

Life at Versailles

Louis XIV worked hard to raise the stature of the monarchy in France. With such exalted titles as the "Sun King," "The Grand Monarch," and "Louis the Great," the king drew much attention to his position. Eleven miles outside of Paris, near the small village of Versailles [vehr SY], Louis built a palace so elaborate, its size and grandeur were without precedent in Europe's history.

The site where Louis intended to build Versailles had already been used by his father, Louis XIII, where he had constructed a modest hunting lodge.

The ground was swampy and Louis ordered the swamp drained.

Between thirty and thirty-five thousand workers were employed on the

construction of the palace at Versailles. The palace was to be more than a half mile in length. The building process began in 1669 and was not fully completed until 1701. But Louis and his court took residence at the unfinished palace in 1682.

When built, it was a beehive of hundreds of rooms. The larger rooms were named for gods and goddesses: the salons of Diana, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Apollo, and other deities. Each room was magnificently decorated in marble, elaborate mosaics, and silver and gold walls. All this created a decorative feast for the eye.

The greatest room remains the Grand Hall of Mirrors. It measures 240 feet in length and faces out to 17 tall windows. The hall's inner wall includes matching mirrors which capture the dazzling light of the sun. After sunset, the Grand Hall and salons of the palace were lit with the yellow light of thousands of candles.

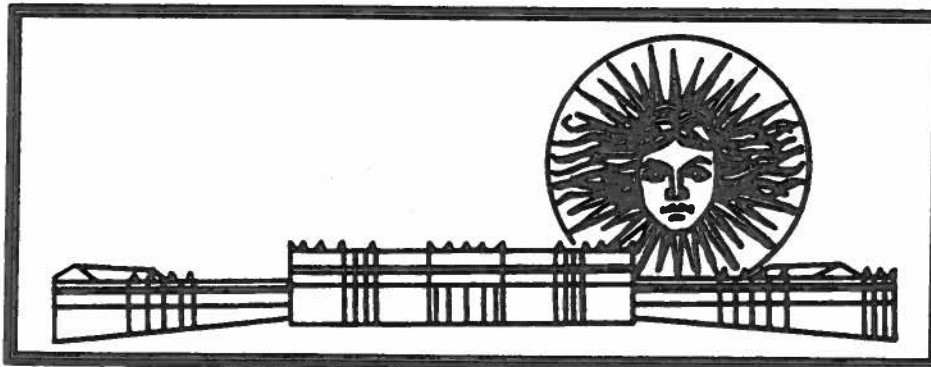
The grounds around the palace were landscaped into a vast park which today still includes great fountains, lakes and ponds, and dozens of marble statues. In the center of the grounds, workers built the Grand Canal, an artificial lake which extended for a mile in length.

Trees were planted by the hundreds. Some were imported to Versailles from the best forests of France. Everywhere about the grounds, one can see green lawn carpets, waterfalls, and trees lining the walkways in uniform rows. Trees were planted originally so that, when fully grown, they would not cast shadows on any of the sculptures.

Flowerbeds were planted everywhere and wooden boxes were filled with flowering plants, which could be moved indoors for special occasions. Many of the flowerbeds had their plants

replaced as many as 15 times a year so that Versailles was always bright with flowers and plants regardless of the season.

But Versailles had its problems. It became home,



during the reign of Louis XIV, to thousands of noblemen and women. The odors from the many privies caused the palace grounds to smell constantly. Louis ordered hundreds of fragrant orange trees in boxes to be placed about the grounds to cover the stench.

The palace was also drafty and cold. In winter, the residents (including the king) might awake to find the water in the pitcher on the nightstand had frozen. Meals eaten in lavish banquet halls were served cold because the kitchens were so far away.

Court life was a mixture of parties, balls, dances, plays, puppet shows, concerts, hunting and hawking expeditions, and a dozen other diversions. Louis kept the nobility at Versailles so he could keep an eye on them and make them dependent on him. As a result, they often fawned over him for attention. Louis created elaborate opportunities for the nobility to serve him. It was considered an honor to be allowed to help the king rise in the morning (the *levée*) and go to bed at night (the *couchée*). During these rituals, noblemen helped wash and dress the king and prepare him for his day.