Southeast Missouri is not strictly in the Ohio Valley, but I hope it’s close enough that you’ll forgive me for slipping it into this conference. Last summer, the Middle Mississippi Survey began what we hope will be a long-term project in Ste. Genevieve.

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 the 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 De Lassus-Kern house, after the first and last landowners.
It’s a very interesting house. It has two stories and a cellar, and several outbuildings. The upper story was added in the late nineteenth century, and the clapboards obscure the construction, but the first story is actually a French style structure, built of upright timbers on a stone foundation. It’s also quite big, with a six-room plan. This makes it one of the biggest vertical-log structures in the Mississippi Valley.

It sits on property that was owned by a French gentleman, Pierre de Lassus de Luzieres, who arrived in the Ste. Genevieve district in 1793. His house was completed by the end of the year, and his family arrived to live in it. De Lassus had ambitions of becoming a leading citizen of the district, and founded New Bourbon, south of Ste. Genevieve, which he expected to become the economic and political center. New Bourbon had inhabitants for a while, but Ste. Genevieve maintained its dominance, and de Lassus became an annoyance more than a civic leader.

This large French colonial structure, on de Lassus’s property, has been assumed by many observers to have been the gentleman’s house. Other observers, however, have had doubts. For one thing, its site does not quite match the documentary evidence. As you can see, it’s at the base of the bluff. The maps, like this one, show De Lassus’s house on top of the bluff. Contemporary descriptions remarked on its commanding view of the river valley. This house overlooks the Grand Champ and is on the highest terrace, but the view is hardly commanding. And yes, that is a platform mound out there, known as the Common Field site, a Mississippian village site.

Back to the house question: there are also a number of suspicious elements in the structure. Not being an architectural historian, I won’t try to cover the details, but there are mismatches in timbers and foundation stones that raise suspicions that the house was actually
cobbled together from two or more previous structures, salvaged for their timbers. It may therefore be made of colonial French timbers, but may not be on those timbers’ original site.

Nonetheless, the house and immediate lot were donated to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources on the assumption that this was de Lassus’s residence. DNR, aware of the controversy about the identity of the house, was at a loss as to how to proceed with interpreting it. So, when we started looking into a Ste. Genevieve project, DNR offered its cooperation and suggested that we begin with this site, in hopes that we could establish whether the lot had been occupied at the end of the eighteenth century.

We planned the field school to include both archaeological and archival work. The crew excavated with me for four days per week, and on Fridays, they worked in the archives under the direction of Bonnie Stepenoff and Carol Morrow of Southeast Missouri State University. The eventual concordance between the archival and archaeological findings turned out to be very useful both as a training experience and as an interpretive success.

I want to talk mostly about the archaeology. We excavated a series of units all around the house, and then a couple on a line southwards, which I’ll explain in a few minutes. Our first unit was behind the house, on the theory that the richest and deepest middens are usually in the back yard.

It didn’t work out that way. The back of the house is situated on the highest terrace of the floodplain, which turned out to have almost no deposition at all. We hit subsoil at a very shallow level, and exposed only a couple of limestone slabs.

Our second unit, off the southwest corner of the house, found an equally shallow deposit, but exposed a set of limestone blocks that looked like part of a foundation. The edge appeared to have a bit of a curve, and we started thinking, oh boy, a well or cistern. So we started
expanding, first with a 1 x 1, which exposed a corner. The we took out a 1 x 2, and it became a rectangular structure. It seemed a little small, but we thought it might be a privy. We designated it Feature 3. But on excavating inside, we found no more deposition than outside the feature. The subsoil appeared burned, but certainly was not a privy fill.

So we expanded again, and expanded again, and just kept on expanding until we ran out of time for the field school, and ended up with this mess. I don’t quite know what to make of it. The primary feature, Feature 3, 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, and we lose the foundation lines as the run into a mess of limestone next to the house.

The weirdest 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.

Meanwhile, we continued testing around the house. I’ll show you the units in counter-clockwise order.
This one was next, on the next lower terrace. We thought for a little while that we were getting into a good deep midden. But my record for finding plumbing stands. We were later told by a neighbor who remembers the installation of the septic tank that the bulldozer had pretty well torn out the whole side yard.

So we moved 3 to 5 meters farther out and sank another 1 x 2. We found a mix of historic and prehistoric materials to a depth of about 40 cm, then only prehistoric sherds and flakes for another two levels, at which point we abandoned pit.

We had hopes that this was a relatively undisturbed deposit, at least in the lower levels, so we took a set of soil samples for Oxidizable Carbon Ratio dating. I like to take OCR samples out of a 20 cm square column from a known stratigraphy, so it ends up looking like this tiny extension. I’m sorry to say that the OCR dates indicate that this deposit is disturbed at least to the bottom level, and maybe to the base of the unit, so it doesn’t look like we got out of the bulldozer trench after all.

We turned the corner then and began a set of three tests across the front of the house. This is the first one. The upper two excavation levels were mixed prehistoric and historic, and the third was nearly pure prehistoric, so we halted here. The crew members in this unit seemed a bit put out by the tree roots. The next unit was essentially the same.

This unit was placed off the northeast corner of the house. Again, the soils context was about the same, with mixed historic and prehistoric in the upper levels.

We turned the corner to the north side of the house with this unit. The long iron artifact in the profile at the top is a window weight. This unit bottomed out on subsoil. The only interesting thing about this unit was this line of brick, which parallels the house. There was a
plugged opening in the wall for a fireplace, but not where these bricks are, so I don’t know what structure these bricks might have belonged to.

The last test in the vicinity of the house was this one, at the northwest corner. This is out at the edge of the uppermost terrace, and there was not much deposition. There was a feature in the corner closest to the house wall, which I thought at first might be a construction trench. But there’s an intruding feature, which you can see in the profile, which turns out to be a trench from repointing the foundation about 10 years ago, so the potential construction trench appears to be thoroughly disturbed, unfortunately.

We also took OCR samples from this unit. The uppermost date is 1875, and the subsoil date is 1650. Subsoil dates usually predate the overlying archaeological horizon by a couple of hundred years. The lowest two dates above the subsoil came out to 1797 and 1802. These dates are potentially interesting, but I suspect they date a pre-house topsoil rather than the occupation of the house. I haven’t catalogued the artifacts from this unit yet, and will have to withhold judgement until I do, but I never saw anything in the field or in the washing lab that looks like it fits the 1790s to 18-teens time frame.

So far, we had been thoroughly disappointed in finding any kind of early or discrete deposits. Toward the end of the season, we sank a series of test postholes, using a two-handled posthole digger, south of the house across the highest terrace, hoping to discover any kind of feature. We followed up two areas with test units.

The first turned up very little. The subsoil was just slightly deeper here than in the units behind the house, and I can only interpret it as a slight natural swale in the surface of the terrace.
The second unit was about 35 meters south of the house. Here the posthole digger recovered a whole pharmaceutical bottle. This turned out to be a rich artifact area, a 20th century refuse dump, although not very deep.

At this point, I haven’t quite finished cataloguing the materials, but I’ve washed them all. As I said a minute ago, so far I haven’t seen anything that belongs to the period of the de Lassus occupation, 1790s to 1820s. The ceramics have been characterized by whitewares and dipped yellow wares, with some coarse stonewares and a few glazed red earthenwares. My tentative conclusion is that this houselot was not occupied before 1830, and maybe not before about 1840. It is not the house built by Pierre de Lassus de Lassus in the 1790s.

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.

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 no doubt that his site is De Lassus’s house, exactly where it is supposed to be, on the bluff with a commanding view of the Mississippi Valley.

Our students in the archives also found some very helpful material. There had, of course, been previous attempts to trace the ownership of the house, starting with de Lassus’s title and tracing it to the Kern family, the last owners. But there was no smoking paper gun that specified when the house appeared where it is now, so the previous researchers were free to assume that it was the original French owner’s house.

Our students worked in a very archaeological mode, backwards from the recent, and also looked for information about occupants and building materials. They found, among other things,
that a cabin was built on the property for a black woman in 1798. That would be very interesting to find.

More to the purpose, we can reconstruct a little of the chain of activities as well as ownership. From the 1790s to 1836, the property belonged to the De Lassus 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 purchase building materials, so it is equally possible that he built the house during his tenure. There are bills against his estate that show improvements to his property in 1846, 1847, and 1848, although he may have held more than one property at the time. The documents specify lumber, nails, siding, plastering, and painting, and also a cellar, gallery, and ceiling.

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. A newspaper account of an interview with John D. Kern, published in 1866, referred to the original Frenchman’s house, with the implication that he was not speaking of a standing structure, thus not the structure that still stands.

The 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 de Lassus-Kern house is not the de Lassus house, although conceivably it used some of the original house’s timbers.

This is not exactly what DNR wanted to hear, although I think they're satisfied to have an answer they can work with. What will happen to this house is not clear. They cannot restore it to a 1790’s French gentleman’s residence and interpret it as the house of Pierre de Lassus de Luzieres, founder of New Bourbon. They can, however, restore it to a French-style house, and use it to interpret the history of New Bourbon. I suspect that is the solution they will plan for.

To conclude, this was a very successful project from a couple of points of view. We answered the primary question, whether the house was likely to be de Lassus’s house of the 1790s. We were able to conduct archaeological and archival research in tandem, with results that were gratifyingly supportive of each other, a very nice illustration for the students of how historical archaeology ought to work. We introduced our Ste. Genevieve project to the community, and got a very warm welcome, including generous hospitality from families with whom our students lived for the six weeks. We did not learn anything about the 18th-century occupation of Ste. Genevieve, but our goal is to understand the change from French colonial to American culture from the mid 18th century to the mid to late 19th century, and this project will fit into the latter end of our study period very nicely.

This coming summer, we expect to move into Ste. Genevieve proper, and excavate in the Felix Valle house lot, another DNR property. Valle was a prominent merchant of the leading French family. The house here was built about 1818, and there are hints of earlier features within the lot. I hope to tell you more about Ste Genevieve, and update you on the De Lassus-Kern house conclusions, next year.