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 travel ~ 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 17,757, plus 14,338 people of African ancestry, mostly enslaved—generally used Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh) or 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 Allegheny 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.

The stroke of a 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 maximally 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 restless flow, Pittsburgh bookbinder 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.

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, hale-looking Kentuckian, with a young and pretty wife, two or three negro-servants, and two small children. He was a fair specimen of the rough and frank Kentucky character ... an independent farmer who had swarmed from the old homestead hive in Kentucky where land already became 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 cadasters. 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 their personal-
Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s

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.

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 settlers traveled this route, the numerous break-of-bulk junctions and extensive overland travel made it hopelessly inadequate at handling heavy freight, even after completion of the National Road in 1817. Not until canals and railways were built in the 1830s–50s did this route attract substantial freight traffic.

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

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 hosted increased traffic with the French colonization of the Mississippi Valley. By the 1730s, shipments mostly of furs from upper Louisiana flowed downstream to New Orleans at rates of 80,000 pounds sterling per year, and increased in Spanish colonial times to around $4 million annually. 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. It grew again 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.

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 260,900. 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, including non-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. Reverence for the great river, and grandiose visions 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 the commerce of the immense territory. . . . You may [sail for] 1000 miles from New Orleans to the Red river...up the Arkansas river, . . . the Missouri, and its branches . . . to the falls of St. Anthony and the same distance from New Orleans up the Illinois . . . the big Illinois, . . . the Tennessee . . . the Cumberland, and . . . the Ohio up to Pittsburgh. Thus New Orleans has to its rear this immense territory, [plus] the coast of Mexico and West India 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 and doubt the most important commercial point on the face of the earth.

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

French traders who follow . . . into the head branches of the Mississippi to purchase furs[,] make of [the yellow ash tree] periaguys [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 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 . . . cannot stand upright in them, without fear of falling; others on the contrary carry besides 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 “bateau.” The improvements meant less risk, more space, more power, more oars and poles in the water (perhaps even a sail), and 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 pegs and iron nails phased out 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

Appendix A

252

Easterner in the 1820s,
is the singular, whimsical, and amusing spectacle, of the var-
ieties of water-craft, of all shapes and structures . . . . [I]n this
land of freedom and invention . . . there are [specimens] re-
ducible 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.

Wrote a later observer, “no accurate classification can be made of the var-
iety of kinds of craft engaged in this vast traffic. Everything that could
float . . . was commandeered into service, and what was found unsuitable
for the serious purposes of commercial transportation was passed off
whenever possible on unsuspecting emigrants. . . .” From this decen-
tralized creative chaos of frontier experimentation, certain forms proved
more effective than others, and a broad taxonomy of Western river craft
typologies emerged.

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 Ameri-
can flatboat voyage to the foreign city of New Orleans occurred in May
1782, piloted by a Revolutionary War veteran named Jacob Yoder of the
Monongahela River, near future Pittsburgh. The southward flow of
Western produce increased after 1787, when Gen. James Wilkinson es-
tablished a secret alliance with the Spanish in New Orleans to accept
Western exports. Flatboats bearing raw materials and foodstuffs for the
New Orleans market would thence prove to be a key force fueling West-
ern development. The rustic vessels of oak, poplar, or pine—“clumsy

11. Flint, Recollections of the last Ten Years, 13–14.
12. Hulbert, Paths of Inland Commerce.
Samuel Hazard (Philadelphia: William F. Geddes, 1834), 295. For an earlier document-
ed journey, see “Down the Mississippi in 1767: The Journey of George Morgan,” Times-
construction,” observed one traveler, “but very burthensome”—typically measured twelve to twenty feet in width and twice or four times that in length, capable of carrying thirty tons in the early years and nearly ten times that amount later on. 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"tendele," caboose, or "wigwam") covered the entire deck, the craft was called a “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 “box.” Other reimbursed them by their origin or destination (“New Orleans,” “Kentucky,” or “Arkansas boat”) or their cargo (“tobacco,” “horse,” or “cattle boats”). The French called them "voitures" (carts), "carriages," or "chalans" (rafts). Most famously flatboats were called “broad horns,” reputedly for the long oars or “sweeps” protruding on each side, or, alternately, for the cattle horns traditionally mounted on the prow.

Captains often christened their flatboats with dramatic or whimsical names to inspire esprit 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,” “Sally,” “Elizabeth”), while others reflected patriotism (“Republican, Thomas Jefferson, Fair America, Sovereign”), regional pride (“Kentucky, Cincinnati”), drama (“Alligator, Galatia, Adventure, Thunder, Hurricane”), irony (“Queen Mary, Dolphin, Flying Mary, Mayflower”), and self-deprecation (“True Poverty, Hard Times, Fearnought, Drunkard, Escape”). Whatever their name or nickname, flatboats were viewed by the barons of commerce as the
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 sawn 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 could cost a dollar 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, skills, 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.

A number of factors influenced when flatboatmen “cut loose” and launched. Most rivermen avoided departures 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 and scourges

---

19. Ashe, _Travels Performed in 1806_.
Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s

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 travelers’ 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 small tributaries, high late-winter and springtime water (called “freshes”) were absolutely essential to reach the main channel (“going out with the fresh”), such rivulets were otherwise unnavigable. 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. Concluded The Navigator,

The best seasons for navigating the Ohio are in spring and autumn. The spring season commences at 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 close.

Upon cutting loose, flatboaters 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 leaned left or right depending on the meander) was more difficult than it seems, requiring significant human force against crosscurrents, strong winds, and on-going obstacles. Launching, docking, and dislodging from sandbars required special brawn and teamwork. Veterans handled these challenges

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 hulloo to the hands to pull out.” Only too soon would they find themselves spiraling uncontrollably at the mercy of a complex and unforgiving force. It got worse downriver, according to this 1808 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 enjoy the thousand beauties of this delightful stream. But on the Mississippi you are descending through an immense unimproved wilderness, and with the rapidity of the stream, obstructed with endless islands, sandbars, snags, sawyers, and planters...25

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, boredom, 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 crew members stumbled across the swaying floor cramped with barrels, stacks, and sometimes live animals. Boatmen might eat heartily, though by no means delectably, if 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. A crew of five, traveling on December 25, 1834, enjoyed an on-board Yuletide feast of “the shank of a shoulder, some dried pumpkins, corn dodger & coffee,” prepared by a full-time cook.26
Fish and game offered both fresh victuals and amusing sport. Catfish, buffalo fish, pike, sturgeon, suckers, herring, eels, and soft-shell turtles could be hooked, netted, or trapped. Turkeys, 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 on the boat’s crew.”

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.

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.” 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 an acre 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. Lashing up might lead to a “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.”

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

29. Evans, “Pedestrious Tour,” in Early Western Travels, 8:344.
30. “Chillicothe,” Indiana Centinel (Vincennes, IN), March 4, 1820, p. 3.
32. Flint, Recollections of the Last Ten Years, 105.
Great Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, five days thence to the confluence with the Mississippi, and three to four weeks from there to New Orleans. Such was the experience of George Hunter, who departed Pittsburgh on June 15, 1804, arrived in Natchez on July 14 and remained until July 31, and arrived in New Orleans on August 7. Total travel time: over six weeks. Voyage length, however, varied greatly depending on current, wind, weather, rapids, 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.” Each passing year saw new navigational improvements, more obstacles removed, and further developments 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 noted 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-traversed 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 Traders’ Useful Guide in Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers (Pittsburgh: Zadok Cramer, 1806), 125. See also page 37 of 1814 edition.
nothing to your progress but a few eddies. . . .” George Hunter apparently concurred with that advice, having floated “night & day” in slow water from Natchez to New Orleans in seven days. 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.” Lanterns, torches, and deck fires were used to spot floating obstacles and warn oncoming vessels.

Other rivermen warned against nighttime travel absolutely. “It 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. . . .” Still others—probably the majority—navigated opportunistically, floating into the night if they thought favorable conditions mitigated the danger, and docking in daylight 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.”

Navigation practices changed after 1830–31, when Capt. Henry Shreve deployed two special steamboats to remove banks, debris 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. But darkness veiled threats beyond mere floating debris, and prudent flatboaters 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.

37. The Navigator (1814), 165–166.
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) of 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. 4 (hereafter cited as THNOC).
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 tobacco, flour, whiskey, hemp, tobacco, bagging, and bale-ropes, 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, “shipped from regions, thousands of miles apart, floated to a common point of union.”44 In other cases, “[s]alt, iron, sugar 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, cordages, 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. 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 com[,] 11,000 weight of pork, 3 thousand weight of beef in barrels, 3 large steers, 15 bushels of oats, 40

44. Flint, Recollections, 103–104.
45. Hulbert, Paths of Inland Commerce, 65.
kegs of lard, 30 dozen of chickens & 40 Turkeys.47

When heading into Southern plantation country, flatboats delivered “barrel pork” to planters for feeding their slaves. Others carried slaves themselves. The Mary, for example, bore “40 barrels whiskey, 6 barrels potatoes, 13 barrels & kegs lard, 2 casks spun yarn, and 2 negroes” to New Orleans according to an 1807 manifest. A few miles behind came the Charlotte with “8 negroes” among its tobacco, flour, butter, pork and saddles.

Then there were the live animals: squealing swine, gobbling turkeys, clucking chickens, mooing cows, neighing horses. The nervous and confused beasts—“almost as great a medley . . . as ever Noah could have stored”—created only half the cacophony at the various river landings; flatboatmen provided the rest:

The boisterous gaiety of the hands, the congregations, the moving picture of life on board the boats. . . . The hands travel about from boat to boat, make inquiries, and acquaintances, and form alliances to aid mutual assistance to each other, on their descent . . . New Orleans. . . . After an hour or two passed in this way, they spring on shore to raise the wind in town. It [benefits] the people of the village, if [the hands] do not become riotous in the course of the evening; in which case I have often seen the most summary and strong measures taken.

About midnight the uproar is all hushed . . . Next morning at the first dawn, the bugles sound. Every thing in and about the boats . . . is in motion, [and] in half an hour, are all under way.

The fleet unites once more at Natchez or New Orleans, and, although they live on the same river, they may, perhaps, never meet each other again on the earth.

48. Ibid., 22.
49. 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), 51 and 58.
51. Flint, Recollections of the Last Ten Years, 103–104.
Some flatboats docked for extended periods, serving as waterborne workshops for tanners, blacksmiths, and toolmakers, or as dry-goods stores complete with “handsomely arranged shelves.” Others tied up near towns and functioned as free housing for the crew or warehousing for their cargo—often to the displeasure of local innkeepers 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, or, by another, one-quarter their initial dollar-per-foot construction cost. Flatboats thus not only transported cargo; they comprised 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.

Prior to the mid-1810s, travelers had two options in returning 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 descendant 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.
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”\textsuperscript{54}.) Their crews battled the same conditions as their ancient forbears—on precisely the same resources: wind, current, and manpower.

A typical Mississippi River keelboat weighed twenty to sixty tons, measured sixty to eighty feet long and ten to fifteen feet wide, and drew about two feet of water. Larger keelboats, sometimes dubbed “larges,” sported two sails or more manpower. What they sacrificed in durability and carrying capacity, keelboats gained in maneuverability: the narrow, streamlined design permitted crewmembers to row, pole, pull, “warp,” or sail their way up a river. The trick was to avoid the middle and the cutbank 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... Any impediments near the shore, must either be surmounted, or the river crossed to avoid them...”\textsuperscript{55} Once they 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 or 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 “Kentucky” was said to be “the best man at a pole,” while Frenchmen proved

---

\textsuperscript{54} As quoted by McDermott, “Western Journals of Dr. Geo. Hunter,” 10.
\textsuperscript{55} Flint, \\textit{Recollections of the Last Ten Years}, 91–92.
\textsuperscript{56} Hoagland, “Transportation on the Mississippi,” 113; James, Mak, and Walton, \\textit{Western River Transportation}, 15–17; Flint, \\textit{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,” “snags,” “bends,” “wreck-heaps,” and “shoots, a corruption . . . of the French ‘chute.’” A boat “swinging” out of control and exposing its flanks 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 the roots or branches . . . fasten into the mud and become as firm when standing in the forest. Should a boat be so unfortunate to strike one of these, it would in all probability prove fatal.

A bobbing motion, cutting the surface of the water, earned sawyers their name. When planters and sawyers broke lose 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 . . .” Foggy conditions forced crews to call out blindly to other vessels or to the bank to gauge their whereabouts, a tense exchange that often denigrated into “obscenity, abuse, and blasphemy . . . sometimes to the length of exchanging musket shots.”

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, when it lies in the harbour has one or more fiddles scraping continually aboard, to which you often see the boatmen dancing.

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 crew than flatboats and, with less 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 31, 91–92.
horse or foot the equally dangerous Natchez Trace or the Unicoy Road, across eastern Mississippi back to the Ohio River Valley. Given the ease of flatboating downriver 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. Lightning storms could prove fatal. “Shears,” errant currents that swiped across the river with no apparent warning, could wrench a steering oar from a pilot’s hands and send a vessel spiraling. Wrecks abounded; broken-up vessels littered the banks 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 1818. “[f]loating barrels of flour are often seen in the Mississippi; and hundreds of barrels of wheat, and hogsheads of tobacco lie in its shallows in a state of ruin.” 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 waterfront during the week of Lincoln’s arrival, its crew probably the victims of crime or accident. One expedition approaching New Orleans found a dead man drifting among its flatboats, spotted another corpse under the tree the next day, and saw a third moments later. 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 tried 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.  

62. Evans, “Pedestrious Tour, In Early Western Travels, 8:260 and 8:30.
64. Diary of Micajah Adolphus Clark, as transcribed in “Flatboat Voyage to New Orleans Told Of In a Diary Kept in 1848,” Times-Democrat, July 9, 1895, 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 H. Dixon, “A Traffic History of the Mississippi River System,” Document No. 11, National Waterways Commission.
ners rigged keelboats with horses, tethering the unfortunate beasts to poles geared to paddles, or trotting them awkwardly on deck-based treadmills. The results were comical for a spectator, costly for the entrepreneur, and sometimes fatal for the horses.

The solution to the upriver problem emerged from the increasingly successful British and American efforts of the late eighteenth century to harness the pressure released by boiling water. Mechanics competed to adapt steam engine technology to watercraft, with some of the most promising work coming out of Philadelphia. In 1786, John Fitch attached a three-inch-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. 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. 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.


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—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 songs seeing it slip 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 to 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].”

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. River levels at 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 a fire broke out on board. Then, while anchored below Louisville, the passengers felt an odd shock wave. They 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

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 beneath their feet would prove far more historically significant than the comet 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 expected, 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 contra-current 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 sank it. By then, the technology had proved 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 journal 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 traveled communities. 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 a piece 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 side 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.

No wonder elders would later view “the year 1811 [as] the *annus mirabilis* or the West.”

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, fueling 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. 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 80,631,934 acres from Michigan to Louisiana. The blossoming society and its agrarian export

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

The economy soon spawned a manufacturing sector; imprecisely measured in the early years, it reached $84 million in 1840, $188 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. The Mississippi River and its tributaries served as the vital arteries for this explosive economic growth, and steamboats rendered them efficient.

Steamboat transportation also transformed life on the river. Horse-powered 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. Keelboatmen found other jobs, often becoming (as Samuel Clemens explained) “a deck-hand or mate or pilot on the steamer.” Others continued to row, warp, and pole their antiquated 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.” 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 resultant 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 455 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. These figures reflect official records for years in which they are available. Actual

77. “Marine—Port de la Nouvelle Orléans,” *New Orleans Bee*, February 24, 1829, p. 3, c. 4 and March 22, 1829, p. 2, c. 3. Survey of “Maritime” columns of *Bee* conducted by author from April 1, 1828, through March 31, 1829.
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 caused by 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 in the remainder of the nineteenth century, usually guided by poor independent farmers and traders who squatted along the uptown batture, or “tramps,” as one observer put it. About two hundred such vessels arrived annually to New Orleans into the late 1880s—the last “Survivors of the Old Flat-Boating Days.”

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,” “ruffians,” and “Kaintocks.” We also conjure up figures like Mike Fink, the hard-living boatman who was later mythologized into a Paul Bunyan-like “big man” character of the Western rivers after his violent death in 1823. 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, conditioned, balanced, or debunked accordingly.

If the word “wilderness” implies nature touched 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. Haines, Mak, and Walton, Western River Transportation, 21.


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. 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 completely wilderness—less one softens the subjective 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 that state. If the word “pioneer” applies to the initial representatives of a group settling a 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-eye” (that is, the “indigenous backwoodsmen” nicknamed for the Ohio forest nut 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.”

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 that 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. 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

Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s

grew from zero to 150. The Mississippi Valley that young Abraham cast his eyes upon in 1828 and 1831 hosted a small agrarian American society expanding steadily 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 as extensively as transportation and communication networks permitted. Wilderness, frontier, and pioneers had all shifted, by this time, hundreds of miles westward.

Lincoln traveled the Mississippi in an era when Western river traffic had become dominated by steamers and flatboats. Freed from the constraints of the legally overruled Fulton-Livingston monopoly, steamers experienced their greatest surge in productivity in those years; 118 passed western waters in 1828, and 183 did so in 1831. They weighed on average 500 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 operations in waters traversed by Lincoln, usually in shallow tributaries.

Flatboats, on the other hand, remained competitive, costing about $10 per ton of cargo in 1830 compared to $14.25 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 do 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.

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

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. This rate equates to five New Orleans-bound flatboats per day, or about one every two daylight hours, not including vessels bound for intermediary 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.

The above 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 count in 1818, “Six hundred and forty-three flatboats were counted descending the Mississippi and Ohio, by a person in a steamboat in his passage up.” If that trip took about thirty days, then roughly twenty flatboats passed daily—a pace corroborated by a boatman who traveled the river in late January 1835 “pretty well lined with flatboats... well on to 20 passed us to day.” 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. 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 Elders 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’œil [glance].

The number of flatboats thus passing [any one point on the lower river] may be estimated at more than 1000 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 forty ocean-going ships, thirty-three steamboats, and thirty-nine

flatboats arriving to New Orleans during a single week in late November 1835, a daytime rate of one vessel every thirty or forty minutes, not including departures or local traffic.91 Still another account estimated “upwards of four hundred ships of all nations . . . more than three deep along the Leveé” in 1806, 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. Riverine and atmospheric conditions also clustered the flow: flatboatman William Ward, for example, joined a fleet of “about 60 Flat Boats . . . 71 counted” waiting out a 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 When river levels were very low, traffic all but disappeared because of slow 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.

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—307,300 tons in 1831 alone—arrived at that city’s wharves, guided there by an estimated 50,000 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:

92. Ashe, Travels Performed in 1806, 319.
94. Louisiana State Gazetteer, June 27, 1826, p. 2.
Let commerce next unfold her various store
Conveying it 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,
Its knowledge would increase, and arts abound,
The blessed fruits of peace, thro’ nations round: . . .

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 genius 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 cycling 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. The men 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 some 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, . . . with the

98. Hulbert, Paths of Inland Commerce, 70.
99. Another hypothesis views the term Dixie as a derivative of the Mason-Dixon Line, while a third theory traces it to an earlier 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 a 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 heel.” 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 geniewine, double-acting engine, can out-run, out-swim, chew more tobacco and spit less, drink more whiskey and keep soberer than any other man in these localities.”

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 skewed 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 sensations 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 danger and drama rather than monotonous normalcy. Collective memory, transmitted through folk tales, bedtime stories, dime novels, and Disney movies, reinforces this disproportionate coverage, oftentimes tainting (or exalting) an entire group with the reputation of numerical exception.

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, 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


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 an amateur flatboatman 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 or merchant navigators and had no relationship with the cargo owner. 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

one observer in 1806, “many of the accidents that happen in navigating the Ohio and Mississippi [owe] to the unpardonable carelessness and penuriousness of the boat builder.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{107} Fowl lay vulnerable to predators; in one case, minks infested a docked flatboat and killed numerous chickens on multiple nights.\textsuperscript{108} Livestock had to arrive healthy and calm. The 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, forcing the captains to reconstitute their cargo in smaller form. Their solution: break their lumber into staves and proceed to New Orleans to sell them to cooperers.\textsuperscript{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, and 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

\textsuperscript{106} Ashe, \textit{Travels Performed in 1806}, 60.
\textsuperscript{107} Adam Hodgson, \textit{Remarks During a Journey Through North America in the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821} (Samuel Whiting: New York, 1823), 32.
\textsuperscript{108} Jacquess, “Journals of the Davy Crockett,” 16.
\textsuperscript{109} Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects-Works Projects Administration, \textit{Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1940), 101.
Western River Commerce in the Early 1800s

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 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 el-
ement targeted certain flatboatmen as naïve bumpkins flush with cash,
while its mosquito-borne yellow fever virus disproportionately afflicted
newcomers who needed to quarantine or returning crews that might have
taken 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
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, fatherly wisdom,
and a 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; my 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 boat-
men of the west; and also of their quarrelsome and fighting
habits. All these practices are much less than they are repre-
sented to be:113

110. William O. Stoddard, Abraham Lincoln: A True Story of a Great Life (New York:
Ford, Howard, & Hulbert, 1884), 54.
111. One example is Jacques, “Journals 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, 860–261.
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 proceeded 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.  

Historian Michael Allen found that most flatboatmen were not the “swashbuckling ‘Alligator Horses,’—hard-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.  

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, he goes 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.
This characterization would accurately foretell Abraham Lincoln’s post-flatboat career.