EXCAVATIONS IN STE. GENEVIEVE, MISSOURI, 1997-1998

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The Middle Mississippi Survey has completed two seasons of excavations at Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, the first permanent French settlement west of the Mississippi River. The long-term project is designed to study the ca. 1750 founding of Ste. Genevieve, its move to its modern location in the 1780s and 1790s, and its transition into an American town in the first half of the nineteenth century. Investigations to date have focused on three historic properties in the Ste. Genevieve district: the DeLassus-Kern house in New Bourbon, and the Felix Valle and Dr. Benjamin Shaw houses in the Ste. Genevieve historic district.

In 1997, the Middle Mississippi Survey began a projected long-term archaeological investigation of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. The MMS is a consortium of archaeologists and historians from Murray State University’s Wickliffe Mounds Research Center and Southeast Missouri State University. Missouri’s Department of Natural Resources, which owns and interprets several historic properties in Ste. Genevieve, welcomed our project and has so far permitted excavations on three of its properties.

Ste. Genevieve was the first permanent French settlement on the west side of the Mississippi River, founded around 1750 as an offshoot of French Kaskaskia. The settlers were drawn by a number of resources: the salt of the Saline Creek just south, lead mines in the interior, trade with Native Americans, and the rich river bottom of the Mississippi, soon to become the breadbasket of French Louisiana. The first town was sited on the floodplain, in the large bottom area known as Le Grand Champ—the Big Field. After a few years, the settlers figured out that the bank of the Mississippi was not a safe place to live. In the 1780s, they moved up to a new site, where the current town of Ste. Genevieve sits—still threatened by flooding in the worst years, but comparatively high and dry.

Our long-term goal is to study the archaeology of the French settlement in Ste. Genevieve, to look at the social and economic diversity of the town and also its transition to an American town
in the first half of the nineteenth century. We began, though, south of Ste. Genevieve proper, with this house. It is known as the DeLassus-Kern house, after the first and last landowners.

The Delassus-Kern house sits within a parcel of land that belonged to Pierre Charles Dehault Delassus DeLuziere, a French gentleman who arrived in the Ste. Genevieve district in 1793. The structure is situated on a terrace at the base of the bluff forming the western boundary of the Mississippi River floodplain.

The Delassus-Kern house consists of two stories and a basement. The upper story evidently was added at the end of the nineteenth century. The primary structure is a single-story, six-room house of vertical-post construction, set on a limestone and sandstone foundation. The house is built in the colonial French style, and is unusually large, thus easily being attributed to the French gentleman who took residence here in 1793.

But there are a couple of problems with making the easy identification. One is that architectural details of the house indicate that it was disassembled and moved, maybe even put together from more than one original structure, raising the question of whether it stands now in its original location. Another problem is that the site doesn’t really match the historically documented location. Contemporary maps place it on top of the bluff, rather than at the bluff’s base, and describe it as having a commanding view of the river bottom. The house
overlooks the Grand Champ, the common agricultural field of colonial Ste. Genevieve, but the view is not exactly commanding. The view does include a large Mississippian mound center, towards which the field students cast many a covetous glance.

Our project included both archival and archaeological research, but I’m going to concentrate on the archaeology, because the slides are better. We started with a one by two meter test behind the house, on the highest terrace of the river bottom. We hit subsoil very quickly, finding none of the deep midden we had hoped for.

We moved south a little bit, and began a second one by two. We found an apparent limestone bock foundation or footing, so we expanded—and expanded—and expanded—and eventually ended up with this arrangement, officially designated Feature 3.

I don’t quite know what to make of it. At the very beginning, I thought it might be a privy. But on excavating inside, we found no more deposition than outside the feature. The subsoil appeared burned, but certainly was not a privy fill.

The primary feature, which we thought was a foundation, is the earliest of about four overlapping limestone arrangements. There are two and probably three walkways cutting across Feature 3. We lose the side of Feature 3 as they run into a mess of limestone next to the house.

The oddest thing about Feature 3 is that the two walls are not quite parallel. They diverge as they approach the house. At
the closed end, which we exposed first, the interior dimension is about 15 inches. By the time we lose it in the rubble, the two walls are about 23 inches apart.

There was very little associated with it that would tell us much about its function. This is not for lack of artifacts, but because of the shallowness of the deposit--there wasn’t much of a context to work with. There were, in fact, Late Woodland sherds and debitage thoroughly mingled with the historical materials. We did note a concentration of eggshell inside the feature, and of course the burned soil at the closed end, but otherwise the materials inside the feature are indistinguishable from those outside. I frankly don’t know what this feature is, and if anyone has seen one like it, I’d appreciate your comments.

We continued testing around the building, and I can only show you the highlights today. On the south side, we thought we were getting into a good, deep midden, but it turned out to be fairly recently disturbed. We also found a late-nineteenth to twentieth century refuse deposit much farther south.

On the east, in the front yard, we found deeper deposits also, but the historic materials were confined to the upper 30 centimeters or so. We stopped when we ran out of historic artifacts, although there is apparently a Late Woodland deposit underneath.

On the north side, we found a linear arrangement of bricks towards the front, but did not have time to follow it. Towards
the back, we identified a feature that probably is a construction trench, but it is intruded by a repointing trench of circa 1960.

The earliest ceramics we recovered were whitewares and yellowwares, with yellowwares in the base levels. All in all, the ceramics fit a mid-nineteenth century profile, and I do not see any evidence that this houselot was occupied before about 1830 or 1840.

A few other pieces of the puzzle fit my interpretation very nicely. An architectural historian has looked at the house, and says that the hardware in it does not pre-date 1840.

Our students in the archives also found some very helpful material. From the 1790s to 1836, the property belonged to the DeLassus family. In 1834, the original holding was broken up among family members, and one Martin Sweek got the lot on which the existing house stands. Sweek was a real estate developer, buying and selling properties and old buildings throughout the area, and he paid $200 for the lot. In 1837, only three years later, he sold our lot to Ichabod Sargeant for $1200—six times what Sweek had paid. Did this change in price reflect the addition of a large house to the property? We know that in the 1830s and 1840s, Sargeant also purchased building materials, so it is equally possible that he built the house during his tenure. Sargeant sold the property to the Kern family in 1855, who held it until it was purchased for donation to the Missouri DNR a few years ago.
Our inference from the documents is that the crucial period is the mid 1830s to mid 1840s, when the property was bought by developers and appreciated in value by a factor of six. A scenario of Sweek or Sargeant building a house with materials salvaged from older buildings is quite plausible. It fits the artifact assemblage, and the architectural evidence. The conclusion is that the Delassus-Kern house is not the Delassus house, although conceivably it used some of the original house’s timbers.

I have also seen a collection of artifacts from the top of the bluff behind our site. The landowner has picked up a few pieces over the years, and these include refined tin-glazed earthenware, green and blue shell edged pearlware, Oriental import porcelain, rose-headed nails, and a black glass case bottle base. I have little doubt that his site is DeLassus’s house, exactly where it is supposed to be, on the bluff with a commanding view of the Mississippi Valley.

In 1998, we moved into downtown Ste. Genevieve, the site of the second town, to which the community moved in the 1780s and 1790s. We worked on two lots owned by the Missouri DNR. The first is known as the Benjamin Shaw house. DNR is planning to construct a service building behind the house, and asked us to do some testing to help them avoid sensitive archaeological deposits.
The front two rooms of this house were built as a store and office by Jean Baptiste Bossier, who bought the lot from the original owner in 1818. Bossier sold it to Dr. Benjamin Shaw in 1837, who added the room across the back in 1845. To the rear of the house is a second building, known locally as the “Fur Trading Post.” The date of construction and identity of the builder are unknown, but a dendrochronological date on a beam indicates a cutting date around 1840.

We conducted a gridded posthole survey and then excavated six test units in the back yard. In one test, we identified a concentration of features, best visible in the profiles. These turn out to be reenactors’ hearths.

The most interesting unit was in the southeast corner. We expanded this one to a two-by-two meter unit to get a better look. There’s a very heavy, well-defined rubble zone here, that gave us a clear stratigraphy. At the base of the rubble zone we found a very datable artifact: a two-inch long, olive green plastic bazooka. I don’t have a photo of it yet. I think it’s pre-G. I. Joe, and probably a 1960s Mattel toy. So the rubble zone belongs to a building demolished in the later twentieth century.

At the base of this unit, we found a series of linear scars that I am pretty confident are plow scars. DNR had an aerial photograph of the town that shows a plowed field here as late as about 1940. I have not completed washing the artifacts from the
Shaw house, but from field observation, we have yellowwares to the base of the deposits in all six test units. The excavations will give us a sample of the material culture from this yard, but there’s just not much context to work with here.

The third site of our project so far is across the street from the Shaw house. This is the Felix Valle house, currently the headquarters of the state park. The house was built in 1818 by a merchant named Jacob Phillipson in 1818. It was purchased by Jean Baptiste Valle in 1824, and his son, Felix Valle, moved in. The house served both as Felix Valle’s home and as the store for Menard and Valle, merchants. The Valles were the most prominent family of French Ste. Genevieve, so this is a particularly interesting lot to work on.

There had been previous archaeological work in this lot. The University of Missouri at St. Louis contracted to do a preliminary survey and testing project here, reported by Colleen Hamilton in 1990. UMSL placed soil probes at one-meter intervals to get a sense of the distribution of artifacts and deposits. They dug a series of test units in the northeast, defining parts of two historic outbuilding foundations that they thought were constructed about 1825 to 1830. They also excavated a couple of isolated units, identifying two deep features, one a probable cellar and the other a possible privy.

Our project picked up where UMSL left off, and concentrated on the two deep features. The first one, the likely cellar, was
in the north part of the yard, not far from the east wall of the Valle house. We began by stripping the sod off a two-by-three meter unit, hoping to re-locate the UMSL test unit. We found that our grid was a little off theirs, but exposed enough of the top of the backfill to allow us to reexcavate most of their trench.

This is their trench with the backfill removed. They had interpreted a several-zone stratigraphy, most notably a gravel zone that covered the area and sealed the cellar. The gravel zone also overlay the two outbuilding foundations that UMSL had worked on, and appeared to date to the early second quarter of the nineteenth century. The cellar itself was filled with a heavy deposit of limestone rubble.

We went ahead and stripped off the gravel zone, exposing subsoil at the east side and defining the feature on the west. We intended at first to maintain 10-cm levels, but the limestone rubble was not stratified, did not cooperate well with 10-cm excavation protocol, and had next to nothing in it by way of artifacts. We went right down to the last day of the season before we could make a lot of sense out of it.

We did manage to hit subsoil at the base of the feature. This is the north profile. There is a distinction in the fill between an upper, more silty zone and a lower zone with heavier rubble, but neither zone had any artifacts to speak of. Then there’s a wedge of soils against the east wall of the feature,
that appears to be displaced subsoil, possibly slumped or washed in due to weathering. This is what confused us. In the original test, the UMSL crew had identified the top of this zone as the base of the feature, which it certainly appeared to be. Only as we got down to the bottom of the feature on the west side, and followed it east, did we realize that it was an infill zone.

The basal deposit also contains rubble, but it’s in a tan, sandy matrix that appears to be the original floor of the feature. Subsoil appeared under that. But there is an area where we did not quite make it to subsoil, which looks in fact like a foundation footing. This is where we had to stop due to lack of time.

Right now, I agree with UMSL’s conclusion that this feature is a cellar. Unfortunately, we found little or nothing in it that will help us date it. It does underlie the gravel zone, and if UMSL was right about the gravel zone belonging to circa 1825, then the cellar obviously was sealed, and the building it belonged to demolished, before that.

I hope, perhaps next year, to remove the backdirt and get back into this unit. I’d like to take out the fill of the apparent footing to see if there is indeed a construction or foundation trench here. I’d like to take out an extension based on my current understanding of the stratigraphy. And, I’d like to clarify the cellar’s relationship to the standing house of 1818. This building could be contemporary with, or it could
predate the Valle house, and right now I don’t have a clue as to which.

This, by the way, is the pile of rubble we did not take back to the lab with us. I’m still counting the smaller pieces that we did haul back.

The other feature we investigated in the Valle yard was farther south, against the east fence. We stripped the sod off a two by four meter area, to define the UMSL test unit. The site administrator, Jim Baker, was kind enough to let us remove the fence to give us elbow room.

We found a feature fill that was also heavy with rubble, but of a different character that the cellar fill. This fill combined limestone and brick rubble, and the soil matrix was a much darker color, although not the very organic soil we might expect of a privy fill.

We removed seven arbitrary levels to a total depth of about a meter. We did not quite reach the bottom, although I think there’s a hint of subsoil at the south side of our final excavation floor.

It’s pretty clear that the feature fill we did excavate is one stratigraphic unit. Not only is the brick and rubble deposit pretty consistent throughout, there are mendable sherds of a green shell-edged creamware plate scattered from Level 1 through Level 7. I think that the identification of this feature as a privy is probably a good one, but that the privy was cleaned out
and then filled with rubble, so that very little, if any, of the original privy deposit is left. We’ll have to get back into this feature and take out the basal deposit to be sure, of course.

The ceramics in this feature were characterized by the green shell-edged creamware that I already mentioned, and also hand-painted pearlwares scattered throughout the fill. Right now I don’t see anything that post-dates those wares, which suggests to me that the feature was filled in before about 1830, or at least that the fill came from a deposit that pre-dates 1830.

I’m wondering if this rubble came from the structure that belonged to the cellar that we’re into in the north part of the yard, and whether that structure predates the Valle house. It’s not likely that I can prove that connection, especially given the dearth of artifacts that came from the cellar, but it’s an idea that I’ll keep in the back of my mind as we move ahead with this project.

We’re hoping to continue with the Ste. Genevieve project for some years to come. Next summer, we’d like to return to the Valle house and finish the deep features we worked on last year, and also conduct more extensive testing throughout the yard. Meanwhile, our archival and architectural activities have concentrated on documenting the Brooks house, a mid-nineteenth-century African American house on the edge of town, which is also in the area of some of the remaining French colonial structures, and we’d like to conduct at least a season of archaeological work
there. In the long run, we hope to obtain a comprehensive sample of house lots in modern Ste. Genevieve, and with luck even get into the remnants of the eighteenth-century old town, founded in 1750 and abandoned in the 1780s, out there in the floodplain.

Now, that should be fun.