



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

1849 C Street, NW

Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Mike Bost
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Bost:

We are submitting the enclosed reconnaissance survey report for the French Colonial historic resources in the area of Prairie du Rocher, Illinois. The National Park Service (NPS) conducted the survey in response to your July 8, 2020, letter to former Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt requesting that the NPS undertake a reconnaissance survey to identify the national significance of sites in the area of Prairie du Rocher and to determine their suitability as a National Historic Park.

A reconnaissance survey provides a preliminary evaluation of a resource for its likelihood to meet the criteria for potential inclusion in the national park system. Reconnaissance surveys typically examine the issues of national significance, suitability, feasibility, and level of NPS management required, and determine if further evaluation through a congressionally authorized special resource study is warranted. To be recommended as a new unit of the national park system, an area must be 1) nationally significant, 2) suitable, 3) feasible, and 4) require direct NPS management instead of protection by other public agencies or the private sector.

The Prairie du Rocher Reconnaissance Survey assessed properties located across the landscape of the Middle Mississippi River region of Illinois that are related to French colonial settlement, administration, and culture, including some of the earliest European settlements in what would come to be known as the Illinois Country. The properties analyzed include buildings, standing ruins, a historic road, and archeological resources. Among these are Fort de Chartres, the center of French military and administrative power in the Illinois Country; the sites of four French villages including Kaskaskia, originally a Franco-Illinois village and later the most populous French settlement in the region; the sites of at least three Illinois Indian villages whose histories and fates were intertwined with that of the French colonists; the Pierre Menard House, home to a bilingual, influential merchant who rose to political prominence and who was also a prominent enslaver; a church and cemetery that represent the legacy of the French colonial parish system; and several excellent examples of French colonial architecture in the village of Prairie du Rocher that together demonstrate the endurance of French colonial cultural tastes long after the area had become part of the United States.

Based on the information resulting from this survey, the NPS does not recommend a special resource study be authorized to further evaluate the historic resources associated with Prairie du Rocher, because the resources considered within the survey are unlikely to meet the established criteria for inclusion in the national park system.

The Pierre Menard House and Fort de Chartres were previously recognized for their national significance and designated National Historic Landmarks. However, few if any of the other resources considered in the reconnaissance survey would individually meet the NPS special resource study criterion for national significance. Collectively, the resources represent a compelling historical narrative of French immigration, settlement, cultural exchange and development, architectural expression, enslavement, religious practice, and political and military administration of the Middle Mississippi River region that could enhance the narratives represented at existing NPS units, but the stories, themes, and types of historic resources associated with individual sites are duplicative to those included in Ste. Geneviève National Historical Park. Therefore, individual sites would not meet the NPS special resource study suitability criterion. There are significant concerns about the feasibility of including the survey area's scattered archeological resources in a potential NPS unit due to the size of the landscape and the need to manage a diversity of active uses including agriculture, religious worship, and residential areas. Fort de Chartres and the Pierre Menard House—the two individual sites that are likely to meet the national significance criterion in a special resource study--are owned by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and open to the public as state historic sites, therefore it is unlikely that further study would find direct NPS management a clearly superior option over current management.

While this reconnaissance survey does not recommend authorization of a special resource study, the historic resources associated with Prairie du Rocher may have the potential to support a national heritage area, provided that a single coordinating entity could be identified. Such a management option may better suit the large size and dispersed resources within the study area.

In light of stakeholder interest, the NPS plans to make this reconnaissance survey report available to the public one week after its transmittal to your office. This will be done through posting an electronic version of the report on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment website.

Thank you for your interest in the National Park Service.

Sincerely,

Charles F. Sams, III
Director
National Park Service

Enclosure