

A Meeting of Cultures

In the late 1600's, the interior of North America was largely unexplored by Europeans. Reports had reached Canada of a possible waterway that extended to the southern or western coasts. The waterway could, if reports were true, give the French in Canada the access that they needed to a warm water port. Lewis Joilliet and the Catholic priest, Jacques Marquet, set out to explore this great river, making observations as far south as present day Arkansas. Marquet's journal survives, and it provides the first European account of what the French called "the Illinois Country." The river they explored is called the Mississippi.

Hi, we're working our way up the Mississippi River right now on this CHV-St. Genevieve Bulldog Ferry. It seems like easy going today, but can you imagine early settlers paddling their canoes across this great river? To my right is Illinois, and that is Missouri. It doesn't seem like far today, but back in the early 1700's, this great river separated the eastern settlement from the far western wilderness. The first settlers to establish permanent residence in present day Missouri were the French-Americans, or Creoles. They settled on the west bank of the Mississippi River and named it in honor of a woman saint—St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris.

So what is Cha de vieve? It means 'joy of life', and that feeling continues today, come on, let's check it out!

Ste. Genevieve is the oldest permanent settlement on the west bank of the Mississippi, in fact, by 1772, 700 people lived there, which at that time made it bigger than St. Louis. This place brought together three distinct cultures, aside from the French, 40% of the people were of African descent, brought to this area as slaves. Several Native Americans also called Ste. Genevieve home. Amidst this multi-cultural setting, life was very different from the frontier settlements in the east, where the mostly Protestant, English-speaking pioneers were more interested in acquiring agricultural land and being self sufficient. Here the residents spoke French, were mainly Roman Catholic, depended on commerce, are relatively respectful of Native American customs and sovereignty. African-American and French children played together in these streets. Although other Europeans would eventually come to live here, the story of Ste. Genevieve's early years is definitely the story of the French in the North American frontier. And it still retains its distinctive character.

So why did they come here? What drew them to this place? Let's talk to someone who knows. Ann, what can you tell us about early French settlement in Missouri?

Well, I'm Ann Herzog a tour-guide at the Lewis Bolduc's home in Ste. Genevieve, and one of the reasons they came here was the excellent farm ground. The also came for the salt from the Saline Creek, trading with the Peoria and Osage Indians, along with the lead mining in an area now called Potosi. This house, with its vertical log walls, wrap around porch, called a gallery, hip roof, casement windows and massive stone chimney, is a good example of early French architecture. This home was built by Louis Bolduc a French-Canadian immigrant who became a successful lead miner, merchant and planter. This is how many of the first settlers built their homes. Notice that unlike the log homes built by early Americans, the timbers are not stacked horizontally, but rather, set vertically.

I'm standing on 'la grande chompe' French for 'the big field.' It was this soil that allowed French-Canadian farmers to sustain their frontier outposts. And, as you can see, the harvest of these fertile fields continues today.

Ste. Genevieve was officially founded in 1750, in less than 20 years, what started off as a tiny settlement, became a thriving town. But despite its success, French and Illinois called the upstart village "Misar", which means wretchedness, or un-want. Many people feared the uncertainties of life on the frontier, especially the chronic flooding that seemed to plague the river town of the west. Then, in 1762, territory west of the

Mississippi transferred to Spanish rule. Land on the east bank now came under control of the British. As the French and British nations had been keen enemies for centuries, most French settlers decided to cross the river and start anew. So, was it a joy of life, or misery living here? Riverside settlements offer mixed blessings. River bottoms are very fertile and the river's great for commerce, but flooding is a very real risk. In 1785, the river completely flooded the prospering town. They called it 'la ana desure' – 'the Year of the Waters.' But instead of giving up, they moved the town four miles to higher ground and Ste. Genevieve was reborn. Ste. Genevieve today bears witness to the determination of its early settlers. Despite the dramatic challenges these first settlers faced, old world practices and traditions, deeply influenced their new beginning. Look at these unusual buildings. Some look French, but others look German or even traditionally American. Many of these homes are a combination of these influences. This mixture of styles occurred because French dominance didn't last. As the new town matured, Americans gained control of the west. By the mid-nineteenth century, many other Europeans made Ste. Genevieve their home.

In 1804, Ste. Genevieve became American territory. The Felix Boulette house is an interesting example on how these cultures came together. Let's go take a look.

Well, this building was built in 1818, by a gentleman who came from Philadelphia, his name was Jacob Philipsen, and he was a merchant who came into this area after the Louisiana Purchase, and like a lot of other Americans, came out here for business reasons. And he had this house built in a style that was very much like houses in Philadelphia, but it was in the midst of a French-Colonial settlement from the 1700's. He built it in a style today that we would call American Federal, but it was kind of a departure from the French houses that were here already. This house is a building that's divided into two sections, primarily for Jacob Philipsen's original use for the house. He was a merchant, so half the house he intended to be his mercantile store, with shelves and counters, and places to sell objects, and then the other half on the first floor was intended for his residence, and it contains a parlor, and a dining room, and then the house has two bedrooms on the second floor for his family's use too. The Valet family bought the house from Jacob Philipsen in 1824, so Philipsen had only owned it for about six years. The Valet family was one of the very prominent French families here in Ste. Genevieve from the 1700's and the young man who came to live in the house was Felix Valet, and he was born in 1800, so he kind of bridges the gap from the Colonial period of Ste. Genevieve into this new American period. Many of the town's buildings were also built in the German fashion. German immigrants, like French and Americans, sought to keep their cultures alive in the frontier. These step-gabled houses and commercial buildings look like old-world German buildings. Some time in the mid-1700's, French adventurers crossed the Mississippi River, to settle into a land that we know called Missouri. They withstood the hardships of pioneering life including tremendous flooding, adapted through Spanish and later American rule and endured German and other immigrants that seemed to flock to the western territory. But through it all, this town retained a bit of France, both through name and in spirit. Ste. Genevieve, it's a part of your Missouri Heritage.