

# Ste. Genevieve Common Field and Old Town Site Needs Protection

Ever since the Missouri Parks Association first met in Ste. Genevieve in 1989, it has been concerned about protection of the remarkable cultural landscape that is the Big Common Field—*Le Grand Champ*—the rich agricultural land in places nearly a mile wide in the floodplain of the Mississippi River that was the original magnet attracting early French settlers to cross the river to the site of what would be Missouri's first and most historic colonial settlement.

French authorities in 1752 divided the rich bottom land into the traditional "long lots" derived from Medieval France and granted the lots to families wishing to farm on the west side of the river. These long lots were nearly a mile long, extending from the river bank to the bluff line, but were only a few hundred feet wide. In this egalitarian manner, every family had equal access to all of the varying soil conditions across the bottomland. The individual lots were not fenced, but each family contributed a certain amount of labor each year to maintain a perimeter fence around the entire big field, in part to control livestock. Although the long lots have since been consolidated into larger farm holdings, this pattern of parallel, narrow divisions in the landscape—from river to bluff—remains quite visible from the air.

Near the river's edge, the settlers laid out their house lots, some



Long lots in the big common field, wider than in the 18<sup>th</sup> century owing to agricultural consolidation, are still evident on Google Earth.

in ranks of blocks four lots square and some at the river end of the owner's long lot. The houses were built of vertical logs, most of them with wall posts buried directly in the ground (*poteau-en-terre*). The result was a string town extending some three miles along the river with several clusters of houses in blocks in the north, middle, and southern part of the field.

Early on, it became apparent that the Mississippi was a problem, caving the banks and washing away some of the lots and houses, especially in the north—the original town center (*chef lieu*) where the commandant lived and the church was located. Then came a year of especially high water—1785, *L'annee des Grandes Eaux*—after which local authorities decided to relocate the town center, including the commandant's residence and the church—to approximately the midpoint of

the settled area, where a new church was built in 1787. Some settlers decided to rebuild on higher ground in various places along the bluffs, particularly at "Petite Cotes," the high ground between the forks of Gabouri Creek. With continued flooding, more families made the move to higher ground, and in 1793 Governor Carondelet ordered the removal of the church and the seat of government to the *Petite Cotes*, the "little hills" northwest of the big common field. More than thirty of the vertical log houses the settlers built there at Nouvelle Ste. Genevieve, most of them on stone foundations or sills, still stand to this day, the largest concentration of such survivals any place in North America.

Fast-forward nearly 200 years to 1973, another big flood year. When the waters receded they revealed bits of brick, ceramic, and

(See "Ste Genevieve" on Page 4)

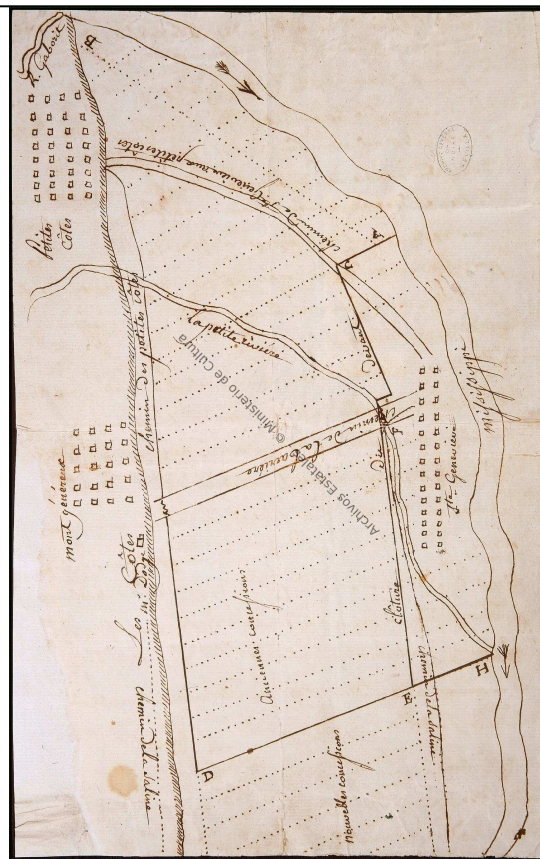


*("Ste. Genevieve" from Page 3)*

other artifacts near the downstream end of the common field. F. Terry Norris, archaeologist for the Corps of Engineers St. Louis District, and others undertook a series of surface investigations (the landowner did not allow excavation) that eventually substantiated ten 18<sup>th</sup> century artifact concentrations suggestive of likely house sites in an area of about 38 acres just inside an agricultural levee that had been built some decades previous.

His curiosity piqued, Norris did substantial analysis of channel changes of the Mississippi River since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and determined that the small 38-acre tract was almost certainly the only segment of the original three-mile string of 18<sup>th</sup> century houses that had not been completely obliterated by the river. Comparison with historic 18<sup>th</sup> century maps and with maps produced independently by David Denman for a University of Missouri multidisciplinary team studying French colonial land transactions and related documents suggested that the tract matched an area in the south-central portion of the common field where house lots were located. This stunning discovery of a portion of old Ste. Genevieve reversed the previous consensus that no vestiges of the original town remained.

But even as the original town site was in process of being documented, economic leaders of Ste. Genevieve and Perry counties and officials of the Southeast Missouri Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission were seeking potential sites for a new harbor and port on the Mississippi River. By 1983 they had created a New Bourbon Regional Port Authority and apparently settled on a site straight out across the big common field from the historic bluff-top community of New Bourbon, about three miles south of new Ste. Genevieve. In an undated environmental assessment, the site was described as an already operating sand and materials inbound transfer facility with twenty acres on the riverside of an agricultural levee and a potential industrial site of 105 acres behind the levee.



*This 1793 map depicts the location of old Ste. Genevieve. The surviving 38-acre archaeological site of the town is near the Ste. Genevieve label on the right side of the map. Mont Genereux is New Bourbon.*

When MPA met in Ste. Genevieve in 1989, it expressed concern about the proposed port's possible impact on the old town site, and urged its acquisition as part of the state historic site in Ste. Genevieve

as well as protection of the cultural landscape of the common field. (Another MPA recommendation, the acquisition of a French colonial vertical log structure for the state historic site, was satisfied in the wake of the big flood of 1993, when two such structures, the Beauvais-Amoureux and Delassus-Kern houses, were do-



*This diorama of new Ste. Genevieve as of 1838 is on display in the Beauvais-Amoureux house.*



nated to the park system.) Several years later the Archaeological Conservancy, a national non-profit that acquires endangered archaeological sites, apparently inquired regarding potential purchase of the old town site, but the owner was not interested in selling. MPA met in Ste. Genevieve again in 1999 and again urged state park acquisition of the old town site and vigilant protection of the big common field—protection that was even more vital to the state now that this archaeological site and cultural landscape of surpassing national and international significance were in the viewsheds of the state's new historic structures.

As it happened, there were inadequate funds for development of the New Bourbon Port, so activity there remained at low ebb for more than two decades. But during the severe economic downturn of 2009, the New Bourbon Port Authority received major economic stimulus funds from the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce that enabled it to commence construction of the \$6 million project.

Construction was well underway when MPA returned to Ste. Genevieve in September 2012 for its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. MPA for the third time urged more attention to the Big Common Field and especially to the old town site, and specifically asked the Division of State Parks, the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to closely monitor the development of the port facility and ensure that the common field and the old town site would not be encroached upon by further development.

By this time the National Park Service was also well along in a congressionally mandated study of the feasibility of NPS involvement in Ste. Genevieve. Though the study has not yet been released, it was clear during a workshop in August that NPS staff clearly recognized the surpassing historical significance of Ste. Genevieve *and of the cultural landscape of the big common field*. NPS officials, in fact, seemed startled to learn of construction of the new port next to the old town site—which, they learned, had recently been acquired by the Port

Authority of New Bourbon.

There is no doubt that Ste. Genevievians appreciate the remarkable tangible survivals of their extraordinary history. Numerous individuals in the community have been extremely generous with their time, effort and personal resources in restoring and maintaining their homes and other historic structures and sharing them with the public. Although the community in the past has generally not favored National Park Service involvement, it now seems highly supportive of an NPS presence in the town as an imprimatur of the community's significance that may help attract more visitation from afar.

The historic preservation movement began in the preservation of historic houses; an appreciation for the historic significance of cultural landscapes is a more recent phenomenon. The remarkable survival of *le grand champ*, in nearly unaltered condition, is one of Missouri's more remarkable preservation stories. That "the big field" includes also a small portion—undisturbed—of the original riverside site of old Ste. Genevieve makes it all the more significant. That the "old town" is beyond the protection of new Ste. Genevieve's preservation ordinances, that the bulk of the common field is in private ownership, and that a sizeable industrial enterprise is being constructed very close by makes it even more important that all interested parties work together to find a fair balance that allows appropriate economic development that is consistent with the preservation of Ste. Genevieve's priceless historic legacy.



The sign for the new port stands on the corner of the 38-acre Old Town site.