French Heritage Festival and La Veillee
Ste. Genevieve, Missouri
Ste. Genevieve County

The French Heritage Festival is held annually in Ste. Genevieve’s National Historic District, celebrating 300 years of French culture in North America from Quebec to New Orleans and recognizes Ste. Genevieve’s status as having the greatest concentration of authentic French Colonial architecture that exists in North America. This event is sponsored by the Foundation for Restoration of Ste. Genevieve. The French Heritage Festival is one of Ste. Genevieve’s “signature events.”

The first French Heritage Festival was held in 1997 and was a three-day event over Memorial Day weekend with Saturday activities in St. Louis, a full day of activities on Sunday in Ste. Genevieve, followed by a half day on Monday at sites in Cape Girardeau. This format recognized the significance and shared history between these three French-founded Missouri communities.

Across the river, the Fort de Chartres and Prairie du Rocher celebrated the following weekend with the long-standing tradition of the Spring Rendezvous, an encampment and reenactment at the old French fort. These middle Mississippi River valley French communities as well as nearby Old Mines (west of Ste. Genevieve), St. Charles (west of St. Louis on the Missouri River) and Cahokia Illinois form the center of the crescent of French settlement and cultural traditions extending from Quebec and Montreal to New Orleans.

Over the years the Ste. Genevieve French Heritage Festival has featured lectures, dramatizations, traditional French fiddling, contemporary Parisian cabaret music, French storytelling, puppetry, mimes, dance demonstrations, French songs by the Petite Chanteurs of Ste. Genevieve, a Cajun gumbo competition, parades and marching by the French Milice (Militia reenactors), traditional crafts, local and regional food and wine, and plein air painting demonstrations. Honorary guests have included senators, state legislators and consular delegation representatives from Quebec. The official date of the festival has been established as the second weekend in June, which follows the tradition of the first weekend being reserved for the Rendezvous at Fort du Chartres.

The festival always opens with a ceremony on the steps of the Church of Ste. Genevieve with opening remarks by the mayor and other dignitaries, singing of the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” and a selection of French carols by the Chanteurs, a benediction by the parish priest, greetings by a modern day Marie Antionette and other costumed guests, a musket salute by the Ste. Genevieve French Milice and La Grand Promenade – a jovial walking parade from the Church through the streets of Ste. Genevieve led by the Milice. Flags of the US, Missouri, France, and Quebec are featured as
well as the historic flags of the Bourbon kings, the Spanish cross and the French colonial flags. These flags are flown at the Opening Ceremony and also carried in the Promenade.

The highlights of the event on Saturday include live music, traditional dance, storytelling, French cuisine, Cajun cuisine, children’s activities, skill demonstrations and reenactments, French Colonial architecture tours at the historic sites, a guided bird walk on the levee in honor of John James Audubon, and playful French mimes portrayed by local high school students. Some years have featured rare tours of historic structures not open to the public. In the late afternoon, the Felix Valle State Historic Site plays host to “La Veillee” (outlined below).

As the sun begins to set, all gather to hear French fiddle music performed by traditional artist Dennis Stroughmatt and l’Esprit Creole in an open-air concert which is free to all. The performance includes a discussion of French language and musical traditions in the region, with all songs sung “en Francais” and accompanied on the fiddle. Guests may enjoy beer, wine and plenty of dancing late into the night. The evening performance concludes with another parade, the “Promenade du Soir” in which the crafty fiddler entreats all the revelers present to follow him on a rousing walkabout of fiddling and singing around the square to wrap up the performance.

On Sunday, the main activities are the tours of the French and early American historic homes and tours of French Colonial Gardens of the region. This is a self-guided driving tour featuring historic sites with beautifully tended gardens ranging from purely ornamental to herb gardens and traditional French planted raised bed gardens. Many festival guests take these tours and then venture out to one of the renowned wineries in the region.

Enjoy traditional activities in the garden at this recreation of a La Veillee, a traditional French Colonial summer social gathering! The Felix Valle State Historic Site hosts special candlelit house tours of this 1818 stone structure. It was built as a combination home and store. The home portion is furnished and decorated in early 1800’s style. The mercantile side is stocked with goods of the period. Out back in the garden, French folktales are told. Then a demonstration of French folk dancing by the Dance Discovery Dance Troupe highlights the evening’s activities.

Bibliography
Cabot, Sandra. “sandracabot360@gmail.com.” stegenevieve@gmail.com, 11 June, 2020.
Figure 1 - French Heritage Festival opening ceremony.
Figure 2 - French Heritage Festival opening ceremony.
Figure 3 - French Heritage parade.
Figure 4 - French Heritage parade.

Figure 5 - French Heritage parade.
Figure 6 - French Festival spinning wheel demo.
Figure 7 - French Heritage Fest wooden box demo.
Figure 8 - French Heritage children’s brigade.
Figure 9 - French Heritage singers.

Figure 10 - Felix Valle Dancers.
Figure 11 - Attendees dance to fiddle music.

Figure 12 - Dennis Stoughmatt on fiddle.