



Foundation Document Overview

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

Missouri



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of the JEFFERSON NATIONAL EXPANSION MEMORIAL is threefold:

- 1. To commemorate Thomas Jefferson's vision of building a unified continental nation and St. Louis' role as a confluence and gateway to the American West during the 19th century.*
- 2. To interpret key individuals and cultural groups involved in exploring, exploiting, and inhabiting the lands from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.*
- 3. To preserve the architecturally significant Old Courthouse as the site of the Dred Scott case, which divided North and South over the extension of slavery into the Western Territories and was a leading cause of the American Civil War.*

Significance

Significance statements express why Jefferson National Expansion Memorial resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- St. Louis was politically and geographically pivotal in the westward expansion of the United States during the 19th century. Significant historic events associated with westward expansion occurred at the site, including the transfer of the Louisiana Territory from Spain to France and finally to the United States; treaty negotiations with American Indian tribes forcing their removal; and the launch and return of the Lewis and Clark expedition. St. Louis was also the starting point for numerous other explorers, fur traders, and pioneers who made the journey west.



Significance

- In 1846, Dred and Harriet Scott sued for their freedom from slavery at the Old Courthouse in St. Louis. This historic case resulted in an 1857 U.S. Supreme Court decision that determined that no “people of color,” enslaved or free, could become citizens of the United States. The decision also removed restrictions on the extension of slavery into the U.S. Western Territories, further dividing the North and South, eventually leading to the Civil War.
- The Old Courthouse is a prime example of mid-19th-century Greek Revival civic architecture, using the very latest technological innovations and materials available at the time. It features the first cast iron dome completed in the United States.
- Jefferson National Expansion Memorial is recognized globally as an exceptional example of mid-20th-century modernist design. The soaring Gateway Arch is one of the world’s great architectural and engineering achievements. It is a tangible symbol of St. Louis’ historic role as the “Gateway to the West.” The memorial is purposefully located on the footprint of the original 1764 village of St. Louis. The site is recognized as a masterpiece composition of integrated structure, landscape, and interpretation.
- Museum objects and archival records housed at the memorial document the westward expansion of the United States and the planning and building of the memorial. The collection is used in ongoing research by site staff and other scholars and is the basis for the site’s interpretive programming and museum exhibits.



Artist's rendering of museum now under construction.

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

The park staff is committed to providing meaningful interactive opportunities in the museums, throughout the park, and in the community in order to inspire audience participation, reflection, and dialogue as forums for civic engagement. The desired outcome for interpretive programming is to reveal history from multiple perspectives so that diverse audiences make connections from the past to critical issues of the present and consider possible solutions to contemporary problems.

- Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the West as a land that would foster and sustain democratic values shaped by United States law and policy including the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition, enabling westward expansion in the 19th century.
- The Gateway Arch acts as a symbol for westward expansion in the 19th century, an unprecedented and rapid migration of people into the Trans-Mississippi West. Thus, the Gateway Arch is a symbol of hope, opportunity, and religious freedom for some, and cultural clashes, environmental destruction, and the forceful removal of American Indians for others.
- The design and scale of the Gateway Arch, and its integration with its setting, make the Arch one of the world’s architectural, artistic, and engineering marvels.
- The Dred Scott decision is a significant event in United States history that highlighted the potential expansion of slavery into the American West and helped exacerbate regional tensions that led to the Civil War.
- The architecturally significant Old Courthouse was a crucible for change that galvanized the struggle for civil rights, justice, freedom, and equality.
- The American West is both a symbol and a physical reality that attracts people from all over the world and continues to shape national identity.
- St. Louis’ strategic location near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers made it a logical hub for exploration, commerce, transportation, military activities, and cultural encounters during the 19th century.

Description

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial commemorates St. Louis' role in the westward expansion of the United States. The memorial consists of the Gateway Arch, St. Louis' Old Courthouse, and museum exhibits. The 630-foot Gateway Arch, situated on the west bank of the Mississippi River, symbolizes St. Louis' historic role as the "Gateway to the West." Construction of the Arch began in 1963 and was completed on October 28, 1965, at a total cost of less than \$15 million. The Gateway Arch is an internationally recognized, iconic example of mid-century modern architecture. Every feature is designed with geometric purpose and precision. The two foundations of the Arch extend 60 feet below the surface and are built to withstand earthquakes and high winds. Visitors can ride a unique transportation system to the top of the Arch to experience spectacular views of downtown St. Louis and the Mississippi River. The museum, located below the Arch, contains an extensive collection of artifacts and exhibits about French settlement, western exploration, the fur trade, riverfront commerce, and the overland migrations. Just two blocks west of the Gateway Arch, the Old Courthouse, built between 1839 and 1862, is one of the oldest standing buildings in St. Louis. It was here that the first two trials of the Dred Scott case were held in 1847 and 1850. Today, the building houses restored courtrooms and exhibits about the Dred Scott suit for freedom from slavery.

