



# Jefferson Hosts an Indian Delegation

In the closing days of May 1781, as British forces were moving up the James River and the General Assembly was in flight from Richmond to Charlottesville, the governor of Virginia wrote a number of hurried

letters from his home. Among anxious missives on military matters to the Marquis de Lafayette and Gen. George Washington was a message to Richmond artisan Robert Scot requesting a presentation medal.

Even in those tense times, Thomas Jefferson viewed this request for a medal as important, because a delegation requiring “attention from us and great respect” was paying him an official visit at Monticello.

The visitors were a group of Indians from the Illinois country, then considered Virginia territory. These Indians, generally called Kaskaskias, had proved them-

selves valuable allies by supporting George Rogers Clark’s campaigns against the British on the northwestern frontier, and their continued cooperation was important to the American cause.

The leader of the Indian delegation was Jean Baptiste Ducoigne, whose name reflected the Kaskaskias’ association with the French that dated to the early 17th century. Ducoigne (which is sometimes rendered Du Quoin)

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2002



“Indian of the Nation of Kaskaskia” engraving by Gen. Victor Collot, c. 1796.

## *This Issue's Other Stories*

- 👉 JULY 4
- 👉 LEWIS & CLARK BICENTENNIAL
- 👉 LEWIS & CLARK EXHIBITION
- 👉 LEWIS & CLARK EXPOSITION
- 👉 LIBRARY DEDICATION
- 👉 NEWS AND NOTES
- 👉 PRESIDENTS LETTER
- 👉 SAUNDERS BRIDGE
- 👉 SHADWELL MARKER
- 👉 SLAVE HOUSE
- 👉 SLAVE MEMORIAL
- 👉 TWO NEW MONOGRAPHS
- 👉 WEB FEATURE

# MONTICELLO



## Indian Delegation

CONTINUED, PAGE TWO

delivered a speech to Jefferson and the members of the General Assembly who had managed to reach Charlottesville. Though no copy of the chief's address has survived, Jefferson's response touched upon issues that may have occasioned the Indians' visit.

Though his term as governor was nearly over, Jefferson promised that justice would be meted out to French settlers in the Illinois region who committed wrongs against the tribes and blamed the war for the disruptions in the flow of goods that had been promised to the Indians. He also asserted that the American colonies would prevail in battle, stating that in six years of war the British had "not yet won more land from us than will serve to bury the warriors they have lost"—an especially bold statement considering that at that very time British troops under Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton were being dispatched to Charlottesville to capture what was left of Virginia's government.

But Jefferson's remarks and later correspondence also reflect a familial side to the Kaskaskias' visit. Jefferson promised Ducoigne, who was accompanied by his wife and infant son, that his request for a schoolmaster would be fulfilled as soon as the war ended "to educate your son and sons of your people."

The Indians evidently were introduced to Jefferson's family as well, for 12 years later, when Secretary of State Jefferson and Chief Ducoigne met again in Philadelphia, Jefferson wrote his daughter Martha, "One of the Indian chiefs now here, whom you may remember to have seen at Monticello ... before Tarlton drove us off, remembers you and enquired after you." Martha was 9 years old at the time of Ducoigne's visit.

During the official proceedings at Monticello, Jefferson and Ducoigne smoked the pipe of peace and exchanged gifts. Apparently Robert Scot had managed to meet Jefferson's request for a medal to be presented to Ducoigne, and Jefferson accepted a gift that he described as "skins" painted with figures – likely buffalo hides bearing pictographic images, common in diplomatic exchange among western Indians. Jefferson promised Ducoigne "to always keep them hanging on the walls in remembrance of you and your nation."

Exactly where Jefferson may have displayed these items is uncertain, as it was not until the 1790s that he began the redesign of Monticello that would include a large entrance hall where his diverse collection of



## Indian Delegation

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**

artworks and objects could be displayed. It is possible, however, that these tokens of friendship from the Kaskaskias may have been early elements of Jefferson's collection of Indian objects that later would be greatly enhanced by items obtained by the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

When warned of Tarleton's approach, the Virginia legislators quickly headed west across the Blue Ridge Mountains and Jefferson, whose term as governor had expired, took his family south to their Poplar Forest farm near Lynchburg. The Kaskaskias had already begun the return trip to their homeland.

In 1803, during Jefferson's first term as president, the Kaskaskias signed a treaty relinquishing a part of their territory to the United States in exchange for protection and support. They continued to live in the Illinois country until 1832, when they were relocated west of the Mississippi.

Chief Jean Baptiste Ducoigne died in 1811. Following his death, the leadership of the Kaskaskias passed to his son, Louis Jefferson Ducoigne.

– Gaye Wilson

*Gaye Wilson is a research assistant at Monticello.*

COMMENTS? [newsletter@monticello.org](mailto:newsletter@monticello.org)