



# ***Remnants of French Prairie du Chien***

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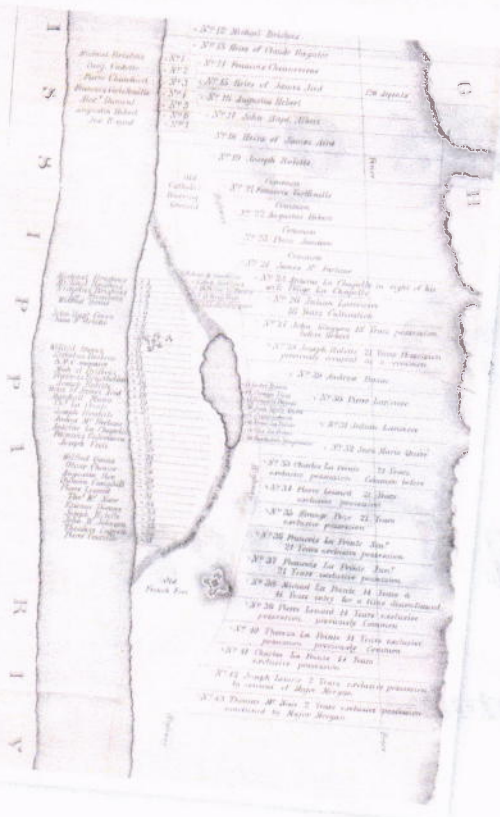
Long before recorded history, the prairie that came to be known as Prairie du Chien was a place of seasonal habitation by the Native Americans who farmed, hunted, and traded along the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers. It was Jonathan Carver who first recorded the prairie's name as *Prairie les Chiens*. Carver visited the prairie in 1766 and later wrote of the 300 lodges he saw on the prairie built by "adjacent tribes, and even those who inhabited the remote branches of the Mississippi", all of who had assembled that fall to trade with the French.

As early as 1685, the prairie had become a stopping place for French explorers, fur traders, and voyageurs. In that year, Nicolas Perrot constructed a fortified building on the south end of the prairie, which he and other traders used to store goods and peltries.



In 1773 Peter Pond came to trade on the prairie. He later wrote how several tribes met on the prairie each spring and fall to trade with the French who came from as far away as Illinois and Louisiana.

Within a few years of Pond's visit Frenchmen from Illinois settled on the prairie. In an informal method, each man chose a site on which to build his house. Some selected land on the large island facing the Mississippi just west of the prairie. This became the *Main Village*. Others made their homes on the prairie close to the water. First one village then a second village came into being. They were the *Upper Village* and the *Village of St. Fiol*. Many men also claimed a larger piece of land on the prairie behind the two villages. These were the *Farm Lots*. By 1780 there were Village Lots and long narrow Farm Lots stretching from the Mississippi River to the bluffs. Throughout the next thirty years more men settled on the prairie. Most were French-speaking and all were connected to the fur trade. These men had come from the Illinois County and Lower Canada. The villages grew and the farm lots increased.



In 1820 Isaac Lee arrived at Prairie du Chien from the Detroit Office of the Surveyor General. Lee was to determine who resided on the prairie and to take testimony. If the residents could prove that the land they lived on had been occupied and maintained for twenty years, the United States would give a person title to his or her land. Lee took testimony, interviewing men who had lived at Prairie du Chien since the 1790s. He then filed a report and drew a map based upon what he had learned. Lee's map platted the entire nine-mile prairie and is the first visual representation of Prairie du Chien.

Though Lee made his report in 1820, it took eight more years before an accurate survey was done of the village and farm lots at Prairie du Chien. In the summer of 1828, Lucius Lyon surveyed each individual lot. In his *Field Notes*, Lyon recorded the names of the three villages at Prairie du Chien. There were the *Upper Village*, the *Main Village*, and the *Lots in St. Friel*. The *Main Village* was located on an island west of the prairie. Across the *Marais de St. Friel* was the prairie on which the other two villages and the farm lots had been platted. The lots in the *Upper Village* and the *Village of St. Friel* faced the "highway" that stretched the length of the prairie. The *Upper Village* lots were north of the old burying grounds (the French Cemetery); the *Village of St. Friel* lay south of the burying grounds.

Isaac Lee interviewed all who claimed the lots. If one could prove at least twenty years of continuous occupation on a lot, the claimant would be granted a patent for the land. Men who had traded and lived on the prairie since at least the 1770s gave testimony as to who had lived upon each lot since the 1790s.







## The Ravoux House

The Ravoux house was located north of St. Gabriel's Church on land originally owned by Pierre Antaya. From the French Illinois Country, Antaya moved to Prairie du Chien in the late 1770s. He was one of three witnesses to the agreement, which in 1781 transferred the ownership of Prairie du Chien to the French-Canadian residents of the prairie. Soon after his arrival, Pierre acquired a large amount of land at Prairie du Chien, which he farmed. He constructed a home and several outbuildings, one of which is the Ravoux house. The structure may have had other uses before 1840 for it was constructed of hewn timbers with the spaces between the timbers filled with soft red brick. It follows the form called the *Quebec connected barn*.

Most of the early residents of the prairie, including the family, were French-Canadian and Catholic. Starting in 1817 priests were sent to Prairie du Chien to marry and baptize the residents. The priests came, stayed a short time, and then traveled to another community, living in a structure owned by a resident.

The first permanent pastor appointed to St. Gabriel parish was Père Augustin Ravoux. Born in France, Père Ravoux came to the United States as a missionary. He was in Prairie du Chien by March 1840. He established records for the parish and continued the construction of St. Gabriel's Church. In September 1841 he traveled up the Mississippi to Traverse des Sioux and began what was to be a period of missionary work among the Sioux. Père Ravoux returned to Prairie du Chien once more, in April 1843.

Rev. Joseph Crétin had become pastor of St. Gabriel parish when Père Ravoux had gone north. Father Crétin had brought with him a small printing press. Using this press, in 1843, Père Ravoux printed *Wakentanka Ti Ki Chankou* (Path to the House of God). This was a history of the Catholic Church and a Catechism in the Sioux language. Tradition holds that Father Crétin lived in this structure, and during 1843, Pere Ravoux lived with him while he printed the catechism.

## ***The "French" Cemetery***

In 1817, Father Marie Joseph Dunand arrived at the prairie. He was the first Catholic priest to visit Prairie du Chien and on May 10 blessed "the parish cemetery." In the short time he was on the prairie, he officiated at one burial, but it was the responsibility of the residents to maintain the records of all future burials until the arrival of the new priest.<sup>3</sup> Father Vincent Badin arrived ten years later. He maintained a record of the burials he blessed.<sup>4</sup> But from the end of his last visit in 1829 until Father Ravoux came to Prairie du Chien in 1840 there is no indication that anyone, religious or secular, kept a record of burials that occurred in Prairie du Chien. While Catholic priests visited to minister to the needs of the residents and Father Samuel Mazzuchelli began the construction of St. Gabriel's Church, there was no permanent priest in residence on the prairie until 1840. In that year, Father Augustin Ravoux was sent to Prairie du Chien to be the pastor of St. Gabriel's Church. He established a Register for the parish in which he recorded baptisms, marriages, and burials. He also laid out a new cemetery behind St. Gabriel's Church. From that date onward, the priests assumed that the Catholic residents of the prairie, upon their death, would be interred in St. Gabriel's Cemetery. Each burial was carefully recorded in the Register.<sup>5</sup>

Strange Powers had given the land, on which St. Gabriel's Church and cemetery were established, to Frederic Rese, the Bishop of Detroit, representing the Catholic Church, in 1836.<sup>6</sup> That same year, Hercules L. Dousman also gave a tract of land to the Bishop Rese "for the specific use of a burying ground." Half of the land would be a "Public Burying Ground," and the western portion was to be a Catholic burying ground.<sup>7</sup> This tract of land was located along the Highway directly east of the Old Catholic Burying Ground.

With two new cemeteries, the old Catholic burying ground fell into disuse. It was not maintained by St. Gabriel's Parish nor any arm of the Catholic Church. Fences, headstones, and burial markers deteriorated. Grass, weeds, and small trees grew in abandon. In the early 20th century people began to show an interest in the cemetery. Individuals, whose ancestors were buried in the cemetery, cut grass, cleared trees, and attempted to mark burials. At mid-century, the Prairie du Chien Women's Civic Club erected a sign in the midst of the burials. Since then interest in the cemetery has grown. Today, the Township of Prairie du Chien maintains the burial grounds.





## *The Main Village*

### **The St. Germain *dit* Gauthier House**



The St. Germain dit Gauthier house is located in the former Main Village of Prairie du Chien. It is constructed of hewn logs set horizontally and joined at the corners by dovetails. Within its structural details are several elements consistent with a method of French-Canadian construction called *piece sur piece a que d'aronde*: the length of the house is a multiple of thirteen feet, the hewn logs are on average five inches wide, and Roman numerals are present on most timbers in the house. At one time, over twenty-five French-Canadian *piece sur piece* homes stood in the Main Village. Only the St. Germain *dit* Gauthier home remains.



The St. Germain dit Gauthier house was constructed on Main Village Lot No. 7 as delineated in the 1820 Isaac Lee map. Main Village Lot No. 7 was confirmed to Jean Baptiste Caron as the lot had been occupied since 1790. Jean Baptiste Caron came to Prairie du Chien from Montreal in the employ of Berthelot and Rolette. While he engaged to work as a *milieu* for two years, he could also be asked to work in his occupation of *tailleur*.

The next occupant of Main Village Lot No. 7 was Guillaume St. Germain. He was from Yamaska and engaged to work for Forsyth, Richardson & Company at Michilimackinac for three years. At the end of his engagement, St. Germain remained in the pays d'en haut. According to family tradition, he moved to Green Bay where he married and then traveled westward, arriving at Prairie du Chien about 1825.



Three generations of the St. Germain dit Gauthier occupied the house and property until 1890 when the property was sold to Nina Dousman McBride. Mrs. McBride first rented and then sold the house to Charles Gremore. He moved the house in 1900 and relocated it upon Lot 1, Block 11, Main Village of Prairie du Chien (part of the original Main Village Lot No. 14). George Coorough purchased the house and property from Charles Gremore in 1902. The house stayed in the Coorough family until the relocation of the residents of the Prairie du Chien 4th Ward in the 1980s.





About this time, more people of French-Canadian heritage began arriving in Prairie du Chien. Two of these people were Louis Roberts and Michel Gauthier. In 1838 Roberts acquired the lot across from the Powers' house from LaChapelle. Either LaChapelle or Roberts constructed a house upon the lot.

The Roberts house is an example of another form of French-Canadian *piece sur piece* construction. This home is made of large logs, hewn on two sides and joined at the corners by half dovetails. The corners are reinforced by pinning vertical timbers to the horizontals at the corners.

In 1856 Louis Roberts and his wife Mary Rose Turpin sold the house to Michel Gauthier for \$300.00. They moved to Minnesota, where Louis was elected to the Territorial Board of Building and was largely responsible for locating the capital of Minnesota in St. Paul.

Examples of two storey French-Canadian log houses are rare. The Roberts House represents the final phase of the French-Canadian fur trade culture at Prairie du Chien.

The house was raised after the 1965 flood. For many years it stood empty. Scott and Jill Sheckler recently purchased the house. They removed layers of wall coverings. Today the unique log construction is visible as is the type of ceilings and floors found in French log houses of the area.

### ***Frenchtown Charmer***

At the very northern end of the *Village of St. Friol* was Farm Lot No. 25 granted to Pelise Lapointe, the wife of Antoine LaChapelle. As early as 1825 a house stood on this property, and an 1845 description located it close to the water. Over the years, the house was owned by Albert Gokey and members of the Cardin family.



In 1950 Earl and Mary LaBonne purchased the property, and they with their children, Jim and Carol, lived in the house. After their death, Carol and her husband, Irving DuCharme, restored the house to its early appearance. An earlier photograph of the house guided the restoration. Within the history of the home is the story of Earl LaBonne, whom many people knew as *The Charmer*.



Though constructed of brick, like other early French-Canadian houses in Prairie du Chien, this house was constructed of heavy timbers. The floor joists were formed from tree trunks with the bark still attached on the underside. And like the Powers and Roberts houses, and other French-Canadian logs houses, *The Charmer*, is a story and a half with only two rooms on the first floor.

## St. Gabriel's Church

In the 1830s Strange Powers purchased Farm Lot No. 28 from Joseph Rolette. About the same time Father Samuel Mazzuchelli came to Prairie du Chien for his first visit. He returned in 1835 when he began as "association for the building of a church." Powers must have been impressed by Mazzuchelli's fervor for in February 1836, Powers donated part of Farm Lot No. 28 as a place to build a church for the community. Work progressed slowly and not until 1839 was the cornerstone set in place. The church was named St. Gabriel's.



With the church begun, Father Mazzuchelli's work in Prairie du Chien ended. In 1840 Augustin Ravoux was appointed the first permanent pastor of St. Gabriel's, and it was under his and Father Cretin's direction that the church was completed.

In 1847 Father Lucien Galtier became pastor. He had begun the parishes of St. Peter and St. Paul in Minnesota Territory and is credited with being the founder of the City of St. Paul. Galtier installed the first Stations of the Cross and built the first rectory. When he died unexpectedly in 1866, Father Galtier was buried in front of the church.



Through the years, St. Gabriel's Church has undergone many changes. During Rev. Peter Becker's pastoral term, St. Gabriel's was extensively remodeled in 1907. By the 1960s cracks appeared in the ceiling because of the weight from the arches Father Becker had had installed. To save the structure, extensive remodeling was done, but the stone walls are the same from the time of Father Mazzuchelli.





### ***The Upper Village*** **The Francois Vertefeuille House**

Two and a half miles north of the city of Prairie du Chien, along County K – known as Frenchtown Road by people born and raised in Prairie du Chien – stands the Francois Vertefeuille house. Built of hand-hewn logs in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the house is all that remains of a small village, called the Upper Village of Prairie du Chien, established at the north end of the prairie by French-Canadian voyageurs. Behind the house flows the Mississippi River.

Although Francois Vertefeuille lived at Prairie du Chien by 1809, he was not the first owner of the house. The lot on which the house stands had been part of Farm Lot No. 15, which had been occupied by Marie Souigny prior to 1799. She sold the tract to Joseph Rolette who then sold the land to James Aird. Of the four people connected to the early history of the house, only Marie Souigny and Francois Vertefeuille lived in the house.

The house is an example of French-Canadian *pièce sur pièce en coulisse* architecture in which hewn logs are set horizontally by sliding one end of the log into a vertical slit in the coulisse. The logs are notched and secured by dovetailing at the corners. The Vertefeuille house was built in two stages. The old section is the room to the south in which is set the front door. The addition is the north section, which includes the back door and the stairway to the second floor. The addition was built circa 1820-1825, after Francois Vertefeuille acquired the property.

Until the present owner acquired the property in the 1980s, all of the families who had made the house their home were of French-Canadian heritage.

The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



## ***The Village of St. Friel***

### **The Strange Powers House**

Little is known about Strange Powers. He was a British-Canadian and arrived at Prairie du Chien about 1799. He was probably drawn to the community because of the fur trade and was often employed as a carpenter and baker. Powers claimed Farm Lot No. 35. About 1818 Powers married Euphrosine Antaya. This made Powers and Pierre LaRiviere brothers-in-law. That may be the reason that LaRiviere sold Powers the lot to the north of his house.

A house may have stood on the lot when Powers purchased the land from LaRiviere. The house originally was a two room structure constructed of hewn timbers and small logs. To build the house, large hewn timbers were laid on a rock foundation to form the sill plate. At the corners and every five feet, vertical squared timbers were mortised and pegged into the sill. A groove had been cut into the opposite sides of each timber and small logs, with the bark still attached, were slid into the grooves to form the walls. The space between the logs were filled with a mortar, and all were whitewashed. This timber and log house is an example of French-Canadian *piece sur piece a tenon en coulisse* construction. Both Strange and Euphrosine lived in the house until their deaths.

Before 1870, a brick structure was built behind the house. Later the two were joined to form one house. In the 1970s, Dale Klemme and Cheryl Mader purchased the Powers house. They uncovered the interior walls, exposing the log construction. Dale also explored a storage area under the house in which he found many objects linked to the fur trade history of the home.

### **The Louis Roberts House**

The lot on which Strange and Euphrosine Powers' stood was large, stretching to the north and down to the *Marais de St. Friel*. In the 1830s, Powers divided his land into smaller lots and offered them for sale. Pierre LaChapelle purchased the land across the dirt highway from the Powers' house.

