

THE SAINT LOUIS CONVENTION: LIVING THE WHOLE AATF EXPERIENCE

The 2017 AATF convention was remarkable for me. I hadn't come into it realizing how meaningful a Midwestern city could be to a French professor. Living on the Gulf Coast near Mobile, AL, New Orleans, and the outlying Cajun country, I know this is where French language, food, music, culture, and history reside *par excellence* in the U.S. Furthermore, I am married to a French-Canadian so Québec is where my compass points for seeing the French language alive and well in North America. I was very surprised that Saint Louis, viewed through Francophile eyes, delighted me.

My journey started in the sessions. Robert Moore's presentation about the "French Colonial Heritage of Saint Louis" was fascinating. Since Robert is the National Park Service Historian at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, I had a sneak preview (and member-only experience) of seeing the many installations that the new museum (still under construction) under the Saint Louis Gateway Arch will contain. The session felt like a private tour of French-Creole Saint Louis.

Beyond the many worthwhile sessions, and for the first time, I took advantage of some of the other convention offerings. At the AATF Awards Banquet, I was enthralled by singer, songwriter, musician, and historian Dennis Stroughmatt from French-speaking Illinois, who played great French-Creole songs, many learned from French-speaking descendants of 18th-century settlers. The music he played was touched by both Canadian and Cajun influences, and he explained so eloquently why.

I also took advantage of the delightful walking tour to the Old State Capital, the Basilica of Saint Louis, and the Gateway Arch. I appreciated that the visit was prepared and done in French by fellow AATF teacher Anne Craver.

Although I was unable to attend the pre-convention tour of the Saint Louis Museum of Art, I found it easy to take the public transportation system in Saint Louis and visit the museum on my own. I had no idea that the mu-

seum had such an extensive collection, and I enjoyed seeing not only several important pieces by renowned French artists, but also several pieces by American artists that complimented what I was learning in the convention sessions about the founding of the area. I truly enjoyed the museum's period rooms, where the entire room was decorated using the furniture and wares of the time and place. The French room was gorgeous.

Finally, I rounded out my experience by signing up for the French-colonial post-convention excursion to Sainte Genevieve, MO, and to several places across the Mississippi River in Illinois. We were a group of 18 people, and we did so much in those 24 hours. This trip layered a whole new richness to the information and slides I had seen in the convention sessions. The trip was unique, too, because I shared the experience with great colleagues in a small group setting. I didn't know anyone when I signed up on the excursion, but I met great fellow French explorers who were eager to discuss and share the experience with me. The excursions were seamless and well-coordinated, and experiencing them with people of similar interests was a highlight of the convention, and of belonging to the AATF. The food was delicious, and the B&B accommodations were delightful.

My experience at the AATF convention in Saint Louis felt complete. It was an investment of time and of money that provided an excellent value. It seemed like in a few days, I experienced a whole course on the French heritage of the area and had done it through the very best quality of experiential learning. As a teacher, I feel recharged with new knowledge that I can share with my students. As a person, I nourished my own experience as a modern-day French explorer and enthusiast.

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