



French Peoria and the Illinois Country: 1673-1846 (Illinois State Museum Popular Science Series, Vol. 12)

Judith A. Franke

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Many histories of Illinois begin at statehood, a little more than 150 years ago, when Americans -- mostly of British descent -- settled the area. These histories often ignore or only briefly touch upon the 150 years before that when time, when the Illinois Country was explored and settled by the French. In commemoration of the 300th year of European settlement at Peoria, Judith Franke's book: *French Peoria and the Illinois Country, 1673 - 1846*, is concerned with the little-known first half of its history. Peoria was first the southernmost part of New France, then the northernmost part of the French Colony of Louisiana, and finally the westernmost part of the of the newly formed United States. It is interesting, therefore, that in the perception of many Americans today, Peoria is the quintessential middle American town. French interests were dominant at Peoria for well over a hundred years, from the time the first French explorers came up the Illinois River in 1673 until the first "American" settlers began to move into the area in about 1815. A small French presence persisted for a time on the east bank of the river, but was gone by about 1846. Today, only faint echoes of French Peoria survive in the street plan of downtown Peoria, and in the name of an occasional street, school, or hotel meeting room: "Joliet," "Marquette," "LaSalle." Since this period of Illinois history had been almost totally ignored, Franke proposed in 1989 to the Dickson Mounds Museum staff to produce an exhibit on the French and the historic Indians of Illinois in conjunction with the Peoria Tricentennial celebration which was to begin in 1991. Her book grew out of the research for this exhibit.

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