

St. Louis Beer History: Underground Beginnings

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While brewing history in St. Louis is inextricably linked with Anheuser-Busch and lager, that's not how things started off. One of the city's founders, Auguste Chouteau, was making whiskey there by the 1790s, and John Coons was brewing and selling beer on a small scale by 1809, if not slightly earlier .

The first production brewery in St. Louis opened in 1810, when the impressively-monikered Jacques Marcellin Ceran deHault St. Vrain, a French soldier went into business with Victor Habb, 'an experienced European brewer ,' from Germany, and they began producing 'table beer and porter' as well as 'common' beer. Not long after, St. Vrain & Habb were also offering 'strong' beer, but hops and malt were difficult to source locally.

John Philipson opened a second brewery, known as the St. Louis Brewery, in 1815, but he experienced similar problems. By 1818, St. Vrain had died and Habb closed down his end of the business; Philipson sold his brewery, but it was destroyed by an arsonist in 1829 (indeed, much of early local brewing history involves regular fires, both accidental and criminal) and did not re-open.

Slightly more successful was Ezra English, who began brewing 'ale and porter ' in 1826, using a cave to keep his beer cool.

In 1839, Isaac McHose joined the business and the brewery, no relation to the earlier one, also became known the St. Louis Brewery (yes, this will be a recurring theme). They expanded the cave operations into a destination, creating an underground beer garden and resort that included a bowling alley and music.

Even in its heyday of the 1840s, English (or English's) Cave ran into its fair share of business difficulties, and it ceased operations after an 1849 cholera epidemic. Rumors persist that there is an entrance to the cave somewhere in the Benton Park neighborhood , but this was far from the only cave used by a brewery in St. Louis.

Uhrig's Cave was used from the 1840s by the Camp Springs Brewery (later known simply as the Uhrig Brewery), and it was also an entertainment location with its own opera company, in addition to being a handy place to keep beer cool.

In the 1850s, Uhrig Brewery was the first in the city to [brew bock beers](#) , even winning awards for their quality lagers, but the firm did not survive long after the death of its Bavarian founder, Franz Joseph Uhrig, in the 1870s. Despite a change in ownership, the cave (and its above-ground [entertainment complex](#) target="_blank") eventually closed—the site was later home to the St. Louis Coliseum, and is currently occupied by the oft-renamed Scottrade Center and Peabody Opera House (née the Kiel Opera House).

Although only a small part of the story, Uhrig's Cave was one of the first examples of what would become a theme in St. Louis—German brewers using natural caves to kickstart their breweries. [Kerzinger's Cave](#) operated near Broadway and Tyler, while Winkelmeyer and Excelsior caves were home to both the Union and, later, Excelsior breweries. The latter two eventually made way for Union Station.

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But the two most successful names in St. Louis brewing also used the natural caves under the city—Lemp and Busch. We've [previously detailed](#) the Lemp family's dramatic role in brewing history, and there are certainly many histories of Anheuser-Busch, but their troglodyte beginnings are sometimes overlooked.

[Adam Lemp](#) used caves for lagering from the beginning, and his son, William, eventually moved the business to a location that would allow him to connect his house to the brewery via a natural cavern. Eberhard Anheuser, meanwhile, bought a failing brewery above a cave on South Broadway, but by the time he turned the business over to his son-in-law, Adolphus Busch, the business had outgrown the original cave.

Of course, caves were not the only reason lager became so popular in St. Louis—**more than 45,000 Germans settled there between 1835 and 1860**, and they brought with them beer gardens and a taste for lager—certainly a refreshing option in the hot Midwestern summers.

By the time of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, Anheuser-Busch and Lemp dominated the city; the official catalog of the event noted that St. Louis was home to ['the largest and by far best equipped brewery in the world](#) '. With the advent of the twentieth century, using caves for brewing and storage had gone out of style, and St. Louis became a brewing powerhouse.

The familiar story of giants like Anheuser-Busch subsuming smaller brewers (perhaps best chronicled by [Maureen Ogle](#) in her excellent *Ambitious Brew*) resonates in St. Louis all the more after Anheuser-Busch was itself purchased by InBev. Anheuser-Busch shut down the competition from the start: as early as the late 1800s, Adolphus Busch fixed prices, bought out smaller breweries and expanded his empire nationwide, and the company continued in that vein (albeit usually more legally) for the next 100 years. The greatly reduced number of breweries with the financial ability to stay afloat post-Prohibition made the task even easier, and by the 1960s, large brewers like A-B and Miller controlled the U.S. market.

The city's small brewery revival paid tribute to some of the early pioneers. When casting around for a new for his fledgling brewery, Tom Schlafly considered calling the brewery Limestone as a nod to those long-gone cave-utilizing brewers, but instead settled on another name from history: The St. Louis Brewery.

While the [Schlafly](#) name is probably more familiar to drinkers than the official brewery name, their success in the shadow of Anheuser-Busch paved the way for other local small brewers: [O'Fallon](#) and [Urban Chestnut](#) have been making waves, and more new breweries and brewpubs are slated to open in the near future.

Perhaps a rediscovery and reuse plan for one of the city's forgotten brewing caves is in order...