

St. Louis County History

Formation of the County

St. Louis County came into existence just nine years after the Louisiana Purchase and nine years before Missouri attained statehood. After their historic exploration of the Louisiana Purchase and beyond, both Meriwether Lewis and William Clark served as territorial governors of the area that included Missouri. On October 1, 1812, Governor William Clark organized the five administrative districts of Upper Louisiana Territory into counties, one of which was St. Louis County. In 1818, still prior to Missouri statehood, Franklin and Jefferson counties were formed out of the original St. Louis County, leaving St. Louis County with the land that today comprises St. Louis County and St. Louis City.

Both William Clark and Meriwether Lewis served as territorial governors of the area that is now Missouri.

The City of St. Louis was thirty-nine years old at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. It was founded in 1764, the year following the end of the French and Indian War and the Treaty of Paris, which transferred France's claims west of the Mississippi River to Spain. Although the area was nominally Spanish, the founders of St. Louis were French settlers from New Orleans.

The first permanent European settlement in what is now St. Louis County was Florissant in 1785, also a French community. Creve Coeur also existed at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. In 1804, the combined population of the St. Louis district of Upper Louisiana (including St. Louis City, St. Louis County and Franklin and Jefferson Counties) was estimated to be 2,780, including 500 slaves.

City/County Separation or "The Great Divorce"

The separation of St. Louis City from St. Louis County occurred in 1876. At the time, the separation was strongly advocated by city leaders who felt the non-urban parts of the County were an undue burden on the urbanized and prosperous City of St. Louis.

Prior to 1876, there was great resentment of the County's taxation policies at a time when the City had large expenses in extending urban infrastructure to its rapidly growing population. A former mayor of St. Louis, John F. Darby, accused the County Court of "a great wrong in imposing an exorbitant tax on the people of St. Louis County, and of enormous, unjustifiable and scandalous waste of public money." (John F. Darby, *Personal Recollections*, St. Louis, 1880, p. 437.) A Taxpayers' League, formed in 1872, was very critical of the County Court's operations and gave impetus to the movement for separation from the County.

St. Louis City boundaries were extended to Skinker Boulevard over the objections of some who asserted that the city would never extend that far west.

The plan of separation was drafted by a Board of Freeholders authorized by Missouri's revised Constitution of 1875. That Constitution also authorized an extension of the city limits of St. Louis and gave the City the right to formulate its own home rule charter.

New City boundaries were adopted over the objections of some who asserted that the city would never extend that far west. The boundaries were moved from the old limit just west of Grand Boulevard to a new limit west of Skinker Boulevard, thereby taking in the newly acquired Forest Park and increasing the size of the City

from 17.98 square miles to its present 61.37 square miles. That left St. Louis County at its present size of 524 square miles. The newly separated County had a population of 31,888, the third largest in Missouri. It had a few small urban centers but was still predominantly rural.

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Selection of a County Seat

After the separation of St. Louis City from St. Louis County, early meetings of the new County Court, as the policy-making body was called, were held first at a home in Maplewood, then at two locations in what is now Des Peres. The first building to accommodate both the County Court meetings and County records and offices was Mt. Olive House, a large three-story brick building which had been built in 1860 as a summer resort on Olive Street Road, just east of the intersection with North and South Road. The County Court met there for two years and even used part of the building as a jail while other parts of the building continued to be operated as a hotel, a post office, and a printing office.

The selection of a permanent County seat was the responsibility of a Commission established by the new charter. After considering several locations including Florissant, they selected a 104-acre site on Hanley Road donated by Ralph Clayton and Martin F. Hanley. After a successful election approving the location in 1877, they platted the site on which two main buildings of the County government center are located today - the block bordered by Central, Carondelet, and Meramec Avenues and Forsyth Boulevard (originally called St. Ferdinand).

The County Courthouses of St. Louis County

An interesting fact of St. Louis County Courthouse history is that the first permanent (not rented) courthouse for St. Louis County was what is now known as the Old Courthouse in downtown St. Louis, the site of the famous Dred Scott trial and now part of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. It was built on land donated in 1823 by Auguste Chouteau and J. B. C. Lucas, two distinguished citizens. The original courthouse was completed in 1833 and was located where the present east wing of the building is situated. The building was expanded in 1839, and the rotunda, dome, and west wing were built in 1843. In 1851, the original east wing was demolished, and in 1856 a new east wing replaced it.

The first St. Louis County Courthouse was what is now known as the Old Courthouse in downtown St. Louis.

Following separation and selection of Clayton as the county seat, a courthouse and jail were built and occupied in December 1878. The original building was expanded in 1912 and 1926. After 20 years of defeating bond issue proposals, County voters in 1945 approved a bond issue for a new courthouse building facing Forsyth Boulevard, and that building was completed in 1949. A change in state law allowing the construction of jail facilities outside of the county seat made possible the construction of the Adult Correctional Institution in Gumbo, completed in 1969. Having relieved severe jail overcrowding and inadequacy, County government succeeded in passing a bond issue for the construction of the ten-story Administration Building, the six-story Courts building and a 1200-car garage. These improvements were completed in 1972.

Since the construction the Adult Correctional Institution in the 1960s, when land costs in Clayton were considered prohibitive, continued jail overcrowding and deterioration of the remaining jail facilities in Clayton created pressure for new correctional facilities. In choosing a site for new facilities the costs and difficulties of continually transporting prisoners between jail facilities in far west County and court facilities in Clayton weighed in favor of a Clayton site for a new jail and expanded Court facilities. The new Justice Center, which opened in 1998, is connected to the Courts Building by a secure skywalk and replaces both the jail in the 1949 Courthouse building and the Adult Correctional Building in Chesterfield.

St. Louis County History

Form of Government

From 1877 until 1950, St. Louis County's governing body was the three-judge County Court, a quasi-legislative and executive body consisting of a presiding judge elected at large and two Associate Judges elected from separate geographic districts. By 1950, this structure had been long criticized as antiquated and unsuitable for an urban county. The County Court's authority over other agencies in the County was severely limited. There were more than a dozen independently elected county officials that were not directly accountable to the County Court; these included the Sheriff, Recorder of Deeds, County Clerk, Circuit Clerk, County Highway Engineer, Constables, Superintendent of Schools and Public Administrator.

In 1945 Missouri voters adopted a constitutional change which allowed counties of more than 85,000 people to reorganize their government under a home rule charter. A Charter Commission proposed a major overhaul of the government creating the position of County Supervisor as full-time paid executive and a separate seven-member County Council, with members elected from seven districts. The first home-rule charter, which was adopted in 1950, created eleven County departments but left sixteen positions which were elected on a partisan basis. Subsequent amendments to the 1950 charter reduced the number of elective offices and authorized a merit system for County employees. Actions taken under the 1950 Charter in response to rapid growth of the County included the creation of the St. Louis County Police Department and adoption of a master zoning ordinance and modern building codes.

The County's first home rule charter was adopted in 1950 and the present charter in 1968.

The present St. Louis County Charter was adopted in 1968, partly in response to problems relating to lack of control over the independently elected Sheriff, County Treasurer and Recorder of Deeds. The new charter left only the County Supervisor (now County Executive), the seven County Council Members and the Prosecuting Attorney as elective officials. Government department heads are appointed by the County Executive with the approval of the Council.



Source: Robert A. Cohn, *The History and Growth of St. Louis County*, 1969.