THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ECHOES

The Escambia County Historical Society, Founded 1971

The June 2022 Newsletter

The June Meeting will be Tuesday, June 28, at 3:00 pm in the Meeting Room in the Museum on the Brewton College Campus. Refreshments Will Be Served. Masks are Optional.

Tom McGehee at the Bellingrath Home

The Program: Tom McGehee, Director of the Bellingrath Home, will present a program on Steamboats on Alabama Rivers

McGehee is a Mobile historian who is curator of the Bellingrath Gardens Home Museum in Mobile County. For more than thirty years, he has researched south Alabama history, and his column, "Ask McGehee," has been a regular feature of Mobile Bay Magazine.

He presented a program for ECHS in January of 2020 on Bellingrath Gardens. In the program

(Continued on page 2)

Table of Contents

Snapshots from the May ECHS Meeting	2
Excerpts from the Early History of Steamboats in Alabama	3
This Ain't Your Mama's Soup	14
The Phantom Steamboat of the Tombigbee	16

Dew Dawn
By ECHS member Robert Smiley

Tiny ephemeral jewels of night seen
Stolen at morn by jealous sunlight
Then resurrected in the night to
Brighten each morn by refracted light

And what to man does this pertain?
We stolen by time that none remain.

The flesh dissolves like dew at morn,
But the soul will fly beyond the sun
And unlike the dew which needs the night
Our souls will dwell in shade less light.

The speaker for the July meeting will be Sierra Stiles, Principle of Turtle Point Science Center. She will talk about the center's programs.

City Of Mobile, stern-wheeler built in Mobile in 1898, destroyed by hurricane in 1916.

Pres. Don Sales reports that the History of Escambia County, Ala. by Annie Waters is being printed. No date yet on when copies will be delivered.

The Poarch Creek Indians Museum is displaying through Oct. an exhibit on Chief Calvin W. McGhee (1903-1970). Bronze bust of Chief McGhee at left.

Volume 49 No. 6
June 2022

THE L HOUSE
PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY
INVITATIONS, PRINTING & CUSTOM FRAMING
Clay Lisenby Owner
(251) 867-9962
716 Douglas Avenue
Brewton, Alabama 36426
Lhousephotography@gmail.com
www.theLhousephoto.com

Our Business Members

Remember to Support Our Business Members

www.LandscapesAre.Us office@LandscapesAre.Us
Quality Landscapes & Irrigation
251.867.3177
1705 Old Castleberry Road Brewton, AL 36426

The Program

(Continued from page 1)

for this month, on “Steamboats on the Alabama River,” he will detail the triumphs and tragedies of the boats, the latter including boiler explosions, fires, drownings in the rivers.

“Long before there were highways or railroads in Alabama, the rivers provided the only choice to move passengers and freight,” says McGehee. “Walter Bellingrath (of Bellingrath Gardens and Home who was the local Coca-Cola bottler) shipped his Coca- Cola cases on many a river steamer in the early 1900s and his father-in-law was a shipwright.”

Tom McGehee with His Daughter Megan.

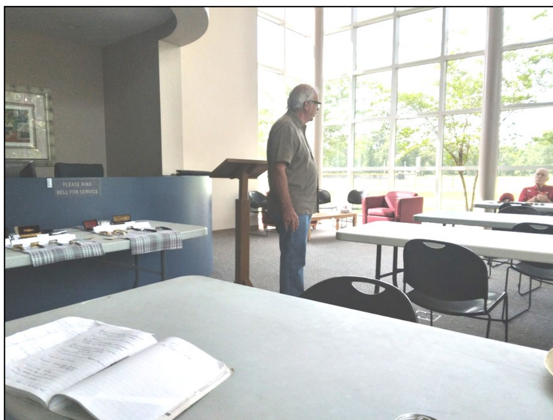
Mr. McGehee will relate the beginnings of the era of river steamers, their peak in the 1890s and their decline and end by World War I.

He is a native of Bronxville, N.Y., and a graduate of the Bronxville School and the University of Georgia, where he earned a BA in journalism with minors in business and history. He is married to the former Lucile Rutherford Smith of Monroeville.

Snapshots from the May ECHS Meeting in the College's Center for Telecommunications Building

Part of Speaker Russell Brown’s Collection of Razors

Enjoying the Program



Speaker Russell Brown

Before the Program

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

By Mell A. Frazer
A. P. I. Historical Studies, 1907
From Alabama Department of Archives and History

The First Excerpt

The present inhabitants of Alabama *(1907)* with their great railroad and steam facilities can hardly realize the hardships and difficulties encountered by their early predecessors.

The earliest commerce on the rivers of Alabama was on flatboats and barges. These, loaded with upcountry products, floated down the river. Then they changed cargoes and were slowly and tediously poled back by hand whence they came, or they were sold for lumber and their owners returned home by land. In time this commerce increased until it gave employment to many rough and hardy men, rude, uneducated, yet brave, honest, trustworthy, and often picturesquely magnanimous.

For several years after the appearance of steamboats, these men continued to run their flat-boats downstream, the steamboats doing all the upstream business. The flat boatmen would sell their boats for anything they could get for them and return home as deck passengers on the steamers.

Gradually, however, the steamboats increased in numbers and in speed until they were able to absorb the entre commerce and then keel-boating died a permanent death. The keel-boatman became a deck hand, a mate, or a pilot on the steamer.

A barge trip from Mobile to Montgomery usually consumed from fifty to seventy days. In 1819 Mr. Henry Goldthwaite, then a young man, traveled on a flat-boat from Mobile to Montgomery and three

(Continued on page 4)

Robert O. Mellown in "Steamboat Travel in Early Alabama," states:

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of steamboats to the development of Alabama, culturally, socially, or economically.

The state entered the Union in 1819, at the beginning of the steam era and the period of rapid growth in river transportation in America.

Steamboats provided a fast and efficient transportation system, helping the state to build its towns, to move its people, and to transport its crops.

The steamboat boom would continue until the Civil War, at which time a fractured infrastructure and an expanding railroad industry finally ended the reign of the Alabama steamboats ***(https://www.alabamaheritage.com/issue-2-fall-1986.html).***

Flatboat (foreground) and Keelboat around Pittsburgh, late 18th Century ***<https://www.alamy.com>.***

Keelboats could go upstream--but only by human muscle power. Hence the legends of the keel boating men, heavy drinking, heavy fighting, and "half-alligator, half-horse." Two methods were employed to move the boats upstream: bushwhacking, also known as poling, and walking along the shore, pulling the keelboat by a rope. The boats moved upstream at about a mile an hour; in decent weather, a fifteen hour day was expected ***(https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/transport/rivers.html).***

R.G. Kendall, Jr.in his History of Brooklyn (Alabama): Part 111, describes the poles used to move the keelboats upstream from Pensacola on the Escambia/ Conecuh River to the Sepulga. **These primitive keel boats were steered by means of a beam being fixed at both the bow and stern and two on either side. Coming up stream, a different method had to be used. An instrument familiarly known among the early boatmen as the "hook and jam" was indispensable to moving these clumsy barges upstream.**

This instrument was a long smooth pole of considerable strength, pointed with an iron spike and with a hook curving its beak a few inches from the point. This was used for giving propulsion to the boat by being pressed against the nearest trees or the banks of the streams. The hook was serviceable by being hitched to the overhanging boughs, which also aided in moving the craft up stream ***(http://leepeacock2010.blogspot.com/2014/04/a-history-of-brooklyn-describes-sinking.html).***

Excerpts from The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 3)

months were occupied on the voyage—a journey that can now be made in six hours.

Occasionally boats came from East Tennessee, passing down the Holston River to the Tennessee, and finally down the Coosa into the Alabama. "A boat arrived March 1st, 1821, the history of which," says the Montgomery Republican, "will no doubt seem almost incredible to strangers. She was a keel-boat fifty feet long, six feet beam, six feet deep, with a capacity for carrying 100 barrels. She was built at West Point, Tennessee, and was launched on the Tennessee River.

"She proceeded 100 miles down this river to the mouth of the Hiwassee, and then 65 miles to the Okoa, up the latter some distance, where she was transported with her cargo 10 miles by land to the Connussowga, thence to and down to Eastonville, and through the Coosa into the Alabama, a distance of nearly 1,000 miles from the interior."

Note: The Hiwassee took the keel-boat into north Georgia, then the boat went onto rivers and 10 miles by land. Finally the boat reached the Coosa, which flows into Alabama and into the Alabama River.

About a month later Captain Cox with a keel-boat 51 feet in length came a greater distance by 150 miles than the one above mentioned. Her cargo consisted of flour, whiskey, apple brandy, cider, dried fruit, feathers, and a four-wheel carriage. After coming to the head waters of the Coosa, Captain Cox built a flat-boat, for the purpose of lightening his boat before passing the falls. This flat-boat was capable of carrying more than 100 barrels.

In the summer of 1819, several boats descended the Coosa from within 10 miles of Tennessee, and at a time when the river was lower than ever before.

But these daring voyages only emphasize the natural difficulties in river navigation in northern Alabama. The fertile valley of the upper Tennessee, was almost cut off from communication with the lower Tennessee and the Mississippi by the long and dangerous Muscle Shoals. Nor could its produce easily reach the Coosa and thence the Alabama River because of the intervening chain of broken highlands.

The Coosa itself was by no means a practicable channel for transportation, being obstructed by a series of falls and rapids. Plans were proposed for a canal around Muscle Shoals, and for another connect-

(Continued on page 5)

Steamer Through A Corn Field

A letter by Bert Neville, historian from Selma, tells the story. He says on the steamer Hard Cash's trip to Columbus, Miss. in 1909 the packet had a heavy freight for Vienna and Pickensville, towns on the upper Tombigbee. He describes the conditions of the river, "There had been a big rise. The boatmen would not attempt the Little or Upper Bigbee on less than a 20 foot rise." After dropping off a barge at Demopolis, then doing a back and forth to Pickensville and Vienna to unload and pick up freight and passengers, the boat headed to Columbus with about 250 people aboard.

After Vienna, the boat came to Somerville Bend, about five miles round, where "the river was making a big run through a corn field." Pilot Peter Gray followed Captain Cooper's advice to go through the corn field and save five miles. Cooper said that he always did this at high water to save time. When almost through the detour, Peter's father, Captain Willie H. Gray, came on the roof to reprimand Peter. Captain Cooper headed him off saying , "Now Willie don't get riled. I told your lad to put her through the corn field; there's enough water under us to sink us above the cabins" (*Alabama Room Vertical Files, "Steamboats"*).

From Ask Rufus, "The Cotton Plant":

The Cotton Plant was a 72-ton side-wheeler built in Point Clear, Alabama in 1821. She was said to have been that year, the first steamboat to reach Tuscaloosa, and was the first to reach Columbus and Cotton Gin *Port (once a busy port on the Tombigbee in north Mississippi, but by-passed by the railroads and now a ghost town)*.

An 1822 description of what had been the scenery along the Alabama River, which was much the same as scenery along the Tombigbee at that time, stated:

"Nothing was to be seen navigating our waters but a few canoes, or perhaps now and then a barge (flatboat or keel boat) not much larger, then the beautiful Alabama rolling its course in sullen silence, through a dark and solitary channel, overhung and almost hid by trees, undisturbed, save by the savage yell which sometimes reverberated along its banks" *(https://cdispatch.com/opinions/2017-02-26/ask-Rufus-the-cotton-plant/)*.

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 4)

ing the Tennessee and the Coosa.

As has been said, prior to the year 1818, all river travel was by means of barges and flatboats. Mobile at this time was still a small place, the population being only about 6,000. It was destined, however, to grow and become one of the principal cities on the Gulf, for in the early part of the year 1818 there appeared on the Alabama River one of the chief causes of her subsequent prosperity, the steamboat.

The average life span of a steamboat was only four to five years, owing to the vessels being poorly constructed and maintained, being sunk by snags and other obstructions in the river, or having their boilers explode *(https://www.britannica.com/).*

This boat had been built at St. Stephens, Alabama, by the St Stephens Steamboat Company, which had been organized in February, 1818. This boat was called the Alabama. An engine was put in her but, unable to stem the current, she went to New Orleans, and finding ever greater difficulties there, she was left to decay.

Very soon, however, another vessel appeared. She came from Philadelphia, and was rigged as a three-masted schooner but was also supplied with machinery. She shared the fate of her predecessor. In the same winter, another vessel came to Alabama from Boston. She was named the Mobile, and had more powerful machinery than the others. In May, 1819, she started for Tuscaloosa. Her passage was necessarily long, for she was obliged to lay by at night and spend much time in procuring fuel, as there were no wood yards along the river at this time.

On the 19th of May she reached Demopolis to the wonder and delight of the citizens, then started on her way to Tuscaloosa. The Warrior, as is usual at this time of the year, had too strong a current for the little steamer, and she was compelled to retire to Demopolis. She forwarded her goods by barge to their destination. Freight on this boat was $3.00 a barrel.

Until October, 1821, no steamboat had come up as high as Montgomery on the Alabama River. Grave doubts had existed as to the practicability of steaming up so far in consequence of sand bars, islands and narrow channels. Hence prior to this time all navigation was still confined to barges and pole-boats, which, of course, was a slow and tedious process. The feasibility of steam navigation had been fully established, however, and it was only reserved for the steamboat Harriet, commanded by Captain Morril, to solve the question of its practicability as far as Montgomery.

This steamboat arrived at Montgomery on the afternoon of October 22, 1821. She had been ten days on the trip from Mobile, including three lost at Claiborne, Cahaba, and Selma *(stops at the landings)*. The presence of this boat caused profound excitement in Montgomery. The entire population, men and women, old and young, turned out in Montgomery to see the wonder.

(Continued on page 6)

Steamboat transportation made possible the plantation-based cotton economy that flourished during the steam era and lasted from approximately 1820 to the end of the nineteenth century. The primary function of most steamboats was to carry as much cotton as quickly and as cheaply as possible from the interior of the state to the ports along the Gulf Coast. In antebellum Alabama, steamboats going downstream to Mobile stopped to load cotton bales at nearly 300 landings along the Tombigbee River and 200 more along the Alabama River.

This photo was taken in the 1890's of the Steamboat Sidney P. Smith. Bales of cotton sit on the bank beside the boat. The Sidney P. Smith was operated on the Coosa River from Rome, Georgia, to Gadsden, Alabama *(https://www.facebook.com/AlabamaArchives/photos/).*

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 5)

On the next afternoon, the Harriet took a party of ladies and gentlemen up the river about seven miles, making nearly six miles per hour against the current. As a result of this trip, a company was at once formed in Montgomery to put on a line of steamers to ply between Mobile, Montgomery, and Blakely.

Hardy *(John Hardy, founder and editor of the weekly newspaper, the Selma Sentinel, and mayor of the city from 1873 to 1875)*, in his History of Selma, also mentions an early boat. This boat was named the Tensas and was under the command of Captain Roman. She landed at the Selma Ferry on Aug. 5, 1822, and was considered a wonderful sight. Many people who had never seen a steamboat before stood upon a high bluff, and looked down at it with a strange mingling of fear and astonishment. But few could be persuaded to go abroad and examine the machinery of the "belching craft."

It had been 23 days from Mobile to Selma and when it landed, Captain Roman "jumped up and cracked his heels together and offered to bet that he would make the trip in less than 14 days" *(History of Selma by Hardy, p. 168)*. It is interesting to note that this early boat was a stern wheeler, for nearly all the boats prior to 1861 with a few exceptions, were side-wheel boats. Now most of the boats have sternwheels. The pilot stood on the deck of the Tensas and guided her with a long lever instead of a wheel. She was covered like a shed and could carry about 200 bales of cotton.

Steamers piled high with 2,000 or more cotton bales were a common sight. Each bale weighed almost 500 pounds *(Ben Windham, Tuscaloosa News)*.

The steamboats at this early period had no whistles, possibly because they had no steam to spare. They had instead heavily charged guns, which were fired when they approached a landing that the freight and passengers might be ready. In time the gun gave place to the whistle, and some of the later and larger boats even had a sort of steam organ, commonly called a calliope, which was played on approaching

(Continued on page 7)

REGULAR WEEKLY PACKET

For Montgomery and Wetumpka.

THE new fast running passenger Steamer EMPEROR, J. BRYAN, Master, will ply during the ensuing season as a regular Weekly Packet for the above and all intermediate landings. Leaving Mobile every Tuesday evening at 5 o'clock, P. M, reach Montgomery every Thursday morning at 6 o'clock in time for passengers to take the Cars carrying the Northern mail, and Wetumpka at 9 o'clock A. M. Returning, she will leave Wetumpka every Tuesday at 2 o'clock P. M., and Montgomery every Friday morning at 10 o'clocd A. M., and will reach Mobile every Sunday in time for passengers to take the New Orleans mail boat.

JNO. H. MURPHY, Ag't. *Montgomery*
MOSES WARING & CO., Ag'ts, *Mobile.*

☞ The Emperor is entirely new—built expressly for the above trade—has all the modern improvements, and for speed and comfort will not be surpassed by any boat on the Western or Southern rivers. nov 20 tf (A.)

At left, an advertisement for steam-powered travel and mail delivery between Mobile in the southern part of the state to the centrally located Montgomery and Wetumpka from the Montgomery Journal dated February 21, 1849 *(http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/)*.

From A History of Steamboats - US Army Corps of Engineers:

Showboats may be the most famous type of steamboat, but the most common boat on the river was the packet boat. The important packet boats carried crops and other goods up and down the rivers. In fact, many river towns developed near large southern plantations to make getting crops to packet boats easier.

Packets also carried people. On many of the boats, wealthier passengers enjoyed the first class deck. Those who could not afford first class traveled in cramped conditions in the lower decks with the cows, pigs, and horses. Some even slept on the open deck in all kinds of weather (*https://www.sam.usace.army.mil/Portals/46/docs/recreation/OP-CO/montgomery/pdfs/5thand6th/ahistoryofsteamboats.pdf*).

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 6)

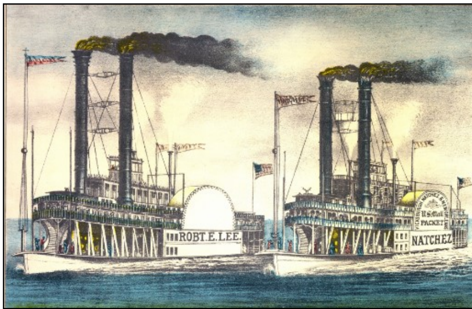
or leaving the landing *(played like a piano by keys, which acted on levers and valves, admitting steam into metal cups where it produced the requisite notes—high, resonant, and not unpleasing at a moderate distance).*

Other boats began to follow in rapid succession. On the 16th of August, 1822, the Cotton Plant, under the command of Captain Chandler arrived at Montgomery from Mobile with a large cargo in tow. She was the third boat to reach Montgomery. On the 22nd of January 1823, the Osage, under the command of Captain Bond arrived upon her first trip, making the fourth boat to reach Montgomery, and on the 16th of the same month, the Elizabeth had the honor of being the fifth boat to Montgomery.

The Elizabeth was a very fine steam vessel as to capacity, appearance, and interior accommodations. It was a matter of pubic congratulation that this river which had wound its way silently and unprofitably to the ocean for centuries, through one of the most fertile regions on the globe now bore on its bosom the products of every quarter of the world and scattered them profusely among those who lived

(Continued on page 8)

The steamboats built to operate in the state had two major objectives they had to accomplish; move cotton quickly and cheaply *(https://www.alabamabackroads.com/steamboats-in-alabama.html).*



From A History of Steamboats:

Steamboat captains often added to the dangers of river travel by racing each other. While the public found steamboat races exciting, they were dangerous for the boats' crews and passenger.

In the 1870 race between the Natchez and Robert E. Lee, illustrated above, the two boats raced from New Orleans to St. Louis. The stripped-down, cargo-less Robert E. Lee won the race, arriving in St. Louis after three days, 18 hours and 14 min. of streaming through day, night and fog.

The Natchez arrived six hours later, having been delayed by carrying her normal load and tying up overnight because of the intense fog. The Captain of the Lee had also saved time by arranging for boats with fuel to meet him on the river.

Illustration from (https://www.alamy.com/horizontal-hand-colored-lithograph).

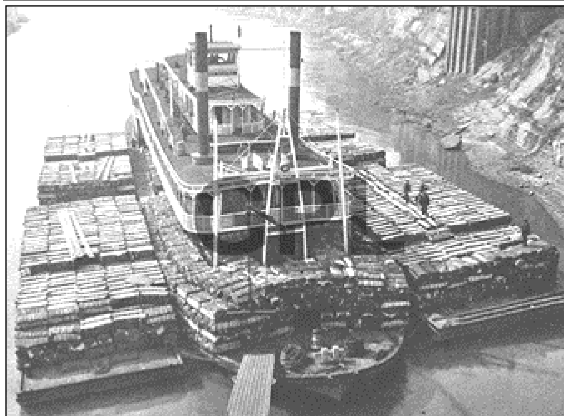
Dangers of River Travel

From A History of Steamboats by the US Army Corps of Engineers).

While snagboats helped remove one of the dangers of steamboat travel, many others existed. Indian attacks and boiler explosions persisted. Often, Indians would hide along the banks of a river and begin shooting at a boat when it got close enough. If a boat wrecked near the bank, the ship would certainly lose its cargo. The crew and passengers might even lose their lives.

On some rivers, Indian attacks remained a concern; however, the biggest danger facing steamboats were boiler explosions. Boilers needed to be carefully watched and maintained or pressure could build up in the boiler. If the pressure became too high, it resulted in a spectacular and deadly explosion.

The steamer Ben Franklin exploded while leaving the Mobile wharf in 1836. The force of the boiler exploding was said to shake the city. Eleven people were killed outright and fourteen badly scalded. The cause was said to be "not letting off steam while the machinery was not in motion" *(https:// ww.usdeadlyevents.com).*



Steamboat on the Coosa with Four Rafts Loaded with Cotton in Addition to the Cotton on the Boat Itself.

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 7)

thousands of miles away from the countries where they were produced

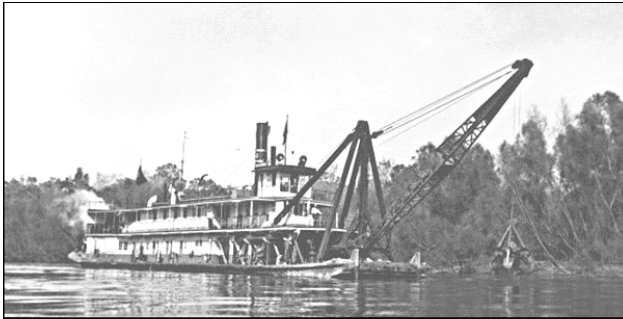
The cargo of the Elizabeth alone, a short time before this would have amply supplied the demands of the territory, and although there were now five boats, still the people were not satisfied.

Up to this time the Osage held the fastest record. She made the trip from Mobile to Montgomery in ten days, two days of which were lost in procuring wood. Her passage from Mobile to Claiborne was twenty-six hours, during which she stopped twice and landed freight, a run, which, at that time, was unprecedented on the Alabama. This boat afterwards made the trip from Mobile to Montgomery in five hours, but had the advantage over the other boats of the period, in that she was not retarded by towing barges.

In January, 1823, the Harriet made a round trip between Mobile and Montgomery in eleven and a half days. She made twenty-two stops, and was detained very often in procuring wood. This was considered a very fast trip, but later in the same year, Dec. 20th, the Henderson, commanded by Captain Hayden, made the trip from Mobile to Montgomery, a distance of 450 miles, in three days and ten hours. Twelve hours were consumed at the different landings. The Henderson had on board 850 barrels of merchandise.

The people of Montgomery began at once to rely

(Continued on page 9)



From A History of Steamboats by the US Army Corps of Engineers:

One of the most important types of steamboats was the snagboat. A snag is a sunken tree, stump, or boat wreck. Before the first snagboat was invented in 1829, snags caused many problems for steamboats. Sometimes the damage from hitting a snag was so bad it caused boats to sink! Snagboats lessened this problem by using a boom and grapple to remove snags from the river making it safe for travel *(https://www.sam.usace.army).*

The Montgomery, pictured above on the Apalachicola River, is a steam-powered sternwheel-propelled snagboat built in 1925 and operated by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The Montgomery cleared snags and obstructions from the Coosa, Alabama, Apalachicola, Choctawhatchee, Flint, Black Warrior, and Tombigbee Rivers until retirement in 1982. She has been restored and is a museum ship at the Tom Bevill Lock and Dam in Pickensville, Alabama *(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montgomery_(snagboat).*

The average cost to build a river steamboat was from $80.00 to $100.00, per ton. Upkeep of the vessel over each five-year period was approximately half of the original building cost *(https://archeologyinc.org/steamboats.html).*

Steamboats eventually developed to be able to travel at speeds from 20-30 miles per hr. *(https://archeologyinc.org/).*

From A History of Steamboats:

Steamboats existed for different purposes. Towboats moved barges by pushing them up and down rivers. Ferries carried people across rivers. Snagboats cleared the river of dangers. Packets carried goods, mail and people. Steamboats called fuelers met other steamboats along the rivers and supplied them with wood, coal, or oil.

Perhaps the most famous type of steamboat was the showboat. Showboats were the floating palaces of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They were beautifully decorated and had theaters, galleries, ballrooms, and saloons. They traveled up and down rivers bringing plays and musical entertainment to river towns.

Showboats would announce their arrival by playing their organ-like, steam calliope, which could be heard for miles. While showboats provided excitement and entertainment for river towns, they were never very common. In 1900, there were less than 30 showboats, and by 1930 there were less than 10 (*https://www.sam.usace.army).*

Some of the earliest Showboats were not technically steamboats, had no engines and were towed.

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

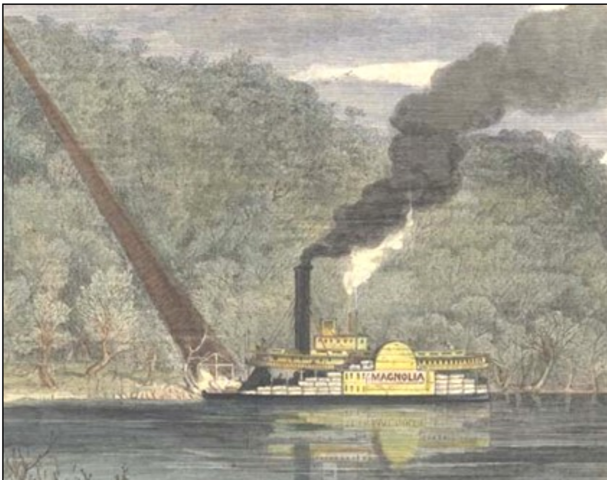
(Continued from page 8)

upon the steamboats from Mobile for dry-goods, groceries, hardware, and stationery. On the down trips the boats transported cotton in exchange. In December, 1822, for example, the steamer Cotton Plant was delayed and the people of Montgomery grew uneasy. Ladies wanted new gowns, and gentlemen new coats.

A ball came near being postponed because the town had no loaf sugar or flour. "Captains of Steamboats ought to always think of these things, and remember there is a tide in the affairs of boats, which taken at the flood leads on to wherever they are bound, admitted, they are liable to sand bars and consequent vexation" *(Montgomery Republican, Jan. 11, 1823)*.

Another steamboat of prominence at this time was the Arkansas. She was a handsome boat in appearance, and was able to make the trip from Mobile to Cahaba in six days. She was a fine boat carrying from 400 to 600 barrels. Another boat soon followed. On the 1st of January, 1824, the Columbus arrived in Montgomery from Mobile in seven days. She had a large cargo, 1800 barrels, and discharged goods at every town and landing between Blakeley and Montgomery. She ran very little at night. On her arrival, she fired a salute which was answered from the shore. She returned to Mobile with 300 bales of cotton, the rest of the cargo being made up at Selma and other places.

(Continued on page 10)



"Cotton-Shoot on the Alabama," May, 1861, Loading cotton onto the steamboat Magnolia on the Alabama River at Claiborne. The cotton bales are delivered to the pier through a long chute. From the Illustrated London News.

At Claiborne, the chute, or "cotton shoot," was the longest in Alabama at 300 feet. To get from the riverbank to the top of the bluff, you had to climb 365 steps.

The 500-pound cotton bales would be rolled to the chute by deckhands called "rollodores," who would push the bales down the chute. Deckhands called "stevedores" would be on the boats' decks to block the fast moving bales and prevent them from bouncing into the river *(https://cdispatch.com/opinions/2013-03-16/ask-rufus-work-chants-and-cotton-slides)*.

The Magnolia was a 325 ton side-wheel built in 1852, with 1400+ cotton bale capacity. In "Ask Rufus: The Luck of the Magnolia," Rufus Ward, Columbus, Mississippi historian, says she was a survivor. She survived a catastrophic fire at the Mobile wharf that destroyed two steamers: Sam Dale and Ambassador. The fire also damaged another steamer named the Wilcox. The Magnolia then survived a collision on the Alabama River with the steamer Wetumpka and a later collision with the schooner Rebecca.

She may be most noted as the first steamer on the scene at the burning of the Eliza Battle. A little over a week later, the Magnolia, with Capt. Stone of the Eliza Battle, returned to the scene of the disaster to recover bodies of the lost.

During the Civil War she passed to Confederate military control, was captured in 1865 by Union troops who rather than sinking her used her to ferry troops. Her luck ran out in 1867 when she sank at Selma, Alabama.

Ward writes, "She struck a 'deadhead' or sunken log in the Alabama River across from Selma. The log ripped a hole in her hull, but she was able to cross the river before sinking just as she reached the riverbank at the foot of Union street. The Magnolia had led a charmed life and even in sinking, managed to reach the riverbank at a city street" (https://cdispatch.com/opinions/2021-09-04/ask-rufus-the-luck-of-the-magnolia).

Mell A. Frazer, author of The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama called the Magnolia the "most beautiful of all," when listing steamboats that ran on the Tombigbee and Alabama.

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 9)

The Second Excerpt

(Missing from the excerpt is the introduction to this discussion of various steamboats and their routes.) Seven of these were built in the West. Three of these, the Senator, Louisa, and Wilcox, ran on the Alabama River. The Frank Lyon, Fashion and Monroe were on the Bigbee *(Tombigbee)* River. The seventh was commanded by Captain H. Kenney, and ran on the Warrior River. By 1855, there were a good many others. The most important was the Cherokee, named for Miss Cherokee Jemison, of Tuscaloosa, whose father became a Confederate States Senator. She gave the boat a piano. The first captain of this boat was Tom Cummings, but he lost his health, and then William Mathews took command. His first mate was Capt. W. W. Stone.

This boat ran on the Warrior River most of the time, but when the water was low, on the Alabama. Some of the others were: Octowa Battle, Empress,

(Continued on page 11)

This image, ca. 1900, shows the dining area, or saloon, of a steamboat that plied the Tombigbee River. Doors to private passenger compartments line either side of the long room. Saloons provided passengers with a place to relax and interact during their often long trips *(http://ncyclopediaofalabama.org/article/m-5322).*

How Passengers Entertained Themselves

The trips were long and passengers soon grew bored with looking at the scenic views. Many read, as one English journalist James Buckingham said, "to pass the time more than for the pleasure of reading." According to this Englishman, many also played cards and won and lost large sums of money.

Author of "Steamboat Travel in Early Alabama," Robert Mellown, says tobacco provided another pastime aboard Alabama steamers, enjoyed by almost all the men, young and old. Buckingham observed "some lads of fifteen or sixteen chewing and spitting as much as their elders, all smoking and chewing at the same time." Those who did not indulge in tobacco were grateful for the many spittoons placed along the floor of the main cabin" ("Steamboat Travel in Early Alabama," Alabama Heritage, Fall, *1986).*

From "Steamboats in Alabama, Alabama Backroads":

The Steamboats in Alabama were designed to carry heavy loads, but they had to make frequent stops for firewood in order to keep them running. Most all of them were what was referred to as "side-wheelers", which were built specifically for river travel. These side wheelers averaged over 200 feet in length, and about 40 feet in width, which made them very effective in the rivers in the state.

They were made from almost all wood, and had a steam engine, a boiler to keep the engine running, as well as paddle wheels in the center. Most all of the Steamboats in Alabama had multiple decks, and the main deck was used for freight and firewood. If there was any space left on the upper decks, cotton bales were also stacked there, which at times made it very inconvenient for passengers.

The deck directly above the main deck was referred to as the "boiler deck," which was used for first class passengers. It also had a saloon that ran the entire length of the vessel, which was considered to be the most luxurious place on the boat. It was very well lit and had a wood-burning stove for warmth when needed, and had tables, rocking chairs, as well as sofas for the passengers.

Above this deck was the "hurricane deck", where the ships officers stayed. The pilot house was on the top deck, and it had two very tall iron smokestacks, which spit out both sparks and clouds of smoke *(https://www.alabamabackroads.com/steamboats-in-alabama.html).*

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 10)

and the ripple of the river constantly washed over them. There were two hundred *(landings)* on the Alabama and three hundred on the Bigbee."

He also describes the method of loading cotton when the landing is near a high bluff as at Claiborne:

"The boat came to the shore at the end of a plank-slide way, down which cotton was sent to it from a warehouse at the top. There was something truly Western in the direct, reckless way in which the boat was loaded. A strong gang plank being placed at right angles to the slide way, a bale of cotton was let slide from the top, and coming down with fearful velocity, on striking the gangplank, it would rebound up and out on the boat against a barricade of bales previously arranged to receive it. The moment it struck this barricade, it would be dashed at by two or three men and jerked out of the way, and others would roll it to its place for the voyage, on the tiers aft.

(Continued on page 12)

In "Steamboat Travel in Early Alabama," Robert Mellown comments that the steamer Peerless, built in 1914 from sections of the James T. Staples and renamed the Helen Burke in 1924, was the last of the Alabama Packets when it sank in the Mobile River in 1932 ***(https://www.alabamaheritage.com/issue-2-fall-1986.html).***

United States snag boat which cleared the waterways of the Conecuh and Escambia Rivers.

Some Steamboats on the Conecuh

From "McKenzie-Scott Archaeological Survey of the Conecuh River Drainage Area Redacted Public Version."

Names and operations of a few of the boats which operated on the waters of Escambia County have been preserved in records and old newspapers:

The Ella D, a steamboat, was employed to ply the Conecuh River. In March 1886, she made a trip from Pensacola to Andalusia.

On April 16, 1891, the Eliza Ann left Harold Mill loaded with principal supplies for Frierson's Mill (*small sawmill located near River Falls*) in Covington County. Supplies were often brought from Mobile and Pensacola by the L&N Railroad and unloaded at Harold Mill onto the river boats (*Harold Mill was located on the Conecuh River east of Brewton*).

J. S. Stanton's steamer, Mary Ann, navigated from Pensacola to Andalusia.

The article on Escambia County in the Encyclopedia of Alabama notes that during the period when Pollard was the county seat, "Steamboats once traversed the Conecuh River carrying cargo to and from Pollard."

From "How the Mail Was (and often wasn't) Delivered in Early Pensacola," a Pensacola News Journal article by Brian Rucker

Early traveling preachers found the transportation network abominable. One preacher, trying to cross Yellow River, crossed over with his horse "by the aid of a stout vine trailing across and connected with the trees on both sides of the river." Another preacher, traversing the eastern shore of Escambia River in the late 1820s, fell through the small, dilapidated bridge with his horse. He was thankful for having traveled a total of 15 miles that day.

Rivers offered transportation via flatboats, keelboats, rafts, barges and schooners. Steamboats began to appear in the 1840s and 1850s, and daily packets connected Pensacola to the Navy Yard, Bagdad and Milton.

Shallow draft steamboats were able to go up the Escambia/Conecuh River system to southern Alabama (around present-day Brewton). But frequent logjams and snags could impede navigation.

West Florida citizens were constantly seeking aid to remove obstructions from the major rivers of the area ***(https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2021/07/11/pensacola-transportation-1800-s-history-roads-boats-railroads/7890444002/).***

One account lists some 24 steamboats, five tugs and one iron hull boat that worked on the Conecuh/Escambia River. The framed list is in the Alabama Room.

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 11)

Emperor, Henry J. King, and the most beautiful of all was the Magnolia. Many of the boats ran on the Warrior and the Bigbee Rivers when the water was deep enough, but on the Alabama and Mobile in the summer when the water was low

The most dangerous job on the river was stopping those heavy bales at the bottom of the slides before they shot into the water. It was easy to get killed by a 500-pound cotton bale whizzing down from a bluff *(Ben Windham, Tuscaloosa News).*

A long time after boats had come into general use on all the navigable rivers of the State there was still something of the primitive in the traffic they did. This cannot be better shown than by an extract from the Seaboard Slave States by Olmsted. In 1853, he went by steamboat from Montgomery to Mobile. He describes his trip as follows:

"I left for Mobile on the steamboat Fashion, a clean and well-ordered boat with polite and obliging officers. We were two and a half days on the trip, the boat stopping at almost every bluff and landing to take on cotton until she had a freight of 1900 bales, which were built up on the guards seven or eight feet in height and until they reached the hurricane deck. The boat was thus brought so deep that her guards were in the water

(Continued on page 13)

"Steamboats on the Sepulga" From A History of Brooklyn: Part III, by R. G. (Bob) Kendall, Jr.

Encouraged by the success of the keel boats and by the widespread use of steamboats on the rivers in the South and in the country as a whole, a meeting was held in Brooklyn in August 1845 to consider the feasibility of undertaking the navigation of the Sepulga River by steam. It was called the steam navigation meeting. Many of the wealthiest and most influential men in the county attended this meeting, and after due consideration a stock company was formed and the money paid in.

(*One source says this was an effort to challenge Claiborne on the Alabama as the main cotton steamship port (https://www.al.com/living-press-register/2009/07/sepulga_river_challenges_throu.html).*)

Subsequently, a steamer known as the Shaw was purchased, a crew obtained and a trip started up the river from Pensacola.
After the steamer had come up the Escambia to the Conecuh and up the Sepulga to Brooklyn without trouble, the backers were greatly encouraged.

The boat was unloaded at Brooklyn of its cargo of supplies, which had been brought up stream from Pensacola and reloaded with cotton. However, its supporters were disheartened because before it had gone very far downstream, the vessel struck a snag and was sunk in the river. The whole cargo was lost.

The principal shipper, George Turk, had on board most of the cotton in the cargo. The result of this sinking was a protracted lawsuit between Mr. Turk and the stock company which was finally resolved in favor of the plaintiff. This suspended efforts to have steam navigation of the Sepulga River for the moment.

A final effort to secure steam navigation between Brooklyn and Pensacola came in 1850. On Feb. 12 of this year a bill passed the Alabama legislature incorporating the Conecuh Navigation Co. It was headed by J.W. Etheridge, H.L. Stearns, J.H. McCreary, C. Johns, Benjamin Hart, A. Perryman and their associates, who constituted the body corporate with a capital stock of $25,000.

The company was charged with the responsibility of providing the operation of steamboats between Montezuma on the Conecuh River and Brooklyn on the Sepulga. Little is known of the success of this endeavor. *(Montezuma was a town on the Conecuh which was moved to higher ground and became Andalusia)*

Upon the completion of the Montgomery and Pensacola Railroad in 1861, Brooklyn's importance as a trading center waned *(http://leepeacock2010.blogspot.com/2014/04/a-history-of-brooklyn-describes-sinking.html).*

Barges and Keelboats on the Sepulga & Conecuh.
By the 1840s, thousands of bales of cotton were transported on the river to Pensacola by keelboats. The vessels varied in size, but were about 60 feet long and 10 feet wide. Boats carried from five to 200 bales at the time southward, then made the trip upstream by hook and jam, pushing and pulling against the current (https://www.al.com/living-press-register/2009/07/sepulga_river_challenges_throu.html).

Excerpts from
The Early History of Steamboats in Alabama

(Continued from page 12)

"The mate standing near the bottom of the slide, as soon as the men had removed one bale to what he thought a safe distance, would shout to those aloft and down would come another. Not unfrequently a bale would not strike fairly on its end, and would bound off diagonally overboard, or would be thrown up with such force as to go over the barricade, breaking stanchions and railings, and scattering the passengers on the berth deck. Negro hands were sent to the top of the band to roll the bales to the slide, and Irishmen were kept below to remove and store them" (Seaboard and Slave States, p. 550).

The main business done by the boats was the bringing of cotton down the rivers to Mobile. There it was shipped to foreign countries. The cost of transporting a bale of cotton from Montgomery at high water was $1.00, and $1.25 at low water. This seems to have been the usual charge for the greater part of the period previous to the Civil War.

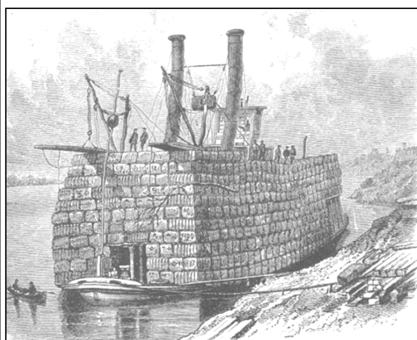
In some instances, as for example in 1855, when the river was exceedingly low, the price asked to carry a bale of cotton from Montgomery to Mobile was $5.00, and even at that price it was hard to get it transported. The price asked now (*1907)* is only 75 cents. At the time just referred to, few light draft boats refused freight higher than Selma, and it cost $12.00 to $15.00 to get a hogshead of bacon or sugar to the seat of government *(Montgomery)* from Mobile.

Besides bringing down cotton, the boats brought lumber and turpentine. The lumber was sometimes placed on board, but more usually was in the form of rafts. If the boat was a side-wheeler, the raft was towed. These side-wheel boats also towed large barges loaded with cotton. The river boats of today lash the barges to their bows; the tugs do all the towing business. Staves and cedar logs were also a frequent cargo of the down boats.

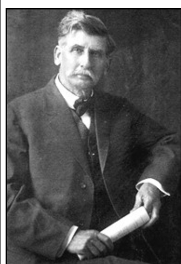
As these articles were reshipped at Mobile, the boats unloaded their cargoes and received others in return which were to proceed to nearly every landing on the river. These often included a great variety of useful things. In the Montgomery Advertiser of March 15, 1824, we find that the cargoes of the Tuscaloosa and the Montgomery, which had just arrived from Mobile consisted of "liquor of all kinds cordials, molasses and cider, vinegar, Madeira wine, sugar, coffee, salt, iron, steel castings, shear molds, also 1,200 pounds of first-class bacon." The most important goods imported were sugar and coffee, and the people began early to rely upon the boats for these articles *(http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/1818).*

Robert O. Mellown in "Steamboat Travel in Early Alabama," says this about the demise of the steamboat:

Already outpaced but never really outclassed by swift passenger and freight trains, steamboats were finally replaced even as cargo carriers by lowly tugboats, which could tow many barges, each loaded with far more freight than any one steamboat could ever hope to carry *(https://www.alabamaheritage.com/issue-2-fall-1986.html).*



Woodcut of Steamboat on the Tombigbee. Ben Windham writes that it is, "so geometrically piled with cotton bales that you can't even see the lower decks. Bales are piled up to the smokestack" *(https://www.tuscaloosanews.com).*



Captain Willis Green Barrow was the Captain of the freight and passenger ship, the Tarpon, shown at right, and went down with his ship when it sank in 1937. He was known for saying, "God makes the weather, and, God willing, I make the trip."

Barrow is the great-grandfather of one of our ECHS members. As the Captain and part owner of the Tarpon (1904-1937) for more than thirty years, he made weekly runs between Pensacola, Mobile, St Andrews Bay, Apalachicola, and Carrabelle, carrying both passengers and freight. In August 1937, the boat sank in a storm off the shore of Panama City, and is now an underwater archaeological preserve.

He was born in Andalusia, Alabama. The family moved to Pensacola when he was ten. He served on various steam boats from the age of fourteen, probably some that traveled from Pensacola up the Choctawhatchee River to Geneva.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

This Ain't Your Mama's Soup

By Darryl Searcy

Sanguinaccio

In the summer of 2014 I had occasion to join a group of close friends who felt the urge to take a trip somewhere - relax and recoup following a very tiring plant collection trip into an Asian rainforest. We settled on going to the island of Sardinia in the Tyrrhenian sea located east of Italy, west of Spain, south of France and north of Sicily.

It was also our intent to visit a small island on the northern coast of Sardinia, called Isle of Caprera (caprera is an Italian word meaning goat). It was the home and burial place of Giuseppe Garibaldi, an Italian patriot and fighter who lived there from 1855 to 1882, when he was not occupied in some far-away country fighting a war.

Some of our older readers may remember that Sardinia played an important role in WW-II, as German troops occupied Sardinia and Corsica until 1943. By July of that year, most airbases in Sardinia had been rendered inoperable by Allied aerial bombing, so Germany moved out and the Italians moved back in.

All that aside, a part of our planning was to try as many local, but odd, dishes as possible while with the Sardinians, but when we arrived in the capital city of Cagliari, we looked but never saw many of the dishes that we wanted to try. We wondered if it was one of those things like jellied eels that gets name-dropped a lot but few people actually eat. It wasn't until we met a fellow named Sebastiano that we felt sure we had a man who would know.

Although his agriturismo *(the practice of touring agricultural areas to see farms and often to participate in farm activities)* excellence in the mountainous center of the island is in an isolated oak cork forest, we got the word that people travel here for his cooking. Even the local *cinghiale* (wild boar) come snuffling to his back door to be fed. On our first meal, he made for us unforgettable platters of homemade ravioli and lung *ragù*. On our second meal, he brought out a large cauldron full of something thick and dark.

The thick mixture was chock full of cheese flakes and bread crumbs. My companions and I collectively thought we had perhaps overstated our culinary fearlessness. He dunked the ladle and poured a shallow bowl of dark lumpy mixture the color and texture of raspberry jam. No visible larvae. It smelled rich, and we were told to spread a little on the flat *carasau* bread they eat everywhere in Sardinia. We were also advised to go slow, a recommendation the folks near our table cheerfully ignored. They soon had ruby-colored stains around their mouths like badly applied lipstick. Gore dripping down their chins, they resembled a bunch of vampires. Sebastiano watched our reactions, smiling, his teeth stained red. Could we guess the secret ingredient? Well, it looked like blood - was it blood?

Sebastiano would neither confirm nor deny. But since we had loved everything he had cooked up to that point, we got started, trying not to think of the lumps as clots. I took a bite, waited for fangs to replace my incisors but instead, there was the richness of, yes, blood but also onion (the lumps) all shot through with mint. It was silky and heartening and it certainly raised the pulse.

As we ate, Sebastiano explained – with extra sign language from his Italian family – that it was called *sanguinaccio*. As well as the ingredients we'd detected, he'd crumbled in homemade pecorino (rich cheese) and thickened it with bread. Animal noises established that he had slaughtered a lamb that morning. This was the meal he always made when he had fresh lamb's blood.

It's not legal to buy blood over the counter because it needs to be eaten within 24 hours. Even in Italy, there is a law that bans the sale of blood, which is why many people get it from their own animals - so at least this concoction was fresh, and we all took a small bowl.

By the end of the meal, our napkins looked like props for a horror movie. Sebastiano was delighted. There was a sense that the bond you make while sharing such a thing is a bond that lasts. As the meal and the evening went on, we gathered from the Italian family that we had seen nothing compared with the food Sebastiano served for parties. Judging by their facial expressions and hand gestures, these meals were a mix between a medieval victory

(Continued on page 15)

This Ain't Your Mama's Soup

(Continued from page 14)

banquet and that scene in The Shining, where the blood pours out of the elevator.

This all made a lasting impression. I was frantically writing in what little Gregg's shorthand I remembered at the time, and suddenly halted when I realized "sangre" in French meant blood, and the word is Latin - is this blood soup (I thought it might be disguised tomato juice)?

My companions, Mack, Arrie, Jacques, Luke and Newton were determined to track down the maggot cheese. "It's not on the menu," the chef said, suddenly finding a few words of English when he learned that Mack was also a restaurateur (Ruby Tuesday). He paused, "but if you want I could bring some from the fridge." He practically ran from the dining area and quickly emerged furtively carrying a shoebox-sized plastic box close to his chest. He put it down on the table and asked us to be careful.

When he removed the lid, I suppose I was expecting more horror, but amazingly it was not like peering into the industrial bins behind Mack's restaurant. In fact, it looked fairly normal. It was pale, crumbly, almost like cottage cheese, with a strong odor. The owner picked up my fork and dug into one of the larger cheese clouds, which disintegrated at his prodding. His eyebrows spoke of revelation. "You're lucky,"

Sebastiano now brought the cauldron near to our table. He did not speak his good English but even if he could, he wasn't going to tell us what we were about to eat. It was a surprise. He was excited. We peered more closely and saw the maggots were not the fat squirmy things you see in films. They were, in essence, made entirely of cheese. No wonder they were so well-camouflaged. They looked like tiny pale strings and they were moving - leaping for freedom or for joy, who could say?

He gave us each a portion and we were advised, again: go slow. He told us that his children loved this cheese, particularly the pleasure of chasing the maggots across the table before sending them to their doom. There was no question, by the way, of not eating the maggots. They were the cheese and the cheese was them, plus they were too small to really pick around. Occasionally, we had to herd one or two back to our plates if they made a rush for the border.

The cheese tasted like an extremely strong, very fine Roquefort, but its greatest attribute was its texture; melting and crumbling and gooey. Sebastiano seemed pleased with our response as he carefully resealed the box and took the cheese back to the frig.

I had read somewhere that French children do not refuse unwanted food. I could only think of it now as that's precisely what I wanted to do, calling on the small amount of Huguenot blood that coursed through my veins, I persevered. Someday perhaps somebody will write something along the lines of "Italian children taunt maggots and drink blood." Those people over there knew what was in the cauldron and they shifted in their seats with anticipation of getting another serving.

One woman asked Sebastiano something and pointed at the cauldron. We listened to his mellifluous Italian. He fulfilled a certain stereotype: stirring the air, making a crumbling action with his fingertips, then drawing his hand down his own chest as though unzipping a jacket. The family swooned. We understood next to nothing but there was one word that stuck out: *cinghiale*. Heretofore we thought of ourselves as brave eaters, but this suggested what we had already heard as nose-to-tail eating.

For the squeamish, sanguinaccio is not a soup at all, but a delicious jam-like spread that is eaten on sliced bread and usually taken before the meal. When we had one and all sampled the spread before us, we each ordered from Sebastiano's menu and relished a platter of freshwater prawns in garlic butter and linguine with white clam sauce, and of course, another round of sanguinaccio on Panini Duri Itlaliani.

Finally something in his waving arms brought home to us that he was referring to wild boar; baked bone marrow, fried brains, roasted tongue. There was no denying that part of the appeal was machismo. Who could boil a pig's head? Who could endure the intestinal stench of andouillette? Who would eat ant larvae soup, or crispy animal ears?

Well, let us confess - WE HAVE!.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The Phantom Steamboat of the Tombigbee

By Katherine Tucker Windham
From "Stories by Ghost Light," a Virtual Production Series by Theatre Huntsville

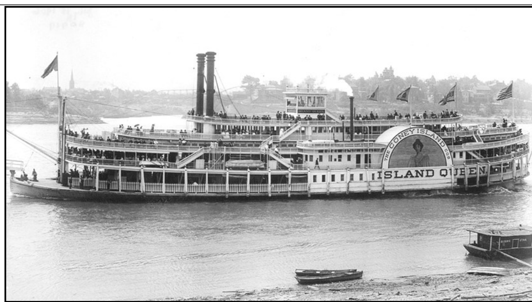


Illustration created from a photo of the Island Queen steamboat, which was the same type as the Eliza Battle. (Library of Congress)

When late winter rains send the Tombigbee River out of its banks at Nanafalia, Tuscahoma, Naheola and Yellow Buff, there sometimes rises out of the muddy water a ghost ship, the charred hull of a sidewheel steamer. On those stormy nights, some folks along the river say they hear the gay music of a steam calliope and others report hearing agonizing cries for help on the cold winter wind.

"It's the Eliza Battle," say the folks who see the phantom boat and who hear the eerie sounds. "It's the Eliza Battle trying to finish her trip down to Mobile. Something terrible is going to happen," for always the appearance of the phantom ship has heralded tragedy. Superstitious river men who see the ghostly hull rise from the water leave the river for safer jobs ashore. They know that the Eliza Battle is warning them that the treacherous Tombigbee will claim their lives just as it claimed the lives of passengers and crew on the Eliza Battle.

The Eliza Battle was one of the grandest steamers on the Tombigbee, built in New Albany, Indiana in 1852. She was a palatial boat and her trips up and down the Tombigbee created excitement wherever she stopped, and no trip was so fine or so grand as her last, the one that began in late February 1858. The Eliza Battle's trip down to Mobile had been advertised for weeks with circulars, hand bills and newspaper ads. In addition to the customary luxuries, the passengers were promised two bands to provide continuous music in the ballroom, glowing lanterns to decorate the entire ship at night, colorful flags and bunting draped and festooned on every deck, a calliope to play the latest tunes and welcoming celebrations at landings all along the way.

So an eager and carefree crowd of passengers was attracted aboard the Eliza Battle bound for Mobile and the gaiety of that port city. At Columbus *(Miss.)* they began to assemble, ladies wearing full skirts so fashionable then and carrying tiny parasols, chatted excitedly as they boarded the boat. Behind them came their personal maids and behind them came burly porters carrying the trunks and valises and hat boxes. On the wharf, the men, plantation owners all, supervised the loading of their bales of cotton. Taking the cotton down to Mobile to sell provided their excuse for the trip.

Carriages came from plantations throughout the area, and each group of new arrivals sparked fresh merriment as friends and relatives, who had not seen each other in many months, were reunited aboard the Eliza Battle. When the last bale of cotton had been loaded and the last pieces had been put in the state rooms, some observers feared the cargo was just a little too heavy, but the band struck a lively tune, the deep voiced whistle sounded and the crowd cheered as the Eliza Battle pulled away from the wharf and headed down stream.

The scene was repeated on a smaller scale at landing after landing as in the pilot house, Daniel Epps guided the Eliza Battle down the river toward Mobile. Crowds of people, bundled in wraps against the increasing cold, waded along the banks to cheer and wave as the Eliza Battle passed and their salutes were acknowledged by shrill trills from the calliope. After nightfall, some spectators set off rockets and other fireworks as the Eliza went steaming past. Epps, a veteran pilot, was uneasy. The high water had covered many of the navigation points and the heavily loaded vessel was difficult to handle in the swift current. The strong and bitterly cold wind blowing in from the northwest added to his apprehension.

Then, about nightfall, the rain turned to sleet mixed with snow as the temperature continued to drop rapidly. Captain Graham Stone, master of the Eliza Battle, joined Epps in the pilot house and together they peered through the storm for familiar lights and landmarks. The sandbars and the shoals were covered by the swirling waters and even the tall trees along the banks of the river were half submerged. The river seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions. Epps relied on his knowledge and experience to keep the Eliza Battle in the main channel. He checked Mrs. Kemp's landing *(near Demopolis)* on the chart and the boat moved past that point and he breathed a prayer of gratitude for safe passage that far, but he became increasingly anxious.

The uneasiness of the pilot and the concern of the

(Continued on page 17)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The Phantom Steamboat of the Tombigbee

(Continued from page 16)

captain were not shared by the passengers. The brilliant lights in the ballroom pushed back all awareness of the menacing darkness outside and the music of the bands drowned out the noise of the slashing storm. Long after midnight the dancing continued as the partners whirled and glided on the polished floor. Then, above the music and the laughter came the cries of "Fire, Fire." The music, the laughter and the dancing stopped. Men and women rushed for the exits. Even before they reached the deck, flames were leaping from blazing cotton bales and racing through the engine room, the cabins and the gangways.

Captain Stone ordered the pilot to run the boat into the riverbank, but the tiller rope had been burned and Epps could not carry out the order. The Eliza Battle, ablaze from bow to stern, drifted crazily with the current. Passengers jumped into the freezing water as they tried to escape the advancing flames. Some of them threw bales of cotton off the deck and attempted to use them for life rafts. Those who could swim fought the current to find temporary safety in the nearly submerged trees where they clung to the limbs and prayed to be rescued before they froze.

For a little while, the flames from the burning boat lighted the scene but soon the blazing boat drifted down stream and the darkness and bitter cold closed in on the survivors. From the darkness came painful cries for help and prayers for deliverance. There were other sounds too, the heavy slashing of frozen bodies dropping into the river from the trees. but the tragedy produced its heroes. Among them was Frank Stone, second clerk of the boat, who swam to shore carrying a child of Mr. and Mrs. Bart Cromwell of Mobile. He then placed another passenger, a Miss Turner, on a bale of cotton and guided her to the riverbank. His efforts to save her sister and her mother failed. The sister froze to death in his arms and the mother died of cold while clinging to a tree.

The glare from the burning boat and the screams of the victims aroused the inhabitants of Naheola, a landing some 30 miles below Demopolis and they hurried to the river to give what help they could. In the group was James Eskridge who commandeered a skiff, the only one available, and paddled through the freezing cold to rescue survivors from treetops, from floating cotton bales and from the edge of the water. For hour after endless hour, he maneuvered the small boat through the dark water looking for survivors. Some witnesses credited him with bringing as many as 100 persons to safety.

Meanwhile, as news of the tragedy spread, planters from the nearby plantations arrived with their skilled servants who hastily built rafts and joined the rescue operation. Later these carpenters made rough coffins for the dead. People on the bank lighted huge bonfires to provide illumination for the rescuers and warmth for the nearly frozen survivors. As they were saved from the river, the passengers were taken to the large home of Mrs. Rebecca Coleman Pettigrew where the house itself and all the out buildings were converted into makeshift hospitals for the injured and the ill.

At one time 75 injured persons were being cared for by Mrs. Pettigrew, her family and her servants. All of her teams and wagons were assigned to hauling wood for the roaring fires which kept the cold from claiming additional victims. Huge cauldrons of soup bubbled day and night to provide food for the survivors. For almost a week Mrs. Pettigrew gave her full time to her guests doing everything possible for their comfort until their families could come for them.

When the weather finally cleared and the river began to recede, the mournful task of recovering the bodies of the dead was completed. Nobody knows exactly how many lives were lost in the disaster. Some say 29. Some say more than 50 but they all agree that the burning of the Eliza Battle was probably the greatest tragedy in Alabama's river history.

For years afterwards, people who lived near the river, who loved her and understood her moods, said that the ghost of the Eliza Battle still plied the Bigbee's waters on stormy nights. They said they saw the great steamer rise up out of the troubled water. The boat they said was ablaze, bow to stern so brightly lighted that the name Eliza Battle could be read plainly even on the darkest nights and always there was music, dancing, providing a background for the shrieks of terror and cries for help that came from the phantom vessel.

Tales about the ghost vessel became a part of traditional Tombigbee River lore. Most often these apparitions were seen by crewmen of tugs and barges and when these river men reached Mobile, they usually began looking for jobs ashore, safer employment away from the threatening river. Sometimes, speaking cautiously, they would describe the ghost ship to friends along the waterfront, and their listeners, river men like themselves, would nod with understanding for they had seen the Eliza Battle too *(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjxNcAtTP_8).*

ECHOES
THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 276, Brewton, AL 36427;
Phone: 251-809-1528; E-mail:
escambiacohistoricalsociety@gmail.com

We're on the web!
www.escohis.org

The Museum is on Facebook at <http: //www.facebook.com. McMillan Museum>.

FIRST CLASS MAIL
DATED MATERIAL
Address correction requested

"Donations and contributions that are not for books or membership dues may now be made online through PayPal to <*escambiacohistoricalsociety@gmail.com*>. Please continue to use the form shown for book requests and membership dues, by mail, as your complete name and address are needed for our records. Thank you again for your support!"

Books Available by Contribution

	Regular	Mailed
Headstones and Heritage	$20.00	$25.00
Escambia Historical Society Cookbook	$10.00	$15.00
Wildflowers of The Conecuh/Escambia River Basin CD	$10.00	$15.00
History of Brewton and E. Brewton (SC)	$35.00	$40.00
Flomaton Centennial Scrapbook	$30.00	$25.00
Addendum to Headstones and Heritage	$20.00	$25.00
Headstones & Addendum Together	$40.00	$50.00

Clip the following form and send to ECHS Treasurer, P.O. Box 276, Brewton, AL 36427

Date ______/____/_____

Name ____

Address ____

____

Phone ______________________________

Email Address ________________________

Do you prefer to get your newsletter by U.S. Mail ___ or email? ___

Dues

($25.00/person; $35.00/ family at same address; Lifetime, $500.00/person; $100.00/year business)

Dues __________________

Donation______________

Total Enclosed ____________________

Your Interests ______________________________________

____

You Will Help With __________________________________

____

Dues are to be paid at the beginning of the year
Many members give a membership as a gift!
Business members get a large scale advertisement 11 months of the year.

ECHOES, The newsletter for the Escambia County Historical Society, a 501 (c) (3) corporation, is published monthly except November. Comments are welcome. You may email the Society at escambiacohistoricalsociety@gmail.com or call 251-809-1528.

OFFICERS

President, *Don Sales*
Vice-President, *Charlie Ware*
Secretary, Shannon Jones
Treasurer, *John Angel*
Echoes Editor, *Ranella Merritt*
Librarian, *Sherry Johnston*
Publicity, *Clay Lisenby and Stephen Salter*
Historian/Curator, *Tom McMillan*

Trustees

Ann Biggs-Williams
Ranella Merritt
Tom McMillan
Sally Finlay
Charles Ware, Alternate
Darryl Searcy, Trustee Retired