

# Stone by stone, medieval castle rises in Ozarks

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SPECIAL TO THE  
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LEAD HILL — A Frenchman is making a little medieval magic in the hills of northern Arkansas.

Michel Guyot is the mastermind of a plan to raise a 13th century-style French castle in a remote area in Boone County.

The fortress will be built by hand, stone by stone, staying as true as possible to construction methods from the Middle Ages, project officials said.

The Ozark Medieval Fortress was designed as a tourist attraction and an interactive classroom, drawing schoolchildren, curious visitors, history buffs and day-trippers from nearby Branson when it opens to the public May 1.

Guyot broke ground for the fortress in 2009 on a 50-acre site off Arkansas 14 between Lead Hill and Omaha.

Guyot believes it will take at least 20 years for a team of artisans, historians and archi-



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**Workers construct** a 13th century-style castle in Boone County, near Lead Hill.

itects to raise the fortress. And visitors can watch the progress over the years.

The project may sound "kind of funny to some people," Guyot said in a recent telephone interview from his own French castle about two hours south of Paris.

Guyot spoke through interpreter Julie Solange, the

project manager of the Ozark fortress. He said he wants to portray medieval history for American audiences "to show what it was like to build a castle ..."

Guyot has restored or worked on the restoration of many French castles, Solange said.

"He just loves rock and

stone," said Johnny Burleson of Lead Hill, site manager for the Ozark fortress.

Ten years ago, Guyot began building Guedelon, a medieval fortress near his home, using 13th-century techniques and materials. Guedelon has become a well-known attraction for tourists and historians, Solange said.

Guyot fell in love with castles as a boy, she said.

"His background is just his passion — a passion for castles, a passion for history, a passion for the French heritage and being able to save that and restore that and bring it to the public."

Back in Boone County, word is spreading about the Ozark fortress, and residents are stopping by for a look, said Burleson.

"At first their thoughts are, 'That's crazy.' Then they come down and actually take a look at it and see it," he said. "They just kind of come in, and you talk to them, and they say, 'That's pretty neat.'"

John Baker, who lives in the Monarch community in Boone County, got his first look at the fortress on his way to Branson in late December.

"We'd heard about it for six months," Baker said. "I think it's neat. I think it's something that will definitely attract people to our area."

The castle's 6-foot-wide stone walls will surround an inner courtyard. The structure will be 1,000 feet around with a drawbridge entry and six main towers, some as tall as 45 feet, Burleson said. A "lord's quarters" will sit atop the stone walls.

A major part of the experience for visitors will be watching and interacting with artisans working on the fortress construction.

Rough-hewn huts surrounding the fortress foundation are work areas for rope makers, basket weavers, stonemasons, carpenters and blacksmiths. A stable will

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# Castle

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house draft horses.

An on-site rock quarry will supply the stones. Timber is plentiful in the surrounding forest. Workers are even erecting a wooden fort, where 13th-century construction workers would have taken refuge if they came under attack by invaders, Burleson said.

But not everything's medieval. There will be a paved entrance road and parking lot, a modern ticket office, restrooms and a gift shop.

"Once they walk onto the [fortress] site, the sounds are going to be the tap, tap, tapping of the stonecutters and blacksmiths working on metal," Solange said.

Visitors will be encouraged to talk with the artisans, who will demonstrate their work and answer questions. Children's programs will include sessions on rope-making and basket-weaving. Adults can spend a week or more on the site and learn a 13th-century trade.

"It's not just coming and watching somebody work," Solange said. "It's getting



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**Michel Guyot** has workers building the Ozark Medieval Fortress using many of the same methods used in the Middle Ages.

involved. It's the interaction those workers will have with the public, and the interaction the public will be able to have on the site."

The job has been a learning experience for Burleson. The owner of a family barn and stable construction business, Burleson said he has al-

ways been interested in old construction techniques. He also did design work as a manager for Emerson Corp. in Harrison for more than 20 years.

Burleson said he's worked from hundreds of photographs and drawings from Guyot and project architects.

"You really have to get your mind around it," he said. "I've had people come on-site and go to work for 45 minutes or an hour and say, 'You people's crazy,' and they'll leave. But the rest of the guys here really enjoy it.

"It's hard work. A lot of manual labor. It's heavy lift-



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ing. Conditions in the weather and the mud and things are tough. But the guys seem to enjoy it. Some of them drive considerable distance to get here and go to work every day."

Guyot learned about the Arkansas site from Jean Marc and Solange Mirat, a French couple who moved to the United States 20 years ago, after their daughter settled here with her American husband.

The Mirats' home in Boone County overlooks

the fortress site. They own about 800 acres in the area and sold Guyot 50 acres for the fortress, Jean Marc Mirat said.

The Mirats, who return to France every year, visited Guyot's Guedelon castle in 2008.

"I was very impressed by the project," Mirat said. He decided that northern Arkansas would be great place for a similar project.

He wrote a letter to Guyot, and an e-mail correspondence ensued. Guyot and his wife, Noemi Brunet, visited the Arkansas site in 2009 and decided to go forward with the project.

Mirat said many area residents are of European descent. Building a medieval castle in the Ozarks will allow them "to find their roots," he said.

The Ozark Medieval Fortress will be open seven days a week from May 1 to Nov. 30. Hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., rain or shine.

According to its Web site, [ozarkmedievalfortress.com](http://ozarkmedievalfortress.com), admission is \$8 for children ages 6 to 16 and \$12 for those over 16. Children under 6 are admitted free. Group rates are also available.