

THE ART OF MEMORY

The Missouri State Capitol complex serves as an epitome art district.

BY W. ARTHUR MEHRHOFF

At 437 feet long and 300 feet wide, the building covers three acres with 500,000 square feet of floor space for legislative assemblies and government offices.

“The setting draws both the teller and the hearers into a larger and older conversation.”

—Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*

SOME MISSOURI LIFE readers may remember the exciting spring ritual of boarding a yellow school bus to tour the Missouri State Capitol. Although the waiting tour guides may not have shared the excitement, everyone understood that something big was taking place.

In literature, an epitome represents or summarizes something big. The Missouri State Capitol Historic District, in the absolute heart of Missouri, epitomizes a much larger and older conversation about the course of Missouri's life.

NOTLEY HAWKINS

OF TIME AND THE RIVER

The Missouri River flows through more than five hundred miles of the state, several major metropolitan areas, and past the State Capitol. Formed more than 100,000 years ago when the Rocky Mountain streams flowed eastward and confronted the western edge of a massive glacier, these bodies of water wisely diverted southward until reaching present day Kansas City. From there, they flowed east along the glacier's southern border, through what is now central Missouri.

Lewis and Clark noted that the powerful river teemed with islands, side channels, quiet backwaters, and lush marshes. Like Runge Nature Center near Jefferson City, the Missouri River floodplain hosted grasslands, forests, and wetlands that attracted the first native peoples and, later, the westering Americans. Today, more than half of all Missourians receive their drinking water—along with fish, wildlife, outdoor recreation, power generation, and river commerce—from this now heavily channelized river and its alluvial plains. It remains the matrix of Missouri.



The Runge Nature Center, just outside Jefferson City, features an indoor wildlife viewing area. Plus, the Missouri Department of Conservation Area has exhibits, classrooms, and an auditorium.

izes those dramatic changes. This stately mansion, designed by noted St. Louis architect George Barnett and built in only eight months by prisoners of the nearby state penitentiary, cost approximately \$75,000. With its mansard roof and pink granite portico columns perched high above the Missouri River, the Missouri Governor's Mansion is on the National Register of Historic Places, and it reflects the fashionable French Second Empire architectural style celebrating the vast new wealth created by industrial capitalism.

Mark Twain called the period from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century *The Gilded Age*, coining the term in his book of the same title. Large corporations made possible, even necessary, by the Civil War replaced the small, locally owned factories and businesses found in places like Jefferson Landing. This new social order witnessed advances in communications and transportation, such as the telegraph and transcontinental railroads facilitated by Eads Bridge in St. Louis; waves of immigrants and rapid urbanization; a perceptible shift from farms and countryside to factories and cities; and the closing of the frontier. The Governor's Mansion overlooking Jefferson Landing clearly reflects these vast new financial and cultural energies in Missouri.

AMERICA BY DESIGN: THE STATE CAPITOL

Missouri's monumental Capitol shows us the continued growth of Missouri and its government during the first part of the twentieth century. Following a devastating 1911 fire, Missourians approved \$3.5 million in state bonds to erect a new Capitol, which was officially dedicated on October 6, 1924.

This Classical Revival building sits on a limestone bluff high atop the south bank of the Missouri River and towers 238 feet over the landscape. The building covers three acres with a half million square feet of



Field trips to the State Capitol were commonplace among Missouri public schools in the 1950s and 1960s. Here, children exit buses near the south entrance and statue of Thomas Jefferson.

floor space for legislative assemblies, government offices, and a truly amazing collection of public art.

The Missouri State Capitol and grounds, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, proudly reflects the City Beautiful urban design tradition. The complex was designed by New York architects Egerton Swartwout and Evarts Tracy, who were formerly with the legendary firm of McKim, Mead, and White and who designed several buildings for that firm in the nation's capital. Strongly endorsed by civic and business leaders, the City Beautiful Movement used classicism to create what architectural historian Spiro Kostof called "an iconography of unity" to mask the ills of rapid modernization. Similar to other early twentieth century urban designs—especially the famous 1902 McMillan Plan for Washington, DC—key elements of the Missouri Capitol design include using physically imposing government buildings in a classical style to define broad boulevards, using monuments to memorialize leaders and historic events, providing grand public spaces, and emphasizing aesthetic improvements such as public art.

And therein lies a tale. When the special property tax earmarked for building the Capitol generated a \$1 million surplus, the state attorney general ruled that the money had to be spent on the building. Legislators decided to use the money to decorate the Capitol, so they appointed a fine arts commission to recruit some of the most notable American artists of the day. Those masters created a fantastic legacy of stained glass, murals, carvings, and statuary that portray Missouri's history, legends, and cultural achievements. In 1935, the Missouri House of Representatives commissioned Missouri native Thomas Hart Benton to paint a mural on the four walls of the spacious House Lounge on the third floor in the Capitol's west wing. Despite serious threats to whitewash its bold, vivid, and often critical scenes of everyday Missourians, Benton's epic *Social History of Missouri* survives as a valuable Depression-era counterpoint to its City Beautiful venue.



ACROSS THE WIDE MISSOURI: JEFFERSON LANDING

As population flowed to Missouri from both the North and South after the Missouri Compromise, the seat of government shifted from St. Charles to the City of Jefferson in 1826. Renowned artist George Caleb Bingham celebrated the lively Missouri River scene and the vital Jefferson Street transportation and commercial landing in the new capital. The Jefferson Landing State Historic Site features the Lohman Building (1839), which is on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Union Hotel (1855). A general store and warehouse in the Lohman Building interpret the mercantile trade era. Both antebellum buildings display the simple, symmetrical Federal Style, which was characteristic of the early American republic. The arrival of the Pacific Railroad on the Missouri River in the 1850s made Jefferson Landing the transfer point for goods arriving by rail to head west by steamboat. New development, such as the Union Hotel, sprang up to serve the constantly changing needs of the bustling district. First dubbing the place the Missouri Hotel and later the Veranda Hotel, owner Charles Maus finally proclaimed it the Union Hotel after returning from Missouri's wrenching Civil War experience. While the Union was forever in song, the Civil War dramatically changed Jefferson Landing and Missouri.

THE GILDED AGE: THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION

The Missouri Governor's Mansion (1871)—whose first resident and chief proponent, Governor Benjamin Gratz Brown, ran unsuccessfully as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1872—symbol-

COURTESY OF JEFFERSON CITY CVB AND MISSOURI STATE ARCHIVES



COURTESY OF JEFFERSON CITY CVB

The Lohman Building at the Jefferson Landing State Historic Site was built in 1839. Then, it was a grocery store, warehouse, and tavern. Today, it serves more as a living history museum.

The Lewis and Clark Trailhead Plaza was designed by Columbia artist Sabra Tull Meyer. Sabra also designed a bust of Old Drum that sits in the Missouri Supreme Court building, an eagle statue in Linn, and the Freedom Flight Veterans Memorial in Boonville.



WHAT TIME IS THIS PLACE?

In *The Mystic Chords of Memory*, Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural historian Michael Kammen wrote that “societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and ... they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind.” The evolution of the State Capitol historic district epitomizes Kammen’s statement about how and why we remember. According to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, the state acquired the Jefferson Landing properties in the 1960s for another parking lot, but concerned citizens, led by Elizabeth Rozier, organized a major historic preservation effort in true sixties style. The Lohman Building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969, and in 1974, Missouri’s Bicentennial Commission adopted the Jefferson Landing proposal as the state’s official Bicentennial project. The Lohman Building and Union Hotel were restored, and the Lohman Building opened to the public on July 4, 1976, as the cornerstone of Jefferson Landing State Historic Site.

The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, perhaps as much or more than the American Bicentennial, galvanized historical interest throughout Missouri. In 2008, state officials unveiled the Lewis and Clark Monument Trailhead Plaza that depicted Lewis, Clark, interpreter George Drouillard, Clark’s slave York, and their dog Seaman. About 1,100 tons of native stone that evokes Missouri River limestone bluffs surround the group, whose cultural diversity clearly reflects more recent thinking about Missouri life. The site also features two waterfalls, benches, and a drinking fountain designed for both people and pets; Seaman would approve. Unlike the intimidating City Beautiful approach to monumentality, the plaza’s design allows visitors to physically interact with their heroes.

Located near the corner of Jefferson Street and Capitol Avenue, just east of the Capitol, the memorial overlooks the Jefferson Landing Historic Site and the river. The project cost more than \$1.3 million and was funded through a federal transportation grant, state and city matching funds, in-kind services, and private donations. The trailhead connects the Capitol to the Katy Trail, Jefferson City’s greenway trail network, and back to the river from where the course of life in Missouri originated. As novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote, “Some things will never change. Some things will always be the same. Lean down your ear upon the earth and listen.”

PLACES TO VISIT

JEFFERSON LANDING STATE HISTORIC SITE

100 Jefferson Street
mostateparks.com • 573-751-3475

THE MISSOURI GOVERNOR’S MANSION

100 Madison Street
mansion.mo.gov • 573-751-4141

MISSOURI STATE CAPITOL

201 W. Capitol Avenue
senate.mo.gov • 573-751-2514

RUNGE NATURE CENTER

330 Commerce Drive
mdc.mo.gov • 573-526-5544