St. Louis' Great Divorce: A complete history of the city and county separation and attempts to get back together

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We've been wasting our breath arguing. This whole city-county arrangement was never legal in the first place. First, the Scheme to divide the city of St. Louis from the county was submitted after midnight on July 3, 1875—on a national holiday, when legal documents cannot be filed.

Second, the vote to separate the city from the county failed. City residents just barely voted yes (11,878 to 11,525), and county residents voted no (2,617 to 848).

Then there was a recount—after a judge in the Missouri Court of Appeals threw out ballots that showed partially erased yes votes replaced with nos. According to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, election officials admitted they'd “stuffed in bogus votes by the handful, swore to false returns and by every device of perjury, corruption and rascality did all that lay in their power to convert the election into a shameless farce.” They said they'd been directed to falsify the count by politicians (in both city and county) who feared they'd lose power if the measure passed. The politicians at fault were not indicted, but the court did direct that the ballots be recounted. The new tally flipped the outcome to victory by a margin of 1,253.

And with that inauspicious beginning, city and county separated.

Deep Background

In the first five years after the Civil War, the population of the city of St. Louis shot up 30 percent, to 310,864. From there, it continued to rise, sparking elated predictions that it would soon hit 1 million. But it peaked at 880,000 in 1950 and started a long downward slide, picking up speed as it dropped below the 1870 count to hit, in 2017, a U.S. Census estimate of 308,626.

Meanwhile, St. Louis County started with 27,000 in rural population and grew to 996,726, in spitting range of that million the city was supposed to reach.

Fortunes had reversed.

Back in 1870, the city was the locus of power and civic energy, controlling nearly $148 million in taxable wealth (compared to $14 million in the county). City residents suspected that the county court was not only remote but corrupt and wasteful as well, greased by patronage. It allowed the state legislature to meddle in their affairs. It allowed—that great American theme—unfair taxation.
Discontent had rumbled since an 1844 attempt to separate city from county. Now, powerful city residents pushed in early 1875. Three plans were put forth: Give the city more representation in the County Court. Consolidate city and county more completely. Separate city and county altogether.

The third idea caught momentum. In November 1875, the entire state voted to elect 13 “freeholders” (landowners) who would write a city charter separating the two governments. Disenchanted with partisan politics even then, voters spurned the slate presented by the Democratic and Republican central committees and chose instead a slate of “citizens” endorsed by the Merchants’ Exchange and the Taxpayers’ League.

They were touted as being “selected from our wealthiest citizens,” and of larger caliber than the existing ward politicians. The classist tone wasn’t lost on opponents, one of whom complained that the separation process had “arraigned one class of citizens against another.” Insisting that he was “no communist” but rather a Democrat, he objected to “a government of the rich for the benefit of the rich.”

Such protests were to no avail. Between April and July 1876, the 13 freeholders met 52 times. The board chairman, George Shields, would later call the meetings “harmonious.” They were also closed to the public.

The new Scheme and Charter were formally submitted in July 1876 for an August vote. Members of the Merchants’ Exchange sent a missive to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch heralding “a document of such vital importance to every citizen of this County as has never before been presented to them.” Should the new Scheme and Charter not be adopted, the writers warned, it would forever prevent separation of city from county unless the state constitution be amended. (One reader fired back a letter calling this a scare tactic: “There’s no law in existence to prevent the city of St. Louis from adopting another scheme of separation and charter.”)

Money worries were invoked by both sides. An attorney who opposed separation noted that “the government of our neighboring city of Chicago has been reduced to bankruptcy—a condition which St. Louis should studiously strive to avoid.” Proponents listed civil salaries that could be eliminated if the city and county separated. They also warned of “designing ward politicians, bummets and tricksters who are circulating false statements... One word to the workingman, that makes his living by honest labor, and who has been fleeced for years by political harpies. Read the Scheme and Charter, and see for yourselves how it abolishes the County Court, and discourages ward politicians and bummets, and puts a stop to all Tweedism in our city affairs.”

On August 22, 1876, voters in St. Louis city and county cast their ballots. November’s recount finalized the separation.
“It is now conventional wisdom among urban historians and urban scholars that patchwork governance has been disastrous for American cities,” wrote Colin Gordon in his depressing classic, Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City. “The City itself appreciated early on that it was bearing much of the cost and reaping little of the benefit of suburban sprawl.”

An Empire Within an Empire

Under the terms of the Great Divorce, the city expanded from 18 square miles to 61. “Since the change would be permanent, the territory ought to be large,” noted lawyer Albert Todd, a member of the state’s 1875 constitutional convention. The “New District” was carefully drawn to encompass Forest Park, O’Fallon Park, Tower Grove Park, and Shaw’s Garden. In return for all that lovely land, the city assumed the county’s debts and pledged good roads and bridges for the entire region.

At the time, 61 square miles must have felt more than ample, extending the western boundary from Grand to Skinker and tripling the city’s square mileage. “It fixes permanent city limits,” wrote the freeholders, “which, after the adoption of the Charter, will never be changed.”

At least one opponent objected to this permanence, pointing out that it “fences in the city of St. Louis.” Shortly before the election, he attended a meeting at Cass Avenue and Francis Street, where a Post reporter jotted his argument: “Believing that it was destined, and not at a very remote period, to be equal to New York, he was unwilling to see it shorn of the natural barriers formed for it by the Almighty, the Missouri River to the west and the Mississippi on the east.”

The new, permanent boundaries—with the county blocking the city’s growth on the north, south, and west, and the river a wet blanket to the east—only began to look foolish to the rest of St. Louis in the next century, as other cities grew exponentially. Suddenly St. Louis “was the only city of any size in the U.S. that had not extended its boundaries in the last 50 years,” noted Circuit Judge Samuel Rosenfeld in 1922. “Unless permitted to widen out, St. Louis, which dropped from the fourth to the sixth city of the country from 1910 to 1920, would be passed by Baltimore, Boston, Los Angeles and other citizens by 1930.”

Rosenfeld was urging reunification, with the city either annexing the county or returning to the county. “Under the second plan, return of the city to the county, a dual government with double expenses and two sets of politicians, jealousies and divided interest would result,” he warned. “Still, St. Louis would be given the opportunity to grow now denied it.”

“An empire within an empire,” St. Louis was called in an 1893 U.S. Supreme Court decision.
But because of those permanent spatial constraints, the imperialism was never its own.

“Damn the City”

In 1924, a new board of freeholders formed, this time to suggest reunification. The county voted no.

A 1930 bid for a metropolitan government was also soundly defeated. At Missouri’s 1945 constitutional convention, an exasperated city official announced that St. Louis "suffers like one whose feet are hobbled, whose hands are manacled and whose body is enclosed in a steel corset.”

In 1959, a new board of freeholders proposed a District Plan in which the city re-entered the county, and the county became the metropolitan government for both. Voters in the city and the county overwhelmingly rejected the idea.

By then, St. Louis was bleeding out, losing jobs, retail businesses, corporate headquarters, the General Motors plant, and above all, residents. Those who stayed were, overall, poorer, older, and less employable than the county’s residents. Plus, with only 61 square miles, it was increasingly difficult for the city to do any disciplined, long-term planning and development.

In the county, “municipal redundancy had reached the ridiculous,” wrote historian James Neal Primm, “as tiny enclaves scrambled to establish an identity separated from dangerous neighbors... Worse yet, the political leaders of the county and its myriad of municipalities adopted a ‘damn the city’ stance, with unsubtle overtones of racism.”

After a metropolitan district plan too timid to suggest merger crashed and burned in 1959, there was another attempt: the 1962 Borough Plan, dividing St. Louis city and county into New York-style boroughs, with eight in the city, seven in the county, and seven straddling the city-county line. Now a new argument was raised: This would dilute the political power of African-Americans, because they’d be residing mainly in only two boroughs. The plan failed spectacularly for that and other reasons, and reunification was pronounced unpopular and impossible.

In 1973, though, the RAND Corporation shamed St. Louis on the national stage, publishing a study that called the city’s plight abnormal even in an age of urban decay. During the 1960s, jobs and per capita income had increased only about half as fast as in the nation as a whole.

Nothing much happened in response. Along with the geography of race, there was the political geography to contend with: The city was solidly Democratic, the county bipartisan. That silenced the discussion for several years, if you don’t count behind-the-scenes scheming and grumbles. Businessman and civic leader Howard Baer called the 1876 divorce “roughly equivalent in economic consequence to England’s giving up the 13 colonies, only the city did it from choice, whereas Great Britain at least had the good sense to struggle.”
Finally, in 1987, yet another board of freeholders was established, but its opponents sued so fast, the plan never reached the voters. The case then rose to the U.S. Supreme Court, which pronounced a board of “freeholders” unconstitutional because the name implied that the members must own land.

In 1996, talk of a merger simmered again as George H. “Bert” Walker III, then head of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on City Governance (and now, 13 years later, a chairman emeritus on the Better Together board) branded the current system fragmented, outmoded, inefficient, and destructive.

In 1999, George Wendel, a professor of urban affairs at Saint Louis University, wrote in the *Post* that reuniting city and county would instantly give St. Louis significantly more positive national rankings and stats for per capita income, poverty, and crime.

He also noted that “the most likely form of governmental change which might occur at some time in the future would be re-entry of the city of St. Louis into St. Louis County. St. Louis County could then become the overall governmental authority for all of its territory, including the city of St. Louis.”

Still, nothing happened.

In 2004, a letter in *The Des Moines Register* suggested that “those against a consolidation of Des Moines-area governments should drive to St. Louis and view the effects of many separate government entities.”

We’d become a lesson in what to avoid.

**Déjà Vu All Over Again**

Like a divorced couple who manage to get through their kids’ weddings with civility, the city and county have cooperated on a few cross-border initiatives: the Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District in 1954, a junior college district in 1962, the Zoo-Museum District in 1971, and a regional sales tax for trails in 2013.

But advocates of reunification haven’t stopped trying. “In four years, [County Executive] Charlie [Dooley] and I may share fire engines, airports, a health district, a bond issue, a tax base—or even an office,” Francis Slay quipped at his second mayoral inauguration. He slipped another mention in during his third.

Two years later, in 2011, a 195-page study funded by Rex Sinquefield claimed that as much as $40 million a year could be saved by combining certain city and county departments and programs. Many of the suggestions in the study were innocuous—go in together to get bulk deals on supplies, for example. But city and county leaders had shared all sorts of information with the analysts, creating a foundation for the group Sinquefield funded two years later, Better Together, to study the possibility of a merger.

In 2016, former St. Louis County Executive Gene McNary resurrected and re-imagined the old borough plan that had failed twice before.
This January, Better Together released its plan for reunification, pledging to use a statewide ballot in 2020. Mayors from the municipalities countered with a proposal to keep the matter local.

Here we go again.

**St. Louis’ Great Divorce ... and attempts to reunite**

1875 By popular election in November, a board of freeholders is to be appointed to write a new charter separating city from county.

1876 On August 22, the new Scheme and Charter are voted down. After a November recount, the measures pass.

1877 In March, the city officially declares itself independent.

1924 A new board of freeholders is formed.

1926 The county rejects its plan to consolidate city and county.

1930 A bid for a Greater St. Louis metropolitan government is defeated.

1959 Another board of freeholders offers a plan to create a Metropolitan District with city-county cooperation, but it falls flat.

1962 Both city and county refuse a reorganization into boroughs, à la New York.

1982 An initiative led by John Hanley, Monsanto CEO, considers reunification but winds up urging only increased city-county cooperation.

1987 Another board of freeholders is established, but opponents sue and block the plan.

1996 Talk of city-county merger heats up again.

2004 The Advance St. Louis charter reform task force strikes out; voters reject all four of its suggested amendments to the city charter.

2005 Mayor Francis Slay hints at city-county merger in his inaugural speech.

2011 A study funded by Rex Sinquefield is released.

2013 The Better Together project is announced.

2019 Better Together announces a push for a statewide vote on reunification.