

THE OLD COURTHOUSE

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial
Missouri

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



St. Louis, Missouri, 1867

(Courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)

HISTORY OF THE OLD COURTHOUSE

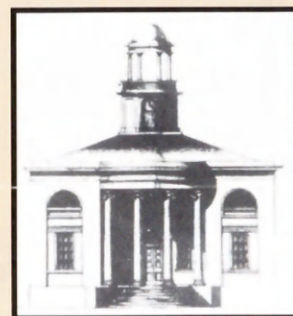
1816 Land for the Courthouse was donated for use as a public square by Auguste Chouteau and J.B.C. Lucas . . . "on the condition that the ground should be used forever as the site on which the Courthouse of the County of St. Louis should be erected."



Auguste Chouteau

1826 Construction began on first Courthouse.

1828 Completion of the original Federal Style Courthouse — "a neat brick building with a respectable portico in front . . . a small clerk's office, a Pillory and Necessary, and a well with windless and bucket occupying an area enclosed by a board fence and planted with trees."



First courthouse by
Morton and Lavielle

1839 Construction began on the existing Greek Revival style Courthouse building — "the court deeming it necessary that an addition should be made to the present Courthouse . . . adopt(s) the plan laid before the court by Mr. Henry Singleton."

1845 The Rotunda and the West Wing of the Courthouse were opened. For many years, the Courthouse Rotunda functioned as the city's public forum, witnessing meetings and orations advocating railroad construction, debates reflecting rising tensions between North and South, and assemblies convened to consider the problems of new immigration.

1846 Meetings held at the Courthouse for the relief of famine victims in Ireland.

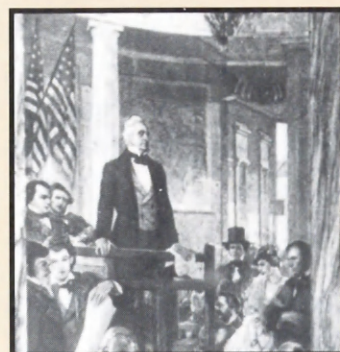
Slaveholders assembled in the Rotunda to demand . . . "protection of slave property against the evil designs of Abolitionists and others."



Courthouse in transition, c.a. 1850

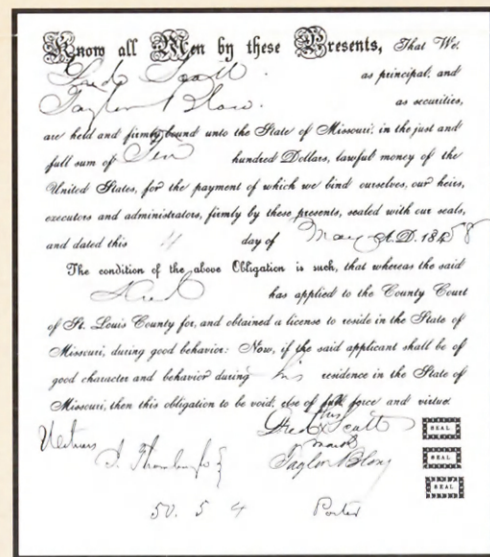
1847 Dred Scott sued for his freedom at the St. Louis Courthouse. His case became a national issue, as Abolitionists and State's Rights advocates argued its merits in the national press. The ruling against Scott by the United States Supreme Court in 1857 contributed to sectional unrest prior to the Civil War.

1849 Senator Thomas Hart Benton made his impassioned oration advocating transcontinental railroad to a national railroad convention in the Rotunda.



Thomas Hart Benton, 1849

1852 Original brick Courthouse was demolished to make way for a new east wing designed by architect Robert Mitchell. Mitchell later proposed a new Italian Renaissance dome to replace the existing Greek Revival style dome.



Freedom bond of Dred Scott

1859 The county began construction on a cast and wrought iron dome for the courthouse. Designed by William Rumbold, this iron dome, along with a larger iron dome designed by Thomas Walter and under construction at the same time for the Capitol in Washington, D.C., were the first of their kind in the U.S.

Ulysses S. Grant, a St. Louis area resident, legally freed his only slave at the Courthouse.

1861 Last slave auction held on the steps of the Courthouse. Such auctions had been held as part of Probate Court functions in the settlement of estates.

1862 St. Louis artist, Charles Wimar, completed work on four historical murals in the dome. Wimar's half-brother, August Becker, contributed in decorating the dome's architectural features.



Portrait of Charles Wimar



Interior of Courtroom #4 during an 1860 trial.

Courthouse completed and officially dedicated. Between 1862 and 1877, the Courthouse was at its busiest housing the Court of Criminal Corrections, the Circuit Court, the Criminal Court, the State Supreme Court, the Probate Court, the Court of Common Pleas, the Land Court, and the Law Commissioners Court.

1872 Pioneer St. Louis Suffragist Virginia Louisa Minor at the Courthouse sued unsuccessfully for the right to vote.

1877 St. Louis separated from the County of St. Louis, ending the County's presence in the Courthouse.

1930 All courts, with the exception of the justices of the peace and their constables, moved from the Courthouse to the new Civil Courts Building.

Heirs of Auguste Chouteau and J.B.C. Lucas charged violation of the 1816 agreement whereby the "Public Square" was donated to the City upon the condition that it be used forever as the site of a courthouse. They demanded return of the property. The Missouri Supreme Court ruled against them.



(Courtesy of St. Louis Public Library, Rare Book Room)
St. Louis Suffragist
Virginia Louisa Minor

1933 A riverfront memorial to Thomas Jefferson and to the historic role of St. Louis as the gateway to westward expansion was first proposed to stimulate downtown redevelopment. Prominent St. Louis lawyer Luther Ely Smith was a leading advocate.

1935 President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed the riverfront area as a National Historic Site and authorized the National Park Service to manage the area.

1939 Demolition of riverfront buildings began for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. The Old Courthouse and the Old Cathedral were spared, but all other structures at the original town site were razed.

1940 The City of St. Louis deeded the Old Courthouse to the Federal Government. The National Park Service began renovation of the building.

1945 The first interior and exterior rehabilitation of the Old Courthouse by the National Park Service was completed.

1955-78 National Park Service completed restoration of the dome paintings and other interior decorations.

1981-86 Rehabilitation of the exterior of the dome and drum completed. Final restoration of the exterior of the building, interior of the dome, and rotunda were completed.



Courthouse in scaffolding

The Old Courthouse is open daily except New Year's, Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address all inquiries to the Superintendent, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, 11 North Fourth Street, St. Louis, Missouri 63102.

Wheelchair entrance to the Old Courthouse is on Broadway. A computer/video kiosk, audio enhancement headsets, video program, TDD, open-captioned film, and photobook are available upon request for those with specific needs.

For your safety, you are entering an historic building with varying floor levels. Remain alert and exercise caution on stairs. Museum etiquette requires that you please refrain from smoking, eating, drinking and touching historic objects.

Enjoy your visit to the Old Courthouse.

TOURING THE OLD COURTHOUSE

While visiting the Old Courthouse, we suggest that you follow the numbered descriptions keyed to the accompanying plan of the building.

Your tour begins in the East Wing of the Old Courthouse, on Fourth Street. If you have entered the West Wing from Broadway, walk straight through the Rotunda to the Museum Shop.

1. Get detailed information about the Old Courthouse at the **Museum Shop**. Rangers are on duty to answer your questions, and books and maps are available to help you enjoy your visit to St. Louis. A model of the Old Courthouse shows the building's growth and change.

2. In the **theater**, see the film, "Gateway to the West", as it traces the history of St. Louis from its origin as a fur trading post to its development as a center of commerce (30 minutes).

3. The **Dioramas** were built in 1940 by Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists. They are preserved as examples of work produced by the Great Depression relief program and present landmark episodes in the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West.

4. The **Competition Room** has several architectural designs that were submitted in the 1947 competition for a monument to be built on the St. Louis riverfront. Eero Saarinen's design of the Gateway Arch was the winner.

Proceed to the south hallway where you will enter the first of four rooms which make up our **Museum of St. Louis History**. These rooms were originally four separate courtrooms, in use between 1856 and 1930.

5. **ST. LOUIS: THE EARLY YEARS (1764-1850)** - A French Colonial house interior and a partial recreation of the St. Louis levee, convey the mood of a small river town inhabited by the Indians, Spanish, French and Americans.

6. **ST. LOUIS: BECOMING A CITY (1850-1900)** - St. Louis enters the Victorian Age. The ornate furnishings of a typical Victorian household, a street vendor's wagon, and cast iron ornamentation manufactured in St. Louis, herald the city's emerging role as a center of commerce and manufacturing.

7. In 1847, the Dred Scott case was tried in a large courtroom on the ground floor of the **West Wing**. In 1855, this room was divided by the present hallway. Here you can learn more about the famous case.

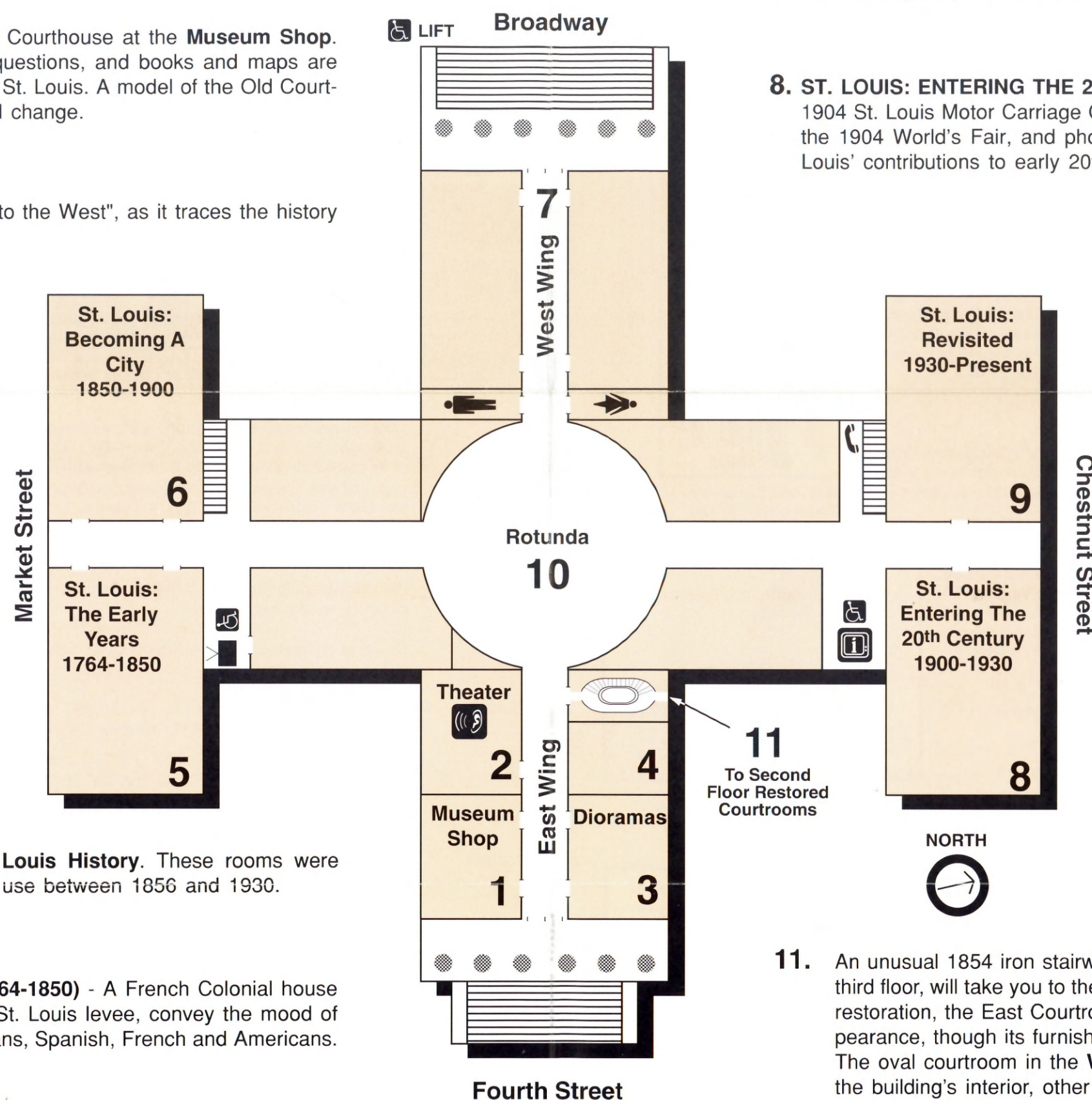
Woodgraining, a technique painters used in the 1800s to stylize doors and wood molding, is prevalent here and throughout the building.

8. **ST. LOUIS: ENTERING THE 20TH CENTURY (1900-1930)** - On display is a 1904 St. Louis Motor Carriage Company automobile, scenes and souvenirs of the 1904 World's Fair, and photos of Lucky Lindy. These items spotlight St. Louis' contributions to early 20th Century culture and technology.

9. **ST. LOUIS: REVISITED (1930-PRESENT)** - Photos, exhibits and architectural fragments of the past and present are combined to offer a summary of the St. Louis experience. A corner of the 1818 Manuel Lisa fur warehouse has been reconstructed in this room.

10. The Old Courthouse **Rotunda** expresses the pride and success many St. Louisans felt as their city progressed from a small colonial outpost to a city of judicial, civil and cultural attainment. People thronged the **Rotunda** as they made their way to and from various courts and governmental offices. Great orations attracted large audiences that filled every balcony to capacity. Architecturally, the **Rotunda** was the center of the Old Courthouse; symbolically, it represented the nucleus of St. Louis.

11. An unusual 1854 iron stairway, spiraling 32 feet from the basement to the third floor, will take you to the **second floor restored courtrooms**. Through restoration, the East Courtroom (No.13) has been restored to its 1856 appearance, though its furnishings date from the first decade of this century. The oval courtroom in the **West Wing** (No.4) is the only major section of the building's interior, other than the **Rotunda**, to survive intact.



Continue to the third and fourth floors for a bird's-eye view of the Rotunda and a closer inspection of the murals created by Charles Wimar.