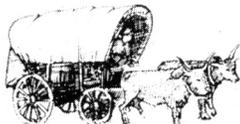




# MUSEUM



# GAZETTE

## Whatever Happened to The Old Rock House?

by Nancy Marie Hoppe

In 1818, a prominent fur trader named Manuel Lisa had a fur warehouse built on the St. Louis riverfront, at the corner of Wharf and Chestnut Streets. One hundred and twenty years later this structure, known as "The Old Rock House" was prized as the oldest standing building in St. Louis. Nearly all the riverfront buildings were demolished between 1939 and 1942 to make way for Jefferson National Expansion Memorial; however, the National Park Service (NPS) saved the Old Rock House and restored it in 1943. Thousands of tourists, particularly school children, passed through the building until it was dismantled in 1959. On April 14, 1961, Charles Nagel Jr., Director of the St. Louis Art Museum, spoke at the Old Courthouse, pleading for the reconstruction of the Old Rock House. He stated that of the three buildings saved from destruction on the riverfront, the Old Courthouse represented justice, the Old Cathedral represented religion, and the Old Rock House represented commerce. Nagel's plea for reconstruction went unfulfilled. Why? Whatever happened to The Old Rock House?



*The Old Rock House in 1958, just prior to dismantling*

The story of the Old Rock House began in the late 18th century. The property on which it stood was originally owned by Francois Bissonet. Bissonet's widow made a land swap with Jean Baptiste Trudeau in 1798, and the following year Trudeau petitioned Spanish Lt. Governor Delassus to have his property extended to the river "to work the part of the [limestone] quarry comprised within the said space." Manuel Lisa, the famous fur trader, purchased the property from Trudeau in 1810, and built a two-story brick house

and store, with family quarters on the second floor. In 1818, Lisa built his fur trade warehouse on the ledges below his home, of stone quarried from the site. Lisa died in 1820, and when his mortgage was settled in 1825, the property was divided into four parts, with the warehouse portion going to the fur trader Oliver N. Bostwick. Bostwick's company had merged with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company in 1823, and so for four years Lisa's warehouse was used by Astor, his one-time rival. According to NPS Historian Charles Peterson, "In those days St. Louis had but 3500 inhabitants.... There was as

yet no Levee or Water Street and the ledges of the old quarry site where Lisa built were some 35 to 40 feet high."

During its early history, the Old Rock House was used by a mercantile firm who operated the first keelboat packet line from Pittsburgh, as a storehouse for army goods for the Yellowstone expedition in 1819, and by Wilson Price Hunt, leader of the Astoria land expedition. James Clemens, Jr., a banker and cousin of Mark Twain, purchased the building in 1828 at an auction; he and his heirs owned it until 1888. From 1849 to 1865 the building was used by Clemens as a "sail loft," making canvas tops for covered wagons going west. It was said that on the morning of the Great Fire of 1849, Clemens sent his son to open the warehouse; the boy found that it was the only building in the area that had not been touched by the flames.

The Old Rock House had many occupants between 1865 and 1900, most of whom ran businesses which served boatmen on the riverfront. It became a tavern early in the 20th century. Older patrons still fondly remember a singer called Rock House Annie who was the star attraction there in the 1930s.

After Jefferson National Expansion Memorial was created in the late 1930s, the riverfront was studied by historians and historic architects. The district was composed of a hodgepodge of deteriorating warehouses interspersed with some interesting older structures. Preservationists were horrified to hear that some excellent 19th century iron-front buildings would be torn down. One architectural scholar, Sigfried Giedion, noted that "The half-deserted riverfront survived as a witness to one of the most exciting periods in the development of America. Some of its commercial buildings - fur and china warehouses, Pony Express offices, ordinary business blocks - exhibited an architecture far in advance of the ordinary standards at the time of their erection". Starting in 1936, NPS Historian Charles Peterson and his staff gathered information on the Old

Rock House and justified its restoration. Although nearly all of the buildings in a 40 square block area of the riverfront were pulled down to make way for the memorial, the Old Courthouse, Old Cathedral, and Old Rock House were saved as premiere examples of St. Louis' architecture and history.

The Old Rock House was restored with a Works Progress Administration (WPA) grant and opened to the public in 1943. Cultural demonstrations and tours were given in the building. Later additions, including an extension on the back (west) side and a third floor complete with Mansard roof, were removed, and the Rock House looked much as it did in Manuel Lisa's day. However, to restore the building to its 1818 appearance, a large portion of the original fabric had to be reproduced, particularly the walls and the roof. The building was constructed of rubble mortared together, with dressed limestone blocks around the doors and windows. The rubble disintegrated when the building was torn down. By the time the building was restored in 1943, a newspaper article stated that as little as 10% of the material in the structure was original.

In 1947-48, an architectural competition was held to design the memorial to westward expansion. One of the stipulations of the competition was that the Old Rock House would be left standing in its original location and incorporated into the design scheme. The winning design, a graceful catenary arch made of stainless steel, was submitted by architect Eero Saarinen. The Old Rock House was to be the entrance to a "sky ride" leading to an observation platform at the top of the Arch.

One of the problems that plagued the memorial development, however, was a set of railroad tracks which ran on a trestle along the levee immediately in front of the Old Rock House. For many years boosters of the memorial, the NPS, and the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis (TRRA) could not come to a satisfactory compromise on the question of the tracks.

The government felt the elevated tracks were unsightly, and refused to appropriate money to build the memorial if they were not moved. The TRRA insisted that they could not function without them. Saarinen proposed several solutions involving tunnels, but would not consider isolating his Arch from the river by using an open railroad cut in front of it. Finally, in 1957 Mayor Raymond Tucker, a trained engineer, proposed a solution acceptable to all. It involved a series of short tunnels and open cuts for the railroad tracks, which would run in front of the Arch. As a result, Saarinen placed the Arch on a false hill overlooking the river; the railroad tracks were hidden within the hill. Unfortunately, the Old Rock House lay in the path of the new tracks, and would have to be dismantled. The decision was a tough one for the NPS and the other groups involved; they wished to save the Old Rock House but they also wanted to move the memorial project forward. Finally, it was decided that the Old Rock House would be rebuilt elsewhere on the grounds of the finished memorial.

Work on dismantling the Old Rock House began in 1959. Immediately, there were problems. The original building had been built into the natural bluff overlooking the river, and as a result had only three sides, the fourth (west) side being composed of the limestone bluff itself. So, in essence, it was a three-sided building which would have to be rebuilt in the open as a four-sided building. As the building was dismantled, the rubble walls once again disintegrated. In the end, 119 limestone blocks from around the doors and windows were carefully numbered for the building's eventual reconstruction.

The blocks were temporarily stored next to the Old Cathedral. "Now, you wouldn't think that people would steal, right smack in front of the church, would you?" asked former park Superintendent George B. Hartzog, "But I've got news for you, they will." The remaining blocks were moved into the basement of the Old Courthouse for safekeeping.

For many years, the issue of the Old Rock House resurfaced. Once the Arch was completed, calls came for reconstruction of the Old Rock House on the memorial grounds or in nearby Laclede's Landing. However, the small amount of original material (after restoration, demolition, and theft) precluded a true reconstruction, and the loss of the original site of the building stripped it of a great deal of its historical significance. As a result, it was determined that the structure had lost its integrity. A compromise was found, however, by building a corner of the structure in an exhibit area in the Old Courthouse, where visitors today can still see part of the Old Rock House in conjunction with historic photographs. The NPS felt that this was the best solution considering the circumstances.

The Old Rock House lives on as a symbol of changes in the preservation movement in the United States. In the 1930s, preservation was in its infancy, and many important buildings were razed on the riverfront. By systematically studying these buildings, however, and presenting convincing evidence of architectural and historical importance, historians polished their skills and helped formulate the modern preservation movement. The Old Rock House was restored, then razed, then exhibited as a reminder of St. Louis' past and the rewards of preservation. Many battles were lost over the years concerning the Old Rock House, but perhaps it stands today as a tribute to concerned citizens who Charles Nagel, Jr. characterized as "those who would not see old St. Louis vanish from our scene."

