

Discours Ambassadeur
Visite de la « Ouiatenon Preserve »
21 mai 2021
West Lafayette, Indiana

Dear Friends,

Chers amis,

What a welcome!

I'm just starting to understand the true meaning of Indiana's legendary hospitality, and even starting to develop some Hoosier pride!

You make me feel at home. And it feels good!

Actually, it is no coincidence that a Frenchman would feel at home in Lafayette and West Lafayette.

We owe so much to the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington. The fact that France and America are each others' oldest allies, with an alliance, a sense of solidarity and a friendship that go back more than 240 years, has its roots in their shared affection and esteem.

Lafayette, Indiana is special, with its three centuries of shared French-American history and heritage. Fort Ouiatenon, founded in 1717, was the first fortified French settlement in what is now Indiana.

The story of the French presence in the Midwest, of the interactions between the French settlers and Indigenous communities, and the way they transformed the area's landscape, economy, and the politics, needs to be better known, further researched and documented.

It is not for me to write history. It is not for me to change the course of history. You are American, you don't speak French anymore, and we are

fine with that! Rest assured that I am not here to reclaim the land... I am simply here to celebrate our special friendship.

And I am here to thank you.

Thank you for honoring our special connection. Thank you for keeping alive traditions inherited from 17th and 18th century France. That is a really moving thing for any French person here in America to witness.

I know that every fall for the past 50-plus years, Fort Ouiatenon has hosted a giant festival, the Feast of the Hunters Moon. The consul arrived here in 2017, just as you were celebrating 300 years of French history and he told me that it was an unforgettable experience.

The Feast commemorates the region's heritage, featuring thousands of reenactors and drawing more than 60 thousand visitors every year. That is a big deal.

I want to thank you all, and to thank your families and your community, for your dedication and hard work. We are just a small piece of your history, but we appreciate the fact that every year, visitors can be reminded of the contributions that diverse cultures – including ours –bring to America's melting pot.

I visited Detroit last July and met with local residents of that city who would like to showcase its French roots. In Missouri, not too far from here, a National Park was recently established in the town of Sainte-Genevieve to commemorate America's French heritage and to educate people about it.

Here, the Ouiatenon Preserve was created and given National Historic Landmark status by the Federal Government, with the support of the French Consulate in Chicago. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate those who spearheaded this effort, as it not only reconnects your community with our common history, but it also highlights the connections between history, ecology and biodiversity. This is an important project for us and for future generations.

These examples show that there is clearly momentum for such initiatives.

Communities in the Midwest do not want to see their French past vanish. They want to preserve, protect, and draw attention to their French heritage. They see it as an asset, for both local development and tourism.

I can only encourage you in that regard and assure you of our full support.

We should not forget that what we call the Midwest today was once known as “Upper Louisiana”, la Louisiane d’En Haut or le Pays d’En Haut.

I understand that a meeting took place recently in Prairie du Rocher, Illinois, where local communities decided to work together to promote the “French Creole Corridor” in the Midwest. We are very happy to support this initiative. I know that Ouiatenon is part of that process and expect other communities from Indiana to join in.

I see these developments as a wonderful opportunity to forge people-to-people connections, cultural and educational exchanges, partnerships in science and higher education, and expanded prospects for business (France is already one of Indiana’s major partners in this area).

I also see the work that you do to become more familiar with your French history as a symbol of our special relationship. By taking part in archeology, research, and education programs, you will learn more about your history, but you will also teach us French more about our own history.

All too often, we recall the French roots of Quebec and Louisiana but forget the Midwest, the French Creole Corridor. You will help us change that, to our mutual benefit.

Alors, merci.

Merci beaucoup pour votre accueil inoubliable.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart./.