

WHERE'S ALL THE POTTERY?

BY HAROLD HENDERSON

On a warm day in 1973, my wife and I packed our one-year-old into her stroller and headed for the neighborhood Tastee-Freeze, a dozen blocks northeast of downtown Peoria. We walked past houses and small businesses that had seen better days, and as we looked downhill across the one-way streets we could glimpse sailboats and barges on Peoria Lake, actually a wide place in the Illinois River. Then we stood on the corner at the Tastee-Freeze, chatting over the traffic noise while our daughter lathered herself with ice cream.

We had no more idea than she did that we were standing on a long-sought historic site. The locals believed that a tiny French village had existed somewhere in the vicinity in the 1700s. But no physical evidence of its existence had ever been documented, and the main historical evidence was a land survey made in 1837—40 years after the village had been abandoned. Some experts had come to suspect that 150 years of urbanization on Peoria's near north side had obliterated all trace of the village.

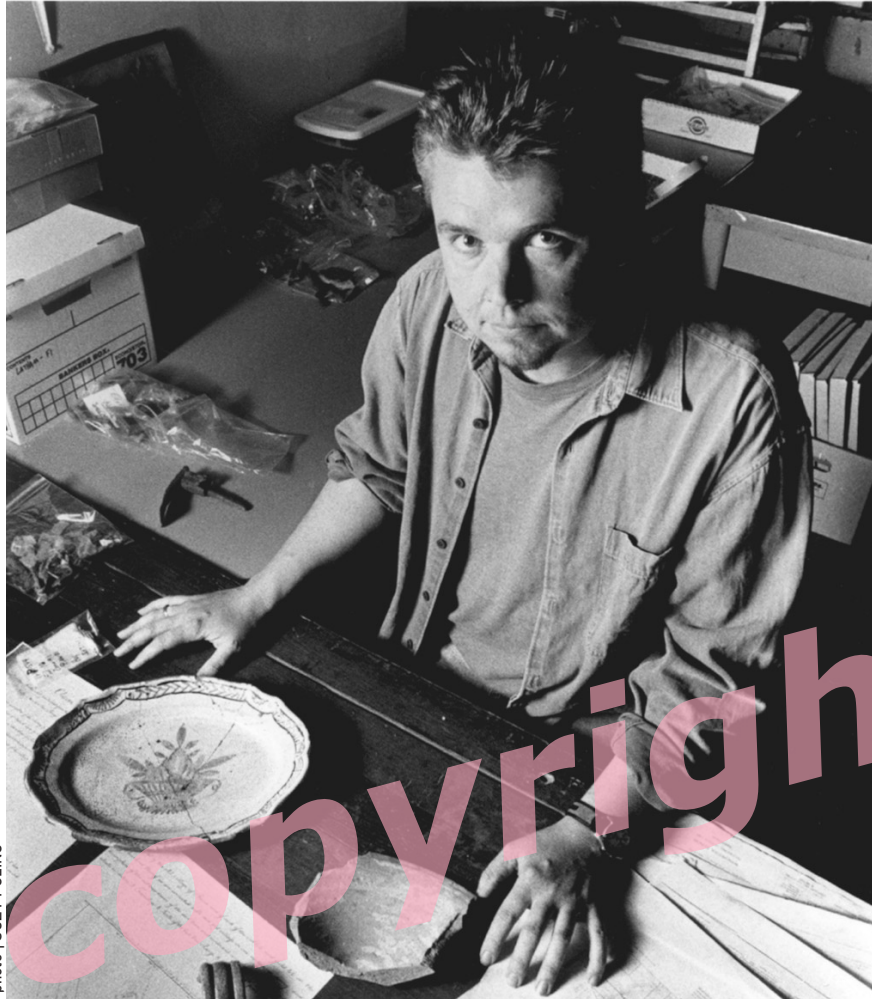
But on September 12, 2001, two archaeologists made news by finding the first bit of physical evidence a block downhill from the old Tastee-Freeze, now Jim's Sandwich Shop. The bigger news may be all the stuff they didn't dig up.

The archaeologists weren't there as part of any plan to find the French village. They were there because the Illinois Department of Transportation was relocating a section of Adams Street to accommodate the nearby O'Brien Steel Company. State law provides funding to seek out and save archaeological evidence in such cases, before construction destroys it forever. The money for this "salvage" work comes from IDOT; the work is done by the Illinois Transportation Archaeological Research Program (ITARP), headed by Thomas Emerson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

So it was that on the morning after 9/11, ITARP archaeologists Robert Mazrim and Dave Nolan went to work in the vacant lot at the corner of Adams and Mary streets. They knew they had a chance to find some sign that the French had been there, but they weren't breathless with expectation.

They started digging in the yard, avoiding the outline of the house that had once stood there because when it was built the ground had been churned up. The backhoe operator made a trench that ran northwest-southeast, at a right angle to busy Adams Street, carefully scraping away a foot or so of black topsoil and its accumulation of 19th- and 20th-century refuse.

Mazrim and Nolan scanned the yellow clay subsoil at the bottom of the trench, which professional archaeologists can read the way you and I read road signs. "I've seen thousand-year-old spade marks in postholes," says Mazrim. "If you dig a hole more than two feet deep, that



ROBERT MAZRIM

little gesture of yours will last a thousand years."

Nolan spotted it first: a faint discoloration about a foot wide, cutting across the trench in a northeast-southwest direction, not quite parallel to Adams Street. They couldn't believe their luck. "Technically, Dave," Mazrim cracked, "that's exactly what we're looking for." Their workday wasn't an hour old. When additional trenches parallel to the first showed that the stain kept running northeast, they called in help to dig out the "feature," map it, and systematically photograph it. (Every soil stain or artifact, no matter how small or how faint, is called a "feature.") Eventually they tracked it for 250 feet.

The stain marked the top of what had been a continuous trench about two feet deep. What had it been? The simplest and most plausible answer was an old fence line. The fence would have been constructed by inserting wooden poles into the earth, making a solid wall of upright stakes to protect crops from free-ranging animals. The wood is long gone, but the signs of disturbance remain.

Two groups of people built fences (and house walls) this way, says Mazrim: Indians of the Mississippian era (600-1,000 years ago) and the French. "There's no other evidence of Mississippian occupation around here," he says, "and there are plenty of archival materials saying that the French were here."

Two months later Mazrim and Nolan returned for another week of work and found even better evidence that the French had been present. In a vacant lot about half a block northeast of the first, they scraped off the topsoil and promptly

found another faint stain in the subsoil. "It was a little creepy," says Mazrim, "hitting something right away." Instead of running straight, however, this stain turned one corner, then another. It marked the "wall trench" for a two-room cabin with, most likely, a porch running along one side—a shape typical of French cabins. "We spent all day November 8 hand troweling, and finally stood back and saw a beautiful rectangle—a room. That

were excited by their discovery, but they were also starting to be puzzled. The cabin area was yielding almost none of the pottery fragments and other durable debris of everyday life that usually help archaeologists summon up the past. All they found were a three-inch chunk of a wine bottle, a hand-forged nail, and a heel bone ("calcaneus") that Illinois State Museum archaeozoologist Terrance Martin later identified as having belonged to a bison. The

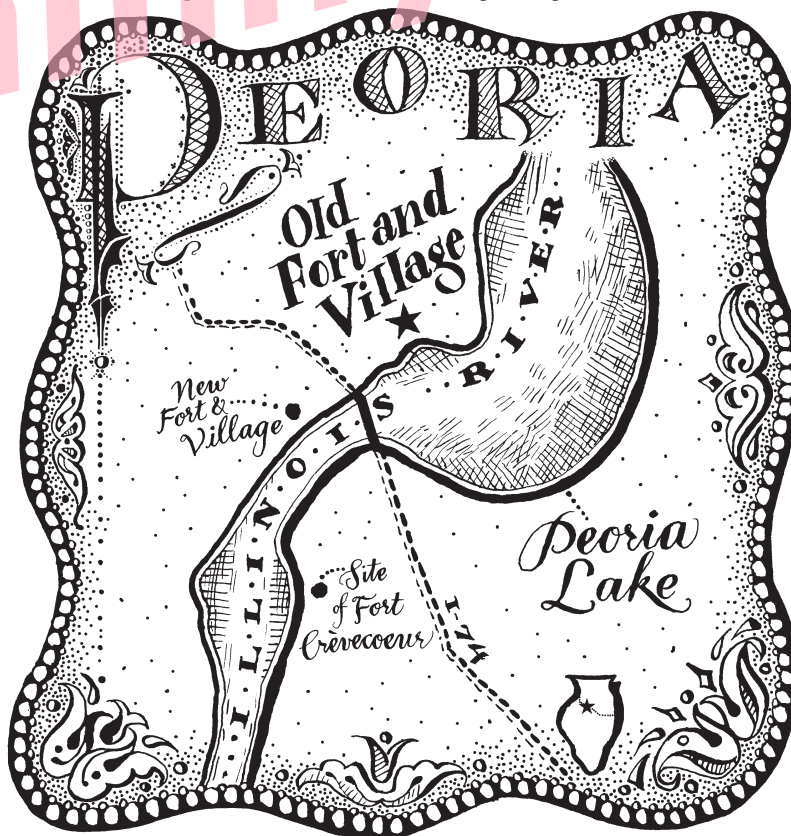


Illustration | ELIZABETH M. TAMNY

was a good day."

It was an especially good day because Mazrim could see how the humble cabin they were unearthing fit into known Peoria history. The probate records for one Louis Chatellereau show that he lived in the area until he died, in 1795. (These records—the only known

bone was an important find because it dates from the 1770s to 1790s; the next most recent bison remains found in Illinois are from the 1730s. Whoever stayed in that cabin evidently dined on one of the last bison to live in Illinois.

Finding so few artifacts around a

Clues to the past of French Peoria turn conventional wisdom on its head.

records of this kind for anyone who lived in the Peoria area in French times—are in the Byron R. Lewis Historical Library in Vincennes, Indiana, and were quoted in the Illinois State Museum's 1995 publication *French Peoria and the Illinois Country*, by Judith Franke.) The 1837 survey also shows this land as belonging to Chatellereau, whose son accompanied the surveyor. The cabin itself is small, close to the fenced field, and at the edge of where the village probably stood, so it may have been used only by farmhands, slaves, or occasional visitors.

dwelling, in ground that hasn't been disturbed for 200 years, is like finding the Loop deserted at lunchtime: something's wrong, but you don't know what. Mazrim says that in the larger French agricultural settlements near present-day Saint Louis, known as the American Bottom, "We'd have found a tableful of pretty artifacts for you to look at." Either nobody stayed in the cabin very long, or all of their household goods were leather and wood and have long since rotted. No doubt this was French Peoria at last, but where *was* everything?

"French Peoria" is actually an ambiguous and potentially misleading phrase. It could refer to at least four different French outposts in the vicinity of Peoria Lake over a period of 132 years, from 1680 to 1812. The one Mazrim and Nolan found was the third known settlement. Peoria Lake was a strategic stop on the main route from French Canada to French Louisiana, by way of Lake Michigan, the Chicago portage, the Illinois River, and the Mississippi. But few European-Americans actually lived there, and their outposts shifted in ways that aren't easily traced.

The first of the French Peorias was Fort Crevecoeur. French explorer Robert Cavalier de La Salle built it in 1680, probably just below the lake on the east side of the river. Then he pushed on, leaving behind a crew that mutinied, burned the structure, and threw everything they couldn't steal into the river. Small wonder that physical evidence of its exact location has been hard to come by.

The second, Fort Saint Louis, was built a decade later, in 1691, by explorer and fur trader Henri de Tonti somewhere on the west side of Peoria Lake (not to be confused with an earlier fort of the same name at Starved Rock). It might have been in the same place as a later village, but again there's no evidence. The fort's 1,800 vertical pickets enclosed a lodging, a warehouse, and two houses for soldiers, according to *French Peoria and the Illinois Country*. (The only book on this subject, it's available from the Dickson Mounds Museum Shop in downstate Fulton County, kfehr@museum.state.il.us.) Soon after 1700 the mission chapel, trading post, and finally the fort itself fell into disuse, though a few French traders could usually still be found in the Peoria Indian villages on the lake. Like most such villages, they were occupied mainly in the summer and were often abandoned in times of war.

The third French Peoria is the