

American City

St. Louis Architecture Three Centuries of Classic Design

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St. Louis: Architectural Lives and Legends

1. The Cream of Everything in the World

Even Henry Adams, that most acerbic of 19th-century memoirists, was bowled over by the St. Louis World’s Fair.

“The world had never witnessed so marvelous a phantasm,” he wrote, before going on to describe “long lines of white palaces, exquisitely lighted by thousands on thousands of electric candles, soft, rich, shadowy, palpable in their sensuous depths. . . One enjoyed it with iniquitous rapture.”

Adams was one of about 20 million visitors to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, which celebrated a century of growth in St. Louis. During this period, the city went from being a small fur-trading post on the upper Mississippi River to the nation’s fourth largest metropolis.

At a time when Chicago was still a rough settlement of log huts, St. Louis was a bustling city of elegant hotels, theaters and government buildings with a levee district that stretched for several miles along the riverfront and was one of the marvels of 19th-century commerce.

“They boast at St. Louis that they command 46,000 miles of navigable river water,” wrote one 19th-century visitor, the British novelist and travel writer Anthony Trollope. “To no city can have been given more means of riches.”

These riches were on ample display at the Fair, which sprawled over 1,200 acres of Forest Park, a large tract of rolling land at the city’s western boundary.

The Exposition opened on April 30, 1904, with a ceremony that began with President Theodore Roosevelt pressing a telegraph key in the East Room of the White House to ignite the Fair’s electrical system.

The highlight was the “Ivory City,” a collection of 12 enormous Beaux Arts exhibition halls grouped around a grand basin at

the foot of what was called Art Hill. The largest – the Palace of Agriculture – occupied more than 18 acres. There was also a massive, circular Festival Hall that contained a 3,500-seat auditorium.

Except for one – the Palace of Fine Arts – all were temporary structures constructed of plaster and lath. The halls were outlined in tens of thousands of electric light bulbs in the most impressive display of outdoor illumination ever attempted.

Five of the halls were designed by prominent St. Louis architects and firms such as Theodore Link, Eames & Young, and Barnett, Haynes & Barnett. A sixth local architect, Isaac Taylor, served as Director of Works, a position that involved supervising the construction of what is still generally considered to be one of the largest World’s Fairs ever held.

The remaining halls were designed by highly regarded East Coast architects and firms such as Cass Gilbert, Carrere & Hastings, and Louis Masqueray. Masqueray, who had previously worked for Carrere & Hastings, Richard Morris Hunt, and Warren & Wetmore, also served as the Fair’s Chief of Design.

“The buildings were elegant and formal and were constructed in the approved palatial style,” wrote Sally Benson in *Meet Me In St. Louis*, a book and film that even today defines how many people view the city. “There was no thought of dynamic expression or crude force in back of anything. . . Greek goddesses presided over the domes, classic and beautiful. . . It was the cream of everything in the world.”

Classicism lingered longer in St. Louis than just about anywhere else in the United States. Indeed, almost all of the city’s greatest architects were Classicists and it is still the default style of the city, used for everything from downtown skyscrapers to public works projects like parks and bridges.

Along with all of those pillars and pediments, however, is an insistent – at times visionary – streak of Modernism that has



Detail, Eads Bridge

moved the needle of architecture forward on more than one occasion. Three structures in particular stand out in this regard: the Eads Bridge, the Wainwright Building and the Gateway Arch.

It is a legacy well worth celebrating. But in order to understand it, one needs to know how it all began.

2. I Have Found a Situation

St. Louis was founded in 1764 by Pierre Laclede, a French fur trader from New Orleans, who had been granted a trading monopoly for what was then known as the Upper Louisiana Territory. The site was a limestone bluff on the west bank of the Mississippi River just south of the confluence of the Missouri River.

“I have found a situation,” Laclede wrote, “where I intend establishing a settlement which in the future shall become one of the most beautiful cities in the world.”

The original plan – very similar to New Orleans – consisted of three parallel streets along the river with a total of about two dozen blocks. At the top of the bluff were a few miles of farms and fields that eventually faded into wilderness.

The French lost control of the city to the Spanish in 1770 but regained it in 1800 long enough for the Emperor Napoleon to sell it to the United States as part of the \$15 million Louisiana Purchase. In 1804, the French flag was officially replaced by the stars and stripes and the city assumed its historic role as the Gateway to the West.

At that time, St. Louis – a city of about 180 stone and wood houses – had a population of about 1,000 residents.

While none of these buildings still exist, drawings and engravings of the period show that they resembled houses in Quebec and other French colonies with vertical post construction, hipped roofs and expansive verandahs and galleries.

English novelist Charles Dickens left an evocative account of the original village in *American Notes*, a book he published following a six-month tour of the United States in the early 1840s. “In the old French portion of the town,” he wrote, “the thoroughfares are narrow and crooked, and some of the houses are very quaint and picturesque: being built of wood, with tumble-down galleries before the windows, approachable by stairs, or rather ladders, from the street. There are queer little barbers’ shops and drinking-houses, too, in this quarter; and [an] abundance of crazy old tenements with blinking casements such as may be seen in Flanders.”

St. Louis played a leading role in one of the most romanticized periods in American history – the Steamboat Era, lasting roughly from the 1820s to the start of the Civil War. The first steamboat to tie up at the city’s wharf was the *Zebulon M. Pike* – named for an early explorer of the Upper Mississippi region – in 1817. By the 1840s, St. Louis was the second busiest port in the west after New Orleans with upwards of 2,000 steamboats a year arriving and departing.

A gauge of business activity during this period can be gleaned from the statistics from the 1849 St. Louis Fire, which began on the morning of May 17 and quickly engulfed about 15 blocks of the riverfront levee district. By the time the fire burned out, about 430 buildings and 23 steamboats had been destroyed with total losses estimated at \$6.1 million. The 23 steamboats and their cargoes accounted for \$600,000 of that figure.

The steamboat industry kicked off a 40-year period of growth for the city and by 1850 the population had surged to 77,860 residents. During this time, the city began to assume its current dimensions and architects emerged as significant players in the city’s development.

3. The Dean of St. Louis Architects

The history of 19th-century St. Louis architecture is bracketed by two epic boondoggles: the Old Courthouse and City Hall.

The former – a handsome Greek Revival structure topped by an iron dome modeled on St. Peter’s in Rome – broke ground in 1838 and was not completed until 1862. The latter – a loose adaptation of Paris’s city hall, the Hôtel de Ville – took even longer. The project was first proposed in 1868 but city officials did not announce a design competition until 1889 and the building was not completed until 1904.

In both cases, construction waxed and waned over the years, succeeding teams of architects were hired and fired and accusations of profiteering and financial mismanagement proliferated. The miracle is that both buildings are magnificent structures that betray no hint of their intensely troubled gestation periods.

The Old Courthouse involved six different architects – eight, if one includes two early unbuilt designs. One of them was George I. Barnett (1815–1898), an Englishman who is often referred to as the “Dean of St. Louis architects.”

Barnett, who was born in Nottingham, England, immigrated to the United States in 1839 after serving an apprenticeship with Sir Thomas Hine, a prominent English architect of the period. Over the course of his nearly 50-year career, Barnett designed hundreds of buildings in a variety of styles with Greek Revival, Italianate and Gothic being the most prominent. His commissions ranged from numerous houses and churches to important civic and commercial projects both in St. Louis and around the state.

More than any other designer, Barnett established Classicism as the city’s dominant architectural language. His proportions were unerring, his ornamentation both restrained and dramatic. He also created the city’s most enduring architectural dynasty as both his son, Thomas P. Barnett, and grandson, George D. Barnett, followed in his footsteps and became leading architects in their own right.

“He was young at eighty years of age and his ideas were youthful and more optimistic than men I know at thirty,”

wrote Thomas Barnett after his father’s death. “So wrapped up was he in his art and in all things done in the art world that he had no time to grow old or to become bored with the commonplaces of life.”

The Missouri Botanical Garden and nearby Tower Grove Park have between them the largest grouping of Barnett structures in the city. These include a museum, two green-houses, a gate, a gatehouse, a tomb and two houses built for Henry Shaw, the founder of the Garden. These buildings – carefully detailed and in a range of traditional styles – provide an evocative view of the city in its early years.

In 1881, Barnett – by then a revered figure in the city – was honored at a dinner at one of his last major commissions, the Southern Hotel, where he was presented with a gold watch and a silver tea service. Afterwards, he was eulogized by A.J. Conant, a painter renowned for his portraits of local notables.

“You belong to that unbroken line of men who have recorded in solid rock the continuous history of the human race,” said Conant, “You have justly earned that enviable reputation which places you in the front rank of the architects of our land.”

4. This Is Going to Be My River

The Civil War had a devastating effect on St. Louis and on Missouri, a slave state that nevertheless sided with the North. Slavery had never been much of a factor in St. Louis. Out of a total population of 160,773 in 1860, less than one percent were slaves. Still, the city suffered inordinately as river traffic came to a halt on the lower Mississippi due to various Confederate blockades while trade with the upper Mississippi region was diverted to Chicago.

St. Louis’s fabled Levee District never recovered. In his memoir *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain, who began his career as a steamboat pilot, described what he saw during a melancholy visit to the city’s waterfront in the early 1880s: “Half a dozen