. Local citizens dismantled the fort for timber, and by 1828 little remained of the original construction. In 1839 the city of Metropolis was platted about a mile west of the fort.

The site served briefly as a training camp during the early years of the Civil War, marking the last time U.S. troops stationed at the site. The fort was abandoned after a measles epidemic in 1861-62 claimed the lives of a substantial number of soldiers of the Third Illinois Cavalry and the 131st Illinois Infantry, who were using the fort as an encampment.

In 1903, through the efforts of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 24 acres surrounding the site were purchased by the state and on Nov. 5, 1908, it was officially dedicated as Illinois’ first state park.

Although archeological and historical excavations were conducted on the site from 1939-42 and again in 1966 and...