Appendix A: Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s

~ Americans in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys ~ Routes to market ~ Western river craft ~ The flatboat ~ "Cutting loose" ~ Life on board ~ Flatboat gravel ~ Flatboat cargo ~ The keelboat ~ The steamboat ~ Voyage of the *New Orleans* ~ The New West ~ Western river trade in Lincoln's era ~ The flatboatman in Lincoln's era ~

Only three out of every hundred U.S. citizens lived in the Mississippi Valley in 1790, a time when most of that vast basin belonged to Spain. Those emigrants—numbering 177,572, plus 14,338 people of African ancestry, mostly enslaved—generally used Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh) and the Cumberland Gap as their gateway into the trans-Appalachian region. The first wave settled in the uppermost Ohio River Valley, nearest to the young nation's hearth. Those who ventured farther west into Kentucky could justly be described as pioneers, living independently on the frontier and exchanging locally to survive. Rates of westward migration increased in the 1790s with the establishment of the Lancaster Turnpike across the Alleghany Mountains and the defeat of Indian resistance in the Ohio Valley. Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville emerged as the premier urban nodes along the Ohio River gateway to the West.[1]

The stroke of pen in 1803 expanded the United States' western border from the Mississippi River to the Continental Divide. Settlers subsequently headed into the lands of the Louisiana Purchase at a rate of tens of thousands per year, pushing out Indian occupants via deals, deception, disease, vice, and violence. An intricate system of navigable waterways extending approximally 16,000 miles fostered the diffusion. By 1810, nearly one million whites and more than 156,000 blacks populated the Mississippi Valley, representing about one in six Americans. In response to the relentless flow, Pittsburgh bookseller Zadok Cramer published *The Navigator, Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers*, replete with geographical descriptions, navigation maps, and advice. Revised twelve times from 1801 to 1824, *The Navigator* guided thousands of Americans west of the Appalachians.

1. Archer B. Hulbert, *The Paths of Inland Commerce: A Chronicle of Trail, Road, and Waterway* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1920), 54–55, 67–68.

By 1820, that population numbered over two million, one in every five Americans.[2]

Bearing traits of individualism, risk-taking, and wayfaring, emigrants brought their personal aspirations and cultural baggage over the mountains. A new archetypal American emerged: the Westerner. A New England preacher described the father of one such family floating down the Ohio in the 1820s:

> . . . a fine, healthy-looking Kentuckian, with a young and pretty wife, two or three negro-servants, and two small children. He was a rare specimen of the rough and frank Kentucky character . . . an independent farmer, who had swarmed from the old homestead hive in Kentucky [where] [l]and . . . had already become too scarce and dear, he wanted elbow-room, did not wish to have a neighbour within three miles of him, and was moving to the upper Mississippi, for range. . . . He proved . . . a kind and friendly, if not pleasant companion [and] generally concluded [his stories] with a song. . . .[3]

Americans like that Kentuckian fought and displaced natives, hunted game, felled trees, built cabins, planted crops, formed governments, imposed laws, and granted land titles. Natural landscapes once altered subtly by indigenous peoples over millennia transformed swiftly in the hands of European Americans and their African American slaves. Maps once filled with the squiggly hachures of unknown physical geography were redrawn with the straight lines of political geography: new territories, new settlements, new states, new counties, new cadastres. Of the trans-Appalachian territories, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio gained statehood first (1792–1802); Louisiana followed in 1812, then Indiana, Mississippi, and Illinois during 1816–8. Missouri joined the Union in 1821, the first state entirely west of the Mississippi.

Settlers coaxed impressive harvests from the valley's fertile soils in a remarkably short time. Once agricultural yields exceeded those person-

The Navigator, Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers (Pittsburgh: Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum, 1814), iii; Pamela D. Arceneaux, "The Navigator," *The Historic New Orleans Collection Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 6–8. Population figures computed by Richard Campanella based on county-level data from the U.S. Censuses of 1790, 1810, and 1820, as digitized by the National Historical Geographic Information System of the University of Minnesota.

3. Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years . . . in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hillard, and Co., 1826), 34–36.

al and community trading needs, farmers sought to export surpluses to distant population centers for cash. The frontier exchange economy of the pioneer era expanded into an increasingly sophisticated market-based economy, stretching from Canada to Louisiana and linked by three transportation alternatives.

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One alternative was to ship cargo up the Ohio River—against the current and around the impeding Great Falls at Louisville—to Wheeling or Pittsburgh, then haul it over the Appalachians to rivers like the Potomac to reach, finally, the Eastern Seaboard. Although many shippers traveled this route, the numerous break-of-bulk junctions and extensive overland treks made it woefully inadequate for handling heavy freight, even after completion of the National Road in 1817. Not until canals and railways were built in the 1830s–50s would this route attract substantial freight traffic.

The second alternative looked even less efficient: ship northward (against the current and over numerous portages) through the Great Lakes, out the St. Lawrence River, then southward along the Eastern Seaboard. Only a few hundred tons per year traveled this circuitous and seasonally icebound route.[4]

In contrast, the third alternative—the southern route, shipping down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans—offered the cheapest, easiest, fastest, and climatologically most congenial way to get Western shipments to market. Used since prehistoric times, this route boosted increased traffic with the French colonization of the Mississippi Valley. By the 1720s, shipments mostly of furs from upper Louisiana flowed downriver to New Orleans at rates of 80,000 pounds sterling per year, and increased in Spanish colonial times to around $4 million annually.[5] The attractiveness of the southern route increased substantially after regular steamboat service commenced on the Mississippi in the late 1810s, giving rivermen a way to return home swiftly. As it grew again in after new packet (passenger) lines began running coastwise between New Orleans and New York in the 1820s, opening the great Eastern markets to Western exports. Sixty

4. Traffic on a portion of this route increased dramatically after 1825, when the newly opened Erie Canal connected the Great Lakes with the Hudson River and New York City.

5. Harry A. Mitchell, "The Development of New Orleans as a Wholesale Trading Center," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 1944): 934–939.

thousand tons of commodities from the trans-Appalachian West arrived in New Orleans in 1810; by 1820, that figure rose to 106,700; by 1830, it more than doubled to 260,000. For the first third of the nineteenth century, shipping down the Mississippi through New Orleans accounted for the overwhelming majority—between 99 and 100 percent—of freight shipments out of the Mississippi Valley. (The route also dominated importations, excluding less-standardized manufactured goods, though to a lesser degree than exports.) The Southern route, quite simply, formed *the* economic artery between the West and the East from late colonial times to the mid-antebellum years.[6] Reverence for the great river, and grandiose vision for the strategically situated city of New Orleans, became axiomatic. Charles Sealsfield echoed the sentiments of many when he wrote in 1828:

> standing on the extreme point of the longest river in the world . . . New Orleans commands all the commerce of the immense territory. . . . You may [sail for] 1000 miles from New Orleans up the Red river…up the Arkansas river; . . . up the Missouri and its branches . . . to the falls of St. Anthony; [and] the same distance from New Orleans up the Illinois . . . the big Wabash . . . the Tennessee . . . the Cumberland, and . . . the Ohio up to Pittsburgh. Thus New Orleans has in its rear this immense territory, [plus] the coast of Mexico, the West Indies islands, and the half of America to the south, the rest of America on its left, and the continent of Europe beyond the Atlantic. *New Orleans is beyond a doubt the most important commercial point on the face of the earth.*[7]

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An ever-evolving progression of watercraft accompanied the river-based economic development of the trans-Appalachian West. The earliest white explorers adopted lightweight birch-bark or bison-skin canoe designs directly from natives. Cheap to construct, maneuverable, and easily portaged, canoes satisfied the explorers' requirement to travel lightly and efficiently. Those needing to haul bulky pelts built larger canoes or replaced

6. Erik F. Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton, *Western River Transportation The Era of Early Internal Development, 1810–1860* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 5–9, 114–126, drawing upon the terminology of Albert Kohlmeier.

7. Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are; Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1828), 165–66 (emphasis added).

them with sturdier "pirogues" or "dugout canoes" of varying sizes. Jonathan Carver, traveling in North America in the 1760s, observed that

> French traders who go into . . . the head branches of the Mississippi . . . to purchase furs[,] make of [the yellow ash tree] periaguays [pirogues] . . . by excavating them with fire, and when they are completed, convey in them the produce of their trade to New Orleans, where they find a good market for both the vessels and cargoes.[8]

Frenchman François Marie Perrin Du Lac described in 1807 a pirogue as

> a sort of boat made of a hollow tree, which many savage nations employed at the time of the discovery of America. The sycamore which grows . . . to an extraordinary size, is the tree most frequently used. When dried, it is extremely light . . . Some of these pirogues are so small, that a man . . . can not stand upright in them without fear of falling; others on the contrary carry beside a number of men, provisions sufficient for a voyage of many months.[9]

Frontiersmen modified these indigenous designs according to need. Splitting a hollowed log and inserting planks in between, for example, broadened a pirogue into a "skiff," capable of carrying crew and light cargo in a more stable manner. Tapering a skiff's blunt ends produced a more maneuverable "batteau." The improvements meant less risk, more space, more power, more oars and poles in the water (perhaps even a sail), and greater ability to carry heavier cargo over longer distances at faster speeds.[10]

River craft construction advanced as hand-hewn lumber came to replace dug-out logs, as water-powered sawmills supplanted axes and saws, and as pegs and iron nails replaced cord, sinew and cord. Key design elements—bow, hull, stern, storage space, and on-board shelter—were tweaked according to materials and requirements. Experimentation flourished. "The first thing that strikes a stranger from the Atlantic," wrote an

8. Jonathon Carver, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North-America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (London, England: Jonathon Carver, 1778), 497.

9. M. Perrin Du Lac, *Travels Through the Two Louisianas . . . in 1801, 1802, & 1803* (London, England: Richard Phillips, 1807), 40.

10. H. E. Hoagland, "Early Transportation on the Mississippi," *Journal of Political Economy* 19, no. 2 (February 1911): 111–112; Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 13–14.

Easterner in the 182[illegible]

> is the singular, whimsical, and amusing spectacle of the varieties of water-craft of all shapes and structure. . . . [I]n this land of freedom and invention . . . there are [specimens] reducible to no specific class of boats . . . whimsical archetypes of things [created by] inventive men, who reject the slavery of being obliged to build in any received form. You can scarcely imagine an abstract form in which a boat can be built, that in some part of the Ohio or Mississippi you will not see, actually in motion.[11]

Wrote a later observer, "no accurate classification can be made of the various kinds of craft engaged in this vast traffic. Everything that could float . . . was commandeered into service, and what was found unsuitable for the strenuous purposes of commercial transportation was palmed off whenever possible on unsuspecting emigrants. . . ."[12] Yet from this decentralized creative chaos of frontier experimentation, certain forms proved more effective than others and a broad taxonomy of Western river craft typologies emerged.

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For much downriver traffic in the eighteenth century, a simple raft of strapped-together logs had to suffice. Advances in woodworking enabled the addition of walls and roofs by the 1780s, turning two-dimensional rafts into three-dimensional "flatboats." One early documented American flatboat voyage to the foreign city of New Orleans occurred in May 1782, piloted by a Revolutionary War veteran named Jacob Yoder on the Monongahela River, near future Pittsburgh.[13] The southward flow of Western produce increased after 1787, when Gen. James Wilkinson established a secret alliance with the Spanish in New Orleans to accept Western exports. Flatboats becoming raw materials and foodstuffs for the New Orleans market would thence prove to be a key force fueling Western development.[14] The rustic vessels of oak, poplar, or pine—"clumsy

11. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 13–14.

12. Hulbert, *Paths of [illegible] Commerce*.

13. "The First Flat Boat on the Mississippi," *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*, ed. Samuel Hazard (Philadelphia: William F. Geddes, 1834), 295. For an earlier documented journey, see "Down the Mississippi in 1767: The Journey of George Morgan," *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans), October 23, 1905, p. 10, c. 5–7.

14. Harry G. Enoch. *Original Journal of John Halley of His Trips to New Orleans Per-*

construction," observed one traveler, "but very burthensome"—typically measured twelve to twenty feet in width and two to four times that in length, capable of carrying thirty tons in the early years and nearly ten times that amount later on.[15] Further enhancements introduced on-deck cabins—sometimes no more than a canopy—to shelter the crew and protect cargo. If the cabin (sometimes called a *tuilet,* caboose, or wigwam) covered the entire deck, the craft was called an "ark," for its resemblance to Noah's biblical vessel. In other sources, flatboats are referred to loosely as "flat-bottomed boats," "barges" (a term also applied to skiffs and rafts), or "boxes." Others dubbed them by their origin or destination (New Orleans, "Kentucky," or "Arkansas boats") or their cargo ("tobacco," "horse," or "cattle boats"). The French called them *voitures* (carts, carriages, or *chalands* (rafts). Most famously flatboats were called "broad horns," especially for the long oars or "sweeps" protruding on each side, or, alternately, for the cattle horns traditionally mounted on the prow.[16]

Captains often christened their flatboats with dramatic or humsical names to inspire *espirit de corps* or simply for insurance and record-keeping purposes. Wharfinger reports and U.S. Customs service manifests list numerous flatboats with names referencing sweethearts back home (*Nancy Polly*, *Elizabeth*), while others reflected patriotism (*Republican*, *Thomas Jefferson*, *Fair America*, *Sovereign*), regional pride (*Kentucky*, *Cincinnati*), drama (*Alligator*, *Gallant*, *Adventure*, *Thunder*, *Hurricane*), irony (*Queen Mary*, *Dolphin*, *Flying Mary*, *Mayflower*), and self-deprecation (*True Poverty*, *Hard Times*, *Scarnought*, *Drunkard's Escape*).[17] Whatever their name or nickname, flatboats were viewed by the barons of commerce as the

formed in the Years 1789 & 1791 (Winchester, KY: Bluegrass Heritage Museum, 2004), 2–3.

15. Estwick Evans, "A Pedestrious Tour, of Four Thousand Miles, Through the Western States and Territories," in *Early Western Travels 1748–1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, OH: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 8:25. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 15.

16. "In Flatboat and Keelboat Times On the Mississippi, Over Seventy Years Ago," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), March 1, 1896, section F, p. 14, c. 6–7; Hoagland, "Transportation on the Mississippi," 119; Hulbert, *Paths of Inland Commerce*, 64–66; Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America Performed in the Year 1806* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), 59.

17. Names culled from Wharfinger Reports, Microfilm #75.09, QN420, 1806, New Orleans Collector of Levee Dues-Registers of Flatboats, Barges, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans, and Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, *Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940).

lowest form of river transportation, as made clear by this antebellum business writer:

> A flat-boat is nothing more than a quadrangular floating box—a wooden dripping tin—a capacious washing tub, composed of rough sawed planks, and provided with a crude kind of cabin, [made sufficiently water-tight to reach] its destination, and no more.[18]

At Pittsburgh and other major jumping-off points, flatboats could be purchased from a number of professional workshops.[19] Elsewhere, overwhelmingly, they were homemade. Expenses varied depending on timber, labor, and other inputs; one 1818 source estimated that a typical flatboat cost nine dollars per foot in length to construct.[20] Flatboats represented a folk technology, so simple in design amid abundant timber that ordinary farmers and their hands could build and deploy them without hiring specialized labor. They constructed them according to received knowledge—via father, uncle, neighbor, friend—and modified the designs according to available resources, tools, needs, and the environment. Flatboats on the upper Ohio River, for example, were built no wider than fourteen feet, "so they might pass through the chute on the Indiana side at the falls of the Ohio near Louisville."[21] Efficiency and maneuverability were afterthoughts, because the river's current powered flatboats gratis. A steering oar mounted at the stern and two sweeps protruding from each side usually sufficed to keep the vessel in deep current, while poling skills and sheer muscle were needed to negotiate the shallows.

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A number of factors influenced when flatboatmen "cut loose" and launched. Most rivermen avoided departure dates that would land them in New Orleans during its dreaded epidemic-plagued slack season of August through October. An autumn or early winter departure, on the other hand, put them in New Orleans just as temperatures cooled, scourges

18. "Flat-Boat Commerce," J. D. B. De Bow, *Commercial Review of the South and West* no. 4 (December 1847): 556.

19. Ashe, *Travels Per[illegible]ica in 1806*, [illegible].

20. Elias Pym Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and [illegible] Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817–1818*, ed. Frederic Austin Ogg (Cleveland, OH: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 79.

21. Rolla M. Hogue, "Life in Indiana, 1800–1820," *Indiana Magazine of History* 9, no. 2 (June 1913): 88.

abated, and demand for their goods increased. Departing at year's end also gave Western farmers something to do after the harvest, while freeing up the subsequent spring for planting. But it also meant frigid temperatures and possibly ice on the river upon returning. Alternately, late winter and early spring departures clashed with agricultural cycles, but meant warmer temperatures, melting snow, and higher river stages—thus a steeper gradient to the Gulf and swifter flow velocities. The 1814 *Navigator* traveler's guide pointed out that "the labour of navigating the Ohio in times of high water is very inconsiderable, [compared] to what it is when it is low, when continual rowing is necessary." On many smaller tributaries, high late-winter and spring time water (called "freshes") was absolutely essential to reach the main channel ("going out with the freshes"), as rivulets were otherwise unnavigable.[22] High water also allowed vessels to glide over obstacles such as the Great Falls of the Ohio, not to mention the ubiquitous snags and sandbars. Certain agricultural products, depending on their harvest time and durability, also determined departure dates, although most flatboat cargo—grain, flour, whiskey, livestock, lumber, hemp, lard, and smoked or salted meat—could travel anytime. Considered *The Navigator*:

> The best seasons for navigating the Ohio are in spring and autumn. The spring season commences with the breaking of the ice, which generally happens about the middle of February, and continues good for about three months and sometimes four. The fall season generally commences in October, and continues good until the first of December, and sometimes all through that month; when the ice begins to form and the river closes.[23]

Upon cutting loose, flatboatmen did their best to exploit every river advantage and dodge every hindrance. Crews avoided the friction-inducing, debris-strewn, shoal-choked banks, preferring instead the river's deep and brisk thalweg. Maintaining the current (whose trajectory veered left or right depending on the river bend) was more difficult than it seems, requiring significant human force against crosscurrents, strong winds, and oncoming obstacles. Launching, docking, and dislodging from sandbars required special brawn and teamwork. Veterans handled these challenges

22. Louis A. Warren, "A Riverside Lincoln Memorial," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 553, November 13, 1939.

23. *The Navigator*, (1814), 36–37.

skillfully; greenhorns were a different matter. "[W]hen merchants are young[,] inexperienced [and] flushed with the idea of a fortune before them," admonished *The Navigator*, they "hastily buy a boat, load, jump into it themselves, fly to the steering oar, and hollo to the hands to *pull out*."[24] Only too soon would they find themselves spiraling uncontrollably at the mercy of a complex and unforgiving flow. It got worse downriver, according to this 1807 account:

> A voyage down the Mississippi is very different from one on the Ohio, where the numberless improvements arrest the attention, and the gentleness of the current affords time to . . . admire the thousand beauties of that delightful stream. But on the Mississippi you are descending through an immense unimproved wilderness, [dealing with] the rapidity of the stream, obstructed with endless islands, sandbars, snags, sawyers, and planters. . . .[25]

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From the perspective of a flatboat captain, a trip to New Orleans constituted a litany of decisions and worries for which he bore full responsibility. From the perspective of a new hand barely beyond his mother's care, the voyage represented hard work, on-the-job learning, occasional danger, freedom, fun, peer competition, persistent discomfort, risqué indulgence, and eye-opening adventure.

Life on board meant tedious hours of exposure to sun, wind, rain, and cold, as crewmembers stumbled across the rattling floor cramped with barrels, sacks, stacks, and sometimes live animals. Boatmen might eat heartily, though by no means delectably, and their cargo consisted of edibles. Typical fare included "the usual western staples of corn, potatoes, hardtack, and meat," cooked in the most functional of ways.[26] A crew of five, traveling on December 27, 1834, enjoyed an on-board Yuletide feast of "the shank of a shoulder, some dried pumpkins, corn dodgers & coffee," prepared by a full-time cook.[27]

Ibid., 38–39.

25. Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New-York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee . . . Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808* (New York: Isaac Riley, 1810), 2:164.

26. Leland D. Baldwin, *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (Pittsburgh: Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, 1941), 87.

27. Asbury C. Jacquess, "The Journals of the Davy Crockett commencing December 20th, 1834," *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 1 (March 2006): 10.

Fish and game offered both fresh victuals and amusing sport. Catfish, buffalo fish, pike, sturgeon, perch, suckers, herring, shad, eels, and soft-shell turtles could be hooked, netted, or trapped. "Turkies, pheasant and partridges, are numerous on [the Ohio's] banks;" reported a guide; "these, with the opportunity of sometimes shooting bears and deer swimming across the river, afford much pleasure to the navigator, and form sumptuous meals for the boat's crew."[28] Bankside peddlers and townspeople eagerly vended snacks and meals. Boatmen drank from the river "as it is; and some suppose it . . . conducive to health. It must not, however, be taken from the eddies," where impurities accumulated.[29]

Flatboats would sometimes launch *en masse* from a single town, crewed by men who all knew each other and worked the same fields. Thirty or forty flatboats, for example, departed Chillicothe, Ohio, in mid-February 1820, "loaded with the produce of the country, [bound] for New Orleans."[30] Convoys offered protection from marauders who targeted lone flatboats for their cash and cargo. Floating downriver at roughly the same speed, some crews would "lash" their flatboats together, forming a "floating town" nearly as large in size. Camaraderie and entertainment seem to explain this arrangement more so than navigational safety or efficiency: the union enabled socializing, retailing, bartering, and butchering livestock for a group meal—not to mention "setting up a dram shop" for the vending of spirits. A decent meal was a powerful incentive: the *Davy Crockett* "lashed up" with "some of our hoosier friends" while floating past Memphis in 1835, motivated primarily by the culinary expertise of Mike, the other boat's steward.[31] Lashing up might lead to "frolic" and inevitably a "quarrel, in which case the aggrieved party dissolves the partnership by unlashing and managing his own boat, in his own way."[32] (Mike the steward proved to be a fine cook and a trustworthy crewmember. But he had enemies, a dark past, and a price on his head. He was murdered four days after the lash-up.)

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Barring disasters, a flatboat trip from Pittsburgh to New Orleans usually took five to seven weeks. Ten days was typical from Pittsburgh to the

28. *The Navigator* (1814), 27–28.
29. Evans, "Pedestrious Tour," in *Early Western Travels*, 8:344.
30. "Chilicothe," *Indiana Centinel* (Vincennes, IN), March 4, 1820, p. 3.
31. Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 14–15.
32. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 105.

Great Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, five days thereafter to the confluence with the Mississippi, and three to four weeks from there to New Orleans.[33] Such was the experience of George Hunter, who departed Pittsburgh on June 15, 1804, arrived in Natchez on July 24 and remained until July 31, and arrived in New Orleans on August 7. Total travel time: over six weeks.[34] Voyage length, however, varied greatly depending on current, wind, weather, troubles, stops, nighttime navigation, and the era in which the expedition occurred. One voyage in 1800 "reached Natchez in fifty-seven days after leaving Pittsburgh, and New-Orleans city in thirteen days thereafter – ten full weeks, replete with numerous 'adventures and escapes from great peril by land and water."[35] Each passing year saw new navigational improvements, more obstacles removed, and further improvements in shipping infrastructure, all of which reduced trip time.

Nocturnal navigation rewarded boatmen with doubled daily mileage, but jeopardized them with increased risk of entanglements and crashes. *The Navigator* advised its readers on this important matter differently depending on hydrological conditions. For the Ohio, the guide warned that rest stops not only squandered time but increased exposure to bankside hazards, and recommended

> you should contrive to land as seldom as possible; you need not even lie by at night, provided you trust to the current, and keep a good look out. If you have moon light so much the better.[36]

But for the main channel of the Mississippi, fraught with driftwood, sandbars, and treacherous currents, "it must be evident how imprudent it is attempting to go after night, even when assisted by a clear moon." That advice changed again for the well-traveled lowermost three hundred miles, where the Mississippi River leaves its alluvial valley and enters the deltaic plain: "[O]nce arrived at Natchez you may safely proceed day and night, the river from that place to its mouth being clear, and opposing

33. *The Navigator, or the Travelers Useful Guide in Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers* (Pittsburgh: Zadok Cramer, 1806), 125. See also page 37 of 1814 edition.

34. John Francis McDermott, "The Western Journals of Dr. George Hunter, 1796–1805," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* New Series, 53, no. 4 (1963): 59–62.

35. S. De Witt Bloodgood, *A Treatise on Roads, Their History, Character and Utility* (Albany, NY: Oliver Steele, 1838), 171.

36. *The Navigator* (1806), 21.

nothing to your progress but a few eddies. . . ."[37] George Hunter apparently concurred with that advice, having floated "night & day" in slow water from Natchez to New Orleans in seven days.[38] Theodore Armitage boated from the Ohio/Mississippi confluence to New Orleans (1,023 miles) in only thirteen days, a trip that would have taken over three weeks had he not "run all night."[39] Lanterns, torches, and deck fires were used to spot floating obstacles and warn oncoming vessels.

Other rivermen warned against nighttime travel absolutely. "[I]t is a rule," wrote Vincent Nolte recollecting his 1811–2 journey, "never to trust your craft in the night to the force of the current, for the surface of the water is so frequently broken by trees. . . ."[40] Still others—probably the majority—navigated opportunistically, floating into the night if they thought favorable conditions mitigated the danger, and docking in daytime if conditions fouled. William Ward's January 1839 flatboat diary, for example, abounds with statements such as "a fine night for floating," "clear and no wind," or "high winds . . . still blowing hard during the day."[41]

Navigation practices changed after 1830–31, when Capt. Henry Shreve deployed two special steamboats to remove banks of trees and excavate meander loops. By Shreve's account, flatboats could now float nocturnally on the Mississippi "with as much safety as they do in the Ohio river," and thus cut their travel time in half.[42] But darkness veiled threats beyond mere floating debris, and prudent flatboatmen continued to tie up at night. Journals of the Indiana flatboat *Davy Crockett*, which carried an enormous cargo to New Orleans in winter 1834–35, stopped regularly every sundown for the night and "loosed" cable" between 4 a.m. and sunrise next day.[43]

37. *The Navigator* (1814), 165–166.

38. McDermott, "Journals of Dr. George Hunter," 62.

39. Theodore Armitage, "Flatboating on the Wabash-A Diary of 1847," *Indiana Magazine of History* 9, no. 4 (December 1913): 273–2

40. Vincent Nolte, *Fifty Years in Both Hemispheres* (New York: Redfield, 1854), 181.

41. Ward calculated that the voyage from New Albany, Indiana, to the mouth of the Ohio River spanned nine days (123 hours) traveling and the remainder (93 hours) to tying up and waiting. William S. Ward, *Diary* [of Flatboat Trip from New Albany, Indiana to New Orleans, Louisiana, 1839], The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accession Number 2009.0139, p. 1 (hereafter cited as THNOC).

42. Henry M. Shreve, "Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: Annual Report of work done in improving the navigation of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in the present year, ending 30th September 1831," as reproduced in *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), December 17, 1831, p. 2.

43. Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 8–24.

Whether moving or moored, crews usually slept upon sacks or pallets on deck. Nightly mooring fueled the development of tiny river towns, which sprouted every so often to serve the improvised fleet with victuals, accoutrements, entertainment, rest, and trading opportunities. Other towns founded during French or Spanish colonial times grew markedly when the new American river traffic arrived. Timothy Flint described the atmosphere at one such harbor in Missouri on a spring evening around 1816:

> [O]ne hundred boats . . . arriving in fleets . . . landed in one day at the mouth of the Bayan, at New Madrid. . . . You can name no point from the numerous rivers of the Ohio and the Mississippi, from which some of these boats have not come.

Some of the flatboats seen by Flint carried pine planks from western New York forests; others, manufactured merchandise from Ohio, cattle and horses from Illinois and Missouri. Kentucky vessels bore pork, flour, whiskey, hemp, tobacco, bagging, and bale-rope, while the Tennesseans carried "great quantities of cotton." Foodstuffs such as corn, apples, potatoes, cider, dried fruits, lard, beef, venison, and whiskey joined raw materials such as firewood, coal, and peltries. "Arrived from regions, thousands of miles apart, . . . floated to a common point of union."[44] In other cases, "[s]alt, iron, cider and peach brandy" flowed south, while "molasses, sugar, coffee, lead and hides" headed north.[45] Miscellaneous items such as hickory nuts, walnuts, pumpkins, beeswax, butter, soap, tallow, cordage, staves and hoop poles used to make barrels, "shook" lumber (wood cut to make boxes and crates), "biscuit" (unglazed pottery), and furniture also shipped on the homemade vessels.[46] The *Davy Crockett,* which departed Posey County, Indiana, in late 1834, provides an idea of the relationship between flatboat size and cargo capacity. On its 1,360-square-foot deck, the *Crockett* carried "1700 bushels of corn[,] 11,000 weight of pork, 3 thousand weight of beef in barrels, 6 large steers, 15 bushels of oats, 40

44. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years,* 103–104.
45. Hulbert, *Paths of Inland Commerce,* 65.
46. Anonymous, "River Navigation in Indiana," *The Indiana Magazine of History* 2, no. 2 (June 1906): 92; Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, *Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940), 184–185.

kegs of lard, 30 doz[illegible] of chick[illegible]s & 40 Turkeys."[47]

When heading [illegible] to South[illegible]n plantation coun[illegible]y flatboats delivered "barrel pork" to pl[illegible]nters for [illegible]eding their slaves.[48] Others carried slaves themselves. The *Mary*, for [illegible]ample, bore "40 b[illegible]rels whiskey, 6 barrels potatoes, 13 [illegible]rrels & [illegible]gs lard, 2 casks spun yarn, and 2 negroes" to New Orlean[illegible] according to an 1807 manifes[illegible] A few miles behind came the *Cha[illegible]* with "8 n[illegible]groes" among its toba[illegible]co, flour, butter, po[illegible]k and saddles.[49]

Then there w[illegible]e the live animals: s[illegible]ueaking swine, gobbling turkey[illegible] cluckin[illegible] chicken[illegible] mooing cows, neighin[illegible] horses. The nervous and co[illegible]fused beasts—"[illegible]most as great a m[illegible]de . . . as ever No[illegible] could h[illegible]ve stored"[50]—creat[illegible]d only half the cacophony at the various [illegible]er landi[illegible]g[illegible], fl[illegible]atmen p[illegible]ovided the rest:

> The boisterous gaiety of the hands, the congr[illegible]ulations, the m[illegible]ving picture of life on b[illegible]ard the boats. . . . T[illegible]e h[illegible]nds travel about from boat to boat, make inquiries, and acquaintan[illegible]es, and form alliances t[illegible]y mutual assistance to each [illegible]ther, on their descent . . . to New Orleans. . . . After an h[illegible]ur or two passed in this wa[illegible], they spring on shore to raise the wind in town. It [benefits] the people of the v[illegible]age, if [the hands] do not become [illegible]iotous in the course [illegible]f the evening; [illegible]which case I have often [illegible]een the most sum[illegible]y and st[illegible]ong measures taken.
>
> Abou[illegible]midnight the uproar is all hushed. . . . Next morning at the firs[illegible]dawn, the bugles sou[illegible]d. Every th[illegible]g in and about the boa[illegible]. . . is in motion, [and] in half an h[illegible]ur, are all under way.
>
> The fleet unites once m[illegible]e at Natch[illegible]z or New Orleans, and, although they live on the same river, they may, perhaps, n[illegible]ver meet each other agai[illegible]n the[illegible]th.[51]

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47. Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 8–9.

48. Ibid., 22.

49. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, *[illegible]ts on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940), 51[illegible]58.

50. William Newnham Blane, *An [illegible]ursion Through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822–23, By An English Gentleman* (London: [illegible]in, Cradock, and Joy, 1824), 102.

51. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 103–104.

Some flatboats docked for extended periods, serving as waterborne workshops for tinners, blacksmiths, and toolmakers, or as dry-goods stores complete with "handsomely arranged . . . shelves." Others tied up near towns and functioned as floating housing for the crew or warehousing for their cargo—oftentimes to the displeasure of local inn-keepers and merchants. An entire economy and culture revolved around flatboats.

Incapable of navigating against the current, flatboats never returned upriver. The crude vessels were almost always disassembled at their destination and sold as scrap lumber or firewood, "for half [their] first cost," by one account, and by another, one-quarter their initial dollar-per-foot construction cost.[53] Flatboats thus not only transported cargo; they *consumed* cargo. They represented a simple technological solution to a high-stakes economic challenge: how to get surplus agricultural commodities to distant sources of demand at minimum cost. So well did the flatboat solve this problem that it remained in service for an extraordinarily long period of time—into the 1860s, outliving other frontier-era river craft by decades.

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Prior to the mid-1810s, travelers had two options in traversing upriver. The first was to go by foot or horse the entire distance. The second, for a higher fee but less effort, greater storage capacity, and some savings of time, was to take a "keelboat" as far upstream as possible, then continue by land.

A keelboat may be considered a descendent of the aforementioned canoe-skiff-bateau lineage, or, in terms of form, a hybrid of a (very large) canoe and a flatboat. Like a canoe, a keelboat had a ribbed hull with rounded edges (to which was added a bottom board, hence the name), a pointed bow and stern, and an elongated overall shape. Like a flatboat, it was large, made of wood, had a flat bottom, drew minimal water, and accommodated storage space and shelter (for passengers as well as cargo). Unlike canoes and flatboats, however, keelboats usually required specialized labor to construct and pilot, and were not scrapped for lumber until they were otherwise unprofitable. Completely covered keelboats formed the first packet services in the West, ferrying passengers along certain routes on a regular schedule. Keelboats were equipped with a single mast on which the crew rigged up a simple sail whenever winds favored their

52. Ibid., 104–105.
53. *The Navigator* (1814), 33; Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels*, 79.

assault against the current. With their upturned ends, multiple oarsmen, and single sail, keelboats on western rivers bore an anachronistic Mesopotamian or Asian look. (One explorer in 1804 described his keelboat as built in the "Chinese stile" [*sic*].[54]) Their crews battled the same conditions as their ancient forbears, with precisely the same resources: wind, current, and manpower.

A typical Mississippi River keelboat weighed twenty to sixty tons, measured forty to eighty feet long and ten to fifteen feet wide, and drew about two feet of water. Larger keelboats, sometimes dubbed "barges," sported two sails and more manpower. What they sacrificed in sturdiness and carrying capacity, keelboats gained in maneuverability. The narrow, streamlined design permitted crewmembers to row, pole, "warp," or sail their way upriver. The trick was to avoid the middle and the cut-bank portions of the river (above the thalweg, where the water ran fast and downriver traffic predominated) in favor of the point bar or batture side, where the current flowed slow and shallow. "It is beside the question," wrote Flint in 1816, "to think of forcing the boat up against the main current. . . . [A]ny impediment near the shore, must either be surmounted, or the river crossed to avoid them. . . ."[55] Once safely crossed the thalweg, the crew was able to row against the slower current, while shallow depths meant they could "set poles" into the mud and, pole pressed to shoulder, walk them bow-to-stern along narrow running-boards. Sails were set whenever winds blew favorably. If all else failed, a "cordelle" (towline) was thrown to shore, swum there by a crewmember with the rope held tight in his teeth, looped around a distant tree, and used as a pulley to "warp" the vessel upriver. Lacking trees, crewmembers "bush-wacked" by grabbing the branches of overhanging vegetation and heaving the vessel upriver. Lacking bushes, men or beasts on the bank would haul the craft upriver by cordelle. Occasionally, the shape of the river fortuitously reversed the bankside current, thrilling the crew with a welcome burst of speed. Sticking near the banks also ensured a certain measure of safety in the event of capsizing, particularly if passengers were involved.

Boatman culture gave rise to a peculiar folklore and lexicon. A "Kentuck" was said to be "the best man at a pole," while Frenchmen proved

54. As quoted by McDermott, "Western Journals of Dr. George Hunter," 10.

55. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 91–92.

56. Hoagland, "Transportation on the Mississippi," 113; Hunter, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 15–17; Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 87, 91, and 94.

more adroit with the oar. Poling off a fixed log, called a "reverend set," propelled the keelboat fastest, and allowed it to evade dangers such as "'riffles" (ripples), "planters," "ponts," "bends," "wreck-heaps," and "shoots, a corruption . . . of the French *chute*.'" A boat "swinging" out of control and exposing its planks to the current could end up entangled or punctured by dangerous "snags," "planters," and "sawyers," which collectively were

> large trees, washed from the shore, which drift down till their roots or branches . . . fasten into the mud, and become as firm as when standing in the forest. Should a boat be so unfortunate as to strike one of these, it would in all probability prove fatal.[57]

A bobbing motion, cutting the surface of the water, earned sawyers their name. When planters and sawyers broke loose *en masse* and matted together, they formed "wooden-islands . . . more dangerous than real ones," because of the unpredictability of the surrounding flow. Those currents could produce "whirls, or swells, or boils . . . so large and strong that a boat is thrown half around in passing over them, and sometimes shoots rapidly out of them. . . ."[58] Foggy conditions forced crews to call out blindly to other vessels or to the banks to gauge their whereabouts, a tense exchange that often denigrated into "obscenity, abuse, and blasphemy . . . sometimes to the length of exchanging musket shots." Flint continued:

> The manners of the boatmen are as strange as their language. Their peculiar way of life has given origin not only to an appropriate dialect, but to new modes of enjoyment, riot, and fighting. Almost every boat, while it lies in the harbour has one or more fiddles scraping continually aboard, to which you often see the boatmen dancing.[59]

Fifteen miles a day was considered a fair clip for an upriver-bound keelboat. A voyage from New Orleans up to St. Louis could easily take three months. Every passing mile grew more challenging, as the gradient steepened and current strengthened. Keelboats needed larger and more skilled crews than flatboats and, with less cargo-carrying capacity and longer voyages, charged much higher fees. Many New Orleans–based keelboats ventured no farther than Natchez, where passengers disembarked and trekked by

57. Tilly Buttrick Jr., "Voyages, Travels and Discoveries" (1831), in *Early Western Travels*, 8:59.

58. *The Navigator* (1814), 144, 164–165.

59. Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 15; see also 191–92.

horse or foot the equally dangerous Natchez Trace (or the Unicoy Road, across eastern Mississippi) back to the Ohio River Valley.[60] Given the ease of flatboating down river versus keelboating upriver, it comes as no surprise that flatboats outnumbered keelboats by a twenty-to-one ratio.

All vessels dealt with myriad riverine dangers. High winds produced swells that frustrated navigational control. Lightening storms could prove fatal.[61] "Sawyers," erratic currents that swiped across the river with the apparent warning, could wrench a steering oar from a pilot's hands and send a vessel spiraling. Wrecks abounded; broken-up vessels littered the bank and bodies frequently floated by. "Upon the western rivers a great many boatmen die, and their graves upon the banks are numerous," wrote one observer in 1811. "[f]loating barrels of flour are often seen in the Mississippi; and hundreds of barrels of wheat, and hogsheads of tobacco, lie on its shores in a state of ruin."[62] Occasionally, fully loaded vessels would lodge in the bank, its crew inexplicably disappeared. An unmanned flatboat "loaded with timber" was found drifting along the New Orleans riverfront during the week of Lincoln's arrival, its crew probably the victims of crime or accident.[63] One expedition approaching New Orleans found a dead man drifting among their flatboats, spotted another corpse under the levee the next day, and saw a third moments later.[64] Among the greatest dangers were thieves and bandits, who preyed on boatmen tied up at night along remote riverbanks.

Keelboats offered the best available solution to the upriver problem, but fell woefully short of solving it. Entrepreneurs competed to offer a better one. Some used sailing ships, but they struggled to make it so far as Natchez, as sharp meanders reversed favorable winds, narrow river widths precluded tacking, and shallow banks endangered deep-draft hulls.[65] Oth-

60. See map of routes in Seymour Dunbar's *A History of Travel in America* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1915), 1:152–153.

61. "Notice—A Flatboat loaded with Stone Coal . . . ," *Louisiana State Gazette* (New Orleans), June 23, 1826, "Auction" column; Major Stephen H. Long, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, performed in the Years 1819 and 1820*, ed. Edwin James (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), 1:15.

62. Evans, "Pedestrious Tour," in *Early Western Travels*, 8:260 and 360.

63. "Notice," *New Orleans Argus*, May 22, 1828, p. 2, c. 5.

64. Diary of Micajah Thelemus Clanton, transcribed in "Flatboat Voyage to New Orleans Told Of In a Diary Kept in 1844," *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1905, part 3, p. 13, c. 7.

65. Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage*, 2:137. Some sailing ships were built in the upper Ohio River Valley in the early nineteenth century, but were simply floated like flatboats down the river for service on the seas. Frank Haigh Dixon, "A Traffic History of the Mississippi River System," Document No. 11, National Waterways Commission

ers rigged keelboats with horses, tethering the unfortunate beasts to poles geared to paddles and trotting them awkwardly on deck-based treadmills. The results were comical for a spectator, costly for the entrepreneur, and sometimes fatal for the horses.

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The solution to the power problem emerged from the increasingly successful British and American efforts of the late eighteenth century to harness the pressure released by boiling water. Mechanics compelled to adapt steam engine technology to watercraft with some of the most promising work stemming out of Philadelphia. In 1786, John Fitch attached a three-in. cylinder steam engine to a side-mounted screw and successfully propelled a large skiff on the Delaware River. Another prototype utilized what might be described as mechanical oarsmen to move the vessel. Other inventors demonstrated a subsequent model to the framers of the Constitution as they convened in 1787—a noteworthy historical moment, if ever there was one. Further experimentation led to better designs and new models during the 1790s.[66] Meanwhile, terrestrially based steam engines, promising to outwork man and beast in everything from the sawing of logs to the spinning of cotton, diffused rapidly from Philadelphia workshops to the southwestern frontier. By one account, Capt. James McKeever and M. Louis Valcour were the first to introduce the emerging technology to the Mississippi River in 1803, building a steamboat for service between New Orleans and Natchez. But the craft ran into shallow water, and the men ran out of capital, before the concept could be demonstrated.[67] It soon became clear that existing craft designs could not be simply retrofitted with steam engines; they had to be redesigned entirely with broad, flat bottoms to minimize draft and maximize carrying capacity.

What also became clear was that lucrative business opportunities awaited whoever came up with an optimal design *and* monopolized legal rights to serve the busiest waterways. Pennsylvania-born inventor Robert Fulton brought to bear the design skills, improving both engine and craft in the U.S. and France during the 1790s–1800s. While in Paris, Fulton befriended the American diplomat and steam-engine investor Robert R. Livingston, who provided the legal prowess and financial wherewithal.

(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 1909), 11.

66. E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or, Gould's History of River Navigation* (St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Printing Company, 1889), 3–6.

67. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 17.

Together Fulton and Livingston obtained patents and secured exclusive legal rights for steam shipping on key waterways. While most jurisdictions bordering the Ohio and Mississippi rivers resisted granting steamboat monopolies, Louisiana—the most important because it received the most traffic—agreed to the arrangement. Fulton and Livingston's Ohio Steam Boat Company then contracted Nicholas J. Roosevelt to conduct research on river hydrology and assist in vessel design. Working out of Pittsburgh on the banks of the Monongahela River, the company brought in a team of New York mechanics to construct a 116-by-20-foot vessel with a 34-inch cylinder and boiler driving a stern wheel, with sails to assist when the winds blew favorably. Costs totaled $38,000.[68] Christened the *New Orleans*, the craft launched in September 1811 amid great throngs seeing it off down the Ohio destined for its namesake city. "'Your boat may go down the river,'" wrote one observer giving voice to the skeptical crowd, "'but as for coming up, the idea is an absurd one.'" Perhaps wary that the contraption might just perform as promised, "[t]he keel boat men crowded around the strange visitor and shook their head[s]."

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The maiden voyage of the *New Orleans* proved extraordinary. That autumn saw a spectacular astronomical event, the Great Comet of 1811, which passengers witnessed nightly; at one point they feared that it might plunge nearby. Rivermen knew the Great Falls of the Ohio—the navigation obstacle whose circumventing portage led to the foundation of Louisville—flowed too low to allow passage. The *New Orleans* had to return upriver, taking advantage of the delay by demonstrating to onlookers its ability to navigate against the current. When water levels rose, the *New Orleans* embarked downriver once again and gingerly made its way over the falls.

Soon after, a fire broke out on board. Then, while anchored below Louisville the passengers felt an odd back wave. They later discovered, upon reaching Missouri, that what came to be recognized as the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in North America had altered the channel of the Mississippi and brought devastation to the river town of New Madrid. There, terror-stricken people begged to be taken on

68. Another source holds that the *New Orleans* measured 138 feet by 30 feet, weighed 200 tons, cost $40,000, and departed Pittsburgh in October 1811, with nine crewmembers plus Roosevelt's family aboard. Robert H. Thurston, *A History of the Growth of the Steam-Engine* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903), 284.

board, while others, dreading the steamboat more than the earthquake, hid themselves as she approached." Tremors, felt as far away as New Orleans, continued for weeks. Continuing downriver, the vessel contended with "shoals, snags and sawyers," some of which had become mobilized by the quake.[69] Passengers pondered if the coincident celestial and tectonic oddities bore any spiritual significance. In fact, the newfangled conveyance bearing their fellows would prove far more historically significant than the comets or the quake.

The remainder of the trip went smoothly, and on Friday evening, January 10, 1812, the steamboat *New Orleans* docked at its namesake city. Travel time, excluding numerous stops, totaled 259 hours. "She is intended as a regular trader between [here] and Natchez," explained the *Louisiana Gazette* to its readers Monday morning, "and will, it is generally believed, meet the most sanguine expectations of [Fulton and Livingston's] company." Another demonstration occurred a week later, when the *New Orleans* "left [here] at 11 o'clock, went five leagues down, and returned at 4 o'clock," proving to skeptical bankers and investors its commercial capabilities.[70] Ever the entrepreneurs, the operators also ran excursions to English Turn for the hefty price of two to three dollars per passenger, and commenced freight and passenger service to Natchez a few days later.[71] The *New Orleans* served for three years until a snag pierced its hull and sunk it. By then, the technology had proven its worth.

Subsequent years saw new steamboats demonstrate increasing capacity, speed, and power, promising to transform dramatically traditional river travel. "There is now on foot a new mode of navigating our western waters," declared one river guide in 1814; "[t]his is with boats propelled by the power of steam."[72] Capt. Henry Shreve's record twenty-five-day journey of the 400-ton *Washington* from New Orleans all the way to Louisville in 1817, convinced the last doubters that the power of steam solved the upriver problem.

After a few years of resolving technological, logistical, and legal barriers (namely the monopoly granted to Fulton and Livingston, overruled by the Supreme Court in 1824), steamboats proceeded to revolutionize

69. As quoted from passenger journals by Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 84–87.

70. Not easily impressed, the *Gazette* sarcastically opined, "Had Mr. Fulton's Torpedoes succeeded equal to his Steamboats, we might now laugh at the thunder of the British Navy."

71. *Louisiana Gazette and New-Orleans Daily Advertiser*, January 13, 1812, p. 2; January 17, 1812, p. 3; January 18, 1812, p. 2, and January 21, 1812, p. 5.

72. *The Navigator* (1814), 30.

western river travel and commerce. Increased competition meant larger numbers of bigger and better boats charging lower rates for swifter service. A decade after the maiden voyage of the *New Orleans*, 73 steamboats averaging 200 tons apiece plied western rivers. Roughly a dozen new vessels joined the western fleet annually until the end of the Fulton-Livingston monopoly, after which two to three dozen were built each year. Twenty years after the *New Orleans*, 183 steamboats traveled the western rivers; that number would more than triple by the fortieth anniversary, when New Orleans alone tallied 3,566 steamboat arrivals in a year—a pace of one every 147 minutes round-the-clock. Steam technology also aided ocean-going shipping arriving to New Orleans, as brigs and schooners once dependent entirely on wind now added steam-driven paddle wheels to their power supply. They benefited additionally from the new steam-powered towboats (tugs) that could rescue them from navigational obstacles at the mouth of the river, or guide them into their narrow berths along the crowded riverfront.[73]

No wonder elders would later view "the year 1811 [as] the *annus mirabilis* of the West."[74]

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Steamboat transportation raised the value of exports and thus stoked the economic development and population growth of the Western river region. Government attention and federal dollars for navigation improvements followed, adding more growth. Steamboats also diminished the cost, time, and discomfort associated with traveling to the former frontier. Getting from New York to New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi, for example, took twelve weeks in 1800, including a grueling overland trek and a wild river journey. The same trip in 1839, via rail, stage, and steamer, took under thirteen days, cost less money, posed fewer risks, and offered greater comfort.[75] Americans poured west: for every one citizen living beyond the Appalachians in 1810, more than twelve resided there in 1860, totaling 12,984,100 (over 41 percent of the national population). For every one acre of improved Western land in 1810, more than eighteen acres were under cultivation in 1860, totaling 80,631,234 acres from Michigan to Louisiana. The blossoming society and its agrarian export

73. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 18, 130–131; Dixon, "Traffic History of the Mississippi," 15.

74. As quoted from passenger journals by Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 89.

75. Bloodgood, *Treatise on Roads*, 171–172.

economy soon spawned a manufacturing sector; imprecisely measured in the early years, it totaled $84 million in 1840, $187 million in 1850, and $419 million in 1860. For every ton exported by the trans-Appalachian West in 1810, nearly *eight* tons shipped in 1860.[76] The Mississippi River and its tributaries served as the vital arteries for this explosive economic growth, and steamboats rendered them efficient.

Steam-driven transportation also transformed life on the river. Horsepowered boats and other impracticalities became campfire stories. Keelboats held on for a few years but soon declined and mostly disappeared on trunk routes; only two specimens, the last of their breed, officially docked at New Orleans during 1828–29.[77] Keelboatmen found other jobs, often becoming (as Samuel Clemens explained) "a deck-hand on a mate or pilot on the steamer."[78] Others continued to row, warp, and pole their unpowered vessels up remote tributaries—until progress replaced them there too.

Flatboat traffic, however, actually increased with the rise of steamboats, because they provided a swift way for boatmen to return home. "Ten years ago the flatboatmen returned on foot & experienced great hardships," wrote Samuel Judah in 1827. "Case is now altered."[79] Flatboatmen also benefited from zero fuel expenses, minimal labor costs, low wharfage fees, and from the fact that the overall boom to agriculture provided by steamboats sent a certain share of the burgeoning commodities-shipping business onto their rustic vessels. So while steamboats killed keelboats, they had a symbiotic relationship with flatboats; both craft types increased in usage for nearly four decades. Flatboat arrivals at New Orleans increased from 155 in 1806 to 2,792 during the peak season of 1846–47, an era in which flatboats helped make downriver shipping anywhere from two to five times cheaper than upriver shipping. As steamboats became more common, larger, and more efficient, the ratio evened out, implying that flatboats were no longer the bargain they once were. Flatboat traffic to New Orleans accordingly declined to between 540 and 700 per year in the mid-1850s.[80] They continued to form a part of the picturesque

76. Haites, Mak, and Wilson, *Western River Transportation*, 112, 115, 117, 124–125.

77. "Marine—Port de la Nouvelle Orléans," *New Orleans Bee,* February 24, 1829, p. 3, c. 4 and March 22, 1829, p. 3, c. 3. See also issues of "Maritime" columns of *Bee* conducted by author from April 1, 1828, through March 31, 1829.

78. Samuel L. Clemens, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Harper & Row), 14.

79. Samuel Bernard Judah, "A Journal of Travel from New York to Indiana in 1827," *Indiana Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (December 1921): 351.

80. These figures reflect official records for years in which they are available. Actual

New Orleans riverfront for another few years before they, too, would go the way of the keelboat, the skiff, the bateau, and the birch-bark canoe. The interruption of the Civil War helped seal the fate of the Mississippi flatboat, but it was not cause but technological progress. After the war, new docking facilities for powered barges replaced the old flatboat landing; coal continued to be shipped downriver on flatboat-like barges, but little else. "Probably we will never again see the old days of flatboats revived," wrote one local journalist in 1866. In fact a small number of rustic craft continued to arrive for the remainder of the nineteenth century, usually guided by poor independent farmers and traders who squatted along the uptown batture like "tramps," as one observer put it. About two hundred such vessels arrived annually to New Orleans into the late 1890s—the last "Survivor[s] of the Old Flat-Boating Days."[81]

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Placing Abraham Lincoln's 1828–31 river experiences in the context of antebellum Western commerce requires addressing some popular perceptions drawn from the ample lore of that era. Words such as "wilderness," "frontier," and "pioneer" come to mind, not to mention "alligator horses," "half-horse, half-alligators," and "Kaintocks." We also conjure up figures like Mike Fink, the hard-living boatman who was later mythologized into the Paul Bunyan–like "big man" character of the Western rivers after his violent death in 1823.[82] These images should not be dismissed merely because they are popular; indeed, folklore and traditional knowledge reveal much about history and how we go about making it. The images should, however, be viewed in the light of whatever hard historical data do exist, and either refined, confirmed, balanced, or debunked accordingly.

If the word "wilderness" implies nature untouched minimally by "modern" (European?) man, the circa 1830 trans-Appalachian West had not been wilderness for two to three generations. French and French Canadian settlers arrived at what they called Upper Louisiana (from Missouri to Michigan) a full century earlier, clearing land and exploiting resources

numbers of flatboat arrivals were probably significantly higher. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 21.

81. *New Orleans Times*, November 22, 1866, p. 7, c. 1; "Mississippi Shanty Boats—A Survival of the Old Flat-Boating Days," *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA), July 27, 1899, p. 10.

82. Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763–1861: Ohio and Mississippi River Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 9–11.

as much as their numbers and technology allowed. Indigenous peoples, of course, did the same for millennia prior, and probably in larger numbers and with greater environmental impact than the popular harmony-with-nature myth implies.[83] Indeed, the very notion of the New World as primeval and virgin wilderness is a somewhat naïve and Eurocentric construct. The lands of Lincoln's youth were certainly rural and largely wild, but not consummate wilderness—lest time softens the superlative condition of that word's meaning.

If the word "frontier" connotes those lands at the fringes of a society's knowledge and control, then the trans-Appalachian West of the 1820s–30s was at least one full generation removed from the state. If the word "pioneer" applies to the initial representatives of a group settling the frontier, then Lincoln's ancestors qualified for that status, but most of his contemporaries probably did not. By the time Lincoln reached adulthood, more than a million Americans populated his home states of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, and over one-quarter of all Americans lived west of the Appalachians. Most of their settlements had entered the Union by 1821 and enjoyed increasingly strong representation in Congress. In the words of Maj. Stephen Long, the era of the "buck's eye" (that is, the "indigenous backwoodsmen" nicknamed for the Ohio forest but shaped like a deer's eye) had given way by 1819 to that of the "Yankee"—"the numerous emigrants who are introducing themselves from the eastern states."[84] Southerners also migrated into the Ohio River region, adding another cultural dimension to the trans-Appalachian West. Manifestations of a civilization—the formation of towns and cities linked by transportation routes; the creation of political, legal, economic, and social structures; the delineation and settling of land; the planting of crops—took shape as the population grew. Settlers altered natural landscapes to accommodate their needs and constantly demanded federal funds to improve river navigation, construct roads, excavate canals, and build railroads.[85] In the twenty years between Lincoln's birth and his flatboat voyages, the trans-Appalachian West's population tripled, cultivated acreage quadrupled, export tonnage quintupled, and the number of steamboats plying the region's waterways

83. See, for example, William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (September 1992): 369–385, and Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

84. Long, *Expedition from Pittsburgh*, 1:20.

85. Curtis Nettels, "The Mississippi Valley and the Constitution, 1813–29," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11, no. 3 (December 1924): 323–357.

grew from zero to 1.[86] The Mississippi Valley that young Abraham cast his eyes upon in 1[illegible] and 18[illegible] hosted a small agrarian American society expanding steadfastly along navigable waterways at the expense of hardwood forests and the remnants of indigenous society. Members of that new society raised impressive quantities of crops through both free and enslaved labor and interacted economically and culturally with the rest of the nation and world extensively as transportation and communication networks permitted. Wilderness, frontier, and pioneers had all shrunk, by this time, hundreds of miles westward.

Lincoln traveled the Mississippi in an era when Western river traffic had become dominated by steamboats and flatboats. Freed from the constraints of the legally overruled Fulton-Livingston monopoly, steamers experienced their greatest surge in productivity in those years; 118 plied western waters in 1828, and 183 did so in 1831. They weighed on average 300 tons each and carried around 270 tons of cargo downriver (half that capacity when heading upriver). Keelboats, unable to compete with steam power, retreated to wherever steamers could not go, perhaps a few hundred operating in waters traversed by Lincoln, usually in the shallow tributaries.

Flatboats, on the other hand, remained competitive, costing about $8 per ton of cargo in 1830 compared to $11.25 for steamboats, flatboats increased in number for over a quarter century after the rise of steamers, although they ferried decreasing percentages of total cargo. A typical professional flatboat operation traveling from Louisville to New Orleans in 1830 cost $324 in total expenses: $73 to build the vessel, $235 to employ a crew of usually five men ($75 for the captain and $40 for the hands) plus $7.50 to feed them, and $8 in wharfage fees. The fifty or so tons of cargo plus the sale of the vessel's wood yielded total revenue of around $464 and a net profit of $140. In an era when a dollar-a-day wage was considered decent pay, a single successful flatboat expedition could compensate a farmer for most of his growing-season toils. The crew would earn fairly well for four weeks of potentially risky but not particularly grueling labor, laced with adventure and enticement. More than one thousand flatboats registered at New Orleans annually during the era of Lincoln's voyages.[87]

To visualizing the extent of Mississippi River activity experienced by Lincoln entails a few gross assumptions. If a thousand flatboats per year paid dues at New Orleans and the vast majority voyaged during the six-month

86. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 112, 115, 117, 124–131.
87. Ibid., 21, 36, 62, 83, 124, 130, 158, 166, 168.

winter-spring peak season, then approximately 150 flatboats passed any given point during a typical peak-season month. That rate equates to five New Orleans–bound flatboats per day, or about one every two daylight hours, not including vessels bound for intermediate destinations such as Memphis, Natchez, and the sugar coast. Accounting for those other flatboats might increase the pace to a few vessels per hour or higher.

These conservative estimates may be conservative. In busier stretches during peak season, vessels of various typologies often traveled within shouting distance, and had to dodge each other at major stop-off points. By one remarkably precise account in 1818, "Six hundred and forty-three flatboats were counted descending the Mississippi and Ohio, by a person in a steam boat in his passage up." If that trip took about thirty days, then roughly twenty flatboats passed daily—a pace corroborated by a boatman who travelled the river in late January 1825 "pretty well lined with flat boats. . . . well on to 20 passed us to day." Other estimates go much higher: an observer in 1816 counted two *thousand* flatboats during the twenty-five-day trip between Natchez and Louisville, an enumeration that probably lumped itinerant peddlers circulating locally together with those vessels engaged in long-distance trade.[89] Boatmen recollected that between the mouth of the Ohio and New Orleans, the Mississippi

> was constantly dotted with flatboats. Nearly all the time [during winter-spring peaks] a flatboat was in sight, often several could be seen at the same time in a single coup d'oell [glance]. The number of flatboats thus passing [any one point on the lower river] may be estimated at little less than 1,000 annually.[90]

An account made at the time of Lincoln's 1831 voyage reported fifty-four steamboat arrivals and departures, plus more than one thousand flatboats, solely on the Wabash tributary of the Ohio River. Another source reported four ocean-going ships, thirty-three steamboats, and thirty-nine

88. *Niles' Weekly Register*, July 11, 1818, as cited by Donald F. Carmony and Sam K. Swope, eds., "Flatboat Building on Little Raccoon Creek, Parke County, Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 4 (December 1964): 306; Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 20.

89. As quoted by F. Harrison Bullock, "Abe Goes Down the River," *Lincoln Herald: A Magazine of Education and Lincolniana* 50, no. 1 (February 1948): 7. See also Lewis E. Atherton, "Itinerant Merchandising in the Ante-Bellum South," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 19, no. 2 (April 1945): 46.

90. "In Flatboat and Keelboat Times," *Daily Picayune*, March 19, 1896, p. 14, section f, c. 6–7.

flatboats arriving to New Orleans during a single week in late November 1835, a daytime parade of one vessel every thirty or forty minutes, not including departures for local traffic.[91] Still another account estimated "upwards of four hundred ships of all nations . . . moored three deep along the Leveé" in 1817, an estimate that excluded the lowly flatboats.[92]

Rarely was traffic distributed evenly along the river. Rather, it clumped in diurnal waves, concentrating nightly at certain stop-over points and launching simultaneously at sunrise. River ice and atmospheric conditions also clustered the flow: flatboatman William Ward, for example, joined a fleet of "about 60 Flat Boats . . . 71 counted" waiting out wind blowing like "Thunder" at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. He later "remained at Natchez [three days] on account of Rain & Fog."[93] And when rivers flowed very low, traffic all but disappeared because of sandy currents and exposed obstacles. As the "Mississippi [fell] fifteen feet below the mouth of the Ohio" in spring 1826, for example, "scarcely any flatboats" traveled between Louisville and Natchez.[94]

This much is clear: the Mississippi River of Lincoln's era hosted an irregularly pulsating stream of traffic bearing the fruit of the ever-growing trans-Appalachian West. To New Orleans went the biggest and best share. Over 99.8 percent of 507,300 tons in 1801 alone arrived at that city's wharves, guided there by an estimated 20,000 men who worked the Western rivers.[95] New Orleans formed a special part of their lives, a place where money was made, business associations were established, social networks were woven, cultural traits were imported and exported, and fun was had. As early as 1796, a traveler noted that people in what is now Indiana spoke of New Orleans "as if it were a walk of half an hour [away], though it is fifteen hundred miles down the river."[96] So connected was New Orleans with its steadily developing hinterland that the first volume of verse ever published about Illinois featured the Louisiana city prominently.

91. "The Wabash," *Daily National Journal* (Washington, D.C.), May 12, 1831, p. 3; "New Orleans, Dec. 1," *Macon Weekly Telegraph* (*Georgia Telegraph*), December 17, 1835, p. 2.

92. Ashe, *Travels Performed in 1806*, 3:19.

93. Ward, *Diary*, THRO, Accession Number 2009.0139, p. 14, 53.

94. *Louisiana State Gazette*, June 27, 1826, p. 2.

95. Haites, Mak, and Walton, *Western River Transportation*, 124–125; Bullard, "Abe Goes Down the River," 6.

96. As quoted by Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 56.

Let commerce next unfold her various store
Conveying [illegible] with speed from shore to shore:
Diffusing what may benefit mankind,
To serve the body or regale the mind: . . .
What merchants here collect with studious pains,
The *Mississippi* wafts to *New Orleans*: . . .
If men would cultivate a friendly trade,
And each to other lend their social aid,
[illegible]'s knowledge would increase, and arts abound,
The blessed fruits of peace, thro' nations round: . . .[97]

•

What of the flatboatman? His role in Mississippi Valley economic development, from late colonial times to the Civil War, may be described as fundamental. "Only by means of his brawn and his gifts for navigation," wrote historian Archer B. Hulbert, "could these innumerable tons of flour, tobacco and bacon have been kept from rotting on the shores." Rivermen moving between the upcountry and New Orleans served as unsuspecting agents of cultural diffusion. At the most basic level, they brought down surplus raw materials and agricultural products unavailable in the subtropics, and returned with highly needed capital. They often themselves exchanged perspectives, language, and knowledge—and sometimes their genes—to both ends of the river and all points between. Many Northern youths first witnessed the institution of slavery, particularly large-scale slave trading, on their maiden voyages to New Orleans, and formed opinions accordingly. They shared stories and spread perceptions about the river, the city, and the South; some even brought home exotic mementos, such as tropical fruits or sugary treats. One hypothesis traces the South's nickname "Dixie" to boatmen and their cycle of riverine trade, which entailed the circulation of a ten-dollar New Orleans banknote emblazoned with the French word *dix*.[99]

The role of economic and cultural exchange, however, [illegible] with the

97. "Mount Carmel: A Poem," written [illegible] a gentleman in London," as reproduced in "First Volume of Verse About Illinois," Historical Notes, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1955): 47[illegible] (emphasis in original).

98. Hulbert, *Paths of [illegible] Commerce*.

99. Another hypothesis views the term *Dixie* as a derivative of the Mason-Dixon Line, while a third theory traces it to another New York slave owner by the name of Dixy. Most researchers agree that *Dixie* did not gain widespread popularity until Northern composer Daniel Emmett published "I Wish I Was in Dixie" in 1859. President Lincoln enjoyed the song.

popular image of the flatboatman. "[T]he man himself," continued Archer B. Hulbert, "remains a legend grotesque and mysterious, one of the shadowy figures of the time when history was being made too rapidly to be written." Hulbert illustrated how legends reduced flatboatmen's all-too-real challenges to folksy caricature:

> If we ask how he loaded his flatboat . . . we are told that "one squint of his eye would blister a bull's hide." When we inquire how he found the channel amid the shifting bars and floating islands of that tortuous two-thousand-mile journey to New Orleans, we are informed that he was "the very infant that turned from his mother's breast and called out for a bottle of old rye." When we ask how he overcame the natural difficulties of trade—lack of commission houses, varying standards of money, want of systems of credit and low prices due to the glutting of the market when hundreds of flatboats arrived in the South simultaneously . . . we are informed that "Billy Earthquake is the geniwine, double-acting engine, and can out-run, out-swim, chaw more tobacco and spit less, drink more whiskey and keep soberer than any other man in these localities."[100]

The popular imagery of the puckish "Kaintuck" ruffian derives in part from our tendency to observe, record and remember that which deviates from the norm. Left out, all too often, is what *constitutes* the norm. The bell-shaped curve of actual experiences—that is, the statistical distribution plotting the predomination of that which is typical and the paucity of that which is exceptional—thus becomes inverted in their documentation and recollection. The typical becomes the exceptional, and the exceptional becomes the typical. First-person narratives of nineteenth-century New Orleans are replete with this sort of reversed reality: we have ample anecdotes of transgressions, debaucheries and curiosities, but surprisingly little information on how plain folk lived their everyday lives.

So too are those sources describing flatboatmen: diary-keepers with an eye for the peculiar, not to mention travel writers enamored with local color and reporters with a taste for the sensational, were more likely to ignore the numerous ordinary, diligent, quiet young men and their long, uneventful days on the river, in favor of the swaggering hero, the brawling hooligan, the tall tale, and the occasional *bona fide* adventure. Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro's circa-1840 description is prototypical:

100. Hulbert, *Paths of Inland Commerce*, 70–71.

> The crew of a flat-boat is generally composed of five or six daredevils armed to the teeth with bowie-knives and pistols; the sworn foes of [drinking] unadulterated water, equally alive to the attractions of a fight as of a mint-julep, the loudest in their applause of a theatrical performance, and invariably noisy everywhere: they are, in short, a concentrated essence of good and evil, and may truly be said to constitute, not the cream, but the cayenne and mustard of ordinary life in New-Orleans.[101]

Flatboatmen themselves, usually little schooled and preoccupied with their work, rarely recorded their own experiences. Thus, their legacy has mostly been documented by others, whose eyes and ears sought out deviance and drama rather than monotonous normalcy. Collective memory, transmitted through folk tales, beadime stories, dime novels, and Mike Fink stories, reinforces this disproportionate coverage, oftentimes tainting (or exalting) an entire group with a reputation of numerical exceptionality.

Historian Michael Allen, inspired by William H. Goetzmann's groundbreaking research on Rocky Mountain fur trappers, studied more than seventy accounts written by flatboatmen themselves, with the goal of characterizing the *heart* of the statistical bell-shaped curve rather than its exceptional fringes. Allen found that most flatboatmen, from the steamboat age to the Civil War, were white men of Anglo or Celtic heritage; common hands ranged in age from late teens to early twenties, and captains from late twenties to forties, or older. The former were usually bachelors; the latter married men with children, a status that steamboats helped foster by dramatically speeding return trips. Some flatboat operations employed foreign immigrants, pure- or mixed-blood Indians, or blacks (both free and enslaved). Women sometimes rode as passengers or worked as cooks on larger commercial operations.[102]

The fraternity of antebellum flatboatmen, Allen discovered, broke down into "various levels of commitment, or castes." At the top were the "merchant navigators" and the "agent flatboatmen," who captained or contracted expeditions to deliver clients' cargo to New Orleans on a regular basis. They were professionals who carefully managed their enterprises, insured their trips, hired and fired help, and maintained business relationships with New Orleans merchants. Usually husbands and fathers and

101. Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, *Random Shots and Southern Breezes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), 1:58.

102. Michael Allen, "The Riverman as Jacksonian Man," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (August 1990): 305–320; Allen, *Western Rivermen*.

often pillars of the community, these merchant navigators and agents took no unnecessary risks and wanted nothing to do with those who did.

These river capitalists shared the waters with "farmer flatboatmen," family farmers who supplemented their main occupation with an occasional marketing trip to convert surplus harvests into cash. (The etymologically mysterious term "hoosier" came to describe such amateur flatboatmen of the Ohio River region. Perhaps because so many farmer-boatmen came from Indiana, "hoosier" by the early 1830s came to mean a native of that state.[103]) Like their professional peers, these amateurs had much to lose if trips were viewed as opportunities for escapism, if interactions turned violent, or if alcohol or indulgence compromised judgment.

Working under each flatboat captain were anywhere from one to a dozen helpers. Crew roles and skills varied; the captain of the Indiana-based *Davy Crockett* (1834) employed a "steersman & pilot," a bowsman, a cook, and a "Clerk & Journalist."[104] Usually, crews simply comprised "common boatmen," or "hands." They were oftentimes teenagers or twenty-somethings on their first paying job (and first long-distance trip), helping deliver their fathers', uncles', or neighbors' produce to market. Other hands were hired by agents for merchant navigators and had no relationship with the cargo owners. Still others were transients or men from other trades looking to fill employment gaps. "[I]nexperienced, but motivated," the common flatboatman, wrote Allen, sought "adventure and a few dollars to get his start in life."[105] The opportunity also provided the lad with a shot at doing something risky and important—to accomplish something that his peers and elders had done, and expected him to do. The voyage to New Orleans served as a rite of passage between boyhood and manhood, between dependence and independence, between the familiar and the foreign. Once that rite had been secured, once or twice or a handful of times, common flatboatmen usually made their living in other endeavors.

Beyond mastering river navigation, a boatman also had to be knowledgeable, resourceful, and savvy. Captains bore responsibility for bringing these attributes to bear, but common hands also had a stake in the voyage's success and played a critical role in it. Boats had to be constructed properly without the benefit of official guidelines or inspections; according to

103. Jonathan Clark Smith, "Not Southern Scorn But Local Pride: The Origins of the Word *Hoosier* and Indiana's River Culture," *Indiana Magazine of History* 103, no. 2 (June 2007): 183–189.

104. Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 8–9.

105. Allen, "Riverman as Jacksonian Man," 317.

one observer in 180[illegible] "many of the accidents that happen in navigating the Ohio and Mississippi [owing] to the unpardonable carelessness and penuriousness of the boat builder."[106] Once afloat, cargo had to be handled properly and protected from rain, rot, mold, infestations, and pirates. Barrels leaked, got wet, popped their heads, or cracked open; contents spilled or developed dreaded mildew growth; "flour turn[ed] sour."[107] Fowl lay vulnerable to predators; in one case, minks infested a docked flatboat and killed numerous chickens on multiple nights.[108] Livestock had to arrive healthy and calm. Both sustenance and well-being of the crew were paramount, afflictions such as sunburn, dysentery, pneumonia, and yellow fever (not to mention hypothermia and drowning) made the flatboat trade a major health risk. Tying up at night prevented exposure to the dangers of nocturnal travel, but increased vulnerability to thieves and marauders; crews regularly slept with hand on club or gun. When things went wrong, captains had to be quick thinkers in mitigating damages and recovering losses. For example, one three-boat, sixteen-man expedition carrying lumber from Wheeling in 1807 shipwrecked disastrously, requiring the captain to reconstitute the cargo in smaller form. Their solution: break their lumber into staves and proceed to New Orleans to sell them to coopers.[109] Even when sailing went smoothly, captains had to decide whether miscellaneous upcountry produce should be traded en route for standard commodities such as cotton, sugar, bricks, or firewood, for which buyers in New Orleans could always be found.

Approaching the wharf at New Orleans brought the challenges of claiming a berth and safely poling into place amid swirling river traffic. Once docked, finding a trustworthy cash-carrying buyer at the right time, place, and price presented a tense challenge, given that hundreds of other captains vying to do the same thing created a buyer's market. Money changers, banks, credit lines, and other financial players had to be evaluated judiciously. Prices could plummet between loading upstream and unloading in New Orleans, a possibility to which wise captains responded by diversifying their cargo. Currency being so sundry and crude in this era, river traders had to keep an eye out for counterfeit money, a huge problem

106. Ashe, *Travels Performed in 1806*, [illegible]0.

107. Adam Hodgson, *Remarks During a Journey Through North America in the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821* (Samuel Whiting, New York, 1823), 32.

108. Jacquess, "Journals of the Davy Crockett," 16.

109. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division for Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, *Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940), 101.

up and down the river.[110]

Bureaucracy also demanded attention: docking required the payment of a wharfage fee, and if the voyage encountered losses, the captain had to register a "Ship Captain's Protest" with the one of New Orleans' fourteen notaries public. This notarized record documented what happened (vessel problems, wreckage, pirate attack, etc.), usually for insurance purposes. Some flatboat captains hired clerks to handle all inventory, money, and paperwork matters, indicating how professionalized the Western flatboat trade had grown by the mid-antebellum era.[111]

New Orleans itself presented additional risks. The city's criminal element targeted certain flatboatmen as naive bumpkins flush with cash, while its mosquito-borne yellow fever virus disproportionately afflicted newcomers. Fearful of quarantining returning crews that might have been infected in the epidemic-plagued city.[112] If all went well, getting one's money and one's self safely home presented the next trial, and many a crewmember failed in either or both. For a successful flatboat captain and crew to evade this minefield of tribulations required not just physical brawn and navigational acumen but also a keen business sense, jack-of-all-trades mechanical skills, personal discipline, leadership, family wisdom, and the bearing of cautious responsibility.

Estwick Evans, who traveled the river in the 1810s, sensed that the popular perception of the brash brawler did not match his observations. "The boatmen of the west," he acknowledged,

> are conspicuous for their habits of . . . swearing. [M]y ears were shocked by their oaths and curses. . . . [But] I witnessed much less intemperance than information previously obtained had led me to anticipate. . . . I may add, that I have often heard of the low conversation, which is said to prevail among the boatmen of the west; and also of their quarrelsome and fighting habits. All these practices are much less than they are represented to be.[113]

110. William O. Stoddard, *Abraham Lincoln: A True Story of a Great Life* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1884), 54.

111. One example is Jacquess, "Journal of the Davy Crockett," 8–24; "Notaries Public for N. Orleans," *New-Orleans Directory & Register* (New Orleans: John Adems Paxton, 1830), unpaginated.

112. "New-Orleans, Sept. 4," *Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), October 2, 1823, p. 2; "Extract of a Letter to the Editors of the National Advocate," *Baltimore Patriot*, June 19, 1826, p. 2.

113. Evans, "Pedestrious Tour," in *Early Western Travels*, 1:260–261.

> The numerous stories which have so often been circulated, and believed respecting the cruel modes of fighting . . . among the boatmen of the west are, generally speaking, untrue. During the whole of my tour, I did not witness one engagement, or see a single person who bore those marks of violence which proceed from the inhuman mode of fighting, said to exist in the west, particularly in Kentucky and Tennessee. The society of this part of the world is becoming less savage, and more refined.[114]

Historian Michael Allen found that most flatboatmen were not the "swashbuckling Alligator Horses,'—mud-drinking, fighting, gambling, promiscuous frontier adventurers"—of popular legend. The typical riverman by contrast, could be described as "a Jacksonian man—an expectant entrepreneur who worked tirelessly for the main chance and reveled in the promise of capitalism, the industrial revolution, and modern America." Working the western rivers simply offered a way to make a living to more than 200,000 Americans over half a century. Flatboatmen thus resembled other working Americans of the era more than their colorful folk counterparts. "[R]ivermen were very much a part of the Jacksonian society they supposedly sought to escape." Allen continued:

> Boatmen were modern men. They had traveled and seen something of the world. They had visited large cities, seen urban squalor, and experienced ethnic diversity. They commuted home on the decks of steam-powered riverboats. They attended church and some even signed temperance pledges. They read newspapers, talked of politics, and became involved in the hotly contested elections of that era.[115]

Authors of *The Navigator*, the western river guide book published in the 1810s, would have concurred with Allen's assessment:

> This voyage [down the Ohio to New Orleans and back] performed[,] the trader returns doubly invigorated, and enabled to enlarge his vessel and cargo, launch out again; this is repeated, until . . . he sets himself down in some town or village as a wholesale merchant, druggist or apothecary, practicing physi-

114. Ibid., 344.
115. Allen, "Riverman as Jacksonian Man," 305–306, 319–320.

> cian or lawyer . . . render him respectable in the eyes of his neighbors. . . .[116]

This characterization would accurately foretell Abraham Lincoln's post-flatboat career.

116. *The Navigator* (1814), 33.