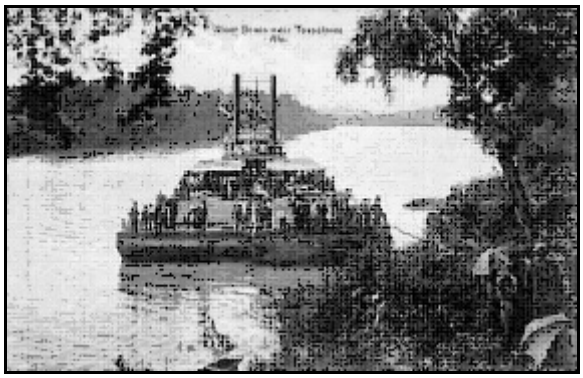


A History of Steamboats

Before trains, cars, trucks and airplanes existed, rivers were used for travel. They carried people and goods from one place to another. River travel was often slow because speed of travel depended on the river current and manpower. That all changed with the introduction of steam-powered boats in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The steam-powered boats could travel at the astonishing speed of up to five miles per hour. They soon revolutionized river travel and trade, and dominated the waterways. The dangers of steamboat travel such as explosions, sinkings, Indian attacks, and daring steamboat races captured the imagination of the country. The great steam-powered boats

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also played an important role in the expansion of the United States to the west. Eventually, other forms of transportation became more important than steamboats, but during their day, they ruled the nation's rivers.

Early Steamboat History

The years after the Revolutionary War were years of growth in the southeastern United States. At the heart of this westward growth were southern rivers like the Mississippi, Alabama, Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint to name a few. In

1798, the Mississippi Territory, including what is now Alabama and Mississippi, was created. Then in 1803, the Louisiana Purchase gave the newly formed United States the city of New Orleans and the large Louisiana Territory. The rivers flowing through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana provided a way for settlers to move west from states like Georgia and South Carolina. Cities grew along the rivers to make trade and transportation easier.

By 1810, flat-bottomed keelboats were carrying goods along the South's rivers. These keelboats brought goods to and from towns and to port cities like Mobile and New Orleans. The speed of these boats depended on the river current; and if the riverboatmen changed their cargo and returned upriver from where they started, they had to pole the boats against the current. A round trip could take as long as nine months. Because the trip upstream was so difficult, keelboat owners often took apart their boats at their destination and sold the timber. They would then make the trip back home overland. Keelboats were the most common way of river travel until the mid-nineteenth century when the quicker and more powerful steamboats gained popularity.

In 1769, a Scotsman named James Watt invented an engine that was run by steam. Once inventors learned about the steam engine they began to experiment with using it to run boats. The first man to build a steamboat in the United States was John Fitch. In 1787, Fitch built a 45-foot steamboat that he sailed down the Delaware River while members of the Constitutional Convention watched. John Fitch built four more steamboats, but they were expensive to build and to operate. Because they were so expensive, his steamboats were unsuccessful. The first successful steamboat was the *Clermont*, which was built by American inventor Robert Fulton in 1807.

Fulton's *Clermont*

The *Clermont* was the combined effort of Fulton and Robert Livingston. Fulton was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. By the age of 17, he was working as a painter in Philadelphia. In 1786, Fulton moved to London where he turned his lifelong interest in science and engineering into a new career. Fulton was especially interested in the use of steam engines and the possibility of using one to run a boat. He was also interested in canal

systems and, eventually, moved to France to work on canals. It was in France that he met Robert Livingston. Livingston was a lawyer from New York who served in the Continental Congress and also on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson appointed Livingston as a minister to France, where he met Fulton in 1803.

Like Fulton, Livingston was interested in using steam engines to run boats. He talked Fulton into returning to New York to build a steam-powered boat. Robert Fulton returned to New York in 1806 and began building a steamboat on the East River. One year later on 17 August 1807, Fulton's steamboat, the *Clermont*, made its first voyage on the Hudson River traveling 40 miles from New York to Albany in a record eight hours. After the *Clermont's* successful first voyage, it made regular trips from Albany to New York every four days. Sometimes she carried as many as 100 passengers. Fulton had found a way make steam powered boats not only useful, but profitable; and the age of steamboats was born.

Types of Steamboats

Any boat that is run by a steam engine is considered a steamboat, however, most steamboats built in the nineteenth and twentieth century were paddlewheel boats. The steamboats that traveled the South's rivers shared a basic design; they had a hull, or body, made of timber (later steel was used), and a wooden paddlewheel. The paddlewheel had a circular center with spokes coming from it like a bicycle wheel. Planks were attached to the spokes to make the paddle, which was placed on either the side or rear of the boat. Boats with paddles on the side were called sidewheelers, while boats with a paddle at the rear were called sternwheelers. The paddlewheels were run by an engine that was powered by steam. Steam to run the engine was made by boilers, which were giant copper tubes with two flues and a firebox. The boiler was filled with water, and the fire was stoked high enough to make steam. First wood, and then coal were used to build the fire.

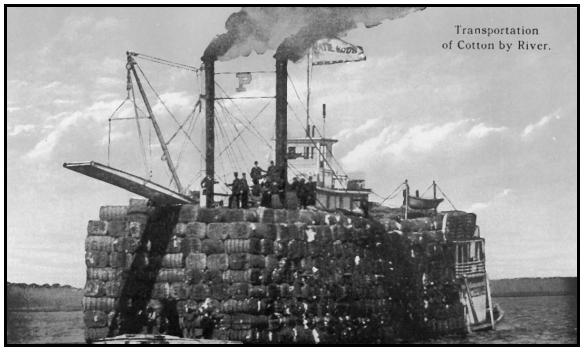
Most steam-powered boats shared a similar design, but different types of boats had different jobs. Towboats moved barges by pushing them up and down rivers; ferries carried people across rivers; snagboats cleared the river of dangers; packets carried goods, mail and people; and steamboats called fuelers met other steamboats along the rivers and re-supplied them with wood and coal or oil. Perhaps the most famous type of steamboat was the showboat.

Showboats were the floating palaces of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many showboats were beautifully

decorated and had theaters, galleries, ballrooms, and saloons. They traveled up and down rivers bringing plays and music to river towns. Showboats would announce their arrival by playing their organ-like steam calliope, which could be heard for miles. While showboats provided excitement and entertainment for river towns, they were never very common. In 1900, there were less than 30 showboats, and by 1930 there were less than 10.

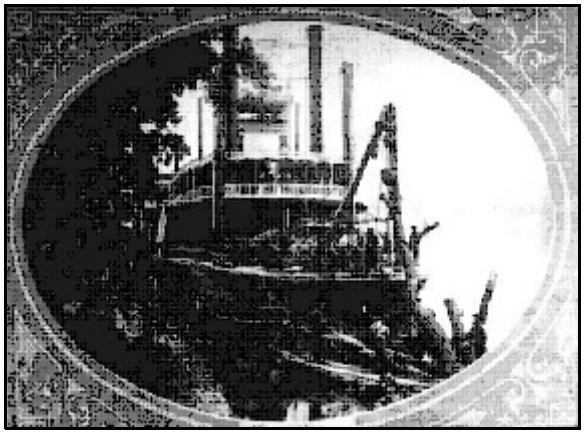
The *J.S. De Luxe*, a showboat

Showboats may be the most famous type of steamboat, but the most common boat on the South's rivers was the packet boat. Packet boats were very important because they were used to carry crops up and down the rivers. In fact, many river towns were built near large southern plantations to make getting crops to packet boats easier. Packets were also important because they carried people. On many of the boats there was a first class deck where passengers who could afford to traveled in relative luxury. Those who could not afford first class traveled in cramped conditions in the lower decks with the cows, pigs, and horses.



A packet boat piled high with bales of cotton

One of the most important types of steamboat was the snagboat. These boats patrolled the rivers and removed snags so other boats would not hit them and sink. A snag is a sunken tree, stump, or boat wreck that could cause damage to a ship if it hit it. Before the first snagboat was invented in 1829, snags caused many problems for steamboats. Sometimes, the damage from hitting a snag was so bad it caused boats to

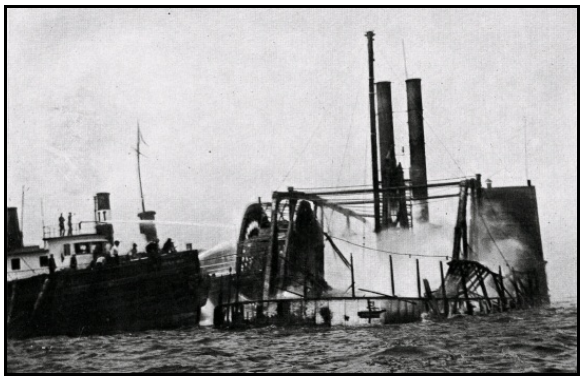

A nineteenth century snagboat

sink. Snagboats lessened this problem by using a crane to remove snags from the river making it safe for travel.

Dangers of River Travel

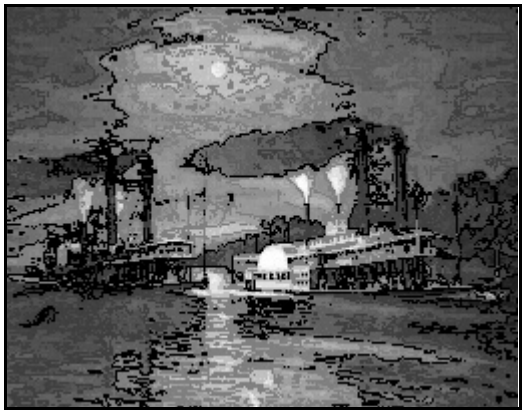
While snagboats helped remove one of the dangers facing steamboats, many others existed. Two of the biggest dangers were Indian attacks and boiler explosions. Often, Indians would hide along the banks of a river and begin shooting at a boat when it got close enough. If a boat wrecked near the bank, the ship would certainly lose its cargo, and the crew and passengers might even lose their lives.

Indian attacks were a concern, but the biggest danger facing steamboats was boiler explosion. If boilers were not carefully watched and maintained, pressure could build up in the boiler and cause a spectacular and deadly explosion. One of the worst steamboat disasters ever recorded was that of the *General Slocum*. The *General Slocum's* boiler exploded killing 958 people and injuring 175. The *General Slocum* explosion was one of the worst recorded, but it was hardly the first or last. From 1811 to 1851, 21 percent of river accidents were caused by explosion. Because of all the dangers, steamboats did not last long. It was rare for a steamboat to last five years. In fact, between 1830 and 1839, 272 steamboats were destroyed after less than three years of travel.



The *General Slocum* burning

If boiler explosions and Indian attacks did not present enough danger, steamboat captains often added to the dangers of river travel by racing each other. One of the most famous steamboat races was the 1870 race between the steamboats Natchez and the Robert E. Lee. The two steamboats raced from New Orleans, Louisiana, to St. Louis, Missouri. The Robert E. Lee won the race arriving in St.



The steamboat race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*

Louis after three days. The Natchez arrived six hours later. While the public found steamboat races exciting, they were dangerous for the boats' crews and passengers.

The Demise of the Steamboat

Although steamboats ruled trade and travel in the 1800s and early 1900s, they were eventually replaced by newer forms of transportation. Steamboats began experiencing competition from railroads as early as the 1830s. At this time there were only 23 miles of tracks in all of the United States. This small amount of tracks did not provide much competition, but by 1880 there were around 93,000 miles of tracks and the trains were taking away much of the steamboats' business. In the twentieth century, with the invention of cars, trucks, and airplanes, steamboats became obsolete, and most were retired. Steamboats no longer travel the nation's waterways, but they will always remain one of the most important advances in United States technology.

For more information on steamboats, visit these websites:

Steamboats
http://www.steamboats.com
http://www.steamboats.org

http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blsteamship.htm

http://inventors.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.steamboats.com/museum.html

http://www2.cemr.wvu.edu/~venable/asa/carl1.htm

http://twaintimes.net/
http://twaintimes.net/boat/sbindex.htm

The General Slocum disaster
http://www.general-slocum.com/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Slocum