CHAPTER 3

THE PATHS OF INLAND COMMERCE

The immigrant into the West embarked in the ark to seek his home, and his prosperity was built up by the sale of goods taken to market in the ark... In an age when the square, boxlike ark was the chief means of transportation, there grew up the psychology of the Middle West, which for good or ill has become the psychology of the country. Perhaps it is not too much to say that out of the womb of the ark was born the nation.

Leland D. Baldwin, *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters*¹

In *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (1920), Professor Archer B. Hulbert of Marietta College spotlighted the Natchez Trace as an important early conduit for American commerce. Hulbert was among the first academic historians to link the “Trace”—an eighteenth-century term for a primitive path or trail—to Ohio and Mississippi flatboaters. Flatboats were downstream craft sometimes called “arks,” and flatboaters returned north along the Trace after trips to Natchez or New Orleans. Back in the days before Ohio Valley boatmen could book passage home on the deck of a northbound steamer, a trek over the Trace was their only option to shipping aboard a New Orleans merchant ship or settling anew in the Old Southwest. Stretching from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee, the Natchez Trace played an important role as Americans took their first steps towards building a new economy west of the Appalachian Mountains.²

The Natchez Trace was not one established route: it was an intersecting series of old Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian trails moving northeasterly four hundred fifty miles from the lower Mississippi Delta to the far western foothills of Tennessee’s Appalachian Mountains. Although the name Natchez Trace was coined by early westerners, it did not see widespread use until the 1830s, well after the route’s 1783–1815 heyday. Other than the infrequent federal postal rider or government official, the Trace’s small collection of humankind was limited to Indians, frontiersmen, rivermen, and criminals. Flatboatmen who sold cargoes in Spanish New Orleans trekked north to the Natchez trailhead on a well-traveled Louisiana wagon road, but the Trace itself was extremely isolated and dangerous. There were no Euro-American towns or villages between Natchez and Nashville, only a wilderness dotted with small Indian villages, a Tennessee River ferry, and perhaps a half dozen “stands” where locals provided trekkers with simple meals and a rude pallet for a night’s sleep. In between lay swamps, canebrakes, and foothills of near-impenetrable forest.

The hardships of traveling the Natchez Trace are apparent in the American ornithologist Alexander Wilson’s description of one party of trekkers he encountered:

I … met several parties of boatmen returning from Natchez and New Orleans… These were dirty as Hottentots, their dress a shirt and trousers of canvas, black greasy and sometimes in tatters; their skin burnt wherever exposed to the sun; each with a budget [clothing and other necessities] wrapped up in an old blanket; their

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study is William C. Davis, *A Way through the Wilderness: The Natchez Trace and the Civilization of the Southern Frontier* (New York, 1995). The field was pioneered by the National Parks historian Dawson Phelps in his “Travel on the Natchez Trace: A Study of its Economic Aspects,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 15 (July 1953), 155–64. Flatboats (arks) are discussed below.

beards eighteen days old added to the singularity of their appearance, which was altogether savage.

Francis Baily, an English scientist, led a small party on horseback north along the Trace in 1797 and kept a thorough diary of the grueling journey. Baily learned about poison ivy the hard way, as his legs swelled up so badly he could not wear his boots. While attempting to ford the rushing Tennessee River, he and others fell overboard and were swept downstream, “our heads just above the water, our hands clinging to the raft.” Cherokee Indians came to their rescue on this and other occasions. 4

Baily complained of the “pilfering disposition of the [Chickasaw] Indians” who stole two of his company’s horses under cover of darkness, and he derided “the dirty hole of a place” in which another band of Chickasaws lived. Yet he never declined the Indians’ hospitality. Farther up the Trace, Baily’s group encountered more Cherokee, who shared their meal of roasted venison dipped in honey (“No meal was ever so grateful as this,” he wrote) and gave them extra venison for their trek. He also encountered white frontiersmen, “who from habit and disposition prefer the Indian mode of life.” When Baily and his companions finally approached Nashville, “Nothing could exceed our joy.” “The sight of it gave us great pleasure,” because his party could at last rest, “completely happy in having performed this laborious and troublesome journey.” 5

THE BUSINESS OF VICE IN NATCHEZ

Historians have written a good deal about the colonial and early national Mississippi Valley economy, 6 and there are separate

4. Wilson quoted in Allen, Western Rivermen, 80; Davis, Way through the Wilderness, 14–25 (Bailey qtns., 21). Hulbert also uses Baily’s lively, quotable diary.

5. Davis, Way through the Wilderness, 18–19, 23–25.

historical studies of crime in the Mississippi Valley. Yet the two should be connected, and not because land and river pirates robbed rivermen and merchants. Business and vice intersect because certain kinds of law-breaking were important economic endeavors in the lower Mississippi Valley. In the early trans-Appalachian West, many purveyors of vice—most notably tavern-keepers, gamblers, and prostitutes—were budding capitalists who excelled at their trades.

River and land pirates were in business to be sure, but they were not true capitalists. These outlaws created no new wealth—they only stole and spent what had been created by others. The town of Natchez and the Natchez Trace environs attracted an abundant share of these men. The exaggerated (and often concocted) stories of Samuel Mason, Micajah and Wily Harpe (“Big Harpe” and “Little Harpe”), and John Murrell are based on the fact that robbery was common in the lower Mississippi Valley in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Mississippi Territorial Governor W. C. C. Claiborne wrote Colonel Daniel Burnett of Walnut Hills in 1802 complaining of “a set of Pirates and Robbers who alternately infest the Mississippi River and the Road leading from this District to Tennessee.” Continuing, Claiborne erred in his sensational claim that the band was led by both Samuel Mason and Wily Harpe (“Little Harpe”). Mason, an American Revolutionary War veteran turned Ohio Valley outlaw, and Harpe, a murderous Kentuckian, probably never crossed paths. Yet this fabrication led to many tales, including those of lawmen severing Mason’s head from his body and planting it on a stake at the Natchez Trace trailhead as a warning to robbers. In fact, Claiborne’s men drove Mason across the river, where he was captured and tried by the Spaniards, who then attempted to deliver him back to Claiborne. En route from New Orleans to


Natchez in 1803, Samuel Mason murdered his captor (Captain Roberto Mackay), escaped, and was never seen again. Meanwhile, the folktales “Harpe’s Head” and “Mason’s Head” spread throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys and soon found their way into Southwestern literature, beginning with the work of James Hall. Many of the same stories are told as historical fact to this day.\(^8\)

Some of the most unreliable scholarship on the subject of land and river piracy appears in, and is later drawn from, Robert M. Coates’s popular book *The Outlaw Years* (1930). Otto Rothert’s classic *The Outlaws of Cave-in Rock* is a better-researched book, but Rothert was a folklorist, playwright, and historian with a gift for weaving fact and oral tradition into a lively narrative. His recounting of robberies at Cave-in Rock (on the lower Ohio River near its juncture with the Mississippi), based almost entirely on oral tradition, later became enshrined in the Walt Disney movie *Davy Crockett and the River Pirates* (1956). Other storytellers have linked the infamous Tennessee outlaw John A. Murrell to the Natchez Trace and Stack Island, on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi. Murrell’s story is especially riveting because it includes his supposed plot to foment a southern slave rebellion as a crescendo to his crime spree. Yet during John A. Murrell’s brief 1830s stint as a petty criminal, boatmen no longer walked the Natchez Trace, and there is no documented account of Murrell’s involvement in Mississippi River flatboat robberies. Storytellers and journalists so often recycled tales of river piracy and Natchez Trace holdups for dramatic effect that it was quite natural for them to add Murrell to their mix. James L. Penick finally got Murrell’s history right in *The Great Western Land Pirate* (1981).\(^9\)

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It is important to reiterate that there were robbers working the Natchez Trace during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Horse thieves, white and Indian alike, robbed locals and returning flatboatmen, and 1780s Spanish court records tell of “highway robbers who by force of arms strip travelers and enter the houses of citizens and plunder their most valuable effects.” Newspapers carried stories of banditry on the Trace, and veteran rivermen recalled “bands of robbers who had infested the lower part of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.” Despite all of the exaggerations, many firsthand accounts of piracy written before the 1830s (and the advent of published folktales in southwestern literature) are probably true.10

Drinking, gambling, and prostitution were the most common and lucrative vices practiced in or near Natchez, Mississippi. Unlike robbers, the gamblers and prostitutes (and the tavernkeepers who sustained them) were not technically criminals. Both gambling and prostitution were often legal in varying forms and jurisdictions, and in an age that saw the beginnings of freewheeling American capitalism, businessmen who owned gambling dens and brothels, and the card dealers and prostitutes who worked for them, were very much a part of the mix. Although the New Orleans river neighborhood known as the Swamp was the most infamous of these vice markets, Natchez


Under-the-Hill ranked a smaller but no less remarkable second place.\textsuperscript{11}

Natchez Under-the-Hill lay literally and figuratively beneath the respectable homes, businesses, and government buildings that sat atop the Natchez Bluff. Throughout the 1790s, Spanish Governor Gayoso forbade rivermen to ascend the hill and thus left them to grovel in their excesses below. In 1810, the traveler John Bradbury insultingly described the “Kentucky men” drawn to Natchez taverns and concluded, “There is not, perhaps, in the world a more dissipated place” than Under-the-Hill. Writing two decades later, J. H. Ingraham labeled Natchez Under-the-Hill a “moral sty” and “nucleus of vice” populated mainly by indolent men, “highly rouged females, sailors, Kentucky boatmen, negroes, mulattoes, pigs, dogs, and dirty children.” A visiting Methodist minister was appalled at the sight of “lawless men and women, whose sole object seemed to be to beguile, entrap and ruin their heedless victims.”\textsuperscript{12}

One long, rutted street ran along the Natchez river wharf, with taverns, gambling dens, houses of prostitution, and various combinations of the three woven throughout. “Every house is a grocery, containing gambling, music, and dancing, fornicators, etc.,” wrote the traveler Henry Ker. Flimsy frame buildings were complemented by shacks and tents. Some tavern-keepers remodeled spent flatboats to ply their trade, or broke them up and used the scrap lumber to build anew. Garbage and animal excrement were scattered about, and vultures reportedly “strode along the streets” looking for a meal.\textsuperscript{13}

W. J. Rorabaugh has documented early national America’s status as “a nation of drunkards,” and Natchez did more than its share to raise the per capita liquor consumption rate. At any

\textsuperscript{11} Smith, \textit{River of Dreams}, 145–49; Allen, \textit{Western Rivermen}, 128.


\textsuperscript{13} James, \textit{Antebellum Natchez}, 169 (qtn.); Allen, \textit{Western Rivermen}, 129–30.
given time at least a dozen taverns operated in Under-the-Hill, while another dozen flourished atop the bluff. The pool of customers never seemed to wane; one contemporary observed rivermen from “150 boats … spending days in the lowest orders of dissipation.” Hard-drinking women joined men who imbibed remarkable quantities of beer, cider, and hard liquor. Bartenders mixed mint juleps in variations, adding cognac, rum, and port to the familiar whisky, sugar, and mint concoction (one tavern even boasted crushed ice in season). William C. Davis tells of a fellow who, in one sitting, drank three pints of whisky and three quarts of cider. “An Englishman could not drink as the Americans do,” a Briton observed. “It would destroy them.” In 1808, the American traveler Christian Schultz visited Natchez Under-the-Hill and witnessed a fight between “some drunken sailors” in one of the first recorded accounts of the boastful “alligator; half man, half horse” American folk hero type.14

Schultz also observed gambling dens where boatmen could quickly lose “the hard earned wages of a two month voyage.” Roulette, billiards, dice, faro, poker, three-card monte (a pea under shells game played with cards), and blackjack amused those not pitching coins at a wall or attending one of the Natchez’s many cockfights and horse races. The traveler William Hall walked into a crowded tavern in Under-the-Hill and wound his way through prostitutes dancing to a four-piece band (two fiddles, a clarinet, and drum) before entering a crowded adjoining card room with a roulette wheel. There he saw men gambling with piles of silver, paper scrip, and bone and wooden chips. From the time of Spanish rule, respectable townspeople had tried sporadically to run the gamblers out of town. But they always returned, and, until well into the antebellum period, gambling’s revenue stream seemed to salve the many irritations it caused Under-the-Hill.15

Then, too, there were the “Houses of ill fame” (“cribs” and “whorehouses” in the local patois) where, one boat captain wrote, “debauchery is practiced in a manner degrading to the human species.” Flimsily dressed “faded young girls” made up the workforce in this, the most shameful of Natchez’s business endeavors. Yet where there is a demand, the supply appears, as it always has in the history of the world’s oldest profession. On a stretch of the wharf dubbed Maiden Lane, a dozen or more brothel proprietors sold their wares. Advertisements pitched Black and mulatto slave girls who were fully “capable of business”; Schultz returned to his boat one morning to find three “copper-coloured” girls, “who it seems had undertaken to enliven the idle hours of our Canadian crew.” Venereal disease was an occupational hazard the women shared with their patrons, and violent fights broke out amid the liquor, gambling, and prostitution in Under-the-Hill. One night, tavern patrons reportedly dragged a dead man outside, deposited him on the sidewalk, and returned to the bar “where the revelry went on at white heat.” However, unlike the vices that bred it, murder was against the law in Under-the-Hill.  

Although the characterization of the lower Mississippi Valley as a “Spillway of Sin” has been exaggerated and (somehow) romanticized, vice was ever present, and gamblers and prostitutes provided valuable services in a freewheeling frontier economy. With the notable exception of the Spanish regime, national, state, and local governments seldom regulated or taxed


casinos or “Houses of ill Fame” in these early days. But as the Mississippi Valley economy began to diversify, more stable family settlements replaced the largely male frontier demographic. Throughout the Age of Jackson, the free market in gambling and prostitution slowly receded before the advance of new regulations and taxes (though it never entirely disappeared). A good lens through which to view this civilizing process is the Natchez Flatboat War of 1837.\textsuperscript{17}

The so-called Flatboat Wars were a series of late 1830s and early 1840s altercations between rivermen and city government officials in Natchez, Memphis, Vicksburg, and Saint Francisville (Louisiana). Storytellers have exaggerated them to portray rivermen as violent and rowdy Alligator Horses, and those stories have found their way into history books; in fact, the behavior of these rivermen during the Jacksonian era (approximately 1815-48) was considerably improved over that of their predecessors. Yet boatmen naturally buckled when river town lawmen began to enforce taxes and wharf fees. Although the rivermen honestly believed there was no precedent for the new taxes, the Spaniards and French had in fact taxed river craft, and the new American officials in New Orleans continued the practice. Wharf taxes slowly moved upstream to the northern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee river towns. A typical duty was two dollars a day for the first two days in port and fifty cents a day thereafter; then, too, there were forms to fill out, local and state sales taxes on flatboat vendors, and fines for noncompliance. With the American Revolution and Whisky Rebellions only a generation past, boatmen focused their anger on the local wharf master assigned to collect the new taxes. Town fathers shrewdly granted this evil fellow the right to rake 15 percent off the top of his haul.\textsuperscript{18}

Natchez Under-the-Hill was the scene of the first

\textsuperscript{17} Allen, \textit{Western Rivermen}, 194–96. The “Spillway of Sin” phrase is used by Jordan in \textit{Frontier Law and Order}.

\textsuperscript{18} City of New Orleans, \textit{Police Code} (New Orleans, La., 1808), 156; \textit{Louisiana Gazette} (New Orleans), Aug. 29, 1806; City of Vicksburg, \textit{Revised Ordinances} (Vicksburg, Miss., 1855), 90–95. The Flatboat Wars are discussed in Allen, \textit{Western Rivermen}, 197–204.
confrontation, in November of 1837, and its peaceful resolution marked the course for subsequent “wars.” Under Mayor Henry Tooley, Natchez passed a one-time ten-dollar wharf and hospital tax on each boat in port and hired M. Wells as wharf master to enforce it. When nine boat captains refused to pay, Wells seized their cargoes to auction them off. A *Natchez Free Trader* article reported the boatmen arrived at the auction “armed with bowie knives,” but local militiamen called up for the occasion carried guns. There was a great deal of shouting and threatening, but no actual fighting, much less shooting. Two rivermen landed in jail, and the rest paid their taxes. “Mercenary ruffians will find threats of violence against the law to be as ineffectual as they have now proved to be,” the *Free Trader* declared. The irony of a newspaper called the *Free Trader* lauding taxes and regulations was apparently lost on the local populace.19

Each of the lower Mississippi river towns tamed the boatmen in similar fashion. Then, town leaders dealt a rougher hand to the gamblers and prostitutes the boatmen had patronized. New Orleanians were the most lenient and shrewd. They chose to isolate the casinos and bawdy houses within their river district, where they could tax and regulate them. Thus they kept order while simultaneously funding city and parish governments. River townspeople to the north chose a stricter course and passed laws abolishing the vice trade. Memphis, Vicksburg, and Natchez either purged the sinners or drove them underground, where the black market became the free market. And only three years following its Flatboat War, Natchez witnessed an occurrence some deemed providential. A great tornado passed directly through the city, obliterating Under-the-Hill. An old boatman recalled that the 1840 storm “swept from sight” all of the ramshackle taverns, houses of prostitution, and gambling dens that had “so long served as a rendezvous for the thousands of desperate and dissolute that congregated there.” After the tornado, Natchez, Mississippi, stood cleansed of sin, literally and figuratively.20

The lower Mississippi Valley economy was rapidly diversifying. The early frontiersmen’s trade in furs, dried corn, ginseng, venison, salt, and pork was revolutionized by the 1811 invention of the steamboat. Cured tobacco, baled hemp, grist-milled corn, iron products wrought from blacksmiths’ forges, and imports were shipped on western rivers. The ranks of merchants and land speculators were joined by regional bankers and exporters. Then, steam power combined with the cotton gin (1793) to give birth to the Cotton Kingdom, a double-edged sword that produced wealth yet sharply increased the demand for Black slaves. Although Mississippi Valley folk would never be able to fully embrace capitalism until the eradication of slavery, they were nevertheless making important strides towards a modern economy. Criminal robberies continued, and so did gambling and prostitution; their role in the Mississippi Valley economy decreased but they never vanished. Today, casinos line the Canal Street block where the New Orleans French Quarter abuts the Mississippi River. And Under-the-Hill, a faux steamboat gambling casino, greets thousands of tourists visiting modern Natchez.

And what became of the Natchez Trace? It was relegated to the position of a safe but minor thoroughfare in the antebellum South’s expanding transportation network. The Trace slowly saw improvements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, in the 1930s, the National Park Service began constructing the Natchez Trace Parkway, a paved two-lane highway following and paralleling the route of the fabled trail. Modern tourists can traverse the entire four-hundred-mile route of the Trace in two days. After visiting Natchez’s antebellum homes they can, if they choose, stop in Tupelo for the night (and visit Elvis Presley’s birthplace), or stay over in one of the remote Tennessee towns that still skirt the Trace. Locals make supplementary income from the small tourist trade and the federal jobs (and road repair) that accompany the Trace. The parkway features campgrounds and historic site pullouts,

including former Indian encampments, Civil War battlefields and skirmish lines, and the gravesite of Captain Meriwether Lewis (who died on the Trace under mysterious circumstances in 1808). Over long weekends and in the summertime, the Natchez Trace is peppered with motorcyclists, alone and in groups, who enjoy the leisurely pace (50 mph speed limit) and beautiful vistas. During the fall, the colored foliage of the vast deciduous forests lining the Trace is spectacular.22

**THE UPPER CUMBERLAND**

From the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, keelboaters, flatboaters, raftsmen, and steamboaters faced hard work and many dangers as they plied the upper Cumberland River, from Burnside, Kentucky, to Nashville, Tennessee. Yet they also sailed the river’s course with an optimism borne of hope for a better life and firm belief that Nature’s river was there for them to use and prosper. In their work, these upper Cumberland rivermen mirror a lifestyle emerging and evolving throughout the Mississippi Valley. The upper Cumberland provides a microcosm—a case study of riverboating in the early republic.23

Near the Cumberland Gap, where eighteenth-century American long hunters and pioneers first crossed over the Appalachian Mountains, the Cumberland River is formed by combination of the Poor Fork, Clover Fork, and Martins Fork Rivers. “All three are considerable streams in their own right, rising far back on the western slopes of the Cumberland Mountain watershed,” writes James McCague, author of *The Cumberland* in the acclaimed Rivers of America Series. “Thus the Cumberland springs to life full-blown, as it were, and boasts a quite respectable size from the outset.”24

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23. This section is a revised and expanded version of Michael Allen, “‘Hard Way to Make a Living’: Life and Leisure on the Cumberland River,” in *People of the Upper Cumberland: Achievements and Contradictions*, ed. Michael E. Birdwell and William Calvin Dickinson (Knoxville, Tenn., 2016), 27–52. See also Allen, *Western Rivermen*, 66–78, 144–51, 159.
The first upper Cumberland rivermen were Cherokee, Shawnee, and Iroquois Indians. They hunted buffalo, bear, and deer, and traded along the river and an elaborate system of mountain trails. Indians paddled sleek log canoes that served both peaceful and military purposes. Canoes moved families, hunting parties, and cargoes up and down the river. In wartime they facilitated rapid movement, attack, and retreat of war parties; on the lower river, in the 1780s and 1790s, Shawnee Indians effectively used canoes to attack European-American flatboatmen. In absence of canoes, or of the time to build them, southeastern Indians used crude craft called bullboats. They constructed them by forming saplings and tree branches into a circular bowl shape and packing them together with sap, clay, and mud compounds as sealants. Indians navigated these boats with oars. The bullboat was obviously a stopgap measure, good for only a few trips or crossings before repair or replacement.

As we have seen, as early as 1761, European-American hunters and trappers were following the Indians’ river routes. These men were called long hunters because they hunted for one to three years at a time, returning to civilization with their ponies bearing the weight of hundreds of animal skins. A tale about the long hunters Isaac and Abraham Bledsoe provides a clue to the quantities of game these men harvested in a season’s hunt. Robbed of all their cache by Indians, the forlorn Bledsoe brothers reportedly carved on a tree, “lost 2300 deerskins ruination by god.”

Long hunters adapted the Indian canoes to commercial uses. Enterprising hunters shipped skins, bear grease, and salted deer, bear, and buffalo meat as far south as Natchez and New Orleans. In 1766, the Philadelphian George Morgan wrote of “twenty large Perrirgous [“pirogues”] up from New Orleans, killing

buffaloe chiefly for tallow.” Bragging on the quality of his salted buffalo meat, Morgan wrote, “All ours is good now as the day it was killed.”28 As the late eighteenth century progressed, upper Cumberland settlers and merchant boatmen introduced larger river craft than those in use on the lower Cumberland and Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Keelboats, flatboats, and rafts came to dominate upper Cumberland River Valley immigration and trade until slowly replaced by steamboats and, ultimately, railroads.29

Keelboats—“keels”—most closely resembled what modern Americans would call a large sailboat or very small schooner. Keels were sleek, proded (not flat-bottomed) boats, averaging sixty feet in length and eight feet in width. Because they drew only a foot or two of water loaded, keels could run the Cumberland’s shallow currents (shoals) in summer, early autumn, and winter. Unlike flatboatmen, keelboatmen possessed the equipment and skills to take their crafts upstream as well as down.30

Keel sails and rigging resembled that of sailboats, but wind power was only one of several methods boatmen used to propel their crafts. Floating downstream, they drifted in the current, with the captain at the large fifteen-to-twenty-foot stern oar, or sweep. Rowing was another means of steering, but was used mainly for propulsion upstream. If rowing failed, then keelboatmen shouldered their famed poles and literally pushed their boats upstream against the current. Another method was hand-winching, whereby keelboatmen tied a thick, strong line to an upstream tree. The line emanated from a large wooden reel on the bow; together the men literally reeled in the line, thereby pulling the keelboat upstream. A more arduous method accomplishing the same end was for the crew to simply jump in the water, grab hold of the line, and, using sheer muscle-power, pull the keel upstream.31

Keelboating on the upper Cumberland flourished after the

28. Ibid., 39.
30. Ibid., 66. See also Baldwin, Keelboat Age on Western Waters.
founding of Nashborough (Nashville). Young Andrew Jackson migrated to Nashville in 1788 and, alongside practicing law and growing tobacco, became a Cumberland River keelboat builder and merchant navigator. Jackson started a general store, stocking it with goods he shipped upstream from Ohio River ports. He exported goods downstream to Natchez and New Orleans and also entered in the Pittsburgh trade. Jackson conducted most of his river dealings in boats he and his partners built themselves at their Clover Bottom shipyard. They built one huge keel that reportedly carried a ninety-ton cargo. Jackson noted that in 1804, two of his keelboats, manned by sixteen rivermen, made the journey from the mouth of the Cumberland to Nashville, consuming “20 gallons whiskey” during their arduous sixteen-day journey.  

The vast majority of presteam upper Cumberland riverboats were the flatboats. Indeed, these ubiquitous flat-bottomed (as opposed to keeled) boats accounted for 90 percent of nonsteam commerce and continued to prosper well into the steam era and late nineteenth century. Among the attractive characteristics of flatboats were their low cost and relative ease of construction; even an amateur boat builder could, for about fifty dollars, fashion a flatboat out of timber he felled himself in the surrounding forest. This was true free market capitalism. Upper Cumberland flats were built on the Wolf River, near Byrdstown, and as far upstream as Laurel River, below Cumberland Falls in Whitley County, Kentucky. Navigators seeking more seaworthy craft might engage the services of professional boat builders. Boatland, a village on the East Fork of the Obey River, became known as a good place to buy inexpensive, reliable flatboats.  

Flatboats were boxlike craft averaging fifty feet in length and twelve feet in width. Unlike the sleek keels, flatboats were extremely difficult to navigate; boatmen steered with a long stern oar (a sweep) and smaller oars on the port, starboard, and bow.

33. Lynwood Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek: Verbal Legacy of the Upper Cumberland (Knoxville, 1983), 130–32.
Flatboats ran in high water (early spring and late fall) to avoid running aground. Western rivers flatboatmen soon learned the safest strategy was to simply reach to their destination running day and night (sometimes as fast as four miles an hour) and never landing until journey’s end. If and when they must land, the best plan was to steer into a thick stand of submerged willows, cane, or brush to cushion the collision. After selling their cargoes, flatboatmen usually walked home, because, unlike keels, flatboats traveled downstream only.34

Upper Cumberland flatboat commerce paralleled the founding of Nashville. Records show scores of upriver flatboatmen, including the Cason and Peterman families of Jackson and Clay Counties. Downriver, Dr. John Bedford kept an elaborate journal record of an 1807 trip he made to New Orleans on the Barge Mary.35 There was upriver flatboat commerce as late as 1880. County histories and oral traditions tell of the Stone, Watson, and Willis families making flatboat trips to New Orleans. John Willis “built a flatboat every year, and loaded it [with] … turkeys and wheat and corn,” his Cumberland County great-grandson recalled. “They’d sell all these products in New Orleans and then they’d walk back.” Gladys Stone, of Celina, Tennessee, told of her husband’s grandfather, who “made flatboats and put his hogs and what corn he had on hand, and run it to New Orleans.”36

Unlike the storied New Orleans trekkers, most nineteenth-century upper Cumberland flatboatmen were bound for Nashville or lower Cumberland River markets. This was a typical pattern, especially while the Spaniards still owned Natchez and the Louisiana territory. Even after the Louisiana Purchase, there were very few downstream markets between the Cumberland’s Ohio River mouth and Natchez, Mississippi. As settlement advanced, flatboatmen sailed farther southwest, but they also began shorter runs, between Kentucky villages and the Tennessee River towns Celina, Burnside, and Carthage. While

34. Allen, Western Rivermen, 67–69, 74–75, passim.
36. Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, 130–32.
it is true that many walked home, after the 1811 invention of the steamboat, flatboatmen could commute home for cheap deck passage of two or three dollars.  

At journey’s end, after their cargoes were unloaded and sold, flatboatmen dismantled their boats and sold the lumber. Many sidewalks and outbuildings in Ohio and Mississippi Valley towns were built with salvaged upper Cumberland flatboat timber; there are stories of flatboat churches that, on hot and humid Sundays, began to reek from their waterlogged timbers!  

Keel and flatboat cargoes varied. Tobacco and corn were important; sometimes the corn was loaded as meal or, more often, as distilled spirits. Hearty fruits and vegetables—apples, potatoes, onions, etc.—made excellent cargo because they did not easily spoil in spring and autumn. Salted pork was a mainstay, as were animal skins and dried venison. Tar, turpentine, saltpeter, tallow, beeswax, and hemp all floated south. Sometimes livestock were loaded and shipped on the hoof; chickens sailed in crates. Although human chattel sailed as slave cargo on the lower Cumberland River, there was little such trade on the upper, where high altitudes were unfriendly to cotton cultivation.  

In high water there was sometimes smooth sailing, but hazards and dangers always lay in wait. For starters, in the early spring and late fall, freezing rain, sleet, and snow made riverboating a rough business. Although rivermen always tried to run straight through, fog forced them to make dangerous landings. Despite precautions, boats ran aground (on shallow reefs, sandbars, or shoals), whereupon boatmen jumped into ice-cold water to muscle them off. Other river hazards were boulders and floating debris, especially uprooted trees. Some trees, called “planters,” were buried underwater in mud, and their submerged treetops gouged the boats’ bottoms; “sawyers” swayed below and above water, moved by swift currents.  

Following introduction of the steamboat, a whole new set of hazards immediately appeared. Slow maneuvering flats were

37. Ibid.  
39. This and the subsequent two paragraphs are based on ibid., 72–78.
sometimes run over by steam-belching downstream craft. There 
was no love lost between flatboatmen and keelboatmen! 
Ironically, the flatboat’s last stand in the late nineteenth century 
was to serve as a barge towed by a steamer. Other dangers could 
take the form of Indians and robbers. Upper Cumberland 
rivermen who sailed the river’s length to the Ohio in the 1790s 
were caught up in the Shawnee Indian wars. Those sailing as far 
south as Natchez or New Orleans found robbers on the Natchez 
Trace more troublesome than Indian attacks. The long walk on 
the Trace—from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville—could result 
in a boatman’s profits or wages ending up in saddlebags astride a 
bandit’s pony galloping down the Trace. Despite much romantic 
nonsense that has been written, a brief look at the history of 
Cumberland boatmen shows that boating was a hard, hard way 
to make a living.

What kind of man would take these risks? What kind of man 
would pursue a career on the river? Late eighteenth- and early 
nineteenth-century language about men “on the make” who were 
“chasing the main chance” describe such boatmen. The modern 
word entrepreneur certainly applies. Even the lowliest upper 
Cumberland deckhand was looking to get ahead, aiming to make 
a few dollars to get a start in life, or enhance a career already 
begun.  

The average upper Cumberland boatman was a white 
male of Anglo or Celtic ancestry, averaging twenty-eight years 
old. Although Indian, Black, German, and Franco men, and some 
women, sailed the Cumberland, they are exceptions that prove 
the above rule. Taking the demographic group described, one 
can further divide them into four major professional 
categories—merchant navigators, professional boatmen, farmer 
flatboatmen, and common hands.

The first three groups were men in their late twenties, thirties, 
or older. Merchant navigators were businessmen (like Jackson

40. Michael Allen, “The Riverman as Jacksonian Man,” Western Historical Quarterly 21 (August 
41. Ibid. My categorizations are based in part on those of Harry N. Scheiber, “The Ohio-
Mississippi Flatboat Trade: Some Reconsiderations,” in The Frontier in American Development: 
and Bedford) who speculated in Cumberland River goods, built or bought boats to transship cargoes, and sometimes piloted the craft themselves. If they could not navigate, they hired a professional boatman to do so for a fee (sometimes they accompanied him; sometimes he was charged with business and navigational chores). A farmer flatboatman was a seasonal entrepreneur. Late fall and early winter was a slow time on the farm and a perfect time for marketing surplus harvest in return for cash to make land payments, or marry off a daughter or son and establish them on their own farmsteads. Deckhands were often teenaged boys, the sons of farmers or other young men from the neighborhood. While they were looking for some spare cash, they also sought a little adventure. During the decades between the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, and during the decades immediately following the Civil War, riverboating became a rite of passage for young Cumberland River Valley youth. A trip to Nashville and points southwest became a substitute for a stint in the army. Many rivermen no doubt took a quick trip on a flatboat, keel, or raft, and then spent decades entertaining family and friends with “stretchers” about when they “saw the elephant” on the mysterious river below.42

Of course, not all presteam rivermen were professionals. Thousands of frontier emigrants plied the upper Cumberland in flats and keels during the trans-Appalachian Great Migration of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Men and women hauled their children, dogs, pigs, cattle, and horses up and down the river in search of cheap land and a new chance in life. On these emigrant boats, women played an important navigational role, assisting as deckhands, manning the sweeps, and standing their own watches. An infamous early river traveler was Colonel (and former vice president) Aaron Burr. Before he led his ill-fated armed flotilla down the Ohio and Mississippi in 1806–1807, Burr purchased a dozen Cumberland River flatboats from his friend Andrew Jackson. The boats were delivered downstream, and Burr soon founded himself indicted for

42. Allen, Western Rivermen, 94–102.
treason, accused of making war against the United States and planning an invasion of Spanish Texas. Yet commerce, not military fame, was the predominant motive of upper Cumberland navigators.\footnote{Ibid., 3, 35, 90.}

Log and lumber rafting on the upper Cumberland is so important that it warrants a separate and detailed discussion. Upper Cumberland rafts plied in numbers that grew for a century; indeed, 1920s Cumberland raftsmen moved timber in a manner reminiscent of their Jacksonian forebears.\footnote{Steven A. Schulman, “Rafting Logs on the Upper Cumberland River,” \textit{Pioneer American} 6 (1974), 14–24. See also Schulman, “Reminiscence of Logging on the Cumberland,” \textit{Kentucky Folklore Record} 18 (1972), 97, passim.} The purpose of log rafting was, of course, to move newly cut timber to downstream sawmills. Then, a lumber raft might further move the newly milled boards to downstream markets. Rafts were large rectangular affairs, often three hundred feet long, composed of two thousand logs.\footnote{Jeannette Keith, \textit{Country People in the New South: Tennessee’s Upper Cumberland} (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 23–24.}

Raftsmen built their rafts—sometimes called drifts—in a manner similar to the modern barge tow. They first constructed a number of small rafts—stringers or blocks—and then pieced them together into the large navigable unit. To secure the logs they strapped and pegged them together with hickory (or other deciduous) saplings and strips (whaling); some hardwoods required metal chain dogs instead of wooden pegs. Raftsmen formed the blocks into the larger raft using wooden pegs or chain dogs to secure the unit. After this arduous task, they proceeded into the challenges and hazards of downstream navigation.\footnote{Schulman, “Rafting Logs,” 16–19.}

The rafting schedule differed slightly from that of flats, keels, and steamers, because raftsmen sailed in late spring and winter. One Cumberland County raftsman recalled a typical trip: “We rafted ’em down the Cumberland to Celina and sold ’em to Kyles [Brothers Lumber Company]. Millard Kyles measured ’em up and gave us our checks and we walked back home then. Yeah,
a heap of a-times when you didn’t wait for a [steam]boat, you
would walk back.”47

Upper Cumberland rafting could be deadly. In Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, William Lynwood Montell recounts the harrowing story of the Cumberland River log raftsman John Cummings. Floating downstream in the dead of winter, Cummings and his fellow rivermen came upon two stranded Wolf River raftsmen:

We went to them. One of them was dead, and the other was just barely breathing. We got him out first. Went back and got the other one... The [other rescuers] had a covered wagon there and a big fire; had bed blankets and everything. And we took the live one out. There’s one old man there. He said, “I’ve brought a quart of moonshine whiskey.” They just jerked the buttons off the freezing man’s clothes and stripped him off. The old man went to bathing him in that whiskey. Had it milk warm, and [the raftsman] was a-breathing pretty good when we took the dead one out.48

In 1811, Nicholas J. Roosevelt steered the New Orleans down the Ohio and Mississippi in the first American western rivers steamboat voyage. As he passed the mouth of the Cumberland, the history of Cumberland River steamboating began.49 Eight years passed before the General Jackson arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, and another decade passed before steamers plied as far north as Carthage, Tennessee. In 1833, E. S. Burge piloted the Jefferson to Point Isabel, a town later renamed Burnside, Kentucky. Because of treacherous shoals directly north of the village, Burnside would remain the head of Cumberland River navigation for one full century of steamboating.50

To learn about the technology and design of upper Cumberland steamboats, one must immediately forget gaudy images of the Hollywood movie Showboat steamers or huge modern tourist boats like the Mississippi Queen (or even the humbler Delta Queen). The typical nineteenth-century steamboat

47. Ibid., 22.
48. Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, 106.
49. Byrd Douglas, Steamboatin’ on the Cumberland (Nashville, Tenn., 1961) is a general history. The best source on the upper river is Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek. 132–61.
50. Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, 132–33.
was, above all, a workboat; most steamers did not sport fancy trappings and luxurious amenities. They were small (three-hundred-ton) sternwheelers, with shallow (two to three feet) drafts suitable for navigating low water depths. Powerful boilers made these sleek craft fast, dexterous, and dangerous. A steamer’s average lifespan was five years. Boats carried crews of ten or twelve men, including a captain, pilot, engineer, mate, and deckhands. Although the upriver trade began with several independent operators, larger companies like the Burnside and Burkesville Transportation Company handled most upriver freight, passenger service, and transshipment.51

Upper Cumberland steamboats ran whenever they could, but peak shipping was the same as that of flats, keels, and rafts—the high water of late fall and late spring. Steamboaters also faced danger during fog and freezing temperatures, and from floating and sunken logs, caved-in banks, and shoals. The “Army Engineers” (today’s Army Corps of Engineers) performed the vast majority of their antebellum dredging and infrastructure work on the lower, not the upper, Cumberland River. Not until 1888 did the corps build locks and dams to facilitate longer upriver steamboat navigation seasons; state and local governments also subsidized improvements. In 1915, Lock 21, built thirty miles below Burnside, improved navigation to that upriver port.52

As noted, steamboats arrived late and stayed late in the upper Cumberland compared to other western rivers. By 1850, five or six upriver steamers arrived in Nashville weekly, carrying agricultural produce, raw materials, and passengers; those boats turned right around to deliver manufactured and store-bought goods and food from Nashville to the upstream towns and farms. Upper Cumberland landings proliferated—Carthage and Burnside were joined by Gainesboro, Burkesville, Albany,


Butler’s Landing, Creelsboro, Celina, and scores more. Indeed, by the early twentieth century, there were one hundred twenty-one landings between Burnside and Carthage, and this figure does not include unofficial farmers’ landings, where steamers would often stop whenever someone flagged them down. All steamers had whistles the pilots sounded as they approached a port. One old-timer recalled, “The way these steamboats would echo up these valleys … you’d hear the whistle, then you’d see the boat.”  

Steamers hauled just about everything, including the kitchen sink. Agricultural produce and livestock, tobacco, dry goods, dress materials, shoes, fruit, wagons and buggies, fertilizer, and Sears and Roebuck parcels all traveled the river. “They carried everything that a farmer would use, or a merchant would sell in country store,” recalled the pilot Escar O. Coe.

We made two trips a week. Would leave Burnside on Saturday night, go to Lee’s Landing, Tennessee [Nashville], and arrive back at Burnside on Wednesday morning. We’d bring egg cases down for people to put eggs in to ship back... And bales of wire, roofing, and nails, and all kinds of hardware and groceries shipped to merchants. We’d pick up produce, chickens, eggs, livestock, lumber, staves, and what-have-you that you could load on a boat.

As the twentieth century progressed, upper Cumberland steamboating slowly faded away. True, the Cumberland Transportation Company began using gasoline-powered boats to haul groceries upriver, and some steamers began to push or pull cargoes in river barges. But these harbingers of modern towboats never prospered upriver for several reasons, the most important of which concerned the Army Corps of Engineers. Beginning with the Ward Engineering Company’s invention of the twin-screw, internal combustion engine–powered “pushboat” (the universally used term towboat is in fact a
misnomer), the lower Cumberland River slowly transitioned to diesel-powered boat commerce. This process was furthered by Great Depression public works infrastructure projects under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration and Tennessee Valley Authority; state government and private capital also contributed to the internal improvements effort. Like steamers before them, towboats dotted the lower Cumberland River, navigating in all seasons via a series of fourteen new and refitted locks and hydroelectric dams constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers.\(^{57}\)

Towboats never came upriver because the corps built and refitted the upriver hydroelectric dams \textit{without} locks. Without modern lockage, diesel towboats, unlike their low-draft steamboat predecessors, could not navigate the upper Cumberland. The corps thus joined other federal and state economic planners in deeming the upper river navigation tangential to modern towboat commerce and designating Nashville the head of navigation on the Cumberland. Slowly, the upper Cumberland River began to grow quieter; the sound of steam whistles echoing up the valleys became less and less frequent.\(^{58}\)

Today, aluminum canoes, fishing boats, houseboats, speedboats, and water skiers dot the many recreation sites along the upper Cumberland River. Modern Kentuckians and Tennesseans vacation and play along the great waterway that their ancestors plied for two hundred years in keels, flatboats, rafts, and steamers.

**LIVER EATIN’ CAPITALISTS**

To many Americans, the term \textit{mountain man} brings to mind wild images of early nineteenth-century Rocky Mountain fur

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trappers like Jedediah Smith, Jim Beckwourth, Jim “Old Gabe” Bridger, Milton “Thunderbolt” Sublette, Louis “Old Vaskiss” Vasquez, and of course Jeremiah “Liver Eatin’” Johnson. Yet, as we have seen, the first American mountain men were in fact *Appalachian*, not Rocky, mountain men, and their ranks included the mid-eighteenth-century Kentucky hunter, trapper, and real estate speculator Daniel Boone. After Boone’s land dealings turned sour in 1799, the sixty-five-year-old frontiersman led his family across the Mississippi River to Spanish Saint Louis in search of new opportunities. The Boones spent the next two decades farming, hunting, and speculating in the lower Missouri River valley. Daniel Boone died in Missouri in 1820, only a few years after army exploratory expeditions led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Captain Zebulon Pike, and Major Stephen Long had passed his way. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Daniel Boone’s Missouri River perch also gave him a perfect vista of civilian business adventurers—a new generation of mountain men—bound for the fur-trapping frontier on the far western fringe of the Mississippi Valley.

During the Age of Jackson, mountain men were as much businessmen as romantic adventurers. Their status as “expectant capitalists” was best described five decades ago in path-breaking work by the late William H. Goetzmann. While Goetzmann mined firsthand accounts to show the entrepreneurial side of the Rocky Mountain trappers, he also noted their mythic significance and appeal to the American imagination. Jacksonian Americans did not view mountain men as market entrepreneurs; they idealized them as brave, rugged, independent (and violent) frontier folk heroes. Thus, mountain men closely resembled their rivermen contemporaries in more ways than their skillful navigation of keelboats. Both groups of workingmen followed similar economic and mythic paths. Like Jacksonian rivermen, Rocky Mountain fur trappers were folk heroes who were very much a part of the emergent capitalist economy. And though

the lifespan of their industry was short, the mountain men’s mythic life has endured and equaled that of the Alligator Horse boatmen.⁶⁰

An intervening era of Canadian and West Coast fur trapping connects Rocky Mountain and Appalachian mountain men. In the late eighteenth century, seagoing British and Spanish fur traders vied to buy sea otter pelts from Pacific Northwest Indians. Fur entrepreneurs always faced the choice of whether to “trap or trade,” and these men chose the latter. But by the early nineteenth century, trapper employees of Montreal’s Northwest Company had penetrated the Canadian interior and were themselves harvesting fur-bearing animals along western river systems whose mouths lay on the Pacific Ocean. Soon, John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company sought a piece of this action, founding Fort Astoria where the Columbia River empties into the Pacific and trading for furs with Indians at Fort Spokane, their upper Columbia post. However, by the end of the War of 1812 Britain had purged the Astorians, and in 1821 the British-Canadian Hudson’s Bay Company bought out the Northwesterners. Trapping and trading, Hudson’s Bay Company ruled the coastal fur trade while forming plans to expand its posts east into the American interior near the headwaters of the Mississippi River’s far western tributaries. There the British would meet America’s Saint Louis–based fur companies and their employees, the mountain men.⁶¹

North American Indians and biracial Franco-American voyageurs played a huge role in this economic mix. From colonial times, the French had proven adept at trapping fur-bearing fox, beaver, wolves, and bear in eastern Canada, the Great Lakes, and along the upper Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. Early

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travelers to the trans-Appalachian West noted skilled and “stout Canadian” keelboatmen, “descendants of the original French settlers.” These men were known as devout Catholics who were strong, “patient, steady, and trustworthy” workers. Travelers often described Frenchmen as “resembl[ing] the Indians both in their manners and customs.” While it is true many voyageurs were European frontiersmen who had become culturally Indianized, many were also the offspring of French and Indian parents. One keelboat crew, stripped naked except for breechcloths, moccasins, and head scarves, protested an Ohio boatman’s asking the name of their tribe: “We no Indians, we French, we French,” they insisted. But interracial liaisons were common on the Mississippi Valley fur-trapping frontier, and racial intermingling would continue as fur trappers and keelboatem migrated up the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains.  

Auguste Chouteau dealt in furs from the time he and Pierre Laclede founded Saint Louis in 1763, and his widow Marie and sons Rene-Auguste and Jean-Pierre carried on the family business. The Chouteaus’ eyes were still turned toward the Mississippi River when Manuel Lisa, a strong competitor of mixed Spanish and French ancestry, set his gaze in a northwesterly direction up the Missouri. Lisa was more interested in trapping than trading, and he pored over Lewis and Clark’s geographic data and descriptions of abundant beaver, fox, wolf, elk, deer, and bear in the upper Missouri River Valley. In 1807, Lisa personally led forty-two men up the river to the Montana country, where they built Manuel’s Fort at the juncture of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers. Like any good businessman, Manuel Lisa hired experienced subcontractors. George Drouillard and John Colter, both members of Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery, marketed their geographic expertise to Lisa much like Daniel Boone had earlier parlayed his own

knowledge to real estate investors. Lisa dispatched the men from Manuel’s Fort to gather information, and although their adventures led to Drouillard’s slaying at the hands of Blackfeet Indians, Colter lived to help lay the groundwork for the 1809 formation of Lisa’s Missouri Fur Company.\(^63\)

In the employ of Manuel Lisa, John Colter became the first in a line of iconic Rocky Mountain trapper folk heroes. Heading upstream in 1807 to scout fur grounds, he became the first non-Indian to gaze upon Jackson Hole and Wyoming’s majestic Teton Range, and he trekked across what we know today as the Wind River Valley and Yellowstone National Park. On a subsequent trip, Colter lived to tell the amazing story of how fierce Blackfeet warriors captured him, stripped him naked, and then, in a sadistic and deadly game, forced him to run for his life as they followed in hot pursuit. He escaped only after a five-mile barefoot dash across a rocky plain, jumping into the ice-cold Madison River and hiding inside a log jam. When the Indians at last gave up the search and departed, he walked two hundred miles to rejoin Lisa’s men. Dispatched again in 1810, Colter somehow managed to survive another Blackfeet attack. He then returned downriver and used his fur trapping and scouting savings to get married and buy a Missouri farmstead.\(^64\)

Following the adventures of Lisa, Drouillard, and Colter, the economic disruption accompanying the War of 1812 stalled the upper Missouri fur trade for ten years. Then, on March 22, 1822, Major Andrew Henry (another member of Manuel Lisa’s party) and his business partner William H. Ashley published what is perhaps American history’s most famous help-wanted ad, in the Saint Louis Missouri Republican:

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To enterprising young men. The subscriber wishes to engage one hundred young men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for one, two, three years. For particulars enquire of Major Andrew Henry ... who will ascend with, and command, the party. [signed William H. Ashley.]

Ashley and Henry had no trouble finding “enterprising” adventurers to form the band that would, after several reconfigurations and buyouts, become the famed Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Ascending to the juncture of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, the advance party built Fort Henry (renamed Fort Union) in 1823. Ashley and Henry’s twenty-five-man troop boasted legendary rivermen and trappers with credentials that both support and qualify Goetzmann’s entrepreneurial archetype. Big Mike Fink, the “King of the Mississippi River,” was certainly an entrepreneur. We learned earlier that Fink, born in western Pennsylvania around 1770, entered the keelboat trade near Pittsburgh in the 1790s, acquired his own keelboats, and successfully subcontracted his services along the western rivers for two decades. It is possible that, like Boone, Fink lost some of his land in a lawsuit (in 1818, in Saint Genevieve, Missouri). Ashley and Henry were no doubt pleased to hire a man as experienced as Fink to move their boats up the treacherous Missouri, but upon arrival at Fort Henry he proved troublesome. A cryptic account of his death appears in the records of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company: “In 182[3] Mike Fink shot Carpenter—Talbot soon after shot Fink and not long after was himself drowned at the Teton.” Thus Big Mike Fink committed a murder and was himself murdered before he was able to restore his fortunes in the Rocky Mountain fur trade.

65. Dale L. Morgan, ed., The West of William H. Ashley: The International Struggle for the Fur Trade of the Missouri, the Rocky Mountains, and the Columbia ... (Denver, Colo., 1964), 39–41; Morgan, Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West (Indianapolis, Ind., 1953), 45–49.

Hugh Glass’s brief and wild trapping career gives new meaning to the subject of workplace injuries. Probably born in Pennsylvania around 1780, Glass shipped as a deep sea sailor and might have been involved with John Laffite’s Gulf Coast pirates before signing on with the 1823 Ashley and Henry expedition. During a trapping foray, it was Glass’s misfortune to encounter a mother grizzly bear and her cubs. She tore his throat open and mauled him so badly his brigade left him in the company of two comrades, who soon abandoned him for dead. But Hugh Glass was alive, and he somehow survived on spring water, berries, and abandoned game carcasses as he struggled a hundred miles across western South Dakota. Rescued at last by friendly Indians, he vengefully hunted down one of the men who abandoned him. Yet when Glass at last found seventeen-year-old Jim Bridger, he forgave him.67

During the next four decades, Bridger (who as he aged became known as Old Gabe) explored the central Rockies and Great Basin of Utah, formed several fur companies (including the third configuration of Ashley and Henry’s Rocky Mountain group), built forts and trading posts, undermined the Mormons while assisting non-Mormon overland trekkers, and subcontracted numerous times as a scout for the U.S. Army. In all this he was assisted by his Indian wives—Cora (Flathead), Mary (Shoshone), and a Ute wife whose name is unknown. They bore him some half dozen children, all formally educated by religious missionaries. Like John Colter, Jim Bridger eventually returned to civilization and a Missouri farm. Never one to turn down federal largesse, Old Gabe spent his golden years demanding government reimbursements for services rendered and money for property he (falsely) claimed the Mormons stole from him. He died in 1881.68

Yet another of Ashley’s and Henry’s “enterprising young men”

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6. p. 298. The account erroneously states Fink was murdered in 1822, one year prior to the expedition. For the folkloric significance of Mike Fink’s death see chapter 2, this work.
68. Ibid.; Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire, 118–20, 278–79, 299, 310, 401, 405.
was Jedediah Strong Smith. Smith was born in 1799 and, like nearly all of the Rockies mountain men, began his trade in the Mississippi River Valley. He grew up in western New York and Pennsylvania but by age twenty-four had worked his way west to the Rock Rapids on the upper Mississippi. He joined Ashley and Henry in Saint Louis and ascended the Missouri alongside Mike Fink and Hugh Glass. Like Glass, Smith traversed the western Dakotas and lived to tell of a fearsome grizzly bear attack. His compatriot James Clyman recalled the bear took nearly all Smith’s head into his mouth “and laid the skull bare to near the crown of the head leaving a white streak where his teeth passed.” Bleeding profusely, Smith instructed Clyman to fetch a “needle and thread” and sew his face back together again. He then rode his horse back to their Black Hills camp, where he convalesced for ten days before resuming his duties as brigade captain.  

Jedediah Smith rose very fast in the fur trade and he soon became a full partner in a company begat by Ashley and Henry—Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. Along the way he fought Plains Indians and led the Ashley and Henry group out of dangerous Blackfeet country into safer central Rocky fur regions he had himself explored and mapped. Smith trekked across the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada into California, where he gazed upon the Pacific Ocean. He quickly made a fortune, sold out to his partners, and departed the mountains for Saint Louis. There, he and his brother founded a merchant supply house while Jedediah invested in a nearby farm and furnished his Saint Louis townhouse. A devoutly religious man, Smith had vowed to lead a more moral life, assisting the poor. But in 1831, he made the mistake of pursuing yet one more speculative opportunity. Leading a supply-laden wagon train westward to Santa Fe, Jedediah Smith crossed paths with Comanche Indians who killed him with spears in the prime of his remarkable life.  

Perhaps as many as one quarter of the mountain men lost their lives in the fur trade. Most of those who survived prospered. As the 1820s turned into the 1830s, the mountain men’s work

patterns and lifestyle reflected those of their Appalachian forebears. Some six hundred “free trappers” (subcontractors) worked the Rocky Mountains during the heyday of the trans-Mississippi fur trade. The long hunt of Daniel Boone and his cohort—leaving home during fall to spend the winter trapping when fur-bearing animals wear their thickest and most resplendent coats—also became the regimen of the Rockies mountain men. They trapped in groups composed of fellow subcontractors, sometimes accompanied by Indian wives and children. Many exemplified upward mobility as they advanced in the ranks and acquired enough capital to purchase their own outfits (horses, traps, weapons, food and supplies), captain their own brigades, form fur companies or, more commonly, leave the trade and use their capital to take up “civilized” careers as ranchers, farmers, miners, carpenters, storekeepers, distillers, Indian agents, bankers, politicians, and more. Thus they mirrored seemingly contradictory values—a daredevil streak that drew them to the wilderness and a bourgeois desire for material comforts and respectability. The historian Marvin Meyers once labeled men like this “venturous conservatives.”

The American penchant, then and now, to overlook mountain men’s pragmatism and view them as romantic adventurers is tied to portrayals of the rendezvous, an important annual meeting in which they all took part. First developed by Ashley and Henry in 1825, the rendezvous had a simple purpose—to gather together the trappers and purchase their furs to ship back east. During July and August, after trapping season’s end, the fur companies designated a central Rockies rendezvous point—the Green and Bear Rivers, Jackson’s Hole and Pierre’s Hole, the Wind River Mountains, and other locales. Mountain men arrived, accompanied by their trapping partners, their Indian families, and other Indians involved in the trade (indeed, the fur companies modeled their rendezvous after traditional Indian

71. Schwantes, Pacific Northwest, 75–77; Goetzmann, “Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 409; Marvin Meyers, The Jacksonian Persuasion (Palo Alto, Calif., 1957), 33–56. The six hundred figure is a central Rockies estimate; including Canada and portions of northern Mexico would push the annual number over a thousand.
gatherings and trade fairs). Fur company officials brought trade goods, traps, ammunition, and bills of credit. The gathering included people of all ethnicities—Indians, French, British (including Anglo and Celtic [Scottish] former Hudson’s Bay Company employees), and Hispanic (Spanish and mestizo Mexican) trappers and traders from the southern Rocky Mountains.72

Frontier historians have written vivid narratives describing the revelry accompanying these get-togethers. Months of solitude in the Rockies left mountain men starved for the pleasure of “a wild debauch,” so they drank “St. Louis whiskey and Taos lightning (aguardiente—brandy flavored with red peppers),” gambled at dice and cards, raced horseback and on foot, cavorted with Indian women, and sometimes fought one another. Ray Allen Billington’s selective description of “scene[s] of roaring debauchery” during which the “Mountain Men drank and gambled away their year’s earnings” are based on truthful observations, but there is more to the story. In such a dangerous trade, a few of these “half-wild, half-tamed outcasts” no doubt threw away a year’s wages partying in a Rocky Mountain meadow. Goetzmann’s figures show high mortality and thus ample motivation to enjoy life while they could. But the data also show many men leaving the fur trade with savings and higher aspirations. Not all mountain men thoughtlessly gambled away “their year’s earnings.” Nor were these rendezvous typically violent and lawless affairs—a recent study by Terry Anderson shows thievery and violent crime were rare.73

At the rendezvous of 1832, Rocky Mountain Fur Company men were treated to a sobering spectacle: the arrival of competing agents from John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company. Having overcome his War of 1812 losses, Astor marshaled considerable capital to challenge and overtake the

Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Sailing up the Missouri aboard sleek new steamers, American Fur Company traders challenged their rivals in the central Rockies and, to the north, succeeded in winning the heretofore unattainable trade of the fierce Blackfeet Indians. Economists sometimes refer to this process by which innovative market capitalists wipe out less efficient competitors as “creative destruction.” After a decade on top, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company was forced to sell out to the American Fur Company in 1832.  

Warren A. Ferris is a good example of the increasingly sophisticated mountain men employed by interloping corporate fur traders. An upstate New Yorker, Ferris entered the trade in 1830—more than two decades after Manuel Lisa and nearly a decade after Jedediah Smith—when he went west to work as a trapper for Astor’s American Fur Company. He traversed the central and southern Rockies, fueled by “curiosity, a love for wild adventure, and perhaps also, a hope for profit.” He gained all that he sought, rising to the posts of clerk and trader in only six years. After he accumulated enough capital to return east in 1835, Ferris joined a number of writers in packaging and romanticizing the mountain man mystique. In a series of articles for the Buffalo (New York) Western Literary Messenger, he depicted the free trappers as rugged individualists, wandering the Rocky Mountains’ “snowclad pyramydic peaks of granite … jutting into the clouds”:

Stern, solemn, majestic, they rose on every side of these giant forms, overlooking and guarding the army of lesser hills and mountains that lay encamped below, and pointing proudly up their snow-sheeted crests, on which the stars at evening light the sentinel fires of ages.  

Immediately after John Jacob Astor bought the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, he was challenged by his old, and well-

75. Warren A. Ferris, Life in the Rocky Mountains, ed. Paul C. Phillips (Denver, Colo., 1940), 1, 44. The newspaper articles ran 1843–44.
capitalized, nemesis, the Hudson’s Bay Company. All competing trappers hunted on what were essentially public lands; the only valid claims to private property, those of the Indians, went unheard except when defended by their war parties. Without enforcement of property rights, creative destruction was particularly damaging to natural resources. Capitalists are better stewards of land they themselves own than land of a commons that everybody (or, rather, nobody) owns. Moreover, dropping fur prices also worked against conservation, and by the mid-1830s the over-harvested beaver had begun to disappear. Because the Hudson’s Bay Company had a diverse business plan (fishing, logging, agriculture, merchandising, etc.), they simply trapped out beaver, ran their smaller competitors out of business, and turned to other more lucrative pursuits. Meanwhile, fashion-conscious easterners and Europeans shunned beaver for nutria and raccoon hats (à la Boone and Crockett) and silk top hats. The year 1840 marked the fur traders’ last rendezvous. The glorious history of the Rockies mountain men had lasted a mere seventeen years.76

The year 1840 falls exactly within the period of time when American journalists and writers began marketing published stories of frontier folk heroes. Like their riverboating Alligator Horse and Appalachian mountain counterparts, Rockies mountain men took their place in the pantheon of folk-based popular culture icons. Americans pored over almanac stories, newspaper articles, and, eventually, full-length biographies of men such as John Colter, Jedediah Smith, Jim Beckwourth, James Pattie, Hugh Glass, Mike Fink, Tom “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick, Milton “Thunderbolt” Sublette, “Cannibal Phil” Gardner, “Peg-Leg” Smith, and Louis “Old Vaskiss” Vasquez.77

Thus some Rockies mountain men became media

personalities, as it were. In this, they were not far behind David Crockett, who had proved that a Tennessee mountain man could parlay his mystique into almanac and book sales and a congressional seat. The fur entrepreneur William Ashley also went to Congress, Charles Bent became governor of New Mexico, and Joshua Pilcher was appointed superintendent of Indian Affairs. William Sublette helped manage the Bank of Missouri and served on the Electoral College (as an 1844 elector for James K. Polk). Benjamin Wilson was elected as the first mayor of Los Angeles. Yet it was Jim Beckwourth who arguably became Crockett’s closest rival in successfully marketing the frontier myth during his own lifetime.

Born in 1798, James Pierson Beckwith was the mixed-race son of a Virginia slave woman and her master. Freed in Louisiana Territory around 1810, he adopted the name Beckwourth and worked as a teamster (wagon driver) and blacksmith. He joined Ashley and Henry’s 1823 brigade and worked his way up in their company, living among the Crow Indians and marrying several Indian women along the way. Always the businessman, Jim returned to the settlements in 1833 (without any of the Indian wives) and parlayed his expertise into consulting and scout work over the next two decades. The Mexican-American War and Colorado gold rush found him again out west, where he contracted the journalist Thomas D. Bonner to write his memoirs. During a time when the Rockies mountain men were gone in history but rising in mythology, Bonner’s 1856 biography The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, Pioneer and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians added to Beckwourth’s growing fame. Although Jim Beckwourth probably told more lies than Crockett, he was not as good a liar, and his Life and Adventures lacks the artistry of Crockett’s Narrative tales. Nevertheless, Americans avidly read about Beckwourth’s feats for over a century, and he ranks alongside John Henry in the history of African American folk heroes.

repr. London, 1892); James Ohio Pattie, The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie, of Kentucky, ed. Timothy Flint (1831) in Thwaites, Early Western Travels, 18.

Americans could not resist the mystique of the Black mountain man and “Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians.”

As we have seen, the first American era of frontier folk heroes in popular culture coincided with the industrial revolution. Jacksonian Americans lived and worked in the decades preceding the Civil War and were beginning the transition from agriculture to industry via steamboats, railroads, and factories. The mountain men were gone, but their myth lived on among modernizing Americans with a yearning for what they perceived to be a simpler and more virtuous time. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the myth of the mountain man grew, thanks to western novels, Hollywood movies, and television shows.

Today, were you to ask an educated American to identify a mountain man by name, they would be likely to say Jeremiah Johnson. This is remarkable, because the man known today as Jeremiah Johnson was not in any way a participant in the historic 1823–40 Rocky Mountain fur-trapping frontier. The age of the real mountain men was long gone by the first appearance of “Liver Eatin’ Johnston,” alias Jeremiah Johnston, John Garrison, or, simply, “Liver Eater.” John Garrison was born in New Jersey in 1824, one year after Ashley and Henry’s brigade ascended to the Missouri. He worked as a farmer, teamster, U.S. Navy sailor (Mexican-American War), and U.S. Army private (Plains Indian Wars) and was known as Jeremiah Johnston, not Johnson. Johnston did live an adventurous life as a gold miner, trapper, hunter, guide, scout, deputy, and trader in the Colorado and Montana Rockies during the 1850s and 1860s. He was also known as a brawler and Navy deserter, but the story about him killing a Crow warrior and eating his liver is unverified.

79. Beckwourth and Bonner, Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth. My account is based on Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire, 121, 123, and Billington, Westward Expansion, 385–86. Although it is highly doubtful Beckwourth was a Crow “Chief,” he did marry a Crow woman and reportedly commanded tribal respect.


Unlike Crockett and Beckwourth, Johnston had no official biographer during his lifetime. But stories of his adventures swirled in oral tradition and showed up in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dime novels, western adventure magazines, and books. Mid-twentieth-century authors retold Johnston’s story: Raymond W. Thorp and Robert Bunker’s *Crow Killer* (1958) attracted an audience expanded by Vardis Fisher’s novel *Mountain Man* (1965). And while the tale of Jeremiah Johnston appealed to mainstream fans of 1950s westerns, moviemakers thought it might also strike a responsive chord among the 1960s and ’70s college students and the back-to-nature crowd. These included hippies who themselves sported fringed leather jackets, moccasins, and “leatherstockings.” The result was the hugely popular movie *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), filmed in Utah, directed by Sidney Pollock, and starring Robert Redford as Johnston without the T. It is Redford’s Jeremiah Johnson who remains the modern pop culture embodiment of the Rockies mountain men who had preceded the career of Jeremiah Johnston by more than a generation.\footnote{Nathan E. Bender, “The Abandoned Scout’s Revenge: Origins of the Crow Killer Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson,” *Annals of Wyoming* 78 (Autumn 2006), 2–17.}

**QUEEN CITY OF THE WEST**

As Americans poured over the Appalachians and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers during the years following the War of 1812, their advance paralleled and propelled a revolution in transportation and market capitalism. This migration was by no means a solely rural phenomenon, as urban pockets quickly developed within the agricultural frontier. New Orleans, Saint Louis, Pittsburgh, Lexington, Louisville, and Cincinnati constituted what the historian Richard C. Wade dubbed the “urban frontier” of the Mississippi Valley. By 1825, Cincinnati, strategically located on the upper Ohio River with a growing...
population of 25,000, had become the hub of the Ohio and upper Mississippi River Valleys. A lucrative river trade with the Cotton Kingdom and completion of New York’s Erie Canal assured Cincinnati’s economic strength in the Old Northwest, and Cincinnati experienced a golden era in its history. Nestled in the American wilderness, Cincinnati, Ohio, typified the freewheeling capitalism of Jacksonian America. From 1825 to 1835, Cincinnati came to be known as the Queen City of the West. 83

The Jacksonian traveler found Cincinnati resting on a four-mile-square plain ringed by heavily forested foothills. Boatloads of settlers and supplies arrived at the wharf daily via the winding Ohio. “Notwithstanding all that I have heard about the improvement and growth of Cincinnati,” wrote an 1829 traveler, “the sight of it filled one with astonishment. I could not have imagined ... anything like it ... either to extent or style or magnificence.” “Magnificence” is certainly too positive a descriptor here, yet the degree of the traveler’s surprise is understandable, for Cincinnati was barely fifty years old. In the 1780s, the Federalist judge John Cleve Symmes’ friends in Congress sold him 300,000 acres of good farm land between the Great and Little Miami Rivers for pennies an acre. He resold it in 1788 to the founders of Losantville, who quickly renamed their little village Cincinnati, after the Roman soldier and statesman Cincinnatus (prominent members of the Revolutionary War Veterans’ Society of Cincinnati simultaneously settled upstream in Marietta, Ohio). Amid Indian wars, the U.S. Army built Fort Washington at Cincinnati in 1790. After General “Mad Anthony” Wayne defeated some of the Ohio Valley Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, the upper Ohio Valley saw a period of rapid growth. As the region grew, so did Cincinnati. 84


By 1800, Cincinnati’s population stood at seven hundred fifty; supplies and manufactured goods came downstream from Pittsburgh and eastern cities, while most of the Cincinnati region’s raw materials—farm produce, corn (and whisky), and pork—were shipped downstream for sale in lower Ohio and Mississippi River ports. Despite a smallpox epidemic, Cincinnati’s population marked 2,500 when the steamboat New Orleans arrived in port in 1811. While the War of 1812 and Panic of 1819 temporarily checked growth, the city sprang back in the 1820s. Doctor Daniel Drake, a leading citizen, author, and booster, optimistically proclaimed, “The inhabitants of this region are obviously destined to an unrivalled excellence in agriculture, manufacturing, and internal commerce; in literature, and the arts; in public virtue, and in national strength.”

As the Ohio legislature chartered Cincinnati’s government in 1819, the mayor and council faced many problems. With an annual budget of $40,000, they focused on drinking water, street construction and maintenance, and sanitation. There was no fire department, and “We seldom pass a week,” lamented the Cincinnati Liberty Hall, “without reading some melancholy account of the disasters occasioned by the most destructive of all elements, fire.” A volunteer fire company formed in 1825, but a huge downtown blaze in 1829 destroyed or damaged thirty-three buildings.

Criminals, “unseemly dregs,” arrived early on to “defile” the city, and reports of beatings and robberies appear daily in newspaper reports. At night, the waterfront, with its saloons, brothels, and gambling rooms, was the most dangerous part of town. The city council voted funds to erect “public lamps” in 1827; a volunteer night patrol policed the town until councilmen created a professional police force in the 1830s. Although home to Cincinnati Medical College, the Queen City endured


numerous health and sanitation problems. Standing pools of water covered dead dogs and cats and bred disease. Despite reluctance to regulate the marketplace, waste from the city’s huge pork slaughtering plants necessitated “intervention of the powers of the [city] council.” But live hogs actually helped to combat sickness according to Mrs. Frances Trollope. In their constant search for food, the porkers ate much of the waste and garbage that filled the city’s streets:

In truth the pigs are constantly seen doing Herculean service in this way through every quarter of the city; and though it is not very agreeable to live surrounded by herds of these unsavory animals, it is well they are so numerous, and so active in their capacity as scavengers, for without them the streets would soon be choked up with all sorts of substances in every stage of decomposition.87

One could say that Trollope, the author of the above quotation, was Cincinnati’s most famous early citizen but for the fact she was a foreign visitor who really did not like the Queen City at all. Victim of a marriage that had slowly depleted two ample family estates, Frances Trollope (with her children) arrived in New Orleans in 1828. Although she initially came to assist her friend, the British feminist Frances Wright, in her West Tennessee utopia Nashoba, Trollope quickly tired of social work among freedmen. Within weeks she was on a steamer bound for Cincinnati, where she aimed to recoup her fortunes. A series of spectacularly disastrous business ventures in the Queen City followed and seemed to end that plan. Then Frances Trollope stumbled upon a gold mine: She wrote a book exposing just what a bunch of ignorant louts Americans really were. *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), a book with a title dripping in irony, was bound to sell tens of thousands of copies to European and American readers alike. One of the recurrent motifs in *Domestic Manners* is Trollope’s critique of American materialism and love of money. Though she was herself on the make, she

87. Ibid., 88–89, 96–97, 116, 122, 284, 289–91, 298; Berry, *Western Prices*, 8; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; repr. Gloucester, Mass., 1974), 39. For Trollope see chapter 1, this work.
saved her sharpest barbs for American money grubbers and sharpers:

During nearly two years that I resided in Cincinnati or its neighborhood, I [never saw] a man of sufficient fortune to permit his ceasing his efforts to increase it; thus every bee in the hive is actively employed in search of that honey of Hybla, vulgarly called money; neither art, science, learning nor pleasure can seduce them from its pursuit.\(^{88}\)

Jacksonian America was certainly a nation of energetic, individualistic entrepreneurs, and Cincinnati was a model Jacksonian city. Most nineteenth-century travelers sensed that energy the minute they disembarked a river vessel and stepped onto the public landing that lay between Front Street and the Ohio. Picking their way through crates of agricultural produce and barrels of salted pork and tobacco, they gazed upon Front Street’s two- and three-story brick buildings, banks, a public lands office, blacksmith forges, taverns, lawyer and doctor offices, and warehouses. Main Street stretched upward for a mile, also lined with stables, inns, print shops, and bookstores. There were hotels, four public markets, a city hall and courthouse, hospital, schools, two theaters, twenty churches, two museums, two colleges, and a branch of the Second Bank of the United States. Construction projects were under way, and brick and stone masons’ carts blocked the roadway. The air was alive with the smell of bakeries, saddletrees, market vendors, livery stables, and, yes, hog butchers. Streets filled with hundreds of people, horses, dogs, pigs, and the occasional milk cow. Boys played marbles and rolled hoops while locals shopped, gossiped, and talked politics and business.\(^{89}\)

Amidst this engine of wealth creation, the role of federal, state, and local government was minimal. There were important exceptions. Whig politicians supported protective tariffs and subsidized river improvements via the army engineers, and there

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88. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 43.
was local regulation of the pork slaughterhouses as mentioned above. Below the Ohio River, government officials subsidized and abetted the slaveholding class. But compared to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, economic regulation was minuscule, and politicians believed their only job was to keep taxes low and protect the people’s right to earn and keep their property. Meanwhile, Cincinnatians pursued the “honey of Hybla” in three broad areas of economic pursuit: the downtown business district and market; numerous manufacturing and industrial ventures located throughout the city; and an expansive Ohio and Mississippi Rivers trade.

The downtown business district was the most visible sector of the Queen City’s booming commercial life. Scores of shops lined Front, Main, and adjacent streets, selling a variety of goods to meet the demands of the growing populace. Folks bought their food at one of four market houses. The oldest of these, two blocks north of Front Street, was located under a long shed supported by brick columns; the market boasted daily offerings of pork, beef, poultry, fish, corn, vegetables, assorted foodstuffs, and dry goods and other merchandise. “For excellence, abundance, and cheapness,” wrote one traveler, “[the market] can hardly, I should think, be surpassed in any part of the world.”

The markets operated from sunup to sunset. Farmers arrived first, driving ox-carts laden with produce; soon after came the merchants, dressed in black coats with linen aprons. Customers gathered with their baskets in early dawn to get the best bargains. In 1829, beef sold for four cents per pound; chickens were twelve cents apiece; flour sold for three dollars per barrel; a barrel of corn was twenty-five cents; ginseng was fourteen cents per pound; coffee was fourteen cents per pound; calico cost twenty cents per yard; and gun powder sold for six dollars a barrel. Eggs and butter were plentiful, but with the exception of apples and watermelon, fresh fruit was rare. Frances Trollope expressed dismay at the watermelon eaters, “groups of men, women, and children … sucking prodigious quantities of this watery fruit” while “streams of the fluid” dripped from their mouths and “hard
black seeds are shot out in all directions, to the great annoyance of all within reach.”

Surrounding the downtown core was a growing industrial and manufacturing complex. Following the Panic of 1819 downturn, town leaders had embraced the industrial revolution as their path to prosperity. “It is well known,” one proclaimed, “that a great city can be raised and an immense population supported by extensive manufacturing establishments,” and by 1825 Cincinnati had become the most industrialized city west of the Appalachians. Fifteen shore-based steam engines were in operation, and the city housed iron and tin foundries, machine shops, textile and woolen concerns, coach makers and boat builders, tanneries, tobacco processing shops, plow and axe makers, paper mills, a sugar refinery, plate glass manufacturers, furniture and barrel shops, a score of lumber mills, and small producers of salt, flour, corn meal, and whiskey. In the 1830s German immigrants brought Old World beer-making expertise that would soon make Cincinnati the “Brewing Capital of the Nation.” Together, these companies employed thousands of skilled and unskilled workers. Men earned varying wages, from four to ten dollars per week, while women and children took home two dollars on average.

“It hardly seems fair to quarrel with a place because its staple commodity is not pretty,” wrote Trollope, trying her best to sound fair and balanced, “but I am sure I should have liked Cincinnati much better if the people had not dealt so very largely in hogs.” Most Cincinnatians were more supportive of their town’s leading industry, and affectionately dubbed the Queen City “Porkopolis.” During the Jacksonian era, Cincinnatians annually slaughtered 120,000 pigs in a number of plants (capitalized at $2,000,000) to lead the nation in sales of salted and pickled pork. The pigs, pastured by farmers in the upper Ohio Valley’s rich deciduous forests, were annually driven or

90. R. Carlyle Buley, _The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815–1840_ (Bloomington, Ind., 1950), 527; Trollope, _Domestic Manners_, 60, 85.

shipped to Cincinnati for processing. The Queen City’s streets were continually filled with transient porker herds, or strays in search of freedom, or at least a bite to eat. In the slaughterhouses on the city’s outskirts, hogs were killed and rendered with mechanical precision. One typical plant was built of brick and measured three stories high and one hundred feet by one hundred feet. Frederick Marryat, an Englishman, expressed amazement at the efficiency of the business:

The hogs confined in a large pen are driven into a smaller one; one man knocks them on the head with a sledge-hammer and then cuts their throats; two more pull away their carcass, when it is raised by two others who tumble it into a tub of scalding water. His bristles are removed in about a minute and a half by another party when the next duty is to fix a stretcher between his legs. It is then hoisted up by two other people, cut open, and disemboweled; and in three minutes and a half from the time he was grunting in his obesity, he has only to get cold before he is again packed up and reunited in a barrel to travel the world. ⑨²

The New York City poet Charles Fenno Hoffman also gave a detailed description of “doomed porkers” in “these swinish workshops,” where the “minute division of labor ... gives dignity to hog-killing in Cincinnati.” He too described each specialized task of the gruesome process, concluding, “When the fearful carnival comes on, [and] the deep forests of the Ohio have contributed their thousands of unoffending victims, the gauntlet of death is run by those selected for immolation.” Trollope devoted one of her accounts to the slaughterhouses’ impact on the natural world. Out for a hike on a beautiful hill bordering the city, “we found the brook we had to cross at its foot red with the stream from a pig slaughtering house,” and she was subjected to “odours which I will not describe, and which I heartily hope my readers cannot imagine.” ⑤³

While the downtown shops and markets and the industrial plants provided great economic stimulus, the key to Cincinnati’s prosperity was the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers trade. Farmers across the upper Ohio Valley shipped their raw produce downriver, as did Cincinnati’s emergent industrial plants. Manufactured goods from back east came to Cincinnati down the Ohio, while imported commodities like coffee and sugar traveled upstream from New Orleans. During the 1820s and ’30s, steamboats slowly came to dominate the trade, pushing out the keelboats, the only prior upstream craft. Interestingly, and as we have seen, the downstream-only flatboat trade continued to flourish for another forty years despite the new technology. Flatboats were cheap to make and appealed to humble but striving farmer speculators. Moreover, steamboats offered flatboatmen a convenient ride home. By eliminating the arduous walk home over the Natchez Trace, steamers turned flatboatmen into commuters.94

“The invention of the steamboat was intended for us,” bragged the editor of the Cincinnati Gazette. “The puny rivers of the East are only as creeks or convenient waters on which experiments may be made for our advantage.” By 1830, less than twenty years since the New Orleans’ 1811 voyage, more than four hundred steamboats regularly navigated the western rivers. The three months it had taken a keelboat to travel upstream from New Orleans to Cincinnati was cut to less than three weeks. This new technology also expanded Cincinnati’s boatbuilding industry, and the Queen City took pride in locally built craft dubbed “waterskimmers” because of their light construction and resultant low draft (the depth necessary to navigate). The only remaining bottleneck on the path to and from New Orleans was the Great Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville, one of the Cincinnati’s chief competitors, hesitated to build a canal around the falls for fear of losing a lucrative portage trade. Yet by 1825, a joint public/private company formed and completed the Louisville Canal in 1830.95

The 1820s saw two more major developments in the transportation revolution that would rock Cincinnati and all of the Mississippi Valley. In 1825, New York State completed construction of the Erie Canal, linking the Great Lakes to the port of New York City and the Atlantic trade. Construction of the Erie Canal was paralleled by a “canal craze” across the upper Ohio Valley; several canal projects aimed at linking the Ohio River to the Great Lakes and New York City. Yet the canals were soon superseded by an even more powerful technological breakthrough. In 1829, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O) successfully tested a new American-made steam engine, and the American railroad age began. Soon, railroads would further strengthen the growing links between Cincinnati and the northeastern states of the United States of America.96

Cincinnati’s African-American population grew amid this turbulent economic revolution, suffering racial persecution while performing menial labor and roiling the politics of the Queen City. Although slavery was banned above the Ohio River by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, slaveholding Kentucky lay just across the river. By 1830, free Blacks represented 10 percent of the Queen City’s populace, residing in two poor, segregated neighborhoods known as Bucktown and Little Africa. Escaped slaves joined their ranks, and Blacks found work as steamboat deckhands, day laborers, porters, vendors, shoeblacks, and domestic servants. Poor white laborers resented the competition, and in 1829 there were race riots in the Queen City. Approximately fifteen hundred Blacks reportedly fled the city, but most returned, and Cincinnati’s free Black population continued to grow.97

Despite Cincinnati’s racism and closeness to slave territory, the key to understanding its 1820s and ’30s economic growth...
was the fact it was not a slaveholding city. Cincinnati’s wharves may have looked across the Ohio at Kentucky, but the city’s future lay on the path of the industrial revolution, not the precapitalist slaveholding system. All of the crucial elements of the transportation revolution—steamboats, canals, and railroads—pointed the Queen City north, not south like during the early keelboat era. While the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democrats’ strategy of linking the South and West had initially succeeded, it was ultimately doomed by the industrial revolution. The vast majority of Ohioans, even as far south as Cincinnati, were becoming Yankees. And when the Civil War came, most (not all) Ohio Valley men would fight for the Union and America’s future, not its past.  

Though no one in the 1820s and ’30s saw it coming, the railroad age would create strong competitors who challenged the Queen City’s preeminence. Cincinnati’s perch atop the emerging urban frontier was already being contested, and not just by Saint Louis and Pittsburgh. Chicago was founded in 1833, sitting along Lake Erie and near the headwaters of the Illinois River, on a flat prairie landscape perfect for building a transcontinental railroad. Decades later, the great Illinois poet Carl Sandburg would celebrate Chicago as “Hog Butcher for the World, / Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, / Player with Railroads and the Nation’s / Freight Handler; / Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders.” By the eve of the Civil War it was obvious that the Ohio Valley’s Porkopolis was being replaced by the Hog Butcher for the World. 

During 1825–35, however, at the height of Jacksonian optimism and exuberance, Cincinnati was booming. The city’s rapid growth was spurred on by emergent middle-class Americans striving to improve their stations in life. It is these middle-class Americans who caused Trollope’s discomfort, and she recurrently expressed disdain for folks who honestly

believed they were her *equals*—socially, politically, and economically. Most Cincinnatians believed that if they worked hard and planned ahead, happiness and prosperity would one day be theirs. It was this desire for self-improvement that had pulled thirty thousand diverse individuals west of the Appalachians to settle Cincinnati. That some of them did not succeed is more than balanced by the fact that most of them did. And in so doing, they built the Queen City of the West.

**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SLAVERY**

“I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia,” writes Booker T. Washington in *Up from Slavery* (1901), a detailed memoir of his progress from the slave quarters to the founding presidency of Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute. Born in 1856 in the upper Ohio River Valley region we now call West Virginia, Washington spent nearly nine years of his childhood as a slave. He remembered his mother working long days in their master’s house and tending to her three children as best she could. He never knew his father, a white man from a neighboring plantation. “Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing.” Nor did Booker T. Washington express interest in learning more about his father, whom he dismisses as “simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time.”

“My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings,” Washington continues. His earliest recollections are of constant work doing odd jobs, carrying water to the field slaves, grinding corn, and swatting flies at his master’s dinner table. His family lived in a small cabin, and he could not recall “having slept in a bed until after our family was declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation. Three children—John, my oldest brother, Amanda, my sister, and myself—had a pallet on the dirt floor,

or, to be more correct, we slept in and on a bundle of filthy rags laid upon the dirt floor.” The children’s workdays kept them separated from one another and their mother until bedtime came again. “I cannot remember a single instance during my childhood or early boyhood when our entire family sat down at the table together, and God’s blessing was asked, and the family ate a meal together in a civilized manner.”

Many of Washington’s adult traits can be traced back to his childhood. Decades after emancipation, he found it difficult to enjoy leisure time or to play at games with his own children. He confessed he knew nothing about football, cards, or other amusements because “there was no period of my life that was devoted to play.” Washington has been ridiculed for his compulsive quest (at Tuskegee and elsewhere) for “absolute cleanness of the body” and advocacy of what he soberly called “the gospel of the toothbrush.” All of this springs from repulsive memories of the filth in which he was raised. A poignant moment in *Up from Slavery* is his recalling the cleanliness and order of his alma mater, Hampton Institute (Richmond, Virginia), where he ate regular meals served on a tablecloth with napkins, slept for the first time in clean sheets, and bathed regularly. “Since leaving Hampton, I have always in some way sought my daily bath.”

Booker T. Washington’s enrollment at Hampton, and his eventual founding of Tuskegee, can also be traced back to his upper Ohio Valley slave childhood. *Up from Slavery*’s opening chapter reveals his aching desire to enjoy the opportunities afforded his master’s children—their comforts, seeming carefree childhoods, playtime, and even the ginger cookies they were given. Charged with carrying his young mistress’s books to school, Washington was struck by the opportunities an education might hold. As an older man, he could still recall the image of the white boys and girls studying in a country schoolroom: “I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.”

101. Ibid., 1–6.
“During the campaign when Lincoln was first a candidate for the Presidency,” Washington continues, “slaves on our far-off plantation ... knew what the issues involved were.” As the Civil War commenced and slowly ground on, they heard news reports from Virginia battlefields east of the Appalachians and southwestward along the course of the Mississippi. Late one night, “I was awakened by my mother kneeling over her children and fervently praying that Lincoln and his armies might be successful.” He remembers that in his part of the upper Ohio Valley, the slave community slowly came to the realization they might all soon be free. As this was happening, thoughts of clean sheets, daily baths, ginger cookies, and going to school germinated in the mind of young Booker T. Washington.  

Slavery was already in use among native inhabitants at the time Europeans first penetrated the western hemisphere in the late fifteenth century. The origins of Europeans’ use of slaves can be traced back to the ancient Near East and, later, Greek, Roman, and Arab slavery systems. By 1650, colonial Spanish, French, and British slaveholders had, for the most part, failed at enslaving Indians and instead introduced captured African slaves to their Caribbean and South American holdings. 

North American slaves constituted 10 percent of all slaves shipped to the western hemisphere; the Spanish, French, and British worked 90 percent of the slave population in the Caribbean and in Central and South America. In the lower Mississippi Valley, French and Spanish slaveholders were followed by Anglo and Celtic Americans, who brought their African-American slaves across the Appalachian Mountains during the decades following the American Revolution. They

104. Ibid.
migrated from the southern colonies—Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North and South Carolina, and Georgia—where American slavery had begun in the mid-1600s. As discussed earlier, 10 percent of African Americans held the legal status of free Blacks that resulted from manumission or the end of their original contracts as indentured servants. The vast majority, however, were enslaved for life—*chattels personal durante vita*—under Black Codes passed in colonies south of the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River. Although the percentage of Blacks in the overall American population actually decreased between the Revolution and the Civil War (from 20 percent to 15 percent), this was due to heavy European immigration and a booming white birth rate. Even with the 1808 American ban on the global slave trade, the Cotton South in 1861 held a population of approximately four million slaves, up markedly from approximately four hundred thousand in 1776.106

Historians go round and round about the “profitability” of slavery.107 These arguments stem from strongly held opinions over whether or not slavery was part of America’s emerging free-market capitalist system. The quick answer to this question is no. True, the Yankee capitalists’ burgeoning textile factories were fed with slave-harvested cotton. Yet Eugene Genovese shows in *The Political Economy of Slavery* that southern slaveholders were “premodern ... pseudo capitalist[s]” who “impeded the development of every normal feature of capitalism.” Although capitalism sometimes grows alongside and encourages pre-capitalist systems, Genovese writes, it is “pointless to suggest therefore that nineteenth century India and twentieth century Saudi Arabia should be classified as capitalist countries.”


Southern white slaveholders held aristocratic aspirations and a marked hostility towards industry, infrastructure, and modern farming techniques (including crop rotation and fertilizer). Slaveholders thus “represented the antithesis of capitalism.”

African-American slaves harvested agricultural produce less efficiently and less profitably than free laborers using modern technology ultimately performed the same tasks. Slavery endured amid rising antebellum capitalism in large part because northern businessmen, for varied and complex reasons, chose to temporarily abide its sins and inefficiencies. Though some slaveholders did make money (a few made a great deal), slavery certainly was not part of a laissez-faire system with a minimal government economic role. Indeed, the forceful hand of the government was essential to slavery’s survival against free markets, and slaveholders could not have existed without it. In addition to the masters’ brutal plantation regimes, state and federally enforced Black Codes, fugitive slave laws, and slave patrols (in which white service was mandatory and refusal punishable) kept the slaveholders’ world intact at the taxpayers’ expense. Meanwhile, taxpayers also funded endeavors like the Mexican-American War, wherein federal troops conquered new southwestern territories to replace the exhausted soil of the Cotton South’s wasteful and immoral labor system.

Although there was urban slavery, most slaves worked in the South’s agricultural fields. Twelve percent of all slaveholders held most of the South’s slaves (half of Cotton Belt farms were slaveless). They worked them on large plantations, growing crops of tobacco, rice, sugar cane, indigo, and, of course, cotton. While field hands did the harvesting, a smaller contingent of house slaves (like Booker T. Washington’s mother) worked in or near the master’s home. An even smaller number of slave holders owned no slaves.


artisans—blacksmiths, butchers, barrel-makers, distillers, etc.—labored nearby. Work conditions and treatment ranged across great extremes. Solomon Northrup recalled one brutal beating he got from a slave trader during which “I thought I must die beneath the lashes of the accursed brute… I was all on fire. My suffering I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell.” Yet Frederick Douglass stated, “A city slave is almost a free citizen,” enjoying “privileges altogether unknown to the whip-driven slaves on the plantation.”

Presiding over all of this were the so-called plantation aristocrats. Because the American Revolution put an end to what little hereditary aristocracy existed in the United States, there were no true American aristocrats in the European mold (and, indeed, Europe’s own supply was dwindling). Yet slaveholders did aspire to that status of republican gentlemen, and this was reflected in behaviors some historians label aristocratic: plantation architecture (with faux Roman columns and Greek façades); ample libraries for gentlemen scholars; aspiration to genteel manners, dress, and dining; and an abiding love for the art of politics (southern gentlemen, Genovese writes, “lived for politics, not, like the bourgeois politician, off politics”). Slaveholders touted their beliefs in virtue, family, patriarchy, and honor, the latter mirrored in their anachronistic practice of settling disputes via a code duello. Unlike their capitalistic Yankee countrymen, slave masters shunned hard work and sought lives of leisure. Booker T. Washington observed that the slave labor system “took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people… They unconsciously had imbibed the feeling that manual labour was not the proper thing for them.”

Slaveholders slowly developed an elaborate intellectual defense of their “right” to enslave nearly four million human beings. This rationalizing was no mean feat given America was a

111. Genovese, Political Economy of Slavery, 28–34 (politics qtn., 28); Washington, Up from Slavery, 12.
democratic republic founded on Thomas Jefferson’s stated belief that all men are created equal. Jefferson and many Revolutionary era southerners honestly viewed slavery as a necessary evil, and some even tried to legislate its extinction. The gentlemen of the post–cotton gin South made no such pretense of guilt or shame—indeed, John C. Calhoun and his brethern pronounced slavery to be a “positive good.” Their argument was based on a strong dose of anticapitalism that today incongruously looks a little like Marxism. To Calhoun, Yankee laborers were simply wage slaves lacking caring patriarchs like himself to watch over them. This belief was spiced with a selective reading of the Old Testament to proclaim the slaveholders heirs to the venerable traditions of the Hebrew prophets (and the Greek and Roman republican slaveholders who followed them). But woven throughout all of this was racism, a deeply held belief in the innate inferiority of African Americans. One could believe in both the justness of slavery and that all men are created equal only if one believed Black slaves were not men—that they were subhuman. In such a mental landscape, southerners imagined slavery to be the only solution to the labor needs of the nineteenth-century American economy. Calhoun wrote in 1838 that slavery, far from being a “moral and political evil,” was “in its true light … the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world.”

The masters’ belief in Black inferiority was proven false each day by slave men, women, and children who survived and eventually triumphed over the South’s peculiar institution. We have seen how slaves worked to build lives for themselves. They marshaled resources, raised families, practiced folk medicine and conjuring, danced and sang, and told folktales that gave them strength and hope. Some resisted their masters through slacking and acts of sabotage. Hundreds followed Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner in violent and failed slave

revolts. Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and thousands like them managed to escape to the North. Yet the vast majority of Blacks remained slaves and endured. In this task they were bolstered by their religion, an Africanized and enthusiastic Protestant Christianity. Most slaves survived, all the while awaiting “a better day a comin.”

It is impossible to describe the psychology of the day-to-day coexistence of white masters and their slaves. As above, the truth no doubt lies somewhere between the horrific and the barely tolerable, between the opposing caricatures of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Gone with the Wind. There was a norm. Although many masters adequately fed, clothed, and cared for their slaves, there are disturbing written records (and a few photographs) of bloody abuse. According to Ira Berlin, the slave masters “employed force freely and often... If they sometimes extended the carrot of privilege, the stick was never far behind.” The growth of a large biracial (mulatto) population evidences the rape of Black women by their white masters and overseers. Yet some of these “pseudo capitalist[s]” no doubt understood the monetary value of a slave (approximately $1,200 in 1850) and sought to avoid beating slaves and breaking up their families.

Then, too, connections and relationships somehow formed between master and slave on the isolated plantations dotting the American South. “One may get the idea, from what I have said, that there was a bitter feeling towards the white people on the part of my race,” Booker T. Washington wrote. “This was not true.” Washington was not the only slave to feel loyalty towards his owner, a fact that speaks more to the magnanimity of the slave than that of the master. Yet Washington simultaneously and strongly condemned slavery and stressed that he had “never seen [a slave] who did not want to be free, or one who would return to slavery.” He concluded, “I pity from the bottom of my heart

113. Fogel and Engerman, Time on the Cross, 109–26; John W, Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, 1972), passim; Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York, 1977), passim. See also chapter 2, this work.
any nation or body of people that is so unfortunate as to get entangled in the net of slavery.”

The lives and careers of two Black rivermen reflect differing ways in which slaves endured before the Civil War. Simon Grey was an exceptional Natchez, Mississippi, slave who worked his way up to a status scarcely distinguishable from that of a free Black citizen. Grey’s owner subcontracted him to the Andrew Brown and Company lumber firm in 1835, where he learned how to fell timber and raft it down the Yazoo River. Brown soon promoted Grey to flatboat captain and sent him “coasting” finished lumber to customers along the Mississippi from Natchez to New Orleans (“coasting” was the business practice of retailing goods from a traveling boat store). Brown trusted Grey with large sums of money (“He is a first rate fellow,” Brown wrote) and eventually let him pursue his own business enterprises and keep the profits. Simon Grey lived with his wife and children in a company house in Natchez and apparently left the firm after emancipation.

“I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, [to a master who] owned about forty slaves,” remembered William Wells Brown (1816–84), who used a river career to escape to freedom and become an abolitionist writer, lecturer, novelist, and playwright. William Wells Brown’s master, Dr. John Young, took him and his mother to Missouri, where they lived on lower Missouri River Valley farms and Young subcontracted out the teenaged William as a steamboat deckhand. William and his mother’s unsuccessful 1832 escape attempt led Young to sell her downriver, and William never saw his mother again. Soon, Captain Enoch Price bought him and put him to work on his own steamboat, but William vowed to escape.

116. Washington, Up from Slavery, 8–11.
It was when Captain Price landed in Cincinnati in 1832, William recalled, that “at last the time for action arrived.” While unloading cargo he snuck off and hid in the woods until dark. Setting out, he caught “sight of my friend—truly the slave’s friend—the North Star!” William hiked to Cleveland, where he found work aboard Lake Erie steamers and helped other escaped slaves flee to Canada. He eventually moved to Farmington, New York, a town with strong abolitionist sentiments, where he joined the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society and served as a lecturer. William Wells Brown’s published autobiography, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847), sold 10,000 copies. He traveled to Europe, wrote several more antislavery works, and with the publication of *Clotel* (1853) and *The Escape* (1858), became America’s first Black playwright and novelist. He published *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People* in 1880, four years before he died in Cambridge, Massachusetts.119

William Wells Brown’s career paralleled and contributed to the rise of both abolitionism and the political Free Soil movement. Although abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison castigated Free Soilers because they opposed only slavery’s westward expansion, and not slavery itself, Frederick Douglass and pragmatic abolitionists saw the utility of infiltrating the political party system. The Whigs (and Federalists before them) had always boasted an antislavery core. The Liberty Party challenged both Whigs and Democrats in 1840, begetting the Free Soil Party of 1848. Eventually, Liberty men, Free Soilers, Whigs, and some northern Democrats formed the Republican Party in Ripon, Wisconsin, in 1854. It was the Republicans’ successful 1860 presidential candidate for whom Booker T. Washington’s mother prayed during the long course of America’s Civil War.120

Religion and opposition to slavery, of course, went hand in hand. Tens of thousands of slaves who flocked to Ulysses S. Grant’s conquering Union Army believed, with good reason, that God had sent Yankee soldiers to punish their sinful masters and set the slaves free. A postwar observer noted that the “great mass

... of negro people” who welcomed Union General William Tecumseh Sherman and his troops showed “how true and strong their faith was in the armed deliverance which Providence had ordained for their race.”121

Meanwhile, in the upper Ohio Valley, slaves on the farm with nine-year-old Booker T. Washington also knew the end of the Civil War was near. He recalled, “Finally the war closed and the day of freedom came... As the day grew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder and had more ring, and lasted into the night.” Millennialism was not an abstract belief to these Black men and women. Only their white masters believed their songs about freedom “referred to the next world and had no connection with life in this world,” Washington reflected. “Now [the slaves] gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the ‘freedom’ in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world.”122

STEAMBOATS, TRAINS, AND CARS

Steam engine technology, first developed in Europe and the eastern United States, crossed the Appalachian Mountains during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Presteam rivermen were reportedly astounded to see Nicholas Roosevelt’s New Orleans belching smoke and chugging along the Ohio and Mississippi in 1811. Their quiet machineless world soon became much noisier, and the boatmen’s awe turned to anger and fear of losing their jobs to a more efficient mode of transportation. Yet during the decades that followed Roosevelt’s voyage, only keelboatmen were run out of business by steamers. Most rivermen adjusted, becoming steamboatmen themselves or enjoying the boom in flatboating that accompanied the steamboat age. “During the half century following the introduction of the steamboat,” wrote the historian Louis C. Hunter, “the West experienced an extraordinary growth.”123

Like the upper Cumberland and Cincinnati steamers described above, Mississippi Valley steamboats were work horses, not show horses. The historian Adam Kane describes them as “marvel[s] of modern engineering,” thrust by “powerful, inexpensive, wasteful, and lightweight high-pressure steam engine[s].” Steamers were small, light, low-draft craft carrying manufactured goods, foodstuffs, cotton, tobacco, whiskey, passengers, and many other cargoes in high (and often low) water. By 1818, Henry Miller Shreve had succeeded Roosevelt, replacing the inefficient side-wheeler with his powerful stern-wheeler, a two-and-a-half-foot draft prototype. In the 1820s, the Army Corps of Engineers contracted Shreve to clear snags and improve navigation channels along the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. These improvements, Kane writes, ensured “a vital means for the settlement and development of the lands of the public domain.”

The average Mississippi Valley steamer’s accommodations were not resplendent. Though first-class passengers could book comfortable cabins, most paying customers rode deck passage. They found berths on the lower decks amidst the cargo (including livestock). Yet the low fare (approximately two dollars from New Orleans to Saint Louis) brought the freedom of mobility to countless common folks—European immigrants, northbound flatboatmen, and farm families—who could now travel hundreds of miles in a few days for a few dollars. While the makeup of steamboat crews initially resembled that of presteam rivermen, increasing German, Irish, and Scandinavian immigration combined with a pool of free Black and slave workers to greatly diversify the fleet’s workforce. Women

123. Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History (Cambridge, Mass. 1949), 11–12, 29; Allen, Western Rivermen, 140–41. See also Eric F. Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton, Western Rivers Transportation (Baltimore, Md., 1975); William J. Petersen, Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi (Iowa City, Iowa, 1968), and Gudmestad, Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom.

shipped as galley workers and maids. Steamers were crewed by a captain and pilot, engineer, cook, two mates, and deckhands, all of whom took turns sleeping as the boat worked around the clock. Steamboating was a hard way to make a living, but during the Age of Jackson it could provide aspiring men a start in life and a chance for adventure, and perhaps produce enough savings for land payments and even marriage.\textsuperscript{125}

Successful steamboat pilots possessed great knowledge and skill, as described by Mark Twain in his 1875 \textit{Atlantic Monthly} articles that became the opening chapters of \textit{Life on the Mississippi} (1883). As noted above, Twain’s famed depiction of piloting ultimately meanders into semifictional anecdotes, yet the opening sections are the best depiction of steamboat piloting ever published. Twain systematically divides his complicated subject into four portions, all served up as a memoir of his own training as a cub pilot under Captain Horace Bixby (“Mr. B—”). He begins by learning visible physical and geographic features (islands, bluffs, trees, etc.) but then is required to learn the changing \textit{shape} of such features for night navigation. The third portion, perhaps the most famous, is a “lesson on water-reading” as Mr. B— teaches Twain to examine the surface of the water to identify dangerous snags, rocks, sandbars, shoals, and eddies. But just as the cub concludes he has learned everything he needs to know, Mr. B— forces him to start all over. River stage assessment, the fourth lesson, teaches that during floods or low water all of the above features change so much the pilot must learn them all anew. In a famous passage, Twain concludes that the river “became a wonderful book—a book was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice.”\textsuperscript{126}

Americans have always been fascinated with steamboat racing,
and Twain wrote of the “vast importance” and “consuming excitement” that preceded a race: “Politics and weather were dropped, and people talked only of the upcoming race.” Like Twain’s lower Mississippi, the Ohio River and its tributaries saw their share of steamboat racing. One upper Cumberland resident, Claude Hackett remembered, “We had a few steamboat races that burned up all the lard and meat and everything to make more steam. Sometimes they’d adjust the safety valve to where it was dangerous.” Winners of an annual Cumberland River race were entitled to hold the rotating trophy; another race produced a folksong from which a short verse is preserved: “The Harley and the Hardison had a race / The Harley threw water in the Hardison’s Face.”

Yet romantic stories about racing often ignore one of their most dangerous outcomes: steam engine explosions. From 1825 to 1850, one hundred fifty major steamboat explosions killed more than fourteen hundred people. Although these numbers are minuscule when set in the context of the overall amount of steamboat traffic on western rivers, they do give cause for reflection. Like modern Americans, Jacksonians were in a hurry to get someplace, and they were willing to take chances to get there fast. These chances, as Hackett recalled above, sometimes included tampering with steam engine safety valves in order to build more steam and increase boat speed. “I tell you stranger, it takes a man to ride on one of these alligator boats,” one steamboat deckhand bragged, “head on a snag, high pressure, valve soddered down, 600 souls on board & in danger of going to the devil!”

Baron von Gerstner, a European traveler, offered an astute analysis of the racing explosions, blaming them on America’s overly acquisitive and dynamic culture. He described Americans as eager strivers who “never like to remain one behind another:

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127. Twain, Life on the Mississippi, 96–97.
128. Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, 153.
on the contrary, each wants to get ahead of the rest.” He asserted, “When two steamboats happen to get alongside each other, the passengers will encourage the captains to run a race.” The eager boat engineers stoked their steam engine boilers, intended for a pressure of 100 pounds, to “150 and even 200 pounds” and this led to explosions and death. And yet the steamboat races continued. Why? “The life of an American is, indeed, only a constant racing, and why should he fear for it on board the steamboats?”

The first two decades of Mississippi Valley steamboat commerce proved to be the most profitable of the entire Steamboat Age. Hundreds of small entrepreneurs entered the trade, while the federal and state governments stayed out of it (with the notable exceptions of improvements and wharf taxes). This relatively free market produced huge profits but never created the corrupt government/capital collusion and monopolies that characterized the transcontinental railroads. By 1830, however, there was too great a supply of steamers and too little demand, and the Panic of 1837 further weakened the market. Business leveled out during the two decades immediately preceding the Civil War, and steamboat businessmen once again prospered. But steamboating never returned to the glory days of 1811–30. As noted, the launch of the first American steam-powered railroad in 1829 had doomed the steamboat trade.

Railroads were superior to steamboats in several ways. While steamboats were bound to the river valleys, railroads could go anywhere men could lay track. Low water, ice, and fog did not hinder the railroads, which offered direct, year-round service to not only port cities but also towns far away from navigable rivers. By the 1850s steam-powered locomotive trains served all of the major Ohio and Mississippi Valley port cities, and businessmen could choose between them and the steamboats. Producers of every major product except coal gradually moved

their business from riverboats to railroad cars. As tobacco, cotton, pork, and corn producers were shifting to railroads, the Civil War intervened, severely limiting all river commerce. The Union Pacific, America’s first transcontinental railroad, was finished in 1869.\textsuperscript{132}

Steamboats continued to ply the western rivers in diminishing numbers into the early decades of the twentieth century. They served small producers who could not secure bulk railroad rates and those river towns the railroads had bypassed. One such market was mountainous river valleys. On the upper Ohio River and its tributaries in Kentucky and West Virginia, steamboats were the preferred conveyors of coal, and the isolated villages along the upper Cumberland River utilized steamboats through the 1920s. The historian Jeannette Keith writes that while the rest of the nation embraced railroads, “the river defined the economy” of Tennessee and Kentucky’s upper Cumberland region.\textsuperscript{133}

Railroads continued to grow, their steam locomotives crisscrossing America’s midwestern heartland. Founded in 1851, the Illinois Central Railroad stretched from Chicago to New Orleans, paralleling the Mississippi from Cairo southward. As Thomas D. Clark has shown, the southern portion of the Illinois Central was initially built to aid the Cotton Kingdom and “free New Orleans of the danger of becoming a victim of slow-moving river traffic.” Railroaders aimed to directly connect slaveholders with food and farming supply outlets in the Old Northwest. However, after the outbreak of the Civil War, the Union army used the Illinois Central line to send men and war materiel south to crush the slaveholders, and they also destroyed track to keep Rebels from using it. After the war, the Illinois Central hastened Reconstruction through connections to the North and the new industrial economy. While goods flowed south, poor white southerners flowed north; freedmen also rode the Illinois Central north to new lives in Chicago and the upper Midwest.

\textsuperscript{132} Hunter, \textit{Steamboats on Western Rivers}, 584, 603–604.
Railroad men even began to supplant rivermen in myth and legend. Casey Jones, the Illinois Central’s most famous engineer, became a folk hero celebrated in tale and song. And the Illinois Central’s most famous train, the “City of New Orleans,” symbolized the Chicago to New Orleans route whose legendary stature was comparable to the Natchez Trace and Oregon Trail.¹³⁴

The dawn of the new century marked yet another phase of the transportation revolution. Less than one hundred years after the voyage of Roosevelt’s New Orleans, the internal combustion engine made steam-powered transport obsolete. Henceforth, gasoline- and diesel-powered transport would supplant both steamboats and steam-powered railroad locomotives. The development of the snub-nosed, twin-screwed diesel towboat revolutionized river commerce. On land, automobiles and trucks began to traverse the Midwest, and state and federal governments built roads to expedite this new mode of travel.¹³⁵

The U.S. road system had slowly evolved in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to facilitate postal delivery and movement of federal troops in the Indian Wars. The Natchez Trace and the National Road (also known as the Cumberland Road) served as models for federally subsidized land transportation, and the Civil War vastly escalated improvements and construction of new roads throughout the Mississippi Valley. Meanwhile, state roads and privately owned toll roads added many routes and facilitated travel well into the beginnings of the twentieth century. With the arrival of cars and trucks, federal and state governments took on a much more active role. Governments used the power of eminent domain to push the toll roads out of business, while increased taxes replaced (and

exceeded) toll fees that had previously gone to private entrepreneurs. Governments built a series of one- and two-lane dirt and gravel roads traversing the United States of America; many of these paralleled, or were built upon, existing roads. Eventually the most important of these became paved government highways.\textsuperscript{136}

The modern federal road system, which greatly affected the Mississippi Valley, was spurred by the growth of Progressivism—the early twentieth-century political reform movement that sought to further expand the government’s role in regulating the nation’s economy. Progressives combined the Constitution’s commerce clause with the enumerated powers of military defense and postal delivery in their call for a network of modern national highways. In 1914, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) formally requested federal assistance; the result was the Federal Aid Road Act, signed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916. In 1921, the Senate Post Office and Post Roads Committee, under the Republican Chester Townshend, drafted the Federal Highway Act. This law established a federally regulated highway system based on existing state and federal roads, but with new construction on the horizon. The Federal Highway Act created the grid of numbered two-lane U.S. Highways. Highways running east and west were assigned even numbers (e.g., U.S. 2, U.S. 6, etc.) while those roads running north and south were numbered odd (e.g., U.S. 101, U.S. 99, etc.).\textsuperscript{137} Thus was born the Mississippi Valley’s famed U.S. Highway 61, the Great River Road.

Highway 61 arguably ranks alongside Route 66 as one of America’s most iconic paved highways. In creating 61, state and federal road-builders connected existing routes with new stretches of road paralleling the Mississippi River from north-central Minnesota to New Orleans; the route also parallels the Illinois Central Railroad from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, southward. Local businessmen and chambers of commerce saw


the potential of such a route not only for traditional commerce, but also as a destination highway for motor tourists and campers. Great River Road (originally dubbed the Mississippi Valley Road) boosters organized in 1938 to promote Highway 61 and worked to enhance tourists’ scenic views along the route by incorporating a number of smaller state highways (e.g., Wisconsin 35, Illinois 96, and Mississippi 1) into the system. The smaller roads retained their old numbers and state jurisdiction but were included as alternate routes of the Great River Road.138

The most recent installation of this story of Mississippi Valley highways began with the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act creating the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways, enhancing and replacing the U.S. Highways. Interstate 55, running north and south from Lake Superior to New Orleans, replaced U.S. 61 as the major Mississippi Valley automobile and truck thoroughfare. Yet many tourists and aficionados nevertheless remained attached to 61, as 55’s vistas of the Mississippi River are few and far between, and do not compare with those of the Great River Road. Then, in the late 1960s, the Minnesota singer and songwriter Bob Dylan recorded his hugely successful Highway 61 Revisited record album, and the Great River Road was immortalized in America’s popular culture as well as its transportation history.139

The internal combustion engine also led to development of airplane transportation in the Mississippi Valley, a story that begins with single-engine props and ends with Saint Louis’s McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation and Chicago’s famed O’Hare International Airport. Whereas Mike Fink, Mark Twain, and Casey Jones came to symbolize the keelboat, steamboat, and railroad eras, the Mississippi Valley aviator Charles Lindbergh became the icon of airplane pilots. A Minnesotan, Lindbergh (1902–74) spent his youth in homes in Little Falls, Minnesota (on


139. Swift, Big Roads, 186–87; Kaszynski, American Highway, 168. For Bob Dylan, see chapter 8, this work.
the Mississippi River), Detroit, and Washington, D.C., where his father served in the U.S. Congress. Fascinated with the emergent field of aviation, he earned a pilot’s license in 1923 and became the first airmail pilot serving Chicago and Saint Louis. Of course, Lindbergh’s great ambition was to become the first aviator to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a nonstop flight to Paris, France, a feat he accomplished in his custom-built aircraft, the Spirit of St. Louis, on May 20–21, 1927. From the moment he landed in France to the welcome of two hundred thousand admirers, Lucky Lindy became a modern-day folk hero with stature equal to that of his contemporaries Sergeant Alvin York and Babe Ruth.¹⁴⁰

The myth of Charles A. Lindbergh combined traditional characteristics of courageous, independent frontier folk heroes with modern technology. Lindbergh became a “contemporary ancestor,” a modern-day American aviator possessing the pioneering skills of historic Americans like Daniel Boone. This mystique later became the basis for Billy’s Wilder’s movie Spirit of St. Louis (1957), starring James Stewart and utilizing a screenplay based on Lindbergh’s widely read autobiography. The movie spotlights Lindbergh’s youthful Alligator Horse daring—his Harley Davidson motorcycling and U.S. Army adventures. One scene shows Lindy parachuting out of a stalled airplane into a Missouri snowstorm, landing, and then catching a train back to Saint Louis to deliver the mail! The myth-making relied in large part on western images, Charles A. Lindbergh’s status as a Mississippi Valley man and favorite son of Saint Louis, the vaunted gateway to the American frontier. Lucky Lindy’s feats in the Spirit of St. Louis fit nicely into the folk traditions of the trans-Appalachian West.¹⁴¹

Charles Lindbergh was flying mail between Chicago and Saint Louis during the twilight of steamboat traffic in the Mississippi

¹⁴¹ Billy Wilder, dir., The Spirit of St. Louis (Warner Brothers, 1957), film. For more on “contemporary ancestors,” see discussions of Casey Jones and Alvin York in chapters 3 and 6, this work.
Valley. Although the steamboat vanished as airplanes, railroads, and U.S. Highways crossed the Mississippi Valley, thousands of enthusiasts and scholars preserved memories of the Steamboat Age. The Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen formed, and James V. Swift published an Old Boats column in the *Waterways Journal* (written by the late Alan L. Bates after Swift’s passing, the Old Boats column still runs weekly, written now by Keith Norrington). State museums and historical societies built steamboat collections, and smaller museums dotted the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys. The Cincinnati Public Library and University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse, established dedicated steamboat collections, while the University of Memphis developed the Mississippi Valley Collection that included the steamboat era. Dubuque citizens built a museum that became the National Rivers Hall of Fame, today’s National Rivers Museum. Louis C. Hunter and “Steamboat Bill” Peterson wrote their classic works on the Steamboat Age.  

One of the most significant and interesting of the steamboat enthusiasts was Ruth Ferris of Saint Louis, Missouri. Born in Moberly, Missouri, in 1897, Ferris carried a childhood fascination with steamboats throughout a long and productive life in the field of elementary education and museum curation. After graduating from the University of Missouri, Columbia, she moved to Saint Louis and began thirty-five years of tenure at the Community School. There she built an elementary social studies curriculum around the microcosm of the Steamboat Age.  

At the Community School, Ferris influenced many students, one of whom grew up to be the innovative folk musician and diesel towboat pilot John Hartford. In his riverboat album *Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below*, Hartford pays tribute in a song entitled “Miss Ferris.” During his 1947 fourth-grade year, Ferris started him “dreamin’ about boats on the Mississippi

142. *Waterways Journal* (Saint Louis) and *The Reflector* (Marietta, Ohio). *The Reflector* is the official publication of the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen.

River” when she took advantage of the sinking of the steamer *Golden Eagle*. After considerable “politicking,” Hartford and his schoolmates found the *Eagle*’s detached wheelhouse on their school playground. Hartford sings,

Now, I had a teacher when I went to school,  
She loved the river, and she taught about it too.  
I was a pretty bad boy, but she called my bluff,  
With her great big collection of steamboat stuff.

She had log-books and bells and things like that,  
And she knew the old captains and where they were at.  
She rode the *Alabama* and the *Gordon C. Greene*.  
As the *Cape Girardeau* she was later renamed.¹⁴⁴

The “great big collection of steamboat stuff” was one of the largest private collections of riverboat artifacts in the world. Ferris was named founding curator of the Missouri Historical Society in 1957, and in 1986 she donated her collection of artifacts and twenty-five vertical file cabinets of information about steamboats, crews, flooding, folklore, and river art to the Saint Louis Mercantile Library. Following her 1993 death, at age ninety-five, a collection of Ruth Ferris’s writings, *St. Louis and the Mighty Mississippi in the Steamboat Age*, appeared. Five of the essays, with topics ranging from steamboat art and décor to the Civil War experiences of Captain Beck Jolly, were reprinted articles Ferris had published in the *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* (now *Gateway Heritage*). Three were previously unpublished essays.¹⁴⁵

In “Experiences of a Collector of Mississippi River Lore,” Ferris reflects on her long career studying the Mississippi Valley. “I did not choose to become a collector; I was just caught in the current and carried away,” she writes. Although Ferris “navigate[s] the whole length of the subject,” she encourages

¹⁴⁵. Ferris, *St. Louis and the Mighty Mississippi in the Steamboat Age*, 13–173. The Mercantile Library is now part of the University of Missouri, Saint Louis, library.
others to “explore some small chute” so as to “make a contribution that will help others to understand and enjoy the culture of the Mississippi.” Interestingly, Ferris ends this chapter on steamboating with an allusion to modern diesel towboating: “While lore of the old packets persists, the collector finds a new lore equally fascinating has developed along with the rise of towboat and barge traffic.” As we shall see, John Hartford carried on his mentor’s work, creating a significant body of artistic work portraying the life and culture of Mississippi Valley diesel towboatmen.146

146. Ibid., 13, 21. See epilog, this work.