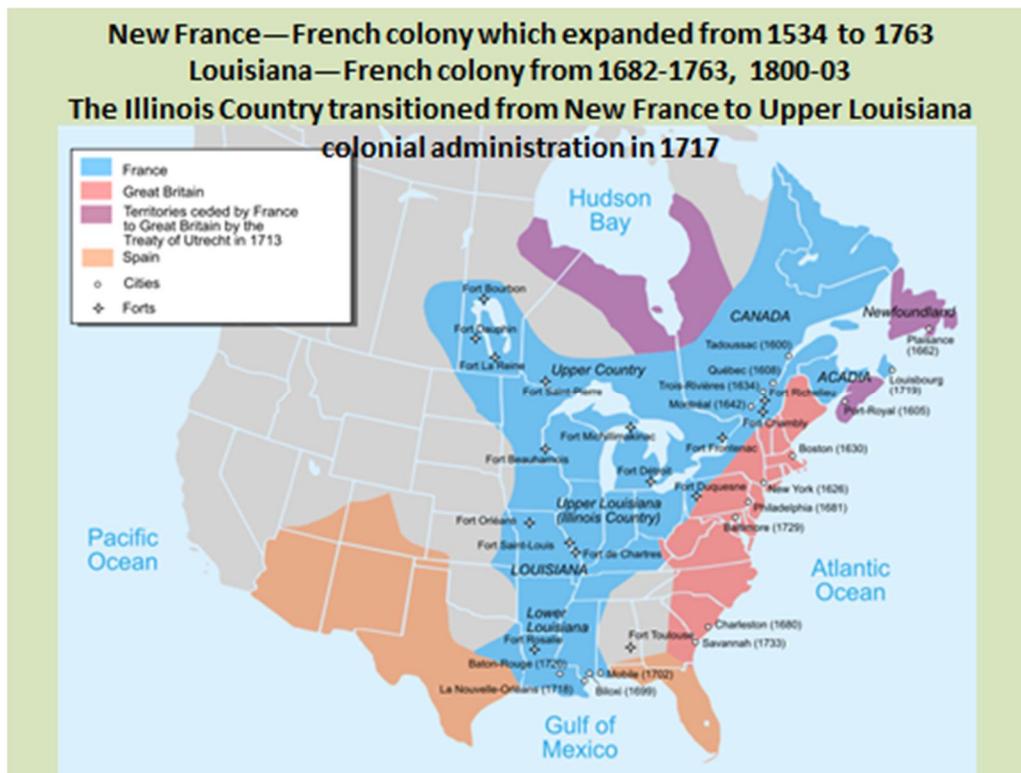


## French-Canadian Heritage Corridor

By

Dr. James Paul, Kankakee County Historic Preservation Commission Secretary

On Monday November 4, 2013, the Kankakee County Historic Preservation Commission supported a proposal to contact Illinois State Representative Kate Cloonen about introducing to the state legislature a resolution to designate a section of Interstate 57 as the "French-Canadian Heritage Corridor". The resolution HR0217 (passed by the House on April 29, 2015) identifies this historic Illinois corridor with one sign located on I-57 for southbound traffic just north of the Manteno exit 322 and another sign located on I-57 for northbound traffic just south of Ashkum exit 293. These two signs would encompass an area where the first non-Native Americans, the majority of which were French-Canadian pioneers, immigrated in large numbers to what is now Kankakee and Iroquois Counties) from the late 1820s to 1850s. Those settlements included Bourbonnais Grove (now Bourbonnais), *Le Petite Canada* (gone now, but the site is located in the Davis Creek area of Kankakee River State Park), Rockville (gone now, but the site is located in the northwest section of Kankakee River State Park), St. George, L'Erable, Papineau, and St. Anne. After the Potawatomi, the first significant ethnic group to make contributions in the Kankakee area were the French-Canadians.



The French were no strangers to the heartland of North America. As early as 1543, France established the colony of New France which eventually covered about ½ of the North American interior. The nineteenth-century French-Canadians were very familiar with the land south of the Great Lakes. They knew about Rene-Robert Cavalier Sieur de la Salle's (1643-87) quest to explore the rivers of New France that flowed into the Mississippi. In 1679, he and thirty-three men made a portage from the St. Joseph River to a marshy river's headwaters. The party continued paddling into the "Great West" along this new "connecting river" with eight canoes. The party eventually completed the journey from Montreal to the mouth of the Mississippi. La

Salle named the connecting river between the St. Joseph and Illinois Rivers the Seignelay in honor of colonial minister of France. The name was later changed to the Theakiki and is now called the Kankakee (Johnson-*Bourbonnais*, 9). The native Potawatomi called the land adjacent to the river *Te-yar-ac-keö* (wonderful land). The word *Ky-an-ke-keö* evolved. Some Indian tribes called the land *Te-ok-e-keeö* (wolf) while some *coureurs de bois* (French runners of the wood) used the name *Quin-que-queö* (Richard, 1).

The Kankakee River Valley of the Illinois Country was sparsely settled until Noel LeVasseur (1799-1879) began recruiting settlers from his native Quebec Province, Canada. Hundreds of French-Canadians soon came to settle and farm along the fertile Kankakee River in an area they called Bourbonnais Grove extending from today's Kankakee River State Park to Cobb Park in Kankakee an area 12 miles long by 1 mile wide. At the age of 19 in 1817, LeVasseur was employed by the American Fur Company (headquartered in Astor, New York with a recruiting station in Montreal) along with his friends Dominique Bray, Henri Boucher, and fifteen-year-old Gurdon Hubbard (1802-86). After the Black Hawk War of 1832, LeVasseur and Hubbard purchased land from the Potawatomi and opened the Chicago to Danville Road through the Grand Prairie along the Kankakee River (now Route 102), and the Hubbard Trail which Illinois highway 1 now follows. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, two other notable French-Canadians joined Noel LeVasseur in the settlement along the Kankakee: the brothers Francois Bourbonnais, Sr. and Antoine Bourbonnais. Bourbonnais Grove was named after them.



By 1846, there were at least 22 French-Canadian families living in Bourbonnais Grove. The records of St. Leo's Parish in Bourbonnais Grove (later to become Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Bourbonnais) in 1847 noted 77 French-Canadian families or 471 people. When Canadian-born George Letourneau (1831-1906) destined to become a renowned statesman arrived in Bourbonnais Grove in 1848, he attended church at St. Leo's Chapel, a wooden structure which had been built in 1841. A new church (Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) replaced the chapel in 1849. This was the church in which Letourneau was married to Elodie (Langlois) Letourneau in 1852. It burned to the ground in 1853. Work began two years later on a new church to be constructed of local limestone. Construction was completed in 1858. Over 150 years later, Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church appears much the same as it was back then.

George Letourneau became mayor of Bourbonnais in 1875 and mayor of Kankakee in 1892. He was present at the first Illinois State Republican Convention in Bloomington in 1856, and listened to Abraham Lincoln's "Lost Speech" this reference denotes the few notes taken by the audience which was spellbound as Lincoln delivered an impassioned condemnation of

slavery. The address was the precedent for his famous "House Divided" speech delivered in Springfield on June 16, 1858. Letourneau served in just about every Kankakee County political office, and was elected state senator in the Illinois 38<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> General Assemblies 1892-96.



George and Elodie Letourneau

French-Canadian priests and brothers of the Viatorian Order and French-Canadian nuns of the Congregation of Notre Dame were instrumental in the religious and educational development of the Bourbonnais Grove community. In the later part of the nineteenth-century, girls attended the new Notre Dame Convent and School after it was built in 1862. Boys were instructed by the Viatorian priests and brothers in the Bourbonnais Grove public school and then St. Viator Academy after 1868. Young men could attend St. Viator College when the Viatorians were granted a university charter in 1874. When Letourneau became mayor of the Village of Bourbonnais when it was incorporated in 1875, the community was already a thriving educational center. A new boys' school, another St. Viator Academy, was built in 1891.

The French-Canadians Noel LeVasseur, George Letourneau, and Captain Francis Seguin spearheaded the organization of Kankakee County in 1853. The new county had a population of 8,000 people. The population would soon shift from Bourbonnais to Kankakee with the arrival of the railroad in 1853. Kankakee was originally platted as the "town of Bourbonnais" in 1853 (Kanaga-Letourneau, 763). Two years later, the name was changed. The population of Bourbonnais Township in 1850 was 1,720 with 81% or 201 out of 248 families of French-Canadian descent (Brettell, "French Canadians in the Kankakee Valley", [www.lib.niu.edu/2005/iht1220528.html](http://www.lib.niu.edu/2005/iht1220528.html)). Other French-Canadian settlements in Kankakee and Iroquois Counties were St. George (1848), LeRable (1854), St. Anne (1851), and Papineau (1872).

At about the same time as the formation of Kankakee County in 1853, Canadian-born Father Charles Chiniquy (1809-1899) was sent by Bishop Vendeveld of Chicago to the French-Canadian community in Bourbonnais. The bishop recognized that the lands in this area were rich and fertile and wanted Father Chiniquy to encourage French-Canadian families to take advantage of the opportunities he saw there. After Chiniquy arrived in November 1851, he began to search for a site that could become the center of his new settlement. He decided on the area of Beaver Mission (now known as St. Anne), and soon returned to Canada to persuade immigrants living there and in the French-speaking countries of Europe to come to Illinois. The families did come and soon the first 40 houses were built. Chiniquy made plans to build a church in the spring of 1851 and when completed in 1852 it was dedicated to Saint Anne, the patron saint of the Province of Quebec. That same year he also became the pastor of Maternity of the Blessed

Virgin Mary Church in Bourbonnais Grove. He served both churches until September 1853, when the new Maternity church burnt to the ground.

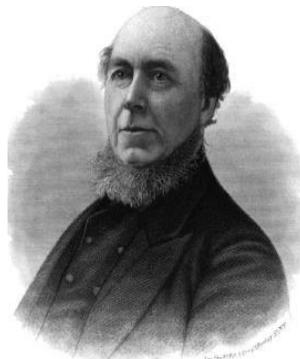
In the meantime there was an increasing flood of immigration to St. Anne by the end of 1852 and it became a serious problem. To alleviate the growing pains, new mission centers were established at St. Mary (now Beaverville), and LeRable. It was estimated that in the three years after Chiniquy's arrival in Illinois that between nine hundred and one thousand families left Quebec and some New England states to settle in central Illinois.

In Bourbonnais a new stone church was being built. It took five years with a great deal of volunteer labor, but the church was completed in 1858, and the beautiful church, Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary still stands today.

French-Canadian immigrants continued to move to the area settling in St. Anne Township and also in Papineau and Beaver Townships in Iroquois County. There was also a small settlement of French-Canadians northeast of Bourbonnais in what became St. George.

After disagreeing with the Bishop of Chicago over the bishop's treatment of Catholics in Chicago, particularly French-Canadians, Fr. Chiniquy led an exodus of Bourbonnais Grove French-Canadian Roman Catholics to the village of St. Anne, Illinois. This crisis split many French-Canadian families. Older French-Canadians in the Kankakee area still today resent Fr. Chiniquy's schism. Fr. Chiniquy was excommunicated in 1856. He then left the Roman Catholic Church and formed the Christian Catholic Church of St. Anne (which in 1862 became part of the Canadian Presbyterian Church).

In 1860, the population in St. Anne, Beaverville, Papineau and Ashkum townships had grown to 3,561 and of those nearly 75% were of French-Canadian ancestry. By 1880 the migration had slowed, which tells us that the majority of immigrant came during a few decades in the middle of the nineteenth century. Many of the descendants of those families remain in the area today.



Fr. Charles Chiniquy

Up until the 1950s, French was a primary spoken language in Bourbonnais. French-Canadian family names still abound in the telephone book, and the *fleur de lies* is the symbol of Bourbonnais as the village symbol and all street signs testify. The following Kankakee area museums, exhibits, and projects publicize the cultural values that the French-Canadians instilled in educational, religious, agricultural, political, and economic institutions of the community:

- Kankakee County and Village of Bourbonnais historic landmark George R. Letourneau Home/Museum (see <http://www.bourbonnaishistory.org/>), which dates back to 1837;
- French Heritage Museum at the Stone Barn in Kankakee (see <http://www.kankakeecountymuseum.com/french-heritage-museum-.html>);
- website *The French-Canadian Interview Project* conducted by students at Kankakee Community College (see <http://frenchcanadians.kcc.edu/index.html>);
- *French-Canadian Heritage Wall*— this 15ø x 4ø exhibit which contains historical narratives, photographs, time line, and interaction by using internet accessible devices, is a tribute to the Kankakee River Valleyø French-Canadian heritage and *The French-Canadian Interview Project*—the wall is on permanent display on the third floor east end, near room L308, of Kankakee Community College, 100 College Drive, Kankakee, IL (815 802-8100);
- *Heritage Rooms* in Maternity BVM Church (Bourbonnais)ø two rooms located inside the north entrance of Maternity Blessed Virgin Mary Church, (308 E. Marsile Avenue, Bourbonnais, IL) which feature displays with artifacts from Notre Dame Convent/Academy, Maternity Blessed Virgin Mary Church, and St. Viatorø Colleeø the church is open weekdays from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm, Sat. 8:30 am to 5:30 pm, and Sun. 6:30 am to 3 pm (815-933-8285);
- *Viatorian Room* in Ludwig Hall at Olivet Nazarene University (Bourbonnais)ø photographs and displays which denote the historical significance of St. Viator College (1874-1939), the predecessor of Olivet Nazarene University, One University Avenue, Bourbonnais, IL (815-928-5534.

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### **Credits**

Map of New France - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_France#/media/File:Nouvelle-France\\_map-en.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_France#/media/File:Nouvelle-France_map-en.svg)

Noel leVasseur ø photo by H.H. Beebe, Kankakee, IL, Kankakee County Museum Collection.

George and Elodie Letourneau ø Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society Collection

Father Charles Chiniquy - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Charles\\_chiniquy.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_chiniquy.jpg)