SCENES AT FT. CHARTRES.

NORA MARKS

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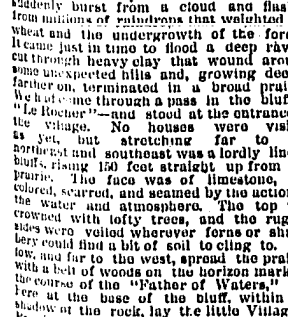
SCENES AT FT. CHARTRES.

THE RUINS OF AN HISTORICAL STRUCTURE ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

An Old French Settlement and Its Crumbling Fortress in the Southern Part of Illinois—Unknown to Commerce and Difficult of Access—Its Capture by the British and Demolition by the Waters of the Great River—Turning Over the Pages of the Past.

"All roads lead to Fort Chartres" was the American form of answer 100 years ago to one who inquired the way to the Mecca of the Western wilderness in the Illinois country. Whatever boat came up from the South laden with explorers stopped at Fort Chartres for supplies; and other boats coming by way of the Great Lakes made the portage at Chicago, and brought instructions from the King, French goods, and recruits, and carried back stories of the marvellous wealth and unhealthfulness of the country, as well as cargoes of furs, to Montreal. Wherever an Indian trail was struck in the wilderness west of the Alleghanies it broadened into a road with hoof points and wagon tracks, these converging from east, north, and south to a common point—Fort Chartres. It held all neighboring tribes of savages in check, so that busy towns and thriving farming communities grew up in a tranquility that has never than been disturbed within the protecting shadow of its walls. From its strong bastions floated the lilies of France, and fur-trader, settler, and explorer hastened to its protection and to swear allegiance to the French King. The Puritans of New England and the Dutch of New York knew it as a menace to their trade in furs with the Indians, and the Spaniards of the Lower Mississippi kept a watchful eye on its encroachments and the occupation of the territory they claimed by their hereditary enemy. Noble officers with long sounding titles, stationed at the important posts of Montreal or Frontenac, in the King's name intrigued for promotion to the command of Fort Chartres, the stronghold that was to furnish occasion for valor and open up sources of fabulous wealth for its commanders and for France. The sound of its cannon reverberated widely through the primeval forest and over unbroken prairies, and reached the ears of European councils;



BY A CART TRACK THROUGH FIELDS OF GRAIN.

but after a lapse of only a century and a half the echoes have died to an indistinct murmer, and a place to which all roads led as to a shrine is now reached only by a cart track between fields of grain.

ONLY A DISTANT SWAMP.

One who inquired the way to Fort Chartres in these days would receive a shake of the head. Elaborate railroad guides give no information, and history is silent or says conclusively: "The spot where Fort Chartres stood is now the bed of the Mississippi River." Only a few who have in later years traced the uncertain lines of its old foundations know this to be untrue. Commerce takes no cognizance of it. Midway between St. Louis and Chester, on the Mississippi river, a point on the map is marked "Fort Chartres," but when I inquired at the steamboat offices in St. Louis for transportion thither I was met by a question:

"You mean Fort Chartres Landing? No passenger boats stop there. It has nothing but a warehouse used by Mr. Brickey of Prairie du Rocher mills to ship flour to New Orleans. It's a swamp, and there isn't even a farmhouse within a mile of the Landing."

This was discouraging, but consulting my map again, I found Prairie du Rocher nearest the point marked Fort Chartres. The steamboat officers knew nothing about the place except that Mr. Brickey had a mill there. It was off the railroads, and could probably be reached by way of Red Bud, a town of uncertain size, forty miles from St. Louis, on the Mobile & Ohio Road. From there it was at least twenty miles from what might prove to be only a mill and an accessory landing. When I boarded a train for Red Bud I plunged into an unknown country, not knowing how I should get into it or out of it, or whether I should find any trace of the object of my search, old Fort Chartres.

But Prairie du Rocher—the name was encouraging in itself, if the estimation in which the place was held by the modern Town of Red Bud was not. The landlady at the barrack of a hotel where I stopped over night gave me a piece of advice.

"If you *have* to go to Prairie du Rocher," as if it were impossible to conceive of any one going there who was not obliged to, "you had better stay here until Monday. A Sunday there would kill any one from the city. Why, it's a tumble-down old French town; half the people in it never use English unless they are compelled to, and there's nothing on earth to see. O, there may be 300 people there, all a century behind the times, and they will all be at the chapel Sunday."

A TUMBLE-DOWN OLD FRENCH TOWN.

What a picture! I had seen 500 towns like Red Bud, but "a tumble-down old French town" in the heart of Illinois was a novelty worth one's getting up at 6 o'clock Sunday morning so as to see as much of it as possible. It held out, too, such rich promise of traditions of Fort Chartres in the very tongue of its former commanders, even if every stone of the old structure had been swept down to the Gulf of Mexico.

It was a monotonous drive over roads roughened by recent rains. The trees dripped above our heads, mud splashed over us, and the carriage jolted through ruts mile after mile, past wheat fields and acres of incense from clover fields drenched with rain. Low farm houses, long distances apart, had an ancient, unsubstantial appearance. Great tracts of country were still unclaimed from the dense woods or disease-breeding marshes over which a fog hung perpetually, and would not be dissipated by the sun which suddenly burst from a cloud and flashed from millions of raindrops that weighted the wheat and the undergrowth of the forest. It came just in time to flood a deep ravine cut through heavy clay that wound around some unexpected hills and, growing deeper farther on, terminated in a broad prairie. We had come through a pass in the bluffs—"Le Rocher"—and stood at the entrance of the village. No houses were visible as yet, but stretching far to the northeast and southeast was a lordly line of bluffs, rising 150 feet straight up from the prairie. The face was of limestone, discolored, scarred, and seamed by the action of the water and atmosphere. The top was crowned with lofty trees, and the rugged sides were veiled wherever ferns or shrubbery could find a bit of soil to cling to. Below, and far to the west, spread the prairie, with a belt of woods on the horizon marking the course of the "Father of Waters," and here at the base of the bluff, within the shadow of the rock, lay the little Village of Prairie du Rocher, a group of half a hundred dwellings—its single broad street with inconsequent off-shoots following the irregular line of its protector on the north and stretching for a mile within its shelter.

THE VILLAGE OF PRAIRIE DU ROCHER.

A French town! Truly you will see nothing like it this side of Canada and the eighteenth century.

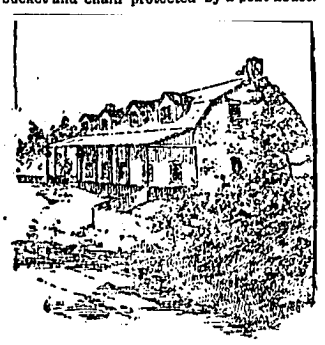
Strongly built were the houses, with frames of oak and of hemlock,

Such as the peasants of Normandy built in the reign of the Henrys.

Thatched were the roofs, with dormer windows, while gables projecting

Over the basement below protected and shaded the doorway.

Like Grand Pré before the expulsion! We transplant so easily in these days and build new homes apart from our fathers that this picture of generations rooted in the soil was almost incomprehensible. To see Prairie du Rocher makes one understand Acadian agony. Embowered in trees the dwellings retreat from the highway. The roofs, roughly shingled, slope to the street over the piazzas, above which dormer windows with gabled roofs are set. The walls glisten with white paint, and low stone walls separate the terraced lawns from the street. Conspicuously in a front corner of the yard is a well, the bucket and chain protected by a pent-house.



A FRENCH HOUSE AT PRAIRIE DU ROCHER.

The few stores and shops are of brick or stone, stuccoed, set back from the street and reached by stone steps leading to a platform. The mill, a tall building, painted a red brown and surmounted by a weather-vane, stands at the north end of the town sneer against the face of the bluff, and towering almost to the top. Jennie Wren could have had the realization of her dream—miles of roses. The air is full of them. They climb up against le rochers, they fall over the stone walls, and wreathe about the piazza pillars and dormer window frames. They hold a lotous wrestling match with the sweet-scented honeysuckle and both tumbled together across the grass. They smother the peonies, put out the light of the star-eyed syringa, and climb the same trellis with the wallflower—a Bacchanalian procession of roses that reels against the signposts and conceals the French names above the doors of the shops. The streets were deserted; not a person had been seen as we traversed the entire length of the town and stopped before a long French house with the piazza shut off from the street by little gates in the railing, over which the roses tumbled. No one but the landlord was present, and he ushered me into a tiny, low-ceiled parlor. The floor was laid in a beautiful pattern in black walnut and oak, and had the polish of a hundred years on its surface. Dimity curtains draped the little square windows opening onto the piazza, and a portrait of Pope Pius IX. framed in gilt hung on the wall. The house, as well as the whole town, looked old but not dilapidated, and as if the first settlers had built for posterity so that it would have time to rest and grow up in peace and security.

It was all so like the house of "the wealthiest farmer of Grand Pré" with its high chimney piece and settee that I half expected to see the "maiden in snow-white cap and kirtle of homespun." Perhaps Evangeline in her search for Gabriel paused in this village—or at Fort Chartres around which St. Anne then clustered and which could not have been unlike Prairie du Rocher. I had forgotten Fort Chartres, but it was impossible that the residents of this village should have done so. It was itself a part of the past.

IN THE LITTLE BRICK CHAPEL.

Following the directions of mine host I went across the field to a little brick chapel which was crowded to the doors with a rural congregation. The men stepped aside to let me into a pew, displaying no curiosity about a stranger where strangers must be rare. They were of small physique, brown and wiry, and clothed in home-made garments. Straight black hair, often untrimmed, shaded mild black eyes that were non-speculative, untroubled, and contented like those of a domestic animal. Patient, plodding, unenterprising, belonging to the peasant class as much as if Makarty still held seigniorial rights over them. The women were of the same type. They were sunk deep in their unquestioning devotions and buried in slat sunbonnets, their figures draped in limp calico dresses of an antique cut. The children were preternaturally old and solemn and brown and polite. Not a dozen persons in the congregation had a modern look, and even they had brought their looks and manners from Normandy and their millinery from Redbud or Chester. In contrast a fat and jolly young German student from Heidelberg expounded a sermon from the high pulpit, his white robes and vestments sitting on him with the jauntiness of a smoking jacket. He paused in his English occasionally for a French word that would be more forcible. Ave Maria and responses were given with an accent to be envied by a Prairie avenue belle as unattainable. I caught a glimpse of a girl's face once from behind an overshadowing hat. She was telling her beads, murmuring over them, and for a moment she looked like a St. Genovieve. Then she came down from her exaltation and the cross on her rosary dropped from her hand into her bosom like an anchor dropped from a ship into a foam-tossed sea. When she passed out of the church before me the beatification was gone, leaving her quite commonplace.

As the women walked down the pavement to the wicker gate the men stood in line on either side and every hat was deferentially lifted. Even a group of colored boys stood uncovered, silent and respectful. What community of mixed Americans would have shown this chivalry? As I went up the wide rose wreathed street I heard a French sentence behind me, or an English one with a French accent. The tones were musical, merry, and contented. I stood on the hotel porch and saw the people disappear under

THE FARMERS STOPPED TO WATER THEIR HORSES.

the dormer windows behind the roses; saw the farmers stop to water their horses at any wayside well that struck their fancy; returned the courteous bows, and then the sunshine slept on the silent town, the precipitous sides of le rocher and the verdure that crowned its lofty summit. A Sabbath stillness was in the air, broken only by a red bird and a Baltimore oriole that flashed like jewels across the sun and swung in the branches of a sycamore that shaded an old well. So might it have been at St. Anne du Fort Chartres a century and a half ago under the ministrations of St. Ange, only that there was boldness, enterprise, prowess and pride, and a certain stately stride with which pioneers and conquerors of the wilderness always walk through history. Here it was as if a tradition of former manners and customs had been dropped down in a happy valley, while another century moved on the mountains above them.

A VISIT TO OLD FORT CHARTRES.

Tracing Out the Ruins of the Historic Structure—Scenes of the Past.

It was over a dainty little dinner of salads and desserts, with unknown sauces, that unburdened myself to the landlady, with her crisp, crinkled black hair, and to her pretty daughter. I had come all the way from Chicago to find Fort Chartres.

"There is nothing there but a few stones, ma cherie," she said. "It is a pity to come so far to see so little; and such a poor little town, too. We have nothing new to show you. But it is years since I was over the old fort. It is perhaps all gone now."

"Did the river carry so much away?"

"The river carried away only the west wall. The Mississippi is a French river and would not molest the old fort, but men have not been so kind. Mr. Brickey of the mill owned the land until recently, and he was so good-natured that when the farmers who were building houses wanted stone for foundations he let them carry away stone from the fort. I do not know if you can even trace the walls now. We do not know much of its history except that it is French and that a few settlements like this that sprung up around it are all that is left of the French occupation of the Mississippi Valley. When the floods of 1772 took the west wall of the fort, the mission chapel of Ste. Anne, and most of the village, everything was removed here and the parish continued under the name of St. Joseph. Father Crewet will show you the parish registers of Ste. Anne, which are kept down at the priest's house."

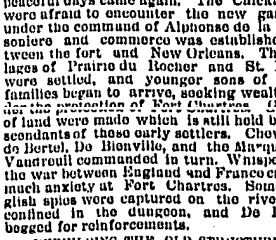
Late in the afternoon I was driven over to the site of the old fort by Mr. John Brickey, son of the mill owner, who seemed uncertain of his way.

"The roads to it are changed every year by the man who lives on the farm, according as he lays out his fields and leaves merely a cart track to haul off grain. It is only a mile from the landing where we ship flour and can be reached by a road lying at the foot of the old bank of the river, but that is marshy and often impassable in the spring. The farm has belonged to my father several times in the last forty years, but the land is poor and he has always tried to get rid of it, but it comes back on him like a bad penny."

THE ROAD TO THE OLD FORT.

We rode across dripping wheat fields and came suddenly up to a farm cabin with as much evidence of comfort and civilization about it as a Tennessee mountaineer's home. The man was a German by the name of Wurin, and only a tenant on this land, almost worthless except for its associations. A flock of scant-skirted, yellow-legged girls stopped out from the porch like half-fledged shanghai chickens to inspect their visitors. But the farmer himself was talkative.

We traced three sides of the fort even to the perfect line of the corner bastions by the ridge of earth covered rocks where the foundations still lie intact. In the southeast



THE OLD POWDER MAGAZINE.

corner stand the crumbling ruins of the old powder magazine, now used as a sheepfold, the only building of which even a portion is left. The foundations of the Intendant's house can be seen, and a portion of the barracks on the south. A gigantic oak tree grows inside the Intendant's house, and an orchard and wheat fields cover most of the western wall. The farmhouse stands almost in the centre of the inclosure, facing to the river. Down near where the floods carried away the southwest bastion is a well dug in 1718. The sides are faced with huge bowlders, and in the crevices ferns and moss grow far down into the dark cavern. A moss-covered bucket drew up a tinkling, splashing burden over the windlass, and we drank the health of De Villiers, Makarty, and St. Ange out of a tin dipper.

RELICS OF THE DAYS GONE BY.

The farmer showed some cannon balls, bullets, a bullet mold, a fragment of a sword, some ancient meat-hooks, and pieces of shells which he had picked up, but not so much as a bullet would he part with. A historical society in St. Louis had tried to convince him of their right to these relics, "But," he said astutely between puffs at his short cob pipe, "Saind Louis aind in Illinois in a hurry, and dat's vere I pays taxes."

Waiting there in the crazy old porch for the rain to pass over, the splendor of the old structure, now fallen to decay, rose before me, and its history passed like a pageant. It began in the daring mind of Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle, to whom obstacles did not exist. His project was to build a line of forts, beginning with Fort Frontenac on the Ontario and extending along the Great Lakes and the Mississippi to New Orleans, that should hold the vast Mississippi Valley for France. But it was forty years after his death by an assassin's hand in Texas before the first stone of Fort Chartres was laid by the French Government and the West India Company. In 1718 Pierre Duqué Boisoriant arrived on the Mississippi with the commission of Commandant of Illinois and with instructions and means to erect a fort in the country. He selected a place midway between the French towns of Kaskaskia and Cahokia, which had been settled long before. His regiments of soldiers laid the stone foundations of the fort and cut the trees of the virgin forest for palisades. After two years' work and the expenditure of more than 2,000,000 crowns of gold French money the fort was completed and named Fort Chartres, in honor of Duc de Chartres.

Philip Francis Renault came over from Paris for the India Company, bringing with him soldiers, miners, settlers, and slaves to the number of 250. All the land along the river between Kaskaskia and the fort was rapidly cleared and settled, and the Parish of St. Anne du Fort Chartres established by the Jesuits.

BURNED AT THE STAKE.

The Commandant led a merry life. Magnificent quarters were provided for him and the Intendant in the fort; he planted the cannon to overlook the river that ran below and terrorized the Indians and Spaniards. Lordly processions of gentlemen and ladies in velvets, brocades, laces, and powder walked into the Jesuit chapel Sunday and to morning mass. Renault was succeeded by De Sietto in 1725 and he a few years later by St. Ange. In 1731 came the gallant young Pierre D'Artaguiette, who had won such signal victories in the Natchez war that he was appointed to command Fort Chartres, a place that needed great skill to hold owing to the hostilities of the Spaniards and Chickasaws. In a battle with the Chickasaws at their village occurred a terrible event, in which all the officers from Fort Chartres, D'Artaguiette, Vincenne, and a young son of St. Ange were captured and burned at the stake.

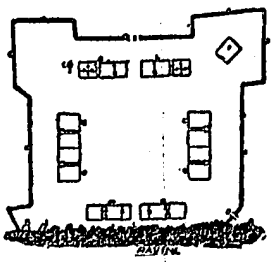
The bells of St. Anne were tolled, masses were said, and the settlers who had loved so long in peace shuddered for the future. But peaceful days came again. The Chickasaws were afraid to encounter the new garrison under the command of Alphonse de la Buissoniere and commerce was established between the fort and New Orleans. The Villages of Prairie du Rocher and St. Philip were settled, and younger sons of noble families began to arrive, seeking wealth under the protection of Fort Chartres. Grants of land were made which is still held by descendants of these early settlers. Chevalier de Bertel, De Bienville, and the Marquis de Vaudreuil commanded in turn. Whispers of the war between England and France caused much anxiety at Fort Chartres. Some English spies were captured on the river and confined in the dungeon, and De Bertel begged for reinforcements.

REBUILDING THE OLD STRUCTURE.

In the autumn of 1750 Chevalier de Makarty arrived with orders to tear away the wooden palisades and rebuild and strengthen the old fort with solid stone work. After it was finished the fort is carefully described in records as having an arched gateway fifteen feet high; a cut stone platform above the gate, with a stair of nineteen stone steps, having a stone balustrade leading to it; its walls of stone eighteen feet in hight; and its four bastions, each with forty-eight loopholes, eight embrasures, and a sentry-box, the whole in cut stone. And within, the great storehouse, ninety feet long by thirty wide, two stories high, and gable-roofed; the guard-house, having two rooms above for the chapel and missionary quarters; the government-house, 84x32, with iron gates and a stone porch, a coach-house and pigeon-house adjoining, and a large stone well inside; the Intendant's house of stone and iron, with a portico; the two rows of barracks, each 198 feet long; the magazine thirty-five feet wide, thirty-eight feet long, and thirteen feet high above the ground, with a doorway of cut stone, and two doors, one of wood and one of iron; the bake-house, with two ovens and a stone well in front; the prison, with four cells of cut stone and iron doors; and one large relief gate to the north; the whole inclosing an area of more than four acres.

The work was hardly completed before the French and Indian war began and Neyou de Villiers, a captain from Fort Chartres has the honor of compelling young George Washington to surrender Fort Necessity.

From the productiveness of the country about it Fort Chartres became a great commissary depot during this war, and it furnished men as well, for almost every battle saw the valiant soldiers of Makarty slain. When Canada was surrendered they thought the colony of Illinois would still be retained



GROUND PLAN OF FORT CHARTRES.

by France, but in the treaty of 1763 with one stroke of the pen of Louis XV. Fort Chartres passed into English hands!

Not yet! St. Ange, old and feeble, came back to the fort, and Pontiac stood in the way of the English. The lilies of France still floated from the stone bastions and Pontiac would as soon sign a treaty with the prince of darkness as with the English. He brought his red warriors to the fort to the aid of St. Ange, who told him all was over. The old French nobleman and the noble Indian wept together, and the next day the cross of St. George floated from the bastions.

WRECKED BY THE MIGHTY RIVER.

How the Fort Was Swept Away by the Waters of the Mississippi.

But it was for seven years only that British officers held command at Fort Chartres. The river was French from the Falls of St. Anthony to Louisiana, and resented English occupancy. The shades of Marquette, La Salle, Joliet, Hennepin, and Tonti haunted its whole course. Higher and higher crept the waters. In 1764, when the ink that had signed the treaty was scarcely dry, the waters of the Mississippi began to have a threatening, sinister look, and in 1772 a torrent poured down widening the stream until it carried away the river wall of the fort. The next day the waters had returned to the old channel, but the British garrison had fled, never to return. The parish register of St. Anne was removed to Prairie du Rocher, and the demolished church and village were abandoned. The river receded, and the bottomland, more than a mile wide below the fort, became covered with a rank growth of trees and underbrush which concealed the ruins from the river. Man did the rest, and stone by stone the magnificent ruin which the Government should afterwards have preserved was carried away to form the foundations or line the cellars of farmhouses of new settlers who knew none of the associations of the place.

Old Gov. Reynolds saw the fort in 1802, when much of it still remained, and as late as 1820 it was surveyed by Beck, who prepared a gazetteer of Illinois and speaks of it as a splendid ruin.

OPENED TO SETTLERS IN 1843.

Fort Chartres Reservation was opened to settlers in 1843, the inclosure was cleared of trees, and part of the stone from the Intendant's house used in the foundations and chimney of the cabin that still stands on the spot. The vandalism went on, and now only a wavering, irregular line of earth-covered stonework marks the old foundations. Only the crumbling ruins of the magazine, which under all this demolition still stands sturdily, testifies to the invincibility of the old fort.

A BIT OF LANDSCAPE.

We took another drink to the gallant soldiers who had held the place in the past, then turned down the steep old bank of the river and drove along the edge of the swamp under trees the low branches of which drenched our faces with rain. Marsh marigolds glowed in the swamp, the broad leaves of the lotus floated on pools of water, and ferns of almost tropical growth mingled with the foliage of the trees. The mosquitoes which had caused good Father Poiseon to do penance for swearing swarmed about us. Noisome vapors crept up from the swamp, while the loud, rushing sound of the wind in the trees drowned whatever murmur of the Mississippi, a mile away, might have reached our ears.

Monday morning, before leaving for Kaskaskia, I visited the priest's house. It was school-time, but no brown-skinned, exquisitely polite little children were seen on their way to school. Instead the doors of the church were piled high with books and lunch baskets. The children of Prairie du Rocher were at morning mass. Presently they filed out, and picking up their books walked decorously, two and two, to the school-house across the street, headed by sisters in the white robes of the Dominican Order.

The fat little German priest conducted me to the rear of the church, where he showed me the communion service, four silver chalices and a monstrance or receptacle for wafers, all solid and of exquisite handwork. The metal was so thin and pure that handling for nearly two centuries had covered the pieces with numerous dents. They had all been used in the first communion administered at St. Anne du Fort Chartres and were still in use. A tabernacle of inlaid wood was of the same date. Vestments of satin and brocade bore the handiwork of skillful fingers long idle in convents of old France.

RECORDS BACK IN 1721.

The parish register, tattered and wormeaten, the stained, mildewed paper held together by strips of linen along the margins, bears some records of 1720, the first year of the establishment of St. Anne. There were the autographs of St. Ange, Makarty, and De Villiers, and a record of the death of D'Artaguiette. But "short and simple annals," the marriages, births, and deaths of parishioners form the bulk of two volumes. Among the earliest is mention made of Joan Baptiste Barbau and his wife Jeannette, who witnessed some ceremony. Their descendants still live at Prairie du Rocher, and preserve the old tongue and customs as their proudest possession. Many Acadians found refuge here after their expulsion from Canada, and their children have never since been disturbed. Old Fort Chartres conquered a peace for all so fortunate as to place themselves under its protection, and now, if not reverently preserved as it should have been, is at least falling into peaceful oblivion within sound of a language that seems an echo of the past and a promise that its traditions will not be forgotten.

NORA MARKS.

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