

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Steamboats of Yesteryear

Paddlewheel steamboats ruled the inland waterways of the U.S. for about a century. Before them, keelboats were commonly used for transportation, with men holding poles propelling them. Their normal speed was one mile an hour. Steam powered boats connected the nation as it entered the Industrial Age and were revolutionary in ferrying people and cargo.

In 1807 Robert Fulton launched the *Clermont*, which traveled from New York City to Albany on the Hudson River powered by steam emerging from its smokestack – a first! The 150-mile route took 32 hours - an astonishing rate of five miles per hour. This touched off the nation's steamboat craze. Now man could to some degree control wind, wave, tide, and current. America's rivers and streams became navigable two-way arteries.

Most steamboats of the 20th century were paddlewheel boats. Paddlewheelers had a hull and at least one wooden paddlewheel which had a circular center with spikes like a bicycle wheel. Planks were attached to the spokes, which were powered by steam. The steam was emitted from boilers filled with water and fueled by fire (initially wood based, and later coal based). Two types of paddlewheelers were prominent. Sidewheelers had 2 paddles, one on each side, and were more stable, as one wheel could be reversed allowing for greater maneuverability. Sternwheelers with one paddle at the rear of the hull were slower at first, but construction methods improved, and they became lighter and could travel on small tributaries more easily, so they became preferable.

By 1820 there were about 60 steamboats on the Mississippi River and its tributaries, and by 1860 about 1000. Cincinnati was prominent as a river town and commercial center. Soon after the first steamboat chugged by the city in 1811, it became active in the shipbuilding and repair businesses. From 1816 until 1880 Queen City shipyards produced 900 steamboats. Records document that 2237 steamboats were tied up at the Public Landing during 1835.



Island Queen

Paddlewheelers were used for transporting loads of agricultural and manufactured goods, construction materials, and people over many miles. Packetboats carried freight, mail, and people. Tugboats moved vessels as they entered/exited ports. Snagboats removed debris and stumps from rivers – making travel safer. Towboats pushed barges laden with commodities. Showboats were “floating palaces” with theaters, galleries, saloons, and ballrooms, and they brought entertainment to river towns. They would play calliopes to announce their arrival at each port. All these boats were active throughout the 16,000-mile system of inland waterways where over 50 rivers emptied into the Mississippi.

Navigation on rivers was dangerous. Mudbanks and sandbars shifted, and water levels rose and fell. Boats ran aground. Visibility was poor at night. The steam boilers could build up too much pressure and explode with disastrous consequences. Fire and collisions with flotsam or other boats also occurred. Two famous steamboat calamities were those of *General Slocum* (1904) when 1021 people died on the Mississippi, and the *Sultana* (1865) when 1192 perished in New York's East River. Most steamboats had brief lifespans, usually less than 5 years, as they wore out quickly, and accidents were common.

Steamboats were eventually replaced by newer forms of transportation. Railroads spread across the United States in the late 1800s. Trains had significant advantages. They were faster, safer, and capable of hauling more and could reach landlocked places that did not have access to waterways. In the 20th century cars, trucks, and airplanes were invented and began transporting passengers and freight. They further eroded the steamboat's dominance. But steamboats had been “high tech” and “new wave” in their day.

The bygone days of river travel have mostly passed, but excursion boats are still an attraction to tourists and travelers. Now they have modern engines- much safer than the old woodfired boilers. These replicas provide pleasure cruises that echo America's past.

Cincinnati prospered during the steamboat era, and it grew exponentially. The city marked this heritage during the Tall Stacks events from 1988-2006. This autumn twelve riverboats will again dock in greater Cincinnati at the River Roots Festival from October 8-12. The five-day event is a prelude to America's 250th anniversary, and celebrates the culture of the river, the steamboats of yore, and the nation's history.