



Rock Island Second Edition

Steve Urie

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There are many U.S. cities that can lay claim to being the most all-American city, but indisputably Rock Island is the nation's most all-American town. From its rough and tumble beginnings during the first half of the 19th century when it was the jumping off point into unexplored Indian territory until vigilante businessmen cleaned out the cabal of gangsters and crooked cops that ran the Town during the Roaring Twenties, Rock Island was a rowdy, fun-loving river town that boasted a number historical firsts: the site of the westernmost battle during the Revolutionary War; the home of the Indians who fought the last battles east of the Mississippi; the first railroad bridge to span the mighty river; the site of the "Andersonville of the North" during the Civil War; America's 19th century timber capital and crossroads of the nation; the site of the first NFL game; the home to Prohibition's most ruthless gangsters west of Chicago; and the home to what evangelist Billy Sunday described as "some of the finest people in the country — and one or two of the meanest." When Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet left St. Ignace in the summer of 1673 and canoed across Lake Michigan, and down the Wisconsin River in search of a water route to the China Sea, they were the first white men to see the stunning Upper Mississippi River Valley. After floating 150 miles down the "Father of Waters," the explorers passed through a treacherous 14-mile chain of rapids lined with villages of peaceful Indians. They didn't find a passage to the sea or the rumored gold mines that the natives were said to possess, but their glowing descriptions of lush forests teeming with wild game opened the western frontier to a rugged group of men who traded tools and whiskey to the Indians for valuable animal furs. It would be 130 years after Marquette and Jolliet's exploration until President Thomas Jefferson sent Lt. Zebulon Pike up the Mississippi from Fort St. Louis to locate a strategic site to build a fort that plans were made for a permanent settlement north of the Missouri River. Lt. Pike selected a 3-mile-long island near the foot of the 14-mile rapids where Indians built their largest villages on a peninsula created by a large river that flowed into the Mississippi. The U.S. Army named the island "Rock Island." Thus began the most dynamic 150 years of history of any U.S. town. Rock Island: The Town is the colorful history from the beginning of the 17th century to the mid-20th century of the development and evolution of America's most representative town.

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