

Renae Farris

Investigating the Delassus House Teamwork in Field Archeology and History

The Delassus-Kern House, Highway 61, south of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, contained elements dating from the 1790s.

In December 1993, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MODNR) acquired a building on Highway 61 just south of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri—by all outward appearances an ordinary German vernacular house. The property contained a mystery that reached back in time over 200 years. Investigations by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) revealed the house to be a significant, six-room vertical log building hidden under 19th and 20th-century modifications. Documentary research proved that the property on which it stood had once been a part of Spanish land grants issued to a French nobleman, Pierre Dehault Delassus Deluziere, Commandant of New Bourbon. Dendrochronology tests performed on the house pointed to a construction date of 1793, the same year he immigrated to the area. These facts, combined with the large size and distinctive construction techniques, led HABS to the conclusion that it had been Delassus Deluziere's home. In order to make judgments about the building's eventual interpretation and restoration, Site Administrator Jim Baker needed further information on the property's layout, its former appearance, and its inhabitants' material culture.

The Middle Mississippi Survey (MSS), a regional archeological research consortium, expressed an interest in a cooperative project with the MODNR. Both Southeast Missouri State

The excavations on the site provided artifacts that confirmed the location of structures.



University (SEMO) and Murray (Kentucky) State University were involved in the venture. The MMS realized that the Delassus-Kern house, as it was known, would be an ideal challenge for the students. It provided an exceptional educational opportunity, because the field school would combine archeological excavations with archival research. The interweaving of two disciplines ultimately held the key to unlocking the riddle of the Delassus house.

The field school began on June 2, 1997. Seven historic preservation students and three anthropology majors, all from SEMO, participated. Dr. Kit Wesler, of Murray State University, led the archeological segment. Dr. Bonnie Stepenoff and Dr. Carol Morrow of SEMO directed the archival research. Supplementing these activities was a weekly lecture series, which featured diverse speakers ranging from representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to the MODNR. Each week at least 40 people, including interested members of the community, attended. On the day of his lecture, archeologist Dr. Terry Norris led a tour of the major French settlements of the region.

The community's support extended far beyond lecture attendance. Some people opened their homes to the students by providing free housing. Others visited the Delassus Deluziere site frequently, sharing their knowledge of the property and area. Local media covered progress of the school on a regular basis and promoted the lecture series.

Clues gathered from 12 test excavations and from archival research led to unexpected conclusions. The crew found prehistoric artifacts, primarily of the late Woodland and Mississippian periods, but nothing historic dating prior to 1830. This presented a puzzle since the house's construction type was consistent with the 1790s. Logically, at least a few items from the late-18th century should

have been recovered. Students found that the mystery deepened when archival research uncovered contemporary accounts of Delassus Deluziere's residence. These descriptions indicated a site on the high bluff behind the house's current position, but no structure of that period remained there.

Further investigations by the field school students revealed evidence which supported the historic accounts. Local citizens, having found artifacts from the time of Delassus Deluziere on the bluff, graciously shared their discoveries with the archeological team. Aerial photographs obtained from the U.S. Department of Agriculture displayed soil stains, such as might be left by a building, in the general location indicated by the historic descriptions. Research into newspaper articles



The combination of archival research and archeology benefits the students and the community.

revealed a piece from the 1860s that referred to the commandant's house as having once been in the midst of an orchard on the bluff. Oral interviews of area residents conducted by the students verified the orchard's site, which again matched historic accounts. It seemed that Delassus Deluziere's home had indeed been on the bluff. Could it have been moved? A relocation would explain the gap in the archeological record.

Studies of probate records and land transfers indicated that a local entrepreneur, Martin Sweek, had acquired numerous properties and structures in the vicinity of New Bourbon, and resold them at a profit. He purchased the land on which the Delassus-Kern house now sits in 1836 for \$200. In 1837 he sold it to a doctor and slave-owning farmer, Ichabod Sargeant, for \$1200. This substantial increase in value suggested a major improvement had been made in the interim. If the house had been constructed on the current site between 1836 and 1837, this would dovetail nicely with the archeological findings.

Was the house Delassus Deluziere's? The field school team found no archival records which would either confirm or deny this possibility.

Archeological investigations could not yield conclusive proof. To solve the mystery of the Delassus house, students had to apply the additional discipline of building analysis.

Close examination of the structure revealed a number of oddities. Since the HABS study, interior 20th-century modifications had been stripped away exposing the building's framework. Observers noticed several misaligned peg holes and notches. These suggested that the house may have been moved and then re-assembled. However, some features did not make sense even if the house were a reconstruction. Several notches were very unevenly spaced and missing at points where logically they should have been.

Analysis of the foundation also uncovered peculiarities. Constructed of limestone and sandstone, the foundation was unusual for the area. Although both of these materials were commonly used historically, they were not used in combination due to differing weathering qualities. In the cellar hewn logs, which served as floor joists, were poorly fitted to the sill log notches. This was not in keeping with the quality of the area's French colonial workmanship. One joist was a sawn beam, measuring a perfect four inches-by-eight inches, well-fitted to the sill. This proper matching of beam-to-sill implied that it was not a later repair, but a part of the building's original construction.

Evidence collected through various branches of study led to the hypothesis that Sweek had built the house from salvaged parts and then sold the property at a profit. It was conceivable that parts of Delassus Deluziere's house were retrieved and used in the current structure, but the evidence neither confirmed nor refuted this possibility.

Through the interdisciplinary nature of this field school, participating students gained experience in multiple fields of study. Christina Olson commented that the "combination of archival research and archeology was very beneficial" to her education. Students also learned teamwork, how to ferret out hidden history, and how to deal with difficulties encountered in various types of research. They felt that this training will prove invaluable. "The gaining of hands-on skills in basic field techniques will aid me in the future, both in graduate school and professionally," said Anne Kern. The field school will continue in 1998 with a new project in Ste. Genevieve.

Renae Farris is a graduate student in the Department of History at Southeast Missouri State University, and serves as teaching assistant to Prof. Stepenoff.

Photos by the author.