

JOSEPH CHARLESS

Joseph Charless is considered the “Father of Missouri Journalism,” after starting the first newspaper in Missouri, the Missouri Gazette.



Joseph Charless

The first person to do anything often becomes a hero, just as our nation’s first president, George Washington, became a hero to Americans.

So it was with Joseph Charless, who came to St. Louis in 1808. He came this far west to start the first newspaper in the Louisiana Territory, the

Missouri Gazette, a four-page weekly. And since his first newspaper in the state, more than 6,000 others have been published in nearly 200 years.

Joseph Charless was born in Ireland and came to America as a young man, no doubt believing there were more opportunities here. On the way to St. Louis he worked on newspapers in Pennsylvania, where he met Benjamin Franklin, another printer, and in Kentucky.

The third issue of the Missouri Gazette, and a Ramage press



It was common practice in those days for printers to move about. Charless wanted to establish a newspaper in a place by a big river, where ships would come and go, bringing in new settlers.

With a promise to print the laws of the Territory of Louisiana he acquired funding to buy a Ramage

hand-operated, mostly wooden press. He printed the laws and he started the Missouri Gazette. He promised his readers he would give them news from the world, especially the eastern part of America. He got his news from newspapers in those areas that were mailed to him. He talked with travelers who went through St. Louis. He had letters from his subscribers to print as well.

But for St. Louis readers, every story was new. It was the first time they had read about such events. Charless also wrote stories to encourage businesses to move to St. Louis, to help build the city, to attract more citizens. If more came, he sold more papers and made more money. He wrote about politics as well.

Newspapers are often called “the school of public instruction.”

They were like textbooks. Families might also have had a Bible and an almanac to read, but not radio or television in those days.



Wooden Type

Charless had challenges getting his paper supply from the East since the mail delivery was uncertain. Bad weather would delay shipments.

And publishers had problems keeping steady workers. Charless was lucky; he had three sons and a stepson and he trained them to be printers. One son founded the first newspaper in St. Charles.

After selling his newspaper, Charless was involved in other businesses, such as running a boarding house, a livery stable, and a drugstore. He also sold real estate. He never made much money, but he enjoyed what he did.

Charless became a famous man to Missourians because he was the first to publish a newspaper in what became Missouri. He earned a place in our history books.

— Written by Dr. William H. Taft,
Missouri Press Association Historian