
In 1847, at a ceremony commemorating the founding of St. Louis, eighty-eight-year-old Pierre Chouteau spoke nostalgically of the simplicity and honesty of the creole society of St. Louis's early years, his thoughts carrying him back to "the frontier dawn of his pilgrimage, when the first Chouteaus were truly the barons of the river" (p. 204). So concludes William Foley and David Rice's valuable biography of Auguste and Pierre Chouteau. In their study of these complex, long-lived, and remarkable men, whose influence spanned over sixty years in Missouri history, Foley and Rice make a long overdue contribution to the history of the political and economic development of the Mississippi Valley.

The First Chouteaus begins in 1764, when the young Auguste Chouteau founded St. Louis with his step-father, Pierre Laclede L'Quest. In the following decades, the Chouteaus built a commercial empire as fur traders and merchants. Skillfully manipulating their influence with the Spanish colonial authorities, they used their trading privileges and business acumen to amass wealth and sizable land holdings. The Chouteaus not only were principal figures in the Missouri fur trade, but also provided the leadership and the capital for early mining and banking ventures and sponsored the construction of a Catholic church in St. Louis. Under American rule, they served as Indian agents and treaty commissioners as well as judges and city officials. In sum, the Chouteaus were the undisputed economic, political, and social leaders in St. Louis until the third decade of the nineteenth century. Foley and Rice mine the voluminous records in the Chouteau Collection of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, to reveal the multifaceted activities of Auguste and Pierre Chouteau through a turbulent and exciting period in frontier history.

As an experiment in biography, The First Chouteaus is not entirely successful, but for such an ambitious task, this is hardly surprising. Auguste Chouteau remains a man history is yet to know, as entire dec-
ades of his life are passed over with hardly a comment by the authors. Pierre Chouteau, on the other hand, is revealed in intriguing complexity, though Foley and Rice rarely depart from their close reading of the sources to elaborate on his character or to speculate about possible motivations for his actions. Pierre was a volatile man, who was haunted by his illegitimacy. Albert Gallatin and James Wilkenson described him as lusting for wealth and power (pp. 109, 116), yet Pierre's fortune never matched his half-brother's and he was thwarted in his quest for power by the rightfully suspicious Americans. Enigmatically, he was a slaveholder but lived much of his life among the Indians.

The first chapters are slightly flawed by the focus on St. Louis rather than the Chouteau brothers themselves. The loss of important documents (the manuscript of Auguste Chouteau's memoirs by Joseph Nicollet in the 1840s and the eighteenth-century account books by the Missouri Historical Society) are partially responsible for the weaknesses of these chapters, but Foley and Rice could have made a more thorough search of other primary and secondary sources outside the Missouri Historical Society to supplement their work. A few imprecise and contradictory statements are made regarding the movements of the Chouteaus (pp. 38–39), their relationship with Indians (p. 56), and other minor details, but the book is solidly documented by Chouteau Collection material. In chapter three, "Merchant-Capitalists and Agents of Empire," The First Chouteaus improves and reaches its height as Foley and Rice explore Auguste's and particularly Pierre's political and economic activities in the troubled 1790s and during the transition period after the Louisiana Purchase.

The First Chouteaus is an important book and a credit to its authors. Its greatest strengths are the insights into the senior Chouteaus' spectacular successes in politics and finance in their time. The Chouteaus entertained lavishly and courted the favor of influential persons among the Spaniards, Americans, Canadians, and Indians. They were true to the Gallic code of honor, honesty, and loyalty in which they had been nurtured, yet kept a keen eye on their business enterprises, alternating caution and daring and seizing opportunities to gain advantage during times of political instability. For the most part, they balanced their public duties as leaders of the St. Louis creole community with their business interests. This tells us a great deal about Auguste and Pierre Chouteau and the times in which they lived. Neither Pierre nor Auguste ever learned English, and it is questionable whether, in spite of their financial successes, they truly ever adapted to the world of nineteenth-century America (p.160).

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