

Additional Kaskaskia Manuscripts¹

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BEFORE 1905 historians had generally assumed that all local records pertaining to life in the French villages of the Illinois country had been destroyed. In that year, however, the late Prof. C. W. Alvord, then of the University of Illinois, at the suggestion of the Illinois State Historical Library, attempted to locate any existing local papers. In the court archives at Belleville and Chester, Ill., Professor Alvord discovered the papers that came to be known as Cahokia and Kaskaskia records. After screening and classifying these collections, Professor Alvord announced their discovery in his publication entitled "Eighteenth Century French Records in the Archives of Illinois."² A second report, entitled "Illinois in the Eighteenth Century," gave particular attention to the Cahokia records.³ The Illinois State Historical Library shortly published, under Professor Alvord's editorship, a volume of the Cahokia records, which included most of these papers, and a companion volume of the Kaskaskia records, which dealt only with the papers in this collection pertaining to the period after the fall of the French régime.⁴ The remaining Kaskaskia papers are still largely unpublished. The collection, however, has recently been microfilmed by Dr. Natalia M. Belting of the University of Illinois and also by the National Park Service.⁵

The present writer has long been interested in the possible existence of additional documents pertaining to the French period and not found by Professor Alvord and his associates. Early in 1950 Mr. John Allen, Curator of History of the Southern Illinois University Museum, called attention to the existence of thousands of loose manuscripts contained in a large wooden box in the possession of the

¹ The author's complete report on this subject, with lists of the documents, is printed in *Illinois Libraries* (May 1952).

² American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1905, I, pp. 353-368.

³ *Bulletin of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol. I, no. 1 (September 1905).

⁴ For the Cahokia records see *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol. II (vol. I, Virginia Series), Springfield, 1907. The Kaskaskia Records were published, *ibid.*, vol. V (vol. II, Virginia Series), Springfield, 1909. Professor Alvord wrote a scholarly introduction to each of these volumes.

⁵ Natalia M. Belting, *Kaskaskia Under the French Régime* (*Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Urbana, 1948), 7-8.

circuit court at Chester, Ill. Permission was obtained from the court to remove these papers to Southern Illinois University, where they were screened during the year 1950-51.⁶ These papers represent the grist of the various courts at Kaskaskia from French times through the British and American periods. Also in this collection are papers of various notaries, justices of the peace, and city magistrates. Many French papers are in the files of François Carbonneaux, a notary in the period of George Rogers Clark and succeeding years. Scattered old papers also appear in civil suits tried after the establishment of the American territorial government, and it is not uncommon to find a rare French manuscript in the most unexpected place, for instance, in a bundle of midnineteenth-century papers. One fears that some manuscript files kept by French officials may have been used in part for scrap paper by the American; this is evidenced by the existence of fragments of documents as well as of scribbled notes on the backs of other documents. From time to time, too, one finds early eighteenth-century French paper used in drawing up a nineteenth-century court record.⁷

From a total of over 11,000 documents screened in this project, 163 items were selected as especially significant historical sources. These documents are dated for the most part before 1800, some of them as early as 1737. Most of them are in French; a few are in Spanish and English. Nearly all the English documents pertain to the American territorial period but refer in some way to the early French inhabitants or to the first English and American settlers who went to Kaskaskia.

The content of the materials selected is indicated by their origin as legal documents. Thus affidavits, legal certificates, contracts, real-estate deeds, notarial minutes, pleas, and receipts make up much of the material. Another important group of papers deals with business and finance, such items as trading engagements, promissory notes and drafts, and financial accounts being most numer-

⁶ Memorandum of the Honorable E. F. Bareis, judge of the circuit court, Chester, Ill., May 3, 1950. The author wishes to acknowledge the services of Miss Mary Judith Wilson, graduate student and research assistant in the department of history at Southern Illinois University. Miss Wilson not only has worked constantly at the task of screening these papers, but also has rendered valuable help in translating certain of the documents. She has been responsible also for most of the clerical work involved. This project was made possible in part by a research grant to the author from Southern Illinois University.

⁷ In addition to the papers in the large wooden box, a number of documents kept in a small metal box have been consulted. This collection is small and was evidently screened by Professor Alvord and his assistants. It contains a few French papers of interest which are not found in the general collection of Kaskaskia manuscripts. These, however, are not included under this project.

ous. The largest single category of documents is that of financial accounts, which comprise roughly one-fourth of the entire list of documents selected. Consisting chiefly of store and mercantile bills dating from 1780 to 1805, these papers contain much material on retail trade, money exchange, and labor and commodity payments. Miscellaneous documents make up the rest of the material and pertain to such subjects as word lists (for language study), jury lists, personal memoranda, personal letters, building plans, interrogations, and political papers. Among the personal letters is a long letter written by Col. Henry Hamilton to an unknown correspondent in Kaskaskia in 1777, which contains some interesting comment on military operations and Indian activities during the Revolutionary War.

These papers have been photographed for use at Southern Illinois University, where they have been deposited with the university librarian. The originals, including the entire collection and a detailed checklist, have been returned to the custody of the circuit court at Chester, Randolph County, Ill. The checklist covers not only the materials mentioned in this report, but others of more limited interest found in the thousands of documents screened. Students desirous of using these papers or the papers collected by Professor Alvord and his associates may communicate with Mr. Harold Hahn, clerk of the circuit court, Chester, Ill.

In closing this report, the writer suggests some further possibilities of the discovery of early Kaskaskia papers in the court archives at Chester. One possibility is in the bound court records of the early territorial period, which sometimes contain copies of early documents pertaining to the French period. Probate records of the county court might also yield some materials. So also with deed records for real-estate transactions. A project to screen these materials is recommended to interested scholars.