



Levasseur and Carmel families

Web and social media capsule



The LeVasseurs in Illinois in the 19th century (part one)

A man named Noël

Jack Klasey Looking Back ⁽¹⁾

On Christmas Eve, 1799, in a log cabin at St. Michel d'Yamaska, Quebec, Marie Angelique Lavallee LeVasseur gave birth to a healthy baby boy, the fifth of her ten children. Marie and her husband, Antoine, decided to baptize this child with the name "Noël" in honor of the holy day.

Almost 80 years later, Noël LeVasseur —born in a log cabin in Canada—would die in a handsome brick house in Bourbonnais, Kankakee County, Illinois. The years of his life between 1799 and 1879 were filled with adventures and accomplishments. The most familiar fact about LeVasseur is displayed on a bronze plate attached to his tombstone in Bourbonnais' Maternity Cemetery:

« In memory of Noël Le Vasseur, first white settler in Kankakee County, placed by the Kankakee Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1955. »

The journey from Quebec to Kankakee County began in May, 1817, when Noël, like many other young French-Canadians, decided that working in the fur trade would be more interesting and profitable than farming. With a group of 80 young men from the Montreal area, he journeyed to Mackinac Island, the headquarters for companies trading with the Indians around the Great Lakes.

The teenaged LeVasseur apparently didn't linger at Mackinac. A biographical account published in 1893 related that, "Actuated by a spirit of adventure which



Local trivia

State Street in downtown Chicago has an historic connection with Gurdon Hubbard and the Kankakee area. What is that connection?

Answer: In 1834, Gurdon Hubbard laid out a trail from Danville through the eastern part of what is now Kankakee County that allowed furs from trading posts to be shipped to Chicago. Hubbard's trail was later marked with milestones and designated as the state's first highway (State Route 1 or "the state road"); State Street in Chicago was its northernmost stretch. The city also has, of course, a Hubbard Street.



Jack Klasey came to Kankakee County as a young Journal reporter in 1963, and quickly became "hooked" on local history. In 1968, he co-authored "Of the People: A Popular History of Kankakee County." Now retired from a career in the publishing industry, he remains active in the history field as a volunteer and board member at the Kankakee County Museum. He can be contacted at jwklasey@comcast.net.

seems almost foolhardy, young Le Vasseur and a companion accepted the invitation of an Indian, and abandoning the fur company, set out for the Great West in a frail canoe. »

They journeyed across Lake Michigan and along a series of rivers to a Chippewa Indian village at what is now [Prairie du Chien](#), Wisconsin. LeVasseur and his unnamed companion spent the winter with the tribe, learning its language and customs. In the spring, they decided to return to Mackinac, but were told that LeVasseur could not leave, because the Chippewa chief had "*adopted him as a member of the tribe.*"

The two young men quietly slipped away from the camp one night, and began a long journey on foot across Wisconsin to Green Bay. They arrived at an American Fur Company outpost there "*in rags and nearly starved,*" where they were fed, clothed, and sent on to the Mackinac headquarters.

It was there, in the fall of 1818, that Noël LeVasseur met a young "Yankee" from Vermont named Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard. It was the beginning of a lifelong relationship; although they came from vastly different backgrounds, the two would eventually become close friends and business partners.

In the spring of 1822, LeVasseur and a party of traders led by Hubbard set out for the "Illinois country" to establish a trading post with the [Potawatomi](#) Indians. In his autobiography, Gurdon Hubbard described the route they followed down the Lake Michigan shore to the mouth of the St. Joseph River: "*It was but a short distance from a bend of the St. Joseph River to the Kankakee River, and I determined to pass my boats and goods overland to the Kankakee ...We found the Kankakee narrow and crooked, with sufficient water to float our boats, but with very little current.*"

The party followed the Kankakee to its junction (near what is today Aroma Park) with the even narrower and more twisting Iroquois River. They ascended the Iroquois, past the site of present-day Watseka, to a location near the village of the Potawatomi chief Tamin. There, they established a trading post that they called Bunkum (today, the village of Iroquois).

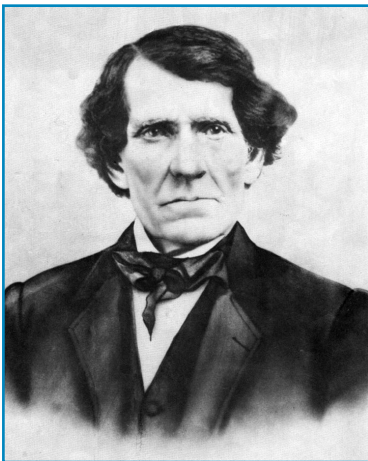
The French-Canadian voyageurs manning the trading post under Hubbard's command were, he wrote, "the only people fitted for the life they were compelled to endure, their cheerful temperament and happy disposition making them contented under the privations and hardships of their calling. "*Among the voyageurs, Hubbard singled out LeVasseur, "in whom I had the utmost confidence."*

The fur trade on the American frontier was fueled by demand from the Eastern States and Europe for the pelts of beaver and other animals to be used in the manufacture of fashionable clothing. In exchange for the animal skins, traders provided the Indians metal tools, cloth, and other manufactured goods (including whiskey).

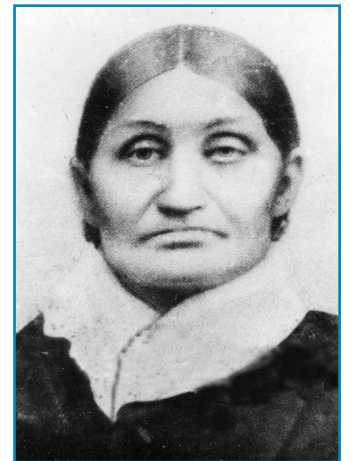
To strengthen their relationship with the Indians, fur traders often married into the tribe. Hubbard followed that practice in about 1826, when he wed Watch-e-Kee, the teenaged niece of Chief Tamin. In the years immediately following his marriage, Hubbard was expanding his business interests, opening a store in Danville to serve the needs of settlers, and laying the groundwork for his eventual relocation to Chicago.

Hubbard's conversion from fur trader to retail merchant created an opportunity for Noël LeVasseur, who assumed responsibility for the Bunkum trading post. He also assumed responsibility for Watch-e-kee: when Hubbard divorced her in 1828, she soon became LeVasseur's wife. Their union would last considerably longer than her marriage to Hubbard, and would span a period of great change for Noël LeVasseur.

During the eight years he was married to Watch-e-kee, LeVasseur would transform himself from a frontier fur trader to a settled and prosperous farmer, land developer, and promoter of French-Canadian immigration to Illinois. He would later achieve recognition as the first permanent non-Indian settler of the region that became Kankakee County.



This formal portrait of Noël LeVasseur was made in his later years, when he was a prominent figure in Bourbonnais, the location where he first settled in what is now Kankakee County. Watch-e-kee was married first to Hubbard, then to LeVasseur, and later (while living on the Potawatomi reservation in Kansas) to a man named Bergeron. This portrait may have been taken in about 1863, when she returned for a short visit to Kankakee and Iroquois counties. The city of Watseka was named for her.



Noël LeVasseur never learned to read or write (although he eventually was able to sign his name). To keep track of his trading accounts, he had a notebook in which he used a system of symbols. This is a page from LeVasseur's notebook that is in the Museum's collection.

References for photos: [Kankakee County Museum](https://www.kankakee.org/)

Next issue: From Bunkum to Bourbonnais.