

# Missouri Digital Heritage



*The Common-place Web Library reviews and lists online resources and Websites likely to be of interest to our viewers. Each quarterly issue will feature one or more brief site reviews. The library itself will be an ongoing enterprise with regular new additions and amendments. So we encourage you to check it frequently. At the moment, the library is small, but with your help we expect it to grow rapidly. If you have suggestions for the Web Library, or for site reviews, please forward them to the [Administrative Editor](#).*

<http://www.sos.mo.gov/mdh/>

In 2007, Missouri's Secretary of State Robin Carnahan proposed an initiative to increase public access to materials relevant to the history of the state. The resulting Website, *Missouri Digital Heritage*, created in conjunction with the Missouri State Library, the Missouri State Archives, and the State Historical Society of Missouri, is already sufficiently developed to make it a necessary first stop for anyone interested in the history of Missouri. Although the purported goal is to "further Missourians' access," anyone can mine this ambitious site to good effect.

One impressive and very useful feature of the site lies in its function as a central clearinghouse for information about the state. In an effort to be comprehensive, the site's creators are engaged in "assisting institutions across the state in digitizing their records and placing them online for easy access." What that means in practice is that much of the preliminary, time-consuming work involved in searching the Web for credible, usable sources can be avoided; the task has already been performed by careful teams of archivists



and curators.

Under varied topic headings—such as agriculture, cultures and communities, newspapers, county and municipal records, exploration and settlement, family and faith, and many others—the site offers links to materials from libraries, museums, government agencies, and universities throughout the state. Links to outside Websites of interest, including brief descriptions, direct visitors to such varied items as an online map exhibit from the St. Louis Public Library; “Quest for the Cure: Care and Treatment in Missouri’s First State Mental Hospital,” from the Missouri State Archives; an illustrated history of the Missouri Botanical Garden (1800-1920), contributed by that institution; and the Grayson Archery Collection from the University of Missouri Museum of Anthropology.

The merits of this collaborative enterprise become clear when one clicks on the collection heading “St. Louis Circuit Court Historical Records Project.” This gateway leads to “digitized collections of court files relating to Lewis & Clark, Native Americans, the fur trade, and slave freedom suits,” including a database of all court cases, beginning in 1804. The introduction to these materials details what has been processed: 86 cubic feet of records covering the period 1804-1835 and 39 cubic feet of selected cases post-1835 (as of February 2006). A keyword searchable database for the digitized records works well. Typing in “Lisa” for Manuel Lisa as a search term generates several cases. Clicking on “view case” brings up six pages of very high quality images. The paper may be torn and the ink faded, but the researcher can view the manuscripts carefully, using both a link for a larger image and the zoom function on a computer to enlarge the image exponentially, a helpful tool for reading such documents. The “Freedom Suits” section includes 301 petitions from 1814 to 1860; “Fur Trade Cases” includes 82 cases regarding Missouri and neighboring territories; and “Native American Suits” includes 32 cases involving Native Americans.

For researchers, the “Archives and Manuscripts Collections Guides” section offers finding aids and detailed descriptions for Missouri records. Of broad interest and vast potential usefulness are areas covered by the Missouri State Archives: the “Missouri Birth & Death Records Database Pre-1910” and the “Missouri Coroner’s Inquest Database,” covering the period 1842-1932, both

contain huge amounts of data. On the latter, records are searchable but not reproduced. Searching this author's surname generates eight results, covering such causes of death as "Justifiable Homicide," "Run Over By Train," and "Visitation Of God in A Natural Way." For more details on these cases, one would need to request copies of the records directly from the state archives; an e-mail link is provided for doing so. Under "Collections," one can also examine the *Registre d'Arpentage*, the French register created by surveyor Antoine Pierre Souland (1766-1825), including maps and details of 710 land grants.

A quick overview of the site demonstrates that the myriad topics it highlights will interest scholars, students, and teachers beyond Missouri. Civil War buffs, for example, might explore online newspaper collections, searchable and in facsimile, such as the *Cape Girardeau Argus*, 1863-1871. Typing the term "emancipation" into the search engine generates 44 hits. One can click on the featured issues, where the term appears on flagged pages in highlighted text. Following links to the Dred Scott Case Collection, from Washington University's library, a reader can access 111 documents in a full-text searchable form.

This Website is a welcome and important addition to resources available on nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. history. The government initiative behind this effort to preserve the past and make it accessible is a laudable one; clearly, the "Show Me" state has much to share.

---

*Patricia Cleary is a professor in the Department of History at California State University, Long Beach, and is the author of The World, the Flesh, and the Devil: A History of Colonial St. Louis (2011).*