

# The History of Jefferson County Missouri

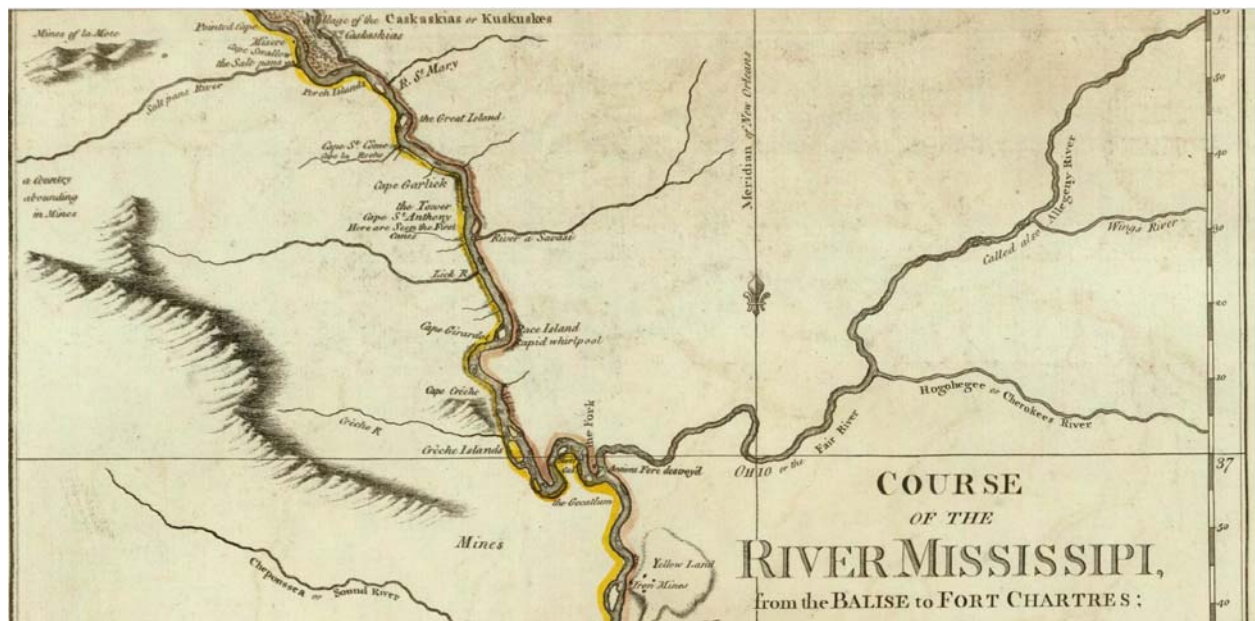
By: Lisa K. Gendron

Jefferson County has an abundance of natural resources. In the 1700's, these amenities, as well as the water corridors, Mississippi River, Meramec River, Big River and the many creeks and streams compelled the native Indians and the European settlers to make this their home.

One of the oldest known archaeological sites in Missouri and the first solid evidence of the coexistence of humans and the American mastodon in eastern North America can be found along the banks of Rock Creek in Kimmswick, Jefferson County, Missouri. At the end of the ice age, glaciers to the north were slowly melting as the earth warmed. Animals such as giant ground sloths, peccaries, and mastodons roamed the Midwest and were trapped in swampy areas where the mud helped to preserve their bones. Excavations have produced bones, relics and artifacts including a stone "Clovis" type projectile point. The Clovis culture is the earliest well-documented Native American occupation for North America. Due to its archaeological and paleontological significance, the Kimmswick Bone Bed is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

There are at least two significant Archaic sites in Jefferson County. These are the Bonacker and Hidden Valley shelters; both located in the south-central portion of Jefferson County. Weapons, tools, and other materials have been found at both sites.

In the 1600's, The French became the first white adventurers into the territory and laid claim to the whole Mississippi valley, known under the general name of Louisiana. After their defeat in the Seven Years' War in 1763, France was ceded the eastern part of the territory to the victorious British, and the western part to Spain. The portion of the territory that included present day Missouri remained in the possession of Spain during the war of the American Revolution. By a treaty in 1800, control of the land passed again from Spain back to France, and in 1803, France ceded the territory to the United States.



**1776 Map of the Mississippi River taken on an expedition to the Illinois in the latter end of the year 1765 by Lieu't Rofs of the 54th Regiment: Improved from the surveys of that river made by the French. Printed 1775**

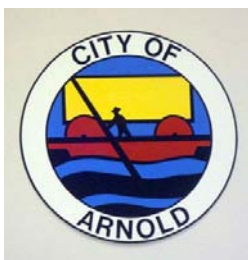
Settlers under both French and Spanish rule were allowed to have a certain amount of land to live on, provided that they would clear the land and build a house on it. The first settlements were made in the northeastern sections of the county. In 1774, John Hilderbrand settled along the Saline Creek in the neighborhood of the Meramec. He is generally described as Jefferson County's first settler. About 1775, salt works were established in the vicinity of what is now Kimmswick. and a settlement was established on Romine Creek about four miles from the Meramec in 1788 by John Boli.

Early settlers were constantly worried by hostile Indian attacks. Several times they had to move their entire families to St. Louis for protection. They finally became so troublesome that the settlers organized and built a rude fortification on Saline Creek for defense.

In 1776 St. Louis and Ste. Genevieve had become important trading posts, but the country lying between was filled with peril, making a journey overland between these points extremely hazardous. The lieutenant-governor of the territory offered 1,050 arpents of land to anyone who would establish and keep a ferry across the Meramec. A Frenchman named Jean Baptiste Gamache accepted the challenge and established the ferry about a mile above the mouth of the river and the place is still known as the "lower ferry." Gamache's ferry was part of the King's Trace or **El Camino Real**. (the Royal Road) The road was marked out in 1789 on an old Indian trail and led from St Louis south, across Gamache's ferry, to Kimmswick, Sulphur Springs, Ste Genevieve, and eventually to New Madrid. After 1850, this route became known as Telegraph Road because the first telegraph line in Missouri followed the route with the first poles embedded along the old trail.



Gamache was one of the first permanent settlers in the Arnold, Missouri area. He is credited with naming River des Peres (River of the Fathers) in honor of Jesuit fathers who were traveling along the Mississippi River and found him living in a cabin on a small island at the mouth of the river. Gamache was so inspired by his encounter with the fathers that he decided to name the river in their honor. He laid out a road between River Des Peres and the Mississippi River to provide better access to his ferry service. The road was completed in 1789. Most recently termed Lemay Ferry Road, it was originally called Carondelet Road.



**The official seal of the city of "Arnold" captures the likeness of Gamache crossing the Meramec River on the original ferry carrying a cargo box and barrels.**

Most of the earliest names in north Jefferson County were French until about 1850 when the English and Irish names began to regularly appear. After the Civil War, German and Bohemian names began to also occur.

The first settlement at House Springs was made in about 1790 by James Head, for which Head's Creek is named. James sold his property to Adam House in 1796. The Osage Indians, who lived near what is now Franklin County, made life miserable for the new settlers. In records from the Historical Library in St. Louis the following report regarding the fate of Adam House and his son was found, dated 19 March, 1800:

"I, Pierre Treget, commandant at Carondelet, pursuant to orders from Don Carlos Dehault Delassus, commandant at St. Louis, repaired to the Renault Forks, with the few militiamen I could assemble, in pursuit of the Indians. On reaching the place, I found an old man dead, head cut off and laid at his side, scalp taken and body full of wounds from musket shots; and a few paces off, a boy eight or nine years old, head cut off and lying near him, face smeared with blood, with a small piece of maple sugar in his mouth, no wound on his body from either musket or knife; a dead cow, one horn carried off, dead calf, head cut off, beds in the house cut to pieces, utensils broken and strewed about the house. Ascertained that the murders had been committed by the Osages; buried the bodies, not known at this time."

The town, which was first called Demaree was later named House Springs in honor of the House family. Only a few yards from the spring, near Hwy. MM and the intersection of new Hwy. 30, an ancient Native American burial ground was found.

Numerous Indian tribes inhabited or hunted the territory now comprising this county, mainly along the main waterways. Tribes included the Shawnee and Delaware, the Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Osage. There are documented Indian burials and many relics have been found along the Big River, the Joachim, in Kimmswick, House Springs and the Plattin areas. There is evidence that the Shawnee helped supply St. Louis with meat at least until the war of 1812.

An article from an old 1870 issue of the local paper, The Democrat, stated that "In the year 1802, Mr. Hardy McCormack now living in Plattin Township, landed at Plattin Rock which lies upon the Mississippi River at the mouth of the transparent stream which shares the same title. During the winter, it was customary for some four or five hundred Indians to come and camp on what is now called the McLane farm, and to which is also given the significant title of "Indian Bottom." This field is located near the head waters of the Plattin and at the time of Mr. McCormack's visit constituted together with the surrounding country, one of the finest hunting regions in the West. And it was on this account that the savages preferred to occupy it."

In 1798, John Clark, a Methodist preacher from Scotland, delivered the first Protestant sermon west of the Mississippi River. The sermon was delivered at Bates Rock near the confluence of the Joachim Creek and the Mississippi River in Herculaneum. Under Spanish law, Protestant ceremonies were prohibited in the Spanish Territory so Clark delivered his sermon from a boat on the Mississippi River to residents gathered along the river shore. By doing this, Clark was well within the laws of the Spanish territory.

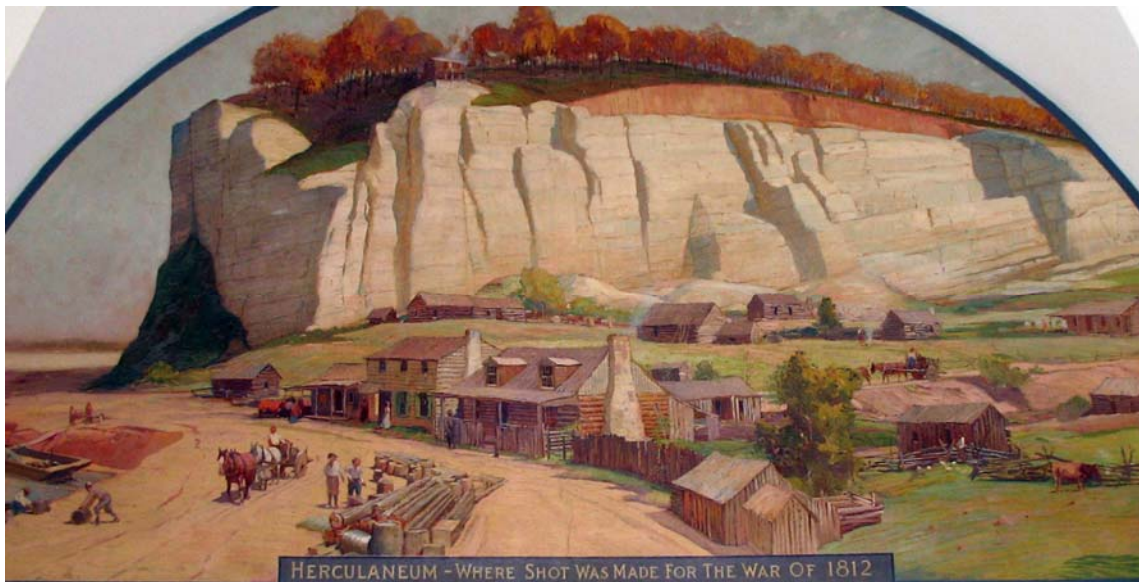
Moses Austin, a settler from Connecticut, obtained a Spanish land grant in 1798 of one square league (approximately 3 square miles) of land after learning of the richness of the area's rich mineral deposits. After bringing in equipment and workmen from Virginia, he began mining and smelting lead despite frequent problems with the neighboring Osage tribe. The first town in Jefferson county was laid out in

1806 by Christian Wilt and John W. Honey and was called New Hartford. The exact location of the town is unknown, but it was on the Mississippi River, near the present location of Herculaneum. In 1808, Moses Austin and Samuel Hammond laid out a town at the mouth of Joachim Creek in Jefferson County as a lead shipping point. It is believed the town was named by Moses Austin, who called it Herculaneum because the eroded limestone resembled seats in the amphitheater of the ancient roman city of Herculaneum.



The first **post office** in Jefferson County was at Herculaneum, established soon after the town was laid out, and it remained the only post office in the county for nearly thirty years.

The very first shot tower west of Pittsburgh was erected by John N. Maclot in 1809, in the southeastern part of Herculaneum. In 1810, Austin also began to manufacture shot in towers, which he had built on the high Mississippi River bluffs. Lead ammunition, and cannonballs from Herculaneum were used in the War of 1812. By 1813, there were three shot towers along the bluffs of the Mississippi at Herculaneum.

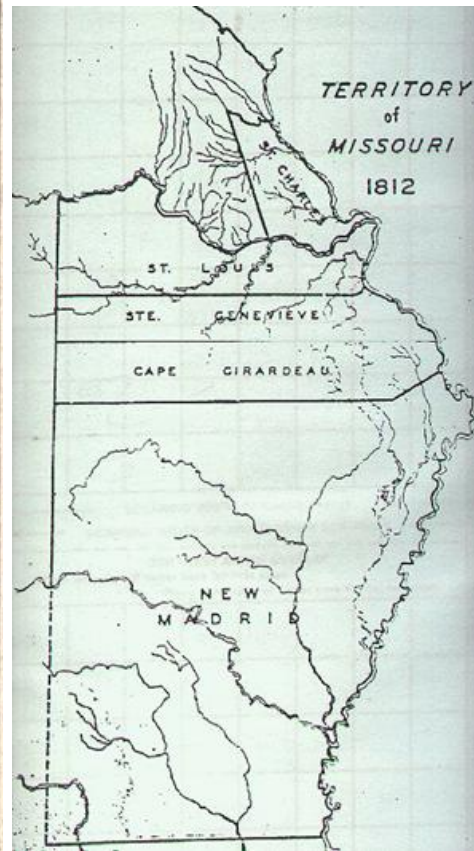


**Mural by Oscar Berninghaus in the Missouri State Capitol Building in Jefferson City, Missouri**

While the abundant lead deposits attracted the attention of many, there were also those wanting to settle and farm the rich soil. With continued immigration, more and more land was settled and cultivated. Peter Huskey came to Jefferson Co. in about 1804. His son, John, became a member of the first Circuit Court in Jefferson Co., MO which was organized in 1819. The Huskey family settled in the Hillsboro area, near Belews Creek. Descendants of the family still live there, and the farm is recognized as the oldest continuously operated family farm in Missouri.

Many other early settlements followed in the years 1800 to 1804 along the Big River at Morse's Mill and Frumet, and along the Sandy, Joachim and Plattin creeks.

The United States purchased the "Louisiana Territory" from France in 1803. In 1806, the territorial legislature created the District of Arkansas from lands ceded by the Osage Indian Nation. The remainder was known as the Upper Louisiana Territory. By 1812, the territory had five counties: St. Louis District, St. Charles District, Ste. Genevieve District, Cape Girardeau District, and New Madrid District.



On June 4, 1812, Congress enacted legislation which renamed Louisiana Territory as Missouri Territory, in order to avoid confusion with the recently admitted State of Louisiana.



**1814 Missouri Territory**

In an "Act of the Territory" on December 8, 1818, a new county called "Jefferson" was created by taking a portion of the county of St. Louis, and part of the county of Ste. Genevieve. The new county was named in honor of Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd President of the United States and the father of the Louisiana Purchase. The establishment of Jefferson County was three years before that of its own mother-state, as Missouri did not become a state until 1821.

Circuit Court Record No. 1, in the office of the Circuit Clerk at Hillsboro, Missouri, states that the first Circuit Court for the Northern Circuit of "Missouri Territory" was held in the town of Herculanum on the 2nd day of March, 1819, with Nathaniel Beverly Tucker presiding as the judge of the northern circuit. The first court of Judge Tucker fixed the rate of taxation for the county as follows: "Ordered that the rates of taxation in and for the county of Jefferson for the year 1819 as follows: On each horse, mare, mule or ass above three years old, 25 cents; meat cattle above 3 years old, 6-1/4 cents; for every negro or mulatto slave between 16 and 45 years, 50 cents; for each billiard table, 25 dollars; for every able bodied single man of 21 years and upward not being possessed of property to the value of two hundred dollars, 50 cents; and on water grist mills, saw mills, horse mills, tan yards and distilleries in actual operation, 40 cents on every hundred dollars of their respective valuation."

Jefferson County possessed an enormous wealth in mining resources. Part of the county lies within the mineral region of south-east Missouri. Before the building of the railroad, the shipments of lead were made by the Mississippi river, which was reached at the "Cliffs of Selma" at the mouth of the Plattin. The place was named by John Smith "T" (for Tennessee) and became a large and important trade center from which immense quantities of lead were shipped from the area and points south. John Smith T owned several mines in Southeastern Missouri, and by 1805 he had also purchased large tracts of land in Jefferson County, Missouri. The lead that was smelted at his mines at Shibboleth was hauled by ox cart over the Selma Road in Jefferson County, and loaded onto boats, or packets at Selma Landing on

the Mississippi River. Many of the farmers devoted all their spare time to teaming from the many lead mines, keeping the Selma road well traveled and busy. During this time, Selma Valley became a busy village with a general store, tavern, blacksmith shop, and stables. A shot tower was also erected on the bluffs directly across from where Selma Hall is now located.

Selma Hall, or **Kennett's Castle** as it is locally called, sits on a high bluff overlooking the Mississippi River,



a few miles south of Festus. The land on which it is situated was first acquired in 1805 by John Smith T. When Smith T died, Ferdinand Kennett took over the operation of Smith's mines at Shibboleth. Kennett's wife, Julia, had inherited almost 3000 acres from her grandfather, John Smith T. Kennett had accumulated a considerable fortune and he wanted to provide an appropriate home for himself and his family. The castle was built during the years 1850-1854. Ferdinand died in 1861, leaving his widowed wife to endure the dangers of the Civil War alone, while trying to cope with the problems of her husband's vast estate. The shot tower

remained in operation throughout the war and was of prime importance to both armies. Enemy boats on the Mississippi fired frequently on the castle. Julia eventually decided to take her children to St. Louis for safety, and the mansion suffered damage and vandalism during this time. Both Union troops and officers were billeted in the castle for a while.

Valles Mines is one of the older mines in Jefferson county and first opened in about 1814 or 1815. Frumet Mines, which was situated seven miles west of De Soto produced large amounts of lead and zinc. Other mines located and worked in the county were the Mammoth Mines and Lee mines in the De Soto area, Plattin mines, and the nearby McCormack's zinc mines, Gray's mines on Big River, McKane's mines on Dry Creek Tarpley and Perry's mines, Old Ditch mines, Sandy mines, Hart's mines, and Howe's mines.

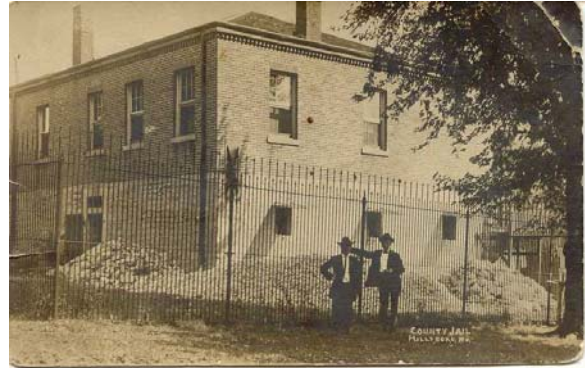
John Johnston and Francis Wideman had two of the earliest mills in the county. Others included the Maddox Mill, Byrne's Mill, Byrnesville Mill, Morse's Mill, and Cedar Hill Mill. Hematite had the grist mill of Donnell and Lee and the Null/Benson mill. The first water mill on the waters of the Plattin was built by a man names Donough. Another mill, and one of the oldest in the county, was Cole's mill on Joachim Creek, near Valle Mines. Pleasant Valley Mill was located near Pevely. Henry Vandecrusen had a mill on the House's Springs Branch, and another was owned by Lewis Snair. In Kimmswick, a flouring-mill was built by Henry Nagle.

By 1819, the slavery question had become a dominant issue in the national Congress because of the pending admission of Missouri into the Union. A group of Jefferson County citizens met at Herculaneum on April 22, 1820 and issued strong anti-slavery resolutions, denouncing slavery as evil and pronouncing it an unsound economic system. The state of Missouri was admitted into the Union as a slave state in 1821 as part of the Missouri Compromise.

By 1831 a more central location for the county seat was needed and the County Court appointed commissioners to select a new site for a seat of justice. They suggested Monticello as there was a spring there, which was the stopping point in the trail that passed between Potosi and St. Louis. In 1836, the County Court ordered that the name of Monticello be changed to Hillsboro because the county seat of

Lewis County, Missouri was also called Monticello. In 1839 the legislature passed an act designating Hillsboro as the new seat of justice of Jefferson County. The first occupancy of the new courthouse was in April, 1840. In less than 25 years, they were in the process of building a new courthouse. This first building afterward served as the first public school building in Hillsboro.

The building, which is referred to as the second courthouse of the county, was completed in 1865, along with the jail, at a total cost of \$16,500. **The jail** was designed with living quarters for the sheriff on the top floor and cells for the prisoners on the lower floor. A 12-foot high solid rock wall surrounded the jail as it was originally constructed.



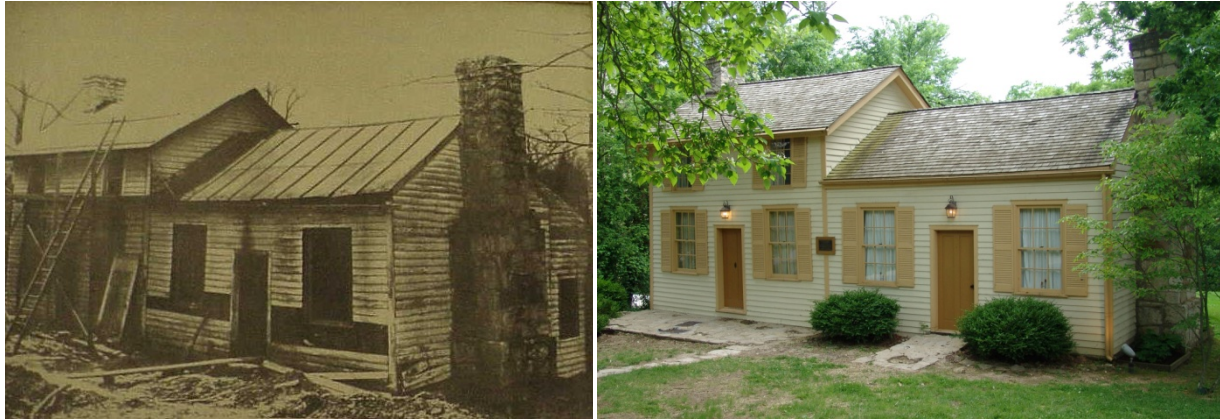
The St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway announced plans in 1851 to build a railroad through the county from St. Louis to Iron County. Thomas C. Fletcher, born in Herculaneum in 1827, and his brother-in-law, Louis Rankin, owned land where the railroad would be constructed and platted the town of De Soto in 1857. The first train into De Soto was September 14, 1857. Fletcher and Rankin built a station house for the railroad. De Soto's post office was established, and the town soon had a general store, grist mill, blacksmith shop, hotel, public hall, and a private school. Railroad shops were built later that employed hundreds of men. Shoe, hat and doll factories were other industries that helped the town flourish.

At the approach of the Civil War between the States of the Union, it is believed that a large majority of the people of Jefferson County were in favor of state sovereignty. They were in sympathy with the southern cause, but not to such an extent as to make them favor secession. At the February 1861 election for delegates to the state convention, the Union candidates carried Jefferson County by an overwhelming majority. The people of Jefferson County preferred to remain in the Union and, if possible, to maintain state sovereignty and state neutrality. Many men from Jefferson served in the Civil War, although no regular engagements between the contending armies took place within the County. However, in October 1861, Jeff Thompson, a Confederate general in the Missouri State Guard, and his battalion called the "Swamp Rats" made an expedition into Jefferson County. They had two purposes in mind; one was to destroy the Iron Mountain Railroad Bridge across Big River at Blackwell, hampering the movement of Federal forces south of St. Louis; and the other was to seize lead from the mines and carry it south for Confederate use. A fierce skirmish was fought at the bridge, which was guarded by Union soldiers. The bridge was burned before Thompson retreated to join his other forces in Fredericktown.

Colonel Thomas C. Fletcher, the man who laid out the town of De Soto, became the first Missouri governor born in the state of Missouri. He served for the Union during the civil war and in 1862 saw action at Chickasaw Bayou, north of Vicksburg, where he was wounded and captured. He spent the next five months in Libby Prison at Richmond. He later commanded the 47th Missouri Volunteers at the Battle of Pilot Knob. For his service there, he was made a brigadier general of volunteers. Fletcher was elected as governor of Missouri in 1864 and took office in January of 1865. As Missouri was not included

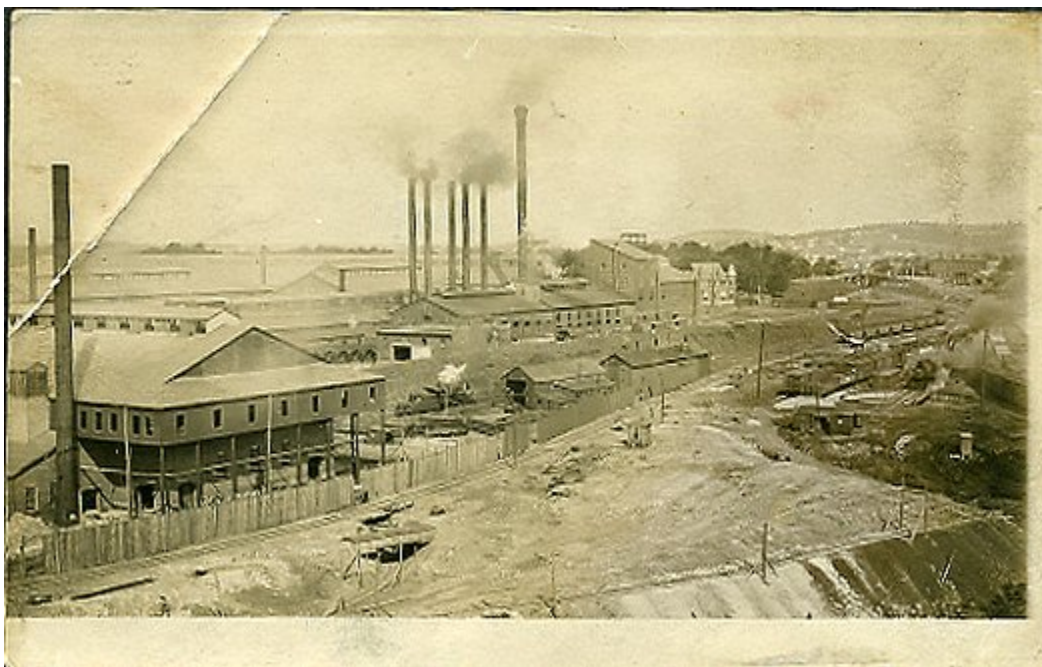


in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, it was Fletcher's task to emancipate the slaves of Missouri.



**The Fletcher home in Hillsboro was built in 1851 and is now on the National Register of Historic Places.**

In 1868 three men discovered that the sand within Jefferson County was of the unusual high quality necessary for making plate glass. As a result, Captain Ebenezer B. Ward of Detroit organized the American Plate Glass Company. Building began in 1872 and workmen were recruited from surrounding farms and a town began to grow around the factory. In 1877 the factory and land were sold to the Crystal Plate Glass Company of St. Louis. Eighteen years later the factory was purchased by the Pittsburgh **Plate Glass Company**. Crystal City was, until 1906, a real "company town", but after that date, lots and other properties were sold by the company to private individuals for residences and business houses. The town was incorporated in 1912.



Since no drinking was allowed on company property, another town began establishing itself on the outskirts of Crystal City. This original town became known as Tanglefoot because of the saloons that grew up there. It later was called Limitville, and then became Festus.

The St. Joseph Lead Company was established in Herculaneum in the early 1890's. At the time it was built, it was the largest lead smelter in the United States. It served the area for over 100 years, until problems with meeting newer air quality standards caused the plant to close in 2013. The 550-foot smokestack — about the same size as the Washington Monument — still towers over Main Street, a reminder of Herculaneum's deep roots as a company town.

By WWI, Jefferson County had progressed and citizens were driving the new horseless carriage - the automobile. However, because of the war, rubber was an important commodity, making it necessary to conserve the tires on the vehicles. The muddy and rutted county roads which had served the iron wagon wheel were now inadequate. In 1927, Jefferson County acquired its first automotive road building equipment. During the Great Depression various public work programs sponsored by the Roosevelt Administration helped the county move forward with its plan of construction of all weather roads. Many of the main artery roads now existing in Jefferson County were originally developed with the aid of Federal Public works. After World War II, St. Louis families began to look to Jefferson County for home sites, away from the crowded city atmosphere. Fresh air, spacious lots and garden spots were an attractive lure.

Visitors to Jefferson County are now offered a wide variety of natural and historic attractions. Currently, Jefferson County has 15 areas designated as park lands totaling 360 acres. Development of the physical and cultural characteristics of Jefferson County has produced a modern, vibrant county which provides excellent services to its citizens. We continue to move toward the 21st century with pride in our past and a commitment to the future.