



In the June 1955 flood, men assembled along the Mississippi River in an effort to restrain its surging waters.

WHS Archives, CF 1777



“Born and Raised on the River”

Weathering the Floods at Villa Louis and Stonefield

By Susan Lampert Smith

One spring day in 2001, Villa Louis director Michael Douglass set out to do a perfectly normal task for a state historical site director. He was going to Madison to give a talk at the Elvehjem Museum on the William Morris–designed textiles that had been recreated for the sumptuous redecoration of the Villa Louis mansion. The Villa, an Italianate estate built by Wisconsin’s first millionaire, Hercules Dousman, is located on St. Feriole Island in the Mississippi River. The island normally is connected to the city of Prairie du Chien by bridges and city streets. But on this April day, before Douglass could drive the one hundred miles to the capital city, he had to head down his office stairs to the rowboat tied below and begin a watery commute out of the Mississippi flood to the mainland.

As Douglass navigated toward civilization, he left behind a world of mud, dikes, sandbags, and water—water that covered parts of St. Feriole Island to just below the street signs. The Villa itself was the only high-and-dry building on the island, surrounded by acres of surging water. “When I went to museum school in Cooperstown, New York, they didn’t teach a course in sandbagging,” comments Douglass, whose staff and restoration crew commuted in boats for twenty-five days that spring.

All nine of the Society’s historic sites allow visitors to experience life as it was lived at different times in history. Just as the War of 1812 battle site, the fur trade post, and the nineteenth-century velvet of the mansion’s furnishings are part of St. Feriole Island’s history, so too is the seasonal trauma of flooding.

Floods are part of the past and present at another of Wisconsin’s Mississippi River historical sites: Stonefield, near Cassville, about thirty-five miles down the Mississippi from Villa Louis. Here the smell of freshly baked apple pie wafts from a farmhouse as costumed guides reenact life in a nineteenth-century Wisconsin village. Located in the farthest southwest corner of the state, Stonefield also includes a museum dedicated to the history of Wisconsin agriculture and a house museum that interprets the life of Nelson Dewey, Wisconsin’s first governor.

During the spring 2001 floods, Allen Schroeder, Douglass’s counterpart at Stonefield, made daily treks to the high bluff in Nelson Dewey State Park to assess the marauding Mississippi’s slow invasion into the village and state agricultural museum below. Like Douglass, Schroeder had spent the week marshalling staff and volunteers. At Stonefield they raised sandbag



Robert Granflaten

Villa Louis may owe its existence to one of the first recorded floods on the Upper Mississippi.

dikes around buildings, jacked up antique machinery onto cement blocks, and tried to safeguard the village’s 75,000 artifacts from the water.

That done, there was little to do but watch the river rise.

“First it made an island [of the village] and then it began to



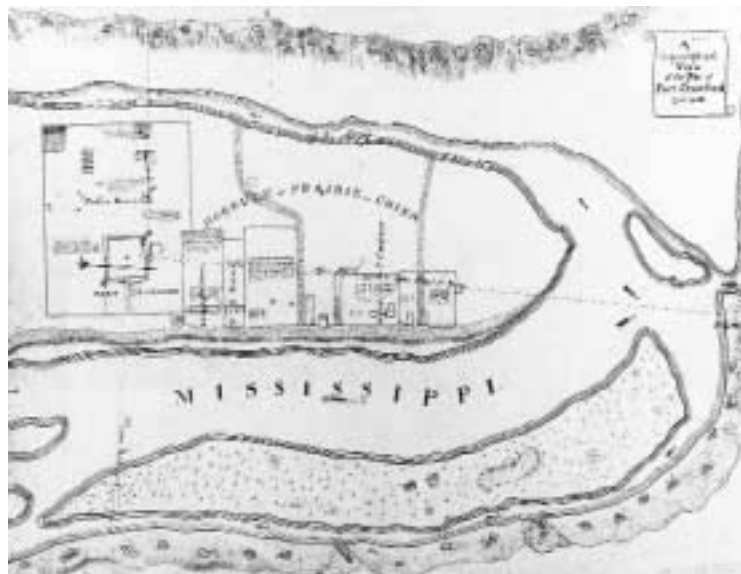
WHS Archives, Place File, WHi(X3)34197

This photograph, taken in the 1860s, shows the residence of Hercules Dousman. The building was later razed to make room for the Villa.

fill the island,” describes Schroeder. Both he and Douglass spent the days when the river was highest making notes, believing there is no time like flood time to prepare for the next flood. Because there *will* be a next time.

“The river is going to continue to flood,” asserts Schroeder, who got his first taste of the mighty Mississippi during the epic flood of 1965, when he was a college student in Winona, Minnesota, and helped on a sandbag brigade. “I can guarantee you that sometime in the future it’s going to flood again.”

Since glacial times, floods have written the history of the Mississippi, erased it, then written it again. In fact, Villa Louis probably owes its existence to one of the first recorded floods on the Upper Mississippi. When the U.S. Army built Fort Crawford as its most northerly fort on the river in 1816, officers picked a strategic spot, an island just above the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers. But they also chose an island that itself was formed by the river’s floodwaters, and they likely did not realize that the uncontrolled river varied widely in flow from year to year. Records from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers show that between the 1830s and the 1930s, when the current



WHS Archives, Place File, WHi(X3)34526

The U.S. Army built Fort Crawford five years before this 1821 topographical map recorded its location on St. Feriole Island. Hercules Dousman’s first home would replace the fort in 1843.

near Prairie du Chien, made the army realize it needed a permanent garrison at Prairie du Chien. Soldiers returned to the fort just in time for the great June flood of 1828. It wasn’t the first time the fort had flooded. According to Iowa historian William J. Petersen, soldiers in the original fort had previously complained of “spring freshets that frequently flooded the barracks to a depth of three or four feet . . . and were invariably followed by bilious diseases.”

However, the flood of 1828 wreaked greater damage. Petersen found military records claiming that that flood turned St. Feriole into “an island over which steamboats could pass in any

lock-and-dam system went into place, the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien varied in flow from 16,000 cubic feet per second to 190,000 cubic feet per second. These statistics also show that the river was capable of rising to nearly twenty-five feet, more than seven vertical feet above its banks.

Douglass notes that the army had largely abandoned Fort Crawford after the 1820 construction of Fort Snelling in the present-day Twin Cities. But the 1827 Red Bird uprising, in which Ho-Chunk Indians fought with settlers

direction. Fences were swept away, the fort was for a time abandoned, and many inhabitants of the village were compelled to retreat across the slough to the higher part of Prairie du Chien, or to seek safety in boats, on rafts, or in the lofts of houses.” According to Douglass, after the 1828 flood the army decided St. Feriole was a poor site and built its next fort on the mainland, at the site of the current Fort Crawford military museum.

There are no accurate measurements from the 1828 flood, but someone was watching it with an eagle eye. Hercules Dousman, stationed on the island as a fur trader, likely noticed that the one thing remaining above the water was an Indian mound on the fort site. The land was first acquired by Dousman’s business partner Joseph Rolette, who later sold it to Dousman. “Dousman could see that the mound was not affected by the flood, and in 1835 he acquired that land,” explains Douglass. The brick home that preceded Villa Louis was built on the mound in 1843.



The next year the river flooded again, and Dousman would have had a front row seat for the running aground of the steamboat *Lynx*, in which he owned a half-interest. The boat’s pilot had tried to take a shortcut over the

flooded island on a run from Galena to St. Peter, Minnesota, and was stranded by falling water. The *Lynx* eventually was freed and went on to ply the Mississippi.

Thanks to Dousman’s foresight in regard to high land, the home on the mound was largely unaffected by major floods in 1870, 1892, 1920, and 1922, although floodwaters frequently inundated the surrounding island community. “It’s clear that flooding was part of the experience of people living here in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” Douglass observes. “Why did it become such a problem in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?”

One reason is that people have greatly altered the river’s ability to spread during flood time. The lock-and-dam system, designed to keep a steady nine-foot-deep channel for barge traffic, along with antiflooding levees, serves to funnel water into unprotected areas such as St. Feriole Island and the lowlands around Cassville, including the Stonefield site. All these factors came together in the epic flood of spring 1965, which covered the island to depths of seven feet. The flood destroyed artifacts in the Museum of Prairie du Chien, a former carriage



Photo by John Maniaci; Wisconsin State Journal via www.Merlin-Net.com

On April 21, 2001, Pete Mumm ferried a boat filled with sandbags across South Okey Street as residents of Cassville fought to hold back the rising Mississippi.



Photo by Craig Schreiner; Wisconsin State Journal via www.Merlin-Net.com

After the water receded, grounds crewman Eric Keppler cleared debris from this flooded storage barn at Villa Louis.

house on the Dousman estate. Villa Louis itself suffered a flooded basement but was otherwise unscathed.

The surrounding neighborhoods on St. Feriole Island were devastated. Floodwaters filled every home in the old Fourth Ward. Marie Fernette remembers evacuating her in-laws, Charles and Helen Fernette, as water poured into their home. “My in-laws were quite elderly and handicapped,” she explains.

“My mother-in-law had never been in a boat, and she didn’t want to leave, but they said she had to.” In her landlubber lifestyle, Helen Fernette was unusual. The rest of the Fernette family was practically born in boats, and for nearly 150 years they had lived within a community that made its living on the water as anglers and trappers.

“The Fernettes were all old river rats,” says Marie Fernette. “They were born and raised on the river, and they weren’t going anywhere.”

But when the 1965 flood receded, as floods always do, it spelled the death of that community. A new floodplain ordinance forbade residents from making any major improvements or additions to their properties, and smaller floods in following years caused the buildings to deteriorate further. The army corps and the city eventually spent about \$4.5 million to move 125 structures off the island, a relocation unprecedented on the Upper Mississippi.

The last to leave was Bob Fernette, whose house relocation in 1986 was delayed, ironically, by an October flood. That year he told the *Wisconsin State Journal* that he blamed human tinkering for the worsening floods. “They got it so regulated with the dams and locks,” he said. “Ain’t natural anymore. Even the wildlife don’t know what to do. Muskrat’ll build up his house, and the next day he’ll be flooded out.”

Bob Fernette had lived on the island all his life—seventy-two years as of 1986—and his family had been in the community so long that his great, great-grandfather, John, a carpenter, had helped build Villa Louis. According to Michael Douglass, many of the people in the Fourth Ward neighborhood had French Canadian surnames and family lineages that reached back nearly to Prairie du Chien’s founding in the seventeenth century. “I lament the loss of that French Canadian community here on the island,” says Douglass, who arrived

Cassville, site of Stonefield Village



Map by Kenneth A. Miller

rolled metal “tinklers” that probably graced the deerskin sleeve of a fur trader or Indian. “[The house] was built in 1820, the first brick home in Wisconsin,” says Al Reed. Like his neighbors, the Fernettes, Reed was born and raised on the water, working as a commercial fisherman. While exploring river islands, he discovered a number of archaeological sites, two of which became the basis of graduate theses by University of Wisconsin students. Reed notes that many of the old islands have disappeared, submerged by sustained high water.

The old St. Feriole neighborhood was removed from its historical location, where the families of French Canadian descent had settled since the fur trade era. But some of them didn’t move far from the river. Reed, for example, bought a home on the river’s edge along Prairie du Chien’s North Main Street. “The houses were cheap, and we have good neighbors; we live among many of the people who used to live in the old Fourth Ward,” Reed says. His neighbors include Marie Fernette, who also moved off the island, but not off the river.

Unfortunately, the 2001 flood found them, flooding Fernette’s basement and covering the

Flooding around Prairie du Chien shaped the lives of French Canadian settlers such as John Fernette and his wife, photographed around 1938.

WHS Archives, Name File





Photo by Frank Cornelius; WHS Archives, Place File, WHI(C76)210

Above: Around 1920, Mississippi River floodwaters surrounded the Dousman House Hotel on St. Feriolo Island.

Left: Not even the 2001 flood prevented Tom Bouzek of Prairie du Chien from grilling up some beer-soaked brats.



Photo by John Maniaci; Wisconsin State Journal via www.Merlin-Net.com

first floor in Reed's home, leading to a long and messy cleanup. Still, neither plans to move. Fernette mentions that the homes on the block that went up for sale after the 2001 flood were snapped up by another former Fourth Warder. "He said to me, 'Water doesn't scare us, does it, Marie?'" she says.

But to others the 2001 flood underscored the reasons the Fourth Ward homes were removed. Water on the island reached a peak of 23.75 feet, second only to the 25.4 level of 1965. Long-time residents said the clearing of the island makes floods like the most recent one much easier to deal with. "When you don't have to evacuate people, it's not nearly as tense," observes former police chief Gary Knickerbocker, who helped out at the county's emergency command center during the 2001 flood and remembers 1965 well.

In the aftermath of a flood, it often appears that the land's wildlife has been drowned out, with only the most hardy and rooted plants left to persevere. As the 1965 flood revealed, floods can have a similar effect on the human life of an island. After the waters receded, the more destitute of the island's population,

many living in shacks they were not permitted to improve, were forced to relocate with the help of an army corps project. Meanwhile, the Villa reigned on its higher ground, presumably a more valuable keepsake to the community.

Today Villa Louis has no permanent neighbors. The site is surrounded by parkland that hosts annual events such as a rendezvous reenactment of the fur trade era and the Prairie Dog Blues Festival. Douglass said that when he arrived in 1983, there was some resentment that the Villa was allowed to remain. Since then Douglass has witnessed five major floods and learned all kinds of things that aren't taught in museum school. One is about the psychology of fighting a flood, which he says produces "bizarre, conflicting emotions." During the preparation phase and the cleanup, there's an esprit de corps that comes from working together. And despite the dirty, hard work of fighting floods, he can't, in the midst of them, help being awed by their sweeping power. "It's still beautiful, it's still awesome and spectacular, because it's so visceral," he says. "You're witnessing some vision of what the river was like during the last glacial melt, when it really did fill the valley from bluff to bluff."

But there are other times when being separated from the mainland by a flood can be woefully isolating. Douglass laments that flooding—which affects some homes while other, slightly higher, buildings go unscathed—can create "Job-like feelings of persecution."

He remembers a bleak night during the flood of 1993. Grounds director Ken White had worked day and night at the pumps of the Museum of Prairie du Chien, while a sandbag dike

St. Feriole Island, site of Villa Louis



Map by Kenneth A. Miller

held back the river around the brick building. “I tell him I’ll take the night shift, and he boats off the island and leaves me,” Douglass recalled. “At about 3 or 3:30 A.M., we lose it. Water is coming in everywhere and can’t be held back.” Douglass continued at the pumps, which had to be filled with gasoline every two hours or so. When he went back about 5 A.M., it was raining, and he spotted a muddy and bedraggled gray fox, making tracks through the water for the mainland.

“It was very depressing and discouraging,” says Douglass. “There are times when you feel like you’re doing battle, and losing.”

Although 2001 was Schroeder’s first flood at Stonefield (he also directs Pendarvis in Mineral Point and First Capitol in Belmont), he already knows that feeling. In a week of work he describes as “almost like a military campaign,” employees and volunteers managed to lift nearly every moveable object above the flood level. A single piece, an 1872 stationary thresher, took two people two days to jack up. As the water crested in mid-April, it looked like Stonefield would survive. Then came word from the army corps that spring rain in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota meant a second river crest was coming, possibly high-

The Author



fun trips for kids and their families.

Susan Lampert Smith and her husband, Matt, and two kids run Blue Valley Gardens, an asparagus farm near Blue Mounds. She writes the “On, Wisconsin” column for the *Wisconsin State Journal* and teaches a reporting class at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her book *Wisconsin Family Weekends* is a guide to

er than the first. “It was just a hopeless feeling,” says Schroeder of receiving the news. “You’ve done everything you could—and it wasn’t enough.”

Fortunately, the second crest never materialized at Stonefield, and after a week of pressure washing, raking, and other cleanup, Stonefield was ready to host a film crew. The lasting damage there is minor, and Schroeder notes that the floodwaters actually had the salutary effect of forcing the cleaning of some storage areas that are now used as regular displays. “I wouldn’t recommend it, but the flood did give us a chance to do a thorough cleaning of the buildings,” he says.

Villa Louis spent \$50,000 coping with the effects of the 2001 flood; Stonefield spent about \$40,000. The Society is still waiting to hear how much of the repair costs will be reimbursed by disaster funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

At Stonefield, the 2001 flood prompted the site to prepare for the next inevitable occurrence. Schroeder hopes to meet with the Army Corps about extending a partial dike, built after the 1965 flood inundated the site, so that it better protects the complex. The pieces of historic farm machinery will be left up on blocks, and the furnace, water heater, and electrical supply will be moved out of the only basement in the village. (Floodwaters reached the eleventh of twelve basement steps leading to the building’s main floor.) “Everything that is up now is going to stay up,” he says, “because next spring, who knows?”

At Villa Louis, the reality of annual flooding means that some plans, such as the hope of reproducing some of the buildings that once stood there, won’t happen. “It would be nice to reproduce some of the nineteenth-century buildings that we know were here, but we’re not going to do it,” Douglass says. The possibility of another flood is surer even than the existence of the Villa on its perch.

The river and its attendant floods have always been part of the history of that house. “When we introduce people to the site, we talk about the fact that the river has always played such a role in the lives of the people here,” says Douglass. “It’s an ongoing creative force, not a done deal.” ❧