

Alexander Doniphan Walking Tour

Extension 12 – Introduction

I am speaking as the voice of Alexander William Doniphan, considered by many historians to be Liberty's best known and most influential citizen. My life covered a crucial time in Liberty, Missouri, from my arrival in Liberty in 1833 until I left in 1863. During the Civil War, I moved to St Louis. After the war I moved to Richmond, Missouri. Several points of interest in Liberty are particularly relevant to my days in Liberty. Please visit these sites and listen to my story. I hope you will gain an appreciation of how, during critical times, I tried to make an impact for good.

I was born on July 9, 1808, near Augusta, Mason County, Kentucky. This was only a year before Abraham Lincoln, another Kentuckian, was born.. I was the youngest of 10 children.

Father died when I was five. He was a teacher and had been a friend of Daniel Boone. I am proud of my heritage. Both of my grandfathers participated in the American Revolution. I graduated from Augusta College in Bracken, Kentucky, at the age of 18. Then I studied law in the office of Martin Marshall, a kinsman of the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. I was admitted to the bar in 1830.

The frontier west was new and growing. Wanting to be a part of this, I moved from Kentucky to Lexington in western Missouri to begin my law practice. In 1833, I moved farther west to Liberty, Missouri, where I practiced law for 30 years.

Some say I was a mighty orator. Perhaps it was my 6'4" frame that gave me a commanding presence and persuasive manner. I was always a defense lawyer, never a prosecutor. I was honored to serve in the Missouri State Legislature in 1836, 1840 and 1854. I was a loyal Whig.

I was an admirer and supporter of Henry Clay. I also served my state and country as a military leader. More about my military service later.

Extension 13 – Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation sign at the site of Alexander Doniphan’s first home

Greetings. Alexander Doniphan here. This is the site of my first home with my bride, Elizabeth Jane Thornton, daughter of Colonel John Thornton. We were married on her 17th birthday. We had two sons, both of whom met untimely accidental deaths in their youth. These tragic events deeply affected both my wife and myself.

Extension 14 – Historic Liberty Jail

Greetings. Alexander Doniphan here. Although I am remembered for my military career, I spent most of my years in Liberty practicing law. One of my more notable experiences as a lawyer involved representing the community of Mormons as a defense attorney. They needed my help in 1833 when they were told to leave Jackson County. Three years later I helped draw up a bill in the Missouri legislature that organized Caldwell County specifically for the Mormons. By 1838, they had built a city called Far West which boasted nearly 5,000 people. However, the conflicts continued with the local citizenry. Governor Lilburn Boggs felt the only solution was for the Mormons to leave the state.

In 1838, as a brigadier general in the state militia, General Samuel Lucas and I led a large force of state troops to Far West, Caldwell County. We had been ordered by the governor to arrest the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and his associates. After what I considered an illegal court marshal, General Lucas ordered me to execute Joseph Smith and other church leaders. I refused and threatened to prosecute HIM before “an earthly tribunal” if HE carried out the order. General Lucas reconsidered. Judge Austin A. King sent Joseph Smith and others to the Liberty Jail to await trial in the spring.

Under an “extermination order” from Governor Boggs, the Mormons moved to Illinois and later established the city of Nauvoo next to the Mississippi River.

Before you is the visitor’s center for the Historic Liberty Jail. Inside is the reconstructed 1833 jail, built of logs and with 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.

Extension 15 – The First Presbyterian Church of Liberty

The current building housing the First Presbyterian Church was built in 1888. Designed in Romanesque style, it was one of the first church buildings in the area to depart from the typical auditorium style of that day. The bell that hangs in the bell tower was donated to the church in 1835 by Emily Drew Thompson. Before being placed in its present home in the bell tower, it stood in the yard of the old church building. Notice the gargoyle on the north side of the bell tower above the entrance. It was apparently the only gargoyle on any building in Liberty.

Extension 16 – Alexander Doniphan’s Second Home on North Main Street

Greetings. Alexander Doniphan here. The house where my wife Elizabeth and I once lived stood on this site from about 1830 until 1925. The house was occupied later by Peter H. Burnett, a legal partner of mine. Peter later became the first governor of California.

Extension 17 – Murals Along the Clay County Justice Center wall.

Here, along the walls of the Clay County Justice Center, is the Clay County War Memorial. This memorial shows the white doves of Anguish on the left and Serenity on the right. Flanked by the white doves, soldiers from Missouri in all the great wars remind us of the price freedom requires—death. The artist depiction is “As the North gestures to the South, the fallow image of Colonel Alexander Doniphan and his entourage marches into history.”

Greetings. Alexander Doniphan here. In 1846, the war between the U.S. and Mexico was in full swing. Along with other Clay County boys from up and down the Missouri River, I enlisted. We mustered at Ft. Leavenworth. They elected me Colonel of the Missouri Volunteer Regiment. Under the command of General Stephen W. Kearny, we began a long overland trek to Santa Fe.

With nearly 1,000 men in the mounted regiment, we moved south to Mexico. We fought a short battle north of the present site of El Paso, Texas. Then we set out on a rough 300-mile march with a mission to capture Chihuahua. In February, 1847, just north of that city, we fought the Battle of Sacramento River. Our brave men overcame 5,000 Mexican soldiers and captured the city.

We marched to the Gulf of Mexico and returned home through New Orleans by boat. The famous “Doniphan Expedition” came to an end one year after it began. We had marched and traveled by boat about 5,000 miles. I was proud of my men. It was an epochal achievement. This march was the longest march in world military history since Alexander the Great crossed the Alps.

After the Mexican War, I was appointed by General Kearny to write the code of civil laws known as the “Kearny code.” It was written in English and Spanish for the territory annexed from Mexico. Much of it is still in use today.

Extension 18 – Steps leading to Jewell Hall on William Jewell College campus

Hello, Alexander Doniphan here. I always felt strongly about the value of education. I was interested when I learned in 1848 that Dr. William Jewell, a noted physician, legislator, and Baptist layman in Columbia, wanted to create a college. He had renewed his earlier offer of \$10,000 in land to start a Baptist college. The Baptists were eager to take advantage of the gift. On February 27, 1849, the Missouri legislature granted a charter creating the first four-year men's college west of the Mississippi.

Dr. Jewell stipulated that the college needed to be in mid-Missouri. Many towns in Missouri wanted the college. Even though I was not a Baptist and Liberty was not in mid-Missouri, I am proud to say that I was instrumental in making sure the college was located in Liberty. I put forth the idea and pushed for raising funds in Liberty and throughout Clay County to bring the college to Liberty instead of Booneville, which was Dr. Jewell's choice. Since Dr. Jewell had done so much to establish the college, I thought it was only fair that he should have the honor of having the college named for him.

It is interesting to note that in addition to Dr. Jewell and me, one of the founding members of the board of trustees was Reverend Robert James, a nearby Baptist minister. His sons, Frank and Jesse, later became famous in their own questionable ways. Remarkably, they made good on their father's financial pledge to the college when Reverend James left the area to follow church members to the California Gold Rush.

While supervising the construction of the first college building, Jewell Hall, Dr. Jewell died from heatstroke. Jewell Hall, which was completed in 1851, remains the centerpiece of the campus.

In 1853, I served as the first Clay County superintendent of schools.

Extension 19 - The Liberty Freedom Fountain on the northeast corner of the Courthouse Square.

This monument commemorates the accomplishments of African-Americans in Clay County's history. It is near the location where slaves were regularly purchased and sold prior to the Civil War. The bricks at the base of the foundation display names of famous African-American citizens of this community as well as those who made donations for this monument.

Greetings. Alexander Doniphan here. The most vexing issue in America's early years was slavery. Missouri was at the center of much of that controversy. There was "The Missouri Compromise" in 1820, the Dred Scott Decision in 1857, and the Kansas/Missouri Border Wars from 1854 to 1858.

Although I was a slaveholder, I sought middle ground to hold off a civil war. I attended the Washington Peace Conference in February 1861, but came away frustrated. The conference was unable to hold the Union together. I opposed secession and favored neutrality for Missouri. Once the conflict began in 1862, I moved to St. Louis, working with the Missouri Claims Commission, helping war refugees seeking pensions.

President Lincoln offered me a high command in the Union Army, but I declined. I did not take an active part in the Civil War. I did not want to fight against some of the same men I had led to Mexico fifteen years before, who sided with the Confederates.

I relocated to St. Louis in 1863 partly because of the tense conflict in Liberty. Federal troops with quarters at William Jewell College were opposed by many local citizens who were fierce Confederacy supporters. For a man like me, who wanted to somehow preserve the Union, it was not a pleasant time to live in Liberty. After the war was over, I moved to Richmond, Missouri, where I engaged in banking and the practice of law until my death on August 8, 1887.

Extension 20 – The Alexander Doniphan Monument in the Fairview Cemetery

Following Alexander Doniphan's death in 1887, he was buried in Liberty's Fairview Cemetery, next to his wife and other family members. Even though he spent the last 22 years of his life in Richmond, this is an appropriate burial site because of his many accomplishments during the 30 years he lived in Liberty.