

History

River Towns

Riverfronts and river communities have traditionally responded to a variety of factors. Economics, social patterns, and advancements in technology are some of the factors that have influenced the riverfront environment. Generally, riverfront communities have experienced five basic phases of riverfront development to varying degrees.

The **first phase** is typically associated with the founding or the 'landing' that created a new settlement. For New York, the Hudson River provided a relatively deep-water estuary to harbor ships, transporting goods and people between the old and new-worlds. For New Orleans, the Mississippi River provided an avenue into the American interior for French explorers, as well as a relatively safe inland harbor for ocean-bound vessels of commerce. The **Missouri River** provided a vital arterial to exploration, settlement, and commerce into the heart of an expanding nation. Settlements such as St. Louis, Les Petites Cotes (St. Charles), and the Town of Kansas (Kansas City) provided staging points for westward expansion.

The **second phase** is generally associated with a time when the riverfront was the focus of community prosperity. Riverfronts were typically centers of activity, aligned with commerce and transportation. For St. Charles and other river towns along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, the steamboat utilized these natural river highways to transport goods or bring people westward to the frontier of an emerging nation. During this time, river communities were highly dependent and connected to their rivers and the activity that took place upon them.

The **third phase** of riverfront development is associated with the coming of the railroad. Communities competed heavily for rail bridges to traverse a river in their particular region. Communities understood that future prosperity was dependent upon the interrelationship of river and rail. Railroads tended to locate along the relatively flat river's edge. Typically, riverfronts became more industrial in nature, with goods, services, and expanding populations moving away from the riverfront. For many river towns along the Missouri River, this trend may also have been fostered by the necessity to develop on higher ground, mitigating the loss of life and property due to flooding of the untame river.

The **fourth phase** can be associated with yet another change in transportation technology and society - the automobile. As communities expanded with the flexibility that the personal automobile afforded, many Americans had the freedom to move further away from the urban core. With the increasing affluence of the middle-class, the creation of the Interstate Highway System after World War II, suburban developments and regional shopping centers, a new American suburban culture was formed.

For Midwest river towns, this meant that the traditional commercial roles along the river's edge changed yet again. Many riverfront environments lost diversity, evolving to more warehousing and industry, while residential and basic services located yet further away to the peripheral areas of the city.



Recent St. Charles' riverfront investments include the Lewis and Clark Boathouse, which houses replica keelboats from the Corps of Discovery expedition and a interpretive center.



Some communities attempted to preserve some of their traditional riverfront fabric through the preservation of buildings and significant features, however, they typically served as a single function or destination such as entertainment or specialty retail shops. Other communities pursued revitalization strategies that were predominantly public oriented, such as parks or event facilities, but they never fully capitalized on the concept of diversity once found in riverfront areas.

The **fifth and current phase** is associated with new thinking about riverfronts and traditional core areas. 'Reinventing' the riverfront has become an active concept along American rivers today. A general sense of a community's connection to its past, as well as developing the riverfront as a bridge to its future, appears to be the next evolution in river towns.

With initiatives such as the America's River Program, a new awareness of the riverfront as a community asset is emerging. Riverfronts are re-establishing themselves as diverse environments, with a mixture of destination uses, regional entertainment centers, goods and services, specialty retail, office, and, most importantly, residential activities. Cities are striving to recapture '24-hour' environments that represent opportunities to live, work, and play along the riverfront.

The Missouri River and St. Charles

St. Charles is a distinct community along the Missouri River. Much of its heritage can be experienced along the Historic Main Street and other historic districts that parallel the river's edge. These are valuable assets that many cities lack.

Community growth in St. Charles during the post-war era of suburban development, like in other American cities, has changed the nature of the way the St. Charles riverfront functions today. Given this context, what is the future prospect for the St. Charles riverfront? To plan effectively for the future, a better appreciation of the riverfront's past will allow for a greater understanding of its future.

Frontier Gateway

Historically, waterways were natural 'highways' connecting the early settlement of the United States, and today, they have great significance in the redevelopment of great American river towns. This relationship is embodied in the connection between the Missouri River and the City of St. Charles.

For Native Americans, the Missouri River or 'Mine Sose', which meant muddy river, was a vital arterial for commerce and trade. During the 17th and 18th Centuries, the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers provided natural routes into resource-rich lands for explorers, trappers, and tradesmen.

The beginnings of exploration along the lower Missouri River is generally associated with the French. Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette led the first French expedition along the Mississippi River in hopes of finding a route to the Pacific Ocean, and, along their route, they passed the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi



Completed in 2003, the Lewis and Clark statue will be a centerpiece in Frontier Park during the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial celebration in St. Charles.



Rivers in the late 1600's. Founded near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, St. Charles' location was ideal as a natural gateway to the western frontier. The trading post, originally founded in 1769 by Louis Blanchette as Les Petites Cotes (The Little Hills), grew to a population of over 200 by 1790.

In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, deeded previously acquired Spanish lands from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean to the emerging Republic of the United States. The 'Louisiana Purchase' nearly doubled the size of the country, and a new American frontier was born. St. Charles and the Missouri River played an important part in the history of exploration. In 1804, Lieutenant William Clark met with Meriweather Lewis in St. Charles.

The Corps of Discovery expedition embarked on the Missouri River for their journey, which would lead them to the Pacific Ocean. Two years later, they returned through St. Charles. That same year, General Zebulon Pike embarked from St. Charles on an expedition to the Rocky Mountains and the southwestern lands of the Louisiana Purchase. St. Charles, the oldest city on the Missouri River, was dedicated as the capitol of the new State of Missouri in 1821 and served in this capacity until 1826.

The Age of Steamboats

Over the next few decades, steamboat travel became the dominant means of transportation along the Missouri River. With the 'age of steamboats', St. Charles became better connected with western settlements such as Independence, The Town of Kansas, and Westport (now Kansas City), where links could be made with the overland routes of the Santa Fe, California, and Oregon Trails.

Further upstream in St. Joseph, the famed Pony Express expedited mail to the West. Navigation along the Missouri River was possible, although at times treacherous, but it provided a natural route to developing communities along the river in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa.

Transportation Revolution

By the mid-19th Century, the locomotive changed the landscape of western travel, replacing the steamboat as the principal means for transporting goods and people. In 1856, freight and passenger train service arrived in St. Charles, however, with no bridge, people and freight had to be ferried across the Missouri River to and from St. Charles. The Wabash Railroad Bridge was constructed in 1871. At the time, it was the longest railroad span in the nation. Other innovations in transportation began to further shape American cities, such as inner-city trolley lines. Trolleys ran in St. Charles until the 1930's. With the advent of the automobile in the early 20th century, transportation preferences further changed.

The personal automobile became more readily available to the masses. In 1904, the St. Charles Rock Road Toll Bridge was constructed over the Missouri River. During this period, the impact of the Corps of Engineers began to shape the future of the Missouri River. Previously, the Missouri River had been an untame channel that meandered and reshaped itself over time.



From steamboats to barges, the Missouri River has been a vital transportation and economic arterial in the region.

