



Old Courthouse

Suggested Pre-visit Activities

These activities are tied into the Missouri, Illinois, and national standards for Social Studies and Language Arts.



Historical Background

During the 1800s, the city of St. Louis grew from a frontier town into the nation's fourth-largest metropolis. Early citizens conducted government business in a number of buildings, including a church, a tavern and an abandon fort. Eventually, one of the city's founders, Auguste Chouteau, donated land on which to construct a courthouse.

St. Louis' first courthouse was a two-story, brick structure built in the Federal style. Featuring a cupola, a columned portico and a large, circular courtroom, it was the grandest building in the state of Missouri when completed in 1828. But the city soon outgrew it and, within a decade, talk began of building a larger courthouse.

Public buildings of the day incorporated the simplicity, balance and symmetry of ancient Greek temples, such as the Parthenon. Architects sought to evoke classical ideals, such as equality and citizenship, in buildings like the U.S. Capitol, Treasury Building and the White House in Washington D.C. Dubbed Greek Revival, this architectural style befit the grand aspirations of the young Republic. As Gateway to the newly-acquired West, St. Louis sought to make the same eloquent statement with its new courthouse.

Architect Henry Singleton's design featured stately, carved columns, low-pitched, triangular roofs and large, recessed doorways framed by narrow windows, or sidelights. Singleton's plain, low-pitched dome was later replaced by a taller, more ornate design similar to that on the U.S. Capitol building. In fact, many people opined that the building, when complete, would make a fine capitol if St. Louis were ever chosen for such a distinction. The honor never arrived, and progress on the building itself was a long time coming.

From the time masons laid the cornerstone in 1839, until completion of the remodeled dome in 1861, the courthouse was a work-in-progress. One newspaper editor wryly quipped, "This relic is getting along. The pillars of the west wing are up and the cornice will be on some of these days...Generations now alive may yet see the Court House completed." For 22 years, the rap of the judge's gavel coexisted with that of the workmen's hammer. One of the lower courtrooms was ready for use in March 1843, and the rotunda was officially dedicated in 1845. It soon became the civic hub of St. Louis.

Amid the clutter of construction, citizens came to pay taxes, apply for licenses, vote and serve jury duty. Court cases large and small began in the finished courtrooms. In 1849, an unassuming slave named Dred Scott brought suit for his freedom against his owner. His case eventually went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in 1857 that Scott was not a citizen and, therefore, was unable to use America's court system. It also declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, threatening the balance between pro-slavery and anti-slavery states and hastening the nation's course toward civil war.

The year 1849 brought throngs of travelers to the city of St. Louis. Many were pioneers preparing for their journey across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains in hopes of making a fortune in the California goldfields or Oregon's Willamette Valley. The trek could take six months by wagon, but a new method of transportation was on the horizon.

Citizens and delegates from 14 states crowded the Old Courthouse rotunda in 1849 for a national convention championing construction of a transcontinental railroad. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton stirred the gathering with a speech in favor of St. Louis as the route's mid-point. Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, who later defended his seat against upstart Abraham Lincoln, argued for a northern route through Chicago. The race was on. When the dust settled, the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific's line connected Chicago with Sacramento, California. A golden spike sealed the deal at Promontory, Utah in 1869. St. Louis remained divided from the east another five years, until engineer James B. Eads completed his bridge across the Mississippi River.

The Old Courthouse continued serving as a forum for public speakers and events. As Kansas became embroiled in a bloody struggle between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions in 1854, St. Louisians assembled to petition the Federal government for help. While the majority of Missouri sympathized with the south, St. Louis remained loyal to the Union. With the waging of the Civil War, citizens gathered to enlist in a volunteer brigade defending the Union. Troops squelched a rebel uprising, and, for the remainder of the war, St. Louis remained free from violence.

No sooner was the building bedecked in celebration of the Civil War's end, than news arrived of President Lincoln's assassination. A memorial dedicated to the fallen president in the courthouse rotunda so impressed young visitors that years afterward, some claimed to have seen the president himself reposing in state.

The nation and St. Louis headed toward happier times, but the struggle for equality and justice continued. Election official, Reese Happersett, was just enforcing the law when he refused to register Virginia Minor to vote in the 1872 presidential election. He soon found himself facing Minor in court, where she was determined to challenge restrictions against women voting in public elections. Minor pursued her case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that "the Constitution of the United States does not confer the right of suffrage upon anyone." Not until 1920, 45 years after Minor's suit, did the 19th Amendment established female suffrage.

For approximately 88 years, the St. Louis courthouse fulfilled its intended purpose. The courts eventually moved to a larger, more modern building, abandoning the Old Courthouse to neglect and disrepair. With the creation of Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in 1935, the National Park Service acquired the building and began restoring it to its original grandeur. Today, the Old Courthouse houses administrative offices for the National Park Service and continues hosting public functions, such as free-speech assemblies, concerts, educational programs and naturalization ceremonies. The building itself memorializes the history of St. Louis and its place in Westward Expansion.

Previsit Activity

Lesson Overview

Students will work in groups to examine primary source material related to the Old Courthouse building and how it was used in the 1800s.

Objectives

The object of this activity is for students to use primary source material to determine how the Old Courthouse was used during the 1800s.

Description

Begin by dividing your class into four groups. Give each group a copy of one of the excerpts on the next page. Give groups time to read and discuss their excerpt, using the Questions for Discussion below. Students may present their findings to the rest of class.

Questions for Discussion

What is the main event?

Who is involved in the event?

Where does the event take place?

When did the event take place?

Why is the event taking place?

What is important or significant about the event?

A public meeting was...held, Sunday, August 25, to take into consideration the general condition of Kansas affairs. The call, which appeared in the morning papers, was responded to by a very large crowd in the Rotunda, at the hour appointed. It was one of the largest meetings ever held in St. Louis--so large, in fact, that it became necessary, towards the close, to adjourn to the east front of the Court House, opposite the Planters Hotel, where the following resolutions were a second time read and passed.
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 13, 1856

An Anti-Abolitionist meeting was held in the rotunda of the Courthouse on November 12 for the purpose of forming an association to counteract the evil influence in our midst of the abolitionists of the North. Col. John O'Fallon was appointed president of the association and vice-presidents were appointed from each ward of the city and each township... They were empowered to employ emissaries to trace out and bring to justice the abolition agents in our country, and further aid in the protection of the owners of slave property.
St. Louis Weekly Reveille, November 13, 1846

A public meeting was called in the rotunda of the Old Courthouse on June 23, 1847, to make arrangements to welcome home the returning Missouri and Illinois Volunteers, and also to pay suitable honors to the remains of Col. John J. Hardin and others who fell gloriously in the Mexican War...On June 28, the first contingent of the soldiers returned and were welcomed home in the rotunda of the Courthouse by a large number of citizens.
Missouri Republican, July 9, 1847

President Cleveland yesterday morning passed through the rough ordeal of shaking hands with several thousand people in the rotunda of the Courthouse...The President and committee left the Lindell Hotel at nine o'clock in carriages...to the north door of the Courthouse... "The decoration of the Courthouse rotunda had been going on for days, and it was a beautiful piece of work. From the floor to the apex of the dome were to be seen bright colors..."
Missouri Republican, October 5, 1887

Vocabulary

architecture - the style or design of a building; the job of designing buildings

citizen - a member of a city, state, or nation; someone entitled to the rights of a city, state, or nation

citizenship - the status of being a citizen with its rights, duties, and privileges

constitution - the document which outlines the basic laws by which a state or country is governed

equality - being equal, especially in social, political, and economic ways

democracy - a form of government in which citizens participate directly or through elected officials

executive - the branch of American government concerned with putting laws into effect

forum - a public meeting place for open discussion

license - a legal document giving permission to do something

judiciary - the branch of American government concerned with interpreting the law

justice - the quality of being fair or just; doing what is right according to the law

legislative - the branch of American government concerned with writing laws

oratory - the art of speaking in public

private - removed from public view, secluded

public - of the people, or having to do with the community at large

Book List

Baylor, Byrd. *Hawk, I'm Your Brother*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1986.

Blos, Joan. *Old Henry*. New York, NY: Mulberry Books, 2001.

Chambers, Aiden. *Present Takers*. New York, NY: Harper, 1983.

DeJong, Meindert. *House of Sixty Fathers*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy, 1956.

King, Casey, Linda Barret Osborne, and Joe Brooks (Illustrator). *Oh, Freedom! : Kids Talk About the Civil Rights Movement With the People Who Made It Happen*. New York, NY: Knopf, 1997.

Marsh, Carole. *Washington, DC Bandits, Bushwhackers, Outlaws & Lawmen*. Washington, DC: Washington, DC Books, 1999.

Marsh, Carole. *Washington, DC Disasters & Catastrophes*. Washington, DC: Washington, DC Books, 1999.

Moore, Robert. *The Old Courthouse: Jefferson National Expansion Memorial*. St. Louis, MO: Jefferson National Parks Association, 2004.

Lee, Antoinette J. and Pamela Scott. *Buildings of the District of Columbia*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Eskew, Glenn T. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*. University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Websites

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www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/wash

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www.nps.gov/linc

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial/Old Courthouse
www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit.och.htm