

# First Trails & First People

**L**ong before Europeans ventured into the land so many of us call home, American Indians thrived here. The earliest Missourians settled the region at least 12,000 years ago. One thousand years ago, Missouri had some of the largest prehistoric settlements in North America. The Mississippians had a network of communities along the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys. This civilization thrived between 1000 and 1450 BCE. They constructed the great Cahokia Mounds in Illinois, villages in the Missouri Bootheel, and mounds that were destroyed as St. Louis expanded. These people were farmers, hunters and traders with connections across the continent.

The Mississippian culture began to decline around the 13th century as their population dispersed due to emigration. By the 17th century, many different native people lived in Missouri including the Missouriia, Ioway, Kansa, Quapaw, Illini, Otoe, Quapaw and Chickasaw. At the time of first French contact, the Missouriia were the powerful nation but were soon reduced by smallpox and warfare. It was the Osage who remained the dominant power in Missouri. Originally from the eastern Ohio River Valley, the Osage retained many of their woodland customs such as wood-framed “long houses” and men’s scalp-lock hairstyles. The women grew maize, beans, squash and pumpkins and gathered edible and medicinal wild plants. Men also hunted for white-tail deer and bison in the spring and late summer. The Osage culture commonly blended eastern woodland and western prairie traditions.

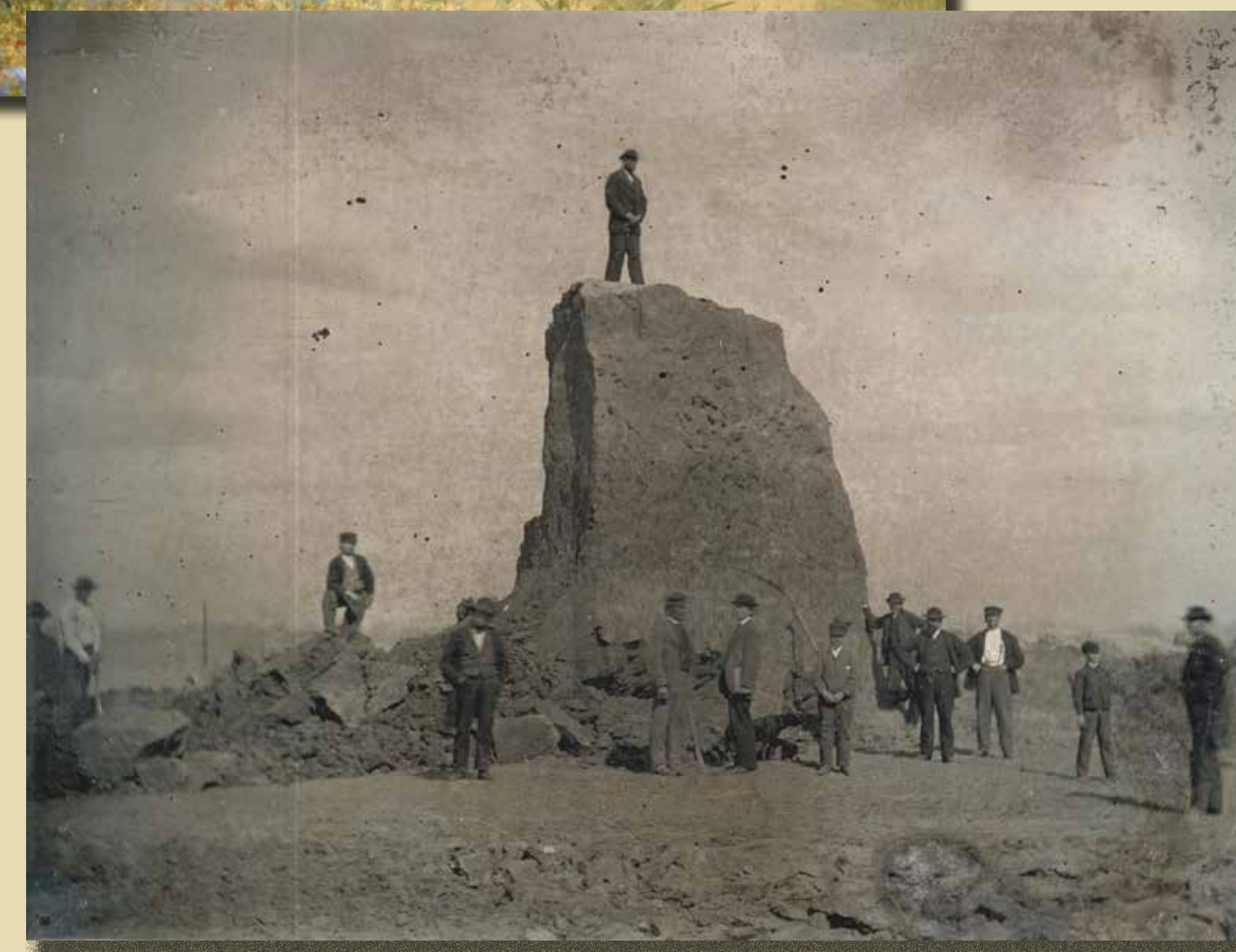
The Osage worshipped Wa-kon-da, an unseen all-powerful life force. Their elaborate clan system represented animals and forces of nature important in tribal origin stories. Twenty-four clans and numerous sub-clans made up the tribes. The Osage divided the clans into two grand divisions—the Tzi-Sho (sky and peace) and Hun-kah (earth and war). The Tzi-Sho consisted of nine clans and the Hun-kah consisted of 15 clans. Their survival depended on the unity of these two groups. Osage villages revolved around two patrilineal chiefs, one from each division, who exercised limited power under a council of elders called Non-hon-zhin-ga, the village council of “Little Old Men.”

When the French and Spanish arrived on the continent, it changed the lives of American Indians. New weapons, such as guns, metal axes and knives, and animals, such as horses, allowed for new ways to hunt and fight. However, they adopted European goods without adopting the culture. The downfall of Missouri’s original trailblazers began when the U.S. purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1804. Unlike the French and Spanish, the Americans intended to permanently farm the territory and build towns and cities. In less than 35 years, the U.S. government forced the removal of all Missouri’s native peoples.



The Osage of Missouri traveled westward during the spring and summer to hunt bison. The arrival of horses to the region helped the men hunt more effectively. When they returned, Osage women butchered and preserved the meats and prepared the skin for other uses, (above).

Image courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “An Osage Indian Lancing a Buffalo” by George Catlin, circa 1846-1848, (above).



St. Louis’ original nickname was “Mound City” for its abundance of mounds left behind by the ancient Mississippian people. As the city of St. Louis grew, developers, property owners and others destroyed the mounds for commercial buildings, farms, and homes. City residents destroyed the last large mound in 1869.

Image courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.