



DEI *Perspectives*

French-American Heritage Month

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(He/Him/His)*

When I was in middle school, I had to write an essay in French class. At some point in the essay, I typed “Detroit” and the spell check changed it to “d’etoit.” Etoit is the French word for “strait,” a narrow stretch of water connecting two seas or lakes. And that’s how I learned how Detroit got its name. It’s built on a strait connecting Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie! I then started looking at maps and finding other artifacts of French settlement throughout the country: Des Moines, Iowa; St. Louis, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; New Orleans, Louisiana; etc.

One of the more ambitious French settlements in the United States was Azilum. This now abandoned site was imagined in the late 1700’s by Philadelphia’s, then large, French community. Azilum was intended to be a destination for the large amounts of French refugees fleeing the French revolutions. These refugees were loyal to the royal family and were comprised of nobility and gentry. They even made a building called “La Grand Maison” for Marie Antoinette and her two children if they managed to get them out of France alive.

The settlement was built on a bend in the Susquehanna River near New York state. At its peak, it had 50 houses, broad streets and the large “Grand Maison,” which housed many important guests like the future king of France, Louis Phillippe. The town struggled to survive in its remote location, and in 1803, Napoleon made it possible for the exiled families of nobility to return to France. Slowly, the site became abandoned and now stands as an archeological site. People can now tour the 20 acres and see the original foundations and reconstructed structures.

French-American Heritage Month is an opportunity to discover the impact of the French on American culture beyond New Orleans’ Mardi Gras. Most of us don’t have to look too far into our own backyards to find evidence of the early French fur traders and settlers that shaped the country we live in today.

Get more information on the French Azilum – <https://thefrenchazilum.com/post.php?pid=9>