

# Delta Sources and Resources

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## **“It’s Our Fault”: New Madrid’s Claim to Fame New Madrid Historical Museum New Madrid, Missouri** by Julianne Couch

Virginia Carlson is a third generation resident of New Madrid. That’s New MAD-rid, in the northern part of the Missouri Bootheel, the part of the state that is distinctly in the South. You can credit one John Hardeman Walker, a landowner in Missouri Territory who didn’t want to become an Arkansan when Arkansas Territory borders were drawn. He argued to the U.S. Congress that the Bootheel belonged in Missouri, and he won. His story is just one of many Carlson is driven to share with visitors to her town. So driven, she started a museum to be sure its history would not be forgotten.

Carlson and her friend Dorothy “Dot” Halstead, who passed away in 2002, were the type of women who work tirelessly to improve their communities. One day some forty years ago, the pair was out sweeping the streets. “We were trying to shame people into cleaning their property,” Carlson said. “It worked. Eventually the city bought a street sweeper.”

While they were taking a break from their efforts, they stopped to ponder an old building that had been standing since before they were born. Overlooking the Mississippi River, it started life as a saloon and eventually turned into an auto repair shop. It was thick with grease and a real mess. This time they saw it anew, Carlson explained. “Dot said, ‘we need to start a museum and right there is where it needs to be.’”

That pronouncement was all it took for the two ladies to spring into action and secure the support of the Chamber of Commerce to purchase the building, which the newly formed New Madrid Historical Museum board restored.

The non-profit museum, located about five miles off Interstate 55, is now a significant tourist attraction in this town of just over 3,000, seeing between 7,000 and 10,000 visitors a year.

When the museum opened in 1975, the board was motivated by the reality of their small community: a lot of history was not being preserved. In fact, much of it had been washed away. “Our original town is a mile in the Mississippi River,” Carlson explained. “Nothing here is real old, because it is all out in the river.” When she says “all” she means the part that was first developed in the 1780s, making it the oldest American town west of the Mississippi; the part that lies in ruins thanks to the series of intense earthquakes in 1811 and 1812; even the part with all the small family cemeteries that provide resting places for generations of New Madridians, her own family’s included. “That’s why we needed a museum.”

The museum started with almost nothing. They had an art showing and “grandma’s attic” items illustrating how townspeople had lived in the 19th century. They began collecting items from the Civil War, which were plentiful due to the Battle of Island Number Ten. Because of New Madrid’s location along a series of tight turns in the Mississippi River, it saw fighting from February 28 to April 8, 1862. Thanks to a quirk of geography, New Madrid is actually on the north bank of the Mississippi, which for most of its length flows north to south, with banks on its east and west. Island Number Ten had been held by Confederates, who used it as a location from which to pounce on Union vessels. Union pilots had to slow down and concentrate to navigate currents in the sharp bends. To make a long and inevitable story short, the Union won the battle and the war. Now Island Number Ten has joined much else the river encounters—under water, stuck in mud, or washed to the Gulf of Mexico.

The New Madrid Historical Museum devotes much attention to this local battle, with cases full of tangible civil war artifacts dug up by locals over the years. And they have items connecting World Wars I and II to local residents. But they didn't have any displays devoted to the earthquakes. "We didn't have anything because nothing survived," Carlson said. "We thought nobody was paying attention to it anymore. We soon found out that was real wrong."

In fact, there was a "big scare" in 1990, when author and climatologist Iben Browning predicted strong quakes would once again shake the New Madrid fault on December 3 of that year. Still an active seismic area, a repeat of the intense quakes of 1811–12 in today's much more crowded region would be a calamity. In spite of the dire predictions of imminent danger and bodily harm, Carlson said, "people from around the world packed this little town waiting for it." The museum created T-shirts sporting the slogan "New Madrid: It's our Fault." "We must have sold a million of those T-shirts."

In addition to T-shirt and book sales and a modest admission price, the museum stays open because its board, composed entirely of volunteers, is an energetic fund-raising force. "We have more fundraisers than you can think of," Carlson said. "One guy donated a steer that we raffled off." They also have an endowment that provides a small annual income, but because of today's low interest returns, "We had to go to Plan B," she said. Plan B includes the annual Mardi Gras party, which will raise enough funds to pay down, in six or seven years, a debt incurred for a professionally developed exhibit on the 1811–1812 earthquakes, installed on the eve of their bicentennial.

The museum does not exactly jump out at travelers who don't already intend to go there. Interstate 55 is three miles from the New Madrid city limits via exit 44 (when traveling north), five miles via exit 49 (coming south) and either seven or ten miles from the museum, depending on the exit you use. Neither the town nor the river can be seen from the high-

way. According to Carlson, around the time the board began to promote the museum to earthquake tourists, they placed a "big black billboard" on the highway outside of town with "shaky letters" that said "Earthquake." A man who was developing an industrial plant in the area "almost had a heart attack when he saw it."

But now highway travelers divert for the museum, as well as other historic sites in town, including the Hart-Stepp Art Gallery, the Hunter-Dawson historic home site, and the Higgerson School historic site. During the summer, big river excursion boats like the American Queen and the Queen of the Mississippi stop here. School bus tours are plentiful, as are travelers who stop along the snow bird trail from places like Florida and Louisiana, headed back to their homes. There's also a bicycle tour, Ride the Fault Line, that comes through town each year. The museum is trying to capture those visitor opportunities by developing a social media presence on sites like Facebook.

Although not a snowbird or leisure traveler, I came to New Madrid specifically to see the town and to learn about the earthquake. It wasn't until I got to the museum that the reality of the intense fighting during the Civil War hit me. I had never visited a Civil War battle site, so standing on the observation platform across from the museum and imagining the river full of Confederate and Union forces made the Civil War more real to me. I also wasn't aware of the Mississippian Indian mounds in the immediate area, although I knew about historic sites such as the Cahokia Mounds near St. Louis. The New Madrid Historical Museum has a display on local mounds that again brought that culture close to home. And of course, I spent time in the room of various domestic items, furnishings, and tools that appeal to the antique-lover side of me. Many items in the collection would fit right into my own 130-plus year old home a few hundred miles upriver in Iowa. But I had no idea how close to home I'd feel until I spent a few moments with museum administrator Jeff Grunwald, a man who drinks



New Madrid Historical Museum.  
Photograph by Eric Mattson.

from an Iowa Hawkeyes mug and speaks with a trace of an Iowa accent.

Grunwald has lived in many cities since leaving Iowa at age 16, and most recently, he and his wife Malinda were living just a few hours away, in Memphis. Deciding the time had come to move closer to her family, that's what they did. Soon, he became involved with the museum, which appealed to the history major he had been. He said he "never in a million years" thought he'd wind up a museum director in New Madrid, Missouri. Now he works there nearly full time.

At the time of my visit on a splendid Friday in late March, foot traffic was starting to pick up for the season. People drifted through the door in pairs or small clusters. Grunwald greeted them, accepted their admission fee, asked a few questions about their knowledge of museum holdings, and guided them into a small room to watch a short introductory movie about local history. A few volunteers, including Virginia Carlson, are sometimes on hand, depending on day and season, to help out. But many days it is just Jeff Grunwald.

One group safely ensconced in the dark, Grunwald would dash back to the museum en-

trance to greet another group, or dart into one of the exhibition areas to answer questions visitors might have or hear the stories they shared about their own experiences.

"They want to talk about earthquakes," Grunwald said. He estimates 60 to 65 percent of traffic is earthquake tourism, 25 percent are civil war buffs, and the remainder are a combination of folks who enjoy dropping into small towns or visiting roadside attractions.

Grunwald sees visitor response as overwhelmingly positive. People seem pleasantly surprised that a town of 3,000 has a nice museum, and leave taking away much more than they'd anticipated. "There is more to New Madrid than the fault," he said.

After spending an hour or so in the museum I selected a few items for purchase. In spite of the museum very clearly having more stories to tell besides the earthquake, what did I buy? A book about the earthquake. And an earthquake T-shirt. I couldn't help it. It's not my fault! ▲▼▲

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