

# THE FLOUNDER SURVEY DESIGN

## Thematic Survey of Flounder Houses in St. Louis City

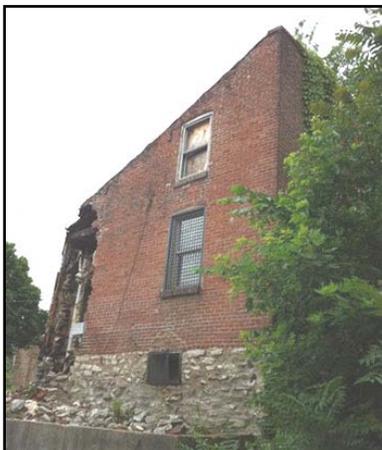
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### INTRODUCTION

From June 2014 through July 2015, the City of St. Louis undertook a thematic survey of extant flounder houses within the City boundaries. The flounder house (also called a “half-house” or “half-flounder”) is a distinct single-family property type that appears through the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in a very few cities in the eastern United States—and in St. Louis in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century—but rarely elsewhere in the country. The survey provided a framework whereby individual flounders can be evaluated; established a typology of the different flounder forms; assessed the structural condition of each; noted the existing context and environment; and identified the flounder’s level of endangerment.

The survey was the first and most critical step towards a planning effort the City will undertake to protect and promote the rehabilitation and reuse of these important endangered resources: a multi-year initiative to promote the rehabilitation of these properties and their reuse as small single-family starter homes. Assessing each resource as to the extent of its condition and environment will allow us to be vigilant and to prioritize planning and development efforts.

### SURVEY OBJECTIVES



**Figure 1—flounder collapse in the Gravois-Jefferson Streetcar Suburb National Register District**

The fate of the City’s flounders has for many years been a topic of concern for local preservationists as well as many members of the Board of Aldermen who have these resources in their jurisdiction. The Landmarks Association of St. Louis, the City’s not-for-profit preservation agency, is so concerned about the future of St. Louis’ flounders that it has included them on their Most Endangered Properties List for 2012. Many of the flounder houses in the City have never been identified or surveyed; no one knows exactly how many of them remain, or how many are currently threatened.

The City’s flounders are vulnerable: their relatively small size makes them difficult to market to contemporary buyers, and they have become one of the

City's most threatened architectural resources. Frame flounders are particularly endangered and the City has lost several in the past few years from fire or simply structural collapse. For several years prior to commencing the flounder survey, the Cultural Resources Office has maintained a preliminary list of known flounders: in the last 18 months, we have lost 5 of them to structural collapse.

While many of the flounders are located in established National Register districts and also have the protection of local designation, many do not. While many people in the City are aware of the flounder house, they are not aware of the number and variety that St. Louis is fortunate to possess.

The survey is intended to increase the public's knowledge of these resources promote and publicize our remaining flounders to promote preservation of one of the City's most character-defining historic resources and encourage their reuse and rehabilitation. It will also be used to document the conditions that endanger these resources, allowing us to prioritize limited City resources and planning efforts.



**Figure 2—Compton and Dry's Pictorial Atlas of St. Louis, 1975. A part of what is now the Soulard neighborhood, showing multiple flounders of several distinct forms.**

## GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION



**Figure 3—small flounder on Ohio Avenue, ca. 1875**

Most, but not all, flounders appear in the older parts of the city. The City's development pattern was fairly consistent, running from the center city north and south along the Mississippi River, then gradually extending westward. Flounders seem to have been ubiquitous in these earlier neighborhoods and were originally similar in number both north and south. (Demolitions from

decades of disinvestment have critically reduced the number of Northside flounders.) Most extant flounders appear in the Soulard and Benton Park neighborhoods on the south side, and in Old North St. Louis and Hyde Park neighborhoods on the north. Others appear in Baden neighborhood in far north City, and several in the Carondelet neighborhood in the far south.



**Figure 4—6867 Southwest, in a neighborhood of later buildings**

Outside of these early districts, however, isolated flounders were found in later neighborhoods: for example, the flounder at **6867 Southwest Avenue** is only two blocks from the City's western boundary, in a neighborhood with resources dating from early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In Phase 2, we presented our planned survey in a public meeting, and received considerable direction from the audience as to where flounder houses could be found.

## METHODOLOGY

Our intent was to identify and document all extant flounder properties within the boundaries of the City of St. Louis and evaluate the condition and environment of each. To that end, we completed a Missouri State Historic Preservation Office Inventory Form on each property, documenting its form, materials, alterations and additions. We will compiled a Cultural Resources Office Condition Survey to detail the property's condition, occupancy and other relevant data that may affect its potential for rehabilitation. All survey field work and research was performed by the professional staff of the Cultural Resources Office.

### Property Sub-types:

A flounder is defined as a residential building that has one side wall noticeably higher than the other. (For the purposes of this survey, we are not considering rear ells that are often included in the “flounder” typology, unless they were originally free-standing structures.) Additional flounder subtypes will be identified during the survey, but at present include: raised basement; semi-detached; 1-story with loft; 1-1/2 stories; 2-stories; 2-1/2 stories; front hipped roof; and side gallery.

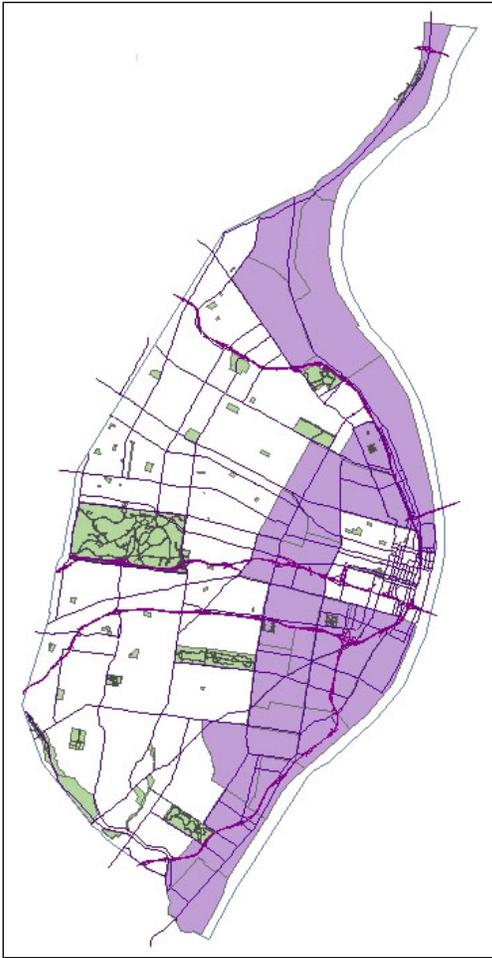
We anticipate identification of approximately 100-150 individual resources, approximately 5% of which may be outside the earlier established neighborhoods. While isolated examples exist in other areas, the majority of flounders are located in the eastern third of the City, where development dates from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as shown in the maps below:

### Phase 1:



**Figure 5—alley flounder in the Soulard neighborhood**

Phase I was a reconnaissance survey in the areas of the City where the majority of flounders have been identified (see Figure 6). These are the neighborhoods first developed, along the Mississippi River west to Grand Avenue. (We excluded the area of downtown between Convention Plaza on the north; Chouteau Avenue on the south; and Jefferson Avenue on the west, an area which has been entirely redeveloped.) We performed a street and alley survey block-by-block in these areas, photographing each structure on all sides and entering data directly in the field using laptops and tablets. Information was then mapped for location and individual resources coded for identified sub-types, dates of construction and levels of endangerment.



**Figure 6—Initial survey areas with flounder concentrations. Note the downtown area (white square at center) has been entirely redeveloped, and no early historic resources remain.**

**Phase 2:**

Once surveys were completed in these areas, Phase 2 extended the survey to the remainder of the City. This entailed a considerable amount of field work, as the resources were scattered, but was less time-consuming than the first phase, as we found fewer than 50 properties in this phase. Unlike the more densely developed areas to the east (see Figure 7 below) these resources were located within later subdivisions and as they predate the street grid in the area, are generally set back from the street or have become rear ells to later street-facing houses. Scheduling the survey of these resources during winter and early spring allowed us to avoid foliage and provide easier views to the rear of properties.



**Figure 7—Bing Bird's-eye view of Soulard with 19 flounders in a two-block area**

To assist us in both Phase 1 and 2, identification of individual resources were checked through the use of digital material, including but not limited to: *Compton & Dry's Pictorial Atlas of St. Louis* (1876); *Google Earth*; and the St. Louis Land Records database.

### Phase 3:



**Figure 8—two frame flounders in the Gravois Park neighborhood**

Phase 3 attempted to place the flounders in a historic and architectural context by performing documentary research on 30 individual properties. Since most, if not all, of the flounders were constructed prior to existing building permit records, traditional

research of construction dates and original owners required in-depth research. We selected individual flounders illustrating a variety of flounder sub-types, estimated dates of construction and architectural detailing. For these properties, we completed research records at the Assessor's Office, Building Division and other City agencies as necessary; consulted *Compton & Dry's Pictorial Atlas of St. Louis* (1876) and other historic atlases and maps and performed additional documentary research at the Missouri Historical Society, City Library and other historic inventories and archives in the St. Louis area.

Phase 3 incorporated a second public meeting to present the results of the flounder survey to the general public.

### EXPECTED RESULTS



**Figure 9—gambrel-roofed flounder**

The completed survey will serve as the basis for future initiatives planned by the Cultural Resources Office to promote preservation and reuse of this endangered property type. The survey is the foundation for an initiative we have tentatively titled *Flounders for the Future*, using digital media, publications and other promotional material to

alert the public to the flounders' special significance to St. Louis; their special architectural and historic character, and the threats they face.