

Steamboats and Riverports: Portal to the World

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The whistle signaled the steamboat's arrival and the port bustled to life for the inbound flow of people and goods and the outbound cargo destined for market. Steamboats transported people and cargo and both steamboats and the ports that linked river to land provided employment, commerce, cultural exchange, communication, and escape.

For Whites with money, steamboats elegantly transported and connected the elite with each other and with luxury goods and lifestyle. For free African Americans with money, the ships meant transportation on the deck—not in a cabin as the laws on the river followed the segregation laws of the land.¹ For workers, horizons expanded whether for Whites, free Blacks, or enslaved African Americans hired out by owners. For slaves in transit, the steamboat was the site of "...an occurrence so common, that no one, not even the passengers, appears to notice...though their chains clank at every step." ²

Steamboat employment mirrored society. Whites could aspire to be boat captains, mates, or pilots. Stewards, waiters, cooks, roustabouts, barbers, chambermaids, and firemen commingled Whites, free Blacks, and slaves; the further south, the higher the percentage of African Americans employed. Slaves hired out by owners might be allowed to keep "Sunday wages" thereby bringing a small income.³

Tons of Lower Mississippi River Valley cotton, sugar, rice and other products fueled the Industrial Revolution's factories and burgeoning cities. These commodities were packed into crates, sacks, or barrels providing work from forest to mill. Hauling by wagon meant business for wheelwrights, blacksmiths, and livery stables. Warehouses offered storage for outbound merchandise while townsfolk awaited inbound shoes, clothing, fabric, guns, foodstuffs, and every imaginable delight.

Smaller scale commerce brought extra money to farmers who would leave stacks of firewood for sale along the riverbank.⁴ Even small boat landings held the possibility for trade. Produce, eggs, and wild game could be sold to boat stewards for feeding passengers and crew. Sometimes, slaves were allowed to sell garden vegetables, fruit, eggs, or game for extra income. Crewmen willing to thwart the law might provide alcohol or firearms to slaves.

Cultural exchanges included fashion, news, and entertainment. Passengers sported the latest styles. Newspapers delivered world news. Singing and instrumental entertainment was often provided by African Americans, free and enslaved. Immigrants brought languages from around the world with French and Spanish still reflecting the region's colonial past.

¹ Buchanan, Thomas, C. *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, (2004), 61.

² William Wells Brown quoted in *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 81.

³ Ibid., 92.

⁴ Wolf, John Quincy. *Life in the Leatherwoods: An Ozark Boyhood Remembered*. Little Rock: August House, (1988), 155.

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Communication networks arose as slaves asked crew members to carry messages to family members who had been sold away. Crewmen, sometimes free to wander cities while a boat was in port, could watch for loved ones in an effort to reunite families.

Steamboats provided escape both physical and imaginary. People flocked to watch the boats, sparking the imagination for those stuck on land. Wages earned on the boats sometimes allowed slaves to purchase their own or loved one's freedom. Some slaves escaped by hiding on boats and traveling to free states or Canada and some slaves, hired to work on the boats, wandered off ship while in port and faded into the crowd and on to freedom. Whether escaping the tedium of agricultural work or the bonds of slavery, the steamboat embodied new possibilities.

A steamboat landing meant access to the world as described by John Quincy Wolf's account from Calico Rock, "This was a remote [area] far from telegraphs, railroads, and the great cities...Our one link with civilization was the steamboats...Most of the boats were modest in size...occasionally, during high water season, the great boats from the Mississippi, "floating palaces"...steamed up the White ...we were dazzled by their size and beauty."⁵

In larger ports, entertainment included the calliope as described in the Ft. Smith Herald in 1859, "At Pine Bluff, there was a circus steamboat with a calliope aboard. Just about dark, it struck up a tune..." Nothing could compete with the all-encompassing sound...All the clangor of Pine Bluff—the barking of her dogs—the lowing of her cows—the neighing of all her horses—the whooping of her fowls...it was furious music! Thirty miles up and down the river, the Negroes danced to it."⁶

Pine Bluff, Little Rock, Batesville, and Fort Smith thrived in the golden age of steamboats, but even private landings such as Lakeport would have been the scene of commerce, entertainment, and hope. Steamboats, laden with nostalgia, belie the con artists, horrific work conditions, boiler explosions, and hidden dangers that could sink a boat.⁷ Regardless, the opportunity and excitement of the steamboat and the ports that served them still resonates—well over a century later.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Huddleston, Duane, Sammie Cantrell Rose, Pat Taylor Wood, *Steamboats and Ferries on the White River: A Heritage Revisited*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, (1998), 44.

⁷ Leslie, James, W. *Pine Bluff and Jefferson County: A Pictorial History*. Virginia Beach, Virginia: The Donning Company, (1981), 101.

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Bio

Lenore Shoults serves as Executive Director of the Arts & Science Center for Southeast Arkansas. An undergraduate degree in art history, Masters in communication, and Ph.D. in heritage studies provided the foundation of interest in the topic of steamboats through the lenses of art, cultural dissemination, and regional heritage. Shoults's Ph.D. dissertation topic was Arkansas' history of pearl and shell. This examination of Native American usage through the pearl rush, button, and cultured pearl industries led to the awareness that steamboats transported tons of shell to button factories that lined Arkansas rivers. Riverboat captains often bought pearls from the people who had harvested the mussels for their shell—and when lucky, a pearl.