The Middle Mississippi Survey conducted a second season of archaeological investigations in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri during the summer of 1998. Test excavations in the rear of the Benjamin Shaw house, built in stages from 1818 to the 1840s, revealed a homogenized deposit reflecting the full range of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century occupation. Excavations in the Felix Valle house lot concentrated on two deep features located by previous investigators. The two features, a large cellar and a probable privy, were filled with a secondary rubble deposit, probably before 1825. We plan to pursue additional questions about both house lots in 1999.

In the summer of 1997, the Middle Mississippi Survey began a long-term archaeological project on the French colonial and early American town of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. Ste. Genevieve was the first permanent French settlement on the west side of the Mississippi River. The settlement began as an offshoot of French colonial settlements on the east side of the Mississippi, especially Kaskaskia and Chartres. The first land grants west of the Mississippi were recorded in the 1740s. Ste. Genevieve was probably founded about 1750, as the first census was taken in 1752. The French town grew up in the bottomland of the Mississippi River, in an area still known as Le Grand Champ (the Big Field).

After the French and Indian War, the French gave up claims to the lands east of the Mississippi, turning control over to Great Britain. France ceded La Louisiane, the lands west of the Mississippi, to Spain. French colonists began moving across the river to Ste. Genevieve. In 1770 the Spanish government established a garrison in Ste. Genevieve, but the number of Spanish soldiers stationed there was always very small. After 1783, the lands east of the Mississippi fell under a new government, that of the United States of America. The flight of French colonists across the river intensified, many choosing Ste. Genevieve as their new home.
From the mid-1780s, the original Ste. Genevieve was replaced by a new town on the present site, inland from the river and on higher ground. The town moved because new settlers required new land, and because heavy Mississippi flooding made the original site uninhabitable. The turn of the century was “the beginning of the destruction of the tightly knit French Canadian and Creole community” (Ekberg 1996:468), the French character of the town coming under subtle assault from intensifying relations with the American populations across the river.


The economy of the French town was agrarian, but lead mining, salt production, and trade with Native Americans were also important pursuits. Despite the small population, colonial Ste. Genevieve was an intriguing mix of people: French, Spanish, African Franco-Americans, Native Americans, French Creole, mestizo.

The archaeology of the French in the Mississippi Valley is not nearly as well known as the history. Previous
investigations near Ste. Genevieve represent a surface collection of the Old Town (Norris 1991) and a survey of the nearby Saline Creek Valley (Trimble et al. 1991). Projects have provided data to aid in identifying French sites, but have not begun to add up to a comprehensive view of French colonial settlement.

Given the multicultural nature, shifting political dominion, and mixed economy of this small colonial town, our long-term project will focus on the period before about 1850, with the following goals:

1. To define French colonial and early Franco-American archaeological assemblages from domestic contexts.

2. To compare French to British/American colonial patterns of artifact procurement and use, economy, and refuse disposal.

3. To study the organization of the French colonial houselot.

4. To sample ethnic and socioeconomic variety within the town and through time, especially toward defining the little-known characteristics of African-American and mixed-family homes in a French colonial setting.

5. And, to study the relative influences of the French homeland versus international and intercolonial trade, the Spanish dominion, and increasing Americanization. For instance, the preliminary surveys (Norris 1991; Trimble 1991) in the area
have suggested that the ceramics inventory in the French colonial period was dominated by British wares, raising questions about French cultural conservatism in a remote colonial outpost.

Our first season of field work concentrated on the Delassus-Kern house, south of Ste. Genevieve proper. This is a large French-style structure on the land of a French nobleman, Pierre de Lassus de Luzieres, who arrived in the Ste. Genevieve district in 1793. Since I reported on this project at last year’s conference, I’ll just summarize: we found no evidence that this house lot was occupied before about 1840, and concluded that the house is not the original Delassus house, as fondly hoped by some local historians.

Last summer, we moved into the downtown historic district, and conducted excavations in the houselots of two of the historic buildings.

This is the Felix Valle house, built in 1818 by a merchant named Jacob Phillipson. It was purchased by Jean Baptiste Valle in 1824, and sometime thereafter his son, Felix Valle, moved in. The house served both as Felix Valle’s home and as the store for Menard and Valle, merchants. Felix Valle’s widow, Odile, lived in the house until her death in 1894. The Valles were the most prominent family of French Ste. Genevieve, so this is a
particularly interesting lot to work on. The property now is owned and interpreted as a state historic site.

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.
At first we tried to maintain 10-cm levels in the feature fill.
This is the bottom of Level 2 of the feature. But since many of
the limestone chunks were larger than 10 cm thick, and since we
saw hardly anything but limestone rubble in the fill, we gave up
on tight levels pretty quickly.

So this is the bottom of level 3. By now we were at the
level that UMSL had identified as the base of the feature, but I
still couldn’t make much sense of it. So we continued another
level.

This is the base of Level 4, and the base of the feature.
There is still a band of rubble, which I think is a foundation
trench very much like the ones described by UMSL for the
structures they investigated just east of here. We did not have
time to excavate the foundation trench and hope to reopen it
next year.

The profile does show some stratigraphy, despite my despair
of finding any during the excavation. There are clearly
variations in the concentration of rubble. More important,
across the bottom, there is a shallow zone of limestone rubble
in a sandy matrix, the texture of which reflects the presence of a lot more mortar. This zone may be the original floor of the cellar.

There was almost nothing in the feature fill besides gravel. I asked the students not to bag the big pieces—here is the pile of big pieces they did not bag. Despite this, we took back to the lab over 15,000 pieces and 100 kg of limestone, which were duly washed, counted and weighed and are now performing erosion control at Wickliffe. In all of that, there were about 20 nails, one piece of semi-melted window glass, and 11 sherds, only five of which are bigger than ¼” wide. The sherds included 8 pieces of glazed red earthenware, one piece of creamware, and two crumbs of glazed ceramic that I think are pearlware but are too small for me to have any confidence in that identification.

Accepting UMSL’s analysis that the overlying gravel zone dates to about 1825, I’d say the cellar was filled not long before that. From the mortar adhering to many of the limestone fragments, the fill appears to be from the destruction of a building similar to the standing structure. We do not know what the relationship is between this cellar and the standing Felix Valle house, but it seems possible that the building associated with this basement was razed at about the time the standing structure was built. We hope to investigate this relationship,
and isolate the lowest zone of the feature fill, with additional excavation this coming summer.

The second of the Valle house features identified by UMSL was farther back in the yard, against the east fence. UMSL had defined most of the feature and identified it as a probable privy from its size, but had not begun to excavate the feature fill. We opened up a 2 x 2 m square and found part of the backfilled UMSL unit, so opened up to 2 x 4 meters to get the whole thing, then extended a little bit east as the state parks people kindly removed the fence and gave us elbow room.

This is the UMSL backfill removed, and the top of the feature. We did try to keep 10 cm levels in this excavation, despite the irregularity of a brick and limestone rubble fill. The fill was fairly evenly mixed between brick and limestone, taking about 50 kg of each back to the lab. In this case, again, I asked the students to leave behind the big pieces. (I think I’m going to change the screening protocol next year—I really don’t need to count and weigh all that brick and limestone!)

We completed seven levels in the feature. We did not quite get to the base. There’s a hint of subsoil showing in this floor, also a lense of dark organic soil that may be a tiny remnant of the original privy fill. I think, though, that this privy was cleaned out before being filled by rubble.
The ceramics were pretty consistent throughout, characterized by creamware, pearlware, a minority of whiteware, a little blue-on-white porcelain, one tin-glazed earthenware, and some glazed red earthenware. Most telling, the mendable sherds of this plate were scattered from Level 1 through Level 7, indicating pretty clearly a single fill episode. I would expect that the privy was filled about the same mid-1820s time as so much of the activity in the north part of the lot.

There were, by the way, 21 ball clay pipestems in the fill. We all know that the pipestem dating formula breaks down after about 1780, and that having a French occupation should further complicate interpreting the bore diameters. But I can’t have a group of pipestems without measuring the bores, so for what it’s worth, the average bore diameter was 4.7/64ths, which corresponds to a date of 1752 by the Binford formula.

I didn’t bisect this feature during excavation, thinking that there would still be a section of it over the line to the east that would retain any stratigraphy. It looks, though, like this may not be the case. We will try to finish the bottom of this feature this coming summer, to see if there is any remnant of the original privy fill at the base, but at this point I rather doubt it.

So, this summer we hope to get back to the Valle house, to investigate lingering questions about the two features and to do
some additional testing in the houselot. Added to the UMSL project, we should end up with a good view of the archaeological resources of the Felix Valle house.

The Benjamin Shaw house is across the street from the Valle house, and is part of the state historic site.

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. Shaw’s widow lived in the house until she died in 1890.

To the rear of the house is a second building, known locally as the “Fur Trading Post” for reasons that aren’t clear to me. The date of construction and identity of the builder are unknown, but a dendrochronological date on a beam indicates a cutting date around 1840. The complex was connected by an artist in the 1930s or 1950s, depending on which source you hear it from, who used it as a studio.

MoDNR is planning to construct a service building behind the house, and asked us to do some testing last summer to help them avoid sensitive archaeological deposits. This block is also of interest because the records say that a horse mill was operating back here, but as nearly as I can determine, the working parts of the mill would have been in the next yard over. It is possible that the horse plodded through a corner of this
lot, but it would be difficult to find archaeological traces of that, I think.

We conducted a gridded posthole survey and then excavated six test units in the back yard. I don’t have time today to give all the details, but I’ll show a few of the test units.

This one, towards the southwest, seemed to have some interesting features. They turn out to be reenactors hearths.

In the southeastern corner, we started a 1 x 2 meter unit that hit a heavy layer of brick rubble. We expanded to a 2 x 2 and excavated through it, revealing a very nice stratigraphy. Clearly a building was razed, sealing the midden below, so the obvious question was how early that rubble zone was created. We did find a very identifiable, datable artifact at the base of the rubble zone: a green plastic bazooka. I think it’s pre-G.I. Joe. The building was probably razed in the mid-1960s.

This is the floor of Level 4, which we expected to be the final floor of the excavation. We ended up with a little extra time at the end, though, and since there was still a trace of artifactual material in the floor, we went down another very shallow level. Good thing, because we found true subsoil and these linear plowscars. As irregular as the scars are, I think they relate to hand or animal-powered plowing, not machine plowing. On the other hand, aerial photographs show a plowed field back here as late as the 1940s. So the entire deposit
here is likely to be plow-disturbed, good for DNR’s construction plans but not so good for archaeological research.

About halfway between that unit and the building, we hit another heavy rubble layer in a 1 x 2. In this case, the interesting material was on top of the rubble. This material is still in the washing stage and hasn’t been analyzed, but in the field I saw some fiesta-type wares, a root beer bottle with a paper label, and some artsy glass that, as an off-the-cuff hypothesis, I’m interpreting as associated with the artist’s studio of the mid-20th century.

Finally, we excavated this unit right behind the so-called “Fur Trading Post.” We had a deep deposit here, but mostly because there’s a clay fill layer on top. These materials are still in the washing, but in the field I saw yellowwares in the bottom levels, which puts the basal deposit in the 1840s or later. That would fit with the dendrochronological date on the beam inside. If we want earlier contexts in this houselot, we’ll have to get up close to the original structures in the front of the lot. We may have an opportunity to do that this summer.

All of the excavations we’ve done in Ste. Genevieve so far have been on Missouri State Historic Properties, and I thank the Department of Natural Resources for permission to work there and for their generous cooperation. I don’t have time today to
thank all of the people who have contributed, but I must say that the community of Ste. Genevieve has been most hospitable and enthusiastic about the project, and it’s a pleasure to work in a community that has such an appreciation for its heritage. Thank you.