

First Muster Among the White Oak

By Adriana Schroeder, ILNG Historian

The Illinois National Guard heritage is similar to the state tree, the white oak. The trunk is stout and strong much like the core of the Guard. Branches lead off one another comparable to the organizational heritage. Units have come and gone throughout the years due to reorganization, similar to limbs that need trimming from time to time. Although visibly removed, units remain forever linked to the trunk of history. Each leaf is unique, like the Soldiers, Airmen and civilians who are part of the Illinois Guard. Leaves bud, bloom, change color, and shed much like the ebb and flow of enlistments, career changes, and retirements. Acorns are unique to the white oak, just like the deployments that occupy some of the leaves or Soldiers. But what about the part that remains buried and forgotten, yet is the element that nourishes the rest of the tree?

The history of the roots of the Illinois National Guard began with the French. Jan. 1, 1718, businessman John Law obtained a charter from the French king who granted him monopoly of French trade in the area known as the Illinois Country. Royal orders dictated a provision for civil government be arranged for the new province of Illinois. During the summer of 1718, the green officials set out from Louisiana and journeyed to their new home. Among other governing associates, the party included Pierre Duque, Sieur de Boisebriant, Commandant; Captain Diron, Dartaguiette; two second lieutenants and a company of 100 Soldiers.

Among the tall grasses of the Illinois prairie, rose the first resemblance of an organized militia, under the French regime. This small unit of French Soldiers had the responsibility of investigating the number of men capable of bearing arms in each village, determining the amount of powder and lead available, forming companies of militia and arranging a signal system from settlement to settlement. By 1721, Fort De Chartes became the first military structure dedicated to the protection of the community.

As the population of settlements grew, militia companies began popping up among each community, under the tutelage of the French. Looking back on his time in Illinois, the inspector of troops, Dartaguiette wrote in his diary, "I called together all the inhabitants of this village [Kaskaskia] to whom I said that I had an order from the King to form a company of militia for the purpose of putting them in a position to defend themselves with greater facility against the incursions which the Indians, our enemies, might attempt, so I formed a company, after having selected four of the most worthy among them to put at the head. This company being under arms, I passed it in review the same day."

Under the shade of the white oak, the militia rested, having completed the first drill May 9, 1723. The first of many hundreds of thousands of drills, the Illinois National Guard will be 289 years old this May, not quite as old as the 500 year life span of the white oak.