FOR THE RECORDS

A Grave Undertaking

Missouri’s First Black Female Licensed Embalmer

When researching African American St. Louis ancestors, you might find details in their obituaries or burial records of who handled their funerals. Undertaking is a solemn business, and a kind and respectful mortician can make a devastating event slightly more bearable. As such, you may find yourself wondering—who were the people who cared for my ancestor’s body?

The St. Louis Burial Indexes, compiled by the St. Louis Genealogical Society, sometimes contain information regarding the mortuary that attended a burial. Missouri death certificates, obituaries, and church records also typically record this information (Figure 1), but seeing a name does not provide much in the way of understanding. In the first half of the 20th century in St. Louis, there were dozens of funeral homes that cared for the dead. What made your family choose a specific one?

Funerals were a deeply personal event, and many African Americans chose to have their deceased loved ones cared for by fellow African Americans. Funeral directors were “culturally valued for their ability to help their communities honor their dead with dignity and the requisite pageantry” (Smith, pg. 8). In the case of African American funeral directors in St. Louis, many of them became leaders or strong figures within their communities. Serving the dead is a steady business, and the relative financial stability of funeral directors further enabled them to support those around them, even as they were expanding their own businesses. That support was shown in a variety of ways, from philanthropic endeavors to work contracts for Black businesses.
One such funeral director was Birdie Beal of A. L. Beal Undertaking (Figure 2). Born in Tennessee, Birdie moved to St. Louis at the age of ten to live with her father, Albert Beal. Albert had moved to St. Louis in 1900, and spent the next thirteen years working hard and saving money to fulfill his dream of opening his own business. In September of 1913, Albert opened A. L. Beal Undertaking Company at 2726 Lucas Avenue (Figure 3).

When Birdie Beal received her embalming license in 1915, she did so as the first Black female in the state of Missouri. The St. Louis Argus reported that she “successfully passed the required examination before the board of examiners in November [1914] and is prepared to render first-class service to ladies” (St. Louis Argus, 26 March 1915). This, then, begs the question: what did “first-class” embalming service entail in the first half of the 20th century?

**The Rise of Embalming in the U.S.**

Prior to the increased urbanization in the latter half of the 19th century, the final disposition of human remains was typically handled in the home. Family members would wash, dress, and bury or entomb their loved ones themselves. But with the rising industrialization of the era, the care of a loved one was increasingly outsourced to professionals, namely, undertakers. Undertakers were called such because they undertook the multiple tasks of removing, transporting, and “funeralizing” the dead. Many undertakers had careers as carpenters or livery owners, serving customers by building coffins or offering transportation via horse and buggy (Figure 4).

When the handling of remains was passed on to undertakers, methods were employed that would be difficult to stomach today. Prior to the American Civil War, undertakers in the U.S. did not typically adhere to the modern ideal of a safe, clean method of preserving the dead. Common methods of preservation included placing bodies on ice, inside sealed metal-lined coffins, and, at worst, using sawdust to provide body “structure.” While chemical embalming was a growing industry in Europe throughout the 19th century, it was not until the 1860s that American doctors and undertakers began following the practice.

Dr. Thomas Holmes (1817-1899) is frequently called the “Father of American embalming” for his contributions to the field. He introduced methods of arterial embalming along with
the invention of his own embalming solution. The embalming business, for Holmes and others, boomed during the Civil War due to the overwhelming need to preserve soldiers’ bodies after they died during Civil War battles. With soldiers’ deaths often taking place very far from home, the chemical embalming of a body allowed for safer transport to the grieving family. This was significant as the more basic methods of preservation (see Figure 5) did not hold up well in the heat of the south, and some railroads began forbidding the transport of bodies if they were likely to give off an odor.

(In the interest of comfort, the details of preparing a body for embalming will not be given here. However, if you are interested in reading contemporary instructions, Dr. Auguste Renouard’s 1878 The Undertaker’s Manual is freely available on Project Gutenberg.)

While there were benefits to the rise of embalming during the Civil War, it was not always practiced in an altruistic way. Due to the high number of fatalities and the unpreparedness of both the Union and Confederate armies, it was easy for vultures to swoop in and take advantage. There were a large number of complaints against embalmers during the Civil War due to their all too common practice of embalming a deceased soldier and then offering to return it to the family, for a price. Embalmers were also accused of demanding exorbitant fees for their services, though they always attempted to justify the costs. Ultimately, embalming surgeons were ordered away from the front lines of war, where they had been doing most of their business and getting the most complaints.

After the Civil War, embalming continued to spread through the undertaking community. As time went on, medically trained individuals began to withdraw from embalming. The service was taken over by those who had no formal medical experience, and who frequently offered their services to undertaking establishments (See Figure 6). The typical “education” for embalmers was customarily delivered by touring individuals who demonstrated embalming techniques, holding sessions which lasted from three or four days to a week. Diplomas were handed out at the end of these sessions, and occasionally examinations were given. In 1894, states began establishing oversight boards which imposed rules and regulations on those who wanted to practice embalming.
Missouri established its own Board of Embalmers in 1895 with the passage of bill No. 202. The bill required those wishing to be licensed to submit an application to the Board, pay a fee of $5 (about $180 in 2023), and take an examination. The examination tested the licensees on knowledge of the venous and arterial systems, anatomy, the science of embalming, and sanitation as well as other aspects. By 1900, courses at the most reputable colleges of embalming lasted for an average of three weeks. St. Louis even had its own mortuary science college, the American College of Embalming, which undertaker M. H. Alexander opened in 1903. It was from this school that Beal received her education in the science of embalming.

Beal Undertaking

Beal’s status as a Black embalmer was further enhanced by her status as a woman. In January, the St. Louis Argus wrote, “In the East the need of having a woman to prepare the bodies of women and children has been felt, and the want supplied there. Though the want has been felt in St. Louis for a long time among the more refined, it remained for Miss Beal to become the pioneer and embark in the calling that will mean so much to the women of this city” (St. Louis Argus, 8 January 1915). While it was not out of the ordinary for male undertakers to handle female bodies, it may have encroached on the sensibilities of contemporary society. To have a female undertaker, particularly one who was Black, perhaps lent assurances of respectful conduct to grieving families.

Beal ran the funeral home with her father Albert until his death in 1929. After his passing, Beal ran the funeral home until the 1980s. According to the St. Louis Burials Index, accessible in the History & Genealogy Department, Beal Undertaking buried upwards of 2,000 people, most of them African American, and most of them in Lake Charles Memorial Park, Friedens Cemetery, Washington Park, and Greenwood Cemetery. The St. Louis Argus frequently published cards of thanks from the bereaved who mentioned their gratitude to the various people involved in their loved one’s funeral, including Beal Undertaking (Figure 7).

Under Beal’s leadership, Beal Undertaking supported the African American communities of St. Louis in a variety of ways. The funeral home sourced all its work contracts from Black businesses (St. Louis Argus, 20 June 1947). This was in line with Beal’s membership in the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, a nonpartisan civil rights organization that aimed to empower African Americans and others in securing economic self-reliance, social equality and civil rights. Beal also served on the National Executive Board of the Funeral Directors’ Association, and was given an honorary lifetime membership on the board of the National Negro Funeral Directors Association. As part of that organization, in 1956, Beal and other leaders in the African American funeral directing community donated $1,000 to the Mont-

Figure 6: To determine the effectiveness of embalming, some businesses displayed embalmed bodies (sometimes without permission). St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 4 July 1899.

Figure 7: Card of thanks. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 13 August 1926.
Beal passed away in 1987 (Figure 8), and her undertaking business was kept in the family. Her daughter, Vora Thompson, along with Vora’s husband Charles S. Wilson, carried on the business after her mother’s death. Beal’s service to the African American community continued when, in 1997, Beal Mortuary “was one of four funeral homes that received a contract... to rebury the remains of those poor souls who were interred at the Washington Park Cemetery just east of the airport” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 10 July 1998). This contract was granted during Phase 2 of Lambert Airport’s work in relocating graves that obstructed airport development. Beal Mortuary’s service in the airport’s project was part of Lambert’s intention to give more respect to the deceased than was paid in the 1992 reinterments. The 1992 work, conducted to clear ground for a MetroLink extension at the airport, was mismanaged to the point that some families lost track of their ancestors, with no indication of where their bodies were reinterred. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch also reported that an archaeologist involved with the 1992 project took “dozens of bodies from the cemetery and kept them for months,” and that the use of heavy machinery for disinterments caused the destruction of the deceased and their coffins (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 5 April 1997). When Beal Mortuary took part in Phase 2, restrictions and guidelines were in place to better ensure the safety of those being reburied.

Laid to Rest

Beal Undertaking was not the only African American funeral home in St. Louis. Ellis, Gates, Manuel, and many more served the Black community, and can be found in burial and death records throughout St. Louis’s past. But Beal Undertaking was one of the first Black undertaking businesses in Missouri. Its fleet of Cadillacs, comfortable and comforting rooms, friendly faces, and community outreach helped to establish it as a respected business. Birdie Beal’s own status as the first Black female licensed embalmer in Missouri added to the mortuary’s notoriety, and, as the St. Louis Argus stated, she was a pioneer in the funerary community and a leader among both women and men.

References


St. Louis Argus. (1915-1964). St. Louis, MO.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch. (1879-Present). St. Louis, MO.

Further Reading

All the Living and the Dead by Hayley Campbell

Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial by Mark Harris

Last Rites: The Evolution of the American Funeral by Todd Harra

Smoke Gets In Your Eyes by Caitlin Doughty

To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death by Suzanne Smith (coming soon to H&G)

Other resources

The Missouri Division of Professional Registration has a database search that allows you to view non-active licenses, including those for funeral directors or funeral establishments. pr.mo.gov/licensee-search-nonactive.asp
Looking for more information on your St. Louis ancestors? History & Genealogy at the St. Louis County Library has the following funeral home records on microfilm:

- Ambruster
- Ambruster, Edith E.
- Ambruster, Robert J.
- Ambruster, Wm.
- Bauman Colonial Chapel
- Bopp
- Croghan Chapel
- Cullen and Kelly
- DeMoor, Len/Tom Murray Monument Co. (obituaries only)
- Donnelly, Arthur J.
- Fendler
- Gebken
- Gebken-Benz
- Hoffmeister
- Howard, Edward F. and Sons
- Howard, Joseph A.
- Parker-Aldrich
- Peetz
- Robert, Wm. J.
- Schumacher-Smith
- Smith and Croghan
- Smith, Jay B.
- Smith, Jay B. Schumacher Chapel
- Southern
- Weick Bros.

Funeral home records can often contain genealogical information about the deceased and their family. The funeral home name can usually be found on the death certificate. If your ancestors were outside of the St. Louis area, check a local historical or genealogical society for information about records. For a detailed list of H&G St. Louis funeral home records, years covered, and microfilm roll numbers, click here. For our Lookup form, click here.
# H&G Classes & Programs

The following History & Genealogy classes and programs are offered for February 2024:

## Beginning African American Research
- **Date & Time:** Thursday, February 2, 6:00 pm, Lewis & Clark
- **Description:** Do you want to research your African American family but don’t know where to start? This class will teach you the basics of genealogical research and introduce you to specific resources for African American research that are available through History & Genealogy at the St. Louis County Library. In celebration of Black History Month. Adults. [Registration required](#).

## Exploring FamilySearch.org
- **Date & Time:** Monday, February 5, 6:30 pm, Virtual
- **Description:** FamilySearch.org is a free website offering access to millions of records for genealogy and family history research. Learn how to search for ancestors, navigate the catalog, and take advantage of other features. Adults. [Registration required](#).

## African American Genealogy: A Mississippi Case Study
- **Date & Time:** Monday, February 26, 6:30 pm, Virtual
- **Description:** Learn about resources for African American genealogy through an exploration of Scattered Leaves: The African American Families of the Rock Hill Community in Panola County, Mississippi with the book’s author, Len Campbell. In celebration of Black History Month. Adults. [Registration required](#).

## SLCL Databases for Genealogy Research
- **Date & Time:** Wednesday, February 28, 2:00 pm, Virtual
- **Description:** Discover the variety of genealogical databases that can be used free at the library and at home with your St. Louis County Library card. Adults. [Registration required](#).

## Coming in March:
- **Finding Female Ancestors**
  - **Date & Time:** Wednesday, March 6, 6:30 pm, Virtual
- **Using Irish Catholic Parish Records**
  - **Date & Time:** Tuesday, March 12, 2:00 pm, Virtual
- **Branching Out with DNA**
  - **Date & Time:** Thursday, March 14, 6:30 pm, Virtual
- **StL Genealogy**
  - **Date & Time:** Monday, March 25, 6:30 pm, Virtual

For a complete list of H&G offerings, click [here](#).
**NEW LIBRARY HOURS**

The St. Louis County Library Board of Trustees voted at their November 20, 2023 meeting to adjust SLCL branch hours in 2024. Starting January 2, 2024 all SLCL branches will close at 8:00 p.m. Monday-Thursday. Previously, all branches were open until 9:00 p.m. Monday-Thursday. All other library hours remain the same.

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**LATIN RECORDS**

Are your ancestors’ records in Latin? Need help reading them? FamilySearch has short, free lessons (3-5 minutes each) on reading Latin in their Learning Center! Lessons include:

- Latin Handwriting 1: Introduction
- Latin Handwriting 2: Latin Genealogical Word List
- Latin Handwriting 3: Google Translate
- Latin Handwriting 4: How to Decline Personal Names
- Latin Handwriting 5: Latin Dictionary
- Latin Handwriting 6: Latin-English Dictionary
- Latin Handwriting 7: The Catholic Encyclopedia
- Latin Handwriting 8: Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine ed Italiani
- Latin Handwriting 9: Latin Language and Script Gallery of Latin Abbreviations
- Latin Handwriting 10: Parish Register Latin: An Introduction

Click [here](#) for these and other FamilySearch programs.

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**HOLIDAY CLOSURE**

All branches of the St. Louis County Library will be closed on Monday, February 19, in honor of Presidents’ Day.

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**WEBSTER PERMITS**

Historic homeowners in Webster Groves will now have an easier time applying for their Century Home Plaques! Webster Groves city building permits for 1908-1996 are now digitized and available online.

See the Webster Groves Public Library for an index to the permits [here](#).

See biblioboard for the newly digitized permits [here](#).

For more information on obtaining a plaque, see the Webster Groves Historical Society’s website [here](#).

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**WHAT’S THE WORD**

The modern word “sheriff,” which refers to an individual who enforces the law in a county, comes from the Anglo-Saxon words “shire” (county or land area) and “reeve” (chief). The Shire-Reeve, beginning in England in about the 700s, was responsible for collecting taxes and enforcing the king’s orders.

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**NEWS AND TIPS**

**HISTORY AND GENEALOGY AT ST. LOUIS COUNTY LIBRARY**
The St. Louis Genealogical Society presents the following events:

Jewish Special Interest Group Meeting: Jewish Foodways: 1870–1930
Sunday, February 4, 1:00 pm, Virtual
Many of us enjoy delicious Jewish food as part of our everyday lives without giving it much thought. Learn how immigration, tradition, and the observance of the laws of kashrut shaped Jewish food culture here in America. Presenter: Margi Lenga Kahn.

Monthly Meeting: Using the St. Charles County Historical Society Website as Your Gateway to St. Charles County History
Saturday, February 10, 10:00 am, Grant’s View/Hybrid
Did you know that St. Charles was Missouri’s first capital city? That Daniel Boone and Lewis and Clark have ties to the city? The history of St. Charles goes back hundreds of years, and the society’s website may help you discover your own ancestors’ stories. Presenter: Greg Hilton. Registration not required for in-person.

STLGS monthly and SIG meetings are free and open to the public!

See stlgs.org for more information and to register.
Registration is now open for the National Genealogical Society’s 2024 conference! The 2024 event is all virtual, and is great for both beginning and veteran researchers. Expert speakers will present 50 lectures with live questions and answers. Topics include records, methodology, AI, DNA, and more. Click here for more information and to register.

2024 Virtual Family History Conference
EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES
16-18 MAY

History & Genealogy at the St. Louis County Library is home to the National Genealogical Society’s book collection.

PastPorts is published by History & Genealogy at the St. Louis County Library
Subscribe at slcl.org/pastports. Current and past issues can be downloaded from the web.

Contact us:
History & Genealogy
St. Louis County Library
Temporary Location: Daniel Boone Branch
300 Clarkson Rd.
Ellisville, MO 63011
314-994-3300
genealogy@slcl.org
slcl.org/genealogy

PARDON OUR DUST
The St. Louis County Library has recently upgraded its website. The History & Genealogy page can be accessed by clicking on “Research & Learn,” and then “History & Genealogy.” Unfortunately, some of the H&G links have been broken during the upgrade process. Please be patient as our hardworking SLCL technology team works to get everything back on track. Please contact H&G at 314-994-3300 or genealogy@slcl.org for help locating any of our online materials.

NEWS AND TIPS | HISTORY AND GENEALOGY AT ST. LOUIS COUNTY LIBRARY
Scanning kits are now available through H&G at the St. Louis County Library! Transform those photos, notes, scrapbooks, and documents into generational legacies.

Scanning Kits contain a Chromebook, a portable Canon flatbed scanner, instructions, and resources for additional information related to organizing your digital archive.

Click here for more information.

SLCL had another successful Beercember event on December 8 at the Grant’s View Branch. Samples from five local breweries, music by the Gaslight Squares, Gus’ pretzels, a Bellefontaine Cemetery beer barons presentation, brewers’ roundtable, home brewing display, and St. Louis beer history scavenger hunt all made for a fun evening. There were over 200 people in attendance. Join us next year at the Clark Family Branch!

Check out this St. Louis County Library offering:

**The Bumpy History of the Bicycle**
Tuesday, February 20, 6:00 pm, Prairie Commons
Join us for an exploration in the evolution of transportation brought by the creation of the bicycle. Uncover the wheeling wonders that transformed mobility, from the earliest pedal-powered contraptions to the sleek and efficient bicycles of today. Adults. Registration required.

Click here for all SLCL programs.
In 1838, approximately 700 German-Lutherans left their homes, farms, businesses and all they knew behind to embark on the dangerous sea voyage to America. Finding new homes in St. Louis and then Perry County, Missouri, they rebuilt their lives and formed communities which endure to this day. Discover their hardships, tragedies and triumphs and explore the families, churches, farms and businesses they established which make East Perry County a unique and truly authentic destination.

Do you have Perry County, Missouri German Lutherans in your family tree? If so, check out the Perry County Lutheran Historical Society for blog posts, conferences, exhibits, research, and more.

Remember, sometimes when researching history and genealogy, it’s best to go local!

In the fall of 1763, a business was formed between Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent and Pierre Laclède Liguést. The search was then on for a suitable location to base the company’s fur trading operations. An elevated area on the west side of the Mississippi River, south of the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, was identified. In addition to river transportation, the area also had natural drainage, nearby forested areas and grasslands for farming. In fact, Laclède declared that it “might become, hereafter, one of the finest cities in America.”

The settlement was named St. Louis in honor of King Louis XI of France, who ruled from 1226 to 1270. He was a devout Catholic who was later made “Saint” Louis. Work on clearing the site began on Saint Valentine’s Day, 1764 by Laclède’s stepson, Auguste Chouteau, and thirty settlers. The street plan produced by Laclède for the early city, based on that of New Orleans, included a public corridor of 300 feet fronting the river, 3 long avenues running parallel, and block sizes of 240 by 300 ft. And the rest, as they say, is history!

Join RootsTech Online for FREE!

Your Story is Worth Remembering • 29 February–2 March 2024

Registration for RootsTech 2024 is now open!

Online (or in-person in Salt Lake City)

200+ new online sessions in over 26 languages
Join keynote sessions live from the comfort of your own home
Chat online with other attendees worldwide
Get digital syllabi and class handouts

St. Louis County Library is a FamilySearch Affiliate Library
## Ancestry Library Edition at Your Branch

Ancestry Library Edition can be used at any of the St. Louis County Library’s branches. This database is a great place to begin or continue your genealogy research. You may use a public computer or bring your own device and connect to the branch wifi. Click [here](#) for more information on the following St. Louis County Library locations:

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<tr>
<th>Branch Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>City, MO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bridgeton Trails Branch</td>
<td>3455 McKelvey Rd.</td>
<td>Bridgeton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clark Family Branch (closed-under construction)</td>
<td>1640 S. Lindbergh</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cliff Cave Branch</td>
<td>5430 Telegraph Rd.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel Boone Branch</td>
<td>300 Clarkson Rd.</td>
<td>Ellisville</td>
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<td>Eureka Hills Branch</td>
<td>500 Workman Rd.</td>
<td>Eureka</td>
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<td>Florissant Valley Branch</td>
<td>195 New Florissant Rd., S.</td>
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<td>Grand Glaize Branch</td>
<td>1010 Meramec Station Rd.</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
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<td>Grant's View Branch</td>
<td>9700 Musick Rd.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamestown Bluffs Branch</td>
<td>4153 N. Highway 67</td>
<td>Florissant</td>
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<td>Lewis &amp; Clark Branch</td>
<td>9909 Lewis and Clark Blvd.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<td>Meramec Valley Branch</td>
<td>1501 San Simeon Way</td>
<td>Fenton</td>
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<td>Mid-County Branch</td>
<td>7821 Maryland Ave.</td>
<td>Clayton</td>
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<td>Natural Bridge Branch</td>
<td>7606 Natural Bridge Rd.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<td>Oak Bend Branch</td>
<td>842 S. Holmes Ave.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parkview Branch</td>
<td>8400 Delport Dr.</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
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<td>Prairie Commons Branch</td>
<td>915 Utz Ln.</td>
<td>Hazelwood</td>
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<td>Rock Road Branch</td>
<td>10267 St. Charles Rock Rd.</td>
<td>St. Ann</td>
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<td>Samuel C. Sachs Branch</td>
<td>16400 Burkhardt Pl.</td>
<td>Chesterfield</td>
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<td>Thornhill Branch</td>
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<td>Weber Road Branch</td>
<td>4444 Weber Rd.</td>
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Slavery in St. Louis, a banner exhibit from the National Park Service, will be on display at several SLCL branches over the next few months. There will also be programs to learn more about the exhibit and the history of slavery in St. Louis. Click here for dates and branches.

St. Louis Love Stories
Thursday, February 15, 2:00 p.m.

Presented by Amanda Clark, Community Tours Manager at the Missouri Historical Society

Take a fun, in-depth look at several important true love stories in St. Louis history. Topics include Dred and Harriet Scott, Frankie and Johnny and Ulysses S. Grant and Julia Dent, plus other well-known and less-known stories of the power of love to change history.

Adults. Registration required.

Daniel Boone Branch
300 Clarkson Road | Ellisville, MO 63011 | 314-994-3300

Program sites are accessible. With at least two weeks’ notice, accommodations will be made for persons with disabilities. Call 314-994-3300 or visit www.slcl.org.
Slavery in St. Louis, a banner exhibit from the National Park Service, will be on display at several SLCL branches over the next few months. There will also be programs to learn more about the exhibit and the history of slavery in St. Louis. Click here for dates and branches.