



National Memorial, Arkansas

The Arkansas Indian robe shown on the cover was acquired by Louis XVI in 1786 for use in the education of his sons. The robe's design depicts the ceremonial Buffalo Dance of the Arkansas and other Siouan tribes, performed to attract the herds when game was scarce. When a dancer became exhausted, he yielded his costume to another, and the ritual continued with no break in rhythm until game appeared.

The Musée de l'Homme, Paris, France

A Quapaw warrior wears ceremonial dress of the early 1700s. The friendly Quapaw, skilled hunters and traders, played a crucial role in the success of the post.

"Traditional Quapaw," by Charles Banks Wilson. Courtesy Arkansas Museum of Science and History, Little Rock, Arkansas



In the late spring of 1687, Henri Joutel and the other weary survivors of LaSalle's ill-fated colony on Matagorda Bay struggled through the wilderness toward the Arkansas River. Joutel later described the reaction of his little band, when, foot-sore and hungry, they arrived at the river's edge:

"Looking over to the further side we discovered a great cross, and at a small distance from it a house built after the French fashion. It is easy to imagine what inward joy we conceived at the sight of that emblem of our salvation. We knelt down, lifting up our eyes to heaven, to return thanks to the Divine Goodness for having conducted us so happily; for we made no question of finding [the] French on the other side of the river."

The house, the cross, and the mighty river that rolled eastward before them—all symbolized for the exhausted travelers their renewed contact with a familiar civilization. On the brink of western wilderness, beside the ever-present, ever-changing Arkansas River, the crude little *Poste de Arkensea* was destined to attract many a weary adventurer in the years that followed.

Today, as you stand near the visitor center and look toward the glittering river, you may find it difficult to imagine that this tranquil, rural spot was once a strategic military and commercial center on the frontier. Yet much of the early history of what is now the State of Arkansas focuses on this all but forgotten outpost. Often called the "Birthplace of Arkansas," the post was the site of French and Spanish forts and trading stations, the scene of a skirmish in the wake of the Revolutionary War, a territorial capital, a thriving river port, and a battleground of the Civil War. Arkansas Post was the focal point of numerous encounters between Indian and European cultures, and its colorful history spanned the reigns of several nations.



## The French Period, 1683-1765

The ravages of time and man have brought many changes to the Arkansas Valley since René Robert Cavalier, Sieur de LaSalle, first visited the region in 1682. Here in lush forests that teemed with fur-bearing animals and other game—a land crisscrossed by great rivers, small streams, and deep meandering bayous—LaSalle hoped to found an inland empire connecting French Canada with the Gulf of Mexico.

As a first step toward realizing his dream, LaSalle granted an extensive land and trading concession to his trusted friend and lieutenant, Henri de Tonty. Tonty intended to develop several fur trading stations and settlements within the area, to establish firmly the French presence in the lower Mississippi Valley, and to open the way for commerce between the Illinois settlements and the Gulf Coast. In 1686, 32 years before the founding of New Orleans, and one year before the arrival of Henri Joutel's party, Tonty sent several men to build a trading house near the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. The exact site of this first *Poste de Arkensea* has not been established. But the "great cross and . . . house built after the French fashion" so joyfully described by Joutel, probably stood about 8 kilometers south of the present-day park.

During the next 75 years the fortunes of the post rose and fell dramatically. European and colonial wars, fluctuating economic conditions, and periods of neglect by French kings all affected the development of the area. By 1700, LaSalle's and Tonty's dream of a great trading empire had failed, due in part to lack of capital. Stringent trade regulations and competition from the British in the Carolinas also contributed to the failure. For a while the French neglected the lower Mississippi Valley. But Spanish and British rivalry for the lucrative Indian trade and rumors of "pearls, gold and other precious metals" soon reawakened French interest, and during the second decade of the 18th century, France ordered construction of several new trading posts. Once again the Arkansas area took on life.

In 1719, Louis XV of France granted a colorful Scottish speculator named John Law a large section of land near Tonty's old post. Law planned to settle 1,500 German and French immigrants at the site. The first colonists soon arrived, and in 1722 a visitor reported:

"Pavilions were already erected for the officer, and cabins for the workmen . . . large store-houses were even built and everything seemed to promise that it would soon become flourishing."

But Law's ambitions exceeded his resources. His grand plans, like LaSalle's, were doomed to failure. He overextended his credit with his backers and the Crown, and eventually had to flee France. Law's grant reverted to the government. During the ensuing years, despite Indian raids and frequent floods which forced several changes of location, Arkansas Post continued to serve as both a military outpost and a trading station. Friendly Quapaw (or Arkansas) Indians exchanged hides and furs for European supplies of paper, axes, salt, vermilion, and similar goods.

During the 1750's Arkansas Post increased in size under the leadership of Governor Baron de Kerlerac, who regarded it as indispensable to the defense of Louisiana and as a base for future French trade with Santa Fe. By 1759 the fort boasted a garrison of 40 men. Substantial improvements in the buildings included a three-room house, barracks, a powder magazine, a prison, a bakery, a warehouse, and quarters for the chaplain.

Although Arkansas Post was never a major French settlement, it nonetheless continued to grow until ownership abruptly changed hands following the British victory in the French and Indian War. In November 1762, France ceded Louisiana, including the Arkansas territory, to Spain, which finally took formal possession in May 1765.



## The Spanish Regime, 1765-1800

The Spaniards recognized the value of Arkansas Post in controlling the Indian trade and limiting British influence among the tribes. The first Spanish governor of Louisiana, Antonio de Ulloa, designated the post as the center for Indian trade in the Arkansas River region. Through the employment of French agents, Ulloa dispensed gifts and treaty medals to various Indian groups. The Indians had learned much about European ways, and they shrewdly bargained for favorable terms and increased annuities. Even the friendly Quapaws threatened to desert to the British, unless they received substantial gifts, including rifles, knives, red silk ribbons, and "hats with silver embroidery," to match those given the Osage and Chickasaw.

Despite the threat of Indian raids, the civilian population increased under Spanish rule. A 1768 census showed 85 whites and 35 black and Indian slaves living near the fort. The post would probably have grown even more rapidly if competing imperial ambitions had not created tensions with the Indians and kept the region in turmoil. It was this same competition for empire that drew Arkansas Post, if only marginally, into the American Revolution.



## Arkansas During the American Revolution, 1779-1783

Few Americans are aware today of the role of the Mississippi settlements in the Revolutionary era, for the major engagements east of the Appalachians overshadowed events in the west. Yet, control of transportation and trade on the Mississippi and its tributaries was an important factor throughout the war. The Spaniards reluctantly joined forces with the American patriots, not out of sympathy for the rebel cause, but as a matter of self-interest. Spain's foreign minister

Floridablanca saw the revolt as an opportunity to regain Spanish territory in Florida and undermine British influence among the Indians. In 1779, following Spain's formal entry into the war, Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez seized Mobile and the British posts along the lower Mississippi. Gálvez's actions, combined with George Rogers Clark's forays into the Illinois country, severely reduced British power in the West. But the British were not yet defeated, and their sympathizers soon launched a counter-offensive.

In 1782 a band of British partisans attacked a Spanish convoy and captured Señora Cruzat, wife of the Spanish commandant at St. Louis. The lady managed to secure her release, however, and hurried to New Orleans, where she warned Acting-Governor Estevan Miró that the Indians, under the leadership of James Colbert, planned to attack Arkansas Post and other Spanish forts. The Governor notified Captain Jacobo Dubreil at Arkansas Post (now called Fort Carlos III) of the impending attack. Dubreil replied that he was prepared to repel any move against the fort, but he underestimated the threat. On the morning of April 17, 1783, Colbert and a force of 81 Indian, black, and British partisans attacked the post. The battle continued throughout the morning. Although the attackers were unable to breach the fort's defenses, they overran the nearby village and captured Lt. Don Luis de Villars, his wife Doña Maria, two soldiers, and several civilians. A few days later, however, a band of Quapaws sent by Dubreil overtook Colbert and forced him to release most of his prisoners.

The "Battle of Arkansas Post" was not crucial. The Revolution was already over. Yorktown had been fought a year-and-a-half before and a preliminary peace treaty signed. The encounter has been largely "lost" to history—its heroes, heroines and villains forgotten!



## Napoleonic France and the Louisiana Purchase, 1800-1803

In the aftermath of the Revolution, affairs in Louisiana and at Arkansas Post became extremely complicated and confused. The new American Nation proved a far more formidable antagonist to the Spaniards than had the British. Aggressive frontiersmen pushed into the area and settled on the rich bottom lands along the rivers. In retaliation, the Indians, especially the Osage, intensified their raids. In 1796 these pressures forced Spain to repair and strengthen the post on the Arkansas, which once again had been relocated because of changes in the river's course, and renamed Fort San Estevan. As a result of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power, Spain ceded Louisiana back to France in 1800. For a brief period Republican France ruled the Arkansas territory. But Napoleon, pressed for funds, sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803 and still another nation took possession of the Post of Arkansas.



## A Frontier Settlement, 1803-1865

After the United States acquired the Louisiana Territory, Arkansas Post became a typical American frontier village—bustling and scrappy. It was peopled by an assortment of settlers, including sturdy pioneer families, adventurous frontiersmen, fugitives, outcasts, Indian traders, and as one visitor noted in 1810, a sprinkling of "men of education and wealth . . . lawyers, doctors and mechanics."

In 1819 Congress established a territorial government for Arkansas, and Arkansas Post became the first capital. Local landowners built attractive townhouses, merchants erected substantial stores and warehouses along the river, and William Woodruff established the first territorial newspaper, the still prestigious *Arkansas Gazette*.

In the same year, the famous naturalist, Thomas Nuttall, visited Arkansas Post and noted:

"The town, or rather settlement of the Post of Arkansas, was somewhat dispersed over a prairie . . . and containing between thirty and forty houses. The merchants then transacting nearly all the business of the Arkansas and White River . . . kept well assorted stores of merchandize, supplied chiefly from New Orleans, with the exception of some heavy articles of domestic manufacture obtained from Pittsburgh. . . . I could not but now for awhile consider myself as once more introduced into the circle of civilization."

But Arkansas Post's period of eminence was short-lived. The first territorial legislature decided that "the remoteness of this situation . . . together with its unhealthiness, forms a serious objection to the present location." Thus in 1821 the legislature, the capital, the newspaper office, and many citizens moved upriver to the newly established town of Little Rock.

When W. F. Pope, nephew of the territorial governor, visited Arkansas Post in 1832, he noted that it presented "a very forlorn and desolate appearance . . . tall chimneys had fallen down and trees . . . were growing out through the roofs."

Despite a brief resurgence in the 1840s as a river port, with an imposing brick bank building, a race track, and a "female seminary," Arkansas Post, like many another frontier settlement, was doomed. The removal of the capital and the decline of the river traffic sealed its fate. By 1856, according to a local observer, "The town at the Post of Arkansas has gone to decay [with] but a few [persons] remaining."

The post had one last moment of glory. Early in the Civil War the Confederate government recognized the strategic advantage of the site and established Fort Hindman on the banks of the Arkansas River near the old town. Union forces under Gen. John A. McClernand attacked the fort in 1863 with river gunboats and infantry, overwhelming the Confederate defenders.

The fierce naval bombardment battered the fort and destroyed many of the remaining town buildings. Although a small farming community grew up near the site after the war, the town never regained its former prominence. The Arkansas River relentlessly eroded the land. The abandoned Confederate fort and remnants of many old buildings disappeared beneath its waters, while native grasses, honeysuckle, and trees buried the remains of Arkansas Post.

#### Arkansas Post, Then and Now

Although the post disappeared, the memory of its contribution to Arkansas history lingered. In 1929 the State of Arkansas acquired the site for a park and pioneer memorial. In 1964 ownership of the park was transferred to the Federal Government.

During its long history the location of Arkansas Post changed many times. Historians have identified at least ten different forts and settlements associated with the post. Although many of these, including Tonty's original trading house, are not within the present park, the 221-acre National Memorial does encompass the sites of several early forts and the territorial capital. Today, there are few visible historic structures, but the park offers visitors an opportunity to enjoy a beautiful natural setting that shelters many native species of birds and wildlife. A walk along the historic trail will help visitors better understand, and recreate in their imagination, the events which occurred here.

The story of Arkansas Post is, in a sense, the story of the river that flowed past it. When Henri

Joutel and his adventurous band rejoiced at their good fortune beside the Arkansas, they paid unspoken tribute to the life-bearing waters of a major wilderness transportation route. Because the river was there, Indians, explorers, traders, and eventually settlers, could travel more easily through a little-known land. And because the river was there, more powerful than the people who used it, the little post on its bank had to change locations many times over the years.

The story of Arkansas Post is also the story of the American frontier. Here Indians, French fur traders, Spanish soldiers, white and black frontiersmen met, fought, mixed, settled and created a new nation. Arkansas Post does not commemorate any major event or great battle. It is, instead, a modest memorial to the men and women of many nations and varied cultures who, despite hardship, privation, and isolation, played an important role in the growth and development of the United States. It is fitting that we pay tribute to little known and anonymous people at a thousand obscure places, as well as to the heroes and famous folk. Arkansas Post is such a memorial.

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