

The Mississippi River from St Louis to New Orleans

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Introduction

The Mississippi River is an important part of the United States of America's history. Its geographical timeline has shaped America's land and given us the beautiful Mississippi Valley. The water has given people inspiration to revolutionize the way ships are built. The water has given people the opportunity to share the produce of their farm lands across the country. The water has put civilizations and cities on the map. The river is not static, nor inanimate. It creates life and gives purpose. One of the vital careers the river has given purpose to is travel on the Mississippi River for the sake of trade.

For the sake of trade, when utilizing and talking about the Mississippi River, it has essentially been divided into two parts. The upper and the lower, or the north and the south. The upper or northern section of the river is more easily navigable and is adjacent to many other river systems that take over the northeastern portion of the United States. The lower Mississippi River has been historically harder to navigate and has taken much more effort to preserve, as at some points in history the river has been impossible to travel. The path is constantly shifting and the depth of the river becomes as shallow as four feet on the journey down to New Orleans. The current flows south towards New Orleans, so it has taken innovation and creative inventions to ship things back north toward St Louis.

In St Louis, the Missouri and the Ohio converged with the Mississippi River, making St Louis an important mark on the map. St Louis became a hub for trading along the rivers, becoming one of the most important cities on the map. The city poured all of its economic strength and focus into commerce on the river despite industrialization and the growing threats of the railroad.

New Orleans sits at the mouth of the Mississippi River and has become one of the other most vital cities for trade on the Mississippi River, despite its geographical conditions. The city of New Orleans is a sinking delta in the humid climate near the Gulf of Mexico. Disregarding the tragic circumstances of the ground sinking to points below sea level, the city was able to flourish in its economy due to the lower Mississippi becoming navigable. It was both physically and financially more difficult to navigate the waters on the lower Mississippi River near New Orleans than any area in the north, nevertheless New Orleans persisted.

Through industrialization, war, railroads, and growing options for a wider variety of freight transportation, the river and its cities have fallen victim to the decline of use on the Mississippi River. While this was possibly inevitable, the importance of the Mississippi River is not forgotten.

Historical Context

The formation of the Mississippi River has had a long journey. At the end of the last ice age, the climate began to warm and the Ohio and Missouri Rivers formed and created a large swamp. Riverbeds began to form and then the Mississippi River took off

down through what is now considered the United States of America. “The water, however, obeying geological principles, meandered throughout its length, as its own deposits and erosions constantly formed new routes to the sea. This process created land of modest elevation throughout the valley but swampy at the river's mouth, where the already ill-defined channel separated into several smaller flows, each seeking its own route to the Gulf. Today, the Mississippi continues to meander, causing man constantly to be on his guard against the shifting waters.” (Clay, 1983) As Clay describes, the valley was created surrounding the river due to erosion deposits, and the river is always subject to change direction at its leisure, creating twists and turns, changing depths, and leaving the people to have to adapt at the river's will. The river has also been described as “a drainage ditch is to dispose of the rainfall on 40 per cent of the area of continental United States, which embraces thirty-one states of the Union, and covers an area of 1,240,050 square miles; an empire in magnitude and population,” accurately demonstrating an idea of how much water the river holds and how much land is at the river's mercy. (Faris, 1927)

The indigenous people of the Americas were possibly the first to use the river for its ability to transport goods for trade quicker than one would be able to transport goods by foot. This required the creation of one of the first boats created to carry bulk items down the river. Small canoes and pirogues used by fur catchers and traders were suitable for navigating against the wind on the river, but they were unsuited to carry items in bulk. The bullboat was the first to be able to carry items in bulk so people could trade along the river, and be operated by just one poleman, “constructed of buffalo hide stretched over an oval sapling frame, it could carry a cargo of three tons while drawing

only ten inches of draft.” (Clay, 1983) This was important because the Mississippi River “at Cairo is over fifty feet, the low-water depth, on shoals and bars, does not exceed four feet. This great highway to the ocean is, therefore, at these latter seasons, practically unavailable for navigation,” and the bullboat was able to combat that. (Whiting, 1892)

In 1519 the first colonizers documented seeing the mouth of the Mississippi River for the first time. “Spanish expeditionary leader, Alonzo Alvarez de Pineda, sights the mouth of a great river, which he names "Rio - del Espiritu Santo,” but later that account is thought to be about the Mobile Bay and in “1582 a more reliable account by Cabeza de Vaca reported that he and the desperate remnants of his tragic expedition had been shipwrecked near the outlet of a major river, which from his description may have been the Mississippi.” (Clay, 1983) Even though the Spanish were the first to report the river, they were distracted by Latin America and didn’t appreciate the discovery to its fullest extent, leaving the river to be free of the colonizers for years until the French heard reports from fur catchers about the river’s potential. This began the fight over exploration and ownership of the lower Mississippi River, as many different waves of colonizers saw the potential and importance of owning the land that could strategically connect over seven hundred miles of land and create a trade route unmatched by any trade route on land thus far.

The French that had settled in the north sent out an expedition team in 1655, and in 1673 they reached the lower Mississippi River. “Unlike their Spanish counterparts, French authorities truly appreciated the value of the discovery, and prepared for a thorough exploration of the river,” and over time they settled on the river and used the Mississippi River to deliver items from their settlement in the north to their new

territory in the south. (Clay, 1983) It was during the time that the French ruled the Mississippi River that we get an understanding of why it is named the Mississippi River. Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle, was the man that sent out the exploration team that discovered the Mississippi River, naming the river “River St. Louis” after his king, Louis XIV. Names for the river also included “Colbert,’ after Louis XIV's illustrious Finance Minister, and even ‘La Salle.’ All of these attempts to name the river came to nothing, however, for the quaint-sounding Indian name prevailed. The theory today is that the name ‘Mississippi’ probably derives from the Chippewa term ‘mid i zibi,’ meaning ‘large river.’ The French apparently understood the meaning to be ‘Father of Waters.’ That misinterpretation survives.” (Clay, 1983) The French eventually moved down river by ship and set up camp near the mouth of the river, at Biloxi. After moving down river, bullboats and keelboats could no longer be a viable option to get back up river so the next big innovation had to be made.

Keelboats were able to move against the current and take items in bulk back north, including molasses, sugar, and other crops. They could be seventy feet long and twenty feet wide, and are slightly curved on the bottom. It could float downstream and would be poled back upstream by a crew on the boat. Getting the molasses, sugar, and other crops upstream would take about four months, but to be able to take them to the western frontier was worth that amount of time for the French. The next reign of the Mississippi River would change how much the river would be used for commerce.

The French and Indian War or the Seven Years’ War was from 1754-1763, causing the French to have to give their territories near the river, including New Orleans, to the Spanish. The Spanish used the river for trade even more than the French, violating the

trading rules of their home country, but because of the economic success of their trading efforts, their king congratulated them on their success in violating the law. The Spanish Americans made New Orleans an important city not only for what is now the United States of America, but also for those who wanted to trade through New Orleans from the Gulf. New Orleans became a center for trade and storage. Warehouses were built in New Orleans so that they could ship items in bulk up and down the Mississippi River, “the warehouses at New Orleans bulged with tobacco, cider, and fur--and their quantities grew with each passing year,” this gave economic power to New Orleans that the English colonies became scared of. (Clay, 1983) The English American colonies wanted New Orleans to themselves because they were scared that the Spanish and French would use New Orleans to cut off their use of the Mississippi River for trade. James Madison, Secretary of State at the time summarized it as:

“The Mississippi to them is everything. It is the Hudson, the Delaware, the Potomac, and all navigable rivers of the Atlantic states, formed into one stream. The produce exported through that channel, last year (1802) amounted to \$1,622,672 from the districts of Kentucky and Mississippi only, and will probably be 50 percent more this year, from the whole of the western country. Kentucky alone has exported, for the first half of this year, \$591,432 in value, a great part which is now, or will shortly be, afloat for New Orleans and consequently exposed to the effects of this extraordinary exercise of

power (possibility of cutting off a port vital to Americans).” (Clay, 1983)

The United States of America bought the French territory in the Louisiana Purchase and gained control of New Orleans. A wave of immigrants moved into the Mississippi River Valley, encouraging commerce and freight transportation on the river. This meant that the conditions of the river needed to be improved. The new invention of the steam boat also called for improved river bed conditions. The first steamboat to take passage on the lower Mississippi River was named for its location, the New Orleans. This was an innovation that had to be made in order to later make the steamboats that could be used to travel up from New Orleans, against the current, to St Louis. It wasn't a perfect design, after only two years it also became the first steamboat that was lost to the Mississippi River. Captain Henry Shreve created a new design of steamboat that took over the Mississippi River after he gained the contacts and publicity due to his participation in the War of 1812. Hundreds of steamboats were carrying bulk goods along the river, calling for river maintenance. There were several spots on the Mississippi river where the river became impossible to navigate due to erosion and logs blocking the paths, but by this time the river had become such a vital part of the economy in the United States. Improving the river meant removing eroded trees blocking the path and cleaning up the destruction from other wrecked ships along the path. It took an immense amount of money and physical effort, as well as a lot of time.

The Civil War not only delayed these efforts, but destroyed all progress. The freight transportation on the river was called to a halt because of the natural obstructions on the river, and then the progress made towards the increase of river use

was set back indefinitely. The Civil War lasted from 1812 to 1815, but the “frequent gunboat sinkings, mining of waterways, placing of man made obstructions, and cutting of levees all made the waterway increasingly dangerous.” (Clay, 1983) During the war, President Grant also tried to create new paths in the river to strategically cut through the land, but he gave up when he realized the effort that would take. This inevitably led to even more deterioration of the lower Mississippi River, and caused an even more catastrophic drop in freight transportation on the river. The neglect of the river following the Civil War continued, and sandbars in the lower Mississippi River created even more dangers for the ships, so much so that “for the next few years emphasis was on piloting rather than on removal of the sandbars, with auxiliary vessels standing by to accept part of the cargo, and a winching process to warp across ships that became stuck on the bars.” (Clay, 1983)

Just as the river started to become a viable option again for freight transportation, the railroads took over. The railroads traveled through sparsely populated areas in the United States, causing people to flee the river towns in the Mississippi Valley and move closer to the railroads. The railroads were more expensive but they were quicker, so companies shipping items with expiration dates were willing to pay the higher price. Not until World War I did the public interest in the lower Mississippi River resurface. River towns had to fight for the federal government to recognize the attention that the river needed. An example of this is an article in the *Military Engineer* where R. L. Faris identified the two largest problems were for the Mississippi River. He begins explaining the problem:

“There are two chief problems of economic concern connected with the Mississippi River, (1) to control its flood waters and (2) to make it adequate for the transportation of articles of commerce; or, in other words, so to control and direct its waters that they shall not be a menace to the inhabitants of its valley in time of flood, and that at low stages there shall be sufficient depth of water in its channel for the free passage of commerce.”

He goes on to say:

“The Mississippi River Commission, under the War Department, was set up by federal legislation in 1879. This action on the part of our national Congress was in response to the growth of public opinion, which had reached the view that works of such character and magnitude should be on the basis of a permanent public project.” (Faris, 1927)

This was the opinion of many river towns that were reliant on the economic boost that was brought to their towns by freight transportation. They felt the promise of keeping the river a source of transportation was not being kept. During wartime, these promises were kept and the lower Mississippi River’s state of being was being reassessed consistently so that the military could take advantage of the cheap freight transportation. Because of this, Congress eventually authorized a deeper channel and

looked into restoring the river to improve the floodplain, as the cities had been lobbying for.

Trade, Maps, the Civil War, & the Decline of the River

Freight transportation on the lower Mississippi River between St Louis and New Orleans was a necessity for the economic vitality of the river cities along the river and in the Mississippi River Valley. St Louis and New Orleans both had lots of companies that were partial to using the river for transportation, as a necessity before the railroad and as a preference because of the cheaper price after the railroads.

New Orleans had annual receipts in 1816 exceeded eight million, and then by 1840 over five hundred thousand tons of freight arrived at the port worth over one hundred million dollars. (Kelman, 2003) In St Louis, St Louis Grain Association first began exploring using the river to ship grain in 1869, by 1879 18% of shipping grain was using the river. (Brown, 1906) Even in 1980, “the key grain export region of the world is that segment of the Mississippi from Baton Rouge to the outlets. Within that reach of the river, actually one deep harbor, there are ten grain elevators, with another under construction. Those facilities alone move about 40 percent of the nation's grain exports.” (Clay, 1983)

As the lower Mississippi River became the primary artery cutting through the United States, maps such as Lloyd's Maps and Norman's Charts became important to navigate the river and to document what could be bought and sold. These were made largely during the time period of the Civil War.



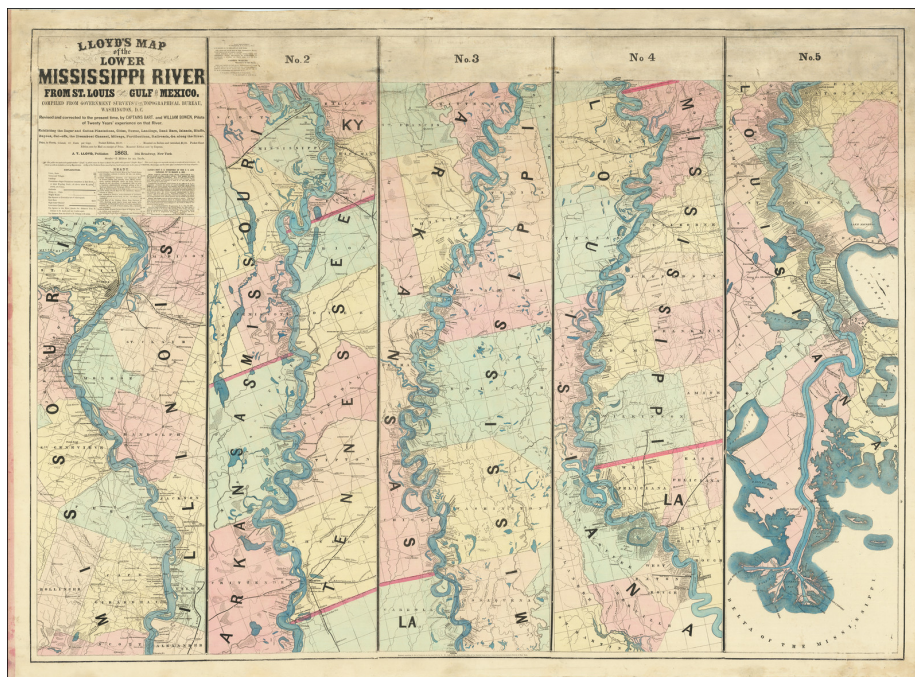
The description of the map reads “Near New Orleans sugar was the primary crop, while upriver in northern Louisiana and in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, cotton was the major cash crop. While individual plantations are not associated with either crop, plantation and landowner names identify the large landholdings lining the river’s edge. One of particular note is Jefferson Davis’ plantation, which is labeled as Davis Bend or Hurricane Plantation, located 20 miles downstream from Vicksburg on a large meander of the river.” (Lloyd, 1862) Personal documented accounts from Frances Trollope in 1832 corroborate the description, as she described the plantations and farms she visited when the boats had to stop and get fuel. She said that they stopped along many sugar and cotton plantations along with other regional farms. (Trollope, 1832)

Other maps of the river document events that happened during the time in the Civil War in addition to where things were being transported. The following of Lloyd’s Maps documents the events of:

Warrenton - "Destroyed by Gun Boats June 1862"

Grand Gulf - "Shelled by Gun Boats May 18, 1862"

Confederate batteries at Walnut Hill and Vicksburg - "Johnsons [sic.] killed
1862"



These details provide a comprehensive look at what is one of the most important pieces of United States history. New Orleans and St Louis embraced their role as cities with some of the largest shipments on the river and carried out freight transportation that made them each millions of dollars. The maps and personal accounts as primary sources prove the worth that the river held and continued to hold through war and economic loss. The river may not be used for commonplace freight transportation today as it once had, but the river proved its importance for trade in its own time.

Conclusion

The Mississippi River, in its entirety, is the most influential highway in the United States throughout history. It is beautiful by its water and its creation of luscious land, and beautiful in its power and capability to hold multimillion (now billion) dollar industries at its will. It has sparked innovation and invention that has been used and built upon for years and will continue to be built upon for years to come in the form of new ships, new ways to store cargo, the ability to transform the river and transform with the river, and more. The river is a powerful force of nature that has changed shape, depth, and width throughout time. It is the first primary way of travel that provides freight transportation in America.

Between the upper Mississippi River and the lower Mississippi River, the lower section of the river proved to have many more complications in being such an important and highly used trade route, nevertheless it persisted. The peoples' lives that depended on the river were put at the mercy of the river, and because of that, the people had to fight to conserve and restore the function of the river. This required lots of labor and strife, all made worth it by being able to travel up or down the lower Mississippi River from St Louis to New Orleans, opening new worlds for trade.

St Louis poured its heart and its economy into the river without promise that the river would continue to provide, the railroads didn't reach St Louis and the river was far too wide to cross. Although there was a decline in freight transportation on the river, St Louis remained the point on the map where rivers converge into the Mississippi River

and prevailed to be the more cost efficient way to ship and trade down the United States. New Orleans was a city founded on hazardous land with many problems, but the hope of the potential of the river is what set it apart. The climate and the geographical conditions proved to be valid challenges against the success of the city and the lower Mississippi River, but the placement of New Orleans allowed it to control trade for many territories and then continue to control trade for many countries. The lower Mississippi River, with its challenging waters and winding turns, made these cities what they are today, along with many other river cities that relied on the river's strength.

The history of the United States of America is reliant on the history of the Mississippi River and its ability to enhance trade throughout the entirety of the country. Its usefulness has outlasted wars, treaties, laws, industrialization, railroads, and hundreds of other trials. The decline of the river for the use of freight transportation was part of the ebb and flow of any business. The river shall remain one of the main veins for the United States of America.

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