

# Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

## Steamboats

*Once upon a time there was a steamboat named the “Jim Johnson,” commanded by a 750-pound one-eyed captain that was so long it took all summer to pass Boonville and had to have a hinge in the middle so it could go around the bends.*

**Not really. That’s just an old river story.** But there was the “J. M. White” that had 75-foot tall smokestacks and sidewheels four stories high when it was built in 1875.



The first bust unveiled in the Hall of Famous Missourians in the third floor rotunda of the Capitol is that of Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) who dreamed of being a steamboatman and returning to his hometown of Hannibal “in glory.” Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

**Steamboats are so much a part of Missouri’s culture** that when casino gambling was legalized in 1995 the law required the casinos to be on cruising riverboats, an idea that quickly ran aground. Today’s casinos resemble riverboats about as much as anvils resemble angels. But they do represent the grip that steamboats still have on our culture.

**Missouri did not see its first steamboat until the “Zebulon M. Pike”** struggled to St. Louis in 1817, its single boiler sometimes so weak that crew members had to use poles to move the boat against the Mississippi River’s current. But the Pike had done a remarkable thing. It cut travel time from New Orleans to St. Louis by an astounding 80 percent.

**Two years later** the “Independence” became the first steamboat to challenge the even more muscular and hazardous Missouri River. Its trip to Franklin, a now-vanished town across the river from Boonville, took 15 days. Its piercing whistle excited some onlookers and terrified others.

**Steamboats brought settlers and commerce,** but they also brought destruction and death. St. Louis flourished because of the steamboat trade so much that Boatmen’s Bank was organized in 1847 to serve the working class, especially the hundreds of people who made their living from the river trade. It was the oldest bank west of the Mississippi when it was sold in 1996 and



Painter Victor Higgins of Taos, N.M. captures the excitement and some of the frightening noise during the celebration of the arrival of the first steamboat to go as far upstream on the Missouri River as Franklin, in central Missouri. The painting is in the southeast hallway of the Capitol’s second floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

is now part of the Bank of America.

**The steamer “White Cloud” caught fire** on the St. Louis riverfront in 1849, and before the fire was put out, 22 other steamers and 450 buildings in 15 city blocks were destroyed. Damage was estimated at \$6 million (about \$150 million today).

**Three years later the “Saluda” blew** itself and hundreds of passengers to smithereens when its captain tried to take the boat around a bend against a flooded Missouri River at Lexington.

**The U.S. Navy’s first hospital ship was built in Missouri,** the “Red Rover” steamship that served the Union Navy on the Mississippi during the Civil War.

**The “Natchez” set a new record** for the trip from New Orleans to St. Louis in its famous race with the “Robert E. Lee” in 1870, three days, 18 hours, and 14 minutes.

**But the Mississippi River,** mighty as it was, was easy for the steamboats compared to the Missouri, where shifting currents, snags, and sandbars made a trip from St. Louis to St. Joseph as long as a trip



Artist Allen Tupper True of Denver painted this portrait of a river pilot waiting for his cargo to be loaded on a steamboat for shipment to the west. The painting is in one of the small domes on the Capitol’s third floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

from New Orleans to St. Louis and more dangerous.

**Railroads already were eroding the steamboats’ commerce** by the time the “J.M. White” was built. River commerce today is done by barges and towboats. All that remains of that glamorous steamboat era is the unique Kansas City museum housing the cargo of the “Arabia,” which sank near there 160 years ago, the writings of Mark Twain and others of that era, and to some degree, the casinos.

Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of “The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone.”

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