Missouri History and Culture: Springs

The Role of Springs in Missouri’s History and Development

Three overlapping periods in Missouri's development can be distinguished in the use of spring water. In pioneer days, springs served as a source of water for people and stock as they moved westward. As communities grew up around these sources of fresh, clear water, the larger fresh-water springs were utilized as a source of power for milling grains, manufacturing goods, and for mining.

There were also mineral springs. One of the most important uses made of mineralized spring waters during Missouri's development was to provide pioneer settlements with a steady supply of salt. Certain springs provided an opportunity for the local manufacturing at the salt springs, particularly from the salt springs of Saline, Howard, and Perry Counties. Salt was used for more than just flavoring as it was necessary for preserving many types of food raised or grown on the land. Later, improved communication and transportation made it more economical to import salt from other areas.
After the decline in the importance of saline springs as a source of salt, they gained importance because of the supposed medicinal qualities of their water. This was the era of the great spas when large hotels, pools, and bath houses were built at many of the mineral springs. More than 100 saline and mineral water springs were listed in an 1892 Geological Survey publication along with locations, chemical analyses and notes on their medicinal value. This trend continued through the 19th and early 20th century but little emphasis has been placed on their potential healing qualities since then.

![El Dorado Springs Resort depicted in an early 20th century postcard.](image)

Today the value of springs lies more in recreation and wildlife habitat. Owing to the uniform temperature and good quality of the water, springs are ideal for both sport fishing and commercial fisheries. Springs are used extensively as fish hatcheries in Missouri, and provide excellent habitat for trout. Many of these springs have been developed in State Parks, National Forests, and by private owners for public enjoyment.

![Among the first State Parks, springs were a major attraction. Pictured above, Bennett Spring was purchased in 1924 by Missouri State Parks.](image)

Without springs, the clear, cool Ozark streams that canoeists and kayakers are so fond of would not be floatable most of the year. During dry weather, nearly all of the water in Ozark rivers and streams is groundwater from seeps and springs. Missouri springs are concentrated in one of the most scenic areas in the nation and are easily accessible by good highways. As a result, they are visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists and outdoor enthusiasts each year. Springs are generally places of unusual natural beauty. They provide anglers a place to fish, artists a place to paint and families a place to enjoy nature. Truly, Missouri springs are some of the state’s most important natural resources.
Springs are used extensively as cold-water fish hatcheries in Missouri, providing opportunities for anglers.

A kayaker enjoys the spring-fed waters of Sinking Creek at Echo Bluff State Park near Eminence, MO.

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