Constructing the House of Chouteau: Saint Louis



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Cities, like people, are conceived, then born. St. Louis was the brainchild of imperial officials and two ambitious merchants. In 1763, Jean Jacques Blaise D'Abbadie, the last governor of French Louisiana, granted to Gilbert Antoine Maxent an exclusive privilege to trade with the Indian tribes west of the upper Mississippi and along the Missouri for six years. Such monopolies followed a certain colonial logic: granted a privileged track in the pursuit of American wealth, private parties would do the costly work of breaking ground, building posts, and pursuing alliances with local tribesmen. D'Abbadie, faced with a depleted treasury, inflation, shortages, and trade disruptions, all consequences of the disastrous French and Indian War, hoped to jumpstart the colony's fortunes and secure the ties that bound the southern and northern parts of this vast region.

Maxent, long involved with this Illinois Country commerce, seized the

opportunity. (He would work closely in the future with Spanish governors of the colony, two of whom would become his sons-in-law.) A quarter share in the venture would go to Pierre de Laclède, who had come to New Orleans in 1755, for serving as the new company's field partner. Laclède's conception was clear. We know exactly what he had in mind and how he proceeded because his clerk and stepson, Auguste Chouteau, wrote a "Narrative of the Settlement of St. Louis." (The fourteen-page manuscript is a fragment of a longer narrative account Chouteau had been writing decades after the actual events. It may have been based on a journal or diary. Neither a complete draft nor a journal exists. It is our most reliable firsthand account.) The party left New Orleans in August and arrived in Illinois three months later on November 3, 1763. Storing their trade goods on the eastern bank of the Mississippi at the administrative center of French Illinois, Fort de Chartres, Laclède and Chouteau (thirteen or fourteen years old at the time) surveyed the western bank between the small mining and farming village of Ste. Genevieve and the mouth of the Missouri, selecting the site of St. Louis for its beauty, its elevation (relatively immune from the very real dangers of flooding), and its easy access to the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois rivers. In retrospect, it seems an obvious choice. And so, as Chouteau recalled, "We set out immediately afterwards, to return to Fort de Chartres, where he [Laclède] said, with enthusiasm, to Monsieur de Neyon [Neyon de Villiers, the commandant], and to his officers that he had found a situation where he was going to form a settlement, which might become, hereafter, one of the finest cities of America—so many advantages were embraced in this site, by its locality and its central position."

Chouteau's "Narrative" is an astonishing document. To be present in this way at the birth of a great city is a historian's dream. (It is, of course, a gift to be used with some caution.) St. Louis, like many colonial American cities, was an intentional creation—a planned birth, not an accidental one. The moment of its birth recorded, St. Louis resembles so many American children, videotaped and well documented upon arrival. The sense of purpose that guided settlers, that covered the distance from old to new, created a most bourgeois environment of great expectations, of possibilities, even entitlement. The act of self-shaping seems to lie at the heart of the American experience. Laclède directed young Chouteau and thirty workmen to clear the land and construct cabins and a large shed in February after the winter thaw. He returned in April with a design for the town and christened the newborn city, naming it St. Louis after King Louis XV's patron saint, Louis IX.

Having made the obligatory nod toward royal patrons and the church, Laclède revealed his priorities and the incipient city's raison d'etre. A towpath for boats separated the river from the limestone ledges. On the ridge, workers laid out three streets parallel to the river: Grande Rue, Rue de L'Eglise, and Rue des Granges. The public market was front and center, followed by Laclède's own house. Behind that would be the church. In the back were the barns. Commerce lay at the heart of this place. Farming was an afterthought. St. Louis soon acquired the nickname *Paincourt* or "short of bread," for food supplies were occasionally brought in from neighboring villages such as Ste. Genevieve. Ste.

Genevieve was, in turn, dubbed *Misère*. Within decades, the Creole citizens of St. Louis would poke fun at the rustic manners of their rural neighbors. The riverfront of the city today would most probably surprise the founders. The dense and bustling antebellum city with goods and people crowding the space between steamboats and Front Street: that was what Laclède envisioned. Today, all remnants of the original city have disappeared. Only the old cathedral and a national park stand on the site. Busy storefronts would have been more appropriate as historical markers.

The first place established during the French regime in North America, Champlain's Québec, and the last, St. Louis, carried the same birthmark: the *comptoir*—the fortified warehouse and counting house. Other economic activities would fill the landscape, but the driving force of this frontier was commerce—specifically, the fur trade. As W. J. Eccles wrote over thirty years ago, French North America "can hardly be said to have had a frontier at all. Rather, it can be said to have been a metropolis, dominating the hinterland around it." Establishing trading posts and other urban enclaves, the French plugged Indian producers and consumers into an international market economy. Merchants such as Laclède and the Chouteaus facilitated exchange and encouraged regional development from a pioneering urban base. And so the French left a legacy of cities across North America from Montreal to New Orleans, Detroit to St. Paul. And native peoples were hardly passive participants in this enterprise. It was the Mi'kmaqs who insisted that Cartier forget about a passage to China and trade for furs.

The conception of St. Louis likewise owed a huge debt to native groups. A great Indian metropolis, Cahokia, had once existed across the river. More than simply a confluence of great river systems, this location encompassed a primary crossroads of native peoples. Indian groups from the upper Mississippi, the Great Lakes, the Missouri, the Wabash, and Illinois rivers all frequented the area. A network of small-scale traders, French and métis, already blanketed the region. Above all, it would be the increasingly powerful Osages living to the west of the new city that determined the success of this enterprise.

Northeast view of St. Louis from the Illinois shore by John Caspar Wild, ca. 1839. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

With so many parents watching over the birth, it is not surprising that St. Louis prospered immediately. Imperial contingencies favored the growth of the settlement. Laclède arrived in the fall of 1763 bringing the news of France's cession of the east bank and Canada to Great Britain. He convinced forty families from the east-bank villages to move across the river to the new settlement. More families followed when the British formally took control in present-day Illinois in October 1765. News that France had secretly ceded New Orleans and Louisiana west of the Mississippi in the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762 finally reached St. Louis in December 1764. The first Spanish officials

did not arrive until 1767. By then, St. Louis had passed through its infancy. It grew up speaking French, and its new imperial guardian made no attempt to change it. The Mississippi River had now become an international boundary. Spanish lieutenant governors, palms well greased, usually winked at contraband trade, and furs, skins, and trade goods would flow across borders with relative ease.

The trade exceeded Laclède's expectations. Sir William Johnson, back in New York, wrote to the Lords of Trade in November 1765 that a Frenchman established near the mouth of the Missouri "carries on a vast Extensive Trade, and is acquiring a great influence over all the Indian Nations." The following summer, a visiting British officer noted that Laclède "takes so good Measures, that the whole Trade of the Missouri, That of the Mississippi Northwards, and that of the Nations near la Baye, Lake Michigan, and St. Joseph's, by the Illinois River, is entirely brought to him. He appears to be sensible, clever, and has been very well educated; is very active, and will give us some Trouble before we get the Parts of this Trade that belong to us out of his hands." That year, 1766, Laclède wrote to his brother Jean, a lawyer back in France, that his business was worth more than 200,000 livres.

To be a successful merchant on this frontier, one needed good judgment, careful calculations, and connections. Procuring goods on credit in anticipation of the next year's production of furs, skins, and robes meant establishing a reputation for reliability and integrity. Information was the key. Knowing about the conditions that would affect the market for all the goods being exported and imported required a network of correspondents in a dazzling array of places, from tribal villages to American, Canadian, and European cities. The fur trade was a global business. Letters and ledgers were as important as pelts. Good relations sustained trade, literally and figuratively. The objective of a merchant was to create a successful house—*la maison*—through the gradual accumulation of capital of all kinds. There was no distinct commercial district in early St. Louis. Business was conducted out of one's house. The private sector was just that, and, more often than not, partnerships were family affairs.

Literacy and a cosmopolitan outlook were a merchant's tools. So it should not surprise us that Maxent had a library of almost five thousand volumes. The Laclèdes of Béarn had been *notaires* and *avocats* for generations. Pierre's Uncle Jean was a man of letters and science, known by Voltaire. Pierre's library in St. Louis included practical business guides, histories, a volume by Mirabeau on the theory of taxation, essays on electricity and physics, and books by Bacon, Locke, and Descartes. Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, published in 1767, could be found in his room in St. Louis. Some of these volumes were later purchased by his stepson Auguste at the estate sale. Chouteau would amass his own impressive library. An affinity for Voltaire seems to have been passed down. Auguste owned a clock adorned with a figure of the great French philosophe. Not surprisingly, freemasonry would attract French merchants in St. Louis, Detroit, and New Orleans. The first generation of merchants who migrated

to St. Louis was, indeed, a cosmopolitan group. The majority came from western and southern France. Northern Italy and Spain provided four each. Others came from Canada, the West Indies, Swiss cities, Holland, and Germany. In short, colonial St. Louis, although a muddy village-sized enclave in the middle of Indian country, was not a sleepy and isolated frontier town. It could not afford to be.

Nor could it afford to be inhospitable to Indian clients who hunted and processed the animal skins that would become luxury goods in distant markets. Their productivity, their taste as consumers, and their goodwill were all key elements. Knowing your customers in this business often meant having connections within Indian settlements. Kinship ties, real and fictive, were maintained. The most important merchants in St. Louis had métis allies in the field. (Some also had more direct relationships with Indian women.) Historian Tanis Thorne described the family of one trader, André Roy, a client of the Chouteau family. After Roy's death, an Iowa Indian, Angelique, with whom he had two children, moved with her family from their village on the Des Moines River to St. Charles, a suburb of St. Louis. In St. Charles, Roy's Iowa family lived near his French widow and children. Both women remarried, the children shared in the inheritance, and apparently, the "siblings enjoyed a close relationship."

St. Charles, a village some twenty miles northwest of St. Louis on the north bank of the Missouri, was founded in 1768 by a hunter named Louis Blanchette. Other suburbs were settled within the metropolitan orbit of St. Louis in this first generation of the city: Carondelet or *Vide Poche* ("empty pocket") in 1767; St. Ferdinand de Florissant in 1785; Portage des Sioux in 1799. The Deshetres, a family of Indian interpreters, went to Florissant. The Antoine Le Claires, father and son, the latter achieving some fame as Black Hawk's interpreter and the métis founder of Davenport, Iowa, lived in Portage des Sioux. By 1800, over half of the 2,447 people living in the St. Louis metropolitan district actually lived in these satellite villages. This suburban population included many of those who filled the lower rungs of the fur trade's occupational ladder. Closer to Indian country, these villages provided convenient jumping-off sites and, for older workers, a place to retire and do a little farming. Land there being cheaper and more available, these villages also attracted full-time farmers. Florissant contained the summer homes of some of St. Louis' wealthier merchants. Viewing the metropolitan district of St. Louis in its entirety, one can say that the place contained a rather diverse population. To call it a middle-ground city would be both redundant and a little misleading. It was, simply, a city, a crossroads, a place where people from different cultures met and products were exchanged.

As the surrounding suburbs drew off the métis portion of the population, the core became increasingly colonial. But the city proper was, from the beginning, a French home. When a group of 150 Missouri Indians arrived in 1764 while Chouteau and Laclède's workmen were first laying out the town, Laclède hurried back to the site and carefully explained why they must leave, disabusing them

of their notion to settle in the heart of the new post. (Before they left, the women and children were engaged to dig a cellar for the company's main building.) Never intended to be an Indian home, St. Louis, nevertheless, quickly became a place of both interest and influence within Indian country. Coeur qui brule, a Kansas chief, wrote to the lieutenant governor in 1800 that "for a long time I have wanted to see the town (*depuis longtemps je désire voir la ville*)." Understanding that St. Louis was a place of French manners and values, he added that he did not want to visit, like some chiefs, to seek presents. On the contrary, he said, "I have the heart of a Frenchman (*j'ai le coeur d'un français*)."

Exchange and curiosity did not always produce harmony. The proximity of disparate cultures with unequal resources and power could easily produce tense situations. In one telling incident in December 1778, an Indian man named Louis Mahas announced that "he had dressed long enough as a Frenchman, he would now dress as an Indian warrior and go and take scalps." He was quickly arrested. Early French St. Louis was a compact settlement, and lots were enclosed with palisades. When Auguste Chouteau purchased Laclède's old stone headquarters in 1789, he enclosed the entire lot with a "solid stone wall two feet thick and ten feet high, with portholes about every ten feet apart, through which to shoot Indians in case of an attack."

The vulnerability of St. Louis was exposed only once in its early period. In 1780, a force of around 950 British soldiers and Indian allies, with some Canadian traders, attacked the town. The invaders were repelled, but not before over ninety inhabitants of the town, free and slave, were killed, wounded, or taken captive. The losses were deeply felt in a town with a population of some seven hundred souls. But the challenge of this first generation was not how to defend the place; rather, the primary task was that of constructing a city, a family, and a business from scratch. Consider the story of its founding mother, Marie Thérèse Bourgeois Chouteau. Madame Chouteau, born in New Orleans in 1733 to a French immigrant, Nicholas Bourgeois, and his Spanish wife, Marie Tarare, did not have an easy early life. Her father died when she was six; her mother remarried. Family tradition has it that Marie Thérèse was placed in the Ursuline Convent. More likely, she lived with her mother and stepfather. She married René Chouteau, a baker and innkeeper, at age fifteen. By all accounts, her husband was contentious and physically abusive. He abandoned his wife and young son, Auguste, possibly as early as 1753 and returned to France. She must have met Pierre de Laclède fairly soon after his arrival in New Orleans in 1755. They remained together until his death in 1778. According to the laws of the Roman Catholic Church and France, the couple could not marry. Therefore, when their four children arrived—Jean Pierre (1758), Marie Pelagie (1760), Marie Louise (1762), and Victoire (1764)—they were given the name Chouteau. When Laclède and Auguste Chouteau, Marie Thérèse's only child by her legal husband, left on their founding journey, she was pregnant with Victoire. Sometime soon after the baby's baptism, she left New Orleans to make the seven-hundred-mile journey upriver with her three young children and infant in tow. In short, Marie Thérèse and her children, alone in the world with few

resources, left a fragile past for a most uncertain future.

Arriving at Fort de Chartres, Madame Chouteau and the children then traveled to Cahokia in a bumpy, two-wheeled charrette and crossed the river in a pirogue. The family began their new life in the newly built stone headquarters. Four years later, they moved to a new house down the street. Laclède deeded this residence to Madame Chouteau, along with the lot, an additional piece of land in the common fields, three black slaves, and two Indian slaves, Manon and Thérèse, both in their teens. These gifts Pierre gave to his partner in consideration of his clerk Auguste's "faithful service" and "the affection" he bore the other four children of "dame Marie Thérèse Bourgeois and of Sieur René Choutaud."

By this time, the missing husband had reemerged. Boarding a ship at La Rochelle in 1767, he returned to Louisiana. He spent some time in jail in New Orleans in 1771 for slandering a rival baker. Then in 1774, he initiated legal action to force his wife to return. Governor Unzaga directed the lieutenant governor in St. Louis to send Madame Chouteau back to New Orleans to be "under the authority of her husband." Although another set of letters followed, this time with a promise to keep Marie Thérèse and Laclède apart, no further action was taken. Laclède continued to live in a room in the house he had given to Madame Chouteau. His children could never acknowledge their true father in public. All of this caused some consternation among the many socially prominent descendants as late as 1921, when one published a tract entitled *Madame Chouteau Vindicated*. What the story suggests is that St. Louis provided not only an economic opportunity, but a domestic one. In this distant place, the family could be secure, beyond the reach of legal propriety. Their stake in the city's survival represented an unusual risk.

To their relief, René Chouteau died in 1776. Thereafter, Marie Thérèse signed herself as Veuve (Widow) Chouteau. Laclède and Madame Chouteau never married, very possibly because he was heavily in debt to his former business partner, Maxent. The two had terminated their arrangement back in 1769, several years after their trade privileges had been discontinued. Laclède bought Maxent out but was never able to cover the notes he had signed. When Laclède died in 1778, his stepson Auguste was appointed by the governor to settle the estate at the request of Maxent. The results of the sale suggest that Maxent allowed the widow to acquire enough property cheaply to provide a good income in the future.

Auguste purchased Laclède's gristmill (the only one in the region), a dam, lake (known thereafter as Chouteau's Pond), and over eight hundred arpents of land for two thousand livres. By this time, both Chouteau brothers, Auguste and Pierre, were trading on their own account quite successfully. All three daughters married well, bringing well-educated men (from France, Canada, and Switzerland), with capital and connections, into the family and its city. In this first generation, the growing Chouteau clan followed the time-honored patterns of mercantile families. Episodic ventures between family members

allowed them to pool their resources while minimizing risk. Early transfers of property, large dowries, and a system of partible inheritance favored the entry of sons and sons-in-law into commercial ventures at an early age. Trial partnerships encouraged the identification of skills. Children were an investment. As one descendant observed, “They come high, but they may become valuable in time to come.” In a new and distant place, women played a critical role in preparing their children for the complex world of international trade. It was Marie Thérèse Bourgeois Chouteau who gave the family its sense of direction and purpose. She set the tone in this bourgeois enclave in Indian country.

By the turn of the century, a new generation of family firms had begun to form. New relations, the building blocks of the urban community and the interconnected family businesses, arrived from Gascony, from Laclède’s home province of Béarn, even from Italy (Barthomolew Berthold or Bertolla whose brother represented the firm that produced glass beads for the Indian trade). A new generation of Chouteau women would create homes that served as gathering places and centers of socialization and education: Julie Cabanné in St. Louis and Berenice Ménard Chouteau in a new Chouteau outpost, Kansas City. Judging from the family’s letters over several generations, it was, for the most part, an affectionate set of connections—a family that saw no separation between the spheres of worldly ambition and domestic pleasure. Indeed, merchants who spent much time away from home pursuing trade in Indian posts and European and colonial capitals often wrote home with thoughts of loving partners and children at play.

At her death in 1814, Veuve Chouteau was mourned by close to one hundred children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Given her own experiences, it is not surprising that Veuve Chouteau acquired a reputation for being thrifty, but family stories also describe her as a woman who loved clothes and jewelry. She conducted her own business affairs, with help from her Indian slave woman, Thérèse, whom she taught to manage her household. The town and family the widow constructed retained its French character during her lifetime. As one visitor described it in 1816, “St. Louis, as you approach it, shows like all the other French towns in this region . . . The French mode of building, and the white coat of lime applied to the mud or rough stone walls, give them a beauty at a distance, which gives place to their native meanness when you inspect them from a nearer point of view . . . The site is naturally a beautiful one, rising gradually from the shore to the summit of the bluff, like an amphitheatre. It contains many handsome, and a few splendid buildings.”

The city changed quickly after Madame Chouteau’s death: new commercial and industrial enterprises, banks, Protestant churches, a new cathedral, civic institutions. Even some of the muddy streets would be paved. Above all, the first steamboat arrived in 1817, an impressive tool for conquering the tyranny of distance and reinforcing the city’s position within a regional and national economic network. Madame’s grandson, Pierre Chouteau Jr., would use steamboats to consolidate the family firm’s dominant position in the fur trade, eventually

superseding and even acquiring John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. Chouteau would become the most famous name in the West in the antebellum period, appearing on Indian medals and flying from the flagpoles of company vessels. Controlling the flow of people, information, and goods, the Chouteau company would continue to serve both their private interests and those of an expanding American empire—in that order. Within a new diversified portfolio that included railroads, railroad iron, and real estate, the fur trade would become an Indian business that drew profits from the dispossession of native people. But then St. Louis had been from the beginning a place that took advantage of its proximity to Indian communities. It was not a home for native people, and Indian residents of the city in this early period were more likely to be slaves, outnumbered by the sizable population of African slaves.

The family itself remained open ended. Veuve Chouteau's grandson General Charles Gratiot Jr., a graduate of West Point, would spend much time in Washington as a company lobbyist. His daughter Marie Victoire would marry a Frenchman and become "one of the most brilliant ornaments of the court of the Empress Eugénie." Another grandson, Frederick Chouteau, would spend most of his adult life in Kansas and Oklahoma. His son William would marry a Shawnee woman, Mary Silverheels. That couple's great granddaughter, Yvonne Chouteau, would celebrate both her Chouteau ancestry and her Indian ancestry and achieve fame in the 1940s and '50s as the prima ballerina of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

It was a curious and fascinating circle Laclède and Chouteau created when they first arranged the pattern of people and buildings named St. Louis. Perhaps the most representative sight in the city's first generation was that of the two Thérèses, one French, one Indian, walking down its streets. The Indian Thérèse served as Madame Chouteau's personal secretary and close companion for almost fifty years. If only we could have recorded their conversations. They were said to have been a "formidable combination." In her will, Madame Chouteau gave the Indian woman her freedom and a small amount of cash and goods. During her lifetime, the French Thérèse, surmounting a rough start, became the mother of a city and a family dynasty. The Indian Thérèse, we should remember, was her slave.

Further Reading: The best history of the city is James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis, 1998). Charles van Ravenswaay, *St. Louis: An Informal History of the City and its People, 1764-1865* (St. Louis, 1991) provides an invaluable anecdotal history in a well-illustrated volume. William E. Foley and C. David Rice, *The First Chouteaus: River Barons of Early St. Louis* (Urbana, 1983) is the definitive study of the first generation of this family, placing their activities in their local, regional, and national contexts. John Francis McDermott, ed., *The Early Histories of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1952) contains Chouteau's "Narrative" and other important early writings about the town. Katharine T. Corbett, "Veuve Chouteau, A 250th Anniversary," *Gateway Heritage* 3:4 (Spring 1983) provides a portrait of the founding mother. Eric Sandweiss, *St. Louis: The Evolution of an*

American Urban Landscape (Philadelphia, 2001) combines the perspectives of history and urban studies in a most useful way.

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