



Pierre Chouteau, Jr.

Dakota Images

Controlling the exchange of goods and furs in the north-central United States, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., exerted a powerful social and economic influence on the region that became South Dakota.

Chouteau was born 19 January 1789 into one of the leading families of Saint Louis and lived with an aunt after the death of his mother when he was four years old. In addition to fluency in French, English, and Spanish, the young Chouteau had a natural aptitude for business and at the age of fifteen became a clerk in the family fur-trading firm. He made his first trading trip up the Missouri River with his father in 1809 and for a short time apprenticed in the lead mines along the upper Mississippi.

At the age of twenty-four, he married his cousin, Emilie Grator, and entered into a business venture in Saint Louis with his brother-in-law, Bartholomew Berthold. He also invested in a partnership that eventually became known as Pratte, Chouteau and Company. In 1827, John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company hired Chouteau as a manager of its Upper Missouri Outfit, and in 1834, Pratte, Chouteau and Company purchased Astor's entire Western Department. Renamed Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company four years later, the firm dominated the regions of the upper Mississippi and Missouri rivers until the decline of the fur trade in the 1850s.

From Chouteau's network of posts, of which Fort Pierre (named for himself) was one of the most vital, tons of furs were sent to markets in New York and Europe. The posts also served as distribution points for the thousands of manufactured trade items that substantially altered the culture of the Sioux Indians. With the voyage of the *Yellowstone* in 1831, Chouteau's firm established the first scheduled steamboat service on the upper Missouri River, carrying not only goods and hides but also government officials, missionaries, explorers, and tourists.

In 1849, shortly before he turned over direct supervision of the fur company to his son, Chouteau established a firm in New York for selling railroad iron and became a partner in an iron-mining venture. Blind for six years due to an illness, Chouteau died a multimillionaire in Saint Louis on 6 October 1865. In honor of the "River King," the cities of Pierre and Fort Pierre bear his name.

by JOAN ANDERSON

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