



INDIANA'S FRENCH CONNECTION

Roots with country's oldest ally run deep



By Marty Benson, OI staff

Next time you're driving along one of the state's major rivers, take note of the place names. Many are French in origin. Terre Haute, Lafayette, and Vincennes are prime examples, and the first fort in the Fort Wayne area was called Fort des Miamis.

Even the name of the state river, the Wabash, has some French-ness, which an alternative spelling, Ouabache, as in the name of the state park near Bluffton, makes clearer. The Miami-Illinois tribes' name for the waterway was *waapaahšiki siipiiwi*, from which the French formed their name. Even some of the straight-up English names in Indiana have French origin. South Bend and Portage are examples, referring to the way their geography influenced French navigation.

Motoring beside the major rivers of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri provides a similar experience to Indiana's, as does driving next to those of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

That's because long before the British became the major European power in what would become Indiana and those other states, they were part of New France, a designation you may not have heard of before. The term obviously had a much shorter life than "New England"—despite that war for independence our ancestors fought against the Redcoats, with France as our ally.

A giant swath of today's Midwest, from the Great Lakes to and including the state of Louisiana, with the Mississippi

River as its western boundary, came to be called New France by those of European descent mainly because of its abundance of furbearing wildlife. The southern portion, in its entirety, was called Louisiana, aka *Pays en Bas*. The northern portion was called Canada, aka *Pays en Haut*. If you don't know or haven't thought of Indiana's French heritage since elementary school—or ever—you're not alone. It's often ignored or forgotten.

The reasons are many. One is that France and its Native American allies lost the French and Indian War to the British and their Native American allies. The result of the conflict, called the Seven Years War in Europe, accounts for English eventually becoming the official tongue of the local Europeans.

Another factor is that the French came to trade with the Native people. They also intermingled culturally, including intermarriage. The British, by contrast, wanted land. Even as they took it, they encouraged the French people to stay. Many did. And the French place names, if not their French pronunciations, lived on.

A movement is afoot to kindle, rekindle, or nurture the Midwest's inherent French-ness. Launched two years ago, the initiative has collectively dubbed the area and its group of one-per-state ambassadors the French Heritage Corridor (FHC). It's an undertaking that the once mother country supports, says the French Ambassador to the United States, Philippe Étienne.

"The French Heritage Corridor ... will benefit both the

(Opposite page) Malcolm Duncan leads the Tippecanoe Ancient Fife & Drum Corps to the landing of the voyageurs during the 54th annual Feast of the Hunters' Moon at Fort Ouiatenon. (Above) Michael Burden, portraying Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary, holds a cross and a pipe as the voyageurs arrive via the Wabash during the Feast. Photos by Brent Drinkut.



Members of the Ouiatenon Brigade bring their canoe ashore from the Wabash. Formed in 1973, the brigade participates in the Feast every year, portraying the lives of French voyageurs. Brent Drinkut photo.





Frank Oliver photo

Ambassador Philippe Étienne is wrapped in a blanket by Diane Hunter, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, during a traditional welcoming for honored guests last year at the Ouiatenon Preserve.

U.S. and France in many ways. I am convinced that thanks to this initiative, people will be interested to learn more about our common roots region and will be curious to discover the sites that tell this story as a testament of the diversity of cultures that forge the American identity in this region.”

Étienne made a two-day diplomatic visit to the Midwest in May of last year. He met with Gov. Eric Holcomb and stopped at the Ouiatenon Preserve in West Lafayette (OI September/October 2021) while in Indiana, promoting the FHC during the trip.

The ambassador calls the FHC’s work “an opportunity to create new activities and to promote the tourism of certain hidden gems that are really worth visiting.”

Ouiatenon, of course, is one of those sites, as are Vincennes and Fort Wayne.

According to State Archaeologist Amy Johnson of the DNR Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology, visiting those and other places with French heritage is not only fun, but also allows you to increase your understanding of historic places, events, and people. And, in some cases, your view of modern times.

“The artifacts, features, and structures left behind help us learn details about the intersection of earlier cultures,” Johnson said. “Historical archaeology provides opportunities to more greatly appreciate who we are today by bringing to light the diversity in our state’s rich heritage as well as the commonalities shared between the past and present.”

The FHC idea was hatched by Lisa Kahn, co-chair of the French Heritage Society’s Chicago chapter. The chapter is just 3 years old, despite the region’s more than three-century French background. The FHS, which has existed 40 years, is based in New York. It has nine other U.S. chapters and one in Paris. The FHS mission is to help preserve French heritage through its grant restoration and Franco-American educational exchange programs, as well as to promote and celebrate the two countries’ longstanding friendship.

Kahn, who directs the FHC initiative, is a long time fan of all things France. She learned about the FHS and its then-impending creation of a Chicago-based chapter from a family friend who lives in France. She studied abroad there during college, visits often, and is working to become fluent in the language. Among her wealth of other relevant credentials, she earned a certificate in French cooking while overseas, and conducts classes in the subject.

Despite all that, the family friend’s tip was the first time she had heard of FHS. Still, the thought of being involved in such a chapter grabbed her, like the first bite of a baguette or sip of Bordeaux.

“The idea of promoting the two countries’ friendship but also of raising money to promote restoration efforts, not just in France but of course here in the United States, has been a really great fit,” she said of what’s transpired since accepting the post.

Expanding her chapter’s reach from its Windy City home

to the rest of Illinois and the other New France states made historical as well as financial sense.

"We were happy to support worthy projects in France, but we certainly wanted to give a lot of focus to the Midwest," Kahn said.

Indiana got involved through a contact Colby Bartlett, director of the Ouiatenon Preserve, had with the French Consul General at the time, Guillaume Lacroix. A consul general is a regional representative of the French ambassador. Lacroix told Bartlett about the FHS Chicago chapter's inaugural conference, and that he had added the Lafayette resident to the invitation list.

As a result of that conference, an FHC board was formed, with Bartlett as Indiana's ambassador.

One of the roles of FHC ambassadors, Kahn says, is to identify and invite their state's stakeholders to join with FHC, which is designed to amplify and strengthen their efforts to get to know one another better and more easily share what's going on in their respective area. Their work helps FHC serve as a one-stop information source for Francophiles and those who might be interested in learning more.

Plenty of places to get your French on dot the Indiana map, but before exploring a small sample, let's examine why the three original Indiana French forts, which were essentially trading posts, came to be.

FUR FEVER

By the late 17th century, fur was one of the things that made the economies of Europe go 'round. As a result, its local supply of wildlife was shrinking. French explorer and fur trader La Salle is credited with claiming the area of New France. His travels in North America took off at the St. Lawrence Seaway, which led him to the Great Lakes. He found a seemingly endless supply of furbearing animals. Many were beaver, the fur of choice.

"These Europeans were looking for the Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean in order to gain access to Asia for trade," Kahn said. "The fur trade in North America was a by-product of this exploration."

From the Great Lakes, the French explorers and traders

boated to the Fort Wayne rivers, the St. Marys and St. Joseph, which meet to form the Maumee—then portaged to the Wabash, which would take them to the Ohio, the Mississippi, and on to New Orleans. They also traveled north via the same route.

"Indiana, the Wabash River, and these three French forts were the most direct water route between Montreal and New Orleans," Bartlett said. "Centuries before Indiana embraced the motto of being the 'Crossroads of America' it was the crossroads for the continent of North America."

The furs that came from Indiana, Bartlett says, were typically taken to Montreal before being shipped overseas.

La Salle, his men, and their countrymen who followed also encountered the Native people of what would become Indiana. Mostly Miami, they were experts at hunting and trapping, primarily for food. The Miami realized that they could trade fur to the French for manufactured products such as cloth and tools made of iron. As part of this mutually beneficial system, French Jesuit priests came in contact with the Miami, attempting to convert them to Christianity.

Because of the major role the Miami played in the pre-contact period and history of what would become the FHC area, Bartlett introduced Diane Hunter, tribal historic preservation officer for the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, to Kahn, who invited her to become part of the FHC leadership team.

"You can't really tell the French history of the Midwest without knowing the Native people's history," he said.

Hunter says the relationship of the Miami and the French long pre-dated the French and Indian War, which ended in 1763.

"Miami people's first interaction with the French was in Wisconsin and Illinois in the mid-1600s," she said. "They had fled their homes in present-day Indiana."

The Miami left the Indiana area to escape the Beaver Wars, under which the more-Eastern-based Iroquois sought to expand their territory and monopolize the fur trade with European markets. The Iroquois sided with the victorious British in the French and Indian War. The Miamis' return to Indiana land in the early 1700s led the French traders to establish their three forts.



Brent Drinkut photo



Frank Oliver photo

(Left then right) A bronze statue commemorates the unknown Jesuit missionary who named the St. Marys, St. Joseph, and Maumee rivers in Fort Wayne. "The French House" is an original French Creole style home that was built around 1809 and inhabited by French fur trader Michel Brouillet, who was born in Vincennes in 1774.



Vincennes' deep French roots are exemplified by The Old Cathedral, one of the oldest standing Catholic churches in the country, built in 1826 on the site of three previous churches. Frank Oliver photo.





Frank Oliver photo

The interior of The Old Cathedral (Basilica of St. Francis Xavier) in Vincennes features pillars that are made from huge trees and covered in masonry. The Greek Revival style building is wheelchair-accessible.

Hunter clarified what could be misperceptions of the term New France.

“The French did not own or control the region,” she said. “Much of New France was *Myaamionki*, the land of the Miami—the French were there with Miami permission, and all of New France was the land of Indigenous nations.

“Just as the FHC wants to promote places today that recognize the French heritage in the region, I hope that people will also recognize that the Miami people are still a living people, not just a people of the past.”

Though it’s not as well known, New France also played a part in Black history in what would become the Midwest. Slavery wasn’t illegal in New France, according to Bartlett, but it wasn’t widely practiced, and the slavery that did exist crossed racial boundaries.

“There were quite a few people of African descent who lived and worked in New France,” Bartlett said. “Many were boatmen in the fur trade.”

He said he’s found what may be documentation of the first known Black man to live in Indiana.

“It was in the 1730s, when the French were at war with the Chickasaw, who were raiding boats on the lower Wabash, which included what we now call the Ohio—the French called it all the Wabash back then,” Bartlett said. “He appears to have been the lone survivor or at least escaped an attack and ended up at Ouiatenon, where he lived with a French trader for a time.”

To help and advise the FHC on such history, Perri Irmer, president and CEO of the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, also serves on its leadership team.

CURRENT FRENCH DESTINATIONS

There are many places to celebrate French heritage in Indiana, even as the FHC develops. Ouiatenon would be a fun, fitting *le début*, particularly during its annual Feast of the Hunters’ Moon, Oct. 1–2 this year.

The Feast is staged by the Tippecanoe County Historical Association (TCHA), which describes the event as a “recreation of French and Indian life in the 17th Century”. It is one of the oldest and largest living-history events in the country, attracting nearly 40,000 visitors each year. The consul general who succeeded Lacroix, Yannick Tagand, and Martin Baier, the Honorary Consul of France to Indiana, attended last year, as did Kahn. She had not heard of the event until Bartlett invited her.

“I was blown away,” Kahn said of her first Feast. “I knew it was going to be great ... I had looked at the agenda but being there in person was just such an experience.”

She especially liked the opening ceremonies and how the participants went through the fort’s story with a flag ceremony.

“It really brought home how history isn’t a neat little package,” Kahn said. “There are all of these factions and twists and turns.

“It was powerful to see the re-enactment of the friendship that existed between the Wea and the French, and as they paddled down the Wabash ... it really felt as if it had come to life.”

Ouiatenon, which became Indiana’s first National Historic Landmark Archaeological District in 2020 (OI May/June 2020) is the only one of the forts for which the archaeological site has been largely preserved; however, no discernible trace of the old fortification or other structures remains aboveground.

“The Ouiatenon Preserve contains more than 20 archaeological sites related to Fort Ouiatenon, including Native American villages, and these sites are widely considered to be some of the best preserved in the nation,” Bartlett said. “They offer archaeologists a unique opportunity to learn more about the Native and French heritage of our region.”

Visitor access to the archaeological preserve is limited, but anyone can go to the adjacent historical park. Its main attraction is the Blockhouse Museum, where the THCA conducts historical programs and demonstrations on select weekends, including Feast weekend.

Ouiatenon was named, in French, for the Miami-speaking *Waayahtanooki* (i.e., Wea people). It was established in 1717 on the Wabash. Bartlett says the location was the southernmost outpost of the Canada colony. The fort at Vincennes, established in 1731, was the northernmost settlement of Louisiana.

“I often wonder what poor souls got posted at Ouiatenon, because it was as far away from home or the rest of the French population here as it could possibly be,” Bartlett said. “It must have been both challenging and an amazing adventure.”

Vincennes, overall, has more to offer everyday visitors in terms of French history. It too has an annual re-enactment event. Called the Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous, it focuses on the American Revolution time period. This year’s dates were May 28–29. The site is the George Rogers Clark National Historical Park, for which Frank Doughman serves as superintendent.

Clark was the highest-ranking patriot military leader in the northwestern frontier during the Revolution. His name tells you he wasn’t French, but ...



Brent Drinkut photo

Dean Flaris of Fishers picks up an order of oysters during the French Market at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Indianapolis last year. The event features French food, music, and activities each fall.



Frank Oliver photo

Musée de Venoge in Vevay in Switzerland County is an all-volunteer living-history museum that includes a French-Swiss Farmstead that dates to 1805. The entire property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places under three designations.

“At least half of his forces were French-speaking,” Doughman said. “We use that term rather than ‘French,’ as technically, after the French and Indian War, they were British subjects.”

The park features the country’s largest national monument that’s not in Washington, D.C. The massive granite memorial commemorates Clark’s conquest of the Old Northwest Territory, much of which had been New France.

“It’s hard to imagine what our country would have looked like without that territory, without the trade access to the Great Lakes,” Doughman said. “I have often told visitors that Americans have a vision of our country being settled from the East and moving west over the Appalachians, yet when Daniel Boone settled Fort Boonesborough in 1775, there were approximately 600 people living in Vincennes, and other French communities had similar habitation.”

The site of the French fort and the settlement around it was largely erased by 19th and 20th century population growth and by erosion from the Wabash. The river, of course, had helped spawn Vincennes.

“The reason the French chose the site was partially related to the geography,” said David Weaver, who manages the Vincennes State Historic Sites. “One of their trade partners, the Piankashaw (another Miami-speaking people), also settled in this area.”

Two of the sites Weaver manages are from a still-later period. One, known as The French House, is an original

French Creole style home built around 1809. It was the home of Michel Brouillet, who was born in Vincennes in 1774 and spent most of his life working in the fur trade. Unlike the familiar American log cabin style that used horizontal logs, this style employed upright posts fitted into a horizontal sill beam.

“This is a direct tie-in to Norman (French) building style and method of construction,” Kahn said. “Many of the French who came to North America and settled in *la Nouvelle France* came from the Normandy region.”

The other site, the Old Cathedral Catholic Church (Basilica of St. Francis Xavier), is one of the oldest standing Catholic churches in the U.S. The current Old Cathedral was built in 1826 on the site of three previous churches. The first was constructed in about 1732 and was where Indiana’s first Catholic parish was formed. Four bishops are buried in the crypt of the current cathedral. The adjoining cemetery is the final resting place of more than 4,000 early citizens of Vincennes, many of French descent.

Vis-à-vis Vincennes and Ouiatenon, the Fort Wayne area’s modern population grew more rapidly. That’s a large reason fewer traces of New France remain there. There are two historical markers, one for each of the two area forts built by the French. The Fort des Miamis name that both came to be known as recognizes the local Native Americans, for whom the Maumee River is also named.

Another attraction is a sculpture on the city’s Rivergreenway

of an unidentified Jesuit priest standing above the rivers' confluence in honor of their influence in area history.

"They typically accompanied the French voyageurs, such as LaSalle, and kept careful records and accounts of their time, which are now important and informative historical documents," Kahn said.

Their efforts led to the development of French Catholic churches and schools, or at least those given French-influenced names. A contemporary example is St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Indianapolis.

Although the history the FHC promotes pre-dates the U.S. itself, its leadership team's work intentionally includes promotion of and support for more contemporary French-themed activities and sites. If you are more interested in those—or just enjoy authentic ethnic food and drink with live outdoor entertainment and crafts for sale—the French Market may be for you. It's been held at St. Joan of Arc since 1990. This year's is Sept. 10.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE

FHC sites in Indiana are by no means limited to the fort areas. They're all over, and part of FHC's goal is to help you find and appreciate them. Here's a few *hors d'oeuvres* that might tempt you to explore more.

The Bailly Homestead at Indiana Dunes National Park is another National Historic Landmark. Bailly (1774–1835) was an independent fur trader who was one of northern Indiana's earliest European settlers. Except for White Pigeon, Michigan, his trading post was the only stopping place for travelers and missionaries between Chicago and Detroit. The homestead complex is the last remaining site of its nature in the Calumet region, both in its capacity as a fur trading post and in its vernacular architectural features and construction types.

Obviously, Switzerland County has a Swiss heritage. Its best-known town, Vevay, is named for a Swiss city of the same name but different spelling. But one of Vevay's main attractions, Musée de Venoge, has a French name, and for good reason. It's an all-volunteer living-history museum that includes a French-Swiss Farmstead that dates to 1805.

The entire Venoge property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places under three designations: European, Exploration/Settlement, and Architecture/Engineering. The attraction's stated purpose is to help guests understand the lives and material culture of the area's early French-Swiss settlers. Special attention is given to early trades, domestic arts, early gardening, and foodways. You can visit throughout the year, but prime time is during the Swiss Wine Festival, which is the focus of this issue's Destinations feature on pages 46 and 47.

The FHC hosted its second annual leadership conference in Lafayette on May 11–12. One of the main topics, thanks to funding from the William T. Kemper Foundation, was the unveiling of FrenchHeritageSociety.org/FHC and an interactive app, both of which include maps, a calendar of events, and other information. The grant also supported the creation of the FHC logo.

Kahn says the tie-in with the foundation was natural. One of the women in the FHS Paris office has known Julie Kemper Foyer for years, the latter having a residence in Normandy, as well as in Kansas City, Missouri.

One of FHC's goals is to gain recognition and support for more rural places like Vevay.

"We want these communities to more than survive, we want them to thrive," Kahn said. "Regardless of whether they have a national park, state park, small historical society's property, or a re-enactment group, they are all precious treasures that help us know more about ourselves."

"The more we can have access to that, the more all of us will have a strong understanding not just of what happened then but who we are today."

As you explore your state and notice places called Versailles, French Lick, Notre Dame, and many others resulting from our deep French Connection, perhaps you'll find yourself wanting to say "Vive la Indiana".

If so, the FHC will have done its work. *Bon appétit.* □

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Frank Oliver photos

The interior of Musée de Venoge in Vevay in Switzerland County. The Vevay attraction's stated purpose is to help guests understand the lives and material culture of the area's early French-Swiss settlers. Special attention is given to early trades, domestic arts, early gardening, and foodways. The town's first settlers arrived in 1802.