Agency on the Edge:

Women of Colonial St. Louis and the Power They Held

Andrea Wilson

In 1763, the city of St. Louis began its life on the western side of the Mississippi River. From its inception the city had aspects that were uncommon for a frontier village. The people there still dealt with normal frontier problems, like relations with neighboring Native American tribes, taming and shaping the land, and supplying the town. However, its location gave St. Louis an interesting history. It was first settled by French merchants who quickly found themselves under Spanish rule. The Spanish would last until 1803 when Louisiana was given back to France then promptly sold to the United States. Through all of these changes the people remained steady, and they developed somewhat uncommon views of women for the time. Those views were reflected in how women came to settle in the city, spent their days, appeared in courts, and how they obtained education. The unique circumstances of women in St. Louis make it an interesting setting for a case study of how women in the early nineteenth century had different levels of agency in their own lives.

The frontier was a place where men went to gain their fortunes and improve their status. It was not an easy life, but many chose it. Those men took along their wives and children, who also had to work to improve their standings. Living in a new diverse borderland allowed new cultural norms to be established. The beginnings of St. Louis occurred much like other borderland settlements. Some men who were willing to strike out into the wilder lands were given permission by a governor to settle a new place in hopes of turning a profit. Several of the colonies started with a man who wanted to make money in the New World getting permission from a king to strike out and try his luck. The stories are similar, but there were differences for St. Louis as it developed from a frontier trade post into a city. Gilbert Antoine Maxent, Jean Francois Le Dée, and Pierre de Laclède were the merchants in this story from New Orleans who entered business together and gained the exclusive right to sell goods to the Native American tribes on the Missouri and the west bank of the upper Mississippi. The French governor at the time was attempting to regain solid financial footing for the colony by expanding trade.[1]

Pierre de Laclède struck out with a crew and supplies on August 10, 1763 to scout out the perfect location. The area he went to had a few problems to overcome

[1] James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley St. Louis, Missouri* (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 1981), 9; Patricia Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil: A History of Colonial St.* Louis (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 21.

right away. It was by the Mississippi river and was prone to flooding. That is why the already established village of Ste. Genevieve was ruled out as a location for the trade post. Laclède scouted on the river until he found the perfect spot. The location had high ground with a rocky bluff beside the river to keep the site safe from flooding. There was plenty of timber, good drainage, and fresh springs. Laclède left the initial work at the site up to his fourteen-year-old assistant Auguste Chouteau. Auguste was the son of Marie Thérèse Chouteau and René Auguste Chouteau. His parents had separated, although they could not legally divorce in Catholic Louisiana. Marie Chouteau and her four younger children, who were Laclède's, went along with Laclède to settle in St. Louis. Marie chose the man she would live with and after his death she was given control of the family residence with the rights to sell and purchase other property. So, Auguste Chouteau helped the man who was essentially his step father build the first homes in St. Louis and his mother and half-siblings reaped the benefits of Laclède's influence and affections after his death. From the beginning, women were finding niches of power in St. Louis.[2]

The first years in St. Louis were fraught with worry. France had lost the Seven Year's War in spectacular fashion. France signed the Treaty of Paris 1763, and had to give England Canada and the land east of the upper Mississippi, what is now Illinois. This placed St. Louis on the very edge of the French holdings in the Americas. On the other side of the river, the English would be in control. Those who began to move to the new village to settle and trade felt the fears of being on that edge between two imperial powers. However, the edge was sometimes the place change came to slowest. The British did not take over command of the fort nearby until 1765. When they came, the French soldiers, families, and artisans who were living in the fort moved to St. Louis further expanding the village.[3]

Over the next forty-one years, the city and the people living there would see major transformations and power shifts. At the end of the Seven Years' War, France also had to cede Louisiana to Spain. As Spain lost territory elsewhere, Louisiana became their compensation. Spanish officials did not arrive in New Orleans until 1766. In 1767, an expedition was sent up the Mississippi to establish a fort and settlement. Captain Don Francisco Rui took forty-four men and some of their families up the river to St. Louis. They were given many instructions for how to make the journey and then how to build the forts. Care was taken to keep to the proper side of the river and not seem to be aggressive toward British forts on the journey. The area was tense, and the Spanish did not want to spark off another war on their first expedition. It was a slow transition of power, but eventually the Spanish built the forts near St. Louis as protection against British encroachment on Spanish lands. A few Spanish ended up administering French and Native American populations. There were some frictions; however, the Spanish official in charge of the Illinois post headquartered in St. Louis, Don Pedro Piernas, worked hard to be fair with the people

---

[2] Primm, *Lion of the Valley,* 10-15; Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, 25-35.
[3] Patricia Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil,* 18; Primm, *Lion of the Valley,* 9-12.

already settled and to keep friction from occurring between French settlers and the Spanish troops.[4]

From the time of the Spanish takeover until the American purchase of Louisiana, St. Louis grew and fended off attacks. They faced trouble with several Native American tribes in the area. The powerful Osage especially gave cause for concern. During the Revolution, Spain eventually sided with the Americans and the French. This meant that the British could move on St. Louis in hopes of expanding their holdings in the west. The city was fortified against an impending British attack. That attack came but was repealed by the defenders at St. Louis. Their victory stole any British claim to that area during the treaty process after the Revolution. The Spanish continued to hold the western bank of the Mississippi down to New Orleans, but the expenses for holding the colony continued to grow. In 1790, the governor of Illinois Arthur St. Clair described St. Louis as, "the most flourishing village of the Spaniards on the upper part of the Mississippi and it has been greatly advanced by the people who have abandoned the American side."[5]

Those who did move from the American side would only have a few years under Spanish rule. On October 1, 1800, Spain returned Louisiana to France in the Treaty of San Ildefonso. Napoleon had plans for a strong French presence in the Louisiana area. However, the revolution in Haiti and renewed war with Great Britain made Napoleon open to selling. On April 30, 1803, France sold Louisiana to America for fifteen million dollars. In St. Louis the transition was almost comical. On March 9, 1804 the Spanish Lieutenant Governor surrendered upper Louisiana to Captain Amos Stoddard. Stoddard was a United States citizen who stood in for France in this exchange. The French flag flew for one day then Stoddard signed documents transferring Louisiana from France to the United States. Since he represented both countries there was no actual change of command from Stoddard. He may have shaken his own hand after signing the documents if he wanted to be sure the transition was sealed. St. Louis began as a French outpost, lived most of its early life as a Spanish run colony and finally was given over to the Americans.[6]

In most of this story so far, the women of St. Louis have been fairly invisible. Yet, they were there facing the same trials and tribulations as the men of the settlement. Marie Thérèse Chouteau came to be with the man she loved regardless of the legality of their relationship. Many other early men in the settlement took Native American wives. St. Louis was a distinctly mixed city. In that part of the country, it had to be because there were so many tribes surrounding the village. Even during the Revolution, the women shared the fear and death of the attack from the British. The day before the attack the women were the ones outside of the fortifications gathering

---

[4] Governor to Captain Don Francisco Rui, 1767, in *The Spanish Regime in Missouri*, ed. Louis Houck (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 1-10; Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 19-25.

[5] Ibid., 41-46, 57-58.

[6] Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, 307-313; Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 72-74.

strawberries and flowers for the Feast of Corpus Christi. During the battle some were in the governor's house with the children. However, one group of women had to ram through the attackers in a horse drawn cart to make it into the city gate and safety. Others were killed or taken captive by the Native Americans fighting with the British. Every problem the men faced, the women faced as well. They were as much a part of the village's story as the men. They had to learn how to survive and prosper on the frontier and they did that in their own way.[7]

The daily lives of women in St. Louis were not taken up with the same jobs and chores as other women of the period. St. Louis fast became a trade hub. It was part of a network of villages close by like Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Ste. Genevieve. That network stretched to include major cities like Detroit, Quebec, New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York, Puerto Rico, and the West Indies. The Mississippi River gave the very inland region an arm to the Gulf of Mexico and the world beyond that. This meant that most of the men were involved in trading in some way. Not many families settled into full time farming. Most followed the Native American's example of planting then letting the crops and weeds grow together. It took less effort during the growing season to plant this way and still allowed a steady supply of food.[8]

While men were tending to the crops they did grow and the trading, mainly in furs, the women had to find their own place in the economy. In other areas of the country women found a wonderful niche in weaving, spinning, and sewing. The goods they produced could be sold or traded and that was a way for the women of the family to participate in the family's economic footprint. In the area around St. Louis inventories of families did not often turn up items like spinning wheels, looms, or knitting needles that would be necessary to engage in those practices. However, this was not surprising because the French government had placed a ban on weaving. All of the cloth the settlers used was purchased from storehouses or merchants. It was a good thing that St. Louis was so connected to the world trade. The mercantilist demands of France needed markets and St. Louis was made to oblige.[9]

Weaving was not the only activity that the French and English women differed in. "The women have more influence over their husbands than is common in most other countries. Perhaps this arises in part from the example of the parent state; and perhaps still more from the almost exclusive right, which the women have to the property, in consequence of marriage contracts."[10] Captain Amos Stoddard

---

[7] Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 12-15, 44-45.

[8] Susan Calafate Boyle, "French Women in Colonial Missouri, 1750-1805," in *Women in Missouri History: In Search of Power and Influence,* ed. LeeAnn Whites, Mary C. Neth, and Gary R. Kremer (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 23-24.

[9] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990),77-80; Natalia Maree Belting, *Kaskaskia Under the French Regime* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1948): 47; Boyle, "French Women in Colonial Missouri, 1750-1805," 23.

[10] Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, historical and descriptive, of Louisiana* (American Antiquarian Society and Newsbank, 2013): 323.

made this observation of the women of St. Louis in his Sketches, historical and descriptive, of Louisiana which was published in 1812. His observations were that the women held a power in their relationships and property that United States women did not often hold. This difference was due to the background of the people who settled St. Louis. The French influence or the, "example of the parent state," was strong. Even though the Spanish owned and administered the area for years they never held a majority of the population. The Spanish administrators often deferred to the laws that were already in use by those in St. Louis. The laws did not differ much from the Spanish laws, so neither the enforcers nor citizens would have had much trouble adapting.

In the Spanish and French systems, "the inheritance laws did not discriminate against women, and in fact as well as in theory the wives in St. Louis's French and Creole families were the partners rather than the property of their husbands."[11] Within the bounds of marriage, both the wife and husband had an obligation to grow the community property of the family. Upon the death of a husband, his wife would receive half of the estate plus a dower, sum of money paid to the wife. The other half of the estate would be split evenly between the heirs, regardless of gender. If there were no heirs, the wife received everything. If the heirs were young, the wife would hold all authority over the property until the heirs came of age. Women who were widowed usually married again. Since there were many more men than women, and life on the frontier was hard and dangerous, some women could marry several times. Yet they carried the authority over their own property through each marriage.[12]

At that time, the English laws in the east used the practice of coverture for women. In its basic essence, a woman was either covered by her father or her husband under the law. She had no civil life in society. Women could not own property or handle their own financial affairs. There were outliers to these laws, and historians still debate how coverture was enacted in eighteenth century America, but women holding active roles in their financial or civil lives were not the norm. The women in St. Louis were used to owning their own property and having power in that area of their lives. The preponderance of trade in St. Louis enhanced the women's role and power on her property. A married woman could spend large portions of the year managing the household without her husband. Hunting trips and trading runs took months to complete. During the husband's absence, the wives grew the crops, bought supplies, kept up the house, bought more land, collected debts, and entered into business arrangements. A few women in the United States could claim this kind of agency due to their own husband's absence. However, it was not as socially accepted. In St. Louis, it was common for a woman to be involved in all economic aspects and even call men into court for wrongs they had committed. For example, Helen Blouin went to the court to force the payment of debts that were owed to her husband, and

---

[11] Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 53.

[12] Boyle, "French Women in Colonial Missouri, 1750-1805," 18-23.

Catherine Bardon testified in court for her husband.[13]

Mary Beth Norton provides the comparison of the French wives' knowledge and capacity to handle the business of the family in loyalist wives after the revolution. Her article, "Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists," showed how little the English Loyalist wives knew about the affairs of their families. During the Revolution, many Loyalists left to go with British troops to England or other ports nearby. These Loyalists submitted claims to the British government seeking compensation for their losses. To receive compensation, they had to provide some sort of proof of what they had in America. Many of the women when questioned could not give complete answers about the finances of the family, debts owed, or the value of property they had.[14]

One such woman, Mary McAlpin even testified that her husband had left all of his estate to his son, when in fact he had left his wife, "life interest in the real estate plus half the personal estate." When it came to wills, property value, or family debts the loyalist women had been kept ignorant either by their own will or by the will of their husbands. These women were not part of the revolutionary changes and fervor; however, they were in America at the same time as the French women in St. Louis. Also, as long as the comparison does not go beyond the revolution, these women are able to be held up against the St. Louis women as the norm for the English colonies. The change to the far more restrictive American system was a hard adjustment for the women of St. Louis to make.[15]

When the Americans moved in, they assessed the administration, laws, and court system the Spanish left behind and they found it wanting. After only two weeks in St. Louis, Amos Stoddard stated that, "[T]he laws, rules of justice, and the forms of proceeding were almost wholly arbitrary-for each successive Lieut. Governor has totally changed or abrogated those established by his predecessor."[16] Essentially the Americans were sure that there was no form of law in Louisiana except in the moment frontier law. Bribery and corruption was seen by many lawyers who came to that area. Many historians have agreed with the contemporary men of the law. However, Stuart Banner's article, "Written Law and Unwritten Norms in Colonial St. Louis" explains that there was in fact a great deal of law happening in St. Louis. It was just not as documented or practiced in the same way as it was in the east.[17]

During the Spanish governance of Louisiana, the upper Mississippi had little formal influence or supervision because of their distance from Spain's seats of power.

---

[13] G.S. Rowe, "Femes Covert and Criminal Prosecution in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania," *The American Journal of Legal History* 32, no. 2 (April, 1988): 138-140; Boyle, "French Women in Colonial Missouri, 1750-1805,", 25-27.

[14] Mary Beth Norton, "Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Jul., 1976): 387-395.

[15] Ibid., 392-393.

[16] Stuart Banner, "Written Law and Unwritten Norms in Colonial St. Louis," *Law and History Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 33-34.

[17] Ibid. 34-37.

It was extremely difficult if not impossible for New Orleans or Spain to implement and enforce laws that far away. The various governors of the Spanish colony tried to send detailed instructions up the Mississippi. When the first expedition set out they had pages of instructions from Governor Antonio de Ulloa that covered how to travel, how to deal with savages (Native Americans) and the British, and how to deal with any daily problems. The officers in charge had the final say in how the journey was run, but Ulloa tried to impose his will. Another governor, Don Alessandro O'Reilly, recognized that the distance created this control problem. He wrote to his lieutenant-governor that, "the great distance from this capital to the Ylinneses (Illinois) demands so much greater prudence in the discharge of its command."[18] He called on his lieutenant-governor to follow the instructions he was sent "with special vigilance." However, it could take months or years for letters to get back and forth from Spanish officials for them to even know their proclamations were being followed or not. It did not help that the government in Spain did not see the upper Louisiana as very significant, and also most of the people living there were French not Spanish. It was much easier to allow the local authorities to judge conflicts and deal out sentences based on their own understandings of the laws and the local customs. Banner called these the unwritten norms of the city. This is why most of the towns did not have the books that held the Spanish colonial law. The over eleven volumes of that colonial law held all the written laws that were supposed to be followed and referred to during cases. However, if the commandants or administrators did not have them available to reference they simply passed judgement based on their understanding of the law and the problem before them.[19]

Despite the seemingly lax legal code, the people of St. Louis and the surrounding towns litigated against each other the same amount as populations in other parts of the colonies. The most common suits involved the sale or purchase of land. These cases could become quite complex, yet they were carried out with almost no formality or documentation. Yet the people were satisfied with their form of law. It is in the documents they did leave behind that some of the more invisible groups start to show through. Some slaves do appear in the records when they were bought or sold. White women make a larger appearance. They were almost 29% of the population in the latter half of the eighteenth century. These women appeared in the records, "primarily as parties to marriage contracts, as co-owners (with their husbands) of property transferred or mortgaged, and as players in the random events giving rise to litigation."[20] They were not completely invisible or covered by their husbands. Amos Stoddard seemed to approve of the practice of women in St. Louis having some say in their property and finances. The old fear that such authority would

---

[18] Don Alessandra O"Reilly to Lieutenant-Governor, February 17, 1770, in *The Spanish Regime* 76.

[19] Governor Antonio de Ulloa to Captain Don Francisco Rui, in *The Spanish Regime in Missouri*, ed. Louis Houck (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 1-19; Banner, "Written Law and Unwritten Norms in Colonial St. Louis," 42-47.

[20] Banner, "Written Law and Unwritten Norms in Colonial St. Louis," 43.

lead the women into impropriety did not stand up to what he saw. The French women were, "as much exempt from impropriety as those of some other countries, who remain almost invisible during their lives."[21] French women were the same in their virtues as American women who did not hold power over their possessions or their person and were civilly invisible.[22]

Just as the women of St. Louis were not invisible they were also not ignorant or uneducated. There was no school or place of formal education for women in the eighteenth century. However, St. Louis was full of opportunities to learn through reading. St. Louis quickly developed a strong aristocratic merchant class and the private libraries in their houses were large even by the standards of the eastern more developed colonies. This seemed surprising for several reasons. First, goods had to travel 1200 miles, which could take about 90 days, up the Mississippi to reach St. Louis. Many would think that books would not be high on the list of supplies and goods to make that long trip to the frontier city. "We can imagine the bewildered worry of many a pioneer," Louis B. Wright writes, "pondering the relative importance of an extra pair of boots or a stout folio as he chose his indispensables for the Great Venture."[23] The founder of the city, Pierre de Laclède, felt that books were worth the effort. His library alone held three hundred books. In 1767, the collection included, "Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise* and *Contrat Social*, Bacon's *Essays,* Thomas Corneille's *Dictionnaire des Arts*, Rollin's histories, Descartes, John Locke, the *Dictionnaire de VAcademic jran gaise*, Mirabeau's *Theorie de Vim-pot*," along with books on topics from commerce, finance, law, and medicine to agriculture, electricity, travels, memoirs, and other subjects. These books that covered more immediate practical help topics were common during the early eighteenth century in private libraries across the United States.[24]

Laclède was not the only one in St. Louis taking the time to collect books. This three-year-old village of forty families contained between two and three thousand books. Given the white population size of six hundred and sixty-nine, the ratio of books to people could have been as high as five to one. Since the women of the town did participate in the legal system and there are letters that remain from some of them, it is safe to assume that some of the white women in early St. Louis had access to a staggering amount of enlightenment knowledge. When St. Louis was

---

[21] Stoddard, *Sketches, historical and descriptive, of Louisiana,* 323.

[22] Banner, "Written Law and Unwritten Norms in Colonial St. Louis," 38.

[23] Louis B. Wright, "The Purposeful Reading of Our Colonial Ancestors," *Journal of English Literary History* 4, no. 2 (Jun., 1937): 85.

[24] John Francis McDermott, "Private Libraries in Frontier St. Louis," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 51, no. 1 (First Quarter,1957): 27; John Neal Hoover, "Private Libraries and Global Worlds: Books and Print Culture in Colonial St. Louis," in *Frontier Cities: Encounters at the Crossroads of Empire,* ed. Jay Gitlin, Barbara Berglund, and Adam Arenson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 190-193; Joe W. Kraus, "Private Libraries in Colonial America," *The Journal of Library History* 9, no. 1 (Jan., 1974): 50; William E. Foley, *A History of Missouri, Vol.1 1673 to 1820* (St. Louis: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 55-56, 57.

given over to the United States, and Americans began to visit or move to the city, they had highly critical things to say. The lawyers decried the lack of written laws and the court systems they were not used to. American writers decried the lack of literary knowledge. The courts and laws of St. Louis were valid they were just different from what American lawyers were used to. The American writers who spoke against the people of St. Louis did not take the time to see the truth of the city's vast wealth of books.[25]

Reverend Timothy Flint was one of the loudest detractors of St. Louis. He visited St. Louis for a short time in 1816. In a letter to a friend, he declared that St. Louis could not hold a reading population. "Few good books are brought into the country. ... the people are too busy, too much occupied in making farms and speculations, to think of literature."[26] Historian John Francis McDermott casts doubt on Flint's observations. Flint did not stay in St. Louis long enough to make a thorough examination of the reading habits of the people there. Had he stayed, he would have seen the vast supply of book available in many of the houses. It is true that the young city was busy with plowing fields, trading, and raising houses, but they did not neglect their reading. Flint was joined by other writers such as Edmund Flagg and Washington Irving in spreading the idea that St. Louis was just a back woods place with no culture. In time the city would prove them wrong.[27]

As the Americans moved in and the nineteenth century began, the private libraries of the early French settlers turned into public libraries of the Americans. There were several early attempts to get a library started. On Thursday, February I4, 1811, the Louisiana Gazette ran an advertisement calling for a meeting to establish a public library. It said that, "the benefits that would result from a PUBLICK LIBRARY in this town, must be obvious to all."[28] If a library resulted from the meeting it did not last long. The next that was publicly printed about a library was on May 13, 1818. The announcement was of a reading room and punch house opening at Main and Second Street. Establishments like these continued to open wherever a business had a good collection of literary works they wanted to make available to the public. Reading rooms sprang up in places like newspaper offices, and hotels. Unfortunately, any records of who frequented these rooms and what they read are not available. These rooms seemed to be put together for a male audience not a female one.[29]

The establishment of a truly public library that stood on its own as a business was needed for the literary works to reach outside of the white male community. On December 24, 1823, a letter appeared in the Missouri Republican calling for the establishment of a truly public library. The letter, signed with the name Franklin, used

---

[25] McDermott, "Private Libraries in Frontier St. Louis," 27.
[26] Ibid., 19.
[27] Hoover, "Private Libraries and Global Worlds: Books and Print Culture in Colonial St. Louis," 192.
[28] McDermott, "Public Libraries in St. Louis, 1811-39," 9.
[29] Foley, *A History of Missouri, vol. 1*, 189; McDermott, "Public Libraries in St. Louis, 1811-39," 9-10.

several arguments to implore the citizens to back a public library. The first argument was that a library would bring knowledge and information within reach of every class of citizen. From his wording, it was possible Franklin meant only the men of the community. He said that, "there [is] no species of trade or business which [m]ay not receive benefit from. the experi[e]nce of past ages as recorded in books, [a]nd there is no man, however low his con[d]ition, who is not humanized and civilized [a]nd raised in the scale of being by an ac[q]uaintance with books."[30] However, the unknown consequence of a public library was that the women of the community would have access to the same knowledge.

The second major argument for the library seemed to be directed more toward women. Franklin drew on the affections of parents to their children. He said, "who is there that does not wish the mind of his children well imbued with various kinds of knowledge, both useful and ornamental."[31] Mothers who read this would heartily agree that they did want their children to have the best opportunities to climb higher in the ranks of society and business. It made it easier for a library to open and thrive if both parents were invested in its success. The fathers would be invested in the library financially, but the mothers would be invested through their children. Franklin's arguments worked and a week after the letter was printed there was a meeting held to establish the St. Louis Library. During the meeting, provisions for how the library would be run were put into place. There was one provision that stood out in regard to the women and other races in the town. Section fifteen stated, "The Librarian is at liberty to admit into the Library room any persons, at any time, when it may not incommode others, for the purpose of reading and consulting books; provided they compensate him for his trouble."[32] It is not clear if this was meant for women and people of color or just the latter. However, it does show that the library started the process of allowing all people access to the books on at least a minimal basis.

The library went through some good and bad years, but by the spring of 1832 it was having financial trouble. There was a call for support in January 1833. In that same article in the St. Louis Free Press, the library made sure to include women. It said that, ""every exertion will be made to accommodate the Ladies, who are respectfully invited to visit the Library."[33] The women were included in this plea for support because they were necessary to the libraries survival. While they were not included in the initial advertisements for the library, they were still allowed in. However, with this new push to ensure the libraries survival the advertisement changed to specifically state that women were welcome in and should have access to the same knowledge. The library even added some hours of business on Thursdays

[30] McDermott, "Public Libraries in St. Louis, 1811-39," 11.
[31] Ibid., 9-10.
[32] Ibid., 14.
[33] Ibid., 17.

from 5:00 to 7:00, "for the better accommodation of the Ladies."[34] Unfortunately, there needs to be more work done with the records from these early libraries to see how often women did frequent them. The subscription records could provide the names of women who rented books from the library. At least with that information historians could see how often women utilized this new right to read. It would be even more useful and informative if the records also included which books each woman took out of the library. Despite the holes in the information it was clear that more than just upper class women who lived in a house with a private library could access books. Women were able to expand their own education through authors from all over the world on any topic they might desire.

The library was not the only place women and young ladies could acquire education in St. Louis. Education had a new meaning to it in the early years of the American Republic. The nation needed to have a universally educated population to thrive. This definition of universal did not include slaves, free blacks, or Native Americans, but it did include women. Women were expected to have some basic education, because they were the front line of passing that education on to their children. In a period when the union was not secure, it was imperative to have an educated population to fall back on for new ideas should the union fail. The republican mother was born, and she read books and passed on knowledge to her children. While this knowledge was supposed to be geared toward the sons, the daughters of the republic gained the knowledge as well.[35]

Since St. Louis was not added to the United States until 1804, the mothers there were not originally republican mothers. However, the women in St. Louis grew up in houses with libraries and in a village of people who read and communicated about what they read. The women of St. Louis were not left completely behind. Towards the end of the 1820s there were some new educational philosophies being made public. Women like Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon were at the spearhead of establishing the norm of college educated women. Both women held different ideas about which women should have that educational opportunity. Beecher felt that the upper class women would have the best advantage from higher learning, while Lyon wanted to be sure that all classes could choose to be educated and better their standing.[36]

One group of women in St. Louis would have agreed with Mary Lyon. In 1827, four French nuns opened a convent and school called Sacred Heart in St. Louis. The nuns came to St. Louis from France to teach western Native Americans. When the school opened the nuns would end up focusing on the white women and girls of the community, but they still did manage to teach some of the girls that were African

---

[34] Ibid., 19.

[35] Nikola Baumgarten, "Education and Democracy in Frontier St. Louis: The Society of the Sacred Heart," *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Summer, 1994): 171.

[36] Andrea L. Turpin, "The Ideological Origins of the Women's College: Religion, Class, and Curriculum in the Educational Visions of Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon," *History of Education Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (May 2010): 133-134.

American or Native American. When the school opened the town had a population of over 4,600. There were some other schools that charged tuition in town, however there was not enough to meet the demand of even the male students. This required many St. Louis parents to send their children to another state or as far away as England, France, or Spain for education.[37]

The sisters who came to teach the Native Americans found that their services were required in St. Louis to teach the children there. The Mayor of the city even made education an emphasis of his 1823 inaugural address. By 1827, when Sacred Heart opened the mayor had not completely met that goal. The nuns addressed the problem. The school they opened had several different levels to choose from. The parents of St. Louis could enroll their daughters in the full time pensionnat, the French term for boarding school. There was a demi-pensionnat for half- time students. There was also a day school where the girls would not live at the school for any amount of time, but attend classes there. The day school was called the academy. Most strikingly the sisters at Sacred Heart offered a free school, housed twenty orphans continually, and instructed African American girls on Sundays. Nikola Baumgarten summed their influence up well when she said that, "The impact of all these schools was probably most striking in the beginning, when they either presented the only educational opportunity for many local females, or supplemented a system that was clearly inadequate for the community."[38]

The school did well from the beginning. The sisters offered five years of courses and started with twenty students. Within the first five years the enrollment averaged out to about thirty students. These students experienced an inclusive atmosphere. Girls from more affluent families were taught alongside girls from the lower classes of the city thanks to the nun's fluid tuition. The inclusiveness went beyond social or class standing. In St. Louis there was a diverse population and a large portion of the people were French speaking. However, the French nuns did not cater solely to that group. Instead the French and English-speaking students were relatively equal from the beginning until eventually the English speakers became the majority. These Catholic nuns also took in Protestants to teach. The school became a wonderful conglomeration of all classes, languages, races, and religions present in St. Louis.[39]

The founding of St. Louis came during a period of great change in America. Before the village became a city, it saw the birth of the United States, the end of French and Spanish control over the Louisiana area, the creation of new ideas about women in the new American Republic, and also changes in education philosophies. These changes would continue to spiral, and women would keep searching for new ways to hold power in their lives. It is important to stop and look at how major events or a large shift in the thinking of people affects areas on a more micro scale. St. Louis

---

[37] Primm, *Lion of the Valley,* 95; Baumgarten, "Education and Democracy in Frontier St. Louis: The Society of the Sacred Heart," 171-172.
[38] Baumgarten, "Education and Democracy in Frontier St. Louis," 172-173.
[39] Ibid., 174.

in its early years offers a very distinct micro scale. No other city sat on the edge of great colonial powers and was ruled by three different powers during its first few years. The combination of the French settlers, Spanish officials, and British or American neighbors created a group of people who could allow new ideas about the women around them to take hold. Perhaps it was because they were on the edge of the wild and in that place survival comes before gender discrimination. However, it is more likely that the combination of the three people and their social norms found a middle to exist in where the women could assert their own role.

The women of St. Louis asserted their will into their own lives. They came to a frontier location to help carve a village out of nothing. They came with the men they loved to seek a chance at fortune. These women recognized their own control over their property. Many of them had to take that authority even further to care for the affairs of the whole family while the man was traveling and trading. Men brought back books of all topics from those trading trips. The private libraries of the more affluent families afforded those women the opportunity to educate themselves. Even the women of the less prosperous families eventually gained that right. Public libraries gave every woman the opportunity to read. With further study their reading habits maybe teased out. Women were imperative to the libraries for their survival. After the first wave of settlers had grown the city, they had to look to the education of their children. The girls were not forgotten. The women who came to St. Louis to start Sacred Heart made sure that all girls of all classes and races in the city had the opportunity to become educated. Mary Lyon would surely have been proud of that advancement. The popularity of the school speaks to how the city felt about the nun's practices. In all areas of life in St. Louis women found ways to push the limits of their power. They held onto property rights, maintained financial knowledge, and ensured that they and their children became educated. St. Louis women held agency over their own lives that surpassed women in many other places at that time.