William Lewis
Sublette’s Big Farm

By Roger Williams

I have been three years doing research for two novels on the mountain fur trade. In reading other writer’s books and articles, I hit upon the fact that mountain man William “Bill” Sublette, one of Jedediah Strong Smith’s business partners, owned a big farm, near St. Louis, Missouri. In reading and telephone conversations with The Missouri State Historical Society (MHS), and digging through biographies on William Sublette, Jedediah S. Smith, and other mountain men of notoriety; a big farm is mentioned but never described in any detail, nor is its location specifically given. The location described as being “west of St. Louis”. It seems that his having a big farm and purchasing real estate, in various places, has not been glamorous enough to warrant more lines of print. Therefore, I set about the task of finding and mapping the location of Sublette’s land. It begins with a large Spanish land grant to Charles Gratiot Sr. ("Grass ioh")

Gratiot’s Grant

In 1781, the 29 year old, Charles Gratiot, Sr. moved to the tiny village of St. Louis (nicknamed Mound City) in what was then land owned by Spain. The governing body of Spanish holdings was located in the port city, New Orleans. Charles Gratiot, later, met and married Victorie Chouteau ("Shoo toe") on June 25th 1781. Victorie was the sister of Auguste and Jean Pierre Chouteau. The marriage gave Gratiot powerful political connections in and around St. Louis.

In 1785 Charles Gratiot Sr. was granted land, which he was required to cultivate. The land, a League Square, was located approximately six miles west of St. Louis. A League is three miles; therefore his grant was three miles square (5760 acres), bordered on the east by Kings Highway, on the south by what is now Pernod St., on the west by Big Bend St., approximately three quarters of what is now Forest Park on the north. The original tract of land was accessed from St. Louis by Fox Creek Road (Old Manchester Ave., which was an extension of Market St., prior to the Railroad running through the area.). (Note: I have found no map that lists Fox Creek Road as old Manchester Ave., but based on word of mouth of the map specialist at MHS old Manchester Road has had at least three name changes, such as St. Louis Ave., Old Manchester Road, and Vandeventer Ave. Fox Creek Road appears on maps in a more southerly area of the county.) In 1790 Charles built a, “French style,” log house on the high ground over- looking the little valley of the Des Peres River.

He and his family often spent summers in the log cabin, but also maintained a large home on the corner of Main (2nd) and Chestnut Streets, in downtown St. Louis.

In 1803 the US Government procured all of the Spanish Lands, recently transferred to France, east of the Mississippi River, known as the Louisiana Purchase. On March 10, 1804, Charles Gratiot Sr., witness for France, signed the transfer documents and Meriwether Lewis signed for the United States. The transfer ceremonies were held at Gratiot’s large stone town home, which downtown and across the street from what would later be William Clark’s store and home. Later, judges were sent to St. Louis from the state of Indiana to set up courts and the legal system in the new territory. Charles Gratiot was appointed a judge.

In 1809 the city of St. Louis was incorporated. Charles Gratiot Sr. was elected a trustee. One of his acts was to name the road on the eastern boundary of his land, “Kingshighway”, for the king of France. On Gratiot’s land, there were at least two sulfur laden springs, which boiled up along the edge of the Des Peres River. Charles built a small resort around these springs, and named it “Sulfur Springs”. At that time, sulfur water was thought to have healing properties and people came from miles around to bathe in and drink the waters. In 1810 Charles’ son, Henry, married and remodeled the old log country house and took it as his home. The resort at Sulfur Springs was once described as “the garden spot of the city’s vicinity.” During the winter of 1819; Manuel Lisa became ill, while at his trading post on the upper Missouri River. He and his wife returned to St. Louis and took a cabin at Sulfur Springs Resort to indulge in the “therapeutic waters.” He died at his cabin in 1820 and is buried in the Bellefontaine Cemetery outside of St. Louis.

In 1817 Charles Gratiot Sr. died. His remaining land grant was divided into twelve pieces, giving each of his nine living children a part of the original League Square Grant and the remainder were sold to other people. (1)(3)(5)

Sulfur Springs Farm

During 1817 and 1830, two sons of Charles Gratiot Sr., John and Henry, displeased with the slavery situation in the new state of Missouri, relocated to Illinois and opened several lead mines. They founded the settlement of Gratiot’s Grove, which later became Galina. They returned to St. Louis to put their inherited lands on the market.

In 1830, William (Bill) Sublette decided to take heavy wagons to the mountain rendezvous being held near the mouth of the Popo Agie River. He purchased ten big heavy wagons and two light Dearborn wagons. His caravan of wagons and loose stock, including twelve head of cattle, left from their camp near Cote Brilliant (St. Louis Indian mound located near the intersection of Kingshighway and Martin Luther in St. Louis). Sublette became the first person to

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pull wagons nearly all the way to the South Pass of the Centennial Divide. Here he and his two partners decided to sell their interest in Smith, Sublette, and Jackson Trading Firm, to Bill’s younger brother, Milton G. Sublette, James “Jim” Bridger, Thomas (Broken Hand) Fitzpatrick, and others, returning home with only ten big wagons, laden with furs. On their return trip Smith, Sublette, Jackson decided to make a record of Bill’s historic trip by drawing a detailed map of the route, showing rivers, campsites, terrain, buffalo regions, and water locations, etc. Jedediah Smith and others worked on the map at his home, on Federal Ave. (old North Broadway Ave., between Washington and Bittle Streets, in St. Louis), with his two recently purchased slaves keeping house, during the fall of 1830. They sent the map, along with a letter, to the United States Government’s Department of War, letting John Eaton, Secretary of War, know that heavy wagons could, with only little difficulty, travel to South Pass and beyond.

On March 10, 1831, and on April 26, 1831, before leaving with his business partners Jedediah S. Smith and David E. Jackson for Santa Fe, New Mexico, Bill Sublette purchased two narrow tracts of land (approximately 1100 feet wide and three miles long) owned by Henry and John Gratiot, consisting of 779 acres total, which included the old Gratiot country house and the Sulfur Springs Resort (see map), for approximately $7000. Sublette lived in the, now, run-down, leaky roofed, Gratiot country house. In December, 1834, he built four 14x16 foot cabins to house his slaves and hired farm help. These structures were to be located on the west side of the soon to be built mansion. Then, he contracted for a two story limestone and wood framed mansion with a full basement, which divided into three rooms. The house, which measured approximately 45x55 feet, was an agriculture show place for the area. The new mansion sat on the “hill”, near the site of the original Gratiot log house. (3)

In February 1835 Milton Sublette was staying in a cabin at Bill Sublette’s farm. Milton’s injured heel was hurting him beyond his ability to tolerate putting his weight on it. He, for several years, had been drinking large quantities of alcohol in the attempt to lessen the constant pain in his leg. Bill assisted, his younger brother, Andrew Sublette and Dr. Farrar, in amputating Milton’s diseased leg. Milton recuperated in the cabin on the farm. For the remainder of his life, he held ill feelings toward Bill, for the removal of his leg and other earlier fur trading business dealings. Robert Campbell, Bill’s good friend and business partner, in an effort to cool Milton’s anger, purchased a cork leg, in Philadelphia, Pa. Campbell sent the leg extension to Milton to wear over his stub, thereby allowing him to walk without crutches. Milton, with a new lease on life, left for the mountains that spring, riding in a Dearborn wagon pulled by a mule. Later, Milton was employed to manage Ft. Laramie, where he died on April 5th, 1837 and is buried in the little cemetery outside the fort. The actual grave site of Milton Sublette, like that of David E. Jackson, Jedediah S. Smith, and many other mountain men of note, is lost to history.

William Sublette cultivated the land on his farm and bred prize winning cattle from stock sent to him, in 1839 from Scotland, by William Drummond Stewart and also stock shipped from Ohio. Sublette owned several slaves, who served in the house and on the farm. Bill maintained an American Indian family on the farm and at the Campbell/ Sublette Trading Store, downtown, near 1st. and Market Streets. By 1841; he had purchased four buffalo yearlings, at a cost of $100, from Michel Cerre. Later, a black bear and one or more antelope were added. The bear was staked-out on a chain in the yard between the mansion and the apple orchard. Sublette maintained these local oddities to remind him of his life and times in the mountains. It was one of Sublette’s dreams of having a horse race track, like his father and grandfather Whitley owned back in Kentucky. He partnered with a Mr. Laclede and established a race track a few hundred yards east of Kingshighway on the south side of New Manchester Road. (6) After 1835; Bill opened a fine whitish colored clay quarry and four coal mines on the farm and leased them to others to work. The three coal mines were sunk into a two to five foot thick, horizontal seam, which ran from near the present Sublette Street to Marconi Street and another mine, on a similar seam, near the corner of Shaw Street and Kingshighway. (7)

The Later Years

William Sublette predicted there was room and need for a town between Independence and Westport. He joined with twelve other investors and purchased approximately 1400 acres of land near Westport Landing on the Missouri River. They plotted out a town and called it Kansas, which later became Kansas City MO.

Andrew Sublette, Bill’s younger brother, introduced him to Dr. Thomas Hereford, his wife, Ester S. Hereford, and oldest daughter, Frances S.; lately moved to St. Louis from Alabama. It was Andrew’s opinion that the Herefords could run the Sulfur Springs Resort better than others that had leased it previously. Bill agreed and leased the resort, plus some land, to be managed by Dr. Hereford and his wife, and daughter. It was rumored that Andrew had a fondness toward the
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tall dark haired Frances Hereford. It is not known if Andrew actually courted Frances or just admired from afar.

Last Rendezvous

In May of 1843, William Drummond Stewart, once again came up the Mississippi River to St. Louis and set up a “last hurrah” trip to the Green River Valley. William Sublette, Solomon Sublette, and many others traveled with William Stewart in the Stewart/Sublette Expedition, to Stewart’s enchanted area on the upper Piney Fork (New Fork) River, near Stewart’s (New Fork) Lake, which is situated in the valley of the Seedskadee (Green) River, for a last grand staged rendezvous. Solomon Sublette led the caravan at Fort Laramie after placing a new headstone on Milton Sublette’s gave. He then traveled south to Bents Forts and beyond. Bill Sublette was already quite ill with consumption (TB) and under the care Doctor William Beaumont of St. Louis. Bill hoped that the clean dry mountain air would improve his health. On the 21st.April, Bill buried his sister, Sophronia F. Sublette Cook, who died from a lingering and reoccurring illness. Bill took two young slave boys along to assist him. Nearly anyone, with money, in St. Louis, was invited to join in the trip and subsequent party. A large number of local men made the journey, by wagon, horse and mule back. Sublette led the wagons up the south bank of the Missouri River to the jumping off town of Westport, Missouri, while Stewart traveled by steamboat which carried other supplies. At the same time and in nearly the same town; John C. Fremont, along with his guide Kit Carson, was assembling another expedition to map the second leg of the overland route to California. (8) Wouldn’t Jedediah S. Smith and William Ashley have loved to have made the trip to the Piney Fork River? It would have been quite a party.) Sublette’s big farming operation was left to the questionable sober management of Andrew W. Sublette. Bill returned from the mountains, in the late fall, to resume managing his businesses. William D. Stewart remained at the farm, as Sublette’s guest, until the end of November, 1843, and then left to New Orleans. Doctor Beaumont’s opinion was that the mountain air had not turned-the-trick and Bill’s health was continuing to fail. Old trapper friends were always welcome to come to Sublette’s home for a visit; eat a meal with the family and reminisce about the shining times of the old days when the bear was not chained and they all had the hair of the black bear about them.

Marriage, Will, and Death

William Lewis Sublette married Frances S. Hereford on March 21, 1844. The simple wedding took place at Sublette’s mansion and was performed by a local Presbyterian minister. Neither he nor his wife were in good health at the time and were under the care of Dr. William Beaumont. They knew that it was very likely that their union would be short lived. In the spring of 1845; it was decided that the Sublette family and Robert Campbell should go to the lower New Jersey coast, where the sea air might help their failing health. On July 14, 1845, William, Frances, Mary Hereford (Frances’ sister), Theresa Cook (Bill’s niece and her guardian), Robert Campbell, and a slave servant girl left St. Louis via riverboat. On the 18th or 19th arriving in Pittsburg, Pa., while still aboard the docked steamboat, William Sublette drew up a new Will, wherein he left the bulk of his estate, including his lands at the town of Kansas, to his wife, along with half of Sulfur Springs Resort. He freed a slave woman, after a year of additional service to Frances, and gave another slave girl to his niece, Theresa Cook, upon his death. The entire group moved into the Exchange Hotel, wherein William and Frances took room #8. He was attended by a local doctor but consumption (TB), unhealthy diet, hard and often deprived living, smoke filled rooms, a troublesome shoulder wound, surgery for a “Fistula-in-Anno”, and humid eastern Missouri weather had taken their toll. On July 23, 1845; before his 46th birthday, William Lewis Sublette died. He was placed in an iron coffin and conveyed back to St. Louis via steamboat accompanied by his wife and others. Robert Campbell did not return with the casket due to pressing family business. Bill was initially buried in the family plot near his mansion. William Sublette left no known children. (2)(4)

In the spring of 1848, Frances Sublette was suffering from consumption and distraught over the loss of her husband and her own health to such a degree that she joined her brother, Thomas Hereford, with plans to move to California, near Los Angeles, for health, and to join others of the Hereford family. At Independence, MO, while at an inn there, she happened to meet Solomon Sublette. After a short time of being together, Solomon proposed marriage. Solomon and Frances were married May, 1848. They remained until March of 1849, after the birth of their first child. Frances then returned to the mansion in St. Louis. Solomon continued on his business trip and returned to St. Louis by November 1849.

Three children were born to Solomon and Frances Sublette, their first child was a son, Solomon Perry, Jr. In December,
First Response to Professor

By Roger Williams

It has been made known to me via the Jedediah Strong Smith Society’s quarterly that someone has insinuated that Jedediah Strong Smith, was a racist. The person was also stating that Smith was not a good tourist or representative of his government in foreign countries and that he was a failure at his attempts to get along with Native Americans, in which he came into contact.

I find no room for criticism in Smith’s dealings with the Native Americans, when viewed in context of time and place. The question I keep asking myself is; “Was Smith acting or saying anything different than any other person in his group of business associates or the entire city of St. Louis, for that matter?” Smith had several men killed in Indian attacks, none of which could he have predicted.

I also find it difficult to hold him in contempt against a word or idea that was not in common use until 1932 (racist) as a noun, and 1938 as an adjective; one hundred and one years after his death. Racism is first attested in 1936 (from French, racisme, 1935). Racism was first used in the context of Nazi theories. (1)

I have read nearly everything printed about Jedediah S. Smith, including some of his letters, and I have yet to run across anything that would say, to me, that he was a racist, when you keep in mind that nearly everyone, in which he rubbed shoulders, believed that Negroes were of less value than themselves and, primarily, it was solely due to their race. They also believed that Creoles were worth just a little bit more than Negroes; remember what went on in New Orleans along St. Charles St. Most trappers believed that Indians, regardless of the tribe, were worth less then themselves. This seems to be a natural human trait. It is my belief that most Native Americans held themselves as being of more worth than Europeans.

In 1832 the Illinois Monthly called Smith “a man whom none could approach without respect, and whom none could know without esteem.” (2)

As a mountain man Jedediah Smith was a success, --period end. He accumulated a lot of money, while in the fur business, and that was the main reason for his being in the mountains. Smith was in the west when it was new to peoples from the United States of America and because he was there, and among the first, he felt at liberty to name some streams, mountains, valleys, and lakes; some of which, like Jackson’s Hole and Jackson Lake, bear those names today, others names were changed, like Sublette Lake was changed to Yellowstone Lake.

While in California, Smith and his men were held captive awaiting the governor’s instructions from Mexico City as to what to do with them. Jedediah’s License was taken; along with his property. His men did some things that would be less than desirable but they were rough and tumble men who were used to fighting and killing, if need be, to get what they needed. Jedediah was away in San Diego meeting with the governor a lot of the time. His authority over the men was stretched very thin. It could be said that the group could have made a better impression on the governor but the deck was stacked against him from the start as the governor suspected anyone or group coming out of the United States were spies.

In the fall of 1830, he, along with his two partners, made a map and sent it, along with a letter, to the Department of War, in care of Mr. John Eaton. The map showed a proven trail usable for heavy
CAPT’N SAYS

If you have a hi-light date, dues are not paid. After May 1, your label will be removed from the Summer Mailing. Last year we lost 39 to lack of dues interest. Don’t let this happen to you!

THANKS!

Endowment Patrons - Darrell Thomas, Jim Steinbinger, M/M Fred Gregory, M/M Sheldon Moore.
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Dennis Running, Belmont, NC; Don Woodruff, Valencia, CA;
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The office move-in at Acacia Creek is scheduled for 16 Feb 2010. Hold mailing until then. After to:
JSS, Acacia Creek, Bldg A, 34400 Mission Blvd. #1116, Union City, CA 94587.

“Of all the visitors to NYC in recent years….most surprising was a beaver named Jose {named for NY Congressman} ….Speculation is that he swam down the Bronx River from Westchester county to the north. He just showed up one wintry morning in 2007 in the Bronx Zoo, where he gnawed down a few willow trees and built a lodge. For more information see: National Geographic, September 2009, pp 122-137; an interesting article on the isle of New York at the time of Henry Hudson’s arrival. It includes an interesting Muir web, charting Castor Canadensis and his relationship with habitat.

McGILL-Queen’s University Press New Releases:
Berens-Hallowell, Memories, Myths, and Dreams of an Ojibwe Leader.
Ed. Ross, Letters from Rupert’s Land, 1826-1840, James Hargrave HBC.
Moreau, The Writings of David Thompson, vol. 1
Manning, Quebec, the Story of Three Sieges.
Simmons, Keepers of the Record, The History of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives.

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wagons to pass over the continental divide at the southern pass. The original map and hand written letter are currently lost to history; only the official printed contents of the letter remain intact. Maybe someday the map and letter will surface, having been misfiled in some government folder. David Burr’s 1839 map (of which I have a copy of the area from St. Louis to South Pass) includes most of the information provided by the partnership’s 1830 map. In 1831, Smith wrote again, offering to guide a military expedition, for free, over the said trail (Sublette’s Trace) and on to California, if they wished. There was no reply to Jedediah Smith from the Department of War.

The mountain men did not go west to fight anybody, just surviving the elements was tough enough. They came for one reason, and that was to make a living trapping fur bearing animals, like the beaver. They walked over gold deposits and never looked back because; “we had beaver.”

I am a poor judge but I deem Jedediah Strong Smith the greatest path finder of them all. Joseph Walker is the only other person who comes close to matching Smith’s abilities. The explorer John C. Fremont, guided by the mountain man Christopher (Kit) Carson, followed in Jedediah Smith’s and Joseph Walker’s foot prints. James Bridger was an excellent path finder, in his own right, but fell short in other areas. It is no doubt Kit Carson heard reports of Jedediah’s trips, via the trapper’s rendezvous and Fremont should have had access to David Burr’s Map of 1839, which allowed him to successfully cross the mountains and on into California’s central valley. Kit Carson could not read or write his own name. (3) He became a Catholic in order to marry his Mexican wife. (4) He killed many Indians and one French trapper out of anger; he died leaving eight children to support and little money with which to do it, and we make him out to be a hero. I’m certain Carson was a great scout, a good army officer, an outstanding Indian Agent, and an all around good man. Kit Carson pointed the way for Fremont, where Smith, Ashley, Bridger, Walker, Provost, Sublette, Williams, Young, and Jackson had already been. Kit had a better press agent, in John C. Fremont and his wife, who had the ear of a senator, and a government sponsored printing press.

We can only speculate on what might have happened had Jedediah Smith lived to return to his home, in St. Louis, in the fall of 1831. More than likely; he would have moved back east to his land in Wayne County, Ohio and become a farmer, like his older brother, Ralph. Oh, well.

(1) Dictionary.reference.com/browse/racist
(2) Faith of Our Fathers.org, 2004. All rights reserved.
(3) Kit Carson & The Indians, Tom Dunlay, 2000, pg. 36
(4) Ibid, 415

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