

WALK THE PILGRIM'S PATH

BENEATH THE BELLS OF STE. GENEVIEVE

Faith, Floods, and the Families Who Shaped a Frontier
Town

A Literary Pilgrimage Companion

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How to Use This Companion

Read this before arriving on the pilgrimage. Carry it during the pilgrimage, and return to the reflection questions afterward. This companion is designed not only to explain what you are seeing, but to help you notice what centuries of pilgrims, parishioners, immigrants, widows, craftsmen, and families left behind.



The Church on the Hill

Ste. Genevieve reveals itself through limestone walls weathered by centuries of floods and winters, French family names still echoing through the historic district, and narrow streets shaped long before automobiles arrived along the Mississippi River frontier.



Floodwaters repeatedly endangered the early settlement, forcing residents to move portions of the community to higher ground.

In 1794, parishioners dismantled their original log church and carried it piece by piece uphill to safety. Inside the present church today rests one of the survivors of that era: an ancient stone baptismal bowl believed to have come from the relocated church.

It's easy to overlook such an object. Yet that bowl witnessed generations enter the Church while the United States was still young and the frontier remained unsettled.

The Mississippi River gave life and threatened it in equal measure.

And above it all rises the bell tower of Ste. Genevieve Catholic Church.

At 190 feet tall, the tower stands as a sentinel, giving testimony to time. It is one of the oldest Catholic

communities west of the Mississippi River, and to the generations of settlers, clergy, immigrants, widows, craftsmen, and pilgrims who shaped the town below its perch on the hill.

Long before the present church rose above the town square, French Catholics from Canada established a small parish community along the fertile floodplain known as "Le Grand Champ," or Big Common Field.

The region's Catholic roots reached even earlier toward the 1673 Mississippi River expedition of Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette, whose travels helped open the spiritual pathways that would eventually connect New France to the frontier settlements farther south.

DID YOU NOTICE?

The ancient baptismal bowl connected to the 1794 church
Massive pillars from the earlier stone sanctuary
The soaring bell tower visible for miles across Ste. Genevieve County
The blending of French, German, and American Catholic history inside a single sacred space

A Church Built Around a Church

Ste. Genevieve occupied a cultural crossroads unlike almost anywhere else in early America.

French colonial traditions mingled with Spanish governance, Native American trade routes, German immigration, and eventually expanding American settlement. Through all of it, the church became the institution capable of holding these changing worlds together.

By the early nineteenth century, the parish had outgrown its frontier sanctuary. In 1831, construction began on a larger stone church, consecrated six years later by Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis.

*Ste. Genevieve occupied
a cultural crossroads
unlike almost anywhere
else in early America.*

And growth continued.

German immigrants arrived in increasing numbers, and sermons were preached in French, German, and English, an extraordinary reflection of the layered immigrant culture that shaped the Mississippi River corridor.

Then came one of the most remarkable chapters in the church's architectural history.

In 1876, under the leadership of Father Francis X. Weiss, construction began on the present brick church. Rather than demolish the older stone sanctuary immediately, parishioners built the new church around and above it while worship continued inside the old structure.

For a time, two churches occupied the same space.

Picture the scene: laborers hauling brick and timber overhead while parishioners gathered beneath them for Mass inside the aging stone church. Hammer blows echoing above prayers. Dust drifting through candlelight. Construction and devotion unfolding simultaneously.

When the new sanctuary was finally completed, the old stone church was dismantled from within and carried out through the doors piece by piece.

Even today, the earlier church remains physically embedded in the present structure. Massive interior pillars from the original stone sanctuary still support the building, and portions of the old foundation remain beneath the church floor.



*For a brief period in the
nineteenth century,
parishioners worshipped
inside the old stone church
while construction crews
built the new church around
them.*



The Widow Who Saved the Church

When the present church was dedicated in 1880, much of its survival rested upon the generosity of one woman.

Odile Pratte Valle, widow of Felix Valle and descendant of one of Ste. Genevieve's most influential French colonial families, contributed \$18,000 toward construction of the church, roughly three-fourths of the total building cost.

Adjusted for modern value, her donation would equal well over half a million dollars today.

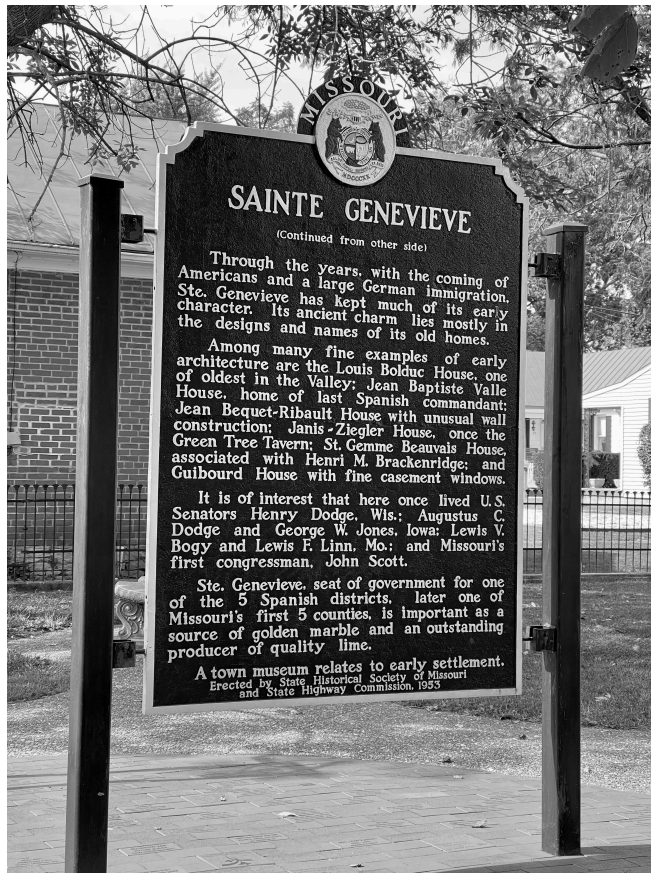
But the true significance of the gift cannot be measured through inflation alone.

In nineteenth century frontier society, few women publicly shaped sacred building projects of this scale. Odile Valle did.

Her philanthropy helped shape not only the church itself, but the skyline and spiritual identity of Ste. Genevieve.

The Valle family name remains woven throughout the town today because the family became one of the most





influential French colonial dynasties in the region. Their roots trace through the French settlements of New France and the Mississippi River corridor, where trade, agriculture, governance, and Catholic faith shaped frontier life.

Ste. Genevieve became economically important because of agriculture, river commerce, and later mining interests. The Valles and other prominent families accumulated influence through land ownership, trade, governance, and business activity.

François Valle, Odile's father-in-law, served as

commandant of Ste. Genevieve during the Spanish colonial era and became one of the region's most important civic leaders. His family helped shape the political, economic, and religious life of early Ste. Genevieve.

The church became a final resting place for some of the people who shaped the earliest history of Ste. Genevieve. Beneath the sanctuary floor of the church, François Valle and his wife Marie Céleste Valle remain interred alongside clergy and early parish figures whose lives became inseparable from the story of Ste. Genevieve itself.

Their names still appear throughout the historic district in buildings, institutions, homes, and local memory.

STILL STANDING TODAY

The Valle House, one of the best-known historic structures in Ste. Genevieve, remains a visible reminder of one of the "founding dynasties" of the town.

Bells Above the River

The church continued evolving into the twentieth century.

In 1911, under Father Charles L. Van Tourenhout, who served the parish for an astonishing fifty-eight years, the church was enlarged to its present form. Marble altars were installed. The sanctuary expanded. Side shrines dedicated to Ste. Genevieve and St. Joseph were added. The bell tower continued watching over the town below.

For generations, the church bells marked weddings, funerals, feast days, danger, celebration, and ordinary worship. Their peal became part of the emotional memory of the French settlement.

Above the town hang four named bells. In nineteenth-century Catholic tradition, church bells were often blessed and named almost like members of the parish community itself. The bells carried spiritual symbolism as well as practical purpose.

Mary honors Mary Immaculate.

Genevieve honors the parish patron saint.

Francis commemorates Father Francis X. Weiss, who guided construction of the church.

Joseph, the smallest bell, became known as the “death bell” because it was rung in honor of St. Joseph, patron of a happy death.

DID YOU NOTICE?

In many nineteenth-century Catholic churches, bells were cast with names, dedications, saints, or donor inscriptions.

Living Traditions

To walk through Ste. Genevieve today is to encounter a town where history still breathes through ordinary life.

French vertical-log architecture survives in homes and merchant buildings throughout the historic district. Family names persist across generations. Recipes, festivals, music, and stories continue carrying traces of the old French Creole corridor linking settlements up and down the Mississippi River.

The annual French Heritage Festival, which begins on the day of our pilgrimage, June 14, demonstrates how this historic district endures as a living cultural landscape filled with music, storytelling, folk traditions, craftsmanship, and demonstrations tied to the region's colonial roots.

Among the businesses carrying forward traditions of skilled craftsmanship is ASL Pewter Foundry and Gallery, located inside one of the town's oldest historic buildings. We will visit the shop for a wine and cheese reception following Mass.

For more than three decades, proprietors Thomas and Patricia Hooper have handcrafted pewter there, including pieces created for Colonial



Williamsburg. They will demonstrate the ancient art of handcrafting pewter during our reception in the foundry and gallery.

Their work reflects an artisan culture deeply connected to towns like Ste. Genevieve, where craft, heritage, and community identity remain closely intertwined.

Visitors can move from Mass beneath nineteenth-century bell towers into workshops where artisans still shape objects by hand.

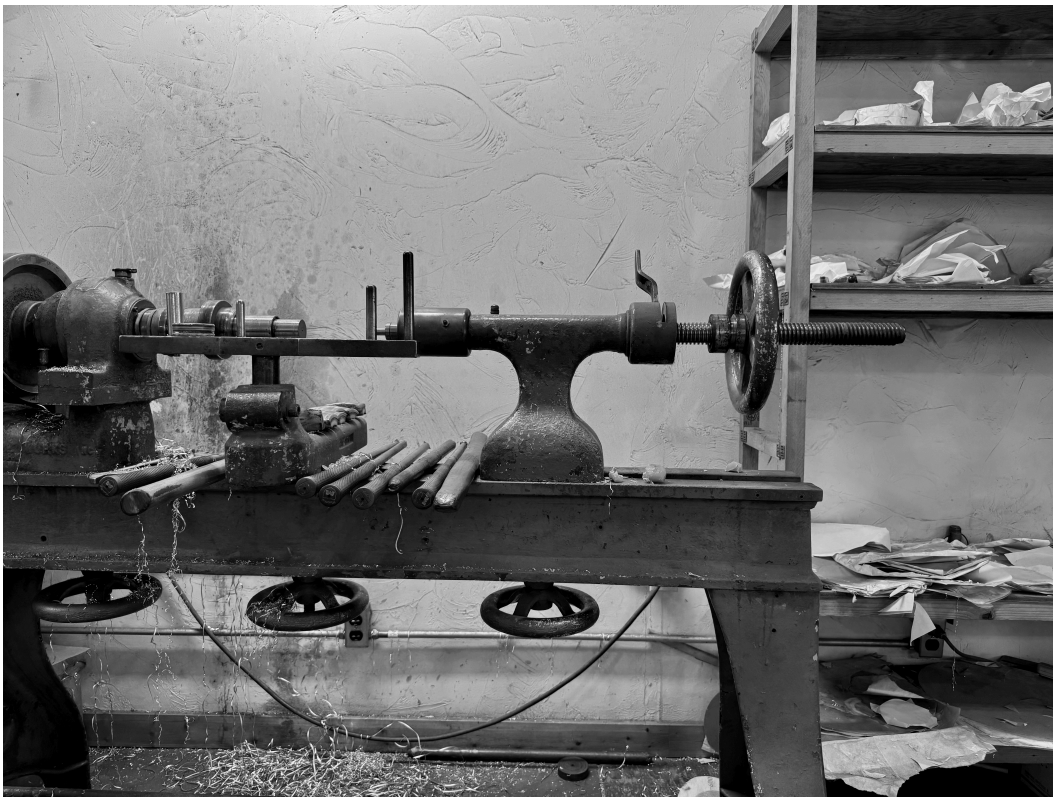
Though not directly tied to the parish itself, the Hoopers' workshop reflects the same spirit that originally defined Ste. Genevieve — where old-world craftsmanship, historic preservation, and community memory remain deeply intertwined.

That continuity may be what makes Ste. Genevieve feel different from many historic destinations. This is not merely a preserved town. It is a town still alive with story, where the church remains its spiritual center.

Inside Ste. Genevieve Catholic Church, generations overlap: French settlers who once feared floods. German immigrants searching for belonging. Wealthy benefactors funding sacred spaces. Priests whose ministries spanned decades. Cantors, laborers, mothers, children, widows, craftsmen, mourners, and pilgrims.

The church gathered them all.

And still does.



Pilgrim Reflection

Inside Ste. Genevieve Catholic Church, generations overlap: French settlers who feared the floods, German immigrants searching for belonging, clergy whose ministries spanned decades, widows who financed sacred spaces, craftsmen, mourners, pilgrims, and families whose names still shape the town.

Their stories remain embedded in the walls, the bells, the records, and the stones beneath the sanctuary floor.

In Ste. Genevieve, the past does not sit behind glass. It rings from the bell tower, rises from the stones, and walks with us through the festival streets.



Like the Old Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, the Ste. Genevieve Catholic Church stands within a federally protected historic district.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to worship in a place where generations prayed before you?
- Which part of the church most captured your attention?
- How does sacred architecture shape memory and belonging?
- What stories still linger within these walls?



A LA MÉMOIRE DE
FRANÇOIS LA VALLÉE
PREMIER COMMANDANT POST STE. GENEVIÈVE
POUR SA MAJESTÉ CATHOLIQUE.
NÉ BEAUPORT, CANADA 1716.
DÉCÉDÉ STE. GENEVIÈVE 1783.
PIERRE GIBAULT, CURÉ.

FRANÇOIS VALLÉ
COMMANDANT CIVIL ET MILITAIRE
POST STE. GENEVIÈVE.
1796 — 1804.

NÉ 1758. DÉCÉDÉ 1804.

JEAN BAPTISTE VALLÉ
DERNIER COMMANDANT POST STE. GENEVIÈVE.
MARS 10, 1804. OCTOBRE 10, 1804.
NÉ 1760. DÉCÉDÉ 1849.
DÉDIÉ PAR JULES F. VALLÉ.
1934.

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