

Public Abstract

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This dissertation is a study of how merchants in St. Louis worked to bring order to their commercial lives in the years between the Panic of 1819, the nation's first major economic depression, and the Panic of 1857, another similar event that struck on the eve of the Civil War. Through the first half of the nineteenth century western merchants had to contend with popular resentment against banks and paper money which lingered from the first panic as well as with a lack of consensus on how best to improve the nation's rudimentary financial system. At the same time, an improving transportation system made financial innovation a necessary corollary to conducting business as the west was integrated into the fabric of the national economy.

Merchants were pressed hard on all sides in the expanding market economy. This study uses private letters, newspapers, legislative journals and business records to show how St. Louis merchants adapted to the problems of conducting business and establishing a more orderly marketplace. Always seeking to improve their position in the marketplace, merchants had to contend with the state legislature, which was often hostile to their interests, and with competitors in other western cities who challenged their trade networks. Merchants formed organizations to facilitate business and which gradually took over some government functions, in effect creating their own quasi-government over the marketplace.