

## *Let's spend a weekend in Illinois's French-Canadian Heritage Corridor*



About 60 miles south of Chicago, the Village of Bourbonnais and the surrounding area along the Kankakee and Iroquois Rivers boasts a French-Canadian heritage. Fur trader Noel LeVasseur and the brothers, Antoine and Francois Bourbonnais, Sr., entered the Kankakee and Iroquois River Valleys as fur traders for the American Fur Company in the 1820s. In 1837, LeVasseur returned to his native Quebec Province to recruit French-Canadians to settle in northeastern Illinois when the Potawatomi were compelled to move west of the Mississippi River. Beginning in 1846, a considerable number of families arrived. Today a 30-mile section of Interstate 57 from Manteno to Ashkum has been designated the French-Canadian Heritage Corridor in recognition of this French-speaking heritage.

A weekend tour itinerary with a two-night stay in the French-Canadian Heritage Corridor is suggested. Visitors might consider staying overnight in the VRBO historic Joseph Legris House located at 465 S. Main Street in Bourbonnais. Other accommodations are nearby.



This two story Colonial Revival house dates back to 1857. After amassing a small fortune in the gold mines of California, French-Canadian Joseph Legris returned to Bourbonnais Grove, married Cleophil Sylvester, and built a small cabin. The home's present kitchen is part of the original log constructed dwelling. Legris added rooms to the house as his family grew. Legris and his sons opened two banks in Kankakee, IL. He was a member of the village board, and spent his declining years in this house. Legris was the father of a very well-known family consisting of Monsignor Gerasime Legris—a life time professor of theology at St. Viator College, poet, musician, author, and devout priest; Frederic Legris—president of the village board for 26 years and banker; Harvey Legris—banker; Thomas Legris—banker. The elder Legris was one of the members of the first village board.

The following weekend tour itinerary is suggested.

**Saturday morning**

- Kankakee River State Park—home to the Potawatomi and before them, many more Native American tribes [Kankakee River State Park, an Illinois State Park located near Bourbonnais, Bradley and Channahon \(stateparks.com\)](#)



This is the site of the Potawatomi Chief Shaw-waw-nas-see's Little Rock Village in the early 1800s. In the Kankakee River State Park, the Little Rock marker is located .6 mile northwest of the Island View parking lot (parking lot is west of the Potawatomi Camp Ground) on the southwest side of the Kankakee River State Park access road. Little Rock Village was the southern part of Shaw-waw-nas-see's tribal boundary. The larger section of the Potawatomi village was Rock Village, located due north on the north side of today's Illinois Route 102. Nearby, the site of *Petit Canada*, where many French-Canadians settled in the 1840s, is located along Davis Creek near the Kankakee River.

- Kankakee County Museum's exhibit "The Story of Kankakee County" from the glaciers to the 1980s [Exhibits | Kankakee County Historical Society \(kankakeecountymuseum.com\)](#).





As one of the oldest historical societies in the State of Illinois, the Kankakee County Historical Society was founded in 1906. In the mid-1940s, the Small family donated 25 acres of land and the Dr. A.L. Small Memorial Home to the society. The historical society’s new museum was dedicated and opened to the public on October 17, 1948. The one-room Taylor School House (built in 1904) was moved to the “Governor Small Memorial Park” in 1976. Since then, a Column Garden and Let Freedom Ring Garden have been added to the memorial park.

- [French-Canadian Heritage Wall—third floor east end of Kankakee Community College Arts & Culture - Kankakee Community College \(kcc.edu\).](http://www.kcc.edu/arts/culture/french-canadian-heritage-wall)



On August 30, 2012, this French-Canadian Heritage Wall was put on permanent display on a wall at Kankakee Community College. It is a tribute to the Kankakee River Valley’s French-Canadian heritage and *The French-Canadian Interview Project*. From 2000-06, Kankakee Community College students interviewed 12 women and 6 men of French-Canadian descent, preserving their life stories and relating to their family histories to local and world history. *The French-Canadian Interview Project* website is located at <http://frenchcanadians.kcc.edu/>. The French-Canadian Heritage Wall is an extension of this project. The heritage wall is located on the third floor east end—near room L308—of Kankakee Community College. The 15’ x 4’ exhibit contains historical narratives, photographs, time line, and interaction by using electronic devices (815 802-8100).

### Saturday late morning-afternoon

- French Heritage Museum (open from 10 am–2 pm) [French Heritage Museum | Kankakee County Historical Society \(kankakeecountymuseum.com\)](http://www.kankakeecountymuseum.com).



This stone carriage house—known as the Stone Barn—now houses the French Heritage Museum. It was built in 1860 by Lemuel Milk (1820-82), a prominent Kankakee business man and farmer. Milk's large mansion once stood just to the east of the stone carriage house. Over its many years of history, the stone carriage house contained a livery stable for Percheron horses, carriages, a milking stall for dairy cattle, ice for the Waldron Ice Company, horses for the Kankakee Fire Department, bakery/restaurant, and headquarters for the Junior League. The French Heritage Museum was dedicated on July 28, 2012. The museum allows one to explore and celebrate the French involvement in the history of the Kankakee River Valley—the first explorers and missionaries; the *coureurs de bois* and fur traders; and the pioneer settlers from France, French Canada, and Belgium. The museum is open on Saturdays from 1-4 pm (closed in January-March). It is operated by the Kankakee County Museum. For more information, call 815 932-5279.

- Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church and grounds (open with mass at 4:30 pm) offers a self-guided tour [Self Guided Walking Tour | Maternity BVM \(mbvmchurch.org\)](http://mbvmchurch.org).



This French-Canadian Romanesque style limestone church is on the site of a 20x30 foot log chapel dedicated to St. Leo. The chapel was built in 1841 on land obtained from Noel LeVasseur who had earlier acquired the land from Potawatomi Chief Mesheketeno. The parish was officially chartered in 1847 as the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The frame church that replaced the log chapel burned to the ground in 1853 (during the pastoral leadership of Fr. Charles Chiniquy), and a new church of native limestone was designed by pastor Fr. Isadore Antoine Lebel. Parishioners completed the construction in 1858. The stone was hauled in horse-drawn wagons from quarries near the Kankakee River. This is the first church of the Clerics of St. Viator in the U.S., first mission of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, first establishment of the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary, and the oldest church in Kankakee County (and one of the oldest in northeastern Illinois). A large bell was installed and dedicated in the belfry of the church in 1867—the same bell still today tolls at church service times. The church is open weekdays from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm, Sat. 8:30 am to 5:30 pm, and Sunday during Masses. The two photographs at right above depict two Heritage Rooms. They are located inside the north entrance of the church. The rooms feature displays with artifacts from Notre Dame Convent/Academy, Maternity Blessed Virgin Mary Church, and St. Viator's College. The Heritage Rooms were created by the pastor of Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Fr. Richard Pighini, in 2010 during the parish's celebration of the 150th anniversary of educating the community: 1860—2010.

- St. Viator College’s original four buildings [St. Viator College: 1868-1938 \(arcgis.com\)](http://arcgis.com).



The building on the right in this sketch is the Roy Memorial Memorial Chapel (1889-1906), later Roy Memorial Hall (1906-39), and today Chapman Hall (1939-). It is located on the site of Noel LeVasseur’s Home. LeVasseur’s fur trading post was located just to the northwest in today’s parking lot of the ONU Larsen Fine Arts Center. When Noel LeVasseur died in 1879, his widow sold off most of the estate to St. Viator College. Their house was demolished in 1885. On the house site in 1889, the college built a large Byzantine style chapel as a memorial to the first college president Fr. Thomas Roy. The Roy Memorial Chapel was destroyed in the fire of February 21, 1906. Roy Memorial Hall was then built in 1906. It is a four and one-half story limestone dormitory and as one of the four original St. Viator College campus buildings, still stands on Olivet Nazarene University’s campus. The residence hall was later renamed Chapman Hall after Dr. James B. Chapman, an early leader of the Nazarene Church. Chapman Hall is located in the center of campus, and is home for approximately 200 freshman male students during the school year.

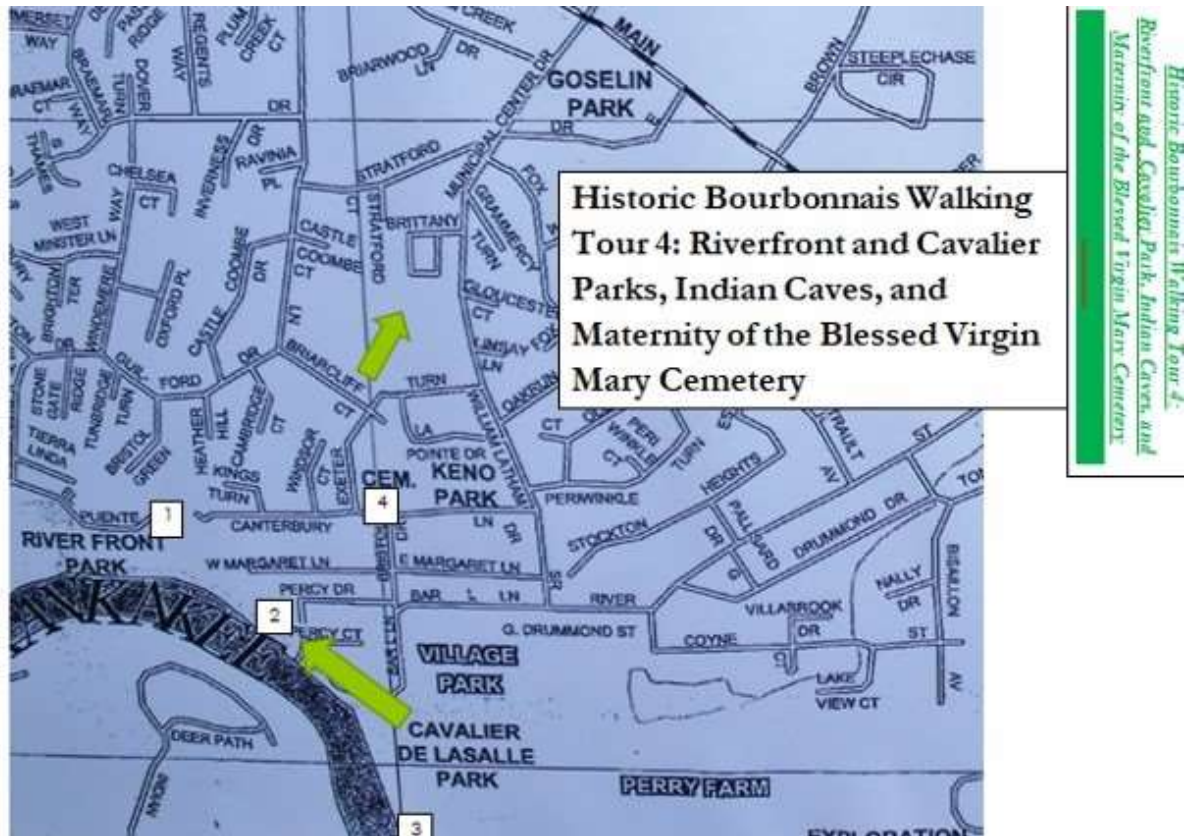
### **Sunday morning**

- Durham-Perry Farmstead [Living History - Bourbonnais Township Park District \(btpd.org\)](http://LivingHistory-BourbonnaisTownshipParkDistrict.org).



The oldest buildings on this farmstead—farm house, three-bay English barn, and horse barn—date back to 1840. The farmstead was built by Thomas Durham, who is buried on the farmstead, and purchased by his son-in-law David Perry in 1866. Like their Roman Catholic French-Canadian neighbors, the Durham family (who were Quakers) supported abolition of slavery. The Durham home, as well as neighboring French-Canadian homes in Bourbonnais Grove, may have been stations on the Underground Railroad. The farmhouse was remodeled into a two-story Greek Revival style frame house. This 25 acre farmstead is located on the 169 acre Perry Farm Park. The farmstead is a Kankakee County Historic Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Thomas Durham’s grave and memorial are on the site. The farmstead is open during Perry Farm Park hours and the farm house is open during Bourbonnais Township Park District business hours (815-933-9905).

- Historic Bourbonnais Walking Tour 4 (Riverfront and Cavalier Parks, Indian Caves, and MBVM Cemetery [Resources \(bourbonnaishistory.org\)](http://Resources(bourbonnaishistory.org)). Click “Bourbonnais Walking Tours” and start on page 32.



*Historic Bourbonnais Walking Tour 4* begins and ends at the parking lot of Riverfront Park at the west end of Canterbury Lane (1071-81 Canterbury Lane) in Bourbonnais. This round trip walk from the park is about 1.75 miles. This walking tour takes the visitor back to the year 1679 in historic Bourbonnais. As one walks the pathways of Riverfront Park, one can imagine the aesthetic enjoyment the Native Americans felt who lived in this part of Potawatomi Chief Mesheketeno’s village in the 1830s. The main lodges of the village were located just to the northeast, near today’s Lake Brittany (which was created by Briarcliff Subdivision developers when a creek was dammed—see location of Lake Brittany indicated by left-of-center light green arrow on map above).

After exploring Riverfront Park **#1 on map**, one should walk east on Canterbury Lane. Turn right at 1065 Canterbury Lane onto the paved asphalt walkway and proceed to Cavalier de LaSalle Park—**#2 on map**. The walk to this point will have been about 1.25 miles. Now walk down the hillside’s asphalt pathway to the river. This may be the spot where in December 1679, Rene-Robert Cavelier Sieur de LaSalle’s group of explorers landed their birch bark canoes for a rest on the river which LaSalle named the Seignelay, in honor of colonial minister of France. Now, proceed southeast along the river. One will soon enter the Bourbonnais Township Park District’s Perry Farm Park. Just a little over .10 mile, one will arrive at the mouth of Bourbonnais Creek and its limestone bedrock canyon commonly referred to as the Indian Caves—**#3 on map**. This unique bedrock formation has been an attraction since the early pioneer days. After finishing the visit to this area, one may retrace the walk back along the beautiful Kankakee River. From Cavalier de LaSalle Park walk onto Percy Drive and follow the curve to the east to the Bristol Lane intersection. Do not turn onto Percy Court, but continue around the curve to the east. Now, turn left onto Bristol Lane and walk to the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Cemetery at the intersection of Bristol Lane and Canterbury Lane—**#4 on map**. This portion of the walk from the Indian Caves to the cemetery will be about .35 miles. The cemetery dates back to 1884 when the parish outgrew its churchyard cemetery. After visiting the cemetery, one may return to the parking lot at Riverfront Park.

## Sunday afternoon

- Letourneau Home/Museum (open 1-4 pm first and third Sundays of the month) [Letourneau Museum \(bourbonnaishistory.org\)](http://bourbonnaishistory.org).



This is the oldest house in Kankakee County. It was built in 1837 and from 1854-83 was the home of French-Canadian nineteenth-century Bourbonnais and Kankakee political leader: George R. Letourneau (1831 – 1906). Letourneau was Bourbonnais Township Supervisor, Kankakee County Sherriff, County Treasurer, and two-time State Senator. He is distinguished by being the only person to serve as first mayor of Bourbonnais (1875-76) and later as mayor of Kankakee (1891-92). To accommodate their family of eleven children and one grandson, George and Elodie Letourneau remodeled the two story house in Greek Revival style in the 1860s. The home/museum is open for tours or by appointment (815-933-6452). The gardens and heritage preserve are open year round. The preserve is now the site for the reconstructed Bourbonnais Grove Log School House (1837-1848) which once stood at 493 S. Main Street in Bourbonnais. The house/museum is a Village of Bourbonnais and Kankakee County Historic Landmark and is the meeting place of the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society.

- Bourbonnais Grove’s first log schoolhouse (open 1-4 pm first and third Sundays of the month) [Log Schoolhouse \(bourbonnaishistory.org\)](http://bourbonnaishistory.org).



The one and one-half story Pre-Railroad style school was built in 1837 and served Bourbonnais Grove students for a ten year period from 1838 to 1848. In December 2011, the unstable house that surrounded the log school house structure was razed and the log timbers of the 20' x 20' original structure were surgically dismantled, tagged, labeled, and stored. In 2022, the log school was reconstructed on the Adrien M. Richard Preserve next to the Letourneau Home/Museum. The log building served not only as a school house, but also a meeting place for Methodist six-week circuit riders. In *Images of America: Bourbonnais*, Vic Johnson stated that in 1848, the French-Canadian Joseph Lesage bought the log school and made it his home after the school’s classes were moved to a new location. Additions were made to the structure over the years, and the logs were covered with clapboards. The home also served as a gas station during the mid-twentieth-century. The house has been owned most recently by Ralph and Mary Marcotte (*Bourbonnais*, pages 34 and 74).

**(This weekend tour of Illinois's French-Canadian Heritage Corridor is endorsed by the**

- **7-state French Heritage Corridor** [French Heritage Corridor - French Heritage Society](#) an initiative of the French Heritage Society,
- **Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society** [Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society \(bourbonnaishistory.org\)](#), and
- **Kankakee County Historical Society/Kankakee County Museum** [About Us | Kankakee County Historical Society \(kankakeecountymuseum.com\)](#).

**For more information on Illinois's French-Canadian Heritage Corridor, go to [French Canadian Corridor \(bourbonnaishistory.org\)](#).** The above tour may also be done on weekdays, but the visitor must call the sites to determine availability.

This information was written by James Paul and the photographs are his and/or those of the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society.