

Faire une Maison: Carpenters in Ste. Genevieve, 1750-1850

BY BONNIE STEPENOFF



Besides vertical log construction, deep porches like these—the Nicholas Janis House in Ste. Genevieve and the Manuel Lisa House in St. Louis—were also common.

(Image: Library of Congress)

French carpenters and joiners created a distinctive cluster of vertical log houses in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More than 20 of these sturdy timber buildings survived in the twenty-first century, but the identities of their builders remained obscure. Close examination of archival records in the small town on the west bank of the Mississippi River sheds some light on the question of who built the old French houses of Ste. Genevieve and also provides a glimpse of the lives of master craftsmen in a French

colonial settlement in the process of becoming an American town.¹

The master carpenters and house joiners of Ste. Genevieve were free white and black men who enjoyed relatively high social status. At least one of these master craftsmen served as a justice of the peace, involved in governing the town and county. Most of them owned substantial property, because a master carpenter needed a relatively large amount of resources and credit in order to buy materials and pay workers. Master carpenters

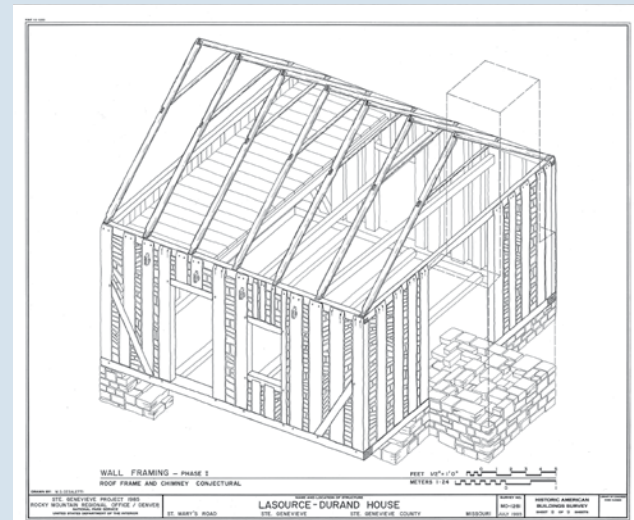
Building a Vertical Log House in Ste. Genevieve

Carpenters and house joiners in Ste. Genevieve and other French settlements learned to build vertical log houses from master craftsmen. Fathers taught their sons and masters taught apprentices, but the craft faded away by the middle of the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, Jesse Francis, who works as a museum curator for the St. Louis County Parks Department, is one of a very few people who know from personal experience how to construct a vertical log house, because he has been restoring French colonial buildings since the 1980s. He learned his skills from his uncle Charley Francis, who taught him about woodworking in the traditional way.

Describing the poteaux-en-terre (posts-in-ground) houses in an email to Bonnie Stepenoff, Francis said that the logs found in the surviving houses in Ste. Genevieve were generally cedar and about 16 to 18 feet long. Francis went on to explain that “the trees were cut down using a saw or axe and then flattened at each end.” Workmen hewed (cut and shaped) the logs that would be placed side by side to form a wall about six or seven inches thick.

To build a posts-in-ground house, workmen dug a trench and placed four vertical corner posts in it. Francis said, “A shoulder cut on the top of each corner post allowed the top plate to be nailed in place on top of them. Before placement the top plate was laid out on the ground and scribed with a diagram showing placement of windows and doors.” After assembling the four corner posts and the top plate, builders would erect the vertical logs. According to Francis, “Someone standing on the top plate would direct the placement of doors, windows, etc., by reading the diagram. Spaces between the logs were filled with bousillage, a mixture of mud and straw, stone, lime, or sand. A tool resembling a cooper’s adze was used for cutting a channel in each log’s side to hold the bousillage between the logs.”

For the roofs of these houses, builders fashioned old-world-style trusses (frameworks) made of oak and rafters (boards or planks) made of oak, poplar, river willow, or pine. According to Francis, “The southern style of poteaux-en-terre with a gallery around the building has rafters placed directly on top of the truss rafters. This placement results in those strange roof lines seen commonly in Ste. Genevieve. Roofing materials would be hand-split shakes made of white oak or shingle oak and



Germans introduced the log cabins we often associate with frontier settlement in North America. The French brought a vertical log construction technique that was common in both Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis in the eighteenth century. (Image: *Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress*)

in the south, cypress. The shakes were nailed in place on sheathing made of anything including poplar, oak or pine.”

Post-on-sill houses survived more frequently than posts-in-ground houses because they rested on firmer foundations. Francis explained that the “post-on-sill building had a stone foundation providing the building with either a crawl space or full basement. A sill log made of oak, walnut or other hard wood sat on top of the stone foundation.” The top of the sill would be mortised (cut to form a recess in which to place the upright logs). After that, said Francis, “Each log was then hewn from top to bottom and a tenon cut in the bottom to set into the mortise of the sill log. The top of the log was nailed in place like the poteaux-en-terre or the top could be mortise and tenon and pegged in place. Angle braces were placed on all four corners to stabilize the building. Roofing and trusses are generally of the same design as the poteaux-en-terre buildings.”

supervised journeymen (who worked for daily wages), apprentices (who were bound or indentured to work for room and board), free laborers, and slaves. Among those these masters employed were their own sons, who learned their fathers' trade. Collectively, they created an architectural legacy that stood the test of time.²

Flurries of construction occurred during five distinct periods in the town's history. The first settlers arrived around 1750 and built the Old Town of Ste. Genevieve on a flat stretch of land close to the river. A flood in 1785 severely damaged this original settlement, and in the 1790s residents (*habitants*) busily re-created their homes on higher ground in an area they called New Ste. Genevieve. During this same period, French émigrés established the neighboring village of New Bourbon that faded away after a few decades. Between 1800 and 1808, around the time of the Louisiana Purchase, builders supplied housing for newcomers including many Anglo-Americans as well as French-speaking people. Again, in the 1820s, when Missouri became the twenty-fourth state to join the Union,

construction boomed and French carpenters continued working in their traditional ways. Finally, between 1840 and 1846, craftsmen erected the last few vertical log houses in a town increasingly turning to Anglo-American and German-American building styles.³

For the earliest period, a rare surviving contract definitively ties a craftsman named Louis Boulet to the construction of a house for a prominent resident named Louis Boisleduc (Bolduc). Bolduc hired Boulet in June 1770 to "*faire une maison*" (build a house) with a rectangular floor plan measuring 26 by 21 French feet. One French foot equaled 12.76 English inches, and so the house would have measured 28 by 22 English feet. This was a small house, but most of the houses in the French settlement were of a similar size. The contract stipulated *poteaux-sur-solle* (post-on-sill) construction, in which vertical logs rested on a horizontal sill to form the exterior walls. The contract also called for *galeries* (porches) all around the house. *Galeries* of this type, which may have originated in the French colonies of the West Indies,

Bequette-Ribault House, 351 St. Mary Road, c. 1808, displays a galerie (gallery) all around. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)





Lalumandiere House, 801 S. Gabouri Street, c. 1829, undergoing restoration. The vertical logs are visible in places where the siding is missing. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)

offered shade in a hot muggy climate. Ventilation and relief from summer heat would also come from two doors, each six feet high, and five windows. Probably the house had only one or two rooms on the main floor and additional space in its enclosed attic under a roof that was to be covered with shingles. The house Boulet built would perish with the Old Town, but the contract described a type of house that became very common in New Ste. Genevieve.⁴

Boulet's contract offers clues about the economic and social position of carpenters in the French colony. Under its terms, Bolduc agreed to furnish all building materials and provide two men, "*deux hommes*," either white or black, who would help complete the job. The French farmers of Ste. Genevieve employed both free and slave labor. Slaves and free men toiled side by side in the fertile fields in the river bottom. It is likely that Boulet's "*deux hommes*" would work with him only during the months when they were not needed on Bolduc's land. The contract allowed more than a year to finish the project; the

completion date was September 30, 1771. For his efforts, Boulet would receive 350 livres in cash or beaver or deer skins.⁵

Another carpenter who settled in the area had ample property, including land and slaves, of his own. Nicolas Caillot *dit* Lachance accumulated wealth in the east-bank colony of Kaskaskia, before he crossed the Mississippi River in the 1780s. In this context, the word "*dit*" meant "called" or "known as," and "*Lachance*" meant "Lucky" or "the Lucky One." Caillot, his wife, and sons acquired several tracts of land in Ste. Genevieve, New Bourbon, and on the Saline Creek south of New Bourbon. After his death in 1796, his wife, Marianne Giard, became administrator of a very sizable estate that included valuable farm land, at least three slaves, livestock, furniture, silver goblets, and other items valued at more than fourteen thousand livres. Most of his children apparently moved away from the area before 1800, but his son Joseph stayed and continued to work as a carpenter through the early years of the nineteenth century.⁶



Guibourd-Valle House, 1 North Fourth Street, c. 1806, belonged to the Guibourd family, which was associated with Michel Badeau. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)

At the end of the eighteenth century, Jean Marie Pepin *dit* Lachance, another “Lucky One,” arrived in Ste. Genevieve after helping to build houses in colonial St. Louis. Born in Quebec, Canada, in 1737, he worked in St. Louis as early as 1767. Although he was a stone mason and not a carpenter, he had business relationships with carpenters first in St. Louis and later in Ste. Genevieve. In the 1770s, he enjoyed a good reputation as a master craftsman in St. Louis, where he owned some land, a house, and slaves. He seems to have harbored some radical political beliefs. During the French Revolution he helped to organize a “*Sans Coulottes*” group in St. Louis. In 1795, he insulted the local Spanish authorities and felt compelled to leave town. At first, he went to Vincennes, but some time later, he and his family came to Ste. Genevieve, where he organized a business with the son who shared his name. An account book dated 1803-11 survived to document the business, which employed local carpenters, including Joseph Lachance (son of Nicolas Caillot *dit* Lachance), in connection with several construction projects.⁷

Carpenters associated with the construction of vertical log buildings between 1800 and 1810 included Joseph Lachance and a newcomer named Michel Badeau. Born about 1785 in the French colony of St. Domingue, Badeau arrived in Ste. Genevieve sometime before 1808 (possibly by 1806). He may have been a white man, but he married a free woman of color named Caroline Cavalier and raised a large family, including three sons who followed in his footsteps and became carpenters. Records indicate that Michel Badeau worked for Jean Marie Pepin *dit* Lachance, who paid him daily wages on several projects. In 1813, he inherited money from Francois Badeau, who may have been his father, although the records are unclear on that point. Over the years, the Badeau family acquired substantial property, including lots at the corner of Washington and Fifth streets in Ste. Genevieve.⁸

Joseph Lachance and Michel Badeau were associated with the Bernier House (sometimes called the Bernier Barn), a somewhat puzzling example of early nineteenth-century *poteaux-sur-solle* construction. Oral tradition maintains that it was originally a barn, but sometime fairly

early in its history the owners converted it to a house. Repeated mentions of the Bernier “grange” in the account book of Jean Marie Pepin *dit* Lachance lend support to this common belief. The names of Joseph Lachance and Michel Badeau occur multiple times in connection with the Bernier “grange,” suggesting that they constructed, repaired, or modified it in 1809. Researchers from the University of Missouri identified this French vertical log building in a survey in the mid-1980s. The original log walls survive beneath clapboard siding and nineteenth-century additions, including verge boards, gabled dormers, and an entry porch with a hipped roof.⁹

Badeau and Lachance may also have built the *poteaux-sur-solle* Jean Marie Pepin *dit* Lachance House at 699 North Fourth Street in the early 1800s. The Pepin (Lachance) family included the elder Jean Marie (born in 1737) and his wife Catherine Lalumandiere (born in 1764). The couple had seven children, but by the time they came to Ste. Genevieve, most of them were adults. Jean Marie the second (1791-1833) married Julie Geron in Ste. Genevieve in 1810. By that time he may have taken

over his father’s business. He and Julie had four children, including Jean Marie the third (1817-1880). As the family grew, so did the house. Originally a one-room vertical log cabin (c. 1806), the house acquired a long sequence of additions.¹⁰

Badeau also has an interesting connection to the Guibourd-Valle House, an impressive example of *poteaux-sur-solle* construction completed in 1806. Historically, the house belonged to Jacques Guibourd, but in the 1930s members of the Valle family restored it. According to historian Carl Ekberg, the Guibourd house was the “first major residence built in Ste. Genevieve under American sovereignty.” Jacques Guibourd fled the slave rebellion in St. Domingue and arrived in Ste. Genevieve in 1799, but he occupied another residence for several years before completing this house c. 1806. Very significantly, Guibourd had a strong connection to Michel Badeau, who also came from St. Domingue. In 1813, the widow of Jacques Guibourd was executrix of the will of Francois Badeau, who left money to Michel Badeau.¹¹

The Badeau family has ties to the Auguste Aubuchon

View of south Main Street in Ste. Genevieve, showing galleries and typical roof lines. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)



House, 467 Washington Street, an early nineteenth-century *poteaux-sur-solle* residence that belonged to a descendant of one of the first French families to settle in Ste. Genevieve. Ekberg noted that the surname “Obichon,” or Aubuchon, appeared in very early records, and that the Aubuchons remained an important presence in Ste. Genevieve throughout the colonial period. In later years, it seems the Badeau family owned this property, although it is not clear who built the house. In 1853, Michel and Caroline Badeau sold two lots at the corner of Washington and Fifth streets, and one of them was purchased by their son Henry. By 2001, according to local historian Mark Evans, Auguste Aubuchon’s old home had deteriorated, but it remained “an excellent example of Ste. Genevieve’s colonial architecture.” In very recent times, a preservationist has purchased this house and is in the process of restoring it.¹²

During the 1810s and 1820s, another master carpenter, Michael Goza, lived and worked in Ste. Genevieve. In January of 1811, Lawrence Durocher signed an indenture binding his son Antoine as an apprentice to Goza, “to learn

the trade art and mystery of a Carpenter and House Joiner,” to live with Goza for five years, and to “faithfully serve his said master.” Goza, for his part, promised to “teach and instruct” the young man and provide him with “good meat drink and Clothing and Lodging.” Over the years, Goza became a prominent and influential citizen of the town. In 1819, he signed a document approving “the timber with which W. J. McArthur repaired the Jail, and the manner in which the work is done.” After Missouri became a state, Goza served as a justice of the peace, signing many official documents between 1822 and 1823. According to the family history, Goza died in Fredericktown, Missouri, in 1836. Antoine Durocher remained in Ste. Genevieve and became a solid citizen and householder, who served on a coroner’s jury in 1847.¹³

The Badeau family stayed on in Ste. Genevieve after Goza left town and passed away. Official documents reveal that Michel Badeau purchased a slave named Michael from Berthelmi St. Gemme in October 1836. Two years later, Badeau signed manumission papers granting Michael, age 26, his freedom for the sum of one dollar.

Aubuchon House, 467 Washington Street, c. 1800, has associations with the Badeau family. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)





Amoureux House, 327 St. Mary Road, constructed c. 1792, was the home of Pelagie Amoureux in the mid-1800s. (Image: Courtesy of the Author)

Papers signed by Badeau offer no explanation, but state that “for divers and sufficient causes me thereto moving, I am willing to manumit and set free my slave Michael.” It was not unheard of for a carpenter in Ste. Genevieve to purchase a slave, but perhaps it was unusual for the husband of a woman of color and father of a racially blended family to do so. Perhaps Badeau purchased Michael with the intention of freeing him, but two years passed before he signed the manumission documents.¹⁴

Henry Badeau ended up in a court battle in 1845 with a free woman of color named Pelagie Amoureux. Pelagie, the wife of a white man, alleged that Badeau grabbed her and shook her while she was walking down the street. After taking shelter on a porch, she reported that he threatened her and cursed her. The records provide no proof of the truth or falsity of Pelagie’s claims, but it is true that she made a similar claim of assault in 1841 against a slave named Charles. In the previous case, an all-white white jury found her claims to be groundless. As a matter of fact, the jury accused her of being a woman of poor character who set a bad example to the community. These cases attest to the complicated relationships between white people, slaves, and free people of color in Ste. Genevieve.¹⁵

While French vertical log construction apparently ceased after 1850, the Badeau family lived in Ste. Genevieve for another decade. Michel Badeau’s work as a master carpenter spanned nearly half a century, including the periods between 1800-10 and 1820-30 when the vast majority of the town’s vertical log structures were built. In 1860, Michel’s wife Caroline and several of their grandchildren died of cholera. Sometime after that, Michel, his sons, and their wives and children apparently moved to St. Louis, where Michel died in 1876.¹⁶

Badeau and the other master carpenters of Ste. Genevieve did not write their names on the houses they built. In a sense, they lived out their lives in obscurity, but they were successful men and substantial citizens. Michael Goza served as a county official. Nicolas Caillot *dit* Lachance owned large tracts of land, slaves, and valuable personal property. Badeau and his racially blended family also owned property. Caillot and Badeau trained their sons to carry on their work, and Goza instructed a young apprentice. These men left a mark on their community, but they could not have imagined that the houses they built would become a great legacy of the French period in the history of North America.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Research for this article depended to a great extent on the Ste. Genevieve Archives, microfilmed by the State Historical of Missouri, and available at several libraries, including the Special Collections and Archives in Kent Library at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. B. H. Rucker compiled the initial list of carpenters and other building tradesmen from census records. James Baker provided important comments and corrections to the original draft of this article.
- ² These generalizations are based on a close study of census records and historic documents that identified individuals in Ste. Genevieve as carpenters and joiners. For information on the trade of carpentry in the French tradition, see Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics, and the Eighteenth-century French Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 261-62.
- ³ Since the 1940s, the National Park Service (NPS) has sponsored numerous surveys of French colonial architecture in Ste. Genevieve. Results of these studies have been published in a number of reports, which will be cited in this article. For information on the history of Ste. Genevieve from 1750-1804, see Carl Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier* (Tucson: Patrice Press, 1996). For information on the history of Ste. Genevieve from 1804 to the end of the nineteenth century, see Bonnie Stepenoff, *From French Community to Missouri Town: Ste. Genevieve in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
- ⁴ Carl Ekberg, *Louis Bolduc, His Family, and His House* (Tucson: Patrice Press, 2002), 6-7; original building contract in Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 23.
- ⁵ Ekberg, *Louis Bolduc*, 6-7; Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 23.
- ⁶ Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve*, 429, 439; Louis Houck, *History of Missouri* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelly and Sons, 1908), volume 1, p. 366; Estate Papers, Mrs. Nicolas Caillot de Lachance (Marianne Giard), 1796, in Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 203.
- ⁷ Charles E. Peterson, *Colonial St. Louis: Building a Creole Capital* (Tucson: Patrice Press, 2001), 51-52. The Account Book of Jean Marie Pepin dit Lachance, 1803-11, is preserved on microfilm in the Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 6.
- ⁸ Stepenoff, *From French Community to Missouri Town*, 42, 53-54; Account Book of Jean Marie Pepin dit Lachance, Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 6.
- ⁹ National Historic Landmark (NHL) Nomination, on file with the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office, 2001, 16-17; Lachance Account Book, Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 6.
- ¹⁰ NHL Nomination, 2001, 18-19, Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folders 6, 203, and 246.
- ¹¹ Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) MO-1109; NHL Nomination, 2001, 17-18; Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve*, 443-44; Stepenoff, *From French Community to Missouri Town*, 25, 79; Account Book of Francois Badeau Estate, Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 114.
- ¹² NHL Nomination, 2001, 36-37; Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve*, 30-31; Property Deeds in Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 34; Mark L. Evans, *Commandant's Last Ride* (Cape Girardeau: Ten-Digit Press, 2001), 95.
- ¹³ Indenture between Lawrence Durocher and Michael Goza, 1811, in the Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 24; approval of repair work on the jail, Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 687; *Goodspeed's History of Southeast Missouri* (Independence: BNL Library Services, 1978 reprint of the 1888 edition), 314; Summons to serve as a juror in a coroner's inquest, Ste. Genevieve Archives, 1847.
- ¹⁴ Manumission document on file in the Ste. Genevieve Archives, Folder 419.
- ¹⁵ Stepenoff, *From French Community to Missouri Town*, 116-117.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-54.