

French Vernacular Architectural Design and Construction Methods in Colonial North America



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While working on my master's thesis, I examined published and unpublished historical archaeological research, historical documents research, and datable extant buildings to develop a temporal and geographical sequence of French colonial architectural designs and construction methods, particularly the poteaux-en-terre (posts-in-ground) and poteaux-sur-solle (posts-on-sill) elements in vernacular buildings, from the Western Great Lakes region to Louisiana, dating from 1690 to 1850. Such a sequence can help provide a basis for scholarship, discovery, and hypotheses about prospective colonial archaeological sites. Additionally, the integration of architectural material culture data and the historical record could also further scholarship on subjects such as how the Europeans in colonial North America used vernacular architecture to create and maintain cultural identity (e.g., "Frenchness"), and how this architecture carried with it indicators of wealth, status, and cultural interaction. Especially helpful for scholars is the fact that several French colonial buildings in the Illinois country remain extant and relatively free of later modifications.



Above: Green Tree Tavern (also known as the Nicolas Janis House, or the Janis-Ziegler House) at Sainte-Geneviève, Missouri. Built in 1790 (some elements have been verified by dendrochronology studies), the property was added by the National Park Service in 2022 to the Ste. Geneviève National Historical Park. (Photo by author.)

Colonial enterprises in the New World left marks, both in the ground and on the landscape, that remain even today. Whether colonists from France, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, or other lands in Europe and Asia came for commercial opportunities, religious and social freedom, or other reasons, they all carried with them to North

American cultural memories and conceptions; these memories and conceptions ultimately would help to shape the colonial experience in the New World. The French used colonial architectural designs and construction methods in North America as part of the colonization process. French colonists used architectural designs (e.g., fortifications, settlements, etc.) to establish and maintain control over Indigenous populations; French colonists also used architectural designs (e.g., hipped roofs, *galleries*, etc.) to transport French cultural traditions and recreate them in the colonies—in fact, this can be seen not only in North America, but also in other areas of the world that the French colonized, such as Indochina, Algiers, and parts of Africa and the Caribbean—and to maintain a sense of “Frenchness” through time. In addition to using architectural designs from the Old World, French colonists altered traditional French construction methods to adapt them to new physical environments, using locally obtainable materials (e.g., local woods, etc.) in preference to materials that would have been either more expensive or more difficult to obtain (e.g., stone, imported woods, etc.). French colonists also altered traditional French construction methods (e.g., *poteaux-en-terre*, *poteaux-sur-solle*, etc.) to adapt them to new cultural environments, which brought the French into close contact with cultures very different from those to which they were accustomed to in Europe.

French colonists in North America used traditional French architectural designs to establish and maintain the control over Indigenous populations (e.g., by building forts and palisade walls, from which defense of trading posts and communities could be effectively mounted) that was crucial to the protection of trade and supply routes, and to create administrative centers serving civil and military purposes. The importance of establishing and maintaining military presences and securing its extensive new empire against threats from the English and Spanish was of primary importance to the French colonization effort in North America; and, to these ends, military engineers trained in military fortification design by Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (who, working for the Crown as a military architect designing fortifications, was given the duty of designing and building fortifications all over France, and who designed more than 30 forts and fortified and strengthened walled towns), traveled to North America with plans for elaborate fortifications. These forts provided some measure of refuge against the savage wilderness and would have been both familiar and welcome to military personnel, religious missionaries, fur traders, *voyageurs* (travelers, who primarily transported furs), *coureurs des bois* (runners of the woods, who were unlicensed trappers and fur traders), and settlers alike.

While French colonial military leaders in North America were expected to use both the best and the latest architectural designs and construction methods when building forts—and were budgeted the funds and the manpower with which to accomplish such large-scale projects—civilians building civil, commercial, and residential buildings were freer to use more familiar, traditional French designs and methods. Additionally, civilians erecting buildings would have had comparatively limited funds and manpower with which to work. While Vauban’s cutting-edge fort designs were being used in both France and North America to build military installations, traditional French designs and methods were being used throughout Nouvelle France. One common French vernacular architectural design used in both France and North America was the hipped roof—a roof where all four sides ran up at a slant. With a hipped roof, a house could have large eaves extending far enough out to cover wide *galleries*, or porches—another traditional French vernacular design element. Thin wood columns often supported the eaves. Framing was most often made of wooden timbers (*columbage*), and generally featured either *poteaux-sur-solle* or *poteaux-en-terre*. Spaces between the framing members would be in-filled with *bousillage* (a mixture of clay or mud with hair, grass, or moss) or bricks. Another in-fill was *pierrotage*, a mixture of lime mortar, clay, and small stones. Another feature of French vernacular houses was that the living quarters were often raised above ground level. Extant French colonial buildings in the Illinois country offer glimpses of how traditional vernacular French designs and methods were implemented by colonists on the North American frontiers.