

Colonial St. Louis- A New Beginning

Stop #1

Laclede Chouteau Building

N1: This tour begins near the South leg of the Gateway Arch, at the lamppost on the walkway heading west towards the Historic Old Courthouse. At the sign, take a moment to orient yourself. Look at the trees and notice where the sun is. Do you feel the sun on your back? Can you feel a breeze on your neck? Do you hear any sounds coming from the river? This may have been what the first residents of the community of St. Louis looked for as well.

N2: The founders of St. Louis planned the community so the river was its focus. As you face the river to the east, standing at the lamppost, you are on the site of the Laclede-Chouteau House, the first substantial building constructed in St. Louis. Built in 1764, the home was a stone structure measuring 34 x 50 feet, with walls that were 2½ feet thick. This was the home of Pierre Laclede, which served as his business office and later as an early seat of government during the Spanish regime.

N1: Pierre Laclede, who sometimes added the family name "Liguest" to his signature, was born on November 22, 1729, in Bedous, France. He was well educated, served in the army, and was known for his skill in fencing. Laclede arrived in New Orleans in 1755 as a "gentleman traveling for pleasure." Laclede fell in love with Marie Therese Chouteau, a woman whose husband had abandoned her and her young son Auguste.

N2: Pierre Laclede and Therese Chouteau were a long-standing couple. She became his common-law wife, as French law and the Roman Catholic Church did not allow divorce. Laclede made her son, Auguste Chouteau, his ward and a clerk in his office. Their relationship bore four children.

N1: Laclede became interested in the fur trade, and in 1762 received, along with Antoine Maxent, the exclusive right to trade with the Indians of the Upper Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. By 1764 Laclede had founded and named the settlement of St. Louis. In 1769 Antoine Maxent dissolved his partnership with Laclede, who then made Auguste Chouteau and Sylvestre Labbadie his partners. Laclede fell deeply into debt and was in poor health by 1777 when he traveled to New Orleans to try to straighten out his fortunes. While traveling back to St. Louis on May 27, 1778, Pierre Laclede died on a boat anchored six miles below the mouth of the Arkansas River on the Mississippi, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

N2: The house in St. Louis was sold to pay off Laclede's debts in 1779. It fell into disrepair; Auguste Chouteau purchased the home and land in 1789. The home, with its servant quarters, occupied the entire square within Market, Main, Walnut, and Second Streets. On September 21, 1786 Auguste Chouteau married Marie Therese Cerre; she was 17, he was 37. To meet the needs of a growing he enlarged the Laclede home by adding a second floor for his private use and a 14 foot wide gallery on three sides. Chouteau had the property surrounded with a solid stone wall two feet thick and ten feet

tall, with holes placed every ten feet, through which weapons could be fired if an enemy attacked. Within the enclosure were outbuildings and slave quarters. Inside, the house was elegantly furnished with imported French silverware, crystal, furniture and mirrors. The floors were of solid black walnut and were polished by hand until they shone “like mirrors.” After Chouteau’s death his widow moved out of the house. By 1836 she sold the house and property for a fortune. The so-called founders home, where you are now standing, was torn down and the block was subdivided to create 32 business structures.

N1: Your next location is to the southeast, toward the river. Please follow the path around the Arch leg to the right, the first lamppost on the east sidewalk near the bike rack. There the story continues.

Proceed to the next stop.

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Stop #2

Spanish Government House

N1: Welcome to our second stop, the Spanish Government House. Face west, toward the city and look at the green grass in front of you. In the middle of this area, with the door facing west, stood the Spanish Government House.

N2: Following the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Spain became the administrator of a vast territory known as Louisiana, formerly a French colony in North America. The capital of Louisiana was in New Orleans. As the population of the territory grew and the communities developed further away from New Orleans, a second seat of government was needed. The village of St. Louis, with its growing fur trade and vast trade network, became the headquarters for the administration of Upper Louisiana, which stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from Arkansas north to the Canadian border.

N2: The Spanish Government House was a stone structure which measured 25 x 40 feet and was built in 1766. The property was purchased by Lt. Gov. Francisco Cruzat in 1783 and used as the headquarters of the Spanish Government until the transfer of Louisiana to the Americans in March 1804. Through the Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800, Spain secretly ceded the Louisiana Territory back to France, facing pressure from that country's ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte.

N2: In 1803, Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, sent an envoy to Napoleon, asking to buy the city of New Orleans. Jefferson knew that if U.S. access to New Orleans was blocked it would destroy the new economy of the lands west of the Appalachians, which would have no easy means of getting their goods to market. Napoleon counter offered: all of the Louisiana Territory for 15 million dollars. The fledging United States had no official language in the Constitution about purchasing land,

nor did it know exactly what this territory entailed. But Jefferson's representatives in France knew that this was a bargain. The treaty was finalized in April 1803. If you would like to see a map of the complete Louisiana Territory, there is one located in the Museum of Westward Expansion under the Gateway Arch.

N2: Though the deal was finalized in the spring of 1803, the transfer ceremony for the Upper Louisiana Territory did not occur until March 1804. On March 9, 1804 in front of the Spanish Government House, Spanish Lieutenant Governor Charles Dehault Delassus [Del-Lah-Soo] turned over control to Meriwether Lewis, officially deputized to receive the territory by the nation of France, and Capt. Amos Stoddard of the U.S. Army acting as a representative of the United States. The French flag flew over the city for a 24-hour period. On the next day, March 10, 1804, the United States flag replaced the French flag, and the territory officially became a part of the United States. "The period has now arrived, when, in consequence of amiable negotiations, Louisiana is in possession of the United States," declared Amos Stoddard, who served as the first civil Commandant of Upper Louisiana.

N1: But what became of the last Spanish governor? Charles Dehault Delassus oversaw the transfer of the territory to the Americans. Ironically, he was not Spanish himself, but French. He was born in Bouchaine, Flanders on November 17, 1767, and joined the Spanish army when he was 15 as a second lieutenant. By 1794 Delassus had risen to the post of lieutenant colonel in the elite Royal Walloon Guards, the personal battalion of the King of Spain. When revolution broke out in France, Delassus' [Del-Lah-Soo's] parents

fled to America and settled in New Bourbon, Upper Louisiana. Soon they were destitute and appealed to their son for assistance. Delassus resigned his commission and asked for a transfer to the Louisiana Regiment so that he might be near his family.

N2: By 1799 Delassus had been appointed lieutenant governor of Upper Louisiana. After transferring Upper Louisiana to the Americans in 1804, Delassus was assigned to a post with the Louisiana Regiment at Pensacola, Florida. His parents both died in 1806, and he inherited their massive debts. Delassus resigned from the Spanish Army in 1811, and thereafter divided his time between St. Louis and New Orleans. He married in 1811, but his wife died by 1816. Most of the large land grants he claimed in Louisiana – many of which he conferred upon himself while governor – were not honored by the Americans. He died in New Orleans on May 1, 1843, a forgotten man.

N1: Your next tour stop is the Robidoux House. Please travel south going away from the Arch, to the next lamppost along this sidewalk.

Proceed to the next stop.

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Stop #3

The Robidoux House

N1: Welcome to our third stop, the home of Joseph Robidoux. This home was in the same block as the Spanish Government House. Face west, toward the city and look at the

green grass in front of you. This southern side of the block was the home and bakery of Joseph Robidoux.

N2: Joseph Robidoux moved to St. Louis in 1770 from Montreal, Canada. He quickly established himself as a player in the fur trade, but wanted to become as prominent as the Chouteau family who locally controlled this lucrative business. Robodoux's home reflected the architectural styles of his native Canada rather than New Orleans.

N1: The constant drive for wealth through success in the fur trade made St. Louis different from other colonial villages. St. Louis imported some of its food from other communities, and was jokingly nicknamed "paincourt" meaning lack of bread, by neighboring villages. The Robidoux family became the bakers in the community, adding to their fur trade income by serving the community's need for baked goods.

N2: The French fur trade, like that of the Spanish and the British, depended on having the Native American Indians trap and shoot the animals. Frenchmen made seasonal trips to the Indian villages where they traded manufactured items like iron cookware, mirrors, woven blankets, glass beads, and firearms for the furs. Merchants like the Chouteaus and the Ribidoux collected the pelts in St. Louis and shipped them to New Orleans or Montreal for trade with Europe. In the French fur trade, holding the exclusive right to trade with a tribe was crucial. The right was controlled by the governor.

N1: When St. Louis was founded Pierre Laclède had exclusive trading rights with the Osage, the most powerful Indian tribe on the lower Missouri River. Laclède's right was soon confirmed by the Spanish governor when he assumed control of Louisiana in 1770. This was passed down through blood or marriage to several people, including Auguste Chouteau and his brother Pierre, brothers-in-law Sylvestre Labadie, Charles Gratiot, and Jean Marie Papin, and to Auguste's in laws the Cerre family.

N2: At one point, seventeen traders as had licenses to trade with the tribes, but of those seventeen, all but two were related by either blood or marriage to the Chouteau family. This frustrated merchants like Joseph Ribidoux, who longed to establish their own fur trade empire. Several of these men actually tried on two separate occasions to open trade with the Mandan villages, but failed due to poor planning.

N2: The fur trade employed most citizens in the village in one way or another.. In the 1779 militia roll for the city, the jobs were listed as follows: 84 boatmen 17 traders 16 merchants, 46 farmers, 4 blacksmiths, 4 masons, 1 tailor, 4 carpenters, 25 hunters 2coopers, and the 212 people listed, 144 were involved in the fur trade

N1: Joseph Robidoux founded several fur trade posts, one near present-day Omaha, Nebraska, and another at St. Joseph, Missouri. Bypassing the Chouteaus and their trade license, Ribidoux opened relations with other tribes further up the Missouri River.

N2: Please proceed to the next tour stop along the St. Louis Levee. Follow the pathway north to the top of the Grand Staircase and walk down the steps to the sidewalk. Proceed north on the sidewalk to the first tree on the right.

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Stop #4

The Levee

N1: This stop features the Levee, the area near the water at the Mississippi. Although this area has changed greatly since the colonial period, there is so much that remains the same for the community.

N2: St. Louis was founded in February 1764, with the official recorded date as February 14. Months before, Pierre Laclède Liguest and his lover's 14 year-old son, Auguste Chouteau, had traveled upstream from New Orleans and found the mouth of the Missouri River on the Mississippi. Sailing south from that point, they found a place without noticeable flood debris atop a limestone bluff. There was access to the river so a port could be established. This is where they decided to build St. Louis.

N1: Why was the river so important? In a word transportation. The French and the Native Americans of the area had two principle means of transportation: by foot and by

boat. The use of boats was especially important for the traders wanting to ship goods to New Orleans. River access was necessary for a village found on the fur trade.

N1: The boats on the Mississippi River during the colonial period were simple. There were pirogues, keelboats, and flatboats, along with Native American canoes. A pirogue is a small boat made from a hollowed out log and similar to a canoe. Moving a pirogue required paddling for upstream movement and steering. Generally, the pirogues were slow and could carry only a few people and a small amount of goods. Large items like horses and barrels were placed on platforms lashed on top of two pirogues.

N2: A keelboat has one flat keel down the middle of the boat and was generally used for moving larger items. Sometimes, these boats would require *cordelling*, people walking alongside the shore pulling a rope attached somehow to the boat. A traveler's description in 1815.

"The ferry boat on which we crossed was a small keel boat, without upperdeck or cabin, and was propelled by four oars by hand. The wagons, then the only means of land travel, were run by hand on to the boat, across which were placed broad planks transversely, resting on the gunwales of the boat, while the tongue of the wagon projected beyond the side of the boat...The horses, wagon, and, saddle, family, slaves, and dogs were stowed in the bottom of the boat between the wagons."

Edwin Draper in 1815-

N1: A flat boat is a large flatbottomed boat steered from the rear and primarily employed to travel downstream with the currents. It could carry large amounts, and move relatively easily downstream. Once the boat made it to New Orleans, the boat could be dismantled, the wood sold, and the traveler, if he so wished, could get himself upstream again and repeat the process.

N2: A great many Frenchmen followed this method of travel and trade along the river. Thank you for joining us for this episode of *It Happened Here*. We look forward to sharing more information about this national park, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.