Since we started with a theme of French colonialism in the Illinois Country, I thought I’d add a brief report of a survey effort to locate what should be the earliest substantial French site in this region: the Juchereau Tannery site of 1702-1703. This is part of the local history of Southern Illinois, but unfortunately known mainly from popularized secondary sources rather than the primary documents. One 1957, two-paragraph account in Illinois History, for example, was titled “French Buried Treasure in Southern Illinois” (Patrick 1957), which gives you the flavor of the story.

Charles Juchereau de Saint-Denys was born in Quebec in 1655, and was a trader and an official of the French colony in Montreal at the close of the seventeenth century (Fortier 1969). He took advantage of the growing French concern about the strategic value of the lower Ohio River, which was seen as crucial to the economic exploitation of the mid-continent and the imperial need to prevent English territorial encroachment.
He obtained a royal commission to establish a tannery at the mouth of the Ohio in 1700.

The commission had a few stipulations: he was not allowed to trade for beaver, although any other hide was permitted; he could mine lead or copper; he could take 24 men, a chaplain, eight canoes, and all necessary supplies including brandy, which was for his expedition’s consumption and not to trade to the Indians. Rival traders immediately protested this new commission as a threat to their business, but Juchereau went ahead with it.

Juchereau left Montreal in May, 1702 (Fortier 1969). He stopped at Kaskaskia, where he found his chaplain, a Father Mermet. A letter from Father Gabriel Marest in November of 1702 is a key document in establishing the chronology. Marest reported, “Monsieur Juchereau is prodigal of his promises, but he thinks, in reality, of his own interests ... [Mermet] is neither a missionary, for there are no Savages, nor a chaplain, for there is no stipend” (Thwaites 1896-1901 v. 65:39-41).

Marest wrote again in 1712, referring to Mermet at “a fort on the river Ouabache,” with a group of Mascouten Indians who “had set up a village on the borders of the same river” (Jesuit Relations 66:237). Marest also noted that the post had been “desolated” by an epidemic.

Juchereau apparently died in the epidemic in 1703 or 1704. One of the survivors apparently tried to salvage a large store
of skins, but lost most of them (Fortier 1969). Some survivors went to Mobile, and some drifted around Louisiana.

That appears to be the primary set of facts known about the tannery. The location was never precisely documented, and maps are not very specific. The best description of the location is this one, from Veniard de Bourgmont: “The Fort Jucherot was built on a great height,” on the west side of the river, two leagues above the mouth of the Ohio (Giraud 1974). Alvord (1965) says that this “would place it at or near the present site of Cairo,” although how Bourgmont’s “great height” would apply is a mystery to me.

Local historians, however, have been fairly confident about the location. There is a highway marker near Grand Chain, Illinois, that identifies the Juchereau post. Local historians point to a parcel of land owned by Mrs. Troy Easter, east of Grand Chain. Embarrassingly enough, I can’t find the reference that led me to the Easter property in the first place*, although a couple of local collectors and Mrs. Easter confirmed that it was the agreed-on site. It is a commanding height overlooking the Ohio River. There is also a large round depression on top of the knoll, which is asserted to be the tanning pit created by the Juchereau post.

With Mrs. Easter’s permission, I took a group of students to the site in the summer of 1996. We found the high hill and
the depression, as described. We flagged a 5 x 5 meter grid over the top of the hill, encompassing the depression, and conducted posthole testing with a two-handled posthole digger at the grid nodes. In all, we excavated 90 test post holes, including a couple of extra ones plus four core samples in the depression. We found a consistent profile of a 7 to 20 cm plowzone throughout, including in the depression. There were a couple of flecks of charcoal, widely scattered, and we recovered a grand total of two artifacts: a whiteware sherd and a chert flake.

The depression does not seem to be anything but a natural feature. In fact, it is far too big to be a tanning pit. Excavations of medieval tanneries (e.g. Shaw 1996) document numerous pits for each facility, each on the order of 1 x 2 m and less than a meter deep. They are clay and wood-lined, and associated with numerous faunal remains. The Easter site does not fit the archaeological signature of a tannery either in feature type or assemblage.

The aforementioned source that I can’t find now, that identified the Easter site as the Juchereau tannery, cited both the pit and several historic artifacts found on the property as evidence. There was a photo of the artifacts. My bet is that these are nineteenth-century artifacts associated with
Cantonment Wilkinsonville, which is thought to be just to the west of our survey site.

Wilkinsonville would be an interesting site to look at. Although poorly documented, it was an American military establishment begun in January 1801. The best estimate is that as many as 900 troops from three regiments, and 40 civilians including sutlers, a butcher, a baker, and laundresses. It was struck twice by tornadoes, and documents describing the damage imply the presence of a quartermaster’s camp, barracks and a parade ground. It was largely evacuated by August, although a small contingent stayed for the winter of 1801-1802 and it was still on the ration list in the spring of 1802 (Caldwell 1949).

In 1804, Congress created post roads in southern Illinois, and the route in 1805 ran “by Fort Massac and the little settlement at Wilkinsonville” (Tevebaugh 1952:33). The site was offered for sale in 1807, and civilians were occupying the buildings (Caldwell 1949). The mail route included Wilkinsonville in 1807, 1809, and 1815 (Tevebaugh 1952). One source also says that the site was a Cherokee town of 12 families in 1807 (Caldwell 1949). The site was not mentioned in connection with mail routes in the 1820s, and the new mail route in 1827 kept to the southern side of the Ohio from Paducah until it crossed at America, Illinois (Tevebaugh 1952).
So where was the Juchereau site? Not on the Easter land—I do not believe there is any significant archaeological site here, and certainly there is no sign of colonial French occupation. Eighteenth-century maps put it in several, somewhat vague locations, including well inland between the Ohio and the Mississippi.

However, I’d go back to Bourgmont’s description: “a great height,” on the west side of the river, two leagues above the mouth of the Ohio. The first high ground along the Ohio is in the vicinity of America, Illinois. Depending on how you measure the league, the distance from the mouth of the river is about right. I’d suggest that anyone looking for Juchereau’s post survey that area, and ignore the local historians who point to the Easter property.

So here I’ve managed to drag a 10-minute paper out of not finding a site, and I thank you for your indulgence.

References

Alvord, Clarence Walworth  

Caldwell, Norman W.  

Fortier, John
   1969   Juchereau de Saint-Denys, Charles.Dictionary of
   University of Toronto Press.

Giraud, Marcel
   Louis XIV, 1698-1715.  J. C. Lambert, trans.  Louisiana 
   University Press, Baton Rouge.

Moyers, William Nelson

Patrick, Ledillon
   History 11:21.

Shaw, Michael
   1996   The excavation of a late 15th- to 17th-century tanning 
   complex at The Green, Northampton. Post-Medieval Archaeology 
   30:63-127.

Tevebaugh, John Leslie
   University of Illinois, Urbana.

Thwaites, Reuben Gold, ed.
   1896-1901   Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents.  73 vols. 
   Burrows Brothers, Cleveland.  Reprinted: Pageant, New York, 
   1959.

*Dearinger, Lowell A.
   1964   VaBache: A Far Outpost. Outdoor Illinois March 1964: 
   4-10.
   (added 9/17/02-KWW)