

Re-Interpreting Westward Expansion on the Arch Grounds

Foreword and Overview of the Goals for the New Exhibit

BY BOB MOORE





The new museum beneath the Gateway Arch chronicles 200 years of history and tells the story of St. Louis' role in the westward expansion of the United States. The awesome responsibility and massive amount of work behind that simple statement has consumed my life, and the lives of many other people, over the past six years.

Renovations to the Gateway Arch as part of a collaborative project between the City-Arch-River organization and the National Park Service required the removal of the Museum of Westward Expansion, designed by Aram Mardirosian and opened in 1976. St. Louisans fondly remembered the old museum—it was in place for nearly 40 years. Because the space was going to be gutted, planners decided to create an entirely new visitor experience. Plans for the new museum focused on expanding the story of the Gateway Arch and its symbolic meaning.

The firm Haley Sharpe Design of Great Britain was chosen as the design firm to create the new museum. It had a great deal of experience in the United States, designing the Jamestown Visitor Center in Virginia, the Fort McHenry Visitor Center in Maryland, and several large exhibitions for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. As the site historian, I suggested themes, stories, and general directions for the new exhibits, as well as potential artifacts from the park's collection, including some from the old museum and others never before shown to the public.

The first question as planning began was, what story or stories should be told? The old Museum of Westward Expansion told a story of a triumphal march of Anglo-Saxon pioneers over the Appalachians, through the Mississippi River Valley, and into the far West. But is that what actually happened? In a series of meetings, I convened a group of academic and public historians, exhibit designers, and park rangers—some nationally known, some local—to discuss and debate our park themes and to put together matrices for use in creating the new exhibits. It was a diverse group, with members of several American Indian tribes, African American and Hispanic American historians, experts on St. Louis, and experts on the greater West.

(Above) A craftsman from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Training Center puts the finishing touches on window openings for the restored Old Rock House façade in the new museum at the Gateway Arch. (Image: National Park Service, Gateway Arch National Park)

(Left) A photomural depicting the St. Louis levee c. 1852 was painted especially for the exhibit by artist Michael Haynes. The multicultural aspects of the community are reflected in the faces and clothing types worn by an array of arriving and departing passengers, plus the free persons of color who owned the drayage businesses that kept the levee operating. (Image: National Park Service, Gateway Arch National Park)



As a result of these conferences we set a course for changing our exhibit themes to mesh with a more modern approach to the story of the American West. In addition, we felt that the former museum gave visitors little idea as to why a 630-foot Arch was built in St. Louis. What did it commemorate? We felt that our approach should be not only to discuss the national issues of westward expansion, but also to tell why St. Louis was important and central to that story. The 90 acres of the National Park Service site along the riverfront were where Lewis and Clark prepared for their journey west, where the Upper Louisiana Purchase was transferred in 1804, where a significant portion of the American fur trade was centered, and where a territorial capital for the Spanish and for the Americans stood.

All of this resulted in the idea that these exhibits should do what the National Park Service does best nationwide: give the public *place-based interpretation*. For example, when you visit a historic site on the Civil War, you don't experience a museum covering the entire war, but rather one that covers the story of the battle or the event that happened on that site. Yes, there is information about cause and effect, how the war began, and the results of the war, but the meat of the exhibit tells the story of the site. The former museum attempted only to tell a national story of westward expansion while eliminating the St. Louis connection.

Second, we wanted to be sure that the individual parts of the park were tied together through the exhibits, so that visitors would understand how the Arch is connected to westward expansion, St. Louis, and the site.

Third, we wanted to be sure that we incorporated a multicultural perspective in the exhibits, and that the story was not one dominated solely by "great men" of the past. Modern scholarship has shown that the old triumphal histories of the West, whose lead characters were white men wearing coonskin caps, are flawed and myopic versions of a history involving a rich tapestry of people, places, and events. There are few places in the nation better than St. Louis to tell the story of the West in an inclusive way. When Americans arrived in St. Louis in 1804, they found a village already inhabited for 40 years by American Indian, French, Spanish, and African men *and* women. They entered a region where mound-building Indians developed a rich culture, and where French-speaking colonials enjoyed prosperity beginning in 1699. We wanted to emphasize that when St. Louis was founded in 1764, it was part of a cultural milieu dominated by French-speaking people and their customs.



The east façade of the Old Rock House was reconstructed using all of the surviving original elements and the windows and shutters from the 1943 restoration. The exhibit will outline the building's use as a fur warehouse, a sail loft catering to western pioneers, and its years as a tavern and nightclub where African American artists performed blues music. (Image: National Park Service, Gateway Arch National Park)



A 15 x 15-foot French vertical log house is the centerpiece of the Colonial St. Louis gallery, which describes the first 40 years of the city's existence and the changes brought by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The replica house, with two sides completed and the other two left unfinished to reveal building techniques, is the same size as several of the smallest homes in the early town. (Image: National Park Service, Gateway Arch National Park)

The committee felt that the exhibit should provide an understanding of why the memorial site is historic and why St. Louis was an important center of the westward movement, the fur trade, exploration, and western commerce; how slavery in the West led

to the Dred Scott case and Civil War; and how all of these things were caught up in a wave of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century memorialization, tribute, and nostalgia leading to the establishment of a riverfront park in St. Louis.

The new museum will be different from the old not only in terms of the artifacts displayed and the technology utilized, but also in terms of the story told and the themes explored. We hope that it will be a museum worthy of repeat visits and that it will stimulate important conversations about the nation's past, present, and future.

This issue of *The Confluence* is meant as an introduction to the overall ideas for the new exhibits as well as an amplification of four stories told within. Museum exhibits are, by design, long on displaying objects and images and short on descriptions and historical details. The stories in this publication provide background detail on some of the most fascinating new themes and objects we will have on display.

The first article details an archival collection of architectural drawings submitted for the 1947–1948

competition which resulted in the Gateway Arch. These drawings will be displayed on a rotating basis in the new exhibit. The next story is about a serendipitous archaeological find—while the museum was being planned and the site prepared, artifacts from the past were uncovered that were worthy of display in the exhibits, and the design was changed to accommodate them. An article detailing the life and career of an almost unknown American man of science, Titian Peale, underscores the importance of the large collection of instruments and clothing that will be displayed by the park that were used by him on the Long Expedition of 1819–1821. Lastly, a neglected theme within the story of Westward Expansion, the Mormon exodus, has surprisingly strong ties to St. Louis which are explored in an article as well as within the new museum beneath the Arch.



The immensity of the levee in the early 1850s, when St. Louis was the third busiest port in the nation, was best represented in a model that could show the scale of the operation. The HO scale model, painstakingly researched and laboriously hand painted, includes five city blocks, twelve steamboats, and 520 human figures. The bustling levee is depicted piled with goods being transferred from boat to boat. A subtle lighting change from day to night every few minutes will bring up the lights within the buildings and the boats, emphasizing that the levee was a place that never really slept during its heyday. (Image: National Park Service, Gateway Arch National Park)