

Downtown Liberty Business District Walking Tour

Extension 1 – Introduction/Overview

In less than 20 years after Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery passed nearby, Liberty, Missouri became a town. The year was 1822, just one year after Missouri and Maine became states as a result of the Missouri Compromise approved by the United States Congress. Liberty was officially incorporated a few years later in 1829. This makes Liberty, Missouri older than either nearby Independence, Missouri or Kansas City, Missouri. From the beginning, Liberty was designated as the county seat of Clay County. The county was named in honor of Henry Clay, the Kentucky Senator who championed the Missouri Compromise.

Liberty's Courthouse Square has always been the center of activity for the town. Most of the trading, market and governmental activity took place here. It was a social and shopping center, not only for residents, but also for provisioning settlers in northern and western Missouri. It was a vital supply and social center for military personnel assigned to the new army fort in Leavenworth, Kansas 35 miles west across the Missouri River.

Liberty's growth moved outward from the Square. Many of the earliest homes were built eastward toward what is now William Jewell College and southward in the direction of the Missouri River. Later, homes were built in the direction of open fields to the north and to the west.

Legendary stories emerged from Liberty's early years. Legendary characters included the earliest settlers, early prominent lawyer Alexander Doniphan, Mormon prophet and founder Joseph Smith, Mayor Madison Miller, Dr. William Jewell for whom William Jewell College is named and, yes, even the outlaw Jesse James. What a strange coincidence that the paths of religious leader Joseph Smith and the notorious outlaw crossed here in Liberty.

The early history of Liberty and Clay County was significantly influenced by their slave-owning residents, many of whom moved here from Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. Residents of the area were unable to escape being part of the violent “border wars” leading up to the Civil War. Forty-one counties in Kansas and Missouri – including Clay County, Missouri – are now united within the Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area commemorating this struggle.

Extension 2 – Southeast corner of Kansas and Water Streets.

From this location on the southeast corner of the Square you can see the Clay County court house in the center of the picturesque square. The earliest Clay County seat of government was actually in a tavern or any other building that could be rented. The first courthouse building in the center of the square was built in the 1830's. That courthouse burned in 1857 and was replaced by a much larger courthouse which was used almost 80 years until the 1930s. The present courthouse was constructed in 1934 as a project of the Public Works Administration during the Depression. Murals depicting the history of Clay County can be viewed on the third floor of the court house any day the Courthouse is open.

The entire row of buildings from this point west on Kansas Street to Main Street is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. That designation identifies important historical places throughout the entire United States. Each of these buildings was built sometime between 1870 and 1899. During your stay in Downtown Liberty try to find time to examine the unique features of each of these buildings standing across the street in front of the courthouse.

Looking to the east you can see Jewell Hall prominently situated in the center of the William Jewell College campus. That building was the first permanent building of William Jewell College, established in 1849. The namesake of the college, Dr William Jewell, oversaw the construction of the building until his untimely death from heat stroke

in the summer of 1851. Jewell Hall was occupied at various times by armies of the Civil War.

Extension 3 – The Liberty Spring

The Liberty Spring was a major reason Liberty is located here and not next to the Missouri River like most other early towns. Liberty is approximately 4 miles away from the river. The spring provided an ample supply of clear, drinkable water. The early settlers found this location much more appealing than the mosquito-infested river area. It was also safely distant from people who might be a threat to the town and its citizens.

Extension 4 – Mill Street near Corbin Mill and the Lewis & Clark Murals

Standing at the corner of Mill Street and Water Street, the large brick building to your south is Corbin Mill. It is the remaining building of a once-thriving mill industry in Liberty. Products such as flour, grist, and cloth were produced and shipped from Liberty. This area was once an industrial center. It now houses a retail shopping center with several interesting stores and a restaurant. Shops have names like “With A French Accent” and “American Whatever”. Local barrel maker, Doug Bratcher, operates Bratcher Cooperage in his small workshop just east of the mill building. He makes barrels the old fashioned way, selling them to customers all over the North and South American continents. He spends several weeks each year at Silver Dollar City as one of the featured craftsmen.

Across the street, on the wall of the Clay County Detention Center, are the murals that were created in 2003 by local artist David McClain to depict members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition which passed nearby in 1804. The Corps of Discovery camped across the Missouri River just a few miles away and explored the area around what is now Liberty during their historic journey upstream.

Extension 5 – Corner of Kansas and Main

From the corner of Kansas and Main Streets you can see what was the old Boggess Hardware store at 5 East Kansas, built in 1895. It served as a hardware store for 88 years from 1902 until 1990. Inside, you can still see some of the old hardware supplies hanging on the walls. Many past visitors and residents remember this as the Hardware Café which operated there for many years. It now is the home of the very successful Los Compas Mexican Restaurant.

In the middle of the block on the west side near the courthouse is a World War I memorial, recognizing the men from Clay County who were killed in that war.

Across the street from the World War I memorial is the Clay County Historical Museum. It is in one of the oldest remaining buildings on the square, built in 1877. The name of Joe Simmons, the last druggist to operate a drugstore in this building, is still on the threshold. The restored and preserved office of long-time local physician Dr. Goodson is on the second floor. The building has housed the Clay County Museum since 1965. The museum is open daily from 1 to 4 p.m.

At the corner of the next street north you can see the building that houses Palen Music Center. This is the Miller Building, the second oldest remaining building on the square, built in 1868. Across the street to the west is a new building built in 2005 to replace a historic building which had a similar look that was damaged in the tornado of 2003.

Extension 6 – Homes of Madison Miller House and Alexander Doniphan

At 124 Gallatin Street is the building that was the home of Madison Miller, the first Mayor of Liberty. His portrait hangs in City Hall. He was a local merchant. This house was built in the 1840's. The large tree in the front yard, now over 150 years old, was brought here by Mr. Miller from California after the Gold Rush in 1849!

A block east on North Main Street is the site of the home where famous Liberty attorney and Missouri militia leader in the Mexican-American War Alexander Doniphan and his wife Elizabeth once lived. After the Doniphan's left Liberty, the house was occupied by Peter H. Burnett, a legal partner of Alexander Doniphan. Burnett later became the first governor of California. The Hubbell family occupied the home for many years after that.

Extension 7 - Historic Liberty Jail Site

In 1838, a prominent local attorney, Alexander Doniphan, who was also a brigadier general in the state militia, along with General Samuel Lucas, led a large force of state troops to the Mormon community of Far West in Caldwell County. They had been ordered by the Governor to arrest the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders. After what General Doniphan considered an illegal court marshal, General Lucas relayed an order from the Governor to have General Doniphan execute Joseph Smith and other church leaders. Doniphan refused and threatened to prosecute General Lucas before "an earthly tribunal" if HE carried out the order. General Lucas reconsidered and Joseph Smith's life was spared. Judge Austin A. King sent Joseph Smith and others to the Liberty Jail to await trial in the spring.

At this location is the visitor's center for the Historic Liberty Jail which houses the reconstructed 1838 jail where Joseph Smith and other church leaders were confined. It is built of logs and a rough stone exterior. The dungeon measures roughly 14 by 14 feet, with a ceiling just over 6 feet high. Only two small barred windows allowed light and air into the cell. The Mormon prisoners suffered from winter weather, filthy conditions, hunger, and sickness.

Inside the Historic Liberty Jail you can see the original key to the jail. The Liberty Jail was rebuilt in a cutaway style. This helps you visualize the prisoners' cramped and gloomy quarters. The Historic Liberty Jail is owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is open, free of charge, 365 days a year from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Extension 8 - Corner of Franklin and Main

Looking north from the corner of Franklin and Main Streets, notice the Liberty Tribune office on the left. This weekly newspaper is the oldest continuously-operated newspaper west of the Mississippi River. It was started in 1846 by a 19-year old man. He was sent as a reporter with Alexander Doniphan's army on its historic march to Mexico in 1848. This is not the original location of the Tribune, however. Across the street from the Tribune is a unique retail store, James Country Mercantile, which offers a full line of historically accurate goods, custom sewing, research, consultation and associated services related to the history of the mid-1800s.

Extension 9 - Northeast Corner of Franklin and Water

From this location at the corner of Franklin and Water Streets several historic scenes present themselves. To the east, on the hill about a half mile away, is the William Jewell College campus, centered by the neo-classical design Jewell Hall, built in 1851. The college was founded in 1849.

Immediately behind you is the Jesse James Bank Museum at 103 N Water, originally the Clay County Savings Association. The building was made famous by an event on February 13, 1866 when the James-Younger Gang was reputed to have robbed it. It has been restored to look like it did in 1866 and is now a museum. This is the oldest remaining building on the Square, built in 1858. The museum is operated by Clay County Historic Sites and is open Monday through Saturday from 10 to 4. Another reminder of Jesse James is the James Farm and Museum east of Kearney, Missouri approximately 10 miles from here.

Diagonally across the street is the Freedom Fountain, recognizing the African-American citizens who contributed to the growth and development of Liberty and Clay County. In the center of the square is the third Clay County courthouse. Beyond the courthouse is

an entire block of historic buildings constructed in the late 1800s which form a historic district recognized on the National Register of Historic Places.

Extension 10 – Freedom Fountain

This fountain at the northeast corner of the courthouse square was erected in 2000 by the Clay County African-American Legacy organization in honor of African-Americans who made contributions to the growth and development of Clay County. The Freedom Fountain is near the location where, 150 years earlier, slaves were regularly bought and sold. For example, in January 1859, \$20,000 worth of slaves were sold on this lawn in one day. The single water fountain for all people reminds Liberty of an earlier era when residents drank from segregated (“white and colored”) water fountains. The June 2000 dedication of this Fountain featured then Governor Bob Holden, providing the first drink to Mrs. Lulu Johnson Felder who, at age 102, was the oldest living African-American resident of Clay County. She was born and raised in the first “free” black community in Clay County, “White Oak” in North Kansas City. The restored church from that community has been re-located next to Strouds’ Restaurant near I-35.

Extension 11 – Corbin Theatre.

The Corbin Theatre at 15 North Water Street is a community-based theatre in a historic building which housed a pharmacy for many years. Corbin Theatre is operated by the local Corbin Theatre Company, providing weekly entertainment with music of all types, narrative reminders of Liberty’s history and dramatic presentations. The name of the theatre reflects an earlier entertainment venue at a different address on the square – The Corbin Opera House – which provided entertainment for over 40 years until its building was irreparably damaged in 1934. This building, comprised of 3 retail store fronts, is owned by Roger and Vicki Burnett who live above all 3 units in their beautifully-restored loft residence.