

Signature Events

Throughout the year Ste. Genevieve hosts a variety of events celebrating their unique French heritage, rural roots and artistic community.

Event name: Ste. Genevieve County church Picnics

Description and context of Signature Event

Celebration of religion in a house of worship has been a part of Ste. Genevieve since its founding along the banks of the Mississippi. An early land grant given by the Commandant of Fort de Chartres required the grantee to furnish materials for a chapel.¹ Those first inhabitants of what was to become the first permanent settlement in what is now the State of Missouri had no resident priest and were ministered to by the Curé (priest) of Immaculate Conception parish across the river. In 1759, the growing village had its first resident pastor and its own parish register. It was originally named the parish of St. Joachim in the Post of Ste. Genevieve in the Illinois Country (Illinois Country described the area on both sides of river in the mid-Mississippi Valley)². The village had always been named Ste. Genevieve based on the 1752 census of the Illinois Country³. In 1766, the parish was first called the Parish of Ste. Genevieve.⁴ Both the town and the parish were named in honor of Ste. Genevieve, a French female saint (thus the e on the end of the word) who was the patron saint of Paris and well-loved by the French. At least three successive churches were constructed at the Old Town site approximately three miles south of present-day Ste. Genevieve. The walls of these churches were constructed by burying posts about five foot in the ground, a style of architecture known as *Poteaux en terre* (post in the ground). Town residents were

tasked with providing material or labor to construct the churches.⁵ A disastrous flood in 1785 caused a migration of the town's residents to the current location. In 1794, the last church structure was dismantled and moved to the New Town on orders from the Lt. Governor in St. Louis.⁶ This church building was replaced with a stone structure in 1837 and with the present larger brick structure in 1880.⁷

The religion of the area was Catholic under the French period of European control ending in 1763. That part of the Illinois Country on the west side of the Mississippi became under Spanish dominion and remained so until 1800. As the country of Spain was catholic, so remained the area of Missouri from St. Charles to New Madrid.

Following the Americanization of the area with the Louisiana Purchase in 1804, the first non-Catholic church in the Ste. Genevieve area was a Baptist church circa 1808 which no longer remains. Many of the early American immigrants to the Ste. Genevieve area came from Kentucky and Tennessee and were typically non-Catholic in their faith.

In 1832, a wave of German immigration began which was to last until 1880. Most of these early German immigrants were from the German duchies of Baden, Württemberg, Swabia and Bavaria. These southern German immigrants were predominately Catholic and their arrival caused the need for more church buildings. Since the local French descendants owned most of the very fertile land along the river in Le Grand Champ (the big field), the Germans had to settle farther west in the hills surrounding Ste.

Genevieve. It was there that they founded the predominately German villages of Zell, New Offenburg, and Weingarten named after locations near the southwestern German town of Offenburg. The Missouri hill country reminded them of their homes in the small villages of the Black Forest on the eastern side of the Rhine river. A chapel was

established at River aux Vases in 1842, the cornerstone for the Church of St. Joseph in Zell laid in 1845 and the Parish of Our Lady Help of Christians in Weingarten established in 1872.⁸ Other parishes established in the 19th century included Sacred Heart in Ozora (1898), St. Lawrence of Lawrenceton (1870), Immaculate Conception in St. Mary (1853), St. Philomena in Bloomsdale (1834– now called St. Agnes). The 20th century parish of St. Catherine of Alexandria in Coffman was established in 1919.⁹ In the 1850's, northern Germans began arriving in the Ste. Genevieve area and were predominately Lutheran. The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church was founded about 40 miles south of Ste. Genevieve in Perry County. The Ste. Genevieve Lutheran congregation was established in 1867 and their church building, Holy Cross, was completed in 1875, making it the oldest church building currently standing in Ste. Genevieve.¹⁰ Other early 20th century buildings in the town included a Presbyterian church completed in 1904 and a Methodist church in 1905 (later torn down circa 1935).¹¹

In order to construct these churches and their ancillary buildings, the parishioners held frequent fund-raising events in addition to the furnishing of materials and labor. Picnics where the general public was invited became a major source of such fund raising.

Ste. Genevieve's oldest existing newspaper for which we have copies began in 1872 (Fair Play) and continued to 1976. The Ste. Genevieve Herald began in 1882 and is still being published. Based on these existing records (which are not complete in the early years), St Mary's Immaculate Conception held a picnic in July 1873 for the benefit of a residence for the priest. They held picnics in 1875 and 1876 for the benefit of the church and a mission respectively. Bloomsdale's St. Philomena held a picnic in 1874 during the

laying of the cornerstone for their church building. In 1875, the Ste. Genevieve Parish held a picnic for the benefit of the church. Zell's St. Joseph parish held a picnic for their church in May, 1880. Our Lady Help of Christians in Weingarten held their picnic in September, 1889 for the benefit of purchasing their church organ.¹²

Church picnics are typically held during the summer or early fall. Fried chicken with ham or kettle beef dinners are offered to the picnic attendees and just about always include liver dumplings (a Ste. Genevieve food specialty). Sliced home grown tomatoes, green beans, coleslaw, mashed potatoes and gravy, dressing, and a myriad of pies, cakes, and other desserts round out the menu. At some festivals, Ste. Genevieve pork burgers are offered. Donated quilts are often raffled and homemade crafts are available for sale. During 19th and early 20th century church picnics, local bands provided music for general enjoyment and dancing. Other earlier amusements offered included lemonade and ice cream stands, games such as cane rack, wheel of fortune, fishing ponds, doll rack, knife rack, grab bag, fancy table, and sack, potato, barrel and three-legged races.¹³ 21st century church picnics in the outlying towns include antique farm equipment and their use demonstrated. Old-time horseshoes or the more modern washer tournaments have become a part of the activities. Other modern additions have included 5K runs and antique car cruises.¹⁴

The Ste. Genevieve County parish picnics are not only a means to raise needed funds for operation of the parish but also provides a homecoming or reunion for those that grew up in the area or live in more distant parts of the county. They have become a legacy of Ste. Genevieve County.

¹ Ekberg, Carl J., *Colonial Ste. Genevieve*, 1985, 379.

² *Analysis of Church of Ste. Genevieve Parish Registers*, R. Mueller, 2019.

³ *Recencement general du pays des Illinois de 1752*, Huntington Museum, Loudon Papers, Vaudreuil subsection, call No. LO426.

⁴ *Church of Ste. Genevieve Parish Register*, First book of baptisms and marriages.

⁵ *Ibid* Ekberg, 46.

⁶ Trudeau, Xenon, August 31, 1794, Ste. Genevieve Archives, SHSMO file XXXX, Order to build the church in new Ste. Genevieve.

⁷ *Church of Ste. Genevieve Parish Register*, Baptisms 1820-1843, consecration of the stone church, 287 - 289; *ibid*, Baptisms 1862 – 1904, 185, for dedication of the present brick church building.

⁸ *Ibid*, Baptisms, 1820-1843, 389; *Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, Centennial Booklet* 1972.

⁹ Archdiocese of St. Louis Archives, parish records for these parishes.

¹⁰ Ste. Genevieve Fair Play, September 2, 1875; *ibid*, May 16, 1967, plans for centennial celebration of Lutheran Church.

¹¹ Ste. Genevieve Herald, September 24, 1904, Presbyterian Church on Main nearing completion: Ste. Genevieve Fair Play, July 1, 1905, dedication of Methodist Church on June 25th.

¹² Ste. Genevieve Fair Play, July 17, 1873, August 26, 1875, July 20, 1876, September 10, 1874, September 16, 1875, May 8, 1880 and September 28, 1889 respectively.

¹³ *Ibid*, September 24, 1892, August 19, 1893, August 3, 1895, and June 11, 1921!; Ste. Genevieve Herald, July 1, 1922 for descriptions of parish picnic activities.

¹⁴ Ste. Genevieve Herald, July 24, 2019, Weingarten Our Lady Help of Christian and Zell St. Joseph parish picnic ads; *ibid*, August 14, 2019, Bloomsdale St. Agnes and Coffman St. Catherine parish picnic ads; *ibid*, September 11, 2019, Ste. Genevieve and Ozora Sacred Heart parish picnic ads.