

# Chapter 2: Historical Overview of Independence

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In this chapter you will find:

A Brief History of the City of Independence



Photograph on cover page:  
Independence County Courthouse remodeled in 1933, ca. 1945,  
Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, 62-214.

# HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INDEPENDENCE

## Historical Overview

Established in 1827, the City of Independence holds a rich heritage that includes a connection to the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails, the Civil War, the Mormon Church, and, of course, President Harry S. Truman. Today, the City highlights that history within a locally designated historic district, a National Historic Landmark District, as well as through individually designated properties, known as local historic landmarks. The focus of much of that history lies within central and western Independence.

The rolling hills dotted with free-flowing springs attracted Native Americans who first gathered here and called the location the “Big Spring.” By the 1820s, these same hills and springs also attracted new settlers from the south and east. Through the Treaties of 1825 with the Osage and Kansa Indians, the U.S. government took control of the Big Spring and opened up the land of the newly proclaimed Jackson County for settlement. Later, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced the relocation of all natives west of the Missouri River, opening the way for the settlers to claim the land.

As the population grew, Missouri’s General Assembly chose what was now known as Independence as the county seat. On March 29, 1827, authorities approved the 160-acre site. The new town’s proximity to the Missouri River was an obvious choice as the starting point for westward expansion along the trails. Trading was reinforced by Mexican merchants who came northeast on the Santa Fe Trail. In the 1840s, Independence became a thriving trading post where pioneers of the Oregon Trail stocked their wagons with final supplies before heading west.

Birds Eye View of the City of Independence, 1877.  
Image courtesy of the City of Independence and Jackson County Missouri Historical Society



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The winter of 1830-31 brought a new kind of settler to Independence. Missionaries were sent by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to convert the Native American Indians living in western Missouri and eastern Kansas. This group of five elders from the church headquarters in Ohio, chose the up-and-coming trading town as the base for their missionary work. Founder and prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. visited Independence the following summer and declared it to be the location of Zion, God's city on earth. To establish the prophet's vision of an earthly paradise, the church purchased more land and other Mormon church members soon migrated to Independence.

Locals had trouble accepting the new missionaries and their evangelistic tradition of religious and social norms. Mormons built homes, schools, churches and stores, began the first newspapers, and worked hard to spread their religious philosophy which included an anti-slavery belief. Joseph Smith chose the location of the temple of the Latter Day Saints in Zion, but his plans for construction were halted. Some of their neighbors, fearing economic domination and loss of political control, joined together and by 1833 drove the missionaries out of Jackson County.

Independence saw great prosperity from the late 1830s through the mid-1840s while the business of outfitting pioneers boomed. In 1848, many of the 12,000 settlers who reached Oregon had started their trek in Independence and the 1849 gold rush prospectors poured through the town. The population and economic power of Independence grew so rapidly that on March 8, 1849 the Missouri General Assembly granted a home-rule charter. On July 18, 1849, William McCoy, the City's first mayor, was elected. But by the late 1840s the town of West Port, located just to the west, brought the Independence monopoly on the wagon trail trade industry to an end by taking away the town's claim to the "last stop on the western frontier."



From left to right: Historic Independence Log Courthouse, Vaile Mansion Postcard, Bingham-Waggoner Postcard, Spring Cabin. Unknown Dates, Independence, Missouri Historic Landmarks.

All photos courtesy of the City of Independence and Jackson County Missouri Historical Society

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The population expansion was not only stunted by the development of West Port, but also by a bloody slavery feud in 1855. Missouri had been admitted to the Union as a slave holding state in 1821. In the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854, residents of the Kansas territory were given the choice of joining the Union as a free or a slave state and the controversy began. In favor of slavery, the Missouri Bushwhackers waged a battle against the anti-slavery Kansas Jayhawkers all along the western border of Jackson County. The feuds had a serious impact on the outfitting trade in Independence and soon the stream of pioneers drastically declined.

The border war and American Civil War split local sentiments. Missouri remained a border state during the war, though allegiances remained divided. Independence saw two important battles during the Civil War; the Battle of Independence on August 11, 1862, when confederate troops captured the town, and the Battle of the Little Blue in October 1864 which lasted for two days. The war took its toll on Jackson County, and as a result Independence was never able to regain its previous prosperity.

A faction of the Latter Day Saints missionaries, who were evicted from the town in the 1830s, won a quiet victory by returning to Independence after the Civil War. While expelled from the state, leader Joseph Smith, Jr. was killed. The church split into factions; one led by his son Joseph Smith III was named the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints (RLDS). The RLDS members returned to the area and their headquarters were established in Independence in the early 1900s. (The RLDS church is now known as the Community of Christ with International Headquarters in Independence).



Downtown Independence, Missouri, 1950.

All photos courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum digital archives



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The City prospered from the late 19th century into the 20th century with the growth and annexation of surrounding land. Stately homes near the Square were built and torn down well into the first quarter of the 20th century to make room for more modest, working and middle class dwellings. It was during this time that Harry S. Truman began his life-long residency in Independence. Truman held his first job at Clinton's Drugstore, and in 1922 was elected presiding judge of the County Court. In 1934, Truman was elected to the U.S. Senate and became Roosevelt's vice-president in 1944. Upon the passing of President Roosevelt in 1945, Truman became President and was re-elected in 1948. During his eight years in office, Truman used his Independence home as a summer residence. When he returned home at the end of his presidential term, 10,000 people greeted him at what is currently known as the Truman Depot. Truman's influence on Independence can be seen throughout the community to this day with his Presidential Library and home as the centerpieces of historic Independence.

The City of Independence is a reflection of the growth of the nation. Today, Independence is both a thriving community as well as a heritage tourism destination. Protection of its cultural resources ensures that physical evidence of its history is maintained. Local designation of those resources aids in the stabilization of neighborhood property values, rehabilitation of the historic built environment through local investment, fostering of community pride, and further economic development of the City's historic commercial districts.

*History provided by the City of Independence, Missouri Department of Tourism.*

For additional Independence resources and further reading go to:  
<http://www.visitindependence.com/IndependenceHistory.aspx>



From left to right: Jackson County Courthouse 112 West Truman Road, The Harry S Truman National Historic Site 219 North Delaware Street, 200 West Maple on Independence Square, 2011.

Photographs courtesy of the Jackson County Office of Communications and the City of Independence