Kaskaskia
The Lost Capital of Illinois

David MacDonald and Raine Waters

“This book skillfully limns an engaging account of Kaskaskia’s colonial beginnings, its multitudinous tribulations, and its ultimate surrender to the waters of the Mississippi. Highly reliable and readable, and furnished with numerous illustrations, the work will appeal to the specialist and general reader alike.”—Morris S. Arnold, author of Colonial Arkansas, 1686–1804: A Social and Cultural History

The rise and fall of the first capital of Illinois

This first comprehensive account of the Illinois village of Kaskaskia covers more than two hundred years in the vast and compelling history of the state. David MacDonald and Raine Waters explore Illinois’s first capital in great detail, from its foundation in 1703 to its destruction by the Mississippi River in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as well as everything in between: successes, setbacks, and the lives of the people who inhabited the space.

At the outset the Kaskaskia tribe, along with Jesuit missionaries and French traders, settled near the confluence of the Kaskaskia and Mississippi rivers, about sixty miles south of modern-day St. Louis. The town quickly became the largest French town and most prosperous settlement in the Illinois Country. After French control ended, Kaskaskia suffered under corrupt British and then inept American rule. In the 1790s the town revived and became the territorial capital, and in 1818 it became the first state capital. Along the way Kaskaskia was beset by disasters: crop failures, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, epidemics, and the loss of the capital-city title to Vandalia. Likewise, human activity and industry eroded the river’s banks, causing the river to change course and eventually wash away the settlement. All that remains of the state’s first capital today is a village several miles from the original site.

MacDonald and Waters focus on the town’s growth, struggles, prosperity, decline, and obliteration, providing an overview of its domestic architecture to reveal how its residents lived. Debunking the notion of a folklore tradition about a curse on the town, the authors instead trace those stories to late nineteenth-century journalistic inventions. The result is a vibrant, heavily illustrated, and highly readable history of Kaskaskia that sheds light on the entire early history of Illinois.

David MacDonald is an emeritus professor of history at Illinois State University and the author of Lives of Fort de Chartres: Commandants, Soldiers, and Civilians in French Illinois, 1720–1770.

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Introduction

Part 1. History of Kaskaskia

1. Dawn of Kaskaskia, 1673–1719
   Describes the migration and first years of settlement by the Kaskaskia Indians and the Jesuit missionaries who accompanied them at what became the town of Kaskaskia.

2. French and Indian Kaskaskias, 1719–1765
   Reviews the period of the French regime at Kaskaskia and French Illinois. The inhabitants of Kaskaskia enjoyed relative prosperity despite the hostility of the Fox and Chickasaw tribes.

3. Kaskaskia and Indian Kaskaskia under British and Early American Rule, 1765–1790
   Follows Kaskaskia through the difficult years of British rule, the conquest of the Illinois country by George Rogers Clark, and early years of neglect by the United States. Repeated crop failures and the great flood of 1785 also plagued Kaskaskia at this time.

4. Mixed Fortunes, 1790–1820
   Recounts the revival of prosperity while Kaskaskia was the territorial and then first state capital of Illinois. This was also a period of disasters, such as the great New Madrid earthquakes, a tornado, and floods.

5. Kaskaskia in Decline, 1820–1881
   Chronicles the calamities that beset Kaskaskia from the movement of the capital to Vandalia through a variety of natural disasters to the encroachment of the Mississippi that began the destruction of the town.

6. Destruction, 1881–circa 1913
   Describes and follows the destruction of the town by the Mississippi and the reaction to the loss of the historic town among the people of Illinois, resulting in novels, newspaper stories, and photographs of the town taken by both professionals and amateurs.

Part 2. Domestic Architecture at Kaskaskia

7. Introduction
   Explains the three basic styles of homes that existed in Kaskaskia during the nineteenth century.

8. Franco-American Homes of Kaskaskia
   Describes the best-documented early homes in Kaskaskia, which combined elements of French colonial and early American architecture.

9. Midwestern Federal and Eclectic Houses and Their Owners
   Provides examples of the best documented homes of the Midwestern Federal style and several homes modified by Victorian or purely utilitarian additions.

Part 3. Pseudo-Folklore

10. The Curse of Kaskaskia—Creative Fiction, Not History
    Examines two tales that first appeared at the end of the nineteenth-century and during the first years of the twentieth claiming that Kaskaskia was destroyed because of a curse and providing detailed accounts of the curse. The stories are filled with gross fictions and are revealed as journalistic fictions, although they do incorporate a few folktale elements amidst a forest of modern misrepresentations.

Appendix A: Notes on Photographers and Sketch Artists

Appendix B: Lexicon

Notes

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