

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

Part 2: The Old Courthouse

11 North 4th Street

St. Louis, MO 63102

(314) 655-1700

<http://www.nps.gov/jeff.htm>

Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)

Overall Rating: 4.1 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 3.5 stars
- Docent-led tours upon request: 5 stars
- On-site docents and staff: 4 stars
- Quality of experience if visiting unaccompanied: 4.1 stars
- Tactile and auditory components: 4 stars (under further development)

This evaluation was last updated on June 28, 2014 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Ms. Ann Honious, Chief of Museum Services and Interpretation for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

This section is an extension of my evaluation of the Museum of Westward Expansion, and it is something that is not to be overlooked when planning a visit to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. In contrast to the Museum of Westward Expansion, the Old Courthouse was found to be fairly accessible for visitors who are blind or visually impaired. Its closer proximity to public transportation stops, its informative and descriptive ranger tours, and its well-narrated film on the Dred Scott Case will make a blind or visually impaired individual's visit both enjoyable and enriching. Many new project proposals and renovations are under consideration which are designed to make the exhibitions and regional history more engaging, enjoyable, and enriching for both sighted and non-sighted visitors. These plans will also effect how visitors access the main facilities on the park's grounds. Therefore, it is important to note that much of the information in this entry is subject to change over the upcoming year.

For individuals with well-developed mobility skills, there is a Metro-Link station about four blocks away which is walkable in favorable weather with clear verbal directions. Otherwise, there are parking meters outside the courthouse that sighted companions may utilize for their

convenience. As usual, cabs and Metro's Call-A-Ride service will be able to drop off passengers directly in front of the main entrance or within easy walking distance from the Old Courthouse.

Tours are typically offered hourly throughout the day, and they are a terrific way for blind and visually impaired visitors to take in the rich history and architecture of the courthouse. As the staff's ability to offer hourly tours depends on the daily availability of rangers, visitors would be well-advised to call in advance to confirm tour times for a specific day. The information provided by the tour guides really helps visitors to step back in time and view the wide array of activities that took place at this historic landmark, and if the guides are aware of any group members with visual disabilities, they are able to provide adequate physical descriptions of the architecture and surroundings. Blind and visually impaired individuals are at liberty to ask to feel the architecture of the building and other structural features that are accessible and within easy reach. Many of the tours conclude in a restored nineteenth-century courtroom where the visitors are free to examine replicas of the judge's bench, the witness box, and other key furnishings of a typical nineteenth-century courtroom. If this final aspect of the tour is omitted due to time constraints, visitors may ask to be shown the room personally, providing that an available ranger can be found.

The Old Courthouse also has an excellent short film on the Dred Scott Case which is shown at regular intervals throughout the day. According to the Courthouse staff, the movie used to have descriptive audio, but the disc which contained the descriptions deteriorated and was never replaced. However, due to the impeccable narration in the film, the blind visitor will not regret the absence of a descriptive audio track.

There are a couple aspects of the Old Courthouse which could give the blind or visually impaired visitor a little trouble. There are a couple of small exhibits on the Dred Scott case, an exhibit on the history of St. Louis, and a collection of paintings and engravings in the main rotunda that commemorate the construction and history of the Old Courthouse. As with most standard museum displays, these exhibits consist of name plates, photographs, and items behind glass with no additional auditory or tactile enhancements. The Old Courthouse also houses several beautiful, scaled dioramas of the building, steam-powered riverboats, and other related items. For the sake of preserving these three-dimensional works of art, the dioramas are also enclosed in glass cases. Blind and visually impaired individuals will need sighted assistance in visualizing these smaller exhibits.

Like the Museum of Westward Expansion, the exhibits within the Old Courthouse will all be replaced in 2017. The changes will provide a more universally accessible and engaging experience for all visitors. Thanks to the efforts of the newly-formed City Arch Riverfront Universal Design Group, painstaking attention has been awarded to improving the experience of visitors with a wide variety of physical and mental disabilities. The design teams involved in the project have been working tirelessly to create an immersive, interactive, and multi-sensory experience that brings the museum's history out of the glass display cases and into the hands (and ears) of the blind. When completed, these renovations will offer blind and visually impaired visitors a truly enriching experience as they journey through the history of this iconic St. Louis landmark. More information will be made available to the general public as plans and timelines are finalized.

For any further questions about the exhibits and services available at the Old Courthouse, please contact:

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