# Finding their Place in an American City:
# Perspectives on African Americans and French Creoles in Antebellum St. Louis

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# APPROVAL PAGE

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## ABSTRACT

"The Valor and Spirit of Bygone Times": The Memory of the Battle of St. Louis and the Persistence of St. Louis's Creole Community, 1820-1847

In the context of the American Revolution, the Battle of St. Louis is a mere footnote, resulting in under 100 casualties. But to the St. Louisans who experienced it – mostly French civilians living in a Spanish territory, many of whom lost loved ones in the battle – it was the defining event of their lifetimes. This paper focuses on two antebellum tellings of the battle story - Thomas Hart Benton's speech in the United States Senate in 1822 and Creole Wilson Promm's speech at St. Louis's anniversary celebration of 1847 - to explore the ways in which Creoles and their allies altered the battle narrative to serve their own cultural or political ends. A close reading of these tales reveals that despite their declining numbers and waning cultural influence, French Creoles remained a distinctive and politically important community in St. Louis throughout the antebellum period. Furthermore, Primm's speech complicates traditional narratives of the nativist moment, showing that some Catholic non-immigrants - such as St. Louis Creoles - risked being targets of nativist prejudice and that they took steps to prevent this, such as invoking the Battle of St. Louis as proof of American bona fides.



## ABSTRACT

Crossing Jordan: Black St. Louisans and the Mississippi River, 1815-1860

In the antebellum United States, two rivers – the Ohio and the Mississippi – combined to form a thousand-mile border between slavery and freedom. Yet political boundaries between slavery and freedom do not always map neatly onto cultural or ideological landscapes. A close examination of Mississippi River crossings and trans-Mississippi connections of slaves and free blacks from St. Louis (by far the largest southern city located on the boundary) complicates any simple dichotomy of "Missouri-slave" and "Illinois-free." In addition to the (hopefully) one-time crossings of blacks fleeing slavery in Missouri, St. Louis free blacks established social networks that extended across the river, and used both temporary and permanent crossings as strategic solutions to problems they faced in St. Louis. At other times, however, they chose to stay in St. Louis, strategic decisions which suggest reveal much about their attitudes toward the river and suggest the limited nature of the freedom available in Illinois. An examination of these crossings reveals the ambiguous and permeable nature of the Mississippi as a boundary between slavery and freedom.

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It takes a village to write a thesis, and my village has been an exceptionally supportive and generous one. Credit is first due to the professors under whose direction these papers were written. I am grateful to Guillaume Aubert for his enthusiasm and sound advice. He saw the potential of Creole St. Louisans' story before I did, and his perceptive observations and questions pushed me to tell it better. Christopher Grasso encouraged me to dream big, convincing me to tell the story of black St. Louisans' Mississippi River crossings rather than settling for a narrower topic with less scholarly promise. He then provided the guidance and feedback I needed to make that dream a reality.

Other members of the William and Mary "village" also helped improve these papers. I am grateful to Hannah Rosen and Melvin Ely for helping me sort through my ideas and provided helpful suggestions for new avenues of exploration. Thanks also to Phillip Emanuel, Maureen Fischer, Alexander Strickland, and Beth Wood for reading draft chapters and providing helpful comments.

Researching Missouri history from Virginia poses some logistical challenges, but the generous assistance of several archivists made the process much easier. Jaime Bourassa and Dennis Northcott at the Missouri History Museum and William Fischetti at the State Historical Society of Missouri located and scanned many resources for me. Michael Everman at the Missouri State Archives – quite possibly one of the nicest people in the entire state of Missouri – went above and beyond to track down information about the lives and freedom journeys of black St. Louisans.

I cut my historiographical teeth at Patrick Henry College under the tutelage of Robert Spinney. Dr. Spinney approached history with a grace and integrity to which I continue to aspire, and was the first and most persistent person to encourage me to pursue an advanced degree in history. He taught me many things, but most of all to tell a true story, and that I could do it.

Finally, I owe more than I can say to my parents, who have supported my passion for history ever since I started checking out biographies from the library instead of picture books. To my role models, my heroes, my biggest fans – thank you.

S. D. G.

To my mother, Patty Roberts,
with gratitude for her love
and for her red pen

## Intellectual Biography

It all started with Elijah Lovejoy. The 2006 National History Day theme was "Taking a Stand," and the abolitionist newspaper editor seemed a perfect topic for my first History Day paper. As the years went on, Lovejoy became a catalyst for my historical interests. In high school, I wrote papers on other figures in the abolitionist movement; in college, Lovejoy's years in St. Louis spurred me to research the city's African American history, culminating in my senior thesis on black pastor and community leader John Berry Meachum. Perhaps fittingly, Lovejoy is the only person discussed in both papers in this portfolio. His multiple identities as an abolitionist and an anti-Catholic serve as entry points for discussions of the complex tensions that shaped life in St. Louis for the French Creoles, free blacks, and enslaved people who are the subjects of these papers.

In one sense, "Crossing Jordan" is a continuation of my previous work on African Americans in St. Louis, but it departs from the biographical framework I employed in my senior thesis to attempt something more ambitious: a broad survey of the black experience in antebellum St. Louis through the lens of Mississippi River crossings. This is, I believe, an important and timely project. In 2014, African American Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (a St. Louis suburb), and the twenty-first-century racial tensions revealed by that event find their analogue in the charged atmosphere of antebellum St. Louis. Straddling the border between north and south, east and west, St. Louis has always been a meeting place of different types of people and a battleground of ideologies. As a first step toward understanding the

geographical peculiarities that have shaped St. Louis's racial history, "Crossing Jordan" examines the Mississippi River, which forms the city's eastern boundary but which for black St. Louisans was notable more for being the gateway to the North. Yet it was even more complicated than that, as the stories examined in the paper demonstrate that the river did not constitute a firm dividing line between slavery and freedom.

"The Valor and Spirit of Bygone Times" shares "Crossing Jordan's" geographical and temporal lens, but it turns the focus to a different cultural group: the descendants of the original French settlers of St. Louis. African Americans were not the only St. Louisans who experienced prejudice and hostility in the years leading up to the Civil War. Immigrants and Catholics also suffered, and even French Catholics from respectable old families could find themselves caught in the crossfire (with Elijah Lovejoy one of those firing rhetorical shots). In responding to these ideologically-driven challenges as well as more prosaic economic and legal obstacles, Creoles found that their French heritage could sometimes serve as an asset despite native-born Americans' prejudice. Furthermore, the very existence of these conflicts over Creoles' place in St. Louis society undermines the historiographical assumption that Creoles were irrelevant in St. Louis by the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition to sharing a setting – antebellum St. Louis – the two papers share significant thematic and structural continuities. Each paper is vaguely biographical, focusing on individuals – Thomas Hart Benton, Wilson Primm, Elizabeth Keckley, John Berry Meachum – who serve as starting points for understanding broader realities. As in biography, the characters encounter challenges – anti-Catholic prejudice, laws prohibiting

black education, threats of sale down the river – and find ways to overcome them. The creative use of assets is a theme throughout the papers, as French Creoles seize on an obscure snippet of St. Louis history to make their case for inclusion in mainstream St. Louis. Black St. Louisans, meanwhile, predictably escape from St. Louis to Illinois in pursuit of freedom, but also find alternative and often counterintuitive ways to use the river to achieve their ends. John Berry Meachum's legendary floating school is only the most sensational of many such acts of creativity.

In addition to these recognizably biographical themes, both papers seek to challenge monolithic binaries that obscure more complex realities. Nativist agitation is sometimes depicted as a movement of native-born Protestants against immigrant Catholics, but "The Valor and Spirit of Bygone Times" introduces a group that falls into neither category – American-born French Catholics – and explores the ways in which they and their nativist neighbors navigated these multifaceted identities. Similarly, the central aim of "Crossing Jordan" is to complicate any simple binary of "Missouri-slave" and "Illinois-free." As the paper shows, the experience of black St. Louisans was more complicated than that, and examining the motivations and mechanics of Mississippi River crossings turns out to be a helpful method of getting at the nature of these complexities.

I see this work as a contribution to the historiography of antebellum St. Louis, as well as enhancing historians' understanding of nativism and African American history more generally. I presented a section of "The Valor and Spirit of Bygone Times" at the Missouri Conference on History in March 2016, and the full paper is currently under consideration by a regional studies journal. "Crossing Jordan" is not quite as far along the

road to publication, and I continue to conduct primary source research and seek scholarly feedback to improve the paper. In the long term, I see this work both as a journal article and as a possible foundation for a larger project, perhaps one that broadens the geographical perspective to include communities like Louisville and Cincinnati.

While I am grateful to my high school self for getting me started on St. Louis and African American history, and my undergraduate thesis on John Berry Meachum was a key catalyst for "Crossing Jordan," it has been exciting to see my scholarly horizons expand through the instruction and advising I have received at William and Mary. Melvin Ely's class on African American history opened my eyes to new facets of the African American experience, and several sections of "Crossing Jordan," most notably the analysis of Elizabeth Keckley, incorporate insights from that class. Guillaume Aubert's Atlantic history seminar got me thinking about what impact St. Louis's French colonial heritage might have had on its subsequent development, and examining the *longue durée* of St. Louis history has proven a fruitful avenue of research. I look forward to continuing to refine these essays, and am grateful to the William and Mary community for helping them get this far.

**"The Valor and Spirit of Bygone Times": The Memory of the Battle of St. Louis and the Persistence of St. Louis's Creole Community, 1820-1847**

The Battle of St. Louis is perhaps better named by the humbler moniker it received from French civilians who experienced it: *le grand coup*, the Great Blow. The encounter pitted a few hundred British-led Native Americans against the militia of the Francophone (but nominally Spanish) town of St. Louis, resulting in perhaps two dozen casualties.[1] Though the battle was technically part of the war between Britain and her colonies, almost no English speakers were present. In the years to come, however, American settlers would pour into Missouri. By the time of Missouri's statehood in 1820, the original French settlers of St. Louis and their Creole descendants were vastly outnumbered in the city they had founded and defended with their lives.[2]

Historians have left the relationship between Creole and American St. Louisans after statehood relatively unexamined, implying by their silence that the French embraced American nationality quickly and quietly and that English-speaking immigrants had little

[1] The best summaries of the battle are Carolyn Gilman's two-part article, "L'Anneé Du Coup: The Battle of St. Louis, 1780," *Missouri Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (April 2009): 133–47, and no. 4 (July 2009): 195–211; John F. McDermott, "The Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor': Captain Fernando de Lebya and the Defense of St. Louis in 1780," in *The Spanish in the Mississippi Valley, 1762-1804*, ed. McDermott (Urbana, IL, 1974), 314–405; McDermott, "The Battle of St. Louis 26 May 1780," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 36, no. 3 (March 1980): 131–51.

[2] In the Missouri context, the term "Creole" does not have a single uniform definition. Jay Gitlin, for example, uses the term to refer to any person of French ancestry. Others, such as Carl J. Ekberg, make a distinction between "French" (original settlers of the area) and "French Creole" (their descendants). Of course, at any time from the birth of the first Creole until the death of the last original settler St. Louis contained both "French" and "Creole" individuals. This paper uses "French" before 1820 and as a general descriptor, and "Creole" after 1820. This is in line with contemporary usage, as the term "Creole" was used in St. Louis beginning in the 1820s. See Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), 191 n2; Ekberg, *François Vallé and His World : Upper Louisiana before Lewis and Clark* (Columbia, Mo., 2002), 51.

objection to their doing so.[3] But the transition was not seamless. Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalism develops smoothly only when political boundaries correspond closely to linguistic ones – and in 1820, St. Louis was one of the few places in the United States where this was not the case.[4] Consequently, in the years following Missouri's statehood, Francophile narrators, both Creole and American, seized on the battle of St. Louis as a tool for articulating visions of the relationship between newcomers and French pioneers in St. Louis.

The Battle of St. Louis was an excellent means for advancing political, economic, and cultural agendas because of the tangled web of narratives that had developed by 1820. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, both British and Spanish officials dashed off reports to their superiors, but no written account of the battle was available in St. Louis until 1812. Thus, the memory of the battle depended on the memories of eyewitnesses, who had been various ages, in different places, and had different levels of knowledge during the battle. According to the conflicting tales they passed down to their children and grandchildren, the French citizens of St. Louis in 1780 included both brave defenders and innocent civilians. They were led by a Spanish governor, who might have been cowardly, incompetent, or treasonous. The official Spanish report maintained that

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[3] For studies of antebellum St. Louis that minimize Creoles, see Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis* (Cambridge, 1991); Perry McCandless, *A History of Missouri*, vol. 2, *1820–1860* (Columbia, Mo., 1972). More recent scholars do examine the role of Creoles after statehood, but usually in context of the strategic political and economic accommodations of the French elite, especially the Chouteau family; analysis of the cultural aspects of a broader cross-section of Creole St. Louis remains lacking. See, for example, Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*; Shirley Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty That Ruled America's Frontier* (New York, 2004).

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London, 2006), chapters 4-5, esp. 77.

Spanish soldiers had fought valiantly, but popular memory held that French militia defended St. Louis virtually unaided by the regulars. Everyone agreed that there were no Native Americans on the French side, but the Native American attackers were portrayed variously as savages, cowards, traitors, pawns of the British, or maybe all of the above. Americans were absent from the conflict. No, they were the true heroes of the day, saving the helpless French in the nick of time. Since even the basic facts of the battle were a matter of dispute, different chroniclers could assign the roles of heroes, villains, and victims that best served their objectives.

Two case studies illustrate both the major threats facing Creole St. Louisans in the antebellum period and the ways in which the battle narrative could be deployed to combat those threats. Throughout Missouri's territorial period and early statehood, French families faced legal wrangling over lands granted to them by the Spanish government. In addition to this economic challenge, Creole St. Louisans faced prejudice due to their ethnic, political, and religious differences from Anglo-American Protestants. In 1822, it fell to Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, a friend of the French business interests in St. Louis, to plead the settlers' case in Congress. Since the vast majority of the landowners – and thus the beneficiaries of any land legislation – were French, Benton would have to find a way to make the measure palatable to his American colleagues in the Senate. To do so, Benton turned the battle narrative on its head. St. Louis was saved, Benton maintained, by heroic American "riflemen of the west" – and their contemporary counterparts, veterans of the War of 1812, were among those who would benefit from the

legislation.[5] Benton thus cleverly circumvented his colleagues' prejudices while appealing to their patriotism. The narrative Benton created well illustrates the Creoles' challenges, goals, and strategies in the early years of Missouri's statehood. In a changing political climate, they sought to secure their continued status and influence by deemphasizing themselves rhetorically while working actively behind the scenes.[6]

By 1847, much had changed in St. Louis. American prejudice was now aimed primarily at German and Irish Catholic immigrants rather than French Creoles. Meanwhile, twenty-five years of immigration and intermarriage had reduced Creoles' numbers and distinctive identity. Accordingly, while racial and religious prejudice was more muted, many St. Louisans now viewed Creoles as a quaint relic of the colonial past, irrelevant to contemporary St. Louis. Meanwhile, the Mexican-American War raised questions about French Catholics' willingness to fight a Catholic enemy. Creole Wilson Primm used the battle to combat these challenges. At a grand celebration of the anniversary of the city's founding, Primm gave the keynote address. Primm emphasized French patriotism by situating the battle within the context of the American Revolution, portraying Spanish actors as cowardly and dishonest, and connecting the story of 1780 with the contemporary struggle against Spanish-speaking antagonists in Mexico. The "valor and spirit of bygone times," Primm explained, was still alive among Creole St.

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[5] [Thomas Hart Benton], "Congress," *Missouri Republican*, April 24, 1822, 2. This speech is reported in the third person ("Mr. Benton said…"), but as it is not reprinted in contemporary Washington newspapers, it is almost certain that Benton wrote the version printed in the *Republican* himself rather than copying it from another source.

[6] For an excellent discussion of the strategies developed by the wealthy Chouteau family and other St. Louis Francophones in response to American political and demographic influence, see Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*, 47-138.

Louisans.[7] Primm deftly used the Battle of St. Louis to demonstrate the loyalty and continuing relevance of St. Louis's French Creole population.

While Benton and Primm differed drastically in their telling of the story based on their objectives, the cultural currents of the time, and the background knowledge they brought to their story, they had one important goal in common: both deployed the battle narrative in support of French Creoles. The uses to which the story of the battle was put reveal the challenges and tensions faced by Creole St. Louisans as they sought to assert their legitimacy, stability, and relevance as a distinct community. Their strategic decision to fade into the background rhetorically should not be mistaken for an actual disappearance. A close examination of the battle narratives shows that Creole St. Louis remained a vibrant community well into the nineteenth century.

St. Louis in 1815 was a boomtown that had grown large enough to need a hotel, and grown quickly enough that none yet existed.[8] So it was that Thomas Hart Benton, Tennessee land lawyer and War of 1812 veteran seeking a fresh start, found himself wandering the streets of an unfamiliar city on a crisp fall evening, searching for someone with a room for rent. The landlord he found was an auspicious one. Charles Gratiot, whom Benton called "a most respectable old gentleman," was a pillar of the community,

[7] *Report of the Celebration of the Anniversary of the Founding of St. Louis, on the Fifteenth Day of February, A.D. 1847. Prepared for the Missouri Republican* (St. Louis, 1847), 10.

[8] The city's first hotel, the Missouri Hotel, opened in 1819. John Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County: From the Earliest Periods to the Present Day: Including Biographical Sketches of Representative Men* (St. Louis, 1883), 311.

a wealthy man whose roots in St. Louis stretched back thirty years.[9] Just as important, Gratiot had connections. Presumably through him, Benton developed strong relationships with many of St. Louis's French elites, including Pierre and Auguste Chouteau, the latter of whom had helped establish the city half a century before. St. Louis had been founded as a fur trading outpost in 1764, two years after the transfer of Louisiana from France to Spain but a year before anyone in the isolated frontier outpost would hear about it. Regardless, St. Louis's character from the beginning was firmly French, and it remained so despite the presence of Spanish officials and a token Spanish military force. "The few Spaniards that settled in the country soon became Frenchmen," a nineteenth-century historian wrote, but "no Frenchman became a Spaniard."[10]

American observers disagreed about what, exactly, becoming a Frenchman entailed, but many felt that it was not a good thing. When Auguste Chouteau resigned from the St. Louis Court of Common Pleas in 1813, a friend warned him that his seat would be filled by one of "those Americans who declare the most inveterate hatred to the French." As Jay Gitlin explains, such hatred stemmed from ethnic, political, and religious differences. Ethnically, American newcomers viewed French St. Louisans with skepticism because of their intermarriage with Native Americans. Politically, many Americans believed that the French were "ignorant of the principles of self-governance, being the 'children' of empire." This belief was clearly held by Frederick Bates, a future

[9] Benton to James P. Preston, November 14, 1819, in Preston Papers, Virginia Historical Society, cited in William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton: Senator from the New West* (Boston, 1956), 62; Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 85. Chambers incorrectly gives 1777 as the year of Gratiot's arrival in St. Louis; although Gratiot frequented the city on business, he lived across the Mississippi in Cahokia until 1781.

[10] Frederic Louis Billon, *Annals of St. Louis in Its Early Days under the French and Spanish Dominations* (St. Louis, 1886), 77.

governor of Missouri, who claimed in 1807 that the French accepted orders from political leaders "as the dispensation of Heaven." Finally, while Baptist missionary John Mason Peck accurately observed in 1818 that most French St. Louisans were only "nominally" Catholic, hostile observers like Bates still considered them subject to the Pope's authority – an authority that threatened their loyalty to the United States.[11]

While Benton's friends would have freely admitted to their Catholicism, and many St. Louis Creoles did have mixed racial heritage, Gratiot's and the Chouteaus' stories of colonial St. Louis would have made it clear that St. Louis's early French settlers were hardly political sycophants. They could not afford to be. Annals drawn up by Auguste Chouteau enumerate some of the challenges they faced: "(Annee des Grandes eaux) The Mississippi rose twenty feet above highest known water marks… (Annee du Grand hiver) the year of the Cold Winter… (Annee de la Picotte)… the Small Pox made its first appearance in Saint Louis."[12] In this precarious community, the actions of an incompetent or malicious leader could cost lives. Thus, when St. Louisans suspected their lieutenant governor Fernando De Leyba of corruption, they did not hesitate to write to his superiors, calling him "a man without humanity, without conscience" and accusing him of a litany of cruelties and injustices.[13]

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[11] Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*, 50, 65; William Bates to Richard Bates, December 17, 1807, in *The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates*, edited by Thomas Maitland Marshall, 2 vols. (St. Louis, 1826), 1: 243; John Mason Peck, *Forty Years of Pioneer Life: Memoir of John Mason Peck D.D.* (Philadelphia, 1864), 87.

[12] Patricia Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil: A History of Colonial St. Louis* (Columbia, Mo., 2011), 52; Auguste Chouteau, testimony before the Recorder of Land Titles, April 18, 1825, in [Theodore Hunt], "Hunt's Minutes," 1825, typescript by Idress Head, 3 vols., Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, 1: 125-27.

[13] Le Peuple Des islinois to Governor General Gálvez, [1780], translated by John McDermott and Odile Delente, in McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 368-72. McDermott has persuasively

Leyba was governor in 1780, which Chouteau called "Annee du Grand Coup" – the year of the great blow. In 1780, English generals launched an offensive to recover land American colonel George Rogers Clark had conquered east of the Mississippi and to seize Spain's possessions on the west side of the river. St. Louis was the first target in the western campaign. Rumors of an attack began swirling in late 1779, more warnings came throughout the spring, and by May the people of St. Louis had built defensive trenches and a guard tower. St. Louis's 300-man militia, including Lieutenant Auguste Chouteau and 22-year-old private Pierre Chouteau, was joined by 150 militiamen from nearby Ste. Genevieve and hunters from throughout the region. But while St. Louis braced for an attack, no one knew exactly when it would come. On May 26, 1780, business was proceeding as usual: farmers were working in their fields, and Leyba was in the courtroom, hearing a case to which Charles Gratiot, who then lived across the river in Illinois, was a party. Thus, all three of Benton's friends were present when the blow finally fell.[14]

Estimates of the number of attackers range from 400 to 1,640, but all accounts agree that they were mostly Native Americans. They struck first on the outskirts of town, causing terrified farmers to run to get inside the town's fortifications. In St. Louis proper, women and children huddled in a stone house, guarded by the Spanish regulars, while the militia manned the cannons in the tower and the defenses on the outskirts of town. After a

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demonstrated that Leyba was actually a competent governor and St. Louisans' disdain for him was unfounded.

[14] "Roster of St. Louis Militia Companies in 1780," in Louis Houck, ed., *The Spanish Regime in Missouri: A Collection of Papers and Documents Relating to Upper Louisiana Principally within the Present Limits of Missouri during the Dominion of Spain….*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1909), 1: 184, 186; Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, 229; Gilman, "L'Anneé Du Coup," part 2, 198-200; McDermott, "The Battle of St. Louis," 139.

few hours, the attackers inexplicably withdrew, but the damage had been done.[15] At least twenty-one St. Louisans were dead, seven were wounded (including three women), and twenty-five were taken prisoner. It was a heavy blow for a town of 700 people. One out of every thirteen St. Louisans was killed, wounded, or captured. The attackers suffered only seven casualties.[16]

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, people coped with their loss in different ways. Some mourned. The register of the Catholic Church records five men "massacred by the Indians" interred on May 26, 1780.[17] Some sought a scapegoat and found one in Leyba, whose poor reputation among St. Louisans before the battle only grew worse after it. In a lengthy letter to the Governor General in New Orleans, an anonymous St. Lousian styling himself "Virtutis, Veritatisque Amicus" ("a friend of courage and truth") accused Leyba of hiding in the guard tower throughout the attack and ignoring the cries of the civilians for leadership and aid.[18] Some sought revenge. One hundred St. Louisans joined an unsuccessful American pursuit of the retreating British and Indians; the next year,

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[15] Gilman, "L'Anneé Du Coup," part 2, 200, 204; Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, 1812), 79. Gilman suggests that the mysterious retreat was initiated by Sauk and Fox Indians who had been compelled to attack St. Louis but were actually friendly to the French.

[16] "Casualty List, Battle of May 26, 1780," in McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 386-88; Patrick Sinclair, letter to his superior, July 8, 1780, in "Documents Relating to the Attack Upon St. Louis in 1780," *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 2, no. 6 (July 1906), 49. A 1779 census put the population of St. Louis at 702; a 1780 census, presumably taken after the battle, lists 687. Cleary, *The World, The Flesh, and The Devil*, 144; Selwyn K. Troen and Glen E. Holt, eds., *St. Louis*, Documentary History of American Cities (New York, 1977), 9.

[17] F[ather] Bernard [de Limpach], entry in Register of the Catholic Church, May 26, 1780, translated in *Report of the Celebration*, 26.

[18] Virtutis, Veritatisque Amicus to [Governor General Gálvez], July 19, 1780, translated by John McDermott and Betty Osiek, in McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 363-67.

sixty-five of them marched to the British Fort St. Joseph, six hundred miles to the north, sacked the fort, and burned it to the ground.[19]

As the years went by, however, St. Louisans' offensive military action in response to the attack seems to have been largely forgotten; no nineteenth-century account of the battle mentions the retaliatory attack.[20] Rather, St. Louisans remembered the grief and helplessness they felt when watching their friends die, and the governor whose actions seemed to exacerbate the situation. The town's schoolmaster, Jean Baptiste Trudeau, composed a bitter diatribe against Leyba and set it to music, and the song continued to be sung for decades. According to the song, Leyba forbade the militia to leave their trenches to rescue friends outside the walls; following orders, the men of St. Louis could do nothing but mourn their "kinsmen and friends on the prairie grass."[21] Other accounts convey a similar sense of helplessness in the face of death. In 1825, John Baptiste Riviere gave a legal deposition about his neighbors' land claims. To prove that he was an old resident of St. Louis and thus knowledgeable about the original colonial division of land,

[19] Gilman, "L'Anneé Du Coup," part 2, 205-207; Steven Philip Stuckey, "Fighting for Family: French Kin Networks and the American Revolution in the Illinois Country, 1780-1781" (M.A. thesis, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2010), 33-47. There were multiple motives for the raid on Fort St. Joseph: Spanish officials sought to intimidate Indian nations into alliances, and St. Louisans wanted revenge for the attack on St. Louis and for British expulsion of French traders from Fort St. Joseph. According to Stuckey, these traders had relatives in St. Louis and had warned them of the attack, resulting in the traders' expulsion and helping prompt the retaliatory expedition.

[20] It is unclear why the retaliatory raid completely disappeared from local tradition. Possibly the attack was instigated by someone other than Francophone St. Louisans – Spanish authorities, or, as Lawrence Kinniard has suggested, Spain's Native American allies – and thus St. Louisans took no personal pride in its success. However, if Steven Philip Stuckey's suggestion that St. Louisans undertook the raid in revenge for treatment of their relatives is true – and his argument is convincing – one would expect that the successful raid would have become part of local lore. The reason for its disappearance remains a mystery. See Stuckey, "Fighting for Family," 33-47; Lawrence Kinnaird, "The Spanish Expedition Against Fort St. Joseph in 1781, A New Interpretation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 2 (September 1932): 173-191.

[21] The song was printed and translated in [Wilson Primm, ed.], "Old Times in St. Louis," *Weekly Reveille* (St. Louis), February 17, 1845. For the editor's identity, see William Clark Breckenridge, ed., "History of the 'Chanson de L'Année Du Coup,'" *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 4, no. 3 (1914): 297.

he recounted his experience at the battle, in which he served as a militiaman, was taken prisoner, and watched a man die. Four months later, Riviere's fellow militiaman René Dodier gave a similar deposition, identifying a parcel of land by saying, "Amable Guyon [another militiaman] was killed by the Indians… on this very lot."[22]

Despite the pain of these memories, at the time of Benton's arrival French St. Louisans apparently talked freely about the battle. According to Benton, the event was "well remembered by the old inhabitants," and Edward Tesson, born in 1812, remembered as a child having "heard the old people speak of times in St. Louis during a previous century, of what happened in this or that year, and frequently of l'ann[e]e du coup - a never-ending topic when conversation turned on that point."[23] The memory of the battle also served a very practical function. When St. Louis was threatened with an Indian attack during the War of 1812, it was Auguste Chouteau, commander of one of the town's two militia companies in 1780, who headed the committee organizing the city's defense.[24]

Serving with Chouteau on the five-man committee were a Frenchman from nearby Ste. Genevieve, a Virginian, and two Pennsylvanians – a geographic and ethnic assortment fairly representative of the composition of St. Louis when Benton settled

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[22] John Baptiste Riviere dit Baccané, testimony before the Recorder of Land Titles, July 9, 1825, in Hunt, "Hunt's Minutes," 2: 50-51; René Dodier, testimony, November 1, 1825, in ibid., 3: 63; "Roster of St. Louis Militia Companies," in Houck, *Spanish Regime*, 1: 188. In the militia roster, these men's names are given as "Bap[tist]a Riviera" and "Gabriel Dodie." A crossed-out notation in "Hunt's Minutes" identifies René Dodier as "Gabriel Dodier;" he apparently used both names.

[23] [Thomas Hart Benton], "Brief Notices of the Principal Events in the Public Life of Governor Clark," *St. Louis Enquirer*, August 2, 1820, [5]; Lyman Draper, interview with Edward P. Tesson, 1880, Draper Manuscript Collection, microfilm, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 28J: 85.

[24] William E. Foley, *The Genesis of Missouri : From Wilderness Outpost to Statehood* (Columbia, Mo., 1989), 225-26; *Missouri Gazette*, February 20, 1813, [3].

there.[25] Between 1780 and 1815, St. Louis had experienced several spurts of immigration: in 1796, when Spanish officials feared a British invasion and thus offered settlers free land in an effort to increase the population available to defend the area; in 1803, when American settlers streamed in following the Louisiana Purchase; and in 1814, when soldiers who had been garrisoned in St. Louis during the War of 1812 decided to stay. A few Francophone settlers also came, relocating from Canada and the trans-Appalachian West in response to the free land offer in 1796, or fleeing from the turmoil of the Haitian Revolution.[26]

A young lawyer specializing in land issues could hardly have chosen a better place to make a name for himself. The Spanish government had granted land freely to settlers, and some St. Louisans had taken advantage of this generosity to obtain huge swaths of land in undeveloped areas of Missouri. However, the process for making a land

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[25] B. Pratte was from Ste. Genevieve, B.G. Farrar from Virginia, and William Christy and C. B. Penrose from Pennsylvania. L. U. Reavis, *Saint Louis: The Future Great City of the World: With Biographical Sketches of the Representative Men and Women of St. Louis and Missouri* (St. Louis, 1876), 529, 641; Richard Edwards and M. Hopewell, *Edwards's Great West and Her Commercial Metropolis* (St. Louis, 1860), 128; Josiah Granville Leach and George Hoffman Penrose, *History of the Penrose Family of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1903), 66. In 1818, one immigrant stated that over one-third of St. Louisans were French, while another gave the proportion as two-thirds. The first estimate is probably closer to the truth. Peck, *Forty Years*, 87; John Fletcher Darby, *Personal Recollections of Many Prominent People Whom I Have Known, and of Events – Especially of Those Relating to the History of St. Louis – during the First Half of the Present Century* (St. Louis, 1880), 5.

[26] For the 1796 immigration, see Cleary, *The World, The Flesh, and The Devil*, 293; Foley, *Genesis of Missouri*, 77; and Troen and Holt, *St. Louis*, 8. For 1803, see Foley, *Genesis of Missouri*, 184-85. For 1814, see Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 227. It seems safe to say that total Francophone immigration to St. Louis through 1839 was under 300 individuals. Of the 3,624 French who entered the United States via Louisiana between 1820 and 1839 and indicated a specific American destination, only forty-one (1.1%) planned to relocate to Missouri or St. Louis. Approximately 16,000 French (including 10,000 refugees from Saint Domingue) entered the United States from all ports between 1783 and 1820; if 1.1% ended up in Missouri (a generous estimate), that would be 176 people. In addition to these immigrants from other countries, a small number of Francophones arrived from the trans-Appalachian West. Cleary, *The World, The Flesh, and The Devil*, 293; Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*, 54; Carl A. Brasseaux, *The 'Foreign French': Nineteenth-Century French Immigration into Louisiana*, vol. 1, *1820-1839* (Lafayette, La., 1990), 569; Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, "European Immigration to the United States in the Early National Period, 1783-1820," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133, no. 2 (1989), 201.

claim official, or "complete," was complicated and time-consuming. The claimant had to spend months traveling to New Orleans to file paperwork, while the government had to pay to have the land surveyed. Consequently, at the time of the Louisiana Purchase the vast majority of land titles in Missouri were incomplete. With the transfer of the territory to the United States, land speculators began forging antedated paperwork that appeared just as valid as legitimate claims, since neither appeared in Spanish records in New Orleans. The fraud gave ammunition to American immigrants, who argued that since the veracity of an incomplete title could not be determined, all incomplete land claims should be denied, leaving the land open to American settlement.[27]

More than a decade after the Louisiana Purchase, most of these disputed claims remained unresolved, and Benton became the personal lawyer for many of the French merchant families who held incomplete land titles, including the Chouteaus. However, Benton aimed higher. He began publishing a newspaper, the *St. Louis Enquirer*, supporting the policies and candidates of the Democratic-Republican Party. As his political aspirations grew, a group derisively called the "Little Junto," composed of elite French families and their allies, coalesced around him. On the strength of this constituency, Benton was elected as one of Missouri's first two senators following the state's admission to the Union in 1821.[28]

Benton the senator proved to be as concerned about the issue of land titles as Benton the lawyer had been. Seven months after taking office, Benton rose to speak in support of a bill to hasten the process of confirming or denying incomplete land titles by

[27] Foley, *Genesis of Missouri*, 99-100, 143-44.
[28] Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 61-100.

establishing a court to evaluate the claims. Benton's speech was that of a lawyer in a courtroom: comprehensive, organized, marshaling evidence for an argument. He gave detailed statistics about the land under dispute, parsed the exact meaning of Spanish legal terms, and systematically laid out the history of the Spanish and American land policies and the legal status of the incomplete titles.

Benton realized, however, that American St. Louisans were not the only ones who held negative views of the Francophone settlers of the newly American Midwest. Although no simple composite statement of Benton's colleagues' racial views is possible, some senators undoubtedly held prejudicial views of the French for some of the same reasons American St. Louisans did – their ethnicity, their political heritage, and especially their Catholicism. Although anti-Catholic sentiment would peak after 1830, it was on the rise throughout the United States during the 1820s and had figured in congressional debates as early as 1798. Furthermore, senators had to consider the interests of their constituents, almost all of whom were Anglophone. Thus, systematic legal argument, no matter how thorough, would not be enough to convince Benton's colleagues to vote for a bill that would benefit the overwhelmingly French holders of incomplete land titles at the expense of the American immigrants – former constituents of his colleagues – who clamored for those same lands.[29]

Accordingly, Benton supplemented his rational argument with an emotional appeal designed to recast Americans as the beneficiaries of the proposed legislation.

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[29] Benton, "Congress," 2; Ray Allen Billington, *The Origins of Nativism in the United States, 1800-1844* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1933; reprint, New York, 1974), 43-44; Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Westport, Conn., 2004), 31; David S. Reynolds, *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson* (New York, 2008), 171.

Benton's strategy focused on the small minority of holders of incomplete land titles who were Americans. In 1796, fears of a British invasion had induced the Spanish to offer land freely to immigrants who would relocate to present-day Missouri and increase the population available to defend the area. Most of the people who responded to this call – and thus became owners of incomplete land titles – were Americans from Kentucky and Mississippi. Spain looked to "the riflemen of the west," Benton explained, to save the region from the "danger" that "menaced" it. And the riflemen answered the call. Indeed, many of these same settlers later fought bravely for the United States by defending the western frontier in the War of 1812; thus, they had saved Missouri from invasion not once, but twice. Were such heroes not worthy of receiving full rights to the land they had honestly acquired?[30]

Drawing on the stories he had heard from his French constituents, Benton pressed the argument one step further. In fact, he passionately insisted, the "riflemen of the west" had saved Missouri a *third* time: in 1780, *l'année du coup*. Benton had an explanation for the mysterious retreat of the British and Native American force from the walls of St. Louis: George Rogers Clark, hero of the American Revolution, had arrived on the scene in response to a desperate plea for help from the citizens of St. Louis. With a force of 400 men, Benton told his fellow senators, Clark crossed the Mississippi from his camp in Illinois to meet a foe four times greater, on behalf of foreign civilians he had no obligation to protect. Clark and his men "knew not danger," Benton proclaimed; "knew it not!" According to Benton, the Native Americans attacking St. Louis mistook Clark's

[30] Benton, "Congress," 2.

small force for the vanguard of a much larger army, and retreated from the city. "History… tells of the passage of the Rhone and Granicus," Benton concluded, "but here is the passage of a river unknown to history, yet surpassing the exploit of Hannibal and Alexander."[31]

The French citizens of St. Louis faded into the background as helpless victims in Benton's narrative of the battle. Benton mentioned them only twice in the story: at the beginning they sent a message to Clark requesting help, and at the end Benton enumerated their casualties. This portrayal of the French as helpless victims appeared throughout the speech. When Benton listed the groups holding incomplete Spanish land titles, he emphasized "the European French, flying from the storms of the Revolution" and "the inhabitants of St. Domingo escaping from massacre and conflagration." The "old inhabitants of the country," the wealthy French settlers who held the vast majority of the titles, were mentioned, but only in passing – a strategic afterthought. Benton implied that by passing the land title legislation, the Senate of the United States could save the beleaguered French just as the riflemen of the West had in 1780, and could help those heroic riflemen at the same time. The legislation helped loyal Americans and helpless French; wealthy Frenchmen like Gratiot and the Chouteaus were nowhere to be found.[32]

Benton's strategy of emphasizing French victims and American heroes only worked because of a glaring factual error: later historians have established conclusively that Clark was not present at the battle; indeed, he was in Kentucky at the time of the

[31] Benton, "Congress," 2.
[32] Benton, "Congress," 2.

attack.[33] Benton was not the originator of this error; it first appeared in print in Amos Stoddard's *Sketches of Louisiana* (1812), which contained the first published account of the battle. Stoddard's source for the myth may have been Benton's former landlord, Charles Gratiot. Shortly before the battle, Gratiot had delivered a letter to Clark pleading for help against the British-Indian invasion – but the letter was from the residents of Cahokia, Illinois, where Gratiot then lived, not St. Louis. Meanwhile, an army did arrive to defend St. Louis: at the request of Leyba, a company of militia from Ste. Genevieve marched to St. Louis a few days before the battle to bolster the city's defenses. It is quite possible that Gratiot, telling the story as an as an elderly man to Stoddard and later to Benton, had conflated the two stories. However, it is also possible that another French informant or Stoddard himself was the source of the error. In any case, Benton clearly relied on French eyewitnesses for other details. For example, his accounting of casualties differed from Stoddard's, and from some source – again, perhaps Gratiot – he had a figure for the size of Clark's force (four hundred men), which Stoddard's account lacked.[34]

Thus, Benton invented neither the tradition of helpless French (which was a part of private French memory) nor that of American saviors (which had been published by

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[33] See, for example, Gilman, "L'Anneé Du Coup," part 2, 205; John Thomas Scharf to Lyman Draper, December 16, 1882, Draper Manuscript Collection, 28J: 11.

[34] Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive*, 80; "Petition to Clark for the Defense of Cahokia," April 11, 1780, in *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol. 8, *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, edited by James Alton James (Springfield, Ill., 1912), 410-412; McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 324; Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 69. In 1820 Benton had published an account in the *Enquirer* ("Brief Notices") that contained the Clark myth and also credited Gratiot as St. Louis's emissary to Clark. Gratiot had died in 1817, and was thus unavailable for Benton to consult when drafting his account of the battle. One likely scenario is that Benton turned to Stoddard's account to refresh his memory of the battle narrative, remembered Gratiot's tale of Clark's rescue of Cahokia, and conflated the two.

Stoddard in 1812 and former St. Louisan Henry Brackenridge in 1814). Nevertheless, Benton did not merely parrot the battle narrative as he had heard it from French informants or read it in Stoddard's and Brackenridge's books. Rather, he carefully emphasized specific elements that were already present in memories and published accounts of the battle to fit his political needs. For example, while Stoddard and Brackenridge had both mentioned Clark's rescue of St. Louis, Benton's hyperbolic statements comparing American riflemen to ancient Greek and Carthaginian heroes were entirely his own; Stoddard and Brackenridge gave brief and straightforward factual narratives and offered no approbation of Clark's actions.[35]

Furthermore, Benton innovated in using the battle narrative as a strategic political tool. In fact, he had done so once before: in 1820, when William Clark was running for governor of Missouri, the *St. Louis Enquirer* had printed an account of the battle that emphasized the heroics of George Rogers Clark, William Clark's older brother, to lend support to the younger Clark's gubernatorial campaign.[36] Benton's choice to relegate French elites to the background elsewhere in the speech shows that his version of the battle narrative was part of a larger strategy to de-emphasize French actors while elevating American ones. Benton saw the battle narrative as a tool that could be used for political gain, molded into different forms depending on the needs of the moment, and deployed to help either Americans (like William Clark) or French (like the land claimants).

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[35] Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive*, 80; H. M. Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana; Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811* (Pittsburgh, 1814), 123.
[36] Benton, "Brief Notices."

Anglophone recorders of the battle narrative, like Benton and Stoddard, agreed with their French informants in portraying the French primarily as helpless victims of the attack; however, they differed from them in importing a hero who was part of no French memory (except perhaps Gratiot's) to defend those victims.[37] In French memory, the incident was a *coup*, an attack, as the French were the recipients of the Native Americans' fury but able to do little to fight back. It was only with the insertion of fictional American saviors to mount a spirited defense that the event came to be remembered as a battle. Other than Benton himself, it seems that most residents of St. Louis, Anglophone or Francophone, continued to remember the events of May 26, 1780 as an Indian attack rather than a battle of the American Revolution.

For St. Louisans, the premier symbol of the French part in the American Revolution was not the battle but the Marquis de Lafayette. Independence Day celebrations were not occasions for remembrance of the battle, but Lafayette might be mentioned there.[38] When Lafayette visited the city on his tour of the United States in 1825, St. Louis gave him a hero's welcome. In the carriage with him as he was paraded

[37] For example, the one verifiably contemporary French account of the battle, the letter from "Virtus, Veritatisque Amicus," does not mention Clark's participation in the actual battle but states that he arrived "several days after the departure of the Royalists with their prisoners… at the request of Mr Leyba" and proceeded to work with Leyba to outfit the retaliatory expedition. In three interviews with eyewitnesses and elderly Creoles between the 1840s and 1880s, Lyman Draper specifically asked about Clark's role at the battle. One "did not remember of Clark marching over to St. Louis;" another "mentions abt. attack on St. Louis - but seems to recollect nothing abt. Clark, in that connection;" the third stated, "There never was, as far back as I can remember, a tradition current that Genl. Clark had taken part, or was in any way concerned, in the defence of St. Louis." Lyman Draper, notes from interviews with John Murphy, [Pascal Leon Cerré?], and Edward P. Tesson, Draper Manuscript Collection, 28J: 6, 85; Virtutis, Veritatisque Amicus to Gálvez, July 19, 1780, in McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 363-367.

[38] I examined a selection of St. Louis newspapers from seven different years between 1818-1835. Of these, two gave detailed accounts of Independence Day celebrations: *St. Louis Enquirer*, July 14, 1819 (no mention of French past); *Commercial Bulletin and Missouri Literary Register*, July 8, 1835 (toast to Lafayette, followed by "Hail to the Chief").

through the streets of St. Louis was a symbol of the American Revolution – Steven Hempstead, a Connecticut native who had fought under Lafayette – and one of St. Louis's French past – Auguste Chouteau, who was there for his role in founding St. Louis rather than for commanding a militia company during the attack. No effort seems to have been made to inform Lafayette of St. Louis's role in the American Revolution.[39]

However, there is no indication that French St. Louisans raised any objection to public failure to integrate the battle into local memory of the American Revolution. Rather, they kept remembering the battle privately and passing along the story to their children without regard for whether it was a part of "French" or "American" heritage. In this way, the French attitude toward the battle of St. Louis is an indication of a broader attitude toward their cultural inheritance. Wealthy merchant Auguste Chouteau is a prime example. After the Louisiana Purchase, he deftly adapted his business model and sought the support of American politicians like Benton to ensure continued economic success in the new American marketplace. Yet he never learned English, a key indicator of "Americanization" in a bilingual city like St. Louis. The founding generation of St. Louisans, like people in all places and times, sought things like economic stability, a happy future for their children, and a respected place in their community. If Americanization helped them achieve those goals, they would adapt. But if they could achieve their key objectives without doing so, they saw no reason to intentionally

[39] Auguste Levasseur, *Lafayette in America, in 1824 and 1825: Journal of a Voyage to the United States*, trans. Alan R. Hoffman, (Manchester, N.H., 2006), 394; Darby, *Personal Recollections*, 61.

conform themselves or their memories to American culture. In 1822, French St. Louisans saw no strategic advantage to making the Battle of St. Louis part of an American past.[40]

As the years went on, the Creole descendents of the early French settlers managed to preserve many of their linguistic and cultural traditions. Creole women continued serving as executrices of their husbands' estates, a practice at odds with American custom. As late as 1845, a contributor to an Anglophone newspaper noted that the French language was "vernacular to many of [the newspaper's] best subscribers," and contributed a poem in French (although accompanied by an English translation). Other aspects of French culture became part of the mainstream of St. Louis. For example, traditional permissive French Catholic attitudes toward the Sabbath predominated over stricter Protestant ones throughout the antebellum period. And the custom of holding family-friendly public balls, long a favorite entertainment among French families, was so thoroughly integrated into St. Louis social life that by 1831, the organizing committee for the winter season of balls included no Frenchmen at all.[41]

Increasingly, however, French language and culture became confined to an ethnic enclave rather than penetrating all of St. Louis society. In 1823, Auguste Chouteau lost St. Louis's first mayoral race to Pennsylvania native William Carr Lane, at least partially because Anglophone voters (who then constituted about half of St. Louis's population) were uncomfortable with a mayor who spoke no English. In 1826, the streets of St. Louis

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[40] Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 235, 431; Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*, 48, 150, 156.

[41] W. Primm, "Old Times in St. Louis"; Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier*, 148; Jay Gitlin, "'Avec Bien Du Regret': The Americanization of Creole St. Louis," *Gateway Heritage* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1989), 9; Charles Van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis: An Informal History of the City and Its People, 1764-1865*, ed. Candace O'Connor (St. Louis, 1991), 81, 243-46, 265.

officially lost their French names and gained new English ones. A visitor in the early 1830s noted that the "inhabitants of French extraction" were "still numerous," but only "in their part of town." By 1842, Irish immigration led the Catholic Church, once the exclusive preserve of French St. Louisans, to switch to English in Sunday morning services. During the antebellum period, in sum, Americans and European immigrants supplanted the Creoles in St. Louis numerically, linguistically, and culturally.[42]

This relatively thorough erasure of Creole culture in mainstream St. Louis led to a new myth about the collective French character. If in the territorial years French St. Louisans were numerous enough to seem threatening because of their ethnic, political, and religious differences, by the 1840s they were few enough that their national character could be recast as harmlessly inferior to the American one. In this teleological portrayal, the early French settlers had been characterized by good-natured laziness, which had led inevitably to their displacement by the more vigorous Americans. This interpretation of French identity persisted for decades. An 1845 visitor explained that St. Louis, while "originally a French settlement… remained unknown and insignificant, until it fell into the hands of the United States, when the superiority of the Saxon race, in energy and enterprise, quickly appeared."[43] An 1860 history of St. Louis characterized the French as possessing "good humor, gaiety, [and] limited education" while Americans "possessed more industry, a superior knowledge in agricultural and mechanical pursuits, and above

[42] Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 235, 269; Darby, *Personal Recollections*, 341; Van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis*, 176; Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833* (New York, 1835), 173; Elihu H. Shepard, *The Autobiography of Elihu H. Shepard, Formerly Professor of Languages in St. Louis College* (St. Louis, 1869), 103.

[43] George Lewis, *Impressions of America and the American Churches* (Edinburgh, 1845), 248.

all, an enterprise and expansive views which soon gave them a controlling influence" in St. Louis. In 1882, Francis Parkman would summarize the prevailing stereotype when he characterized early St. Louisans as "contented, lighthearted, and thriftless." This attitude, Jay Gitlin argues, has even caused more recent historians to "insist that the French past had no bearing on the American present or future. Like their allies, the Indians, the French must give way to progress. Their legacy was insignificant."[44]

In the 1840s, however, this newer view of French St. Louisans as harmless and insignificant was still vying for supremacy with the older view that emphasized their dangerous differences from Anglophone St. Louisans. The older view proved especially tenacious because of an influx of newcomers who, like the French, differed from Anglophone Protestants ethnically and religiously. Between 1820 and 1850, St. Louis's population increased seventeen-fold, from 4,598 to 77,860. The Germans were by far the largest immigrant group. In 1829, Gottfried Duden published *Report of a Journey to the Western States of North America*, encouraging Germans to emigrate to Missouri. Thousands did. By 1850, 22,534 St. Louisans – over a quarter of the city's population – were German-born. The second-largest immigrant group was the Irish, who were a significant minority in St. Louis as early as 1820, emigrated in large numbers during the potato famines of the 1840s, and constituted one-eighth of the population by 1850. Most

[44] Edwards and Hopewell, *Edwards's Great West*, 278; Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada* (Boston, 1882), 251; Jay Gitlin, "From Private Stories to Public Memory: The Chouteau Descendants of St. Louis and the Production of History," in Gregory P. Ames, ed., *Auguste Chouteau's Journal: Memory, Mythmaking and History in the Heritage of New France* (St. Louis, 2010), 5.

of the Germans were Lutheran, some Catholic; virtually all of the Irish were Catholic.[45] Thus, the numeric threat to American Protestant hegemony in St. Louis was still largely Catholic, but was now Irish and German rather than French.

Anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment exploded throughout the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, and St. Louis became a major target of Protestant zeal due to its perceived strategic location as the Gateway to the West. Scottish Presbyterian pastor George Lewis warned, "The most energetic agents of Rome have chosen St Louis as their centre of operations on the valley of the Mississippi." In 1833, an anonymous St. Louisan wrote to the New York *Home Missionary* that St. Louis was "the seat of Romanism in the West," and called for a French Protestant missionary to "our French and Germans here." From St. Louis, "this fair position for Antichrist," nativists warned, Catholics were mounting a crusade to take over the nation.[46]

Some St. Louisans were not so sure. Catholics were indeed well-established in St. Louis, but their most visible contributions were schools, hospitals, and orphanages – hardly indications of an intent to take over the country. Beginning in 1827, Catholic and Protestant St. Louisans alike sent their daughters to the girls' school operated by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart; for most Protestant parents, the school's educational quality, modern curriculum, and policy of religious toleration outweighed any fears about its Catholicism. During a devastating cholera epidemic in 1832, four Sacred Heart sisters risked their lives to care for almost 1,500 victims. Two of the sisters died, but most of

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[45] James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis, 1998), 104, 143-144, 165-166; Van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis*, 175-76, 303; McCandless, *History of Missouri*, 2: 39-40.

[46] "Missouri," *The Home Missionary* 6, no. 5 (September 1833), 80; "Missouri," *The Home Missionary* 15, no. 5 (September 1842), 105; Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 51-54; Lewis, *Impressions of America*, 248.

their patients lived, and a grateful city proclaimed the Sacred Heart hospital the official hospital of St. Louis.[47] In 1837, recent immigrant William Greenleaf Eliot summarized the views of many St. Louisans: "We are told, indeed, by sectarists that the Catholics have evil designs of self-aggrandizement, even in their best institutions. Perhaps it is so; but, until they exhibit such designs by other modes than doing good, we do not feel authorized to join in preaching a crusade against them."[48]

As the Catholic immigrant population of St. Louis rose, however, nativist sentiment became more common. The strongest voice of anti-Catholicism in antebellum St. Louis was newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, more famous for his abolitionist editorials that prompted the repeated destruction of his press and his eventual murder. In an argument reminiscent of the old charge against French Catholics' political fitness and loyalty, Lovejoy claimed "that Popery in its very essential principles is incompatible with regulated civil or religious liberty." He warned of "the hordes of ignorant, uneducated, vicious foreigners who are now flocking to our shores, and who, under the guidance of Jesuit Priests, are calculated, fitted, and intended to *subvert our liberties*." Lovejoy's anti-Catholicism had strong nationalist and class dimensions. It was poor immigrants, especially the Irish, and their malicious leaders who threatened the political and religious liberties of Protestant Americans.[49]

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[47] Nikola Baumgarten, "Education and Democracy in Frontier St. Louis: The Society of the Sacred Heart," *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1994): 171–92; Peter J. Rahill, "St. Louis under Bishop Rosati," *Missouri Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (July 1972), 499-501; Andrew H. M. Stern, *Southern Crucifix, Southern Cross: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2012), 60, 66.

[48] Adler, *Yankee Merchants*, 54; William Greenleaf Eliot, *Religious and Moral Wants of the West* (Boston, 1837), 272.

[49] Elijah Lovejoy, "Why Discuss the Subject of Popery," *St. Louis Observer*, August 27, 1835, in Joseph C. Lovejoy and Owen Lovejoy, eds., *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; Who Was Murdered in Defence of*

Other St. Louisans agreed. The Missouri Native American Association was organized in the early 1840s, the nativist *St. Louis American* began publishing in 1845, and the American (Know-Nothing) Party was a major force in Missouri politics throughout the 1850s. On Election Day 1844, nativists attempted to keep naturalized citizens from voting. Earlier that year, a mob of over three thousand people attacked the medical college of the Catholic Saint Louis University – the first of several riots during the 1840s and 1850s. Opportunistic politicians channeled the city's nativist sentiment for their own advantage, shifting their position toward Germans, Irish, or Catholics based on whose vote they were courting at a given time. In 1854, for example, Benton was ousted from his seat in the House of Representatives, due largely to his opponent's strategy of enlisting the editor of an anti-Catholic German newspaper to paint Benton as anti-Catholic. The very fact that a German could be anti-Catholic shows the complex character of nativism in St. Louis. Even among nativists themselves, the question of *who*, exactly, was being opposed was open to interpretation.[50]

This uncertainty extended to the Creole Catholic population of St. Louis. Despite his virulence, Lovejoy insisted that he had nothing against Creoles personally. "There is no more respectable or intelligent portion of our citizens," he wrote, "than many of those who are of French origin, and who are either nominally or really members of the Romish

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*the Liberty of the Press, at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837* (New York, 1838), 114-115; "The Charge of Judge Lawless," *St. Louis Observer*, July 21, 1836, [4]. For further discussion of Lovejoy's anti-Catholicism and its repercussions in St. Louis, see [Jasper W. Cross], "Elijah P. Lovejoy As An Anti-Catholic," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 62, no. 3 (September 1951): 172-180, and John A. Duerk, "Elijah P. Lovejoy: Anti-Catholic Abolitionist," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 108, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 103–21.

[50] McCandless, *History of Missouri*, 2: 243, 266-70; J. Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 165; Van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis*, 377; John C. Schneider, "Riot and Reaction in St. Louis, 1854-1856," *Missouri Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (January 1974): 171–185.

church." In apparent contradiction to his statements that Catholicism was incompatible with civil liberty, he asserted that the Creole Catholic elites were "republicans, in the genuine sense of that term, and there is no class of our citizens to whom we would more readily or confidently entrust the guardianship of our free institutions."[51] Missouri Native American Association president Vespasian Ellis, on the other hand, argued that French immigrants were just as dangerous as German and Irish ones. In an 1841 speech, Ellis resurrected the old argument that a heritage of monarchy made a people unfit for American citizenship: "Do not Englishmen, Scotchmen, and Irishmen, defend the crowns of Victoria? – Frenchmen, the crown of Louis Philippe? – Germans, the crowns of their petty kings? And are not the immigrating countrymen of these defenders of royalty like them?" Ellis argued that just as the "Irishman" most trusted "some favorite son of the Emerald Isle," the "Frenchman some friend from his own beautiful France," and the "German some brother immigrant from his '*fader land*,'" native Americans should outlaw naturalization and allow only the American-born to affect America's destiny.[52] Ellis's speech does not mention American-born French Creoles. However, the fact that Ellis even bothered to criticize French immigrants – a tiny proportion of St. Louis's population compared to Irish and German immigrants – perhaps reflects a suspicious eye cast on a larger group: the early French settlers of St. Louis and their American-born children.

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[51] Elijah Lovejoy, "Why Discuss the Subject of Popery," *St. Louis Observer*, June 11, 1835, in Lovejoy and Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 109-110.

[52] Vespasian Ellis, address before the American Party, in Ellis and Charles C. Carroll, *Address of Vespasian Ellis, and the Oration of Charles C. Carroll: Delivered July 5th, 1841* (St. Louis, 1841), 5, 8.

Rising tensions in the Southwest, culminating in the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in 1846, provided anti-Catholic nativists with new ammunition. Some Protestants expressed hopes that an American victory would eradicate Catholicism in Mexico, and the Native American Rangers, one of several volunteer units raised in St. Louis, left the city to the cheers of a crowd so enormous and enthusiastic that the soldiers could barely clear a path through the streets to their waiting steamboat. St. Louis Creoles, however, turned the challenge of nativist war fever into an opportunity. When some St. Louisans raised questions about American Catholics' willingness to fight a Catholic enemy, Creoles and other Catholic St. Louisans answered with a resounding affirmative. A significant number of the volunteer troops from St. Louis were Catholic, and Creoles served as officers in at least two military units, the Laclede Mounted Rangers and the St. Louis Horse Artillery. Other Creoles supported the war effort in other ways; Wilson Primm, for example, served on a committee charged with ensuring that the families of volunteer soldiers would be financially secure in their primary breadwinners' absence. The war gave Creole St. Louisans a chance to combat both the older stereotype – suspicions of disloyalty due to their national background and Catholic faith – and the newer tendency to dismiss their French heritage as insignificant. By supporting the war effort, Creole St. Louisans could put to rest questions about their patriotism; by the same act, they made a positive contribution to contemporary St. Louis, thus asserting their continued relevance.[53]

[53] Jasper W. Cross, "The St. Louis Catholic Press and Political Issues, 1845-1861," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 80, no. 4 (September 1969), 212; Tyler V. Johnson, "'To Take up Arms against Brethren of the Same Faith': Lower Midwestern Catholic Volunteers in the Mexican-American War," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 1, 2006), 533-535. The St. Louis

The war fever in St. Louis mirrored the city's generally high level of patriotism throughout the antebellum period. St. Louisans enthusiastically celebrated January 8 (the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans) and Washington's Birthday with parades, public balls, and other festivities. The Fourth of July, one historian explains, "was the event of the year. The day featured parades, bands, sporting events of all kinds, orations, dramatic readings and an abundance of food and drink, while calling forth special oratory damning England and King George III and praising America and American patriots." In 1819, the celebration had featured a full-length portrait of George Washington, surmounted by a live eagle, and in 1834 there had even been plans for a fireworks show.[54] Revolutionary War veterans walked the streets of St. Louis, and as the founding generation aged, elderly veterans throughout the United States often became revered as living links to the revolutionary era. Historian Sarah Purcell explains, "There grew up a cult of the 'hoary-headed veteran' as towns vied to display their last remaining men of the Revolution as symbols of their link to the patriotic past."[55]

In 1845, as Creoles sought to chart a path between the Scylla of nativism and the Charybdis of irrelevance, Francophile St. Louisans had an idea. Why not throw a Fourth

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*Catholic News Letter* vigorously opposed allegations that St. Louis Catholics were unwilling to serve in Mexico; see the editions for May 23 and June 6, 1846. Of the 261 officers of Missouri volunteer units, five bear names that are clearly French: Louis C. Garnier, Edmund F. Chouteau, Louis T. Labeaume, John R. Gratiot, and Antoine Lefevere. However, by the 1840s many Creoles bore American surnames, so it is likely that other officers – as well as many enlisted men – were of French descent. Scharf, *History of Saint Louis*, 366, 369, 372; William Hugh Robarts, *Mexican War Veterans: A Complete Roster of the Regular and Volunteer Troops in the War between the United States and Mexico, from 1846 to 1848* (Washington, D.C., 1887), 60-64.

[54] Christian, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 225; McCandless, *History of Missouri*, 2: 188; Van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis*, 243, 310, 355-58.

[55] Levasseur, *Lafayette in America*, 394; Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, 2002), 188.

of July-style party to celebrate not St. Louis's American past, but its French past? It seemed like an opportune time. According to their calculations, 1845 marked the eightieth anniversary of the founding of St. Louis (actually it was the eighty-first), and St. Louis had its own "hoary-headed veteran" – Pierre Chouteau, who had come to St. Louis as a child and was now well into his eighties. On February 17, Joseph Field, editor of the *St. Louis Reveille*, noted that "there are those among us, alas… who saw planted the first stone from which has sprung this proud and spreading city, but who may not much longer watch and glory in its prosperity." Accordingly, Field suggested a grand anniversary celebration, which would provide an opportunity for "an assemblage of those venerable and venerated men – the founders and fathers of the city" to remind their "*posterity*" of St. Louis's "wondrous past."[56]

In the same issue of the *Reveille* appeared a "specimen of poetic ability" that the Field suggested might have been the "*father* of all Western poems." The piece, "Chanson de l'Année du Coup," was the same song about the battle of St. Louis that had been written by schoolmaster Jean Baptiste Trudeau, and the man who submitted it was Wilson Primm, who had learned the song as a boy in Trudeau's classroom. Primm had been born in 1810 to a French mother and American father. His great-grandfather was one of the earliest settlers of St. Louis, and his mother probably remembered the battle of 1780, which happened shortly before her seventh birthday. At age twenty-four, Primm married Amélie Guion, whose great-grandfather, Amable Guyon, had been killed in the attack before the eyes of militiamen René Dodier; her grandfather had been a sixteen-

[56] "Octogenary," *Weekly Reveille*, February 17, 1845, 1.

year-old militiaman. "The Spirit of [St. Louis'] Founders was in him," an early biographer concluded. Yet Primm's American heritage was also strong. His paternal grandfather had served seven years in the Continental Army and taken part in the siege of Yorktown. The adult Primm was known for his fine singing voice, and especially for his renditions of the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "old Congo and Creole songs." He was fluent in both French and English, and his children bore both French and American names – Jacqueline, Jean Baptiste, Frederick. Primm was a prominent lawyer and public servant who commanded respect from Creole and American St. Louisans alike. "A thorough American," explained the early biographer, "he yet loved the French race from which he sprung."[57]

Primm's decision to submit his schoolmaster's song to the *Reveille* was motivated by the same impulse that prompted Field's suggestion of an anniversary celebration: a desire to preserve memory of "Old Times in St. Louis." The song, Primm lamented, was "nearly forgotten," and he hoped that its publication would stir the "dormant memories" of some of St. Louis's oldest residents "to furnish for your paper their recollections of *Paincourt*, as our city was once named." Primm noted that the early inhabitants of St. Louis, "by intermixture with the '*Americans*,' laid aside or forgot their old habits, customs and reminiscences." In 1845, Primm and Field shared the same straightforward

[57] Billon, *Annals of St. Louis*, 201; William Clark Breckenridge, "Sketch of the Life of Judge Wilson Primm," *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 4, no. 2 (1913), 127-149, 157; *Report from the Secretary of War, in Obedience to Resolutions of the Senate of the 5th and 30th of June, 1834, and the 3d of March, 1835, in Relation to the Pension Establishment of the United States*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1835), 3: Illinois section, 18.

goal: to remember the "old times" of St. Louis, which they believed were well worth preserving.[58]

Pulling off a grand celebration of St. Louis's past was no small logistical undertaking, and the planning took time. When the celebration finally happened in 1847, it took a committee of forty-five men, including Field and Primm, to organize it. A dazzling parade included two miniature steamboats, massive beer casks, several Indians (both genuine Native Americans and whites in costume), hundreds of schoolboys, soldiers, Masons, Odd Fellows, and twelve early residents of St. Louis in an open carriage. A working printing press on a cart dashed off copies of an ode written for the occasion and printers handed them out to the crowd. The procession wound on for almost half a mile, and all of St. Louis turned out to see it. Businesses closed, the city was festooned with flowers and flags, and the streets along the parade route were jammed with spectators. The crowd before the speaker's stand, the report of the celebration proclaimed proudly, "surpassed any thing heretofore witnessed in this city." January 8 and July 4 had provided the models for the celebration, but these American holidays could not compete with the outpouring of excitement for the first large-scale celebration of the city's French heritage.[59]

Once the last carriages had filed past the speaker's stand and the Washington Band had played the Marseillaise, Wilson Primm rose to give the keynote speech. Primm had gained a reputation in St. Louis as a historian of the town's early days, and was asked to speak on the history of St. Louis from its founding in 1764 to its incorporation as a city

[58] W. Primm, "Old Times in St. Louis."
[59] *Report of the Celebration*, 1-6.

in 1822. In the two years since Primm had submitted his schoolmaster's song to the *Reveille*, the spike in nativism due to the Mexican War seems to have affected his conception of the celebration. To Primm, the event was now much more than simply a nostalgic look back at the city's past. Rather, it was a chance to do battle against the nativism that divided St. Louis into ethnic and religious enclaves, and particularly against prejudicial attitudes toward Creoles. Primm saw the French past – the memory of St. Louis's colonial period in general, and the battle of St. Louis in particular – as a strategic tool for accomplishing those ends.

Primm began his speech with expressions of solidarity for the immigrant communities who now bore the brunt of the prejudicial sentiment that had once been aimed primarily at the French. The mere fact that Catholics, Protestants, Germans, Irish, and native-born Americans all marched down the parade route was "gratifying" to Primm. For one day at least, the people of St. Louis could "lay aside all those feelings and opinions, which, in their shock and conflict, mar the harmonious organization of social existence." The celebration was an "oasis" from "hatred and rancor," and on this day the "best and kindliest impulses of nature" prevailed in St. Louis. The celebration, he implicitly hoped, was only a beginning.[60]

Primm then proceeded to narrate St. Louis's French past. This was not the first time Primm had spoken on the topic; in 1831, he had given an address before the St. Louis Lyceum that covered much of the same ground.[61] Many of Primm's remarks at the

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[60] *Report of the Celebration*, 6.

[61] *Report of the Celebration*, 7; Wilson Primm, "History of St. Louis," *Illinois Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 19 (April 1832): 312-320, and no. 20 (May 1832): 355-365.

celebration repeated his words from sixteen years before. There were some notable changes, however, which were calculated to make the Spanish appear less favorably and the French appear more resistant to Spanish rule. In 1831, Primm had stated that Don Pedro Piernas, the first Spanish governor of St. Louis, had "adopted the prudent plan of tempering the mandates of government with paternal mildness." Such a course was necessary because St. Louis was "on the verge of civilization" and harshness would have alienated him from the French population; such a division could have threatened the survival of the fledgling settlement. Sixteen years later, the story was very different. In 1847, Piernas "tempered all his official acts with a spirit of mildness;" the reference to his prudence was gone. The reason "mildness" was necessary had changed as well: the French, Primm claimed, "had come with ill humor under the Spanish power," and might have risen to overthrow Piernas had he governed them harshly.[62]

Primm also added new sections to his speech. One detailed the Revolt of 1768, a Francophone rebellion against Spanish government in New Orleans following the transfer of Louisiana from France to Spain. The people of New Orleans, Primm explained, were "indignant at a proceeding which had transferred them from hand to hand, like merchandize," and clung "to their loved government of France." According to Primm, St. Louisans accepted the transfer peacefully only because they were "fewer in numbers" and thus "incapable of such resistance;" consequently, they were "compelled to submit." Primm also added a paragraph about French attitudes toward the American Revolution. Many early settlers of St. Louis had migrated from English settlements on the opposite

[62] W. Primm, "History of St. Louis," part 2, 363; *Report of the Celebration*, 9.

side of the Mississippi, and opposition to English rule "lingered in their hearts," such that "they could not view unmoved the conflict that was raging… between the spirit of tyranny on the one hand, and the spirit of freedom on the other."[63] Between 1831 and 1847, Spanish characters became less praiseworthy, while French characters became more hostile to Spanish rule and more sympathetic toward American ideals.

From Primm's perspective, the Battle of St. Louis was a golden opportunity to expand on these themes because it showed St. Louisans fighting on the same side as the Americans to the east. In his speech about the land claims, Benton had argued that Missourians' service in the War of 1812 entitled them to their land out of gratitude for their patriotic actions. If Primm could show that the French had fought on the American side in the American Revolution as well as in the Mexican-American War, these demonstrations of patriotism would undermine suspicions about their loyalty, since they showed that the French had been pro-American sixty-five years ago and remained so at the present day. Primm thus devoted a quarter of his speech to the battle of St. Louis. In Primm's narrative, George Rogers Clark and his Kentucky riflemen did not arrive to save the day; rather, French bravery saved St. Louis after Spanish incompetence almost lost it.

Primm's story of the battle was a blistering indictment of the Spanish in general and Leyba in particular. According to Primm, Clark had offered military aid to St. Louis the year before, but the foolish Spanish governor had spurned his offer. Leyba had also ignored early warnings of the attack, leaving the town "perfectly unguarded" and vulnerable to attack. The only aid that reached St. Louis was a company of sixty

[63] *Report of the Celebration*, 8-9.

militiamen from nearby Ste. Genevieve under a Spanish lieutenant, Silvio Francisco de Cartabona; through either "fear or treachery" most of them hid in a garret throughout the fighting. Leyba ordered the cannoneers to stop firing on the advancing Native Americans and even briefly turned a cannon on St. Louisans. Primm even reported a rumor that Leyba was secretly pro-British and "had been bribed into a dereliction of duty." In Primm's view, the evidence, while not conclusive, indicated that Leyba was likely "aider and abettor" of the attacking force. Primm made it clear that French St. Louisans disapproved of Primm's incompetence, thus intimating that they had resisted Spanish rule just as their descendants were currently doing in the Mexican-American War.[64]

If Spanish conduct before and during the battle was as inexcusably bad as Primm claimed (and later historians have called many aspects of Primm's narrative into question), it is surprising that St. Louis did not fall to the British and Native American force. Primm attributed St. Louis's survival in part to sheer luck. St. Louis was attacked on May 26; if the British had attacked on the previous day, they would have found the town virtually undefended, as almost the entire population of St. Louis was out picking strawberries following the celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi. Beyond that, credit for saving St. Louis belonged to the French citizens of the town. Benton had emphasized American actions at the battle, but Primm's goal of showing French patriotism required a focus on the heroism demonstrated by French St. Louisans. As soon as the Native Americans began their attack, the cry, "To arms!" resounded throughout the town. Although terribly outnumbered and "almost deprived of hope," St. Louisans "determined

[64] Gilman, "L'Anneé Du Coup," part 2, 200; *Report of the Celebration*, 9-10.

to defend themselves to the last." The meager force spread out along the defensive embankments constructed around St. Louis and began firing the few cannons they possessed. Deterred by the unfamiliar fortifications and the aggressive cannon fire, the Native Americans "deliberately retired." For Benton, the arrival of George Rogers Clark had caused the retreat; for Primm, it was the heroic actions of St. Louis's French defenders that turned the tide.[65]

Unlike most other early narrators of the battle, Primm looked beyond the immediate context of the battle to place it in perspective as part of the American Revolution, casting French heroism and Spanish treachery as parallels for American heroism and British treachery. According to Primm, "The defence against this attack, and the bold spirit of the population, manifested on the occasion, were in keeping with the deeds of their brethren who took part in the American Revolution." Not only had the French displayed heroism comparable to that displayed by American patriots, they had fought the same enemy. Leyba, according to Primm, was "like another Arnold… seduced into defection from his duty, and… it was only the unflinching daring of the people of St. Louis, that saved this infant outpost from utter destruction." French conduct "has given them occasion to say, that on the occidental shores of our river, they have been the first to battle against English oppression and English ambition." By fighting America's foes, the French had earned their right to be considered Americans. Primm closed his narrative of the battle by invoking St. Louisans' service in the Mexican-American War: "And if the valor and spirit of bygone times can descend, like a mantle, upon the successors of the

[65] *Report of the Celebration*, 10.

hardy pioneers of St. Louis, our citizens of this day, may exultingly claim, that in the present contest with the Mexican foe, they have been among the first to offer themselves as the defenders of their country." Between their past heroism and their current loyalty, Creole St. Louisans' patriotic credentials were impeccable.[66]

Primm also sought to undermine the stereotype that French St. Louisans were lighthearted and unindustrious, inferior to Americans in character, and thus insignificant in St. Louis's history after the American takeover. In his 1831 address, Primm had claimed that the "ancient inhabitants of St. Louis" possessed both "amenity and gayety of disposition" – the substance of the stereotype – and "a valor that was at the same time bold and magnanimous." In 1847, the first half of this characterization was gone; Primm focused exclusively on the "valor." In place of "amenity" and "gayety," Primm praised French "intelligence and enterprize" and the "ingenuousness of deportment, the stern uprightness of character, and the unflinching truth of these people" – traits much less inimical to the stereotypical American work ethic so often set in unfavorable contrast to supposedly French attributes. While Primm did not go so far as to attribute traditionally "American" virtues, other than "enterprize," to the French, the stereotype of happy-go-lucky Frenchmen was noticeable by its absence.[67]

Despite Primm's efforts, the stereotype was very much in evidence during other parts of the celebration, particularly at the celebratory feast that evening. A toast from William C. Carr, who came to St. Louis shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, called French St. Louisans the most "cheerful, gay, and happy community" he had ever

[66] *Report of the Celebration*, 10.
[67] W. Primm, "History of St. Louis," part 2, 361; *Report of the Celebration*, 12-13.

encountered. The prevalence of such sentiments throughout the nineteenth century suggests a grain of truth; the "leisurely" French past, one historian has noted, was perhaps "nine parts imagination" but still "one part fact." In his remarks at the celebration, even the venerable Frenchman Pierre Chouteau called the early French "remarkably simple and primitive in all their tastes and habits." However, in perpetuating the stereotype Chouteau realized, as Primm did in avoiding it, that it could be twisted to suggest French inferiority or disloyalty. Accordingly, in an effort to combat notions of American superiority due to work ethic, he added that the French were "industrious, without being over ambitious," and, in an effort to combat religious prejudice, "truly pious and religious, without a spark of fanaticism."[68]

The very nature of the celebration made it difficult for people to entirely avoid perpetuating a nostalgic image of Frenchness. The Fourth of July, the major celebration of American patriots, is both a founding and an event in a war. Since Creole St. Louisans had no event that fulfilled both functions, they chose to celebrate the founding of St. Louis rather than the battle of St. Louis, a decision that led easily to nostalgic reminisces of "the good old days." It is difficult to view anyone as happy-go-lucky in the midst of a battle, but when remembering the times before the hustle and bustle of steamboats, railroads, and the telegraph, it was much easier to perpetuate a myth of a passive, fun-loving national character. The very act of celebrating St. Louis's founding thus tended to reinforce the idea that French Creoles were a quaint relic of St. Louis's past. Primm's

[68] *Report of the Celebration*, 13-15; J. Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 400.

focus on the battle of St. Louis was an attempt to demonstrate their relevance for the present and future.

During the 1840s, as the battle gained attention in speeches, newspapers, and travelers' accounts of the region, Creole St. Louisans continued to retain a private memory of the attack that treated it as a day of victimization and mourning rather than heroism. In October 1846, just four months before Primm's speech to the gathered multitude in front of the courthouse, 73-year-old Pascal Leon Cerré, seven at the time of the attack, shared his childhood memories with an American interviewer. Cerré insisted that the battle was not the momentous event that some interpreters tried to make it. According to Cerré, the battle was part of no grand British design of conquering all Louisiana and Illinois, but was a private revenge mission headed by a Frenchman. In contrast to published writers who estimated well over a thousand Native Americans were present, Cerré said there were "about four hundred, not to exceed that number." He had "no recollection of any shooting out of the houses at the Indians; thinks they did not expose themselves to be shot at." The attack did not last long, "only that afternoon," and Cerré "doubt[ed] if as many as sixty or seventy of the people were killed." He maintained that seven slaves, and no one else, were captured, in contrast to official estimates that twenty-five prisoners were taken.[69] According to Cerré, the battle was not as long, as large, or as deadly as it was generally made out to be.

Rather than emphasizing the scope of the battle, Cerré focused on the things he had seen himself – the scars the attack left on a seven-year-old boy. After the alarm was

[69] "Interview of L. C. Draper with Pascal Leon Cerré, St. Louis, Oct., 1846," in "Documents Relating to the Attack," 51-54; "Casualty List," in McDermott, "Myth of the 'Imbecile Governor,'" 386-88.

raised, Native Americans lay in wait for people streaming toward town from outlying areas. "One French cart filled with these poor people put on the whip to their horses," Cerré remembered; "seven of them were wounded as they passed the ambushed Indians, but they all got in." The Native Americans "killed one man between the big mound" – a child's landmark – "and the town." The attackers' muskets "made some of their balls rattle on the roofs of the houses in St. Louis;" one imagines that sixty-six years later, Cerré could still remember that exact sound. An enslaved man, accompanied by a Cerré family dog, died on the outskirts of town. The dog stayed at the spot until hunger drove him back into St. Louis, where "for three days successively the dog howled and would start off in the direction of the" place where the slave had died. Cerré's memories of the battle are filled with fear, helplessness, grief, and death.[70]

Cerré's narrative also includes an anecdote that he did not witness himself. A Native American pursued Louis, a slave who later belonged to Cerré's brother, until Louis "concluded there was but one chance for him, and that was to fall prostrate upon the ground. He threw himself flat upon the earth and, as he hoped, the Indian, unable to suddenly check his speed, stumbled over him, and in the fall dropped his gun; this Louis quickly seized and before the Indian could recover himself Louis shot him and brought in the gun as a trophy of victory."[71] One can imagine such a story of dramatic escape making the rounds among the children of St. Louis; perhaps Louis himself told Cerré and his playmates of his ruse to trick the foolish Indian while the children roared with laughter.

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[70] "Interview of L. C. Draper," in "Documents Relating to the Attack," 52-53.
[71] "Interview of L. C. Draper," in "Documents Relating to the Attack," 53.

Indeed, despite the prominence and poignancy of grief in private memories of the battle, a lighthearted thread runs through these memories. The fact that one of the earliest sources about the battle is a song is perhaps significant. However, the song was published not by the first generation of St. Louisans but by a third-generation Creole, Wilson Primm. Meanwhile, all of eyewitness Cerré's memories are tragic except for the one that was clearly reported to him by someone else. Perhaps a certain amount of distance – either temporal distance, or at least hearing a story from someone else rather than experiencing it personally – allowed people like Benton, Cerré, and Primm to conceive of the battle as something other than a tragedy. Primm was the first to bring the French defenders of St. Louis to the fore as heroes, rather than just victims, and the first person of French descent to write publicly about the battle at all. His ability to put the battle narrative to a strategic purpose, and to tell it as – if not a comedy – something other than a tragedy, reflects the softening of memory with the passage of time and may not have been possible for a member of the first generation.

For Creole St. Louisans in the decades after Missouri's statehood, the Battle of St. Louis was firmly in the past – part of the stories of their parents and grandparents. Yet both the private stories about the battle and the occasional public resurrection of the battle narrative to address key challenges reveal much about the persistence and nature of French heritage in an increasingly Americanized space. In 1822, French political influence contributed to an effort to pass federal legislation to advance the economic interests of Creole St. Louisans, and a personal relationship with a United States senator

led to the retelling of the battle narrative – albeit in an altered, American-centric form – on the Senate floor. In 1847, a major citywide event reinforced visions of French Creoles as part of the city's past, not its present – but a Creole used the battle narrative and the Mexican-American War to argue that Creole St. Louisans remained relevant right up to the present day. Meanwhile, private memory of the battle, passed down from parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, persisted until at least the 1880s.[72] Bygone times were not, after all, so bygone.

Of course, demographic pressures caused an inexorable decline in French influence in St. Louis. It would be inaccurate to assert that St. Louis's antebellum Creole community possessed the vitality of places like New Orleans, where Francophone immigration from the diaspora of the Haitian Revolution helped offset the influx of American and European newcomers. However, to say that St. Louis's Creole community in 1847 was proportionally smaller and less distinctive than it had been earlier in the century is not to assert that it had lost all relevance. On the contrary, while Creoles like Wilson Primm moved easily in American circles, they continued to value their French heritage. The fact that they "Americanized" does not mean that they left their Creole inheritance behind, or that that inheritance was irrelevant to the development of St. Louis as a whole. There is no better illustration of the Creole role in antebellum St. Louis than that of Primm himself: child of a French mother and an American father; fluent in both French and English; known for his renditions of both the Star-Spangled Banner and

[72] Testimony of Benoist Marechal, in "L'Annee du Coup," *St. Louis Republican*, November 19, 1880; Draper, interview with Tesson, 1880, Draper Manuscript Collection, 28J: 85.

traditional French songs. The story of the French in St. Louis is not one of disappearance but one of hybridization, adaption, and continued relevance.

In 1780, St. Louis's greatest landmark was the guard tower erected to defend the town. All physical traces of the tower and the village that surrounded it have long since vanished, replaced by the parklands surrounding the Gateway Arch, symbol of American expansion. Two blocks from the Arch grounds stands another of St. Louis's modern landmarks: Busch Stadium, home of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. If the most exciting event in St. Louis in 1847 was a celebration featuring parades, speeches, and feasting, the preeminent community event in modern St. Louis is a Cardinals game. On May 25, 2014, the colonial, antebellum, and modern worlds of St. Louis collided when the Sons of the American Revolution dedicated a plaque just outside Busch Stadium commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of St. Louis and the 234th anniversary of the Battle of St. Louis. During the ceremony, Thomas M. Busken, a descendant of one of the militiamen who defended St. Louis, was sworn into the Sons of the American Revolution on the strength of his French ancestor's service in a Spanish militia.[73] In commemorating the city's founding, the ceremony connected the battle with St. Louis's French past; in acknowledging local militiamen as soldiers in the American Revolution, it linked the battle to the city's American heritage. Wilson Primm would have been proud.

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[73] "Missouri Society," *SAR Magazine* 109, no. 1 (Summer 2014), 45; Fernando de Leyba Chapter Sons of the American Revolution, "Missouri Society of the Sons of the American Revolution (MOSSAR) Battle of Fort San Carlos and 250th Anniversary of St. Louis Plaque Dedication," accessed December 5, 2015, http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mofdlsar/assets/MOSSAR%20Plaque.pdf; Fernando de Leyba Chapter, "Our Patriot Ancestors," accessed December 5, 2015, http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mofdlsar/ancestors.html.

**Crossing Jordan: Black St. Louisans and the Mississippi River, 1815-1860**

*I'll meet you in the mornin',*
*I'm boun' for de promised land,*
*On the oder side of Jordan,*
*Boun' for de promised land.*

- African American spiritual[1]

In April 1840, enslaved St. Louisan Polly Wash crossed the Mississippi River to the free state of Illinois to pursue her freedom. Wash had craved liberty for many years, and her daughter Lucy Delaney would later explain that "the injustice and weight of slavery bore… heavily" upon her mother. Wash was "always planning and getting ready to go," Delaney remembered, and when mother and daughter talked and dreamed of freedom together, "no schemes were too wild for us to consider."[2] As she boarded the ferry bound for the Illinois shore, Wash must have felt a thrill of excitement. After years of planning, she was finally taking a bold step – both physically and symbolically – toward her freedom.

But Polly Wash was not running away. She was heading for the Illinois farmhouse of Naomi Wood, an old acquaintance who had known her affectionately as "Pol" when the teenaged Wash had lived with her master in Illinois twenty-two years before. Wash was in the process of suing for her freedom in the St. Louis Circuit Court, and if Wood's testimony confirmed that she had lived in the free state of Illinois, she would be legally entitled to liberty. For Wash, Illinois was only the first stop in a freedom

[1] Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, N.Y., 1869), 18.

[2] Lucy A. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light: Or, Struggles for Freedom* (St. Louis, n.d. [1890s]), 19-20.

journey that she hoped would end in the slave state of Missouri.[3] Like other enslaved and free black St. Louisans, Wash realized that a crossing to Illinois did not automatically free her from slavery or white prejudice; yet, with the help of friends like Naomi Wood, it could be an important step in that direction. Polly Wash's journey illustrates the strategic and often counterintuitive ways in which St. Louis blacks used Mississippi River crossings to pursue their goals. It also emphasizes the social connections that were essential to successful crossings, and the differing yet interlinked roles of St. Louis and Illinois as sites of slavery and freedom.

In the antebellum United States, two rivers – the Ohio and the Mississippi – combined to form a thousand-mile border between slavery and freedom, and St. Louis, Missouri was the largest southern city located on this border. By 1860, St. Louis was the eighth-largest city in the country, boasting a population of over 160,000; Louisville, Kentucky, less than half its size, was the only other southern border city of any consequence. With the free state of Illinois less than a mile away, the 3,297 African American residents of St. Louis had strong incentives to travel across the river.[4] Fugitive slaves fled across it; missionaries carried the Gospel across it; community leaders built religious and social networks across it. These crossings profoundly shaped the lives of St. Louisans both slave and free.

Political boundaries such as the Mississippi do not always map neatly onto cultural or ideological landscapes. Stephen Aron has argued that the region he terms the

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[3] Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson, Miss., 2009), 40-53; Lea VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott* (Oxford, 2014), 143-58.

[4] In 1860, St. Louis was home to 157,476 whites, 1,755 free blacks, and 1,542 slaves; Louisville had 61,213 whites, 1,917 free blacks, and 4,903 slaves. Approximately 1,000 free blacks lived in Madison and St. Clair Counties, Illinois, directly across the river from St. Louis. Joseph C. G. Kennedy, comp., *Population of the United States in 1860…* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 83, 182, 297.

"American Confluence" – the land on both sides of the Mississippi between the mouth of the Missouri River just north of St. Louis and the mouth of the Ohio 150 miles to the south – should be seen as fundamentally unified during the colonial and early national periods, with the Mississippi as an artificial border that separated political units rather than cultural ones.[5] In the antebellum years, this essential unity was perhaps most obvious in the strong proslavery sentiment and laws that existed on both sides of the river. While Chicago and other northern areas of the state were solidly antislavery, residents of southern Illinois communities like Alton, located on the Mississippi just north of St. Louis, leaned in the opposite ideological direction. Legal loopholes allowed slavery to continue in the state into the 1840s, and runaways escaping to southern Illinois knew that masters and slave catchers would face few obstacles from proslavery local populations in their quest to recover their property. Meanwhile, for free blacks, the state's stringent Black Codes, limiting their civic participation and requiring a $1,000 bond just to reside in the state, meant that living in Illinois was in some ways more difficult than residence in the slave city of St. Louis. Missouri's Black Codes constrained blacks' educational opportunities and social gatherings, among many other aspects of their lives, and anti-black sentiment was often stronger than the laws. But there was no bond requirement, and the city of St. Louis offered better economic prospects than the rural communities on the Illinois side.[6]

In the biblical book of Joshua, the Israelites end forty years of wandering in the desert by crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, and crossing Jordan likewise

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[5] Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington, Ind., 2006).

[6] The popular sentiment and laws of Missouri and Illinois toward slavery and free blacks are discussed in more detail below on pages 56-57 and 63-64, respectively.

represents freedom in African American spirituals. Harriet Tubman conceived of the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania as a "magic 'line,'" and when she crossed the border, "There was such a glory ober ebery ting… I felt like I was in Heaben."[7] For black St. Louisans, however, there was no particular "magic" in crossing the Mississippi, and Illinois was not heaven. Based on the deep ideological and legal similarities between Missouri and Illinois, Thomas Smith has argued that the Mississippi was no Jordan, and that the Nile, which flowed through slave territory on both sides, better reflects the Mississippi's actual role in the lives of Missouri blacks.[8] Yet nuances in the biblical account actually make the Jordan River an apt metaphor for the antebellum Mississippi. After the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they still faced years of warfare before settling down in their new home, and even then many Israelites chose to re-cross the river to settle on the side they had left behind. In the same way, fugitive slaves escaping from St. Louis realized that the Mississippi River crossing was only the first step on a longer journey to freedom, while both free and enslaved blacks understood that certain goals could best be met by remaining in St. Louis or even crossing the river into slave territory.

Accordingly, African Americans crossed the Mississippi early and often, in both directions. In addition to the (hopefully) one-time crossings of blacks fleeing slavery, St. Louis free blacks used both temporary and permanent crossings as strategic solutions to problems they faced in St. Louis. At other times, however, they chose to stay in St. Louis, pursuing their goals using resources within their own city. An intimate knowledge of local conditions on both sides of the river, gained from networks of informants in both

[7] Bradford, *Scenes in the Life*, 19.

[8] Thomas Ruys Smith, *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi before Mark Twain* (Baton Rouge, La., 2007), 9.

Missouri and Illinois, informed their decisions. Sometimes crossing was an act of defiance; other times, it was a pragmatic response to local conditions. It was often both.[9]

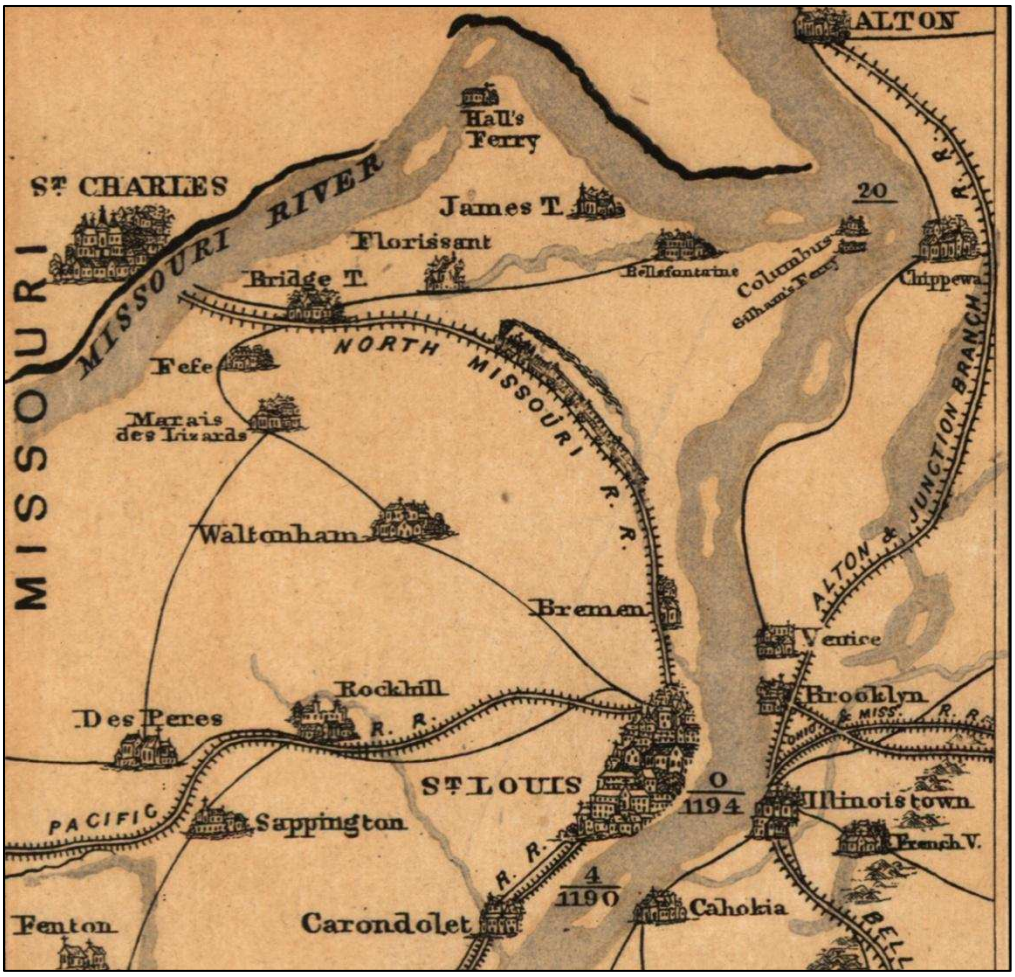


**Figure 1.** Map of St. Louis and surrounding area. Schonberg & Co., "The Mississippi, Alton to the Gulf of Mexico, As Seen from the Hurricane Deck" (New York, 1861), Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

[9] A note on sources: Twentieth-century oral histories and post-Civil War slave narratives are key to reconstructing African Americans St. Louis. These sources' lack of contemporaneity does not negate their utility. As Cheryl Janifer LaRoche argues, the historian should be "cautious about disregarding lore and longstanding legends without research supporting refutation" and bold about using such narratives thoughtfully, as starting points rather than proof texts. For example, a story that lanterns were hung, Paul Revere-style, in the cupola of an Alton apartment building to indicate whether it was safe to cross the Mississippi cannot be true, since the building did not exist before the Civil War. However, the story certainly suggests a degree of cooperation between Underground Railroad operatives on both sides of the river, a conclusion also supported by other evidence. Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad : The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana, Ill., 2014), xii, 34; John J. Dunphy, *Abolitionism and the Civil War in Southwestern Illinois* (Charleston, S.C., 2011), 51.

Sometime in 1815 or 1816, twenty-five-year-old former slave John Berry Meachum presented himself at the ferry landing at Illinoistown, directly across the river from St. Louis, and requested passage to the city.[10] Perhaps recognizing that Meachum, who was probably illiterate, could not read the rate schedule posted at the landing, the ferry operator decided to take advantage of the freedman, charging two dollars for a trip that was worth twelve and a half cents. Meachum arrived in St. Louis with a single dollar in his pocket.[11]

Meachum had journeyed from the free state of Indiana to venture back into slave territory for the same reason many would-be runaways never left: family. Meachum had married an enslaved woman, Esther Myers, in Kentucky, but while Meachum was traveling in Indiana shortly after being freed, Myers' master had moved with his slaves to St. Louis. When Meachum heard about this, he determined to follow his wife to St. Louis and buy her freedom. Esther Myers's experience was not unique. Following the Louisiana Purchase, thousands of Americans crossed the Mississippi to settle in Missouri, and many brought their slaves. For these enslaved people, the move to St. Louis might entail a painful uprooting and separation from family and friends. However, it did not signal any change in their status as slaves or their place in society; it was simply a move from one slave state to another. For free blacks like Meachum, however, the Mississippi

[10] John Richard Anderson, "A Sermon of the Life, Character, and Death of Rev. John B. Meachum," 1854, in *The History of Black Baptists in Missouri: National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc*, by Alberta D. Shipley and David O. Shipley ([St. Louis?], 1976), 224; John B. Meachum, *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1846), 4; F. A. Cox and J. Hoby, *The Baptists in America: A Narrative of the Deputation from the Baptist Union in England, to the United States and Canada* (London, 1836), 318. Anderson and Meachum give Meachum's date of arrival as 1815; Cox and Hoby give the date as 1816.

[11] Agnes Wallace, "The Wiggins Ferry Monopoly," *Missouri Historical Review* 42, no. 1 (October 1947), 5, reproduces a ferry schedule for 1824; earlier rates were presumably similar or lower. Rates range from 12.5 cents for a foot passenger to $2.25 for a four-horse wagon. The group Meachum led to Indiana did have wagons, but it is highly unlikely that Meachum himself possessed one, given his virtually nonexistent cash property.

River crossing represented a courageous decision to leave free territory to settle in a slave state, with all the increased prejudice and restrictions that could entail.

Another group of blacks experienced even greater hardship when crossing the Mississippi to St. Louis: fugitive slaves who had been recaptured and were being returned to their owners in Missouri. In 1842, sixteen-year-old Caroline Quarrlls ran away from her owner in St. Louis, and during her journey to freedom she experienced constant fear that she would be captured and returned to St. Louis. In Wisconsin, an Underground Railroad conductor later recalled, "After crossing the Detroit river Caroline began crying, and clutched me by the arm, asking if it was possible that she was being taken back to St. Louis…. She declared everything appeared to her as if she were on the banks of the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis." For those who actually *were* returned to St. Louis, the sight of the city across the river was inexpressibly painful. Recalling his ferry ride in chains from Illinois to St. Louis, captured runaway William Wells Brown said simply, "I cannot describe my feelings upon approaching the city." A few minutes later, "we were on the Missouri side, and were taken directly to the jail."[12]

Brown made his journey to slave territory under duress; Meachum did it willingly. From Meachum's perspective, despite being located in a slave state, St. Louis had much to recommend it. Most obviously, it offered him the chance to reunite with his wife. More subtly, for a skilled craftsman like Meachum (a cooper), urban St. Louis presented more opportunities than rural Indiana to make a living and perhaps earn enough money to buy his wife's freedom. St. Louis also offered a strong community of free blacks and even sympathetic whites who would help the young cooper make his way in

[12] *The History of Waukesha County, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1880), 464; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1847), 73.

the world. Accordingly, after Meachum bought his wife's freedom, the couple decided to stay in St. Louis.[13] Meachum would become a successful businessman and the spiritual leader for much of St. Louis's African American community. If Meachum's decision to cross the river was all about community – especially family – and economic opportunity, then it was certainly a success. But Meachum's overpayment for his initial ferry ride was a foreboding of things to come for St. Louis blacks. Many future crossings would be marked by harassment from whites.

In 1816, however, Meachum focused on making a life for himself – a task complicated both by Missouri laws restricting free blacks' activities and by the prejudice of many of St. Louis's white inhabitants. When Missouri became a state in 1821, a proposed constitutional provision prohibiting free blacks from entering the state and requiring manumitted slaves to leave immediately failed by only two votes. Other limitations, less draconian but still significant, did receive legal force during the antebellum period. Beginning in 1835, free blacks were required to obtain a license in order to remain in the state. In 1843, in-migration of free blacks was prohibited, except for those who could prove they were citizens of another state (and the "citizen" exception was removed in 1847). Other laws required black children to serve apprenticeships until age twenty-one and forbade school attendance, unlicensed gun ownership, and religious gatherings without a white official present. These laws were enforced with varying degrees of diligence throughout the antebellum period, but even an unenforced law

[13] Meachum, *Address to All the Colored Citizens*, 4. White Baptist missionary John Mason Peck, for example, befriended Meachum and gave him religious training and leadership opportunities culminating in his ordination in 1825. Peck and Rufus Babcock, *Forty Years of Pioneer Life: Memoir of John Mason Peck D.D.* (Philadelphia, 1864), 90, 271; George E. Stevens, *The History of the Central Baptist Church, Showing Her Influence upon Her Times: Issued for the Eightieth Anniversary Celebration, November, 1927* ([St. Louis], 1927), 7; Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America*, 318.

carried with it the threat of future enforcement.[14] Furthermore, each law demonstrated the prejudice of those who had enacted it, enshrining existing attitudes in legal form. When the state legislature outlawed black schools in 1847, it simply codified strong public sentiment against black education that had been evident in St. Louis as early as 1818, when an anonymous writer styling himself "Justice" sent a threatening letter to white Baptist ministers John Mason Peck and James Welch, warning that "the sanctity of the clerical character" would not shield them from "punishment" for operating a Sunday school for blacks.[15] Thus the obstacles black St. Louisans faced were not only legal and institutional; they were personified in the human beings they encountered every day.

Faced with an unjust law, or with significant community pressure that could have the force of de facto law, black St. Louisans had three options. They could comply with the law, disobey it quietly and hope to avoid detection, or evade it by crossing the river to Illinois either temporarily or permanently. Free blacks' responses to the law against black education illustrates the range of possibilities. The 1850 census reported that only thirteen percent of free black children in St. Louis attended school, leaving eighty-seven percent in compliance with the 1847 law. While this is certainly an underestimate, as blacks would have been extremely hesitant to report their noncompliance, there is no doubt that

[14] Donnie D. Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri, 1820-1860," *Missouri Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (January 1973), 198, 205-6; *The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri: Revised and Digested by the Eighth General Assembly....* (St. Louis, 1835), 413-17.

[15] R. S. Duncan, *A History of the Baptists in Missouri…* (St. Louis, 1882), 88. Dennis L. Durst states that the city of St. Louis outlawed black education in the early 1820s, a claim which I been unable to verify. Even if this is true, however, the point that public sentiment was more impactful than legislative prohibition still stands, as Durst notes that the law was rarely enforced. Dennis L. Durst, "The Reverend John Berry Meachum (1789-1854) of St. Louis: Prophet and Entrepreneurial Black Educator in Historiographical Perspective," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 2.

many black parents in St. Louis did not send their children to school, due either to fear of reprisals or to a financial need for their labor.[16]

Another option was quiet defiance. Many black individuals and churches hosted illegal schools for black children in St. Louis during the antebellum period, usually disguised as either vocational training or religious instruction. Elizabeth Keckley, accomplished free black seamstress and future dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, may have operated a school for black girls that she disguised as a sewing class. A school operated by African Methodist Episcopal (AME) pastor and future senator Hiram Revels had 150 students.[17] Meachum's First African Baptist Church offered both Sunday and day schools that served over 150 children by 1846, just before the law against black education was passed, and the day school continued to operate secretly after 1847 until city officials discovered it. James Milton Turner, who attended the school as a young boy, later remembered that the basement schoolroom was always dark (presumably due to the clandestine nature of the school), lit by candles the students made themselves (perhaps indicating that the school was disguised as vocational training). One day while Turner and his fellow students were "poring over the blue back spelling book, the authorities burst in, arrested the teacher, an Englishman, and scattered the school."[18]

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[16] Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago, 1981), 169.

[17] Harrison Anthony Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865* (Baltimore, 1914), 84; Judy Day and M. James Kedro, "Free Blacks in St. Louis: Antebellum Conditions, Emancipation, and the Postwar Era," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 30, no. 2 (January 1974), 123-124; Donnie D. Bellamy, "The Education of Blacks in Missouri Prior to 1861," *Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 2 (1974), 160; Durst, "Reverend John Berry Meachum," 16. Keckley's biographer casts doubt on the assertion made by Trexler and others that Keckley conducted a clandestine school. Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley* (New York, 2003), 128, 340-41 n20.

[18] Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America*, 318; Meachum, *Address to All the Colored Citizens*, 5; Stevens, *History of the Central Baptist Church,* 41.

After Meachum's school was broken up, St. Louis blacks turned to both local and trans-Mississippi strategies for gaining education. A few students, including Turner, attended a school conducted in St. Louis by white nuns in open defiance of the law. This was a dangerous course of action, and while blacks might attend such open schools, they dared not operate them.[19] Legal schools outside Missouri were safer. One story – probably a legend but nonetheless illustrative of the strategies free blacks employed – holds that Meachum anchored a steamboat in the middle of the Mississippi River, which was technically federal territory, and used it as a school.[20] Turner and several classmates retreated across the river to attend a private school in Brooklyn, Illinois, and other black St. Louisans attended schools in Illinois at various times.[21] However, such students would have faced either the daily time and expense of commuting by ferry across the Mississippi or a temporary relocation to Illinois, away from family and friends in St. Louis. And any child openly attending school – whether in Illinois, in a white-operated school in St. Louis, or on a Mississippi River steamboat – would have faced opposition from St. Louisans who held the ideologies that led to the implementation of the law in the first place. Maneuvering around legal requirements was one thing; living in the same city with people who were aware of and resented one's maneuvering was quite another. For

[19] The school operated by the nuns seems to have been tolerated, yet the forced closure of white-operated schools in 1836 and 1846 and the letter to Peck and Welch provide clear evidence of resistance to white-sponsored black education throughout the antebellum period. Bellamy, "Education of Blacks," 148; Duncan, *History of the Baptists in Missouri*, 88.

[20] The "freedom school" legend seems to have originated in a 1964 textbook on St. Louis history. It is apparently a conflation of two other facts established by contemporary sources: that Meachum operated a school for black children and that he owned a steamboat. Helen I. Baldwin, Ruth M. Dockery, Nancy L. Garrett, and S. Joseph Gore, *Heritage of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1964), 59; Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America*, 318; I. M. Allen, *The Triennial Baptist Register*, no. 2 (Philadelphia, 1836), 280.

[21] Stevens, *History of the Central Baptist Church*, 41; Julie Winch, "The Clamorgans of St. Louis," in Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, 1858, ed. Winch (Columbia, Mo., 1999), 27.

this reason, secret schools in St. Louis continued to be the best option for many black children.

Other laws, however, could be circumvented only by Mississippi River crossings. Sometime in the 1830s, AME missionaries set out to establish a church in St. Louis, but were hamstrung by legal restrictions and extralegal opposition from whites. Future bishop William Paul Quinn is said to have started his work in the city by standing on the Illinois shore and shouting sermons to black St. Louisans across the river because the "municipal authorities of St. Louis," according to a later church historian, "did not allow him to stay all night."[22] Apparently city officials interpreted the 1835 law requiring licensing for free blacks as prohibiting even an overnight visit from an unregistered free black. Later, Quinn began taking day trips to St. Louis, ferried across the river by a freedwoman named Priscilla Baltimore. Baltimore had moved with her family from St. Louis to Illinois, where she founded the town of Brooklyn, sometime between 1829 and 1832.[23] Her position as a community leader and her connections to devout African Americans on both sides of the river made her uniquely suited to serve as the facilitator for Quinn's missionary work in St. Louis. In addition to ferrying Quinn across the Mississippi, often leaving the city in the wee hours of the morning to avoid an overnight stay in St. Louis, Baltimore also provided housing for Quinn in Illinois and a venue for AME meetings in

[22] James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia, 1902), 345; George A. Singleton, *The Romance of African Methodism: A Study of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1952), 72; Odessa Wright Farrell, *History of Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Church* ([St. Louis], 1986), 1.

[23] Unfortunately, very little is known about Baltimore's extraordinary act of founding a town. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua's definitive history of Brooklyn helpfully summarizes what little information is available. Brooklyn differed from other black towns in Illinois, Cha-Jua argues, in that it was formed at the initiative of blacks without reliance on white philanthropy. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 35-43.

St. Louis (a cabin she owned on Main Street).[24] Baltimore's roots on both sides of the Mississippi and her willingness to cross it frequently were key to the early establishment of the AME church in St. Louis.

Law and public opinion, the same variables that had constrained black St. Louisans' educational choices, also affected missionaries' ability to operate freely in St. Louis. When AME bishop Daniel A. Payne visited St. Louis in the 1840s, he neglected to obtain a license. AME evangelist Jordan Winston Early, who then resided in St. Louis, recalled that "About these times the laws of Missouri were such that no man could transact business in any part of the state or city, unless he were a citizen or had a permit from proper authorities." This description indicates a shift in the interpretation of the law; whereas in the 1830s Quinn could not spend the night in St. Louis, in the 1840s Payne could not even transact business during the day. The law had not changed, but the attitudes of white St. Louisans had. Payne's unlicensed ministry caught the attention of the "enemies of African Methodism," who "had him arrested and brought before a magistrate."[25]

Payne's lawyer managed to get him off on a technicality, but as soon as the verdict was pronounced, the lawyer warned Early to get Payne out of town as quickly as possible. Payne had been acquitted of violating the laws of Missouri, but the real threat to his safety was the "enemies of African Methodism" who had arranged to have him arrested in the first place, and who might seek to harm him physically now that legal

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[24] Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History*, 345; Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations* (Armonk, N.Y., 2008), s.v. "Baltimore, Priscilla."

[25] Sarah J. W. Early, *Life and Labors of Rev. Jordan W. Early: One of the Pioneers of African Methodism in the West and South* (Nashville, Tenn., 1894), 38.

recourse had been exhausted. "I hurried him out of court," Early remembered, "and put him into my carriage. I had a swift horse, and if ever a horse was made to travel, my horse did that day. We crossed the ice on the Mississippi, for it was winter, and landed him safely in the State of Illinois, in the house of Mrs. Priscilla Baltimore, where he was out of danger." By 1854, St. Louis AME pastor and future senator Hiram Revels reported that the licensing law was "seldom enforced," but that he nevertheless carefully refrained from saying or doing anything that could be construed as inciting slaves to run away.[26] Legal restrictions and community opinion often worked hand in hand, but free blacks realized that the two were also independent variables. Payne's experience showed that just because something was legal did not mean it would be tolerated by hostile whites, who forced him to retreat to Baltimore's home in Illinois. Similarly, Revels realized that a loosening of legal requirements in one area did not preclude hardening of suspicion and opposition in another.

Despite these obstacles, AME ministers continued their evangelistic efforts in St. Louis. Just as Meachum chose to enter the slave state of Missouri in order to be with (and eventually emancipate) his wife, these missionaries felt that their goal was important enough to risk reprisals from white St. Louisans and find ways around the restrictions imposed on their activities. Social connections played an important role in helping them navigate the charged racial atmosphere of St. Louis. Out-of-towners like the missionaries Quinn and Payne relied on locals such as Early and Baltimore, who could serve as guides

[26] Joseph A. Broome, ed., "The Autobiography of Hiram Rhodes Revels Together with Some Letters by and about Him," *Midwest Journal* 5 (Winter 1952-53), 81; Early, *Life and Labors*, 39-40. The story of crossing the Mississippi on ice is plausible; the river did freeze solid in the winter of 1855-56. Joseph Mills Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri: Being the Story of the Life and Exploits of Captain Grant Marsh* (Chicago, 1909), 55-56. Quinn is said to have walked across the river on ice (Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 38).

through the "dos" and "don'ts" of antebellum St. Louis and who possessed trans-Mississippi resources that could help them leave the city if needed. Sometimes great goals could be achieved by boldly crossing the Mississippi to St. Louis, these missionaries realized, but only with the help of the local infrastructure built and navigated by community leaders like Priscilla Baltimore.

As they helped their friends, family, and coreligionists in St. Louis formulate trans-Mississippi strategies, black Illinoisans like Baltimore understood that crossing the river was no panacea for St. Louisans' problems, because Illinois was far from an antislavery stronghold. The state's Black Codes constituted some of the most stringent legal restrictions on blacks of any state in the nation. Free blacks moving into the state had to post an enormous $1,000 bond to guarantee good behavior and financial self-sufficiency – approximately three years' wages for a laborer and an amount roughly equivalent to the price many of them had already paid for their freedom.[27] Even slavery itself was not entirely extinct in Illinois. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had forbidden the importation of slaves into the territory, but many slaveholders interpreted the ordinance as allowing them to keep the slaves they already owned. Others argued that the ordinance forbade slavery but allowed "voluntary" indenture, and they accordingly redefined their slaves as indentured servants serving lengthy indentures, some as long as ninety-nine years. For all practical purposes these "indentured servants" continued to be treated as slaves. They were liable to whipping and sale, and their indentured status was heritable. When Illinois became a state in 1818, its constitution prohibited slavery from

[27] Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 43. The irony of requiring an enormous cash payment as proof of future solvency was not lost on blacks and their allies. A sympathetic white Baptist noted in 1836 that the bond was intended to prove that free blacks would "never become paupers," and drily added that this was "obviously an impossibility." Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America*, 317.

being "introduced" into the state but tacitly allowed already-resident slaveowners to keep their slaves, and it upheld the indenture system. Both slavery and indentured servitude persisted in Illinois until the 1840s.[28]

Illinois's harsh laws reflected the opinions of many Illinoisans regarding African Americans. Although the percentage of proslavery residents probably declined over the course of the antebellum period, since slaveholders were hesitant to move to Illinois after the passage of the 1818 constitution banning the introduction of slaves, the state's Black Codes still accurately represented the views of many white Illinoisans toward enslaved and free blacks. Furthermore, proslavery sentiment increased dramatically the further south one went in Illinois. Southern Illinois was so strongly proslavery that one scholar has suggested that the National Road, which separated the southern third of Illinois from parts north, was a more accurate border between North and South than the Ohio River that separated slave and nominally free territory. Communities across from St. Louis, such as Brooklyn and Alton, straddled this border.[29]

Outcomes of previous crossings also factored into African Americans' strategic decisions about when, whether, and how to cross the river. One important crossing was that of a white man, Elijah Lovejoy, whose abolitionist editorials in the *St. Louis Observer* drew a variety of legal and extralegal responses from St. Louisans in the 1830s. Beginning in fall 1835, several public meetings were held to condemn Lovejoy's insistent antislavery agitation. The editor of the *Missouri Argus* argued that by publishing

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[28] Norman Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois, and of the Slavery Agitation in That State, 1719-1864* (New York, 1904), 7-10, 22-23; Anne Silverwood Twitty, "Slavery and Freedom in the American Confluence, from the Northwest Ordinance to Dred Scott" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010), 19.

[29] Harris, *History of Negro Servitude*, 48; LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 91.

inflammatory content, Lovejoy had forfeited all right to "courtesy," implicitly condoning violence against him. In the face of escalating opposition, Lovejoy decided to move the *Observer* to Alton, about twenty miles upstream on the Illinois side of the river.[30] Like Bishop Payne, Lovejoy planned to cross the Mississippi to escape the extralegal violence of proslavery St. Louisans.

Yet just as the AME church conducted its operations in St. Louis using social networks that extended across the river, so the citizens of St. Louis and Alton were prepared to work together to thwart Lovejoy, regardless of whether his press was located in free or in slave territory. On the day Lovejoy announced his intention to move, a mob broke into the *Observer* office and vandalized about $700 worth of furniture, office equipment, and printing materials. Lovejoy salvaged the press and moved it to Alton, but when it was delivered to the city wharf on a Sunday, Lovejoy, a strict sabbatarian, left it there overnight. In the wee hours of Monday morning, a group of Missourians and Illinoisans threw the press into the Mississippi River.[31] Thus, immediately upon Lovejoy's arrival in Illinois, it became clear that the Mississippi did not represent a significant barrier to those who resented Lovejoy's antislavery message. And like Priscilla Baltimore, proslavery St. Louisans were willing to cross the river to achieve their aims in the dead of night. The next year, things turned deadly. In a chain of events strikingly similar to that which unfolded in St. Louis, several dramatic public meetings were held in Alton, a St. Louis newspaper wrote that Lovejoy had "merited the full measure of the community indignation," and mobs destroyed two more of Lovejoy's

[30] Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 60-61, 83-84.
[31] Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 88, 90.

presses in quick succession. On November 7, 1837, Lovejoy was shot and killed while attempting to defend a fourth press from destruction.[32]

African Americans in St. Louis and Alton were certainly aware of the opposition Lovejoy encountered, and his death seems to have shaken some of them deeply. John Richard Anderson, a young man who considered John Berry Meachum his mentor and who would go on to pastor churches in both Illinois and St. Louis, worked as typesetter for the *Alton Observer.* His eulogist recorded that the teenaged Anderson "stood and gazed in silence on the flaming mass in which was consumed the press which had nobly dared to speak out against the oppression of his own people. He read, in those letters of flame and blood, the desperate character of that tyranny that consigned his race to the furnace of affliction."[33] This account certainly displays a degree of hagiographic exaggeration, yet the death of Lovejoy also affected local blacks in more prosaic ways. Lovejoy's murder showed that even a white man could not always escape proslavery violence by crossing the Mississippi. Perhaps the situation in Chicago or some other far-off part of Illinois was different, but in the regions directly bordering St. Louis, there was little distinction between Missouri and Illinois in terms of anti-abolitionist and anti-black sentiment. Lovejoy's murder, then, likely solidified black St. Louisans' understanding that local approaches to effecting change made more sense than trying to find a better state of affairs across the river.

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[32] Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy*, 123, 170; *Missouri Republican*, July 17, 1837, [2].

[33] [Galusha Anderson], "Memorial Sermon of Rev. J. Richard Anderson," in Shipley and Shipley, *History of Black Baptists*, 230. This source incorrectly gives the name of Lovejoy's newspaper as the *Alton Bee*, casting some doubt on its veracity, but Anderson's known residence in Brooklyn at some point during the antebellum period lends credence to the idea that he also spent time in other communities in Illinois. *C. B. Carroll's East St. Louis, Ill. City Directory, Including Also the Towns of Brooklyn, Collinsville, Edwardsville, Granite City, Madison and Venice* (East St. Louis, Ill., 1905), 18.

No St. Louisan illustrates this belief better than Elizabeth Keckley. Keckley was born into slavery in Virginia and moved to St. Louis in 1847 with her master's family and her son, born of a forced relationship with a white man. In St. Louis, she fell in love with free black James Keckley but refused to marry him because she was still enslaved and did not want to bear more children condemned to slavery.[34] Determined to gain her freedom, she faced a choice: would she flee across the Mississippi River or find some way of gaining her freedom in St. Louis? Keckley chose the latter course, and approached her master to request permission to buy herself and her son. Keckley was an accomplished seamstress, having once supported a household of seventeen people, whites and slaves, with her needle. She felt confident she could earn the money. At the same time, she must have felt that her loyal service had endeared her to her master, and that he would be inclined to grant her request. Her master, however, flatly refused, and commanded her "never to broach the subject again." But Keckley would not be denied. For two years, she pestered him with the same request, until one day, in exasperation,

> he turned to me in a petulant manner, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew forth a bright silver quarter of a dollar, and proffering it to me, said:
>
> "Lizzie, I have told you often not to trouble me with such a question. If you really wish to leave me, take this: it will pay the passage of yourself and boy on the ferry-boat, and when you are on the other side of the river you will be free. It is the cheapest way that I know of to accomplish what you desire."
>
> I looked at him in astonishment, and earnestly replied: "No, master, I do not wish to be free in such a manner. If such had been my wish, I should never have troubled you about obtaining your consent to my purchasing myself. I can cross the river any day, as you well know, and have frequently done so, but will never leave you in such a manner. By the laws of the land I am your slave--you are my master, and I will only be free by such means as the laws of the country provide." He expected this answer, and I knew that he was pleased. Some time afterwards

[34] Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York, 1868), 46.

> he told me that he had reconsidered the question; that I had served his family faithfully; that I deserved my freedom, and that he would take $1200 for myself and boy.[35]

At first glance, Keckley's refusal to accept her master's offer of freedom, as well as her decision not to attempt escape during the two years that her master refused to let her buy her freedom, could be read as evidence of an undue attachment to her master or an internalization of the paternalist ethos of southern slaveowners. However, Keckley's insistence on purchasing her freedom was actually a calculated strategic decision. If she crossed the river as a slave – either with her master's blessing or without it – she would legally be a runaway, subject to recapture if her master changed his mind about letting her go. Furthermore, she had no desire to be free apart from her son and her lover, and as difficult as it would be for Keckley to find her way to a place of safety alone, it would be exponentially more difficult for three. If she crossed the Mississippi as a fugitive, she had little chance of evading the slave catchers for long, and even if she managed to make it to northern Illinois or Wisconsin and start a new life there, she would not be completely safe from the threat of recapture. Success and security demanded that she seek freedom "by such means as the laws of the country provide." In repeatedly asking to buy her freedom, it was not her master's blessing that she desired; rather, it was the security provided by the sanction of the laws.

Keckley's years of faithful service to her master were a deciding factor in his decision to allow her to purchase her freedom. Indeed, perhaps Keckley worked extra-hard during the two years in which she was pleading for the chance to purchase her freedom, not because of any misplaced loyalty to her master but in an effort to gain his

[35] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 45-49.

respect as a strategic part of her effort to become free. Similarly, Keckley's rejection of her master's offer to gain her freedom by escape "pleased" him, as she knew it would, and factored into his decision to allow her to purchase her freedom. In part because she refused freedom via an inferior method (the ferry to Illinois), she was given the opportunity to gain her freedom via her first-choice method (self-purchase), which allowed her to stay with those she loved.

Keckley's pursuit of freedom via self-purchase worked because of a set of assets, some of which she had deliberately cultivated: a relatively kind master, the respect of that master, and an ability to earn a significant amount of money through a skilled trade. Priscilla Baltimore had similar assets. Her master was a Methodist missionary who allowed her to purchase her freedom for $1,100. For both Keckley and Baltimore, freedom came with a heavy price, both in time and in money. Keckley worked for about five years to earn her freedom, and Baltimore labored for seven. Baltimore then worked to buy her husband John out of slavery, after which the couple crossed the Mississippi and settled in Illinois, where they each may have paid the $1,000 bond required by law to live in the state.[36] Furthermore, both women suffered from the opportunity cost of purchasing freedom: if they had not been putting aside every spare penny for half a decade, what purchases and investments might they have been able to make to improve their economic position?[37] Despite these handicaps, Keckley became Mary Todd

[36] The law requiring the $1,000 bond was not always enforced. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 38-39, 43; *History of St. Paul AME Church And Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary, October 1921* (St. Louis, 1921), State Historical Society of Missouri, St. Louis, Ernest Calloway Addenda (ECA), box 44, ser. 8, fol. 474, 10.

[37] For a general discussion of the economic drawbacks of self-purchase, see Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 65-67.

Lincoln's personal dressmaker and Baltimore amassed valuable real estate in both St. Louis and Brooklyn – a testimony to these women's hard work and determination.[38]

As a young man in Kentucky, John Berry Meachum had also purchased his own freedom, and after eight years' labor at a skilled trade – coopering – in St. Louis, he was able to buy the freedom of his wife and children. As a businessman and community leader in St. Louis, he encouraged other blacks to do likewise. Realizing that not everyone had the opportunities for self-purchase available to Baltimore and Keckley, however, he himself began purchasing slaves, especially children and those about to be sold away from their families, and allowing them to work for him to earn their freedom. In 1836, he owned about twenty enslaved people; a decade later, all were free. Meachum told the story of one young man whom he bought for $1,000, and whose drive for freedom mirrored that of Keckley, Baltimore, and Meachum himself. In addition to paying back his purchase price, the man bought his wife's freedom for $700, then invested $1,600 in a plot of land and a house. "So much for industry," Meachum concluded proudly.[39]

Most enslaved St. Louisans lacked the set of circumstances that allowed Keckley, Baltimore, Meachum, and Meachum's slaves to purchase their freedom. However, a few had a different asset that they deployed in pursuit of liberty: they had once lived in a free state, which made them eligible to sue for their freedom in the St. Louis Circuit Court.

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[38] John and Priscilla Baltimore's real estate holdings included twenty-three lots in Brooklyn, including a ten-acre plot with a six-room house and two lots that they donated to the AME church. In St. Louis, they owned a cabin on Main Street. The sources are not always clear on whether the properties were owned by Priscilla, John, or both jointly. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 53; George A. Singleton, "'Following the Trail of the Fathers': Priscilla Baltimore," *The AME Church Review* 79 (April 1964), 4; C. S. Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.…* (Philadelphia, 1922), 541; Snodgrass, *Underground Railroad*, s.v. "Baltimore, Priscilla."

[39] Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America*, 318-19; Meachum, *Address to All the Colored Citizens*, 4-5.

Between 1814 and 1860, hundreds of enslaved St. Louisans turned to the courts to argue that they were being wrongfully held in slavery. Enslaved people could argue for their freedom on several grounds, including that their mother had been born free or that they were of Native American ancestry. By far the most common argument, however, was that the enslaved person had lived in – not simply visited – a free state with the consent of his master. Polly Wash chose this course, as did Dred Scott, who argued that he was entitled to his freedom since he had lived with his owner, an army surgeon, at posts in Illinois and Wisconsin Territory. On appeal, the Supreme Court famously disagreed.[40]

Only a small number of enslaved people were fortunate enough to have lived in a free state before crossing back into the slave state of Missouri, and even those who had were not guaranteed success. But over the years, over a hundred slaves gained their freedom through the St. Louis courts. Many different lawyers took their cases, but one prominent advocate was Francis Murdoch, the antislavery Alton city attorney charged with prosecuting both the pro- and anti-Lovejoy factions from the mob of November 7, 1837. Shortly after the trial, Murdoch crossed the river to St. Louis and began taking cases there, including freedom suits. Surprisingly, one prominent defendant in the suits was John Berry Meachum. Over the years, five of Meachum's twenty slaves sued him for their freedom.[41]

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[40] Twitty, "Slavery and Freedom," 6-7; Robert Moore, "A Ray of Hope, Extinguished: St. Louis Slave Suits for Freedom," *Gateway Heritage* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1993-1994), 4.

[41] Twitty, "Slavery and Freedom," 7-8; Moore, "Ray of Hope," 4; VanderVelde, *Mrs. Dred Scott*, 233; "Suits for Freedom, St. Louis, 1804-1865," Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, https://www.nps.gov/jeff/learn/ historyculture/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=3120182 (accessed April 15, 2016); St. Louis Circuit Courts Historical Records Project, Freedom Suits Case Files, 1814-1860, http://stlcourtrecords.wustl.edu/search.php (accessed April 21, 2016). The slaves who sued Meachum were Judy (also known as Julia Logan), another Judy, Green Berry Logan, Archibald Barnes, and Brunetta Barnes. All filed suit between 1835 and 1840.

These suits reveal the flaw in Meachum's program of emancipation: the differences in goals between Meachum and the enslaved men, women, and children he purchased. For Meachum, his strategy of having enslaved people pay off their purchase price, rather than granting them their freedom outright, served both a practical and an ideological purpose. First, while Meachum was fairly well-off at points during his life, he also suffered significant business losses, probably driven in part by enmity from "crafty" white competitors who took advantage of his illiteracy and lack of legal knowledge. Indeed, the freedom suits themselves may have been driven by such whites as a way of undermining Meachum's financial stability. In any case, while at one time Meachum had the financial resources to purchase large numbers of slaves, he simply could not afford to free them without receiving at least some money back to help cover his costs.[42] Second, Meachum, himself a self-emancipated man, believed in hard work as the key to success and saw the period during which a slave was under his ownership as a sort of apprenticeship, an opportunity to develop habits of industriousness in a safe and regulated setting. For Meachum's slaves, however, neither Meachum's money troubles nor his well-meaning but almost obsessive belief in the power of hard work was their primary concern. They were most concerned with gaining their freedom.

Despite these tensions, at least some of Meachum's slaves viewed his program of emancipation as a better option than others open to them, including escape. For example,

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[42] Martin Robison Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1852), 138; J. Anderson, *Sermon of the Life, Character, and Death*, 225. Proslavery St. Louisans claimed that greedy white lawyers initiated freedom suits; for examples, see Moore, "Ray of Hope," 8. However, even if whites did initiate proceedings or assist slave plaintiffs in the legal process for their own reasons, the concurrent agency of enslaved people in aggressively pursuing their own freedom cannot be denied. On Meachum's financial reversals and possible explanations for the freedom suits, see Katie [Anna] Roberts, "John Berry Meachum: Colored Citizen of St. Louis, 1789-1854" (B.A. thesis, Patrick Henry College, 2012), 105-113.

Meachum allowed one of his slaves, Judy Logan, to hire herself out to earn money to purchase her freedom, and Judy chose to work in Galena, Illinois for a month. Working in an isolated town 350 miles away from St. Louis, Logan could easily have escaped and made her way north to Canada. Instead, she returned to St. Louis and continued paying off her debt to Meachum.[43]

All of Meachum's slaves who sued for their freedom won their cases, based on either birth of a free mother or residence in free territory before Meachum owned them.[44] Yet the courts were by no means a sure avenue to freedom. Francis Murdoch, who participated in at least seventeen freedom cases, including the Dred Scott case, later wrote with a tone of despair, "The advocate who pleads against slavery wastes his voice in its vaulted roof, and upon ears stuffed sixty years with cotton. His case is judged before it's argued, and his client condemned before he is heard." Many if not most plaintiffs failed to gain their freedom, and the vast majority of enslaved St. Louisans had not lived in free territory and had no grounds on which to sue in the first place.[45]

For those with no hope of gaining freedom through the courts or self-purchase, a few other options were available. A small number were freed in their masters' wills, but this was a path to freedom over which enslaved people exercised little control. Freedom

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[43] VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs*, 235 n35.

[44] Meachum was likely unaware of these slaves' claim to freedom at the time he purchased them. After all, since his goal was (in general) to save slaves from sale out of state, if he had know a slave was entitled to freedom, he could have facilitated that freedom much more cheaply by assisting in a freedom suit than by buying the slave and knowingly holding him or her in bondage illegally.

[45] A 1993 article reported that only 37 percent of St. Louis freedom suits were successful. However, more case files have since been discovered, and no updated statistics have yet been published. An undated listing of 240 cases posted on the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial website (presumably by park historian Robert Moore, who published the 1993 statistics) indicates that 119 were successful, 89 were unsuccessful, and the outcome of the remaining 32 cases is unknown. "Suits for Freedom"; Moore, "Ray of Hope," 4, 14 n2; Twitty, "Slavery and Freedom," 7-8; VanderVelde, *Mrs. Dred Scott*, 400 n1; *San Jose Telegraph* [edited by Murdoch], April 28, 1857, quoted in ibid., 243.

suit plaintiff George Relf, who twice attempted to kill his master, was exceptional, although his action indicates the desperate lengths to which some enslaved people were willing to go in order to become free. Some pursued multiple paths to freedom simultaneously. Benjamin Miller was working to purchase his freedom, but when he heard a rumor that his master planned to sell him south after he had paid the full sum, he crossed the river and "made for the North." Maria Whiten was one of several who filed suit for her freedom, then ran away while the case was pending.[46] Freedom suit plaintiffs, of course, were far from the only enslaved St. Louisans who chose to run away. This was a desperate strategy. The vast majority of runaways escaped alone, leaving behind spouses, children, parents, and other family and friends. And the majority were caught. But when all other means of gaining freedom were exhausted, and the master had just administered a particularly brutal beating or threatened to sell a slave *down* the river, commandeering a skiff and escaping *across* the river began to sound like a good option.

For some runaways who made their way to free territory from St. Louis, the river crossing was the beginning of their journey. For others, the Mississippi was far from the first obstacle they had encountered. John Brown, for example, who passed through St. Louis around 1847, escaped from slavery in Georgia and had already traveled through six southern states on foot, by raft, and on a steamboat before stealing a boat from the St. Louis shore and rowing himself across the Mississippi in the dead of night. Henry Bibb passed through St. Louis during his second successful escape attempt; after reaching Canada in 1837, he returned to his old plantation in Kentucky and attempted to escape

[46] Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee, Or, The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada: Related by Themselves…* (Boston, 1856), 187; Twitty, "Slavery and Freedom," 89.

again, this time with his wife and children. Sadly, only Bibb himself ever managed to find freedom.[47]

For such well-traveled fugitives, or for St. Louisans who worked on the Mississippi or lived on its banks, the river itself did not tend to pose a significant obstacle to freedom. William Wells Brown, who was intimately familiar with the river from his years as a steamboat hand, simply walked to the northern end of town, "selected a skiff to carry [himself and his mother] across the river," found a board that would serve for an oar, and paddled across. John Anderson, who made the crossing somewhere north of St. Louis, crossed "by using a boat which he found on the bank"; William Walker recorded that he and a fellow fugitive simply "secured a row boat and went across the river." Sixteen-year-old Caroline Quarrlls took passage on the steamboat that served as a ferry between St. Louis and Alton. St. Louisan Mattie Jackson, her mother, and her sister reached Illinois "after traveling two days"; apparently the crossing itself was not eventful enough to merit specific attention. At least one black woman had a much more difficult crossing, however; she is said to have swum across, a distance of about a mile.[48]

For those who encountered difficulty with the river crossing, the challenge was usually not so much getting across the river as escaping the notice of watchful eyes while they did so. As she stepped off the ferry at the Alton wharf, Caroline Quarrlls apparently

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[47] John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave Now in England* (London, 1855), 90-143; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849).

[48] W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 68; Harper Twelvetrees, ed., *The Story of the Life of John Anderson, the Fugitive Slave* (London, 1863), 18; William Walker, *Buried Alive (behind Prison Walls) for a Quarter of a Century: Life of William Walker*, ed. Thomas S. Gaines (Saginaw, Mich., 1892), 54; *History of Waukesha*, 458; Mattie J. Jackson and L. S. Thompson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson…* (Lawrence, Mass., 1866), 7; LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 34. Swimming the river was not unheard of; at least two fugitives were reported to have done so opposite Quincy, Illinois. Arna Bontemps, "The Underground Railroad," in *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*, ed. Brian Dolinar (Urbana, Ill., 2013), 26; Benjamin G. Merkel, "The Underground Railroad and the Missouri Borders, 1840-1860," *Missouri Historical Review* 37, no. 3 (April 1943), 274.

"acted a little strange," drawing the attention of "a colored man who was at the wharf [who] asked her if she was a slave escaping." Fortunately for Quarrlls, the man was an Underground Railroad operative, but the event highlighted the danger of recognition that any public appearance, even a short twenty-mile ferry ride, posed for a fugitive slave. [49] A few runaways had the requisite combination of money, clothes, worldly wisdom, and just plain chutzpah to make it to the North by means of a lengthy steamboat or railroad voyage, but for those who did not, a brief Mississippi crossing at St. Louis, hopefully followed by assistance from free blacks and friendly whites in Illinois, was a more attractive option.

Strikingly, no extant slave narrative records any degree of relief upon entering the free state of Illinois. After describing John Anderson's crossing of the Mississippi, his biographer explained in the very next sentence that since Anderson knew "that successful attempts had been made to recover fugitives in that State, he did not feel secure, and therefore resolved to observe the same circumspection he had practised in Missouri." Similarly, by the time John Brown finished poling himself across the river, he recalled that "it was daylight, and therefore dangerous for me to be seen." Their fears were not unfounded. When Mattie Jackson and her family reached the Illinois shore, advertisements had already been posted for their recapture, and "loafers" found the three women "on the brink of the river." Fugitive slaves in Illinois understood that the Mississippi River crossing was by no means the end of their journey. It was relatively easy for masters to recapture their slaves, especially in southern Illinois, and railroads and

[49] *History of Waukesha*, 458.

steamboats made it feasible and cost-effective for slave catchers to pursue fugitives well into the North.[50]

Given the omnipresent threat of recapture, almost no fugitive managed to make it to safety without the help of other blacks or sympathetic whites along the way, and St. Louisans were often among these benefactors. While one historian has stated that fugitives from Missouri who wrote narratives of their escape "did not report that they received assistance from whites or free blacks," many sources other than Missouri slave narratives *do* record such assistance. Furthermore, the slave narratives, especially those published before the Civil War, may have intentionally elided such actions in order to protect the identities of those who helped them.[51] Finally, while another historian has asserted that fugitives were "rarely… aided by abolitionists while still on the slaveocracy's terrain," white abolitionists were by no means the only people who aided runaways.[52] Newspaper articles, slave narratives from other regions, and oral traditions make it clear that many fugitives escaping through St. Louis received help and that many of the brave men and women who aided them were free blacks.

While historians are probably correct to state that the organized Underground Railroad route near St. Louis "began" across the river in Alton, many St. Louisans, both black and white, aided fugitives in less coordinated ways. Unfortunately, some were

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[50] Twelvetrees, *The Story of the Life of John Anderson*, 18; J. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 143; Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 7; Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 120.

[51] Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri," 210. On intentional elisions, see Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York, 2014), 77; LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 14.

[52] Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 40. On the role of free blacks in the Underground Railroad generally, see Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, Ky., 1961); Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 143-67; and for Illinois, LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*; Gara, "The Underground Railroad in Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56, no. 3 (October 1963), 518-20.

unsuccessful. Between 1840 and 1861, ten St. Louisans – eight white men, one black man, and one black woman – were imprisoned in the Missouri State Penitentiary for the crime of "slave stealing." While the details of their offenses are hazy, their actions were probably similar to those taken by Mary Meachum, John Berry Meachum's second wife, a year after her husband's death. On May 21, 1855, Mary Meachum, a free black named Isaac, and eight or nine fugitive slaves including Esther Shaw and her two children climbed into a small boat and crossed the Mississippi. Unfortunately, as soon as they reached the other side, waiting slave catchers and law enforcement officials captured them. Shaw was sold down the river to Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Meachum and Isaac stood trial for the crime of "enticing away a slave." Meachum was eventually acquitted and the charges against Isaac were dropped, but the consequences of the failed crossing were much harsher for the fugitives – especially for Shaw, who probably never saw her children again.[53]

Other attempts by St. Louisans to aid runaways were more successful. St. Louis free black Peter Hudlin regularly aided fugitives, hiding them in his basement and transporting them across the river in crates in the back of his wagon, and managed to conceal his activities from his own children to decrease the risk of discovery by officials or slave catchers. When Henry Bibb sought steamboat passage from St. Louis to Cincinnati, he ran into a free black steward who had helped him on a previous escape attempt; the man again aided Bibb in safely navigating the steamboat voyage. In November 1847, when free black Bill Williams was caught aiding three runaways

[53] For Mary Meachum, see *Missouri Republican*, July 19, 1855, [2]; Harriet C. Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865* (Jefferson, N.C., 2004), 183-84; Snodgrass, *Underground Railroad*, s.v. "Meachum, John Berry"; VanderVelde, *Mrs. Dred Scott*, 434. For the claim that the Underground Railroad route began in Alton, see Dunphy, *Abolitionism and the Civil War*, 50.

escaping to Illinois, he was described as an "old hand" at the business, indicating that he had successfully aided fugitives in the past.[54]

Even if they were not able to help with the crossing itself, black St. Louisans assisted runaways in other ways. Fugitive John Brown found himself in St. Louis on a Sunday morning and fell in with a group of blacks who were on their way to church at St. Paul AME. After the service, the church deacons and other leaders, suspecting he was a runaway, "closed up and began talking to me" and gave him food and clothing. Fearing to get his benefactors into trouble, Brown claimed he was not a fugitive and refused further assistance. At the very least, however, the black community of St. Louis had provided him with a day's anonymity among a large group of black church attendees, along with provisions for the next stage of his journey. Later, when Brown reached Terre Haute, Indiana, he met a man who turned out to be the brother of the pastor in St. Louis. This man gave him shelter for the night and directions to a "settlement of coloured people" where he stayed for some time. Just as in St. Louis, the mere presence of a sizeable community of blacks, whether or not they actively aided his escape, provided something almost as valuable: a safe place to hide.[55]

On the Illinois side of the river, free blacks were just as active in aiding fugitives, and here their actions took on more of the organized cast associated with the Underground Railroad. Rocky Fork, a primarily black town north of Alton, served as a receiving point for fugitives fresh from the Mississippi River crossing. One local

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[54] "The Hudlin Family," *Proud* 7 (Fall 1976), 28; Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 169; Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri," 209.

[55] J. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 140, 151. Brown gives the St. Louis minister's name as Cole; Israel Cole served as pastor of St. Paul AME from 1850 to 1851 and was perhaps an exhorter or held some other leadership position when Brown passed through St. Louis in 1847. *History of St. Paul*, 35.

historian estimates that Rocky Fork may have been "the oldest and largest Underground Railroad operation in Illinois," staffed by both black and white operatives. Isolated by land, Rocky Fork was accessible by water, making it an ideal hiding place for fugitives who had just crossed the river.[56] In Brooklyn, directly across from St. Louis, free blacks hid fugitives in churches and private homes. The entire town, according to early settlers' reminisces, was "one of the 'Cities of Refuge' for fugitive slaves." While few details of Brooklynites' Underground Railroad activities survive, Priscilla Baltimore, who had frequently transported William Paul Quinn across the river, almost certainly aided fugitive slaves in the same way. Another operative, free black William Carper, "was killed on the threshold of his own home, for giving shelter and protection to a fugitive slave."[57] But even this tragic event apparently did not dissuade Brooklynites from continued participation in the Underground Railroad. Brooklynites like Carper and Baltimore transported fugitive slaves to Alton, where a defined Underground Railroad route began. Oral histories indicate that several buildings in Alton served as hiding places for fugitives, and tunnels still exist under some of them. In addition to serving as a transshipment point, Alton joined Brooklyn and Rocky Fork as a receiving point for runaways from Missouri. In 1854, a free black man from Alton helped fifteen fugitives cross the river in skiffs, then sent them on their way to Chicago.[58]

Some fugitives who crossed the Mississippi, however, did not go on to the North, but rather stayed in the black communities along the Illinois bank. According to oral

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[56] LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 34-35; Judy Hoffman, *God's Portion: Godfrey, Illinois, 1817-1865* (Nashville, Tenn., 2005), 46.

[57] *C. B. Carroll's East St. Louis, Ill. City Directory,* 18.

[58] *C. B. Carroll's East St. Louis, Ill. City Directory*, 18; Seth Concklin to William Still, February 18, 1851, in William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc...* (Philadelphia, 1872), 28; LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 36.

tradition, the group of African Americans that Priscilla Baltimore led across the river to settle in Brooklyn included some fugitive slaves, and a few of the runaways who came to the town in the decades that followed may have stayed and mixed with the free black population. In Rocky Fork, the white Spaulding and Hawley families allowed fugitives to settle on parcels of their land, which they farmed and paid for over time, although the fugitives apparently never gained official title to the land. The remote location of these plots, as well as black and white families' circumspection about the arrangement, allowed runaways to evade Illinois's slave catchers, restrictive Black Codes, and hostile whites, building new lives just a few miles from slave territory. Others worked for the Hawleys temporarily, earning enough to relocate to safer territory farther north. Like Meachum, the Spaulding and Hawley families apparently had both economic and altruistic reasons for the arrangement, benefiting from the fugitives' labor but also helping them get a start on making new lives for themselves.[59]

In addition to black and white benefactors working independently on both sides of the Mississippi, friends of fugitive slaves coordinated their efforts across the river using established religious networks and personal connections. St. Louisan James Milton Turner would transport fugitives across the river by night in a skiff tied to the stern of a steamboat, then convey them to the pastor of Brooklyn's Antioch Baptist Church.[60]

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[59] Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 32; LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 24-27; Hoffman, *God's Portion*, 31-49.

[60] In a 1911 interview, Turner claimed that the pastor in Brooklyn was John Richard Anderson, which cannot have been true as Turner (born in 1840) was still a young child when Anderson lived in Brooklyn. As best as Anderson's wanderings can be reconstructed, he moved from St. Louis to Alton in the mid-1830s, back to St. Louis by 1839, to Brooklyn for a few years after 1842, and finally to St. Louis, where he lived from 1845 until his death in 1863. The elderly Turner, remembering events decades later, may have simply confused Anderson (probably his pastor in St. Louis) with a different pastor in Brooklyn. Turner's biographer states that this interview with Turner is "highly exaggerated," although he does not comment specifically on the skiff story. "St. Louis Ex-Slave, Once Sold for $50, Earns $1,000,000 Fee," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 9, 1911, 5; Stevens, *History of the Central Baptist Church*, 29-30; G. Anderson,

Brooklynite Priscilla Baltimore likely worked with members of the St. Louis AME churches in similar ways. It may be no coincidence that an Underground Railroad operative met Caroline Quarrlls at the ferry landing in Alton; perhaps some sort of trans-Mississippi communication network alerted him to the fact that a fugitive was coming across on the ferry. Twentieth-century legends tell of lanterns hung in the cupola of Alton's Enos Apartment Building to signal whether the area was clear of slave catchers. While not literally true, such stories reveal the same impulse to coordinated action that drove Paul Revere to gallop through the Massachusetts countryside on the eve of the American Revolution.[61]

For black St. Louisans, crossing the Mississippi was a strategic, purposeful, and coordinated operation. Free blacks crossed the river to improve their communities: children crossed to obtain an education when it was illegal to do so in St. Louis; missionaries crossed in the opposite direction to bring their message of faith and hope to St. Louis; Priscilla Baltimore crossed to build a new community on the Illinois side. Sometimes local options – secret schools, existing churches, staying in St. Louis – made more strategic sense. Yet the Mississippi was always in the background, offering one possible way to respond to future challenges, and friends on the other side of the river were invariably key to a successful crossing.

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"Memorial Sermon," 229-30; *Ninety-Fifth Anniversary: Historical Sketch, Program and Auxiliaries of St. Paul AME Church* ([St. Louis], 1935), ECA, box 44, series 8, fol. 476, 7; *C. B. Carroll's East St. Louis, Ill. City Directory*, 18; St. Louis city directories, 1838, 1839, 1845, St. Louis Public Library, http://indexes.slpl.org/Pages/freemen.aspx (accessed April 14, 2016); Gary R. Kremer, *James Milton Turner and the Promise of America: The Public Life of a Post-Civil War Black Leader* (Columbia, Mo., 1991), 10.

[61] LaRoche, *Free Black Communities*, 34, 36; Dunphy, *Abolitionism and the Civil War*, 51.

For fugitive slaves, Illinois had no intrinsic attraction other than being a nominally free state; as Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua has argued, it was a "haven… by default." For the majority of runaways, the crossing to Illinois was only one step in a longer journey to freedom; Canada, or at least some more northerly part of the United States, was their destination. Because of southern Illinoisans' proslavery leanings, this was the case even before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which prompted a significant drop in security for fugitives living in more northern areas but did not materially alter conditions for runaways in, say, Alton. As early as the 1830s, fugitives like William Wells Brown and Henry Bibb recorded feeling unsafe in free-state communities near the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers; Canada, even at this early date, was their goal.[62]

Thus, in some ways, the river was little more than a symbolic boundary between slavery and freedom. Fugitives were no more free in Alton than in St. Louis, and the Black Codes kept Illinois from being a hospitable place for free blacks to call home. Yet Priscilla Baltimore and the band of African Americans she led would not have bothered moving to Brooklyn if they did not see better opportunities there; Caroline Quarrlls would not have wept at the thought of crossing the river had there not been something she dreaded back in St. Louis. The extent to which the Mississippi constituted a significant boundary depended on what aspect of slavery, legal restrictions, or white prejudice was at issue. For the AME minister who fled to Priscilla Baltimore's home in Illinois to avoid violating Missouri's free black licensing law, the river was a rigid line separating the state where the law applied from the state where it did not. For fugitive slave John

[62] Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, 34; Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 50-51; W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 67-68, 84.

Anderson, it was just one more obstacle to freedom, not a firm dividing line separating him from that freedom.

The river flowed inexorably south, a motion over which black St. Louisans had no control. William Wells Brown was forced to work "the longest year I ever lived" for a slave trader plying the St. Louis to New Orleans route. Thousands of other black St. Louisans saw their loved ones sold downriver, transported on steamboats like those Brown crewed. John Berry Meachum bought such unfortunate slaves when he could, but he could only save a few. When the daughter of one of John Richard Anderson's St. Louis parishioners was sold downriver, Anderson could do nothing about it but try to comfort the distraught mother. "I told her that God was down there, as well as up here, and would, in some way, take care of her daughter, and that when she was so happy as to get to heaven, where the wicked cease from troubling, she would not find that Presbyterian deacon [who had sold her daughter] there to torment her."[63]

Illinois was neither heaven nor the Promised Land, and the wicked still troubled fugitive slaves and free blacks there. Yet if traffic down the river was outside of black St. Louisans' control, to swim, row, ride, walk, or even shout across was well within the power of many, and those actions could have both symbolic and practical weight. The Mississippi River loomed large in the imagination of black St. Louisans. Like the river Jordan, the Mississippi was not necessarily the gateway to a better life, but it was at least one step on the road to getting there.

[63] W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 63; John Richard Anderson, quoted in G. Anderson, "Memorial Sermon," 236.

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