

Flatboat Mondays



by Kathleen E. Jones

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BOSTON

“Flatboat Mondays” were a way of life for a great many pioneer families in the United States during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Just as we are used to the routine of traveling on our roads, so were the American pioneers who traveled down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Those rivers were the highways of their time. And the river towns of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Wheeling, West Virginia grew into big cities on those rivers. The transportation most people used on those river roads was the flatboat.

The Mississippi and the Ohio

The Ohio and Mississippi Rivers are two of the largest rivers in the United States. As settlers began to move into the Midwest in the early 1800s, they played an important part in developing the trade industry of the country.

The 2,320-mile path of the Mississippi River begins at Lake Itasca in the state of Minnesota. The Mississippi River ends its journey below the city of New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Ohio River begins where the Allegheny River and the Monongahela Rivers meet in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Ohio River then travels 981 miles west to join the Mississippi River at Cairo (CARE-oh), Illinois.

Before 1800, Conestoga wagons brought large loads of merchandise to the source of the rivers. People loaded the merchandise onto riverboats to be moved downriver and sold.



Map of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers

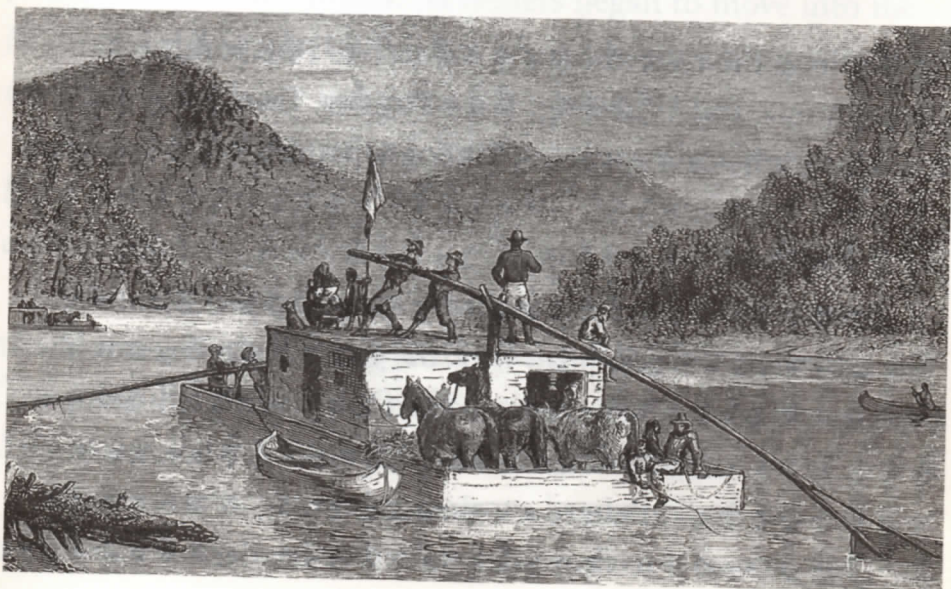
Trade along the rivers began in towns like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Wheeling, West Virginia. Years later, that trade led to the development of the steel industry in those towns.

The Flatboat

People needed a cheap and easy way to travel downriver. The answer was the flatboat. In 1782, Jacob Yoder became the first man to pilot a flatboat down the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers. It was called a flatboat simply because the bottom of the boat was flat. It didn't have a v-shaped bottom, as other boats do. This allowed it to float safely in only a few feet of water. It looked like a big floating box.

Almost anyone could build this kind of boat with the right tools. A group of men could build a flatboat in about thirty days. Flatboats could be made of boards tied together or put together with wooden pins. A kind of caulk, or sealing material, made the boat waterproof.

The sides of a flatboat were about five feet high. The size of the boat depended on what it was used for. Flatboats could be 20 to 100 feet long and 10 to 25 feet wide. The average flatboat was about 50 feet long and 12 feet wide. The flatboats had to be just the right size to make it through narrow places like Ohio River Falls. The falls narrowed to only 15 feet near Louisville, Kentucky. A wide flatboat could easily become stuck.



A flatboat carried people, animals, and supplies.

A flatboat could only travel downstream, with the current. Since it did not have any power of its own, like a paddle wheel or an engine, it moved along with the flow of the water. It was steered with six oars. The two long oars on each side of the boat were called *sweeps*. They were about thirty feet long and needed two men to handle each one. The back of the boat, or the stern, had another long steering oar. The prow, or front of the boat, had a shorter oar called a *gouger*. This was for fast-moving water. It took one man at the steering oar and one man at the gouger to control the boat.

A flatboat needed an average crew of five men to run it. If the boat was fully loaded, it sat about two feet deep in the water. Flatboats usually had a small roofed cabin in the center of the boat. The cabin usually had only one room, but on larger flatboats, two. This was where the crew or a family of pioneers slept. They cooked their meals in a fire built over a sandbox.

The smaller, less sturdy boats were called Kentuck boats. People used the Kentuck boats mostly on the shorter Ohio River. The bigger, sturdier boats were called Orleans boats because they would travel farther. They usually went all the way down the Mississippi to the port of New Orleans. The journey to New Orleans was long. It would take the crew almost six weeks to float down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River, and then down to New Orleans, if they traveled all day and night.

Who Used Flatboats?

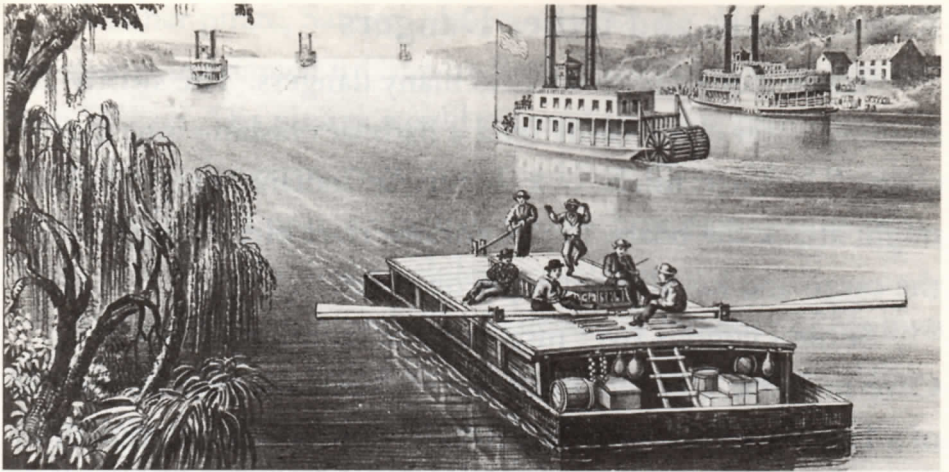
Farmers used flatboats to sell the extra crops they had. Flatboats carried Ohio farm products such as flour, salt, cider, and peach brandy. They also carried iron ore from Ohio mines and extra produce such as apples and potatoes. These were all loaded on the deck of a flatboat to take south. Flatboats could hold as many as 300 to 400 barrels of produce.

Once the flatboat reached New Orleans, the products would be sold. For instance, people in the New Orleans market might buy Monongahela flour, which was an important product of the Ohio region.

Tradesmen were also seeking a way to move their goods. Growth of territory in the interior of the country had the government looking for new trade routes. The flatboat could move the goods downriver to new areas for trade.

Families often joined together to share the cost of the flatboat. Pioneer families looking for a new place to settle were a common sight on the rivers, their flatboats piled high with their belongings. Those belongings often included basic supplies and livestock. Cows and chickens were needed for food and milk at the new home.

When the families found a good place to settle, they pulled their flatboat onto the shore. Then they would live on the flatboat until they built their new log cabin.



Flatboat and steamboats

By the beginning of the 1800s, many businesses had sprung up along the Ohio River. The first iron factories were large enough to begin to ship iron products. Glass factories sprang up. Boatyards and brickyards businesses were established. As businesses grew, they needed workers. The workers needed a place to live, so they moved into the small towns along the river. These businesses and factories then supplied goods and building materials to the towns. The towns grew larger.

Flatboats shipped products made in the factories and businesses along the rivers. Flour from Ohio was shipped southward. Brickmakers, potters, and gunsmiths made products that towns going up along the rivers needed. Cotton and wool weavers made cloth. Printers, rope makers, and brewers were hard at work making the supplies for the growing country.

River Pirates and Other Dangers

Travel along the rivers held many dangers. The swiftly running water could easily send a flatboat crashing into the shore. The boats might sink. American Indians along the river might attack the boats. And notorious river pirates might steal the cargo and kill all the people on board.

Several famous river pirates made their home base at Cave-in-Rock. Cave-in-Rock is a 55-foot-wide cave carved out of a limestone rock. It is in northern Kentucky along the Ohio River. Jim Wilson found the spot when he was traveling on a flatboat. He got stuck in a bad storm and used the cave for shelter. Later, he brought his family with him. He also brought enough supplies to start a tavern. This tavern became a place where many outlaws would gather. The outlaws became part of Wilson's gang.

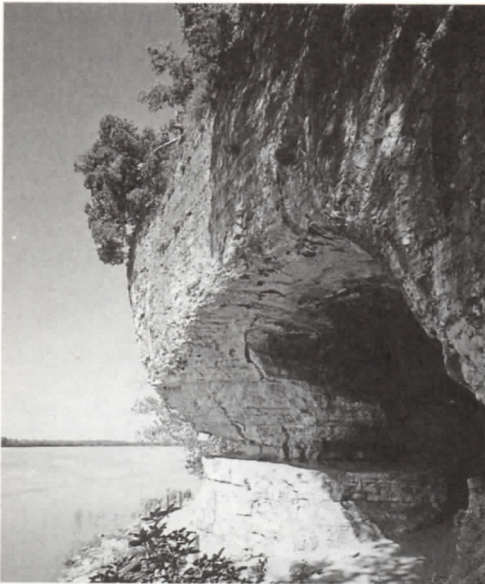
As flatboats passed by the tavern, they often pulled up. A thirsty pioneer might want to stop for a drink. The gang of outlaws would then capture the boats and steal the goods. New pilots would then take the flatboats down to New Orleans and sell all the merchandise.

When people began to get suspicious, Wilson's gang panicked. Many fled. But there was a reward on Wilson's head, dead or alive. Someone chose the first method, and that was the end of Jim Wilson.

Another pirate, Samuel Mason, came along. He took over the tavern and named it Cave-in-Rock. Mason was even sneakier than Wilson. His pirates would pretend to guide travelers through the dangerous waters of the Ohio River. They would steer the flatboat onto a sandbar or somehow damage the boat. Then they would rob the helpless travelers.

Mason's end was much like Wilson's. A member of his own gang, Wiley Harpe, killed Mason for the reward money. After that it was the turn of the Harpe Brothers to take over Cave-in-Rock and lure flatboat travelers to shore.

The last famous river pirate of the 1800s was a man named Colonel Plug. He worked alone. His scheme was to pretend to



have trouble on shore and call for help. When a boat stopped, he would rob them. One day Colonel Plug tried to disable a flatboat by pulling out the caulk that made it waterproof. He got trapped underneath the flatboat and drowned.

Pirating was not a job that lasted very long!

Cave-in-Rock on Ohio River

Saving and Recycling

Shipping goods overland was expensive. In the early 1800s, it cost \$5 to haul 100 pounds by wagon from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This would be the same as \$40 today. But it only cost \$1 to haul 100 pounds by flatboat. A flatboat shipment to New Orleans was faster and much cheaper than wagon shipment on a road.

Because flatboats moved by drifting, they only went one direction — downriver. The lumber of flatboats tells the story of the journey. At the end of the journey the boats were broken up. The boards were then used to build cabins for pioneer families who settled along the river. In the port of New Orleans, workers built many houses and early wooden sidewalks from the boards of flatboats.



Steamboat *Kabekona* on the Mississippi River, c.1915

Once flatboats reached New Orleans, the journey was over. If passengers wanted to return to Ohio or another place upriver, they had to walk or ride a horse. The trip back was a very long and dangerous journey. Eventually, ship builders made keelboats, which could travel upriver. The steamboat became another way to travel back upriver.

Two Famous Flatboatmen

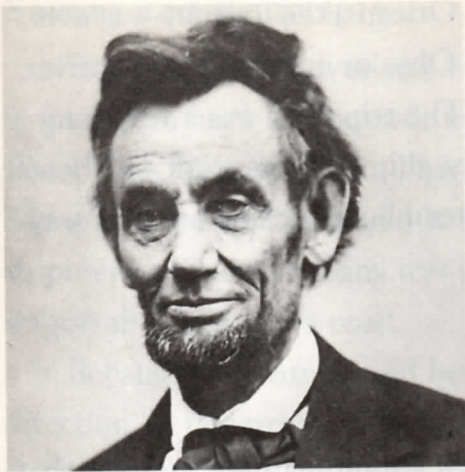
Abraham Lincoln

When Abraham Lincoln was a young man, he thought that navigating a flatboat downriver would be a great adventure. He was nineteen years old when his wish came true. It was in the spring of 1828.

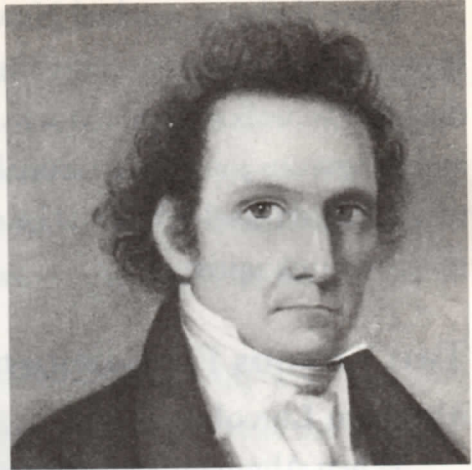
Lincoln began his journey down the Mississippi River with the son of a boat owner. Lincoln worked as a hired hand. His flatboat was taking pork, flour, cornmeal, and potatoes to the port of New Orleans. In New Orleans they were to sell the merchandise or trade it for cotton, sugar, and tobacco.

Trouble came on one of the last nights of the journey. Seven men attacked Lincoln and his friend as they slept. The two fought off the attackers and kept their goods safe. Lincoln got a scar above his right eyebrow from the fight.

Eventually, they arrived safely in New Orleans. While there, however, Lincoln and his friend saw a slave auction. Lincoln was deeply upset by how the enslaved people were



Abraham Lincoln



John James Audubon

treated. Viewing their suffering certainly contributed to Lincoln's horror of slavery, and to his ending it almost forty years later as President.

John James Audubon

On October 12, 1820, John James Audubon began his own journey down the Mississippi River on a flatboat. While he traveled on the flatboat, he kept a journal about his trip. He drew and painted pictures of the birds he saw and wrote down where he saw them. Audubon's trip on the flatboat continued until he reached New Orleans in January of 1821. Twelve years later, he published the first of four books that showed the birds of America in the places where they lived. Audubon was the first naturalist to study birds in their habitat.

Canals

Roads were built where they were needed, but they were very difficult to travel in the days of the pioneer. Rivers were easier to navigate, but they did not always take people where they needed to go. A canal was a way to get the best features of both.

A canal is a water road. It is a narrow waterway built by people to allow a boat to move from one waterway to another. Some canals connect rivers to other rivers. Others connect oceans to rivers. Still others connect a river to a larger town.



The C & O *Clipper* navigates the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal near Great Falls Tavern, Maryland, 1995.

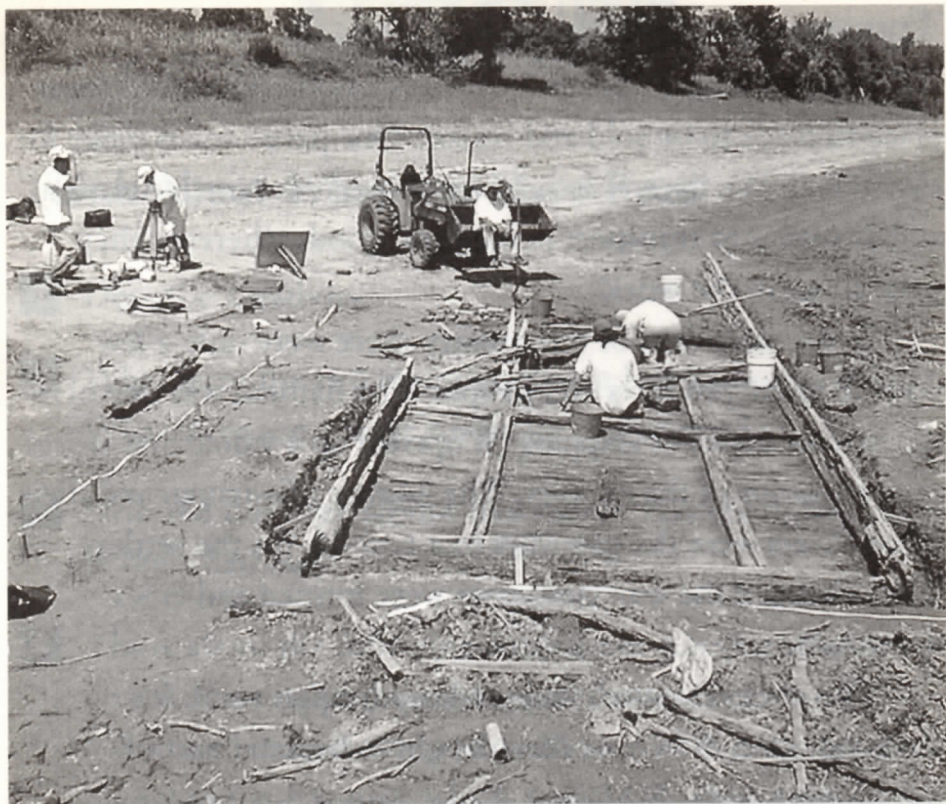
By 1790 there were 30 canal companies in 8 of 13 colonies. Hundreds of canals were built in America. Canals were important in the transportation of goods to areas in the same way that flatboats were. They brought produce, tobacco, flour, and other products on a boat to be sold to settlers or traded for other goods. Some of the most famous early canals were the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the Erie Canal, and the Potomac Canal.

A Flatboat in the 21st Century

In September of 2000, a man named John Schwegman made a startling discovery while walking along the Ohio River. It was just a few miles from where the Ohio joins the Mississippi River. He found half of the bottom of an early American flatboat, the largest piece of a flatboat ever discovered! And it is believed to be the only piece still in existence.

Mark J. Wagner is an archaeologist from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is studying the flatboat. "There are only about a half-dozen first-hand accounts of how these boats were put together," Wagner said. "This was put together differently than any of the written accounts."

The flatboat was originally 45 feet long and 12 feet wide. It was made completely of oak, and was put together with wooden pegs. Various artifacts were also discovered with the flatboat, including a pewter spoon, a six-pound iron ax head, and a clay bowl.



The excavation of the flatboat that was discovered in 2000.

It is very possible that the owners of the flatboat might have crossed paths with the notorious pirate, Colonel Plug. His headquarters were not far away.

Scientists hope to learn more about flatboats with this discovery. But they also hope to learn more about early buildings of the region, including architectural details. The wood from flatboats was also used as building material.

Transportation Today

Today, just as in the pioneer days, goods are moved from place to place to be sold and traded. Our paved roads make for easy travel. We have railroads that criss-cross North America and airplanes to transport people and goods wherever they need to go in the world.

In the early days of the country there were only a few ways to move products and people. The flatboat was one of the earliest forms of shipping. It opened up a whole new world in the interior of the country. The mighty Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers were the gateways to a new life for the settlers. They changed the way businesses were formed and cities developed.

The rivers remain a major transportation route for shipping, even if flatboat Mondays have become part of our pioneer yesterdays.

Responding

Think About What You Have Read

- 1** Describe a flatboat.
- 2** What were the two main rivers that had flatboat traffic? What were some large towns on these rivers?
- 3** How did the river pirates fool people coming downstream in their flatboats?
- 4** Think about the following flatboaters: Abraham Lincoln on the Mississippi, John James Audubon sketching birds, a pioneer family moving to a new home. If you could be in one of these scenes, which would you choose, and why?

Activity Write three math problems about flatboats. Use some facts from *Flatboat Mondays* to base your problems on. For example, a flatboat could carry 100 pounds for a dollar; it took six weeks for a flatboat to travel down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; a flatboat measured 50 feet by 12 feet.

The New Nation



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

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