



Levasseur and Carmel families

Web and social media capsule



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

Looking Back: From Bunkum to Bourbonnais

Jack Klasey Looking Back (Dec 19, 2018) (1)



This drawing shows the brick residence built by Thomas Durham for Noël LeVasseur in 1837, the year after the trader and Watch-e-kee divorced in 1838. LeVasseur married Ruth Bull they would fill the house with eight children. The house was demolished in 1885, when St. Viator College erected Marsile Hall. (Credit: Kankakee County Museum Photo Archive)

In 1832, while traveling an old American Indian trail along the Kankakee River, Noel LeVasseur found Bourbonnais.

The Bourbonnais he discovered was not the town but a man: Francois Bourbonnais Sr., a French-Canadian trader whose log cabin was located near what is today the junction of Routes 45 and 102. The elderly Bourbonnais was no stranger to LeVasseur. A decade earlier, they had been members of competing fur trading posts on Bureau Creek in central Illinois.

If Bourbonnais already was living here in 1832, why is LeVasseur described as Kankakee

County's first permanent settler?

The key word here is permanent: Once LeVasseur arrived here, he stayed for the rest of his life. How long Bourbonnais had been living here is unknown, but in 1833, he relocated to land that had been granted to his Potawatomi wife, Catish, by an 1832 treaty. (Catish's 640 acres of land included most of what later would become downtown Kankakee). Several years later, Bourbonnais and Catish moved west of the Mississippi River when the Potawatomi were relocated.



Local trivia

Noel LeVasseur's funeral was held at Maternity BVM Church in Bourbonnais. In addition to being a parishioner, what other important connection did he have to that church?

Answer: In 1849, LeVasseur sold a 14-acre parcel of land to the Catholic Bishop of Chicago for \$100. The first Maternity BVM Church, a wooden building, was constructed that year (the current stone church opened in 1858). In addition to the church, the 14 acres later accommodated the first buildings of St. Viator College (now Olivet Nazarene University).



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.

The place where LeVasseur and his companions, Dominique Bray and Henry Boucher, opened a trading post in 1832 initially was called "La Pointe." The name referred to a narrow band of woods that extended out into the prairie. Later, it would be known as "Bourbonnais Grove" (or "Bullbonus Grove," a colloquial English pronunciation). Finally, in 1875, the name officially became Bourbonnais when the settlement was incorporated as a village.

LeVasseur came to La Pointe from the trading post at Bunkum, some 30 miles to the southeast, where he had been since 1822. While at Bunkum, he had married a Potawatomi woman, Watch-e-kee, niece of Chief Tamin whose village was nearby. Before they divorced in 1836, Watch-e-kee and LeVasseur would become parents of a daughter and two sons. The daughter, Marian, lived in LeVasseur's household until her death in the 1850s; when the two sons became adults, their father helped them set up in business in Galena.

The relocation from Bunkum to what later would become Kankakee County might have been prompted by the expected transfer of about 800,000 acres of land from the Potawatomi tribes to United States ownership. Two treaties, in late 1832 and 1833, opened northeastern Illinois to settlement. Under the treaties, the Potawatomi would move across the Mississippi River to lands in Iowa.

The treaties also granted individual Indians and the children of some Potawatomi/French-Canadian marriages "reservations" of land. The land grants ranged in size from 320 to 3,200 acres and were generally choice properties. Most of the wooded acreage along the north bank of the Kankakee River, from Rock Creek to present-day Kankakee, for example, was "reservation land."

Wealthy speculators from the Eastern states were eager to purchase the now-available Illinois land. Since LeVasseur and his friend, Gurdon Hubbard, were very familiar with the area, they often acted as agents for these real estate transactions.

They also made purchases on their own: In July 1834, LeVasseur purchased half the 1,280-acre reservation granted to Me-chi-ke-teno for \$1,000. The present-day village of Bourbonnais is located on that property. Three months later, LeVasseur and Hubbard bought the other half of the reservation for \$1,200. The next year, two other reservations located to the northwest of Bourbonnais were bought by LeVasseur.

The former fur trader also sold land in both small and large parcels. One of the earliest and most significant sales was in late 1834, when a 370-acre tract was sold to Thomas Durham. A little more than 50 years later, the village of Bradley would be built on that land.

In 1836, LeVasseur hired Durham to construct a large brick residence on the site of what is now Olivet Nazarene University's Burke Administration Building. It was the first brick house in present-day Kankakee County (some historians contend a brick home near Davis Creek, built by Dominique Bray, was actually the first).

The next year, LeVasseur returned home to Canada to visit his aged parents. The trip had two additional purposes: to encourage French-Canadian emigration to Bourbonnais Grove and to find a wife to share his new house. He succeeded in the first but failed in the second.

“Through his favorable reports of the beauty and fertility of the Kankakee valley he induced a large Canadian emigration to come there,” noted a newspaper story, “and the flourishing settlements of French Canadians throughout the Northwest are the results of his efforts in this direction.”

Not long after returning from Canada, he met and married **Ruth Bull** on a visit to Danville. She moved into the brick house in Bourbonnais, and during the next 22 years became the mother of eight LeVasseur children. She died in 1860. LeVasseur remained a widower for two years, until marrying a Chicago woman, Eleanore Franchere.

On Dec. 12, 1879, just 12 days short of his eightieth birthday, LeVasseur died in his Bourbonnais home. The Kankakee Gazette reported “the funeral services at Bourbonnais [on] Tuesday morning were of an impressive nature. The burial rites were performed by eight priests in the presence of a congregation numbering 1,000 people.”



Ruth Russell *Bull* LeVasseur

BIRTH 1818

DEATH 16 Nov 1860 (aged 41–42)

BURIAL Mound Grove Cemetery
Kankakee, Kankakee County, Illinois, USA

Noel LeVasseur

BIRTH 24 Dec 1798
Yamaska, Monterege Region, Quebec, Canada

DEATH 12 Dec 1879 (aged 80)
Kankakee, Kankakee County, Illinois, USA

BURIAL Maternity Blessed Virgin Mary Cemetery #02
Bourbonnais, Kankakee County, Illinois, USA

