

ST. CLAIR COUNTY.

An Interesting and Instructive Chapter of Illinois History--The First Pioneers, the First County, and the First Church and School-House.

To the Editor of The Tribune.

BELLEVILLE, Ill., March 17.—I propose in this letter to string together for the benefit of the readers of THE TRIBUNE some facts of interest in connection with the early history of St. Clair, the first organized county of Illinois. As early as the year 1630 the Jesuit missionaries, those wonderful pioneers who found no hardship so great as to prevent them from penetrating the wilds of America, planted the cross in the then Indian village of Kaskaskia. It was not, however, until the latter part of 1713 that they established a permanent mission there. Kaskaskia then began to assume a position of importance. The Indians and hunters began to bring in peltries to exchange for powder and tobacco. The Jesuits erected several mills in the neighborhood of Kaskaskia and Cahokia in 1717. In 1718 the first organized government in Illinois was established by the Company of the West, with its headquarters at Fort Des Chartres, on the east bank of the Mississippi River, within the limits of the present County of Randolph. This enterprise had its origin in the fertile brain of the celebrated Scotchman, John Law, who at that time had Paris all agog with his wild banking scheme. An offshoot of the Company of the West, called the Company of St. Phillip, was organized in Paris in 1719 for the purpose of developing the mines supposed to exist near Fort Des Chartres. Phillip Francis Renault was placed at the head of this colony. He got together some 700 or 800 men, about half of whom were negro slaves purchased in the West Indies while en route. These slaves were the first negroes brought to this country, and many of their descendants still live in the southern part of this State. Silver Creek, which runs through this county, was so named by Renault, because he supposed silver ore existed near it. From the arrival of this colony until the year 1763, when the British took possession, the country had enjoyed a great degree of prosperity. A large part of the population left as soon as the British took possession, unwilling to remain and live under English rule. The first court established in this county was organized in 1768. Prior to this date all difficulties that had arisen in this isolated community had been submitted to the priests for adjustment.

In the year 1784 Virginia ceded this country to the United States, and in 1787 Congress passed an ordinance establishing the Northwest Territory. Arthur St. Clair was appointed Governor of this Territory, and held the office until 1802, at which time the State of Ohio was organized. Gen. St. Clair arrived in Kaskaskia early in 1790. The whole Territory at that time did not contain over 100 men capable of bearing arms, and not to exceed 1,500 men, women, and children, the majority of whom were located in and about Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Peoria. In a short time after the arrival of Gov. St. Clair this county was organized and named after him. St. Clair County, at the time of its organization in 1790, extended from the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to a point on the Illinois River near the present City of Pekin, a distance of 250 miles, covering an area as large as Scotland or Ireland. Five years later the County of Randolph was taken from the southern part of St. Clair.

At this time Kaskaskia was the centre of the fur trade of the West. Her merchants were shipping to New Orleans and Pittsburg large quantities of furs, lead, and flour, and receiving in return powder, tobacco, blankets, and such other merchandise as the early settlers and Indians needed. The slow-going flatboat, often requiring months in which to complete a voyage, was the only means of transportation the merchants of that day had. In spite of this drawback they carried on a large and increasing trade with the South and East, and waxed rich.

In the year 1797 William H. Harrison, afterwards President of the United States, was appointed Secretary of the Northwest Territory, under Gov. St. Clair, and in 1799 he was elected Delegate to Congress by the Territorial Legislature which met at Cincinnati, and in 1803 was appointed Governor of Indiana Territory, which at that time included the present State of Illinois.

In the year 1794 Shadrack Bond, Jr., moved from Frederick County, Maryland, and located with his uncle, Shadrach Bond, Sr., in the American Bottom, near Cahokia. He was the first Delegate to Congress from the Territory of Illinois in 1812, and the first Governor of Illinois under the State organization. It was mainly through his instrumentality that Congress, in 1813, passed the act granting the citizens the right of pre-emption to secure their improvements. Previous to the passage of this act the people had no title whatever to their lands. This caused emigration to flow in, permanent improvements were made on all sides, and the country started on that path of improvement which it has ever since pursued. Gov. Bond, during his first term of office as Governor, advised the construction of a canal to connect Lake Michigan with the Mississippi River.

In the year 1807 Elder McKendree of the Methodist Church arrived in St. Clair County. Under his auspices the first Protestant edifice, a log structure, was erected in Illinois, six miles northeast of Belleville. A beautiful and commodious brick church-building now occupies the spot where once stood that humble pioneer church of Illinois, and six miles northeast of it, at Lebanon, is the college that bears the name of this illustrious divine.

In the year 1809 the Territory of Illinois was organized, and Ninian Edwards was appointed Governor, with the seat of Government at Kaskaskia. After the State was admitted into the Union, in 1818, Edwards moved to Edwardsville, and from thence to Belleville in 1823, where, ten years later, he died of cholera. He was elected Governor of the State in 1821. The eloquent Gen. E. D. Baker, who fell at the battle of Ball's Bluff in the late War, was a law student under Gov. Edwards during his residence in Belleville.

In 1809 M. Duncan, of Kentucky, established the first newspaper ever published in Illinois at Kaskaskia. This paper was afterwards carried on by R. Blackwell and D. P. Cook, whose name your county bears. In 1817 Cook was made bearer of dispatches to John Quincy Adams, at that time Minister to the Court of St. James. After his return he was elected Attorney-General, where he remained until his death, in 1825.

It will perhaps be of some interest to the many school-teachers of this State to know that the first school in Illinois was opened in 1783 by John Sceley, in the New Design settlement, in the present County of Monroe. This was sixteen years before Illinois had become a Territory, and thirty-five years before the State was organized.

Lest I exceed the limits allowed an occasional, I will close this letter by advising those of your readers who are interested in the early history of this country to consult John Reynolds' "Pioneer History of Illinois," and the writings of the Rev. J. M. Peck, to both of whom I am indebted for much of the information contained in this letter.

There are remaining with us yet a few whose memories still reach back to the days of Bond and Edwards, and it is a rare treat to hear them discourse of the time when the Indian warriors still roamed over these hills and valleys, but the shadow of the wing of the Archangel of Death is falling upon them, and soon the last of the pioneers will have passed away. One who still retains his faculties vigorous and clear, and can tell of St. Clair County as he saw it sixty years ago, is our worthy fellow townsmen, William McClintock. Our Teutonic friends will be interested to know that the first German that ever came to Illinois was brought here by Mr. McClintock.

F. H.