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# WESTON - CELEBRATING 175 YEARS!

by Kim Kirby

**T**ucked in the bluffs of northwest Missouri is a small, picturesque town by the name of Weston. Part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the land was originally inhabited by the Sioux, Fox and Kickapoo Indians. On July 2, 1804, William Clark of the Lewis & Clark Corp of Discovery Expedition noted in his diary that the expedition stopped to repair a keelboat mast on the large island of Bear Madison (Kickapoo Island) in the middle of the Missouri River. His diary notes the mast was broken by a large, hanging branch close to the edge of the river. The cottonwood tree limb used to repair the mast turned a bright red color after it was installed. The diary noted the terrain and a land rich in different types of trees and berries.

Lewis and Clark explored the Missouri River around the Weston area 32 years before 2 million acres were purchased by the United States of America and became the Platte Purchase. One year later, Joseph Moore, a soldier from nearby Fort Leavenworth purchased 168 acres that would eventually become Weston. The site this soldier picked ascended from the river and was a natural amphitheater formed by the valleys of two small streams and surrounding bluffs and hills. It was a perfect spot for a town. He sold half of the acreage to an attorney by the name of Bela Hughes, who saw its potential. The town name of Weston possibly came from a second soldier by the name of Tom E. Weston who surveyed and laid out the town. The name also may have been derived from the geographical location being the westernmost bend in the Missouri River as it related to St. Joseph, the neighboring town to the north, or "west town." Possibly, the name is a combination of both.

At the time Joseph Moore, Tom Weston and Bela Hughes were laying the town plat, the Missouri River was at the bottom of Main Street. The river



was a natural port for steamboats and travelers to disembark before heading further west. By 1853, Weston had a population of 5,000 persons, was the second largest port in Missouri, and the largest city west of St. Louis. Steamboats jammed the ports bringing people and goods. More than 300 steamboats visited the port from April through November. Outfitters supplied overland wagon trains. There were coopers and cabinet-makers, jewelers, livery stables, hotels, saloons, a flourmill, a meat-packing plant, and six or eight wholesale and retail general stores conducting a million dollars in trade each year. The town boasted one or two distilleries and breweries. Large warehouses stored hemp and tobacco, the two largest crops in the area. Weston residents, with the help of slave labor, were able to process hemp into rope that found a large market up and down the river, including to the U.S. Government, who relied on Weston to supply Fort Leavenworth.

During this time a 19-year-old man by the name of Benjamin Holladay moved to Weston and became a major property owner and entrepreneur. He initiated a large portion of the overland freight and wagon trails from Weston. He eventually became owner of the Pony Express, Overland Stage and several steamship lines. Because of Mr. Holladay's contacts with

Mormon leaders, Weston was the first western city to freight goods to Utah.

While at its peak, Weston boasted of the first town in the Purchase to have paved roads, the first large distillery west of the Mississippi, the first telegraph line to St. Louis, the first newspaper and the first gasworks. There were eight churches and 12 private schools. A two-block downtown business district had grand three-story buildings. Two-story, stately homes replaced settlers' log cabins. The main "courthouse" was known to be the largest meeting room west of St. Louis. It seemed Weston would be the next St. Louis.

## DISASTER

Between the years 1855 and 1880 the town known as the "Queen of the Platte Purchase" faced several disasters. Fire struck a large part of the business area on March 8, 1855. The cause was never known. It was a sad scene, with more than 41 businesses and homes burned to the ground. Many of the downtown buildings today are marked with the year 1855. A second fire further devastated the business district in 1858.

Many early Weston settlers hailed from the southern states of Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, bringing slavery with them to the area. Weston's agriculture depended on slaves. Slaves raised the crops, cared for the livestock, handled the hemp and tobacco crops, warehousing, and packed tobacco on rafts for floating down the Missouri. When the Missouri Compromise was repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, many of Weston's pro-slavery residents flocked to the bordering state of Kansas to establish slavery settlements. Abolitionist groups in Kansas were determined to stop them. During the height of Weston's prosperity, a struggle occurred that divided families, friends, business partners and church members. The Civil War broke out, residents were torn between a sense of allegiance to

the Union and by a desperate need to maintain their Southern way of life. Weston leaned toward the Confederacy.

With Weston's proximity to Fort Leavenworth, Union soldiers occupied much of the town during the war. Several homes in Weston were used as headquarters for the federal officers and troops who were ready to counteract intrusions by southern sympathizers. While only a few battles actually took place in the area, with more than half the residents sympathetic to the "southern cause," backyard battles and street demonstrations were a constant threat. Bushwhackers opposing the Union efforts raided farms and destroyed homes. In the middle of this strife, many wives and children were left behind to support themselves in whatever way they could, maintain their homes and raise the crops.

With the Emancipation Act, Weston's destiny changed. Leading merchants and families moved from the town, leaving it nearly deserted. Slaves vanished, leaving the hemp market to die. By 1870, the population was less than 1,000.

The third major disaster to befall Weston was flooding of the Missouri River. From 1853 to 1880, the river flooded five times. In 1881, a large flood inundated the port of Weston and surrounding area. When it receded, the port had disappeared several miles to the west. The channel had changed. Weston's river port days were over.

After Weston's reign of prosperity ended, those that were left had a love for the land, for their family and the town. A good-humored self-acceptance; a social code based on courtesy - not competition; and a distrust of change for the sake of change, slowly restored the town. One of the crops that first supported Weston, tobacco, helped to once again renew the prosperity of its citizens. By 1910, the first and only tobacco market west of the Mississippi was established. For many years much of the economy was linked to tobacco. Traders came from as far away as Kentucky to bid on the leafy crop. More than 2 million pounds per year were auctioned. Capitalizing on the opportunity, zealous business owners promoted an annual "Tobacco Show" during the auctions. There were vaudeville entertainers and circus performers attracting thousands of visitors. The shows ended in the late 1950s. Tobacco is still grown on the hillside farms around Weston, but the



**The Saint George Hotel opened its doors in 1845 and today is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.** Photo courtesy of the Missouri Division of Tourism.

tradition of the great auctions ended in the early 21st century.

#### A HISTORICAL TOWN

Weston has made something of its past. The Weston Historical Museum is a great place to start when visiting Weston. Founded in 1960, in a building originally the home of the First Baptist Church, and on the site of the International Hotel built by stagecoach king Benjamin Holladay, the museum is full of Weston history. An all-volunteer staff and board keep the museum updated and relevant to the 21st century.

The city of Weston was placed

on the National Register of Historic Places as a "district" in 1972; the first town to be allowed on the register as a "district." This district encompasses sixteen full city blocks and portions of eight additional city blocks in Weston. The district contains 200 structures of various age, design and function. Sixty-six residential and commercial buildings have been designated historic sites. Many of those properties are significant architectural, pre-Civil War homes that are opened each year during the Annual Candlelight Homes Tour. Many of the downtown buildings are dated 1855, built after the great fire of that year. Quaint antique stores, home



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Members of Boy Scout Troop 249 carried the American Flag during the 175th parade and celebration. Photo credit: Beth McPherson, *The Weston Chronicle*

decorating, clothing stores, and many other unique retail establishments now occupy those buildings.

In 1982, a group of citizens under the leadership of Jeff Elsea, current Bank of Weston President, formed the Weston Development Company. They were determined to revitalize Weston. Knowing a large part of revitalization was Weston's historic assets, the board of aldermen passed an ordinance forming a Historic Preservation Commission to oversee a two-and-a-half block Historic Zoning District that is downtown Weston. The Commission adopted rules and regulations to guide building owners in restoring their historic properties. The Weston Development Co. would go on to become the Weston Chamber of Commerce, which today is the main tourism center and marketing department of Weston.

Weston was designated a Preserve America Community by the White House in 2006. The Preserve America program fit with Weston's overall goals and initiatives. Some of those goals were: to share the knowledge of Weston's past; strengthen local pride and participation in preserving the Weston heritage; and support the economic vitality of our community. Weston was fortunate enough to receive a Preserve America grant for "The Historic Weston Experience" that included completing the Lewis & Clark Exhibit, and developing a walking/driving tour of the town. The entire project was a joint venture between city officials, the Weston Historical Museum volunteers, and members of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Committee.

In May of 2012, Weston applied for and was approved to be a Certified Local Government.

Today, Weston is a tourist favorite for many in the Midwest. Several bed and breakfast homes, quaint shops, a restored hotel, wineries and restaurants attract many to town. Weston has been named the "Best Day Trip" by *Ingram's Magazine* for seven years. The annual Lost Arts Festival, Apple Fest, held each year in October, captivates the young and the old. O'Malley's Pub holds the annual Irish Fest each year. November weekends are spent celebrating the holidays, and the annual Candlelight Homes Tour is held the first weekend of December.



## CELEBRATION

The 175th Anniversary of the town was celebrated on Sept. 22. A parade through Main Street began the festivities. After the Pledge of Allegiance, the West Platte High School Marching Band played the Star Spangled Banner. Father Charles Rowe of the Holy Trinity Catholic Church invoked a prayer for the town. Mayor Carlen Carter spoke about the history of Weston and how proud he was to be the 50th mayor of this great town. The Weston Museum held an essay contest and the winners were announced, including one 10-year-old winner. The West Platte Elementary Choral sang "Weston," a poem written in 1987 when the town commemorated the 150th Anniversary. The poem was written and set to music by the late Reverend "Tuck" Tucker of the Weston Christian Church. The elders of Weston were recognized, the oldest being 93-year-old Vera Wright. A time capsule was filled with memorabilia of the town, pictures and essays written by elementary students, and many other items. A plaque announcing the date to open the capsule in September of 2112 was fashioned by a local artisan. The capsule will reside in the Weston Historical Museum until that date.

Weston is a great place to visit and an even greater place to live. The mixture of old and new is attractive to many. You relax in Weston. The mayor and board of aldermen are committed to Weston's prosperity and economic growth. Working together, the community will continue to thrive for another 175 years.

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Kim Kirby is the city clerk for the city of Weston.

(left) Visitors to Weston will find many inviting antique, home decorating and clothing stores in the historic district. Photo courtesy of the Missouri Division of Tourism.