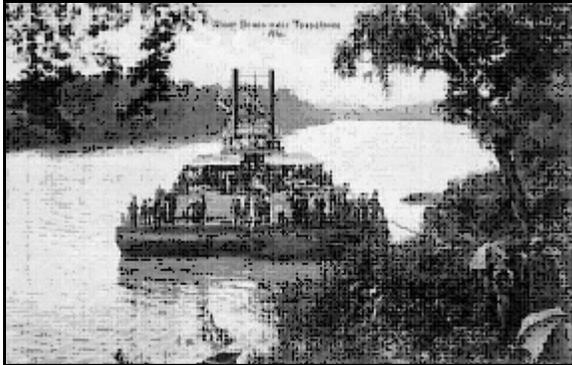


A History of Steamboats

Before trains, automobiles, and airplanes existed, rivers were used for travel. They carried people and goods from one place to another. River travel was often slow. It depended on river currents, wind, and manpower. That all changed with the invention of steam-powered boats in the late 1700s. Steam-powered boats traveled at the astonishing speed of up to five miles per hour. They soon changed river travel and trade. Before long, more steamboats worked the rivers than the old flatboats. Steamboat travel was dangerous. Explosions, sinkings, Indian attacks, and daring steamboat races captured the imagination of the country. These great steam-powered boats also played an important role in America's westward expansion. Eventually, other forms of transportation became more profitable than steamboats. Yet, during their day, they ruled America's rivers.



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Early Steamboat History

In the years after the Revolutionary War, the southeastern United States grew in population. This westward growth centered on southern rivers like the Mississippi, Alabama, Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint. In 1798, the Mississippi Territory was created. It included what is now Alabama and Mississippi. Then in 1803, the Louisiana Purchase added the large Louisiana territory and the city of New Orleans to the newly formed United States.

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The rivers flowing through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana provided a way for settlers to move west. They came mostly from Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Cities grew along the rivers. These new cities made trade and transportation easier.

By 1810, flat-bottomed keelboats carried goods along the South's rivers. Keelboats brought goods to and from small towns to port cities like Mobile and New Orleans. A keelboat's speed depended on the river's current. If the river boatmen returned upriver loaded with cargo, they had to pole the boats against the current. One round trip could take as long as nine months! Because the trip upstream was so difficult, keelboat owners often took apart their boats at the port and sold the timber. They would then return home overland. Keelboats served as the most common way of river travel until the middle of the 1800s. Then, the quicker and larger steamboats became more common.

In 1769, a Scotsman, named James Watt, invented an engine run by steam. Other inventors learned about the steam engine. They began to experiment with using it to run boats. John Fitch built the first steamboat in the United States. In 1787, Fitch built a 45-foot steamboat that he sailed down the Delaware River. 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. Robert Fulton built the first successful steamboat, the *Clermont*, in 1807.



Fulton's *Clermont*

The *Clermont* combined the efforts of Fulton and Robert Livingston. Fulton was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. By the age of 17, he worked as a painter in Philadelphia. In 1786, Fulton moved to London, England, where he studied science and engineering. Fulton was especially interested in how steam engines could power a boat. His other interests included canal systems. In 1803, he moved to France to work on canals, where he met Robert Livingston. Livingston, a lawyer from New York, served in the Continental Congress. He also worked on the committee that wrote the Declaration of Independence. Livingston was an ambassador to France when he met Fulton in 1803.

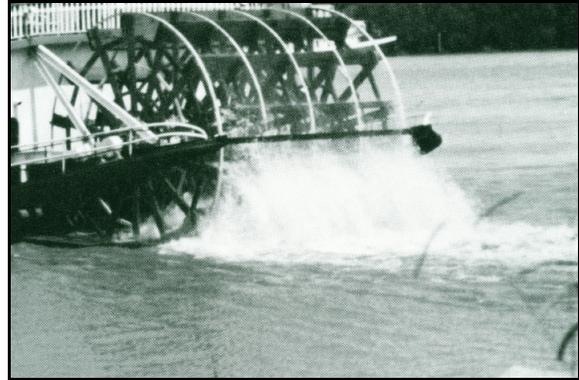
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Like Fulton, Livingston studied how steam engines could power boats. He talked Fulton into returning to New York to build a steam-powered boat. Fulton returned to New York in 1806 and began building a steamboat on the East River. One year later, on 17 August 1807, Fulton's steamboat, the *Clermont*, made its first voyage. She (the *Clermont*) traveled 40 miles on the Hudson River from New York to Albany in a record eight hours. After the *Clermont's* 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 useful and profitable. The age of steamboats began.

Types of Steamboats

Any boat run by a steam engine is a steamboat. Most steamboats built in the 19th and 20th centuries had paddlewheels. Most steamboats shared a basic design; they had a hull, or body, made of timber and a wooden paddlewheel. Most 20th-century steamboats had steel hulls. 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. Boats with paddlewheels on the side are called sidewheelers. Boats with a paddlewheel at the rear are called sternwheelers. Steam to run the engine was made by boilers. The boilers consisted of

giant copper tubes with two flues and a firebox. A very hot fire, stoked in the boiler, filled the tubes with steam. Early steamboats burned wood. Later, coal was used.



A working paddlewheel

Steamboats existed for different purposes. 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. Steamboats called fuelers met other steamboats along the rivers and supplied them with wood, coal, or oil. Perhaps the most famous type of steamboat was the showboat.

Showboats were the floating palaces of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They were beautifully decorated and had theaters, galleries, ballrooms, and saloons. They traveled up and down rivers bringing plays and musical entertainment to river towns. Showboats would announce their arrival by playing their organ-like steam calliope,

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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

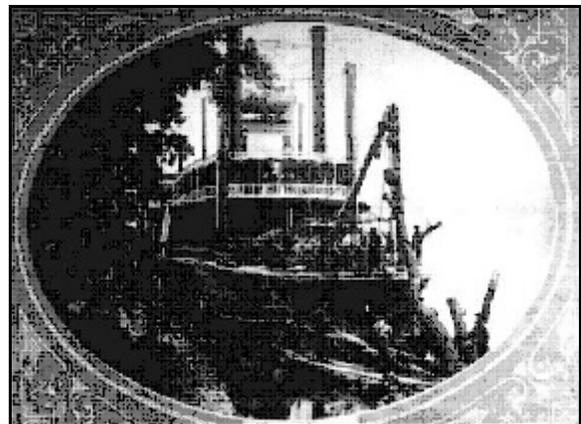
Showboats may be the most famous type of steamboat, but the most common boat on the river was the packet boat. The important packet boats carried crops and other goods up and down the rivers. In fact, many river towns developed near large southern plantations to make getting crops to packet boats easier. Packets also carried people. On many of the boats, wealthier



A packet boat piled high with bales of cotton

passengers enjoyed the first class deck. Those who could not afford first class traveled in cramped conditions in the lower decks with the cows, pigs, and horses. Some even slept on the open deck in all kinds of weather.

One of the most important types of steamboat was the snagboat. A snag is a sunken tree, stump, or boat wreck. 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 sink! Snagboats lessened this problem by using a boom and grapple to remove snags from the river making it safe for travel.



A nineteenth century snagboat

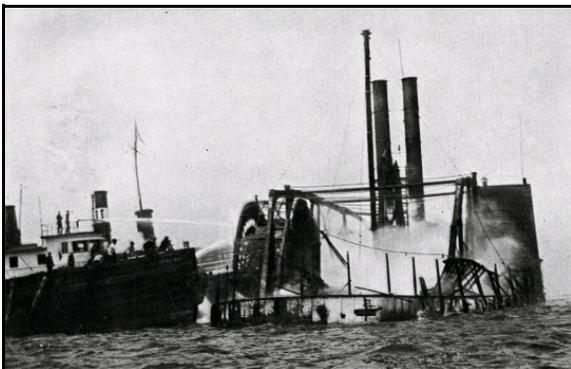
Dangers of River Travel

While snagboats helped remove one of the dangers of steamboat travel, many others existed. Indian attacks and boiler

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explosions persisted. 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. The crew and passengers might even lose their lives.

On some rivers, Indian attacks remained a concern; however, the biggest danger facing steamboats were boiler explosions. Boilers needed to be carefully watched and maintained or pressure could build up in the boiler. If the pressure became too high, it resulted in 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 people. From 1811 to 1851, boiler explosions caused almost one quarter (21%) of river accidents. Because of all the dangers, steamboats did not last long. It was rare for a steamboat to last five years. The years between 1830 and 1839 saw the destruction of 272 steamboats after less than three years of travel each.



The General Slocum burning

Steamboat captains often added to the dangers of river travel by racing each other. One of the most famous steamboat races occurred in the 1870 race between the steamboats *Natchez* and *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. 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 steamboat race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*

The Demise of the Steamboat

Although steamboats ruled trade and travel in the 1800s and early 1900s, newer and cheaper forms of transportation eventually replaced them. Steamboats began experiencing competition from

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railroads as early as the 1830s. This competition increased in the years before the Civil War. By 1880 there were around 93,000 miles of tracks, and the trains took away much of the steamboats' business. In the 20th century, with the invention of automobiles and airplanes, steamboats became obsolete. Most were retired and scrapped. Steamboats no longer travel the nation's waterways. Nevertheless, they will always remain one of the most important advances in transportation technology.

For more information on steamboats, visit these websites:

Steamboats

<http://www.steamboats.com>

<http://www.steamboats.org>

The History of Steamboats

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

The Steamboat Museum

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

The Paddlewheel Riverboat

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

Mark Twain Times

<http://twaintimes.net/>

In particular

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

The General Slocum disaster

<http://www.general-slocum.com/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Slocum