

## A GATEWAY TO GREATNESS Part Symbol and Part Architectural Masterpiece, the Gateway Arch Defines St. Louis

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ALTHOUGH THE GATEWAY ARCH IN ST. LOUIS WAS COMPLETED IN 1965, THE IDEA FOR THE 630-FEET STAINLESS STEEL MONUMENT WAS FIRST PROPOSED IN THE EARLY 1930S.

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Few cities are lucky enough to have a landmark that has become a national icon. Enter the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The 630-foot stainless steel monument has been a defining symbol of the city for the more than 40 years. As the nation's tallest monument, the Gateway Arch was built as part of a memorial to westward expansion.

"People tend to either appreciate the Arch as a symbol of St. Louis or they appreciate it as a work of modern architecture and engineering," said Bob Moore, historian for the Gateway Arch and the National Park Service.

### VISION QUEST

The idea for the memorial came about in the early 1930s, when a St. Louis lawyer named Luther Ely Smith came up with the idea to create a memorial on the St. Louis riverfront, which was the oldest part of the city and had fallen on hard times.

"[Smith] thought that if all the buildings were torn down, a memorial to westward expansion and St. Louis' role in the trans-Mississippi west would benefit the city and put people back to work during the Great Depression," Moore said.

Smith presented his idea to the city fathers, who embraced the idea and eventually took it to Washington and secured federal support and funding. Before World War II, all of the buildings in a 37-block span along the riverfront were torn down to prepare for the memorial. However, when the war started, the funding disappeared and the riverfront remained empty.

After the war, Smith resumed his quest to realize his vision. He obtained enough private donations to launch an architectural competition to decide what the memorial would look like. From the 172 anonymous entries, the expert jury chose a design by Eero Saarinen, a first generation American from Finland.

"[Saarinen's] entry was for a gigantic stainless steel arch standing on the riverfront," Moore said. "It was a magnificent idea, but no engineers or architects knew how to build it."

The project then stalled once again due to a lack of federal funding. However, in the late 1950s the federal government found the funds to proceed with the project. Saarinen's firm solved the engineering problems for building the arch and designed a complementary landscape for the surrounding riverfront park. The Arch was constructed between 1963 and 1965. Sadly, Luther Ely Smith did not live to see it completed.

### ARCH ATTRACTION

Today, the Gateway Arch Riverfront is comprised of the stainless steel arch, a 90-acre park and an underground complex that houses the Museum of Westward Expansion and a visitor



center. The Old Courthouse, located just three blocks away from the Arch, was brought into the park in 1940. This historic courthouse was built in 1839 and served as the site of the infamous Dred Scott slavery case. The entire Gateway Arch Riverfront has been a National Park Service area since 1935.

“The Arch, because of its sheer size and visual beauty, has really overtaken what the original purpose of the memorial was supposed to be,” Moore said. “It is this magnificent piece of international architecture. Because it is so front-and-center on the St. Louis downtown skyline and right there on the riverfront, it quickly became the symbol of the city.”

When it was built, the residents of St. Louis immediately embraced the Arch, and still today residents refer to it as the St. Louis Arch.

The landscape for the 90-acre park surrounding the Arch was designed by Saarinen specifically to augment and reflect the characters of the Arch itself. The landscape employs the same catenary curve of the arch through the park’s walkways and stairways. Rose Hill Ash trees line the walkways and serve as the dominant species in the park. An additional 20 species of plantings on the grounds further complement the park and the Arch. As a National Historic Landmark, the entire site has been preserved according to Saarinen’s original plan and vision.

The Arch, along with the original Busch Stadium, played a pivotal role in revitalizing downtown St. Louis. After the addition of the Arch and the stadium, major hotels started to move into the downtown area, corporations moved their headquarters downtown and further development followed.

Currently, the Arch still draws people downtown. In fact, visitation to the landmark has increased in the past year. Recently, however, local critics have expressed discontent with some of the connections between the park and the city. The top concern is that the highways that have been built around the park make it difficult to access. To address these issues, the National Park Service launched an international



design competition to improve how the park is keyed into the city.

“All of this has generated tremendous interest and excitement among St. Louisians,” Moore said. “It reaffirmed our understanding of how important the Arch is to the community.”

While a steady influx of domestic and international tourists visit the Arch, the National Park Service is currently focusing on drawing locals back to the park.

“Our research has shown that the average St. Louisian visits the Arch once in every 10 years; we’re trying to improve that ratio now,” Moore said.

To attract more St. Louisians the National Park Service is creating smaller events with a local focus. For instance, the park has held Park Palooza, an outdoor event with different family-friendly activities such as archeological digs, climbing walls and kayaking. Further, the Museum of Westward Expansion recently displayed local artist Sheila Harris’ exhibit of riverfront building paintings from the 1930s which illustrated the history of the area and the plot of ground where the Arch is, Moore said.

While the Gateway Arch symbolizes many things, one of the most important is the fact that this magnificent monument owes its existence to one man’s dream to revitalize and beautify a city with a rich history. ■

THE GATEWAY ARCH RESTS WITHIN A 90-ACRE PARK IN ST. LOUIS.

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