MUSEUM GAZETTE
Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

The French Heritage of St. Louis: 1764-1804

By Bob Moore

The story of the French in St. Louis was a part of the struggle of several European powers to dominate North America during the colonial era. The French were eager to start a colonial empire based on furs, trade, and sugar cane. They colonized four major areas in the Western Hemisphere: the North Atlantic maritime region (Acadia); the St. Lawrence River Valley and the Great Lakes (New France); the lower Mississippi River Valley and the Gulf Coast region (Louisiana); and various island holdings in the Caribbean (the West Indies). In 1685, Henri Tonti established Poste des Arkansas on the Mississippi River; the French founded Natchitoches, Louisiana, in 1714, and New Orleans four years later.

Auguste Chouteau, one of the founders of St. Louis

The French colonial empire was centered on the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo, with its cash crop of sugar cane. Louisiana, extending from New Orleans up the Missouri River to modern-day Montana, supported the empire by producing flour, grain, salt, furs and lumber for the sugar islands. The Mississippi River was the major avenue of transportation, settlement and trade.

With European competition for America's resources came friction and a series of wars in America and Europe. By 1762, the French knew that they would lose the Seven Years War (called the French and Indian War in America), and with it their entire North American empire. The French did not want the British to possess Louisiana, and so ceded the area west of the Mississippi to Spain, which administered the colony for 40 years. By the terms of the 1763 Treaty of Fountainbleau, the British received the portion of Louisiana east of the Mississippi.

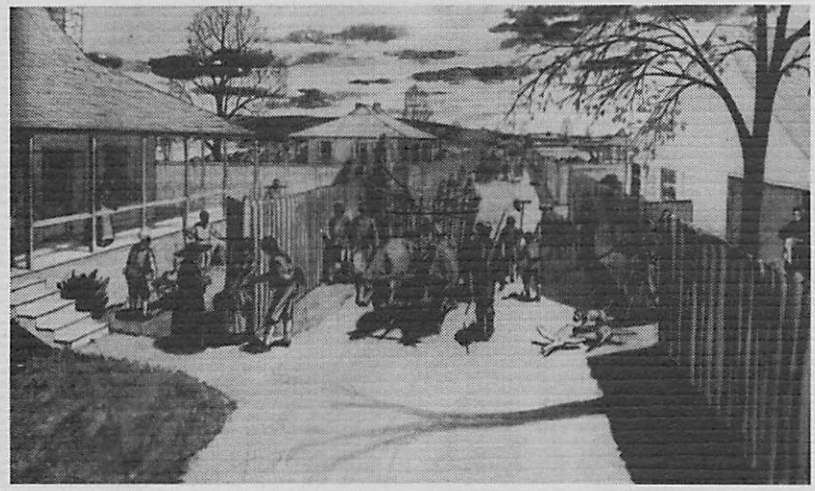
In late December 1763, Pierre Laclede, a partner in the New Orleans fur trading company of Maxent, Laclede and Company, paddled his way up the Mississippi, landing 18 miles south of the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Laclede sought a suitable place to establish an Indian fur trading post, and chose a narrow, flat bank topped by rocky limestone bluffs. Laclede's 13-year-old stepson, Auguste Chouteau, returned to the site on February 14, 1764 with a small group of men, including several African-Americans, to begin construction of a village. Laclede predicted that the site, named St. Louis in honor of France's King Louis IX, "might become, hereafter, one of the finest cities" of the continent, "by its locality and central position." Laclede and Chouteau realized that with the English moving into the Mississippi Valley, most of the French inhabitants of Illinois would be eager to move across the river to territory held by the Spaniards.

By 1770, when the first Spanish governor arrived, the small community of St. Louis had taken shape. French settlers from Illinois brought windows, doors and other parts of their houses across the river to start anew. They came to take advantage of the fertile soil, and the protection that the new town offered. The community of St. Louis was composed of French Canadians who had settled in Illinois in the late 1600s, and other French people from the Louisiana coast and Europe. With them they brought many African slaves, who were regulated by Roman law. This meant that slaves could earn money by working evenings and weekends, and might eventually purchase their own freedom. The area's Indians were friendly to the French settlers, and enabled the community to thrive.

Laclede and his men patterned St. Louis after other French colonial cities of the day, especially New Orleans. The block where the south leg of the Arch now stands was reserved as a

public square, known as the Place d'Armes or Place de Publique. Directly behind this square was the founder's home, which served as Laclede's residence and also as a headquarters for the growing village. The company block was set aside to the west, and adjoined the church square, (where the Old Cathedral stands today), a religious center for the Catholic town. Father Gibault dedicated a temporary log chapel on the site in 1770 for the Roman Catholic Church. A second, larger log church was constructed in 1776 and stood until 1820. In May 1818 Bishop Louis DuBourg laid the cornerstone for his brick cathedral; the present "Old Cathedral" was not built until 1834.

All other land besides the company block and the church plot was given away by the Maxent-Laclede company to encourage settlement. Each lot was enclosed by its owners with a log palisade, called pieux en terre (stakes in earth). Some of the larger stone houses were surrounded by stone walls, and had large courts or gardens which enclosed not only the house but slave quarters as well. Great attention was paid to gardening, and orchards of apple and peach trees were also planted. At the top of the hill behind the town (today's Broadway) stood the Coteau des Granges (Hill of Barns), where the community's livestock, hay and grain were stored. The common fields (commune), used as community farm land, ran south to the River des Peres, seven miles away.



St. Louis looked much like this during its colonial period.

Except for the church and the cluster of barns on the hill, nearly all community activities took place in the homes of private citizens. There were no retail districts, no waterfront warehouses, and no industrial centers. Houses were built in the Poste a terre fashion, and on average sheltered about five persons. The houses were topped by the steep French hip roof adopted from Canada, had casement windows, and were sided by a porch or "galerie" adopted from New Orleans and the Caribbean, which sometimes extended to all four sides of a building.

St. Louis was administered by the Spanish from Havana, Cuba, by a Royal Governor located in New Orleans. Two Lieutenant Governors, one in Natchez and the other at St. Louis, supervised affairs and commerce along the Mississippi. Few Spaniards, however, ever lived in the colony. The French gathered together in villages for reasons of security and sociability. In St. Louis, farmers lived alongside artisans, and houses formed compact residential blocks separate from pastures and cultivated fields. In this respect, early St. Louis resembled the old villages of Europe. There was a sawmill and two windmills for grinding grain, a bakery and a maple sugar works, and of course, in a town based on the fur trade, there were tanneries.

In 1779, Spain, after years of covert help to the American cause, entered the Revolutionary War against England as an ally of France. (Spain never openly allied with the Americans). In St. Louis, a stone tower was built by order of Spanish Governor Fernando DeLeyba at the corner of today's Walnut and Broadway. Named Fort San Carlos, it was this simple stone watchtower which saved the city of St. Louis from destruction from a combined group of British subjects and Indian warriors who attacked on May 26, 1780. Sioux, Sac, Fox and Winnebago warriors fell upon the community and its barely-completed entrenchments, killing several settlers and slaves who were tending the fields on the outskirts of town. The firing alerted the able-bodied male populace. The battle lasted two hours, with 21 villagers killed and 71 captured. The attack was repulsed, and the British were prevented from obtaining control of the Mississippi.

In 1783, as part of the settlement of the Revolutionary War, the line of the Mississippi River became the border between the new United States and Spain. Spanish Governor Esteban Miro (1782-1791) noted the growing westward migration of the Americans; he allowed settlement in Louisiana only if the newcomers pledged themselves to Spain and the Catholic Church.

The Spanish secretly ceded Louisiana to France in 1800, but the French government did not have time to take possession, for Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803. An official transfer ceremony was held in St. Louis on March 9, 1804, when Captain Amos Stoddard, a U.S. Artillery officer, received the territory for France, and Captain Meriwether Lewis delivered the territory for Spain, along with the Spanish Governor, Delessus. The following day, the French tricolor came down, and the stars and stripes went up the pole.

With the arrival of the Americans, the simpler days of the little French-speaking town were gone forever. American settlers began to push in ever-growing numbers across the river into what came to be called Missouri. St. Louis hung onto its French traditions for a time, but in the end overwhelming waves of settlers from Europe and the eastern U.S. moved in. St. Louis grew up fast, but in some ways did not entirely forget its French past. Many of its streets and buildings are named for the French, and the name of the city itself was never changed. The cosmopolitan attitude of the city founded by the French and African-Americans, administered by the Spanish, a trading center for countless American Indians, and an adopted home for disaffected and adventurous people from Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and the original 13 English colonies, has never fully disappeared.