

NEW MADRID FLOODWAY PROJECT THREATENS PARK

by Susan Flader

After a long period of controversy, agricultural interests in the Missouri Bootheel and conservationists statewide are awaiting imminent release by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers of the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the New Madrid Floodway—St. John's Bayou Project. This massive project, for which Congress appropriated funds back in 1996, would have a major impact on the hydrology and ecology of Big Oak Tree State Park, which stands out as an island of massive trees in a sea of soybeans. But the trees at Big Oak, a remnant of the great bottomland forest that once covered virtually the entire Bootheel, depend on the seasonal rise and fall of Mississippi River floodwaters that the Corps project seeks to control in the interest of agriculture.

The proposed project would enclose the only significant portion of Missouri's Mississippi River floodplain that is still largely connected to the river by closing a gap at New Madrid and enlarging 25 miles of the St. John's Bayou channel north from New Madrid. These changes would reduce backwater flooding on 130,000 acres, causing substantial loss or impairment of wetland habitat with a potentially devastating impact on birds, fish, and other wildlife. Needless to say, conservation organizations have fiercely opposed the project, which has been stoutly supported by regional economic and political leaders.

Big Oak Tree, located in the lowlands north of New Madrid, was imperiled by drainage for agriculture even before the threat of the new project, and the state had appropriated some \$1.5 million for a ring levee surrounding the park that

(See "Corps Project" on Page 4)



Missouri Department of Natural Resources aerial view of Big Oak Tree State Park.

Come To The Bootheel In October!

New Madrid, the place that gave its name to a great earthquake, will be the site of MPA's 21st Annual Meeting, October 25-27, 2002.

There are many reasons to come to this old city, with its spectacular view of the Mississippi River, in the heart of Missouri's southern Bootheel. The seven Bootheel counties were sparsely settled until lumbering and swamp drainage in the early twentieth century "reclaimed" the land for farming. In the 1920s, "cotton fever" seized the region, shaping a distinct cultural identity closely linked to the cotton-growing South. The Bootheel retains a unique character and flavor well worth experiencing.

The annual meeting will feature field trips to Big Oak Tree State Park, a remnant of vanishing hardwood and cypress swamp, the antebellum Hunter-Dawson mansion built of cypress wood, a new state park on Crowley's Ridge, and other natural and cultural treasures of the flatlands. Headquarters for the meeting will be The Rivers restaurant in downtown New Madrid. Overnight accommodations are available at Marston Super-8 at Exit 40 off Highway 55 just a few miles from New Madrid. The conference rate is \$58.90 per night for a double room and the reservation deadline is October 1.

Please mark your calendars and plan a Bootheel experience! Watch for more information in the next issue of *Heritage*.

MPA REQUESTS INVESTIGATION OF AIRPORT VIOLATIONS

by Susan Flader

Following discussion at the February board meeting of damage to Lake of the Ozarks State Park by unpermitted land clearance and earthmoving at Lee C. Fine Airport, MPA directors resolved to ask Attorney General Jay Nixon to investigate the incident and make recommendations for further action. MPA president Susan Flader wrote to Nixon February 28 to request an investigation.

The earthmoving was done by a firm contracted by the City of Osage Beach, which operates the airport under a lease from DNR that includes stringent requirements designed to safeguard park resources. The activity in blatant violation of the lease agreement occurred last October to create a safety area of 200 feet at the end of runway 21 mandated by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Without providing specific plans to DNR for approval as required by the lease, or applying for a state land disturbance permit, or holding a public hearing, or notifying MPA as we had formally requested, but apparently after certifying to FAA and the Missouri Department of Transportation that the city had obtained all necessary permits, the city cleared and graded an area approximately 750 by 1,200 feet damaging nearly thirty acres of park property. The site is on a steep downslope at the end of the runway, yet the contractor bulldozed and mulched all trees, including a number of significant oaks, and reconfigured the slope without using best management practices or any other erosion control techniques. A tributary to Robinson Creek, one of the two ecologically richest water

resources in the 17,000-acre park, was damaged by the bulldozing and by sediment from erosion, including leachate from the enormous mulch pile, in violation of Missouri Clean Water Laws. A hiking, biking and equestrian trail was also adversely impacted by the construction.

MPA has long been in favor of removal of the airport from the park. The facility, with one of the longest runways in mid-Missouri, was constructed in the park in the late 1960s at the instigation of former Governor Warren Hearnes, who planned to host a national Governors' Conference at Lake of the Ozarks. There were grandiose plans at the time for a huge convention center and luxury resort at the park, which were never built. The jetport was intended to trigger an economic explosion in the region, but regularly scheduled commercial service never materialized, and the airport has served primarily as a landing and practice strip for the private aircraft of wealthy homeowners and visitors to the Lake.

The Department of Natural Resources was on a trajectory several years ago to phase out the airport operations within about 17 years, after the then-existing FAA requirements for maintaining and operating the facility had been met. But that period was subsequently lengthened when DNR leased the airport to Osage Beach in March 1999 and the city was given five years within which to seek further FAA funding for improvements. Any new FAA grants entail a further 20-year commitment.

As part of the lease agreement, DNR was to conduct a study of alternative locations for an airport, but the study has not yet been conducted or budgeted. MPA directors believe that pressure for

(See "Investigation" on Page 4)

UPOP UPDATES FOR 2002

by Mary Abbott

At the MPA board meeting in February, members approved an expansion of MPA's Urban Outreach program into the St. Louis area. Mary Abbott, board chair of the UPOP Committee, and Shalonn Curls, director of the project for the Kansas City area, met with a group at Tower Grove Park in St. Louis to help initiate a UPOP for this summer. Among those at the meeting were John Karel, Leo Drey, Eleanor Hoefle, and Ron Coleman (MPA board members); The Rev. Dwayne Sleet (Morning Star Baptist Church), Susan Lammert (Commission Chairman of Tower Grove Park), Mary Donze (Division of State Parks), and Pam Tomasovic (St. Louis Open Space Council). After a lively discussion of ideas and funding possibilities, Dwayne Sleet agreed to write a proposal for the St. Louis project with input from MPA board members Hoefle and Coleman.

In Kansas City, UPOP plans a partnership with the Kauffman Foundation's Youth Entrepreneurial program. A group of 125-150 young people representing twelve agencies in the city's urban core will spend a May weekend at Camp Pin Oak in Lake of the Ozarks State Park. Shalonn Curls will coordinate the program along with Neldra Flint of the Kauffman Mini-Society which fosters 4-H After School Programs. This will be in addition to the UPOP summer project.

An allocation of up to \$5,000 for Kansas City UPOP and \$5,000 for St. Louis UPOP was approved by the Board for summer 2002. MPA will also be inviting members to contribute.

INITIATIVES TO PRESERVE FRENCH COLONIAL HERITAGE

by Bonnie Stepenoff

Two initiatives, one state and one federal, hold promise for deepening our understanding of America's French colonial heritage through the preservation and interpretation of sites in Ste. Genevieve. In December 2001, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources signed a contract to purchase the Creole House, 339 St. Mary's Road, from Royce and Marge Wilhauk. Recently, the United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources has been considering Senate Bill 1638, the "French Colonial Heritage Area Study Act of 2001," introduced last fall by Senator Christopher Bond.

The Creole House, a bed and breakfast, is situated on 2.9 acres between the Bequette-Ribault House and the Amoureux House, two of the last five remaining French colonial *poteaux-en-terre* (post-in-the-ground) vertical log houses in North America. Senate Bill 1638 recognizes the significance of these houses and other historical features of Ste. Genevieve, including Le Grand Champ (the large French colonial agricultural field) and Native American archaeological sites. By purchasing the Creole House, a modern residence in the French style, DNR has taken the first step toward creating a French heritage interpretive area. According to plans announced in December, the current bed and breakfast would become an interpretive center. Eventually, if Senator Bond's initiative succeeds, the property would be the centerpiece of a National Park Service unit with a mission to tell the story of French settlement in North America.

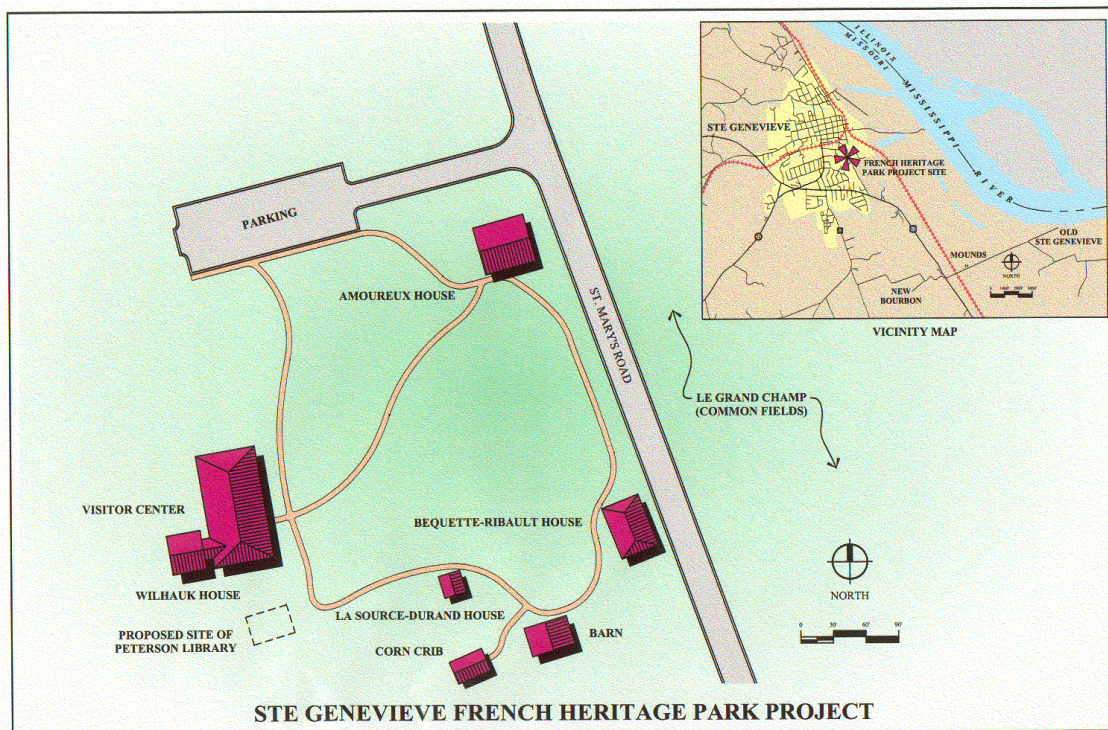
Currently, DNR manages the Amoureux House as a part of Felix Valle House State Historic Site. Also included in this unit of the state park system are the Felix Valle House and the

Dr. Benjamin Shaw House in downtown Ste. Genevieve and the Delassus-Kern House three miles south of Ste. Genevieve facing Le Grand Champ (Big Field). The Bequette-Ribault House is privately owned.

MPA, which has a long-standing interest in protecting the cultural resources of Ste. Genevieve, has endorsed Senator Bond's proposal. In 1989, MPA strongly supported expansion of the Felix Valle House State Historic Site to include a French colonial vertical log structure, the remaining portion of the original town site of Ste. Genevieve, and the Mississippian mounds in the Big Field. MPA also endorsed the protection of the eighteenth-century agricultural landscape represented by Le Grand Champ. During the following decade, the Division of State Parks acquired two vertical log houses, the Amoureux and Delassus-Kern properties.

In 1999, MPA urged continued archaeological, architectural, and archival research on these properties, the original town site, and the Big Field, in order to preserve, understand, and interpret the rich and complex resources of Ste. Genevieve. The recent initiatives, representing cooperative efforts of the state and federal governments, are promising steps toward the accomplishment of these goals.

Missouri Department of Natural Resources conceptual drawing of the proposed heritage area at Ste. Genevieve.



("Corps Project" from Page 1)

would allow park officials to mimic a more natural hydrologic regime. But that effort is on hold because of the potentially much greater impact of the Corps project. In an earlier final EIS issued in September 2000, the Corps had proposed alternatives for mitigating the hydrology at Big Oak Tree, but when it was forced to go back to the drawing boards to deal with a range of problems, it came up with a "Draft Revised Supplemental EIS" in October 2001 that left out the mitigation features for Big Oak that had been in the previous document. Conservationists suspect the work at Big Oak was omitted because the Corps wanted to show a positive benefit/cost ratio and the whole project was teetering on the edge.

In a hard-hitting letter to the Memphis district engineer in December, DNR Director Stephen Mahfood said that a fundamental commitment by the Corps to protection for the 1000-acre Big Oak Tree State Park, a National Natural Landmark and one of Missouri's most threatened natural history features, as well as mitigation for other wetland resources, was essential before DNR would approve a Section 401 water quality certification for the project. He indicated that DNR would expect clear provision for funding adequate relief wells and pumps, a larger system of levees, and acquisition of lands adjacent to the park sufficient to allow for the new protective measures. Even if these were provided, park division naturalists say, it is unclear what further problems might be caused by reduced frequency of backwater flooding, sediment/nutrient losses, water chemistry differences, and other changes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency also submitted comments calling for substantial changes in the project, including moving the levee closure about four miles up the floodway from the Corps' preferred location.

The Missouri Parks Association, after discussing the issue at its February meeting, resolved to oppose the project as a whole because of its potentially devastating consequences for Big Oak Tree and for wetland habitat in the entire area, but also to insist, if the project is allowed to proceed despite opposition, that adequate safeguards for the park be incorporated in the proposal. When the final EIS is released, there will be a 30-day period for comments from the public. MPA encourages all interested conservationists to make their concerns heard.

("Investigation" from Page 2)

improvements at the airport will never end until a new site is found and the state musters the political will to do the right thing and decommission the airport. Already there is talk of the need for a new cross runway in order to retain the current level of FAA certification to land the 727 passenger jets desired by the tourism industry. This would require the destruction of additional park land on a massive scale and result in further noisy intrusions on campgrounds and the nearby Patterson Hollow Wild Area.

Park officials have met informally with City of Osage Beach officials, who acknowledge they made "some mistakes," but a planned formal meeting to discuss penalties or further requirements has not been held at this writing. The State Park Advisory Board, with whom several MPA directors toured the site on January 10, has resolved, similarly to MPA, that DNR exercise the termination clause of the city's lease, conduct a feasibility study for a new airport location, and cease operations at Lee C. Fine Airport as soon as FAA commitments can be fulfilled. Watch for further developments in an upcoming issue of *Heritage*.



Post Office Box 1811
Jefferson City, MO 65102



Printed on recycled paper

NONPROFIT ORG. U.S. POSTAGE PAID COLUMBIA, MO PERMIT #338
--

Return Service Requested

Floodway Threatens Park (p1)
Airport Investigation Requested (p2)

<http://parks.missouri.org>