

# The Relationship Between People And Government

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One of the prevailing themes of American history is the changing relationship between people and their governments at the local, state, and national levels. It is a story of individuals having a more personal and frequent contact with government and its actions. People placed requirements upon both local and federal governments which changed with growth and industrialization. These differing roles have a profound impact on the appearance and lifestyle in St. Louis of the late twentieth century.

## THE HOME RULE LEGACY

Missouri enacted a new constitution in 1875, replacing the ten-year-old one from the end of the Civil War. The new constitution looked to create mechanisms to deal with future problems. Among its more progressive provisions was city home rule, allowing a larger cities to govern themselves without the oversight of their counties. In short, it allowed St. Louis and Kansas City to secede from their counties if they chose.

Newly elected Mayor Henry Overstolz called a joint meeting in late 1875 of the St. Louis City Council and the County Court (the ruling body for St. Louis County) to divorce the two jurisdictions. City residents provided the lion's share of the county's tax revenue, so felt they were paying for government and services in unincorporated parts of the county from which they derived no benefit. At the same time, the County Court administered revenue, so it held control over tax dollars remitted from the city. All in all, the arrangement was less than ideal.

After completing a cumbersome process, the city and county reached an agreement. St. Louis City took control of government buildings and property within the new city limits, but also assumed the county's debt load. It took effect in 1877, making St. Louis the first city in the United States to enact a home rule city charter. Respected by both Democrats and Republicans, Overstolz won a second term in 1877 with endorsements from both parties to facilitate a smooth governmental transition.

This new city government started home rule with some distinct disadvantages which came to roost in coming decades. Assuming the County Court's debt left the city government in financial straits from the start. Legally restricted in its ability to issue bonds and politically precluded from raising tax revenue, the city found itself barely making ends meet.

The charter also limited the amount the city could spend from annual coffers for capital improvements, also limiting the improvements to newly acquired and rapidly populating areas. By the time the city passed a new charter in 1914, St. Louis was already declining in its national stature. "The depressing census data underlined St. Louis's major problems in 1980," concluded historian James Neal Primm. "Almost all of the negatives related in one way or another to the understandable and well-intentioned decision in 1876 which erected an insurmountable barrier against central-city growth after the first quarter of the twentieth century."

Since the charter set the city-county boundary permanently, the city cannot annex new territory. While other cities can expand their territorial reach to include new and future industrial parks, housing developments, retail centers, and manufacturing interests, St. Louis cannot. It must attract those tax-paying entities back to the city, reversing local and national trends.

With the two separate entities-St. Louis City and St. Louis County-there is no formal structure to solve regional problems. Thus, there are duplicate services and institutions for each such as duplicate public library systems, public schools (making the desegregation process even more complicated), police, fire, and a host of other agencies.

Popular expectations of a more active local government started in the early nineteenth century. When St. Louis incorporated as a city in 1822, its overseer of roads had been at work since 1811, and a police captain had replaced the citizen patrols seven years later. As with most American cities, two volunteer fire companies composed of all men eighteen years or older protected local buildings from burning starting in 1810; it became one of the first fire departments in the United States.

## WATER

City government authorized its first water system in 1832. It purchased a system three years later which the burgeoning city outgrew quickly. Two large reservoirs completed in 1849 and 1855, taxed the current system less. On the eve of the Civil War, some seventy miles of water pipes lay under St. Louis streets.



As more people moved farther from the core city, services followed. Growing demand required three new towers to keep water flowing into more and more homes. The city completed a Corinthian column water tower on North Grand in 1871, followed by a square tower at Bissell Street built in 1886 and one on South Grand next to the reservoir at Russell Avenue in 1899. They are three of only five remaining such towers in the United States.

Problem was, the water they provided was still muddy. While visitors often commented on the brown liquid that flowed from the tap, many locals felt it gave the water a special flavor (which it undoubtedly did) and nutritional value (which is debatable). Fair chairman David Francis told Mayor Rolla Wells that, vitamin-fortified or not, the water in fountains at the 1904 Exposition had to be clear.

After a typhoid outbreak in 1901, the city's health department advised people not to drink tap water without boiling it; similar advice came again in 1902. With the upcoming Fair as a deadline, crews worked feverishly to complete the purification plant. The first clear water flowed from St. Louis taps March 21, 1904, more than two months before the Fair opened. Ironically, use dropped when the water was cleaner.

## SANITATION

The first water disposal system, in the mid-nineteenth century, drained sinkholes and removed storm water. But a cholera epidemic in 1849, in which thousands died, elevated the need for waste management. Some 31 main sewers were complete in the city's first underground system by 1855. Thirteen years later, the entire city had service with 101 miles of subterranean sewers. Some of these brick-lined sewers, including those under Arsenal Street, date to these original lines.

New household technology taxed the system further. People replaced outhouses with indoor flush toilets starting in the 1880s. Waste lines paralleled storm sewers and, like them, dumped their contents into the Mississippi River—a practice that continued until the late 1960s. In its first long-term joint venture, city and county governments formed the Metropolitan Sewer District in 1954. The waste treatment plant at Bissell Point incorporates some features retained from its nineteenth-century predecessor, ensuring that what goes into the river is far cleaner than its existing water.

A more recent arrival to local government's role in public health is garbage collection. Our nineteenth-century predecessors, asserts historian Andrew Hurley, were better at recycling than we are today. Our precursors, of course, used far fewer disposable containers, and threw away very few reusable ones. Further, most people owned or had access to hogs, to which they fed any edible scraps. "They converted trash," says Hurley, "into bacon." One consequence is that "solid waste management"—collecting trash and figuring out what to do with it—is a larger problem for urban governments than ever before.

The first rubbish collection in the city came during the 1860s, but was run by private operators who contracted with the city to haul away refuse. The city also contracted with private entrepreneurs until the early twentieth century to collect garbage for dumps and food scraps to feed hogs on an island in the Mississippi down river from St. Louis. After a dispute between Mayor Rolla Wells and private contractors, the city initiated its own trash collection.

## **LUNGS AT WORK**

Air pollution was not so simple to solve. St. Louis was widely reported to be the dirtiest place in the Mississippi Valley by 1822, just five years after the first steamboat puffed into town. Seventy years later, the problem was out of hand. The city enacted its first smoke abatement ordinance in 1893. It helped a bit, until ruled unconstitutional by the Missouri Supreme Court four years later.

Coal was the root of the problem. St. Louisans burned it for heat and stoking industrial machinery, but used soft coal from Illinois. It was the least expensive on the local market, but also produced the most smoke when burned. The result was a constant smoky haze hanging over the city, sooty grime on buildings, and occasional problems with living conditions.

Soon after winning election as mayor in 1901, Rolla Wells declared city smoke a public nuisance, and created the Chief Smoke Inspector position. He extended the Inspector's domain to include steamboats and barges, among the worst offenders, the following year. But as a prospering St. Louis expanded its economic base, it increased the pollution.

Air grew worse. A Citizens' Smoke Abatement League worked in the 1920s toward stiffer city ordinances to clean up the atmosphere. Growers refused to sell evergreens to be planted in the city, knowing they received too little sunlight and oxygen to survive. The Missouri Botanical Garden considered moving to preserve its collection of trees and plants. People complained of having to use auto headlights to see-even in the middle of the day.

Smoke was getting worse by the day in late November of 1939. "Black Tuesday," the 28th, was a "midnight-at-noon" day. City government soon passed the stringent anti-smoke legislation for which citizens' groups had been calling for years. Soft Illinois coal was banned from use in St. Louis in April, 1940, except in mechanical stokers. Home fires now burned Arkansas anthracite, which was harder but more costly coal that burned cleaner.

Air quality improved even more after the Mississippi Valley Fuel Company completed its gas pipeline from the South in 1941. Laclede Gas offered gas for heating at a lower cost than coal, providing the one factor to change the way people heated their homes. As industry converted from coal, air quality improved.

## **MILITARY AFFAIRS**

After acquiring the Louisiana Territory in 1803, Thomas Jefferson commissioned a group to map the new acquisition, establish federal authority with Native American tribes, and gain greater scientific understanding of its plant and animal life. Heading this expedition were Merriweather Lewis and William Clark. They started and ended their two-year mission, from 1804 to 1806, in St. Louis.

Operations at the Army's Fort Bellefontaine on the Missouri River moved to the newly created Jefferson Barracks, south of the city, in 1826. With other forts farther upriver on the Missouri and Mississippi, Jefferson Barracks was a busy place. Some 500 troops trained at the fort by 1829. On the eve of the Civil War, a federal arsenal, Camp Jackson, and the barracks were all in St. Louis.

Military activity boosted the local economy. St. Louis was a main supplier to forts upriver and in the West.

The government purchased goods and provisions in the more conveniently situated St. Louis rather than Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, or New Orleans. It was a main staging area for the Mexican War as well, and a main construction site for Union ironclad ships during the War Between the States.

As a border city in a border state, St. Louis was particularly torn by the Civil War. While outstate Missouri was a battleground often in Confederate hands, the pro-Union state government relocated to St. Louis for the war. Deep divisions remained in the city despite its being controlled by Unionists. Some lost property after refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the Union, others were even exiled for the conflict.

James Eads' ironclad boat construction business was one of the few bright spots on the Civil War economy in St. Louis. The opposite was true during World War II. Central location made St. Louis relatively secure from attack from Axis powers, and transportation connections increased its advantages as a center for manufacturing war materiel.

## **THE NEW DEAL & BEYOND**

The federal government had an increasing presence in the city in the years preceding World War II. The Great Depression, starting in October of 1929, hit St. Louis harder than many cities. On the riverfront sat the country's largest "Hooverville" of people economically displaced by the Depression who were living in ramshackle temporary housing, sarcastically named for President Herbert Hoover. One St. Louis worker in four was out of work. People struggled through 1933 and 1934, despite early relief programs in the New Deal. Local relief roles topped 100,000 in 1934.

An improved economy and more effective works programs reduced the out-of-work to 35,000 by 1936. Much of the increased employment came through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created in 1935 to provide jobs through public works and community improvements. Between 1932 and 1936, the United States government spent \$50 million on relief alone, matched by another \$6 million from the state and \$12 million from city government and voluntary agencies.

## **PUBLIC HOUSING**

New Dealers envisioned public housing as a vehicle to provide a minimum housing standard for Americans. By the 1930s, governments in cities like St. Louis wished to remove the worst housing through slum clearance, but left no place for displaced poor to move. The Housing Act allowed local governments to establish public housing authorities to use government funds for housing with rents scaled according to income. The St. Louis Housing Authority opened in 1939 to facilitate such programs.

In its first year the Authority completed Carr Square Village on the city's near north side; three years later, Clinton Peabody Terrace opened. A fresh infusion of federal dollars through the Housing and Redevelopment Act of 1949 inspired further public housing. Designs for a new high-rise complex, Pruitt-Igoe, in St. Louis won national acclaim in architectural circles the following year. When Pruitt-Igoe opened in 1954-55, its 31 high-rise buildings could accommodate some 3,000 families. Darst-Webbe, on the near south side, opened in 1953 as public housing for whites, while Pruitt-Igoe was to be for African-Americans. In policy they were integrated through the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case in 1954. Still, they quickly became de facto segregated housing.

Riddled with crime and administrative problems, Pruitt-Igoe became an unfortunate national symbol. Originally, it represented an innovative approach to urban housing, trying to build communities within the complexes. Problems were soon apparent. Builders cut corners in construction and design to accommodate federal regulations and budget restrictions. The Authority poured another \$5 million into the complex by the mid-1960s, but the decline continued. Only half the buildings were inhabited by 1971, when the first of its buildings were razed. National news televised the dramatic image of the last Pruitt-Igoe buildings being

imploded in a matter of moments. By the 1970s, it represented not bold innovation, but publicly funded folly.

## **URBAN RENEWAL**

Designed to revitalize core cities, urban renewal sought to raze slums and devise new, income-generating uses for those properties. St. Louis formed the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority in 1951 to administer federally funded urban renewal. A "Land Clearance and Redevelopment Corporation" worked to use matching funds two years later to clear the area between Chestnut and Olive near the Civic Center.

More controversial was the Authority's bond issue to clear Mill Creek Valley starting in 1959. A black community of residences, businesses, schools, churches, and retailers as well as the heart of the jazz community, Mill Creek was seen by white leaders a large slum needing complete clearing. Churches moved, businesses closed, and people dispersed as the area was razed. Urban renewal destroyed the neighborhood to make room for an industrial park, new businesses, and the Ozark Expressway (US 40).

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*Created by the [City of St. Louis](#) CDA/SLDC*

Last Modified Sunday, June 30, 1996