THE STRUGGLE FOR STATEHOOD

Missouri’s application for statehood in 1818 unleashed boiling tensions that threatened westward expansion and raised difficult issues our Founding Fathers struggled to resolve.

Missouri shook the United States like no other new state before and made the issue of slavery unavoidable for the nation. This crisis unfolded for nearly three years and could only be resolved by a dangerous compromise, which kept the union together by dividing it into two halves: “slave” states and “free” states. The Missouri Compromise held for a few decades, but it also set up a sectional conflict in which Missouri would find itself divided as the nation plunged into Civil War.
PRE-1673
Native American tribes (Osage, Missouria, Caddo, Dakota, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Kickapoo, Sac & Fox and Shawnee) inhabited the area that is now Missouri.

1673
Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet voyaged down the Mississippi River and are the first Europeans to set foot on land that would later become Missouri.

1735
Ste. Geneviève, the first permanent European settlement in Missouri, is founded.

1762
November
France cedes the Louisiana Territory to Spain in the Treaty of Fontainebleau during the Seven Years’ War.

1764
February 15
City of St. Louis is founded by Pierre Laclède.

1800
October 1
Spain retrocedes the Louisiana Territory to France following the Treaty of San Ildefonso.
Disputed Lands

The northeastern part of present-day Missouri was disputed hunting territory between the Osage; their Algonquian-speaking enemies, Sauk and Mesquakie (Sac & Fox), whose main villages were on the other side of the Mississippi River in present-day Illinois; and the Ioways, to the north. With few Native villages in the disputed area, French traders and later United States settlers were able to move into the region with relatively little resistance.

Osage

Another Siouan people, the Osage, were far more numerous than the Missouria, and they dominated the region economically and politically due to their numbers. By the mid-1700s, after a long military campaign, the Osage had established a vast empire. Their population was concentrated in present-day southwestern Missouri, but Osage territory spanned across the region, overlapping with many diverse language groups. One of the largest indigenous populations, they controlled much of the trade between Europeans and less powerful neighboring peoples.

Cession of Native Lands

The Osage had established themselves as the dominant people in the region. As a result, the Osage became the major party in a series of treaties with the United States that allowed most of Missouri Territory to be opened to settlers. After being removed from their homelands farther east, the Kickapoo, Shawnee, and Delaware were pushed by a series of additional treaties from lands they had been allowed to settle in present-day Missouri.

Missouri’s First Peoples

Before Europeans ever arrived in the land that would become Missouri, the region had a long history as a center of human civilization. The landscape was dotted by hundreds of ceremonial mounds, which gave St. Louis the nickname “Mound City.” Only a few of these mounds remain visible today. They can be seen in places such as Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Illinois.

Osage Chief with Two Warriors

This painting by George Catlin depicts Tchong-tas-sáb-be (Black Dog), war chief of the Osage, standing with Tál-lee and Kó-ha-túnk-a, two of the tribes most celebrated warriors. Throughout the mid-19th century, Catlin painted more than 500 works featuring western landscapes and Native American portraits.

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Sacred Sun

Mohongo, which in English means Sacred Sun, was an Osage woman who lived near the towns of Arrow Rock and Franklin at the time of the Missouri Crisis. She was among the group of Osage tribe members who traveled to France in 1827. While in Europe, Mohongo gave birth to twin daughters. Shortly after, the Osages were abandoned by their guide and forced to spend the next two years traveling around Europe. In 1829, with the help of American Revolutionary hero, Marquis de Lafayette, Mohongo returned home to North America.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Missouri and the Missouri River are named for the Missouria tribe. The name means “town of the large canoes.”

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French Foundations

France claimed the Mississippi Valley following the explorations of Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet and immediately established amicable relations with the Native people of the region. In the early 1700s, French missionaries and settlers from Canada and New Orleans began to colonize both sides of the Mississippi River, establishing the towns of Cahokia and Kaskaskia in present-day Illinois and Ste. Geneviève, Missouri. The habitants of the “Illinois Country,” as the French called the region on both sides of the Mississippi River, made a living by growing food for the French sugar colonies further south, mining lead, and trading European-made goods, such as pots, cloth, and guns, to Native Americans for animal pelts.

ST. LOUIS

In 1763, Pierre Laclède Liguest and his teenage stepson, Auguste Chouteau, journeyed up the Mississippi River from New Orleans to establish a new trading post with the region’s tribes. They chose a location near where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers met and began construction in February 1764.

The Spanish Interlude

Negotiations at the end of the French and Indian War left Spain in control of the west bank of the Mississippi. Few Spanish settlers came to the land that became Missouri, and thus the European population of the province remained largely French. During the Revolutionary War, Spain led the defense of St. Louis against a British-sponsored attack in 1780. Nevertheless, Spain struggled to attract settlers to the area and thus offered land to those who promised to be good Catholics and loyal subjects of the Spanish crown. Millions of acres were dispensed by Spanish land grants, including some of the best lands along the Mississippi River.

Multiracial Slavery

The most problematic legacy of the French regime was the establishment of colonial slavery in the region. French settlers brought enslaved Africans north from New Orleans. They also bought and enslaved Native American captives traded by their trading partners, the Osage. The Illinois Country had no large plantations, but enslaved people worked in all areas of French colonial life, including in the lead mines and fur trade.

DID YOU KNOW?

Paw Paw French, or Missouri French, is a dialect originating from early French settlers and was once widely spoken throughout eastern Missouri. It was spoken by hundreds of people in the area until the 1890s. Today it is considered an endangered language, spoken by less than a dozen people.

Colonial Missouri

Like the states east of the Mississippi, Missouri has a colonial history, but unlike them, Missouri was never part of the British Empire. Instead, its European colonizers were French and Spanish, and they left a complicated legacy for the future state.
1803

April 30
The Louisiana Purchase is signed.

1805

March 3
The Territory of Louisiana is established.

1808

July 12
Joseph Charless founds the first newspaper in Missouri, the *Missouri Gazette*.

November 10
Treaty of Fort Clark: Osage nation cedes lands in Missouri to the United States.

1812

June 4
A portion of the Louisiana Territory is divided to become the Missouri Territory.

1815

July – September
The Treaties of Portage des Sioux are signed between Missourians with the Sac & Fox, Osage, and other tribes to reestablish peace after the War of 1812.
THE AMERICANIZATION OF MISSOURI

In 1800, Spain signed a secret treaty returning the territory of Louisiana to France. Rumor of the territory's retrocession soon reached President Thomas Jefferson, who feared that France would not recognize American rights to navigate the Mississippi and trade goods at New Orleans.

In 1802, Jefferson sent Robert Livingston to Paris to negotiate the purchase of the port of New Orleans from the French Emperor Napoleon.

The Louisiana Purchase

Napoleon originally envisaged Louisiana and his other colony, Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), to be the centerpieces of a French New World empire. When the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue won their independence in a bloody revolutionary war, Napoleon no longer needed the Louisiana Territory, meant to supply the Caribbean colonies, but greatly needed to refill his war coffers. In 1803, he surprised American emissaries by agreeing to sell not only the port of New Orleans, but all of Louisiana to the United States for $15 million. The Louisiana Purchase was one of the most significant events in American history, as the new territory nearly doubled the size of the United States.

The Missouri Territory

By 1804, the land that became the Missouri Territory had an estimated population. In just sixteen years, that number grew to more than 71,000. Early the French and the Spanish had a brutal slavery in colonial Missouri, as had the Nations before them, but western embers there were supported and entrenched the system in the new federal territory.

After the War of 1812, migrants from the United States poured into the Missouri Territory, bringing the non-Native American population. Thousands of enslaved African Americans and African Americans were brought to move too, either with their owners or by means of the growing domestic slave trade.

Townspeople bailing from eastern tobacco-growing states, such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, found opportunities in central Missouri and claimed additional lands. As one observer wrote in 1816, "it does appear as if all Kentucky are on the road for the country [in Missouri]."

DID YOU KNOW?

Beer making has been nearly synonymous with St. Louis since its founding. The first documented brewery was opened in 1809 by John Coons on what is today the site of the Gateway Arch.

Boon's Lick

Many of Missouri's migrant slave owners settled in the central part of territorial Missouri along the Missouri River, called the "Boon's Lick" because of the salt springs in the area. Fertile lands and river access to markets in St. Louis made the area prosperous for slave owners and one of the most important agricultural regions in the state before the Civil War.

Daniel Boone

American pioneer Daniel Boone famously led explorations that helped to open the American frontier to new settlements. In 1799, Boone and his family migrated to the Femme Osage District of Missouri, now part of St. Charles, where he spent the remainder of his life. His legacy, Boone and Crockett, are rooted in Missouri, a part of the region that inspired the name of the Missouri River.

Missouri Population, 1804–1820

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<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Free African Americans</th>
<th>Native Americans</th>
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<td>3,011</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>5,000**</td>
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<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>17,327</td>
<td>9,797</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>4,500**</td>
<td>32,039</td>
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SLAVERY ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI

Slavery in the Missouri Territory differed from bondage on sugar and cotton plantations in the Deep South. Most enslaved people in territorial Missouri worked on smaller hemp and tobacco farms, as domestics, or were leased out in the growing slave market in St. Louis.

Some viewed Missouri’s small-scale slaveholding as more benevolent than the large-scale plantations typical in the south. However, enslaved people in Missouri dispute this claim. William Wells Brown noted the frequent use of the whip on his owner’s plantation in St. Charles. The whip made “of cowhide, with platted wire on the end of it, was put in requisition very frequently and freely.”

Markets

In territorial Missouri, as elsewhere, enslaved people were valuable commodities. As laborers, they produced goods for regional and national markets. As slaves they were also profitable, the slave’s body also increased in value. In St. Louis, these owners could lease their bondspeople through the slave hiring market, or they could buy or sell their human property on the auction block. Slave owners could also mortgage enslaved people to increase access to credit. The slave markets in Missouri connected masters and their slaves to a global financial system that stretched across the world.

Freedom and Resistance

In the Missouri Territory, enslaved people received the visceral and inhumanizing effects of slavery and struggled to secure their freedom. Men and women, like William Wells Brown, chose to run away from their masters and escape the bonds of slavery. Others used the law to challenge their enslavement. In 1769, Spanish officials ended the enslavement of American Indians in territorial Missouri. Thus, if enslaved people could prove American Indian ancestry in court, they could be free.

Manumission

Some enslaved people saved money to purchase freedom for themselves or for family members. White manumission was common under French and Spanish colonial law, American lawmakers increasingly sought to restrict the practice. By passing a number of laws that restricted freedom, mobility, and education, white Missourians discouraged free blacks from moving or settling in the territory.

DID YOU KNOW?

Despite hostilities, a small but growing free black population existed in Missouri as early as 1763. This community of St. Louisans made a living as small business owners and laborers. The community grew throughout the 19th century and had its own social season and debutante balls.
1816

December 4
James Monroe is elected as the 5th President of the United States.

1817

September 27
Thomas Hart Benton and Charles Lucas duel on Bloody Island, resulting in Lucas’s death.

1818

January 8
The first petition from the people of Missouri requesting statehood is presented to the U.S. House of Representatives.

May 28
General Andrew Jackson invaded Florida in the Seminole War.

December 3
Illinois is admitted to the Union as a free state.

1819

The Panic of 1819, the first major financial crash in the U.S., began, leading to foreclosures, bank failures, and unemployment.
LIVING ON THE EDGE OF STATEHOOD

James Monroe’s first presidential term is known as the “Era of Good Feelings” because political party conflicts temporarily quieted and the country seemed to be unified. Yet on the Missouri frontier, political tensions boiled and would eventually explode with the territory’s application for statehood. Further troubles ensued as a major financial crash hit the United States during Missouri’s quest for statehood, causing economic uncertainty for the country and the people of the Missouri Territory.

Dues and Violence
Young politicians arrived on the Missouri frontier ready to violently fight their way to the top by any means necessary — beatings, duels, and riots were common. Missouri’s first representative to Congress was John Scott, “who always carried dirk and pistol in his pockets” and was elected by sending soldiers to violently harass the opposing candidate and voters with “fighting, stabbing, and cudgeling.”

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IN 1818, THE BANK OF MISSOURI ISSUE A $3 BILL, AUGUST 3, 1818

This $3 bill is signed by Auguste Chouteau, founder of St. Louis. In the bill’s center is a vignette of a bust of President Thomas Jefferson. Behind the bust are ships at sail and mountain peaks.

The Panic of 1819
In 1819, European demand for American agricultural goods declined. Market prices for crops fell, raising land values in the plains. The ensuing financial crash, known as the Panic of 1819, was the United States’ first major economic depression. The Panic was especially devastating in the recently settled West, where cash was scarce and rising land values had been a major driver of the economy. Half of the mercantile businesses in St. Louis shut down, including the troubled but badly needed Bank of St. Louis. Economic uncertainty further complicated Missouri’s application for statehood. Enslaved workers remained a major financial asset for their owners, and the financial crisis made slavery seem essential to their economic survival. Thus, slave owners in territorial Missouri clung to slavery at a time when many others questioned its continued existence.

DID YOU KNOW?
In 1818, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne arrived on the Missouri Frontier where she opened the first free school west of the Mississippi River. She also established boarding schools in St. Louis, which were the first schools to educate students of color in the region.
HOW TO JOIN THE UNION

In 1819, the nation was equally divided between eleven “free states” and eleven “slave states.” This delicate balance of power in government between the North and South kept growing as sectional tensions subsided. Yet it was only maintained by ensuring there was always an equal number of free and slave states in the Union.

When Missouri, a territory which allowed slavery, petitioned Congress for admittance into the United States, it threatened to upset that balance. Congress descended into crisis over the Missouri Question—how, or if, Missouri would join the Union as a new slave state.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

Thirty years before the Missouri Crisis began, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a three-stage process for territories, as their populations grew, to become full-fledged states. Under the laws of the Ordinance, new states would enter the Union with equal status and rights as the original states. The Ordinance also prohibited slavery in the Northwest territories, making the Ohio River the boundary between northern “free states” and southern “slave states.”

Territorial Population Under 5,000:
Congress appointed five officials to run the territory: a governor, a secretary, and three judges. The governor and the three judges made all laws for the territory, but such laws were subject to Congressional approval.

Territorial Population Over 5,000:
The territory could hold elections and form a territorial legislature. The president still appointed the governor and the upper house of the legislature, but the “elected” territorial legislature could now make laws. The territory was also allowed a nonvoting delegate in Congress.

Territorial Population Over 60,000:
The territory could propose its proposed constitution as a state. Congress would then draft an enabling act, authorizing the territory to write a constitution and create a state government. Once Congress approved the state constitution and government, the territory became a state.

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1819

February 13
James Tallmadge introduces to the U.S. House of Representatives an amendment to the bill enabling the Territory of Missouri to form a state government. The debate over Missouri’s admission begins.

February 16
The House approves the Missouri bill with the Tallmadge Amendment and the bill is sent to the Senate.

February 27
The Senate votes to strike the Tallmadge Amendment from the Missouri bill, sending it back to the House.

March 2
The House rejects the Senate’s Missouri bill without the Tallmadge Amendment.

March 3
The 15th Congress adjourns with no agreement and fails to pass a bill enabling the Missouri Territory to join the Union as a state.

December 6
First session of the 16th Congress begins.
THE RISE OF “THE NORTH” AND ANTIARCHAEM POLITICAL

By 1819, across a wide swath of the republic, slavery was seen as an evil of the past that the country needed to move beyond. The New England states and Pennsylvania had all abolished or phased out slavery during or shortly after the American Revolution. The Mid-Atlantic states of New York and New Jersey passed gradual emancipation laws in 1799 and 1804, respectively. Thousands of free African Americans became voters. Furthermore, the abolition of the international slave trade in 1808 helped to propel an antislavery movement. Northern politicians took notice and were motivated to act.

When Congress convened in 1819, the debate over Missouri and the expansion of slavery renewed. The House eventually passed a bill authorizing the people of Missouri to form a constitution and a state government; however, the next day, Rep. James Tallmadge, Jr. of New York amended the bill to restrict slavery in Missouri.

But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.

– Thomas Jefferson

Emancipation in the North

By state constitution
By state statutes in force (gradual emancipation)

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The Crisis in Public Opinion

The Tallmadge Amendment drove a wedge into the country along regional lines. By 1819, a vocal “anti-Missouri” movement launched in the Northeast, a crusade to prevent slavery’s growth in the West and keep it contained where it already existed in the southern states. In the South, an “anti-restriction” movement grew advocating for Missouri's admission as a slave state.

State legislatures joined the debate, issuing statements reflecting the views of their constituents. Public meetings, petitions, and legislators’ statements made Missouri’s admission a national question and an emerging national crisis.

The Anti-Missouri Movement

Amidst loud public meetings on Missouri statehood were held throughout New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Vermont, and eventually inspired similar anti-Missouri meetings further south. With this latent tension behind them, anti-Missouri leaders, like House leader John W. Taylor of New York, rose publicly against Missouri again.

Although the majority of northerners were not calling for the abolition of slavery where it already existed in the South, the local anti-Missouri movements ardently fought its extension into new territories. Whether in Washington, D.C., or across the North, demanding the restriction of slavery in Missouri was “in the name of freedom and humanity.”

Missouri’s Reaction

The news that Missouri’s quest for statehood had stalled in Congress over slavery was not well received in territorial Missouri. Whereas the majority of Missourians were not slave owners, local public opinion was overwhelmingly against slavery’s restriction from Missouri.

Many of the territory’s residents had migrated from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, bringing with them strong proslavery views. Those white Missouri settlers who desired statehood were divided over whether their region would have the same rights as United States citizens. They held numerous town meetings, and even some courts and churches participated. They issued anti-Missouri speeches as a defiance of Congress.

The Restrictionist Crusade

In the South, defenders of slavery saw the Missouri movement to prohibit the spread of slavery as a threat to states’ rights. They opposed restrictions in Missouri, arguing that the Union was made up of equal states, each with freedom to decide for itself whether to be free or slave. They called their proslavery position “restrictionless.” They argued the Tallmadge Amendment would allow the nation to be divided, and the new slaveholding states had been admitted to the Union, so allowing Missouri’s passage was a right established by the country’s founding fathers.

The Restrictionist Remnant

A small number of Missouri settlers supported the Tallmadge Amendment and a bill to ban slavery’s expansion. The Baptist missionary John Mason Peck and Ohio saddle maker and future leading abolitionist and newspaper publisher of the Missouri Gazette, Joseph Charless, campaigned and preached against slavery.

Among the loudest voices in the restrictionist camp was Joseph Charless, publisher of the Missouri Territory’s first newspaper, Missouri Gazette. Through his paper, he took bold public stances that challenged the status quo. He printed criticism of Missouri’s territorial leaders and advocated for banning slavery. His newspaper’s motto was “Truth without Fear,” and Charless lived up to it, being constant themes of beating and assassination.

DID YOU KNOW?

Arthur Charless founded the Missouri Gazette, where he printed many of his anti-slavery sentiments. In 1819, he moved his newspaper to St. Louis to print the Missouri Gazette. Born in Ireland, Joseph Charless immigrated to the United States in 1795. He published several newspapers in Pennsylvania and Kentucky before moving to Missouri to print the Missouri Gazette.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, is said to have received his first vision from God. In 1820, as the Missouri Crisis was coming to a head, the Missouri Mormon War and their eventual exodus to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. The State Historical Society of Missouri.
1819

December
Maine applies for admission into the Union.

December 14
Alabama becomes the 22nd state, admitted to the Union as a slave state.

1820

January
The petition for Maine to be admitted as a state is presented to the U.S. House.

February 16
The House passes a bill to admit Maine as a free state with an attached amendment authorizing Missouri to form a state government without restriction on slavery. The bill is sent to the Senate.

February 17
After a month-long debate in the Senate, Senator Jesse B. Thomas proposes an amendment outlawing slavery north of the 36° 30’ latitude line except within the boundaries of Missouri.

February 18
The Senate passes the joint Missouri-Maine bill, with the inclusion of the Thomas Amendment, and sends the bill back to the House.

March 1
The House rejects the Senate’s version of the Missouri-Maine bill.

March 2
Speaker of the House Henry Clay proposes a joint meeting between members of the House and Senate.

March 2
The House votes to approve the Missouri bill with the Thomas Amendment.

March 3
The 16th Congress passes the Missouri Compromise.

March 6
The Missouri Enabling Act is approved and signed by President James Monroe.
The Thomas Amendment
In 1820, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill admitting Maine to the Union as a free state. The bill included an amendment authorizing the people of Missouri to form a constitution and state government without any restriction on slavery.

The Senate accepted the bill but added an amendment by Illinois Senator Jesse B. Thomas — who favored Missouri’s admission as a slave state — prohibiting slavery, with the exception of Missouri, in the remaining parts of the Louisiana Territory north of the 36°30’ latitude. Any future state below that latitude would enter the Union as a slave state.

However, the House rejected all of the Senate’s amendments, and a stalemate again defined Congressional attempts to admit Missouri.

The Compromise
In order to break the deadlock in Congress, Speaker of the House Henry Clay formed a joint conference of members of the House and Senate and convinced the committee to reach a resolution that both chambers could accept.

1) Maine would enter the Union as a free state.

2) Missouri would be authorized to form a constitution and erect a state government with no restriction on slavery.

3) Slavery would be prohibited in the remaining parts of the Louisiana Territory north of the 36°30’ latitude as proposed in the Thomas Amendment.

DID YOU KNOW?
The Missouri debates led to the creation of a commonly used word idiom: “bunk.” Congressional speeches had become so repetitive and boring, that when North Carolina Congressman Felix Walker demanded to make a speech on the behalf of his home county “Buncombe,” the House refused to listen. From this emerged the word “bunk” – meaning foolish talk or nonsense.

CRISIS AND COMPROMISE
Not since 1788 had the meaning and interpretation of the United States Constitution been so intensely debated. Missouri’s admission was at the heart of a long-unanswered constitutional question: How should power be divided between the federal government and the states?

Congressmen were divided by whether they believed that Congress had the authority to place conditions — in this instance, a restriction on the spread of slavery in Missouri — on a state, even before it was admitted into the Union. Debates in Congress reached heated levels, as threats of disunion and even civil war became commonplace.
Born in Pennsylvania in 1775, McNair moved to the Missouri Territory in 1804 following the Louisiana Purchase. He became a successful businessman and served as a United States Marshal in St. Louis. A popular campaigner, McNair was elected Missouri’s first governor in a landslide victory over famous explorer William Clark. Throughout his single term as governor, he supported anti-restrictionist and proslavery policies, despite his personal friendships with members of the local free black community.

“Portrait of Alexander McNair, Missouri’s First Governor, ca.1821,” Courtesy of the Missouri Secretary of State’s Office

Alexander McNair
Missouri Governor

Known as “Old Bullion” in the U.S. Senate, Benton served five terms as a Missouri Senator. Benton was born in North Carolina in 1782 and moved to the Missouri Territory in 1815. Benton was a slaveholder all his life and fought hard to establish slavery in Missouri. Later in life, under the influence of his daughter, Jessie, and son-in-law, the explorer John C. Fremont, Benton eventually came to support the Free Soil side of the slavery debate, open to preventing the spread of slavery west of Missouri. He lost his Senate seat over the issue after a bitter contest in 1850.

“Thomas Hart Benton,” ca 1820, portrait by Matthew Harris Jouett
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Thomas Hart Benton
United States Senator

Scott was elected as Missouri’s first state representative to Congress in 1821. Born in 1785, he migrated to the Indiana Territory in 1802. After graduating from Princeton, he moved to Ste. Geneviève and began practicing law. Scott served as Missouri’s lone representative in the House and was instrumental in getting Congress to pass the Missouri Enabling Act. Scott was a staunch anti-restrictionist throughout his life.

“John Scott”
Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

John Scott
United States Representative

Born in Tennessee in 1783, Barton moved to St. Louis in 1809. He became a ranger in the Missouri Territory and was later appointed Missouri’s attorney and superintendent of the Missouri Territory’s public lands and mineral rights. In 1812, he was one of the most powerful politicians elected to the Missouri legislature.

“David Barton,” portrait by Chester Harding
Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

David Barton
United States Senator

Missouri’s First Elected Leaders

The first election for state offices was held in August 1820, a year before Congress had approved the state’s constitution. Qualified candidates were required to be male, of European descent, and tax-paying residents of the Missouri Territory.

DID YOU KNOW?

Senator Thomas Hart Benton’s great-nephew is the celebrated 20th century painter and muralist, also named Thomas Hart Benton. He is famous for his portraits and landscapes depicting the people and culture of Missouri and the Midwest.
1820

July 19
Missouri sends forty-one delegates to the state constitutional convention in St. Louis and adopts a new state constitution.

August 28
Missouri’s first state elections are held.

September 18
Missouri’s first General Assembly begins its first session.

November 14
U.S. Representative for Missouri John Scott presents Missouri’s state constitution to Congress.

December 6
President James Monroe wins reelection.

December 13
U.S. House of Representatives rejects Missouri’s state constitution.

1821

March 2
Congress passes the second Missouri Compromise.

August 10
Missouri is admitted as the 24th state in the Union.
MISSOURI CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The first Missouri Compromise allowed Missouri to create a government, but it was not yet a state. To become an official state, Missouri was required to elect delegates to a convention who would then write a state constitution. Once Congress approved the state constitution, Missouri would be admitted to the Union.

Throughout the territory, Missourians overwhelmingly elected proslavery delegates to the constitutional convention who would ensure slavery was “kept safe” within the state.

The First Missouri Constitution

The proposed state constitution, drafted by the proslavery convention delegates, included two controversial clauses that, once again, put Missouri’s statehood in jeopardy.

1) The constitution made it illegal to free enslaved people in the state without the slave owner’s consent.
2) The constitution empowered the Missouri Legislature to pass laws preventing “Free Negroes and mulattoes from coming to and settling in the state.”

The second controversial clause meant that under Missouri state law, free African American citizens would be barred from entering and settling in the state. Northern representatives argued that this clause violated the United States Constitution, which guaranteed “the citizens of each state shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several states.”

The Missouri Constitution deadlocked Congress in the summer of 1820, and Missouri’s quest for statehood stalled once again.

The Second Missouri Compromise

By January 1821, Congress was still deadlocked over Missouri. Henry Clay again came to Missouri’s aid and brokered a second compromise. A joint House and Senate committee led by Clay offered a resolution to admit Missouri as a state under the condition that the provisions in the state constitution preventing free African Americans from entering the state could not be used to deprive any United States citizen of privileges and immunities granted to them by the United States Constitution.

Under the terms of the second compromise, the Missouri legislature did not have to change its constitution but was required to affirm the condition. After months of stalling, this was finally done in July 1821. The affirmation was called the “Solemn Public Act,” but Missouri leaders did not take it seriously. Subsequent state legislatures ignored the oath repeatedly by passing laws discriminating against free African Americans.

DID YOU KNOW?

The members of Missouri’s first General Assembly have often been described as “rough characters.” Physical fights between members were common on the floor of the legislature. The new lawmakers enjoyed drinking more than they enjoyed paying their bills – bankrupting several taverns and boarding houses in St. Charles, the temporary state capitol.
After nearly two years of debate, Missouri was officially recognized as the 24th state on August 10, 1821. Geographically, the Missouri Compromise was an awkward solution to the sectional crisis over slavery. The new state's growing slavery-based economy was surrounded on almost all sides by free states and territories. Consequently, the new state was the setting for a series of national events that inflamed the sectional conflict again and again. Missouri became a powder keg helping to ignite the Civil War.

**Bleeding Kansas**

In 1854, the Nebraska Territory was opened to popular sovereignty, repealing the Missouri Compromise. The Kansas-Nebraska Act triggered a land rush in the Kansas Territory as proslavery forces from Missouri and "Free Staters" clashed in bloody violence. The conflict became known as "Bleeding Kansas."

**Dred Scott**

Following statehood, nearly 300 African American Missourians filed for their freedom. Most notably was Dred Scott of St. Louis. In 1846, Scott sued for his freedom after his master had taken him to live in the free territory of Wisconsin, today Minnesota, before returning to Missouri. In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, ruled that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional. The decision invalidated all laws and precedents that limited slavery, including the Missouri Compromise.

**The Murder of Lovejoy**

In 1837, St. Louis editor Elijah P. Lovejoy became "the first martyr" to the cause of abolition when he was shot down by a proslavery mob. Lovejoy had moved his antislavery newspaper across the river to get away from violent threats in Missouri. Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and many others cited the Lovejoy case as the moment they realized that northerners needed to fight back against slavery.

**The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner**

The violence committed along the Missouri border following the Kansas-Nebraska Act spilled into Washington, D.C. In Congress, Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts was nearly beaten to death by a proslavery congressman. Sumner was a noted abolitionist and supporter of the anti-slavery movement. The incident, known as "The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner," was a pivotal moment in the lead-up to the Civil War.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Sixty percent of Missouri's eligible men served in the Civil War. Nearly three-fourths of them fought for the Union, although the state was claimed by both the Union and the Confederacy.

**Proslavery rioters burn the printshop of abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, 1835**

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This exhibit was developed by the Missouri Humanities Council (MHC) in consultation with the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy and is supported by The Bicentennial Alliance. Companion programming has been made possible in part from funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Members of the project team who worked to create this exhibit include: Dr. Steve Belko, Claire Bruntrager, Brian Grubbs, Dr. Jeff Pasley, Lawrence Celani, and Dr. Christa Dierksheide.

MHC gratefully acknowledge the following individuals for their help with this traveling exhibit: Dr. Dianne Mutti Burke, Dr. Louis Gerteis, Dr. Carol Diaz-Granados, Dr. Brook Poston, and Dr. Kenneth Winn.

A special thanks to the students in the University of Missouri’s “History in the Public” course whose research helped to create this exhibit.