

# PRESERVING HISTORY DURING GROWTH

O'Fallon's Restored Historic Buildings Offer Historic Beauty And Economic Opportunity

By Thomas Drabelle

It wasn't very long ago that the city of O'Fallon, Missouri, was such a small town that police officers on night patrol sometimes simply parked and listened for trouble, mostly from restless teenagers. The surrounding community was so rural that officers were occasionally called to shoo cows off the road.

Now, with city limits encompassing more than 27 square miles, O'Fallon is essentially a new city with 83,000 residents and border-to-border new homes, retail businesses, and globally-connected corporations. Officially, it is Missouri's seventh largest municipality and the second-largest city in the St. Louis metropolitan region.

Despite the City's exponential growth and new construction, O'Fallon retains original structures that tell the story of the town's beginnings. One such structure is a rare War of 1812 fort site from the days when the area was recognized as the leading edge of the American frontier and teeming with bear, elk, and contentious Native Americans. The other is a nucleus of 19th-century buildings from O'Fallon's "modern" foundation as a town jump-started by a railroad.

To preserve its legacy of historic buildings with an eye to fostering heritage tourism and economic development, the City formed its newest board, the O'Fallon Preservation Commission, in 2013. Under the board's guidance, the City is moving ahead on inventorying historic sites and structures, designing an attractive streetscape for O'Fallon's historic Main Street, and highlighting local history through interpretive park signs, brochures and videos. In these endeavors, the City will be assisted by O'Fallon's recent designation as a Certified Local Government (CLG) that makes the City eligible for grants and programs through Missouri's State Historic Preservation Office.



Although O'Fallon is one of Missouri's newest CLGs, the City is not new to preservation. Thanks in large part to the O'Fallon Community Foundation and steadfast citizen and business support for preserving local heritage, O'Fallon will cut the ribbon this spring on its reconstruction of Zumwalt's Fort, a War of 1812 settler fort. One of at least 35 "family fort" sites in Missouri (as opposed to military forts of the day, of which only one, Fort Howard, existed west of the Missouri River), it is the only site of its kind that has been rebuilt.

"Our City's history is tied to larger-than-life heroes like Daniel Boone and real-life heroes like Jacob Zumwalt and his family, who sheltered other families from Native American raids during the War of 1812," said O'Fallon Mayor Bill Hennessy. "To see this fort rebuilt from the ground up is truly a proud moment for our City. The depth of research, including three archaeological surveys before the work

began, and the professionalism and craftsmanship that went into reconstruction have created one of the most interesting, attractive interpretive sites in the state. It is an excellent example of what can happen through dedicated public-private partnerships."

The grand opening ceremony for Zumwalt's Fort will roughly coincide with the 200th anniversary of the war's end in the Midwest in 1815, when, at the invitation of General William Clark (of Lewis and Clark Expedition fame), thousands of Native Americans gathered at nearby Portage des Sioux to sign treaties to end the fighting.

The end of this war in the Midwest opened the country to westward immigration. Not all traces of those days have vanished from O'Fallon's landscape. Sections of O'Fallon's interstates and highways, especially Highway P and Highway N, are rooted in Indian trails and Boone-family frontier trails leading from St. Louis and St. Charles to points west.

"That history resonates today, and we need to tell it," said Hennessy. "It's exciting to realize that, for over



The Zumwalt Fort log house circa 1886.



**The original Nicholas Krekel house remains a cornerstone of the downtown area.**

a generation, thousands of people heading west to new lives passed through present-day O’Fallon on roads that we still use. Even Route 364, newly-constructed through the heart of O’Fallon, overlaps paths blazed two centuries ago.”

O’Fallon also has railroading and Civil War history to tell. In the mid-1850s, Judge Arnold Krekel brought the railroad to the area, and along with it, progress – by investing in land, plotting a town, and deeding the North Missouri Railroad a right of way. He named the new town O’Fallon in honor of prominent St. Louis businessman John O’Fallon, the railroad’s president.

Judge Krekel’s younger brother Nicholas erected the first house in 1856. As was the custom in those days, Nicholas located his business, a general store, on the first floor. In short order, Nicholas Krekel became not only O’Fallon’s first citizen, but its first business owner, postmaster, and railroad.

Three years after the railroad was completed through O’Fallon, the Civil War began and the town found itself fending off Confederate troops bent on destroying the trestle bridge at the west end of town. Thanks to vigorous military patrols of the area, including downtown, and a newly-constructed Union blockhouse overlooking the bridge, the railroad at O’Fallon remained intact throughout the war.

With no paved roads, the town was particularly protective of its railroad, as it was the only reliable way in and out of O’Fallon. It was at the hub



**Heald Home circa 2007.**

of the town’s commerce, with farmers and merchants shipping and receiving goods, and townspeople regularly commuting to St. Charles and St. Louis. On Oct. 11, 1904, O’Fallon’s citizenry rode the train to St. Louis in celebration of “O’Fallon Day” at the World’s Fair. Although the depot no longer serves the railroad, the line continues to operate through the City as it did more than 150 years ago.

Today, O’Fallon looks to make the most of its historic downtown landscape. The original Nicholas Krekel’s house remains a cornerstone of the downtown area. The building is now owned by the City and city leaders are exploring options for the building’s

preservation and future use. It is one of the latest of several 19th and early 20th century buildings the City has taken under its wing.

Salvaging vintage structures, regardless of how historic they may be, is one step, and perhaps the least expensive step, in the preservation process. Once acquired, the renovation and maintenance needs of these structures can turn historic treasures into serious budget strains.

O’Fallon’s solution has been to find ways that the buildings help pay their way, mainly through public-private partnerships. The City has been successful. Among its Main Street acquisitions, the Westhoff Mercantile



**The Westhoff Mercantile building, erected in 1875, is now the home of McGurk’s Public House and Restaurant.**

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building, erected in 1875, is now the home of McGurk's Public House and Restaurant. The City also restored the Light and Power building that now serves as the local offices for Edward Jones.

In 1997, while searching for a larger City Hall with extra room for the police department, the City purchased the St. Mary's Institute school buildings from the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood. With marble flooring and original woodwork inside and a brick façade fronted by a three-story rotunda as an entrance, the O'Fallon Municipal Centre is one of Missouri's most distinguished-looking government buildings. The Sisters remain on the convent campus next door that includes the motherhouse built in 1875.

On Civic Drive off Main Street, the City's 1907 Wabash Depot, officially named Krekel Depot, was purchased for \$1, renovated, and repurposed as administration offices for O'Fallon's Parks and Recreation Department.

In all of these instances, the historic look and value of the buildings is maintained while the building serves

a modern function with 21st-century amenities.

Across the street from the depot in Civic Park, the City maintains a log cabin rescued from demolition and rebuilt as O'Fallon's Bicentennial project in 1976. It is now the home of O'Fallon's Historical Society's Log Cabin Museum.

Nearby, in Fort Zumwalt Park, the Darius Heald Home, built circa 1886, and Zumwalt's Fort serve as interpretive sites for the City's first 100 years. The City acquired Fort Zumwalt Park from the state for \$1 in 1978.

Looking to expand on these successes, the City is pursuing a long-term, public-private partnership for the Nicholas Krekel House. The two-story building exists on its original site; a prime location that is directly across Main Street from the Municipal Centre, with popular restaurants within walking distance and I-70 a few blocks away. Furthermore, the City is exploring a new streetscape plan through the historic downtown district. When complete, this plan will help tie O'Fallon's modern economy to its rich history and help sustain this vital area of the City.

Looking to O'Fallon's future, as the Historical Preservation Commission helps link the City's story to the nation's westward expansion, the heyday of railroading and O'Fallon's small-town beginnings, O'Fallon is poised to attract both heritage tourists and people who simply enjoy the ambiance of an historic setting. By fostering economic opportunities such as themed restaurants, shops and offices, the Commission hopes to cement O'Fallon's preservation efforts for generations to come. □

**Thomas Drabelle** is the communications director for the city of O'Fallon. For more information on the City, visit [www.ofallon.mo.us](http://www.ofallon.mo.us) or call (636) 240-2000.