

Archaeological evidence indicates indigenous people inhabited the Arrow Rock bluff on the Missouri River thousands of years ago. Along with Native Americans, explorers and early westward travelers used the bluff as a significant landmark. As early as 1713, French explorers prospected for gold and silver in the area surrounding present day Arrow Rock. Well before the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition, indigenous Osage peoples and French trappers created a trading center near Arrow Rock.

In 1813, Major George S. Sibley built the first house in Arrow Rock after being sent by the United States Government to establish a post to trade with the Osage and European hunters and trappers. In 1827, Sibley and his wife, Mary Easton Sibley, founded Lindenwood School for Girls in St. Charles, which today is Lindenwood University.

Incorporated in 1829, Arrow Rock was briefly called Philadelphia and became the stepping-off point for the Santa Fe Trail. Before the Civil War, people followed the route of the Santa Fe Trail from the Missouri River down Arrow Rock's Main Street with their supplies, merchandise, and animals.

The town was home to many prominent citizens including Dr. John Sappington who brought quinine west of the Mississippi River to treat malaria; artist George Caleb Bingham; and three Missouri governors: Meredith Miles Marmaduke (1844), Claiborne Fox Jackson (1861), and John Sappington Marmaduke (1885-1887). Jackson was the state's only Confederate governor, serving from January through July of 1861, when he was removed from office by the Unionist majority in the legislature for planning to force secession.

Located in a region of the state known as Little Dixie, Arrow Rock reached its peak population of 1,000 as the Civil War began. The region's culture, politics and architecture were southern in character and one-third of Saline County's population was enslaved African Americans. The town never recovered from the economic decline that resulted from the Civil War and two major fires in 1872 and 1901 that destroyed much of the business district.

The population declined as people moved away for other opportunities and Arrow Rock may have disappeared, if not for the efforts of a few history-conscious citizens. The 1926 restoration of the J. Huston Tavern (1834), led by Nettie Dickson and the Missouri Society Daughters of the American Revolution, was the catalyst that inspired Arrow Rock's rebirth. The Arrow Rock State Park (the first state park in Missouri) was established that same year, followed by the creation of the Friends of Arrow Rock, in 1959, and the launch in 1960, of a regional, professional theater, the Arrow Rock Lyceum Theatre. The J. Huston Tavern is the oldest continuously operating restaurant west of the Mississippi River, with more than 188 years of service to the public. It is the centerpiece of the Arrow Rock State Historic Site. Since 1963, the entire village of Arrow Rock has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. Today, the Arrow Rock State Historic Site, the historical tours and attractions operated by the Friends of Arrow Rock, and the Arrow Rock Lyceum Theatre attract more than 150,000 visitors annually to the village, which in 2022, boasts a population of 56.