

BOAT BUILDING

Motorists driving along Main Street in New Albany today can't see the river. The floodwall has cut it off from view. The floodwall has covered the old wharf, too, and blocked the streets that once ran to the river. But a century ago, the waterfront was the most important place in town. The wharfmaster was one of the most important city officials, and the steamboat captains and builders were respected citizens. . .

If a riverboat man had been asked in 1855 if he had heard of New Albany, he would probably have answered, "Of course. That's where some of the best boats are built."

By that year New Albany had built about 250 boats – boats that had gained a reputation for speed, hard service and beauty. The Glendy Burke, a New Albany boat, has been immortalized in song by Stephen Collins Foster. The A. L. Shotwell built in 1863 at New Albany, set a speed record from New Orleans to Louisville of four days, nine hours, and 29 minutes, a record which has never been beaten. The Robert E. Lee, probably the most famous of all river boats, wasn't built until 1867, but she was to be a New Albany boat. The Lee set a record from New Orleans to St. Louis of 17 hours, 11 minutes, another record that still stands.

Boat building was New Albany's biggest business in the 1840 and 1850s, and just about its only business. The city's population in 1855 was about 10,000 persons and more than 5,000 depended directly or indirectly on boatbuilding for a livelihood.

New Albany had started boat building early. In 1818, when the little town was only five years old, Capt. Henry Shreve built the Ohio at New Albany. Shreve never settled in New Albany but he was frequently in and out of the town in its early days. It was Shreve who defeated Fulton's attempts to get a steamboat monopoly on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Shreveport, La. was named for him.

New Albany's location below the Falls was a factor in making a boat building center. The Falls were a dividing line in the river in the early days. Boats were not able to go up through the Falls and the first canal at Louisville was too small to handle boats of any size. As a result, New Albany builders were able to get orders for many of the boats that were to run between the Falls and New Orleans. Abundant stands of hardwood forests near the city provided all the lumber that was needed for boat building. New Albany foundries and boiler shops provided the machinery to run the big steamers, and New Albany craftsmen added the fancy carvings and decorations that made the boats into floating palaces.

But the river meant more than boat building to the city. It meant trade and commerce. In the days before the railroads practically all freight was carried on the river. New Albany's wharf was stacked high with goods coming in and going out. Wholesale business prospered and New Albany supplied goods of all kinds to farmers and store-owners in a vast area back from the river. Merchants from Salem, Corydon, Paoli, and dozens of smaller towns received their merchandise from New Albany.

Farmers hauled their produce to New Albany for sale and shipment by river. The waterfront was a beehive of activity and the most important place in town. Even today New Albany's streets show how important the river was. Main Street, closest to the river is 80 feet wide. Streets farther back were narrower and narrower. The oldest part of Oak Street is only 30 feet wide.

The steamboat days made New Albany a cosmopolitan city, too. The rivermen were constantly traveling, bringing back some of the manners of New Orleans and the business hustle of Pittsburgh. Every boat brought travelers from far places who stopped at New Albany's inns and hotels. Memphis, Vicksburg, New Orleans, were all important places to New Albany. When the Mexican War broke out, the city supplied a large company of volunteers, eager to go, to see new sights. Travel was in the blood of every New Albany citizen.

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