Prairie du Chien:
The Americanization of a French Settlement

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Introduction

The French had a significant influence on the settlement of the United States, impacting city planning, land divisions, architecture, religion and many other aspects of life. Coming to the United States in search of trade and land, they spread their culture and heritage via the establishment of trade routes, particularly through the economics of the Great Fur Trade and in rare instances farming communities.

In Wisconsin there too exists a French legacy. Many settlements throughout the state bear French names, specifically those scattered along or near the Mississippi River such as La Crosse, Trempealeau, Prairie du Chien, and Platteville. We focus our case study on the rise and fall of French influence in the settlement of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, located just north of the Mississippi and Wisconsin confluence. The purpose of this study is to understand the French settler’s impacts, if any, on the cityscape and traditions of Prairie du Chien. Furthermore, we will assess how those impacts and traditions transcended time through architecture, land distribution, toponymy, and festivals.

The story of Wisconsin and the settlement of Prairie du Chien is perhaps so intriguing because it is the story of “the Americanization of a French settlement,” a process coined in 1908 by Rueben Thwaites. Beginning with the first French expeditions of Joliette and Marquette to the area in 1673, the French settlement and its socioeconomic structures flourished and therefore remained unchanged for nearly two full centuries. Following the war of 1812, the Americans for the first time take possession of Prairie du Chien and consequently started its Americanization through the incorporation of the area into the United States and with it changing land use patterns. Although the modern day residents of Prairie du Chien Wisconsin are not French due to later waves of immigration, a loose sense of French heritage is still connected with the place through toponyms as well as the remaining French heritage sites and festivals.

Methods

Historical Review

The first section of our research will highlight the captivating history of the French settlement of Prairie du Chien from the first landings in 1673 until present day. The historical narrative examines the transformation and Americanization of Prairie du Chien. To properly understand the significance of French settlement and heritage in Prairie du Chien, it is imperative to extend one’s knowledge to include a general overview of French settlement in North America. Thus, the historical narrative’s focus, at first, will encompass the broader arena of North America. Next our perspective will narrow slightly to the territory that would eventually become the state of Wisconsin and finally we will explore the city proper of Prairie du Chien, including its unique settlement style. The research and literature used are vast; a majority
of it, however, can be attributed to the Wisconsin State Historical Society. For a full literature listing, please see the bibliography.

**Toponymical Study**

Furthermore, a genealogically based toponymical study will compare the familial lineage and influence on the toponyms of Prairie du Chien (see appendix 2). Our study traces several of the prominent French surnames and their connections to place names and historical sites.

To accomplish these objectives, we utilize several historical resources including the extensive name study by McBride in conjunction with the Wisconsin State Historical society. Within the realm of toponyms, we created a thematic map of Prairie du Chien which focuses on the French Heritage sites and places with French origin toponyms. The purpose of the map is to allow the greater public to understand the importance of French history in Prairie du Chien.

**Plat Survey and Remote-Sensed Image Comparisons**

The land plot comparison allows us to identify trends in preservation or elimination of French heritage settlement influences. The comparison utilizes .TIFF images of Prairie du Chien plat maps ranging from 1820-2001 (see appendix 3). Each image is compared in a qualitative sense, i.e. side-by-side comparison. Most notably, the plat maps depict the changes in the French influenced long lots, a cadastral system which formed the original division of land plots in the city of Prairie du Chien. Beyond comparing plat map surveys, an aerial photo assessment aims to identify the transformation of the cityscape. Aerial photos provide a vantage point not easily visible from ground level, showing developments in a three-dimensional view for a qualitative analysis of changes in the cityscape.

**Historical Review**

**FRENCH SETTLEMENT: NORTH AMERICA**

In the early 16th Century, prominent European powers sought the procurement of additional territory in the New World. With extensive Spanish and English claims already held, the French proved late in their exploration of the New World. Not until the mid 1500s would François I the French crown take heed and send official voyages to the Americas seeking territory in the name of his majesty.

By that time, however, Spaniards and Portuguese as well as the English already laid claim to the most desirable parts of the New World including Central and South America. Hence, the French purposely laid claim to as much territory as possible, essentially any lands not already held under the jurisdiction of other European powers. That, in turn, left the French sandwiched between the English and Spanish worlds.
The 1530s and 40s saw Jacques Cartier’s exploration of North America. Cartier’s voyage to Canada established a French presence in the St. Lawrence River Valley. That presence laid the foundation for a wave of successive explorers including Samuel de Champlain. In 1608 de Champlain founded the first French base at Quebec. From the newly founded stronghold Quebec, the French sent parties westward as permitted by local Indian tribes to further their exploration and thus their claims to territory not occupied by other European powers.

In 1634, Samuel de Champlain, Governor of New France, sent Jean Nicolet west on a journey to explore the great interior and a route to the Orient, or the Northwest Passage. According to the records of Catholic Jesuit missionaries, Nicolet traveled from Quebec via Lake Huron then through the straits of Mackinac into Lake Michigan, stopping at the shores of what is now Green Bay. Expecting to encounter Asian peoples, Nicolet donned a Chinese damask robe to greet them but met, instead, a small group of Menominee Indians. That encounter marked the beginnings of what would become an extensive arrangement of Franco-Indian communities throughout the Wisconsin area.

FRENCH SETTLEMENT: WISCONSIN

Forced westward into Wisconsin by social, political, and economic disruptions of European settlement and inter-Indian warfare, the Mesquakies or Fox Indians settled on what is now called the Fox River. The Fox tribe became a prominent middleman of the fur trade.
controlling access to the Fox-Wisconsin River portage, a vital link to the Mississippi River. They, along with the *coureurs des bois*, or individuals who illegally participated in the fur trade, circulated throughout the Wisconsin area. Consequently, many newcomers freely married into neighboring Indian tribes giving rise to extensive Franco-Indian métis communities, including the future settlement of Prairie du Chien.

Many French explorers sought a westward route to the Orient, the Northwest Passage. Along their way, however, a surprisingly abundant array of wildlife, including bison and beaver, astonished them. The allure of large quantities of both animals and seemingly unoccupied land proved tempting and ultimately too strong. Consequently, French explorers opted to construct settlements and forts along the Mississippi River—the epicenter of those settlements was Prairie du Chien (Karn, 90).

The heavy dependence on the Fox-Wisconsin Portage connection, which linked Green Bay to Prairie du Chien, acted as a catalyst in the creation of fur trading forts as well as French-Canadian settlements. A profitable and thus significant settlement for many fur traders, Prairie du Chien provided alternate routes by which goods such as copper and furs could be shipped to Europe either via Quebec or down the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico and back to France.

The mid 1600s saw the emergence of another distinguished group of French: the Jesuits. The French Jesuits’ presence stretched from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi. Included among those Jesuits were Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet. Significant to our study, Marquette and Jolliet passed through Green Bay in May 1673, taking the Fox-Wisconsin River portage on their way to the Mississippi River where they passed near the future site of Prairie du Chien.

Facsimile of the autograph map of the Mississippi or Conception River drawn by Father Marquette at the time of his voyage. Image ID: WHI-42824
Prairie du Chien is located immediately on the east bank of the Mississippi River just above the mouth of the Wisconsin River. In colonial times, most persons considered that region to be a part of western Upper Canada, due north of the Louisiana territory. Still others referred to the area more specifically as Illinois Country, or a loosely defined region of the middle Mississippi Valley characterized by the similarities among settlements and communities found throughout that vicinity.

During the exploration of the New World, French explorers claimed extensive lands, more than they could effectively occupy. Spread thinly, a solution surfaced: the French built a series of outposts at the limits of their claims. Hence, Prairie du Chien became an outpost controlling northern access to French territories.

A passage from the tenth volume of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections* describes the first probable establishment at Prairie du Chien. Not surprisingly, the excerpt comes from a Frenchmen’s letter, the explorer Robert de La Salle known best for his exploration of the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basin. The following passage is one of the earliest records of a possible settlement at Prairie du Chien written the 22nd of August, 1682:

“Six weeks afterward, all having returned to the Ouisconsin with the Nadouesiaou on a hunt, the R. P. Louis Hennepin, and the Picard, resolved to go to the mouth of the river, where I had promised to send messages, as I had done
by six men, whom the Jesuits deceived, telling them that R. P. Louis and his fellow travelers had been slain. [...] they [the Indians] did it in order to secure their portion of the merchandise, of which they feared they would receive none if they once entered the village where the Frenchmen were to go” (Draper 1909, 321-2).

La Salle’s letter clearly confirms the existence of a village at the mouth of the river, the Ouisconsing. As depicted on several maps of the late 17th and early 18th Centuries, the Ouisconsing proves to be the same river that today bears the name Wisconsin. Knowing this information, we nevertheless cautiously assume the village to which La Salle refers is none other than the future settlement of Prairie du Chien (Franquelin’s “Map of 1688” featured later in this section employs the term Ouisconsing).

In 1714, according to Trewartha, the French Crown reversed a previous edict banning fur traders from the area that is today Wisconsin. The inconstant nature of the French monarch proved advantageous for fur traders, who seized the opportunity to partake in the highly profitable trade found throughout Wisconsin. The Fox-Wisconsin waterway remained a vital link to the Mississippi hence the many fur traders’ incentive to seek a truce with local tribes, most notably the Fox who held control of the Fox-Wisconsin portage.

Typically, the French came “as exploiters, not as settlers, and as a result their settlements were temporary and unsubstantial” (Trewartha, 182). The French preferred easy to construct outposts. Those outposts proved cost-effective and, thus, enabled lucrative trade among the native tribes inhabiting the area. Between 1650 and 1700, haphazard and sporadic settlements characterized the French way of life. An attribute of French “voyageurs”, random settlement patterns lasted until circa War of 1812 (182).

In contrast to the typical French settlement, Prairie du Chien developed a distinctive pattern of land usage that characterized all the communities within the Illinois Country (described later on in this section). Unlike many French Canadian frontier settlements, however, Prairie du Chien never attained the status of missionary center. Rather, the locale just north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin served first as a rendezvous point for French Canadian fur traders. More notably, a group of French Canadian coureurs des bois fleeing Indian wars on the Upper Mississippi established a trading post at the mouth of the Wisconsin River in 1737.

By the 1750s a distinctive French presence, both commercial and military, characterized the small settlement of Prairie du Chien. The 1750s also saw the construction of a French fort at Prairie du Chien presumably as a reaction, anticipatory in nature, to a potential war with Britain. The existence of such a structure is best known through Jean-Baptiste-Louis Franquelin’s “Map of 1688” depicting a fort just north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin, arguably at or near the exact village site of Prairie du Chien, labeled as “Fort S. Nicolas.” Franquelin was
the first cartographer to record the name and location of Fort St. Nicolas. A credible mapmaker, Franquelin rose to prominence with the acquisition of royal hydrographer to the French king, creating several important maps of New France, particularly of Canada (during this period Prairie du Chien was considered a part of Canada).

Following his compatriot's example, French navy cartographer Nicolas Bellin's map of 1755, "Parite Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou Canada" also denotes a fortification "Ancien Fort François de S. Nicolas" in the same location as Franquelin's map. Both Franquelin's and Bellin's maps most probably pay homage to a fort supposedly erected in 1683 by Nicolas Perrot, a French-born explorer and fur trader responsible for claiming large tracts of land in the name of his majesty the French crown. The likelihood that Perrot constructed a fort at Prairie du Chien is given further credible evidence in Bellin's published works of 1755 in which he states: "Nicholas Perrot built a fort at the mouth of the Wisconsin" (Miracle, 1995).
In the years that followed, nearly all significant maps depicting La Nouvelle France maintained Franquelin’s precedent of the denotation of Ft. St. Nicholas north of the Mississippi and Wisconsin confluence: D’Anville 1755; Coven’s and Mortier’s Amsterdam Atlas of 1757; and Atlas Moderne (Paris) 1762. Thus, to learn that scholars hold a general consensus that such a fort existed north of the mouth of the Wisconsin should come as no surprise.

Beginning in the mid 1700’s, the Hundred Years War began in Europe and in North America manifested itself as the French and Indian War also known as the War of Conquest, or “Guerre de la Conquete” (St. Feriole Island Pamphlet).

In North America the French and Indian War, primarily fought between French and British forces, resulted in a substantial loss of French territory in what is now modern day Wisconsin. This conflict was total war between the two aggressors and its main cause was a desire by both sides to occupy and/or expand onto lands rich in pelts for fur trading. At the time of the French defeat by the British in 1763, New France consisted of what is today French Canada, lands west of the Appalachian Mountains, and a north south stretch of land from Wisconsin and Minnesota south following the Mississippi river through to New Orleans. Following the defeat, the French territory was given over to the British. Nevertheless, the French influence remained strong in the Prairie du Chien region of Wisconsin.

The village of Prairie du Chien first acquired major significance as a trading center after the war, when the land on which the city was surrendered and became British Territory. More specifically, Prairie du Chien fell to British sovereignty with the Peace of Paris in 1763 which resulted in the collapse of French political power and the consequent establishment of British posts in former French territories. Most historians regard this event as the end of the French Regime in North America; from here, the French saw only a decline in their prominence.

Though under British jurisdiction, Prairie du Chien maintained its French identity nonetheless. British rule seemed more a formality than an alteration to daily life and customs. It made little difference to the French settlers, often metis, and their cultural life, especially given the village’s status as a frontier post.
Always recognized as an early Franco-Indian village, Prairie du Chien’s strategic site at the mouth of the Wisconsin River enabled the post to thrive through the conflict. In 1781, Indians formally ceded a tract of land to the white settlers so the settlers could develop a formal town. Following the American Revolution in 1783, the town of Prairie du Chien fell from the hands of the British to the Americans. Slowly the Americans pushed into the region, edging the French traders out. The French influence on the fur trade significantly diminished between the American Revolution and the War of 1812. By 1801 the US Census counted 550 people living in the settlement, a large proportion of which consisted of French Canadians, mainly traders and voyageurs retired from the fur trade.

Nevertheless, many residents still retained ties with the dwindling fur trade. Less than a decade after the first US census in Prairie du Chien three well organized and financed British fur companies (a small testament to a relatively short British occupation), including the Mackinac Company housed important depots if not headquarters at Prairie du Chien. Although most of the remaining companies and businesses linked to the fur trade no longer retained their French ownership, many of them consisted of French clerks and voyageurs. French Canadians upheld control of the town’s trading post, for example. Indeed, the town’s population remained predominantly French Canadian until the years leading up to 1812. An 1811 description of
Prairie du Chien from Faith Miracle's *Maps of Encounter: the French in Seventeenth-Century Wisconsin* depicts the town's Indian and French roots:

“Prairie du Chien is an old Indian town which was sold by the Indians to the Canadian traders about thirty years ago, where they have ever since rendezvoused, and dispersed therein in various directions. The Indians also sold them at the same time a tract of land measuring six leagues up and down the river, and six leagues back of it. The village contains between thirty and forty houses, and on the tract just mentioned about thirty two families, so that the whole settlement contains about 100 families. The men are generally French Canadians, who have married Indian wives: perhaps not more than twelve white females are to be found in the settlement (Miracle 1995, 21-2).”

As the excerpt suggests, Prairie du Chien consisted of mostly French-Canadians, often métis—or the marriage of a European to an indigenous person—thus signifying the notion of a mixed race. Although somewhat debated, most historians agree that French-Canadian cardinals were the first non-Indian inhabitants to permanently settle at Prairie du Chien. With the growth of the fur trade, which proved an important cultural identity for many French settlers, came more and more French-Canadians to the strategic site just north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin: Prairie du Chien.

For a relatively brief period of time, frontier towns like Prairie du Chien largely escaped the influence of Washington. Prairie du Chien coalesced as a pioneer settlement around The Fort Crawford trading post built in 1814. By 1816, however, the arrival of American troops saw the occupation of the Fort Crawford garrison which, in turn, marked the establishment of an official American presence.

Regarded at that time as one of the last Franco-American communities, Prairie du Chien increasingly lost its French essence. An 1820 survey reveals that a mixture of French and English names best characterized those holdings of the American Fur Company located down by the river. The survey also reveals that 43 larger holdings stretching from the river to the bluff line possessed the same mixture of French and English names as the holdings down by the river. Thus, a good indication that by 1820 many Anglos infiltrated the Franco-Indian village of Prairie du Chien arises. Clearly, the American Fur Company played a significant role in the undermining of the community's French identity.

**PRAIRIE DU CHIEN SETTLEMENT STYLE**

By the early 1800s, Prairie du Chien shared a similar pattern of land usage with many other settlements in the Illinois Country. In fact, nearly all French settlements in the Illinois Country (as holds true for most French settlements in North America) utilized the same cadastral system, or a certain method of demarcating property boundaries: long lots. A long lot is, as defined by Terry G. Jordan, a cultural geographer known for his extensive knowledge on the
subject, is “any rectangular parcel of land whose depth was at least three times its width,” (Ekberg 1998, 5-6).

Within the context of the Illinois Country, the longlot’s derivation stems back to medieval Europe. As author Carl J. Ekberg notes in his book *French Roots in the Illinois Country*: “Rectilinear longlots associated with distinct geographical features, either natural or artificial—streams, dikes, canals, forest, or roadways—developed in many regions of Europe during the Middle Ages,” (Ekberg 1998, 6). Those regions typically associated with long lots in Europe included the German-speaking world and, more notably for our purposes, northern France.

Applied to Prairie du Chien, the cadastral pattern of long lots fell into three general geographic areas. The first was the Main Village which included the likes of Fort Crawford, at this time (from 1816 on) an American military base, and the American Fur Company. Located to the village’s extreme west on land that became an island during high waters, the Main Village served as the principal residential center. Some of the most important members of the community lived in the Main Village including the prominent Nicolas Bolvin, francophone US Indian agent. The second and third areas that made use of long lots are St. Friol Village and Upper Village—additional clusters of residences located near the bank of the Mississippi River. Finally, agricultural lands situated on the mainland running east from the riverfront to the bluffs acted as the third region to employ the use of long lots.

In particular, Prairie du Chien exhibited two distinct types of long lots, one for residential properties and one for agricultural lands. That distinctive pattern of separate residential and agricultural plots was unique to Prairie du Chien and Prairie du Chien alone. To expound: distinguishing living spaces from work spaces through the use of long lots was the key factor that set the structural development of Prairie du Chien apart from the other settlements in the Illinois Country.

Principally located in the Main Village (on the island), residential long lots contained anywhere from 4 to 7 acres of land. Those long rectangular lots ranged typically from a width-to-length ratio of 1:10 to 1:20, with the long sides running perpendicular to the Mississippi. Furthermore, most lots constituted small village estates. In addition to dwelling houses, lots contained: barns, stables, pigpens, chicken coops, orchards, and kitchen gardens. Inadequate to accommodate arable fields, long lots thus provided for the division into residential and agricultural ones.

Unlike residential lots, agricultural long lots occupied the mainland proper stretching westward from the high bluffs to the bank of the Mississippi. To further distinguish those lots from the village ones (on the island), many residents referred to them as “land lots”. United States land commissioners, on the other hand, called them “farm lots”. Commonly, many inhabitants who lived in the Main Village also owned one or more land lots. Ranging anywhere
from a width-to-length ratio of 1:5 to 1:10, agricultural long lots maintained areas between 32 and 281 square acres. Interestingly, some residents of St. Friol and Upper Village (located near Mississippi riverfront) owned contiguous plowlands that stretched from their residential property back to the bluff line. Such residential-agriculture long lot patterns proved reminiscent of medieval Europe, specifically northern France.

Additionally, a fence line running parallel to the Mississippi River further divided agricultural long lots into two sections. Portions of lots nearest the bluffs or east of the fence line presented the best soil conditions and thus owners devoted arable tillage to those areas. Segments nearest the riverfront or west of the fence line, in contrast, yielded lesser quality soil; common pasturage became the subsequent use. To identity more specifically those sections of land lots held in common pasturage, members of the community called them the “Commons”.

In general the tripartite system, or the division into three parts, best characterized the land pattern at Prairie du Chien. The nucleated village—the Main Village and the clustered residences of St. Friol and Upper Village—comprised the first element. Next, sections of land lots devoted to arable farmland made up the second factor. Thirdly, the Commons or the pastoral aspect of land lots provided the last component of the tripartite system at Prairie du Chien. Not surprisingly, the tripartite system exercised at Prairie du Chien shares a common origin with the long lot, it, too, traces its roots back to medieval Europe including a large number of villages in France.

Nonetheless, the distinct division of long lots into residential and agricultural ones was not the only feature that set Prairie du Chien apart from other French settlements in the Illinois Country. A deficiency in the use of the 3-field system, rather the complete lack thereof, once again characterized Prairie du Chien as unique. In fact, Prairie du Chien was one of the only French settlements in all of North America that refrained from using the 3-field system. Specifically, crop rotation and fallow fields failed to ever obtain importance. Additionally, fodder was nonexistent. Although farmers had the resources to provide fodder to cattle, they saw no need to do so as the cattle, many thought, managed to forge sufficiently during the winters without additional aid.

The detail to which the land use pattern is described draws largely on peace of justice and US land agent Isaac Lee’s map of Prairie du Chien in 1820:
Facsimile of the plan of Prairie du Chien Settlement in 1820.
(De Julio 1996, 41-2)
TOPONYMIC STUDY

The next section will highlight toponymy, or the scientific study of place-names. The toponyms' origins and meanings will provide insight to the preservation of French Heritage in Prairie du Chien. Specifically, a toponym is a named point of reference in both the physical and cultural landscape on the Earth's surface, including natural features such as streams and artificial ones like cities. For our purposes, more detailed features of cities such as roads and buildings will also be studied. In particular, the study compares changes in toponyms from initial French settlement to the current day via historical plat maps.

The following list highlights only the most prominent toponyms linked to the Prairie du Chien community, that is those toponyms that exhibit the most visible forms of communication such as dwellings and cemeteries (for a full list see Appendix 2).

BRISBOIS

Currently, the name Brisbois can be seen at several sites in Prairie du Chien: *Brisbois Street, Brisbois House, and the Brisbois Store*. Each is named for Michael Brisbois. Brisbois attended school in Quebec, Canada, and soon turned to the fur trade eventually moving his operations to Prairie du Chien. He served as associate justice for Crawford County and thereafter held various local offices in the Prairie du Chien area. His son Bernard Walter Brisbois also began his career in the fur trade, working as an agent for the American Fur Company; later he engaged in the mercantile business in Prairie du Chien until 1873 when appointed consul at Verviers, Belgium. Bernard returned to Prairie du Chien in 1874 and lived there until his death.
DOUSMAN

The toponym Dousman is linked to: Dousman Street, Dousman House Hotel, Villa Louis, Villa Louis Road, and Calvary Cemetery. Each of these locations has ties to Hercules Louis Dousman. H. Dousman was a fur trader, lumberman, land speculator and businessman. From 1826 to 1834 H. Dousman worked as fur trader agent for the American Fur Co. in Prairie du Chien. In 1834, the owner of the American Fur Co, John Astor, sold the trading company to Ramsay Crooks. H. Dousman took that opportunity to become a stockholder in the reorganized American Fur Co. Furthermore, to supplement the declining fur trade business, he also established a large wholesale and retail store sometime before 1838. In 1843 H. Dousman completed construction of a large mansion on the banks of the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien (on the site of the future Villa Louis, built in 1870). During the 1850's he was active in directing immigration and business to the Upper Mississippi River ports, and for a time owned five river steamers and was financially interested in several steamship lines including the Prairie du Chien, the Northwestern Union, and the Prairie du Chien, Hudson, and St. Paul Packet Co. He became greatly interested in railroad promotion, especially the Milwaukee and Mississippi (which later became the Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien), the first Wisconsin railroad to reach the Mississippi River. Dousman acquired a large fortune after his many endeavors. He spent the declining years of his life on his large estate at Villa Louis, giving lavish parties and entertaining distinguished visitors from throughout the nation.
Dousman House Hotel is located on St. Feriole Island on Fisher St. It was known as The Railroad House and premier hotel of the Upper Mississippi when built in 1864. The hotel was renamed The Dousman House Hotel in 1868 upon H. Dousman’s death.
The Villa Louis is a Victorian style estate located on St. Feriole Island at Villa Louis Road and Bolvin Street. The Villa Louis is home to three generations of the Dousmans, the first of which was, of course, Hercules Dousman in 1840. Louis Dousman, the son of Hercules Dousman, built the present residence at Villa Louis in 1870. At entrance to the home a Historical Marker reads: "On the site of old Fort Crawford, Col. Hercules Louis Dousman, important agent in John J. Astor's fur company, built his 'house on the Mound' in 1843. Later it was named Villa Louis. Today this luxurious mansion appears much as it did in the days when it was a brilliant center of social activity, even while the pioneers lived side by side with the Indians."
VERTEFEUILLE

Finally, the toponym Vertfeuille is given to the François Vertefeuille house. De Julio’s article is a very detailed history of French settlement in Prairie du Chien as it relates to this historic landmark. While the author says that traces of French heritage are largely absent due to later immigration from other groups (mainly remaining in family names and holiday traditions), an original log cabin built in French Canadian style is still standing roughly two and a half miles north of the town on County Highway K, which is still known by some as Frenchtown Road.

The Vertefeuille house was built around the War of 1812 in an architectural style popular in seventeenth and eighteenth century French Canada, pièce sur pièce en coulisse, which literally means “sliding into place, piece by piece.” The logs are roughly squared and stacked horizontally to form the outer walls of the house, with a coulisse, a vertical timber in the center of each wall with grooves cut on opposing sides that the horizontal pieces fit into, with corners joined with half-dovetail notching. The roof pitch is slightly less than 45 degrees and has eves that end in a bell-cast eve, or coyau (similar to a sprocket or cocking piece in architecture). The house is one of the few examples of this kind of architecture left in the country, and is currently undergoing preservation. This piece of French architecture is an enduring symbol of French heritage in the area that has been passed down through French families for generations.
**GEOSPATIAL COMPARISON**

In order to present a more visual representation of these landmarks and toponyms, we created a thematic map highlighting sites of French heritage in Prairie du Chien using ArcGIS and Illustrator software to distill the information (see Appendix 4). This highlights the spatial distribution of these sites in the town, with most of the sites being clustered around the original settlement on St. Feriole Island and the immediately adjoining mainland.

The change from the highly French organization of land to a more “Americanized” version is evident in comparing the historical and current plat maps, although the cadastral longlot system is still seen on the edges of town. In the first official plat map drawn in 1828 (see Appendix 3), the longlot land parcels are clearly seen extending throughout the entire town, from north to south along the Mississippi and including St. Feriole Island. In the 2001 plat map (also Appendix 3), some of the same ownership boundaries still exist on the north and south edges of town, but the original parcels numbered 29 through 39 in the center of town on the mainland as well as all of the lots on St. Feriole Island are now gone. Immediately to the east of the original outlines of the city, the land allocation system converts to the six mile by six mile square parcels used by the Public Land Survey System enacted by the U.S. government in 1785 in a further process of Americanization of the land.

Changes over time can also be seen in the aerial photographs. The collection at the Robinson Map Library includes photos of the area spanning from 1938 to 1992 (see Appendix 3). Since the pictures were taken by different agencies during different decades at different altitudes, the pictures were roughly geo-referenced using ArcGIS software and a shapefile of the Prairie du Chien road network obtained from the U.S. Geologic Survey National Map Seamless Server. These photos do not extend back in time to the era of original French settlement, but changes in land use over time can be seen, as well as vestiges of a visible impression of the longlot system. For example, in the 1938 aerial photo trees look as if they are still growing along old longlot lines, while in the 1992 photo this growth is not as visible, as trees look reduced in number and land use looks more homogenous. This is a qualitative comparison only, but the visible changes over time are still striking as the land use of Prairie du Chien becomes more like other American small towns.

**MODERN PRAIRIE DU CHIEN**

Today, Prairie du Chien is a cultural tourist destination due to its title of second oldest community in Wisconsin, and home to five National Historic Landmarks and nine sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Although the current population of Prairie du Chien is mostly made up of descendents of later German and Norwegian immigrants rather than people claiming French descent, the French history is celebrated in a historical context. In addition to the monuments and museums chronicling the early French history of the area, the yearly French
cultural festival Prairie Villa Rendezvous is a large tourist draw for the area. During the 4-day festival there are demonstrations of blacksmithing, pottery, flint-knapping, weaving, 1700s medical practices, story-telling and other ways to demonstrate the settler days of the community. The plain of Prairie du Chien was historically used as a trading place for French and Native American tribes to rendezvous and exchange furs, and gives the modern-day cultural event its name.

The Rendezvous is an important way in which the residents of Prairie du Chien keep the French heritage of their community alive in a historical context, even though many do not claim a personal French heritage. The French heritage of the city is also valued as an economic and touristic draw in the state, ensuring that vestiges of French culture will continue into the future even with an increasingly dwindling native population of people of French descent (“Prairie Villa Rendezvous.” Prairie du Chien Area Chamber of Commerce).

Continuing our Study

We chose to include this section into our research to allow other geographers interested in the study to continue our work. The city of Prairie du Chien is largely dependent on its tourist attractions. For our study, we hoped to visit these locations in order to distribute a survey as a way to enumerate and understand the importance and lasting impact of French Heritage on tourism. Because of time constraints (one semester), we could not visit the historical sites, most of which do not open until after May. The purpose of the cultural study portion of our research is to gauge the importance of French Heritage to the citizens of Prairie du Chien. Data for the study would have been acquired via a general questionnaire (see appendix 1) with the following aims to:

1. Quantify which historic French sites are still valued in the community;
2. Discover the cultural images that Prairie du Chien citizens value as “French”;
3. Quantify the value of French language in the community;
4. Determine which age group values its French heritage the most and;
5. Learn what, if any, historical French stories the community has managed to preserve.

The questionnaire was designed to circulate randomly. The study does not select individuals from the Prairie du Chien population based on any predetermined criteria, as the purpose is to randomly sample for cultural values that may or may not be present in the community.
Conclusion

The narrative of Prairie du Chien illustrates to us that it was a highly French settlement. Its society was impacted by French methods of city planning, French cultural traditions and the economic goals the French regime had during the time period. This influence however was cut short by the arrival of the Americans and the onset of the “Americanization” of Prairie du Chien. The French impacts on Prairie du Chien, although a remnant of the past, cannot be forgotten, for they are intractably linked to the place that Prairie du Chien is today. The three major sections [historical narrative, toponymy and geospatial comparison] of our study each allow us to make the conclusion that although Prairie du Chien has largely become “Americanized”, from its decisions in city planning to its eradication of the French language and economic preferences, we can see that the community itself seems to value the French history of place. Although the “Americanization” of Prairie du Chien has lost a large essence of what the settlement used to be, what we have observed in this study is that the community of Prairie du Chien, although no longer genealogically or ethnically French, observes and maintains the cultural traditions for a variety of reasons, most importantly perhaps, the tourism economy. This observation allows us to move beyond the idea that heritage and cultural practices are only observed if the community largely is composed of that culture/ethnicity. French Heritage sites such as the Marquette-Jolliett Bridge statue, the restoration efforts in the Villa Louis and the French toponyms that scatter the street maps of Prairie du Chien, each illustrate the community’s commitment to preserving the small portion of Franco-history that played a large role in the settlement and establishment of Wisconsin. This commitment, or value, transcends the physical place of Prairie du Chien through its very important tourism industry, bringing visitors from all over to see and in some cases, relive the French heritage traditions.
Bibliography


- "2nd Fort Crawford" [Image ID: WHi-5385];
- "Brisbois House, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" [Image ID: WHi-42420];
- "Brisbois Fur Trading Post, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" [Image ID: WHi-42507];
- "Calvary Cemetery Caretaker Building" [Image ID: WHi-13425];
- "Dousman House Hotel" [Image ID: WHi-42302];
- "Dousman House Hotel, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" [Image ID: WHi-42301];
- "Ebner's Coulee" [Image ID: WHi-36201];
- "Fort Shelby, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" [Image ID: 42229];
- "H. Louis Dousman" [Image ID: WHi-5392];
- "View of the Great Treaty Held at Prairie du Chien" [Image ID: WHi-3142];
- "Villa Louis, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin" [Image ID: WHi-41982];
- "Villa Louis Porch" [Image ID: WHi-60079].


W.W. Hixson & Co., Plat book of Crawford County, Wisconsin. (Rockford, Ill., [19--]).


Appendix 1: Heritage Questionnaire

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gauge the importance of French Heritage/Culture to the citizens of Prairie du Chien and to learn more about the French settlement influence in Prairie du Chien and what remains of that influence.

1. Below you will find a list of the top 15 French Heritage Sites/Festivals located in Prairie du Chien. Please indicate how many times you have visited and when the last time you visited was.

   1. St. Feriole Island
   2. Fort Crawford Museum
   3. Villa Louis Historic site
   4. Brisbois Store - Fur Trade Museum
   5. Brisbois House
   6. Rolette House
   7. The Dousman House Hotel
   8. Lawler Park
   9. The Old French Cemetery
   10. Francois Vertefeuille House
   11. St. Gabriel’s Church, School & Cemetery
   12. LaRiviere-Ravoux House
   13. Marquette & Jolliet Historical Marker
   14. Villa Louis Carriage Classic
   15. Annual Prairie Villa Rendezvous Festival

Other: ________________________________

2. What about the city of Prairie du Chien is uniquely French?

3. What is your favorite Historical Story about Prairie du Chien?

4. Do you speak/read/understand French or Acadian?

5. Optional: Circle the age bracket which best describes you:

   [18 – 25]   [26-45]   [46-64]   [65 or older]

25
### Appendix 2: French Toponym Exploratory Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Place, or Other</th>
<th>Connection to City</th>
<th>Resident</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Present Connection to City</th>
<th>Present Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beaumont, William</strong></td>
<td>Physician/army surgeon</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island (Pt. Crawford)</td>
<td>Street name (Beaumont St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brisbois, Michael</strong></td>
<td>Fur trader; associate justice of Crawford County</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
<td>Street name (Brisbois St.)</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brisbois, Bernard</strong></td>
<td>Fur trader for American Fur Co.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
<td>Bribois House</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bolvin, Nicholas</strong></td>
<td>US Indian Agent</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
<td>Street name (Bolvin St.)</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cass, Lewis</strong></td>
<td>Governor of Michigan Territory (WI part of MI Territory until 1836)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Street name (Cass St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calvary Cemetery</strong></td>
<td>Land deeded to St. Gabriel’s by Hercules Dousman; burial place of Dousmans</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
<td>Calvary Cemetery</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coulee</strong></td>
<td>A ravine or gulley; derived from French verb “coulér” meaning to flow</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
<td>Street names (Mill Coulee Road and Vineyard Coulee Road)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dousman, Hercules L.</strong></td>
<td>Fur trader, land speculator, businessman</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Is.</td>
<td>Street name (Dousman St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dousman, Louis</strong></td>
<td>Built Villa Louis</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Is.</td>
<td>Dousman House Hotel</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Villa Louis</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Villa Louis Road</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name/Place/Other</td>
<td>Connection to City</td>
<td>Resident Y/N</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Present Connection to City</td>
<td>Present Location</td>
</tr>
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<td>-------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>La Pointe</strong></td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Is./mainland proper</td>
<td>Street name (La Pointe St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lessard</strong></td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
<td>Street name (Lessard St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marquette-Jolliet</strong></td>
<td>Credited with discovery of future site of Prairie du Chien</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Confluence of Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers</td>
<td>Street name (Marquette Rd./Great River Rd.) Bridge name/commemorative statue (Marquette-Jolliet Bridge) Post Office Relief Sculpture</td>
<td>Mainland proper Mississippi at Wisconsin St.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paquette, Pierre</strong></td>
<td>Trader; agent to Jean-Joseph Rolette through American Fur Co.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Street name (Paquette St.)</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rolette, Jean-Joseph</strong></td>
<td>Fur trader; land speculator; judge</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>St. Feriole Is.</td>
<td>Street name (Rolette St.) Rolette House</td>
<td>St. Feriole Island St. Feriole Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vertefeuille, Francois</strong></td>
<td>resident</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
<td>Vertefeuille House</td>
<td>Mainland proper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix 3: Aerial Photos through time-Prairie du Chien**

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Appendix 4: Plat Maps of Prairie du Chien

Plat Map 1828
Appendix 5: Thematic Map

French Heritage in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin

Cultural Sites and Toponymy

Appendix 5: Thematic Map

Lawler Park
In the early 1880s, steamers landed on this beach. This historic park was named for John Lawler, the builder of the famed pontoon railroad bridge.

Marquette-Jolliet Bridge
This bridge, bearing the name and commemorative sculpture of the first European discoverer of Prairie du Chien, crosses the Mississippi River to Iowa at US-151.

Historic French Landmarks

A. Villa Louis The estate was first developed in the 1840s by fur trader and frontier entrepreneur, Hercules Dousman.

B. Brionois House Built by Joseph Rolette in 1836 with surplus limestone from the construction of Fort Crawford on property owned by the Brionois family.

C. Rolette House Joseph Rolette began construction in 1840, but died before completion. In the 1870s it was extensively remodeled, becoming a hotel, then a boarding house.

D. The Dousman House Hotel The Railroad House was the premier hotel on the Upper Mississippi in 1864. It was renamed after Hercules Dousman upon his death in 1866.

E. Francois Vertefeuille House This French-Canadian cabin built by voyageur Francois Vertefeuille is designated as the oldest structure in Wisconsin.

F. LaRiviere-Revaux House Pierre LaRiviere, a prosperous farmer built this home. Petal Augustin Revaux, lived in this house in 1843 while translating the Catholic catechism into Sioux.

G. Brionois Store/Fur Trade Museum Built in 1851-52 by fur trader and merchant, B.W. Brosson.

H. Post Office Inside is a relief sculpture of Marquette and Louis Jolliet.

I. Fort Crawford Museum The second Fort Crawford Hospital was first occupied in 1831, with Dr. William Beaman as the first surgeon.

J. Old French Cemetery The first recorded burial in 1817; Joseph Rolette is buried here.

K. Calvary Cemetery Hercules Dousman deeded the land to St. Gabriel's before the Civil War. The prominent Dousman plot is near the center of the cemetery.