

Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

Mining

French explorers crossed the Mississippi River almost 300 years ago to search for silver. They followed animal paths and Indian trails away from the river until they came upon lead, not silver. From that day to this, lead mining has been an important industry in Missouri, a state that still produces about 70 percent of the nation's lead. The mining of lead created our first road and led to the founding of our first permanent town. It also brought slavery to our state.

Phillip Francois Renault led explorers to our side of the Mississippi River in 1719 to an area known today as Old Mines. They came back a year later and began removing lead ore, a process that required a lot of workers, leading the French to bring slaves to the mines, creating a social institution that lasted for more than 140 years and ended only with the Civil War.

The early mining was primitive by modern standards, with workers shoveling ore from shallow holes, or pits. Large bonfires heated the ore until the lead melted out of the rock. Only a small percentage of the lead could be recovered this way. Better methods were developed through the years to recover much more.

The early miners cleared a path through the forest known as the “Three Notch Road” so lead could be moved from the mines to the new Mississippi River settlement named Ste. (for Sainte) Genevieve where it was loaded on boats and taken to the main shipping point of New Orleans. Sometimes the lead was shaped into the form of collars that the oxen could wear as they pulled wagons containing more of the lead.

Some of the lead was turned into bullets by John Maclot, who operated a factory in



Lorentz Kleiser's tapestry depicts early lead mining in Missouri using a windlass to hoist chunks of lead from a prospect hole. The tapestry is located in the Senate Lounge on the third floor. Photo by Harrison Sweazed.



The importance of Missouri's lead mining industry is represented in Tom P. Barnett's mural from the Natural Resources wing of the state museum showing a mine in the southwest Missouri lead belt. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

Herculaneum, another of the eastern Missouri leadbelt towns. Andrew Jackson's soldiers used some of those bullets to defeat the British in the famous Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

As the supply of easily dug lead ran out, new sources had to be found. Some later mines had to be dug 500 to 1,500 feet down to find the ore.

Early surveyors in southwest Missouri noted the presence of lead-bearing rock shortly after Missouri became a state, but serious mining did not begin there until after the Civil War. One of the early miners laid out a

town in the area that he called Joplin. As years went by, zinc mining rivaled lead mining in the Joplin Creek Valley, and Joplin became the world's lead and zinc capital. So many mines were dug that about three-fourths of Joplin has mines beneath it.

Today, St. Joe State Park near Park Hills, an 8,200-acre abandoned mining area, commemorates the history of Missouri's first industry. Mining of lead and zinc continues in the state today, but three centuries of mining has produced a mixed legacy. Large areas are contaminated by decades of lead dust and runoff from water and chemicals used in processing the minerals. Extensive cleanup of those areas will continue for many years while newer, safer means of processing a material that has been such a major part of a Missouri history continues.



Allen Tupper True's dramatic portrayal on the Capitol's third floor of a lead miner emphasizes the importance of the industry to Missouri's history and economy. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of “The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone.”

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