

St. Louis, Ste. Genevieve & Two Empires

The first French traders began exploring the Missouri River and its tributaries in the late 1600s. With them, firearms, and other trade goods became readily available to the Osage and other tribes. Access to European traders made the Osage even more powerful, and they worked hard to keep their advantage. Competition for trade goods intensified inter-tribal warfare.

Meanwhile, the French continued to move into the land later known as Missouri. By the 1740s, the French had established the first village west of the Mississippi River, Ste. Genevieve. Nicknamed “miserè” or misery because of its constant flooding, this agricultural community remained the only non-Native settlement west of the Mississippi until the founding of St. Louis in 1764.

St. Louis’ founding came at a tumultuous time, as the French transferred the Louisiana Territory to the Spanish. The two empires secretly signed the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762. Spain’s lack of government officials in the area, however, meant that St. Louis remained a culturally French community. Residents focused on trade on the Mississippi, and with the Osage and other American Indians in the region. Members of the Shawnee and Delaware tribes resettled in southeast Missouri at the invitation of the Spanish government in 1787.

In 1795, Spain opened up immigration to Louisiana to Americans. They hoped Americans would help fight against a potential French takeover and American Indian raids. By 1800, Americans outnumbered the French colonists. At this time, Spain wanted out of the territory and saw the rise of Napoleon in France as their opportunity. On Oct. 1, 1800, Spain ceded the territory back to France with the Treaty of Ildefonso. Napoleon began to plan a new empire in the west.



Oscar E. Berninghaus’ depiction of Auguste Chouteau, (center in red coat) founding St. Louis on February 15, 1764, (above). “Old Ste. Genevieve—Settled 1735,” lunette painted by Oscar Berninghaus for the Missouri State Capitol, (below). You can view the lunette on the second floor, west side of the Capitol.

Images courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. “The Founding of St. Louis by Auguste Chouteau February 15, 1764,” (top); Sophie Grus, (bottom).