

[print](#) | [close](#)

Has St. Louis been celebrating the wrong day as its founding?

BY TIM O'NEIL

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, Feb. 14 2010

ST. LOUIS — President Lyndon B. Johnson and the French ambassador came to town on Feb. 14, 1964. Explorer Scouts dressed as colonial boatmen landed on the riverfront, bearing a French flag.

Large crowds cheered the boys and every other event on St. Louis' 200th birthday. VIPs, led by Bicentennial chairman August A. Busch Jr., dined on lobster at the Chase-Park Plaza Hotel. The Post-Dispatch splashed congratulations across its front page.

But did St. Louis jump the gun? Is its real birthday on the 15th?

Clues to an answer are in the rough penmanship and statements of Auguste Chouteau, who was present on this community's first day in 1764 and wrote a description of it four decades later. Historians have disagreed on the date almost from the beginning, but the popular choice in the 20th century was Feb. 14. Thus the big bash 46 years ago Sunday.

The party was premature, says a history professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis who has studied Chouteau's original manuscript for a new book on the city's founding. Fred Fausz, a professor at UMSL since 1991, says Chouteau's "5" isn't the best example of

penmanship but is clear enough. Fausz says the 15 in Chouteau's manuscript has a 5 that looks just like other 5s elsewhere in the paper, and nothing like the 4 that marks Page 4. Fausz also says Chouteau cited Feb. 15 in transcribed testimony for a land case in 1825, four years before he died.

"The only eyewitness account of the founding of St. Louis says the 15th," Fausz

said. "That trumps everything else, which is secondhand."

Backing him is Gregory Ames, a curator at the St. Louis Mercantile Library, where the manuscript is kept.

"We have many interesting questions about that manuscript, but the number 5 isn't one of them," Ames said.

The 14th is not without defense. Some history books say the badly eroded stone over Chouteau's grave at Calvary Cemetery, where he was reburied in the 1850s, listed that day for the founding. His son, Gabriel, who donated the manuscript to the Mercantile Library in 1857, wrote that his father told him the big day was the 14th.

James Neal Primm, whose "Lion of the Valley" is the standard modern general history of St. Louis, began his book with these words: "On Feb. 14, 1764 ..."
Primm, a longtime professor of history at UMSL, died last July.

And at 11 a.m. Sunday, members of the French Society of Saint-Louis will lay a wreath before the statue of Pierre Laclede, founder of St. Louis and Chouteau's common-law stepfather, as it has done every Feb. 14 for years. The statue is outside City Hall. Suzzanne Bouchard, the society's treasurer, says she honors the 14th and doesn't believe the exact date is of great importance.

"Either way, we still have a St. Louis," she said. "Ours has been a very nice tradition. Isn't this issue like the exact date of Christmas?"

BACK TO THE SOURCE

Fausz said he'd rather know for sure. He speculated that the 14th prevailed after J. Thomas Scharf went with it in 1883 for his two-volume "History of St. Louis City and County," a standard local reference work. Scharf outlined arguments for the two dates in lengthy footnotes, then took the son's word.

Fausz said Gabriel must have been mistaken. "These things proliferate, and that's why we go back to original documents," Fausz said.

Auguste Chouteau was 14 when he stepped onto what became the St. Louis riverfront at the behest of Pierre Laclède, businessman and intimate friend of the boy's mother, Marie Therese Bourgeois Chouteau. Laclède and Madame Chouteau had met in New Orleans after her wastrel husband abandoned her and her son. Laclède and Madame's friendship produced four more children. In the convention of the times, all were named Chouteau.

Laclède took Auguste with him up the Mississippi River in 1763 to establish a trading post near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. They reached French Fort de Chartres, 50 miles downriver from the present St. Louis, in November. Laclède scouted for high ground and found a low limestone bluff where the Gateway Arch now stands. He marked a few trees and returned to the fort to wait out winter.

When the river ice broke, Laclède sent Auguste, then 14, and 30 workers upstream to begin clearing land. There was nothing momentous about the founding day, just the wielding of crude iron tools. Laclède joined them in April and named the village after St. Louis (French King Louis IX), patron saint of the reigning king of France, Louis XV.

After Madame Chouteau gave birth to her youngest, Victoire, she and the children began the 1,000-mile wilderness journey up the Mississippi. All survived to join Laclède in September 1764. By the next winter, about 40 families made St. Louis home.

Fausz said St. Louis first celebrated its founding on Feb. 15, 1847. He said he could find no reference to any celebration of the centennial in 1864, when St. Louis was a bustling staging point for the Union Army in the Civil War.

CLOUDED MEMORY?

Frederick A. Hodes, author of "Beyond the Frontier, A History of St. Louis to 1821," says Fausz may be correct. Hodes went with Feb. 14 in his 670-page work, published in 2004, because his research made him wonder whether Auguste Chouteau's "memory had clouded. ... I would not be surprised if neither date is the actual date."

Hodes said he didn't examine the original manuscript, using instead the printed version that the Mercantile Library published in 1858. That version says, of all things, that the landing was on March 14. Somebody had written the French word for March over the manuscript's original "February." Scharf's footnotes say not even Gabriel Chouteau knew who did that, and most historians have concluded that it couldn't have been March.

Fausz says his work will be published later this year in two volumes, one a book of documents, including the Chouteau manuscript, and the other volume a narrative titled, "Founding St. Louis: First City of the New West."

He takes his case at 5 p.m. Monday to patrons of the Royale, a tavern at 3132 South Kingshighway that regularly holds bull sessions on topics of local or political interest. His son, John, is a bartender there.

"I'm intrigued to know if anyone really cares," Fausz said.

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge.

Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>
