



Pressing West

Vol.1

No. 1

A Page In History



WRITTEN BY

CHRIS STUCKENSCHNEIDER

“Gabriel! Tend to business! The boat’s rounding the bend. Make ready with the wagon,” the voice cut sharply, like the frigid air poking fingers through the woolen scarf around Gabe’s neck.

The oldest of four, Gabe was sturdy for a boy of 12, a testament to manual labor, cutting wood, driving fence posts, unloading boats. This wasn’t how the boy envisioned spending the rest of his life, but it was necessary since his father, Andre, took sick with Yellow Fever.

Gabe’s mother, Josephine, said they’d been lucky not to

landing superintendent, Gabe wished himself anywhere but bogged down in Mississippi River mud.

Before his dad took sick, Gabe had plans, a future his parents encouraged him to pursue. A lawyer, that’s what he’d be. The U.S. had doubled in size just five years earlier with land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase. Laws and lawmakers would be needed in the western frontier Lewis and Clark had explored.

It was happening right now in St. Louis. Since the explorers had returned, Meriwether Lewis had been named governor. One of his first duties was to make sure a set of laws was written when the territorial legislature met in the summer.

Changes were in the air. To some people getting an education was becoming as important as knowing how to load a gun or plant a field of corn. There was talk about establishing schools, a movement encouraged by President Jefferson.

“Grab this rope and tie us up,” another voice shouted at Gabe. It came from a swarthy man aboard the keelboat the boy was set to unload.

Gabe lurched forward to catch the thick rope, but it landed with a smack on the foot-pocked, muddy bank. Not wanting to look the

fool, Gabe hurried to pick it up, but the rope flipped in his hands like it was alive, peppering his face and hair with muck.

The man doubled over in laughter, stopping only when a well-dressed gentleman with a boy about Gabe’s age walked to the front of the boat.

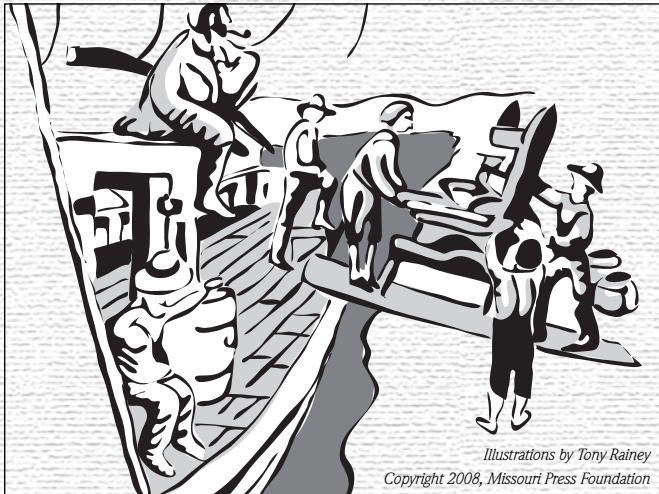
“Sake’s alive, Hinkle, leave the lad alone. If we all pull our weight, we’ll be able to unload this press and get it under cover before dark,” the gentleman said in a thick Irish brogue, glaring at Hinkle and shaking his head in disgust.

It dawned on Gabe that this was Joseph Charless, the printer folks had been talking about, the man bringing the Ramage printing press to Missouri.

A new page in frontier history was going to be written. St. Louis was about to get its first newspaper, and Gabe could hardly wait.

LEARN MORE

- Gov. Lewis needed a newspaper in the Missouri Territory to give information on new laws being written. Look for current examples of how your newspaper still gives information on new laws from the government.



Illustrations by Tony Rainey
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The muddy water of the Mississippi River churned, waves breaking on the soupy banks at Gabe Martin’s feet. The St. Louis riverfront was a flurry of activity as keelboats carrying goods to the new territory, and canoes packed with pelts slid silently ashore.

The Gateway to the West, the frontier town would be called in coming years. But today, early in 1808, all Gabe hoped was that St. Louis would offer him a gateway to opportunity, some coins or food in trade for another day’s work.

lose him, ravaged as Andre was with the disease, which left him weak and pale. It had been months now and the once-strapping man was improving, but walking a few steps was about all Andre could muster.

With baby Anne to care for, and the twins only 3, Gabe’s mother appreciated her son’s help, but there was little time left for the boy to read or write. Gabe had adult responsibilities now, leaving the house before dawn to pick up odd jobs.

Snatched from his daydream by the bad-tempered