

Joseph Guinotte

Civil Engineer
1815-1867

by Daniel Coleman

Kansas City has often been compared to Europe's famous cities: it was known as the "Paris of the Plains" during the raucous 1930s, and its many fountains garner comparisons with those of Rome. Few may realize, however, that one of Kansas City's earliest settlers, a French-speaking Belgian named Joseph Guinotte, envisioned an American Brussels at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers.

Joseph Guinotte was born in Belgium to a wealthy family in 1815. He was educated well in the schools of his youth and later trained extensively in the field of civil engineering. In the early 1840s King Leopold I commissioned him to assist on behalf of the Belgian government in the construction of a railroad in Mexico. Guinotte proposed to his sweetheart before crossing the Atlantic, and from the beautiful Aimee Brichaut, daughter of a family long associated with the famous Brussels mint, he extracted a promise to follow him to the Americas when he sent for her.

The war between the United States and Mexico of the late 1840s disrupted Guinotte's work building a rail line between Vera Cruz and Mexico City. Aware of the French Chouteau fur trading family and their enterprises in the western United States, Guinotte left Mexico and travelled up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, arriving at the Chouteau settlement near the mouth of the Kansas River around 1848. He purchased 1,200 acres from the Chouteaus in the area now known as Kansas City's East Bottoms—a fertile tract of wilderness extending roughly from the Missouri River south to today's Independence Avenue and east from Troost Avenue to Scarritt Point.

In partnership with his brother Edouard and steamship operator Joseph Magis, Guinotte recruited Belgian immigrants to work the rich Missouri River bottomland. They brought nearly 200 settlers, many of whom hailed from the city of Liege, in 1850. Tragedy struck the following year, however, when a cholera epidemic filled the colony's first graveyard. The survivors created bountiful gardens

and cultivated flower varieties yet unseen in western Missouri; Guinotte's Belgians are generally credited with bringing the first dahlias to the Kansas City area.

Guinotte constructed a large log cabin atop a river bluff, hewn from timber cut to clear the location, which we would now describe as 3rd and Troost. The home offered a view upriver nearly to the Quindaro Bend and downriver to the Randolph bluffs. A path from the river's edge led to the house, then continued south through several miles of forest and prairie to Westport.

Aimee traveled to New York, married Guinotte in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and soon found herself in a landscape alien to most urbane, well-to-do European women of her era. She later described her early years in Kansas City as having been very difficult, but she became a beloved figure in the Belgian community, caring for those who were sick or struggling, and known for her manners and proper French speech.

Aimee and Joseph Guinotte had four children, all of whom became prominent second-generation Kansas Citians: daughters Emma and Lydia (after whom Lydia Avenue was named) were active in the field of education and the teaching of French in Kansas City schools, and sons Jules and Joseph Karl found success in the fields of law and architecture, respectively.

Joseph Guinotte died in 1867 at age 52, just as the city he envisioned began to blossom; Aimee lived on until 1907. The Guinotte home was razed in 1921, but many Kansas Citians of Belgian descent remain rooted in the fertile ground to which their forbears followed its builder.

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