

ABOUT ST. LOUIS: HISTORY



Pierre Laclède Liguest, recipient of a land grant from the King of France, and his 13-year-old scout, Auguste Chouteau, selected the site of St. Louis in 1764 as a fur trading post. Laclède and Chouteau chose the location because it was not subject to flooding and was near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Construction of a village, named for Louis IX of France, began the following year. Most of the early settlers were French; many were associated with the fur trade. St. Louis transferred to the Spanish in 1770, returned to France under a secret treaty with Napoleon and, following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, became part of the United States. According to legend, on the day of transfer of the territory to the United States in 1803, St. Louis flew under three flags in one day--French, Spanish, and American.

The town gained fame in 1803 as the jumping-off point for the Louisiana Purchase Expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. After 1804, more New Englanders and other East Coast emigrants settled in St. Louis, but the population remained predominantly French until well into the 19th-Century. St. Louis incorporated as a city in 1823. During the 19th-Century, St. Louis grew into an important center of commerce and trade, attracting thousands of immigrants eager to find a new life on the edge of the frontier.

Between 1840 and 1860, the population exploded with the arrival of many new immigrants. Germans and Irish were the dominant ethnic groups settling in St. Louis, especially in the wake of the German Revolution and the Irish Potato Famine. St. Louis was a strategic location during the American Civil War, but it stayed firmly under Union control--in large part because of the fiercely loyal German influence. No major battle was fought in or near the city, although the "Battle of Camp Jackson" was a noteworthy skirmish fought on the modern-day location of the St. Louis University campus. Later waves of St. Louis settlers included Italians, Serbians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Greeks, who settled here by the late 19th-Century.

St. Louis's current boundaries were established in 1876, when voters approved separation from St. Louis County and establishment of a home rule charter. St. Louis was the nation's first home rule city, but unlike most, it was separated from any county. Baltimore also is a similarly divided metropolis. Although this boundary would in the future prove a severe limitation to the City of St. Louis, at the time there was ample room for the city to grow within its fixed boundaries. After the Civil War, St. Louis continued its rapid growth, and by 1900 was a major manufacturing center. Industries grew in St. Louis because of the city's dominance in the region, its access to rail and water transportation, and the city's central location in the nation. The 1874 construction of the Eads Bridge made St. Louis an important link in the continuing growth of transcontinental rail travel--but came too late to prevent Chicago from overtaking it as the largest rail hub in the nation. By the 1890s, St. Louis was the nation's fourth largest city.

One of the City's great moments came in 1904, when it hosted a World's Fair: the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, in Forest Park and the city's western edge. The 1904 Olympic games were also held in St. Louis, at Washington University's Francis Field, in conjunction with the fair. More than 20 million people visited the fair during its seven-month run, immortalized in the song "Meet Me in St. Louie, Louie." Through the early 20th-Century, St. Louis continued to industrialize. The increasing popularity of the automobile caused congestion in the downtown area as early as the 1920s. Rapid transit schemes were proposed but never seriously considered. St. Louis was home to the nation's first gasoline station and first automobile accident; today, the region is second in the nation only to the Detroit area in automobile production. During the Great Migration, thousands of African-Americans moved to St. Louis between World War I and World War II. By 1940, over 800,000 people lived in the City of St. Louis.

After World War II, the City's population peaked at 856,000 by 1950. This crowded city had no more room to grow within its fixed boundaries, and much of the housing stock had been neglected during the Great Depression of the 1930s and during World War II. Thus any new growth had to occur in the suburbs in St. Louis County, which St. Louis could not annex. Although some African-Americans from the South, as well as

Southeast Missourians, continued to move into St. Louis, earlier immigrant generations gradually moved to suburbia. Urban renewal efforts and public housing development programs could not stem the tide of population loss, and in some cases contributed to the decline. Four new interstate highways cut block-wide swaths through neighborhoods, facilitating the exodus to the suburbs. Meanwhile, the last streetcar line in St. Louis, the Hodiament, stopped operating in 1966. In the early 1970s, suburbanization of the African-American population began. By 1980, the City's population had fallen to about 450,000.

Yet, the 1965 construction of the Gateway Arch and 1966 construction of Busch Memorial Stadium (home of the Cardinals baseball team) helped promote the revitalization of the central business district. A thirty-year downtown building boom followed, including such projects as the Cervantes Convention Center in 1978, the Union Station rehab in 1985, and St. Louis Centre in 1986. At the same time, growing interest in preservation of historic neighborhoods--partly fueled by Federal tax credits--led to the revitalization of the Central West End, DeBaliviere Place, Soulard, and Lafayette Square neighborhoods during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Although the 1986 tax reform and the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s slowed growth considerably, several major projects were completed such as the MetroLink light rail line, the Convention Center expansion, Kiel Civic Center (home of the Blues), and Trans World Dome (home of the Rams). The great Mississippi River flood of 1993 detracted from urban revitalization efforts somewhat, but most of the low-lying industrial areas of the City were protected by a floodwall. The most severe flooding in the City occurred along the River des Peres, a drainageway serving the western and southern parts of the City and flowing into the Mississippi River. Today, despite a continued population decline, downtown and neighborhood revitalization efforts are ongoing in the City of St. Louis. Medicine at Barnes-Jewish and St. Louis University Hospitals, brewing at Anheuser-Busch, and banking at Bank of America and Firststar Bank are leading industries in the City; five Fortune 500 corporations are headquartered in the City limits, and many of the older industrial buildings in the City serve as incubators for small business. Despite the challenges, the City of St. Louis is ready to grow into its fourth century.

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- [Built St. Louis](#)
- [St. Louis Genealogical Society](#)
- [Historical City Planning Reports](#)

ST. LOUIS HISTORY REFERENCES

Consider checking out or purchasing some of these books for more information about St. Louis history.

- [Missouri Historical Society Catalog of Publications](#)
- [Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, 1764-1980, Third Edition](#), the definite history of St. Louis, by James Neal Primm, Curators' Professor Emeritus at the [University of Missouri-St. Louis](#)
- ["Ain't But a Place": An Anthology of African-American Writings about St. Louis](#), edited by Gerald Early, Professor of History at [Washington University](#)



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