

Steamboats and their role in Indian Removal

Steamboats, or steamers, were used during Indian Removal during the 1830s for both the shipping of supplies and passage of emigrants using the Arkansas, White, and Ouachita waterways. Steamers would also tow keelboats or flatboats with supplies, livestock, and even passengers. Cherokee and Chickasaw emigrants used steamers to transport them from Memphis down the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Arkansas River up to Little Rock and ultimately to Fort Coffee, Indian Territory. The Seminoles traveled up the Mississippi from New Orleans before reaching the Arkansas River that took them to Fort Gibson. Choctaw and Muscogee (Creek) emigrants traveled by steamer up the White River to Rock Roe, where they continued overland to Indian Territory. The Ouachita River was traveled from the Mississippi River up to Ecore Fabre at Camden, where emigrants would then disembark and continue overland.

Water routes were the preferred means of travel due to faster travel times and fewer hardships. Oftentimes, the steamers would travel during the day then dock so that travelers could disembark at night to cook and make camp. However if water levels were good, steamboats would run both day and night, unless stops were required in the contract. A trip by steamer from Memphis to Fort Coffee would take an average of eight to ten days.

Water routes were not without their hardships. Low water levels were a source of concern and would result in stalled or grounded boats and force the captains to dock prematurely before reaching their destination, ultimately making steamboat travel an expensive endeavor. One such example is illustrated by the bid of Clark and Buckner of Louisville, who offered to haul 1,200 tons of supplies to Fort Coffee in three trips at \$2.90 per hundred tons. If the water levels fell, Clark and Buckner required \$150 per day per boat until the water rose or the contractor unloaded the goods. They required an advance of \$1,000 or \$1,500 per boat to be paid at Little Rock with the remainder due upon return to Louisville or Cincinnati. (Paige, et al. 2010, 77)

While water travel was preferable to overland travel, it did not come without dangers. On October 31, 1837, during the removal of the Muscogees (Creeks) up the Mississippi River, the steamer *Monmouth* collided with the ship *Trenton* that was being towed downriver by the steamer *Warren* at Prophet Island Bend (or Profit Island Bend), split in two, sank, and killed more than 300 Muscogees (Creeks) aboard the *Monmouth* (Foreman, 187). Around the same time, the *Thomas Yeatman* experienced a boiler explosion which led to several crewmen being killed (Paige, et al. 2010, 121).

Simeon Buckner, a steamboat owner from Louisville, Kentucky, was hired to take an estimated 5,662 Chickasaws from Memphis to Fort Coffee on his six steamers: *Kentuckian*, *Cinderella*, *DeKalb*, *Fox*, *Cavalier*, and *Itasca*. The plan was for all Chickasaws to travel by steamer, but when word came of the *Monmouth* tragedy, many refused to travel by boat, leading to more Chickasaws emigrating over land than by water (Paige, et al. 2010, 121).

Seminole removal began in 1836 and was conducted by water route almost exclusively. Seminoles took a steamboat or schooner from Tampa Bay, the sailing ships being towed by steamboat from the mouth of the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Then the Seminoles continued their journey by steamboat up the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers all the way to Fort Gibson, Indian Territory. On the rare occasion that water levels made it necessary to disembark and travel overland, emigrants did not fare well due to hasty arrangements and lack of preparation for overland travel. (Knowles 2011, 212-213)

The last Cherokee removal party to travel through Arkansas was led by John Drew and included Cherokee Chief John Ross and family. When Ross's wife, Quatie, became ill along with several other members of the party, Ross purchased the steamboat *Victoria* at Tuscumbia, Alabama, and transported these ill Cherokees by water to Indian Territory. Sadly, Quatie died on February 1, 1839, aboard the *Victoria* and was buried in the Little Rock city cemetery. (Kent 2007)

Steamer use continued after Removal ended in order to provide subsistence to the removed tribes for one year after their relocation as agreed upon in their removal agreements. Additionally, steamboats remained active in the trade and commerce industry as evidenced by the purchase of the *Victoria*, once owned by John Ross for use in Cherokee removal, by John Brown of Batesville in 1840 to establish a regular trade route from Batesville to New Orleans. (Huddleston 1998, 24)

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Erin Fehr is the Archivist at the Sequoyah National Research Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where she has been since 2011. She received her BA in Music from Central Baptist College in Conway, Arkansas, and her MM in Musicology and MLIS from the University of Oklahoma. Erin is a member of the Society of American Archivists, Society of Southwest Archivists, and the American Indian Library Association.