

The Jesse James Story Walking Tour

Extension 30 – Introduction

Welcome to Jesse James country, centered at the Jesse James Bank Museum in Downtown Liberty and at the James Farm just a few miles away.

Listen to the story of Jesse James to learn about Jesse James and his family, about how the Civil War affected Jesse and about the bank robbery that made this building in Liberty such a popular tourist attraction.

Perhaps no American persona has such broad international appeal as that of Clay County, Missouri native, Jesse James.

Born in the fall of 1847 on a farm within 30 minutes drive of Liberty's downtown square, Jesse reached adolescence amidst America's darkest hour. In 1861, when he was just 13 years old, our country was thrust into a great Civil War. Though he would never be a soldier in the Civil War, Jesse rode as a guerilla fighter in the late years of the conflict. But, his true mark on our country would begin as the war's smoke began to clear.

After the Civil War ended, Jesse James and his gang began a crime spree that would last for over a decade. That spree would start right here at Liberty's Historic Downtown Square.

Extension 31 – MISSOURI & THE CIVIL WAR

Although the American Civil War started in 1861, in the state of Missouri and the territory of Kansas, violence over slavery, land rights and political affairs erupted as early as the mid-1850s. Missouri itself was divided. But in the James' household, there would be no doubt that his family, with their Kentucky roots, would side with the South in fervent opposition to the abolitionist North.

Although Clay County was situated in the pro-Southern region of Missouri known as “Little Dixie”, most residents at first wished to stay neutral and hoped to remain untouched by the encroaching war. Communities across the region formed “Home Guards” to protect against invading troops from both North and South. Jesse’s brother, eighteen-year-old Frank James, was among the enlistees of one such militia group in Clay County. Although Frank’s Home Guard unit was, on the surface, opposed to secession, the group clearly pledged allegiance to the South.

By the middle of June 1861, Frank and his unit were indeed engaged in the war, and were indeed fighting for the south. Jesse, on the other hand, was only 13 when the conflict started, and thus he would never fight as a *soldier* in the Civil War. By the spring of 1864, 16-year-old Jesse had joined his brother Frank and other bushwhackers under the leadership of William “Bloody Bill” Anderson. Jesse was wounded severely in the chest in 1865, the war’s final year, as a member of a Missouri guerilla band. It was then that his personal war against the North began.

Extension 32 – Feb. 13, 1866 – The first daylight bank robbery begins

After being wounded during the Civil War’s final year, Jesse would convalesce later that year at his mother’s farm, during which time the young guerilla fighter probably stewed over Missouri’s new post-war constitution. The constitution, in essence, limited the rights and abilities former Confederates. During his time of recovery, Jesse may have indeed helped devise a *new* way to continue the fight against the repressive victors of the Civil War....

For those who sided with the South, Missouri’s new Drake Constitution—drafted and passed by radical pro-Union legislators and voters—was oppressive, discriminatory and demoralizing. Former Confederates were not allowed to vote, hold leadership positions in the church, nor hold certain jobs.

But in 1866, a daring crime served notice that Missouri’s pro-Southern bushwhackers would not retire quietly to the hills.

In the middle of the afternoon of February 13, two men in blue soldiers' overcoats entered the Clay County Savings Association in downtown Liberty, Missouri. The bank was known to have Unionist owners and officers whom the bushwhackers considered to be political enemies. Therefore, a robbery at this pro-Union bank provided more than a mere windfall for the bandits. It also allowed the defeated bushwhackers to continue their fight against the North and its harsh, anti-Confederate laws.

After grabbing approximately \$58,000 in bearers' bonds and gold and silver coins – nearly two million dollars in today's money —the intruders forced cashier Greenup Bird and his son into the vault and shut the door. But the vault was not locked, and when it appeared the bandits were gone, the two men rushed to the window to alert the townsfolk about the crime ... *the first-ever peacetime daylight bank robbery in the United States*. In the chaos of the moment, 19-year-old George Wymore, a student at William Jewell College, was shot and killed.

It's not known if the recuperating Jesse James played a role in the actual robbery, but it is possible he helped plan the heist. The robbery in Liberty would mark the beginning of 16 years of crime and continued rebellion for the James boys and their gang.

Over the next three-plus years, Jesse and Frank James and their comrades would rob banks from Missouri to Kentucky in relative anonymity.

Extension 33 – INSIDE THE BANK

The building which housed the bank that was robbed is now a museum. You will be asked to pay admission to the bank museum. Following is a description of the incident using the testimony of the bankers themselves and the Liberty Weekly Tribune article from Feb. 16, 1866, headlined as *Horrid Murder and Heavy Robbery*.

“Our usually quiet city was startled last Tuesday by one of the most cold-blooded murders and heavy robberies on record. It appears that in the afternoon some ten or twelve persons rode into town, and two of them went into the Clay County Savings Bank, and asked the clerk, Mr. William Bird, to change a ten dollar bill. As he started to do so, they drew their revolvers on him and his father, Mr. Greenup Bird, the cashier, and made them stand quiet while they proceeded to rob the bank.

After having obtained what they supposed was all the money, they put the clerk and cashier in the vault; and no doubt thought they had locked the door. They went outside with the stolen treasure, mounted their horses and were joined by the balance of their gang, and commenced shooting. Mr. S.H. Holmes had two shots fired at him, and young George Wymore, aged 19 years old, one of the most peaceable and promising young men in the county, was shot and killed standing on the opposite side of the street at the corner of the old Green House. The killing was a deliberate murder, without any provocation whatever.

The town was soon all excitement, and as many as could procure arms and horses went in pursuit, but up to this writing nothing is known of the result. Thus has our city and people been grossly outraged by a band of thieves and murderers... We hope to God, the villains may be overhauled, and brought to the end of a rope.”