

ROBERT E. LEE

An item in the New Albany Ledger excited the city's interest on a June evening in 1870 as the last rays of the setting sun sparkled on the broad Ohio. A new time record had been set from New Orleans to St. Louis by a Cincinnati-built boat – the Natchez. The editor of the Ledger was unimpressed. Watch out for a New Albany-built boat, he advised Capt. Tom Leathers of the Natchez. Watch out for the Robert E. Lee.

New Albany was proud of the Robert E. Lee. The big sidewheeler launched at Dowerman & Humphrey's shipyard in 1866 had already set a time record of 16 hours and 37 minutes from Memphis to Cairo, and had established a reputation for speed and dependability. She was owned by Capt. John W. Cannon who had her built in New Albany – as all his boats had been – because he was convinced New Albany boats were the finest on the river. The Robert E. Lee was soon to prove that Capt. Cannon had a shrewd eye for a good boat-building town.

Capt. Cannon and Capt. Leathers had been partners once in the steamboat business, but that had been long ago, and now their rivalry for the New Orleans to Vicksburg trade was marked by lawsuits, squabbles over freight rates and political differences. Capt. Cannon had accepted the South's Civil War defeat gracefully. Capt. Leathers was an "unreconstructed rebel."

The Natchez was a new boat in 1879 and rumor was that Capt. Leathers had her designed as a racer so she would outshine the Lee in speed.

A race between the boats of the two rival captains was to be expected and the stage was set when the Natchez broke the record time from New Orleans to St. Louis which had been set the year before by the New Albany-built Dexter.

Both the Natchez and the Lee were in New Orleans June 30, 1870 and the whole city knew a race to St. Louis was impending though Capt. Leathers denied it and Capt. Cannon advertised the Lee as bound for Louisville. When the two boats backed out from the foot of Canal Street at 5 p.m. a prolonged cheer went up from the thousands of spectators who filled the levee and the roof-tops, lining the river for blocks. They were watching the start of the most famous race in river history.

The telegraph quickly ticked the news ahead that the race had begun. The distance from New Orleans to St. Louis by river is 1,200 miles and practically every mile of the way was lined with enthusiastic spectators who cheered the boats on. The oldest veteran of the Mississippi could not recall such public excitement before.

The Lee took an early lead and kept it but the race was close. At Vicksburg, 24 hours out of New Orleans, the Natchez was 18 minutes behind. The Lee passed Memphis late on the night of July 2, one hour and three minutes ahead of the Natchez. With steady rhythmic strokes of the pounding machinery, the two great boats pounded relentlessly through the muddy waters while sweating firemen fed the ever-hungry boilers.

The Lee passed Hickman, Kentucky about 3:30 on the afternoon of July 3. Smoke from the Natchez could be seen 20 miles below. The Natchez was hopelessly beaten, but to add to her woes she had to tie up six hours for fog during the night. When she limped into St. Louis at 5:51 p.m. on July 4, the Lee had been there for six hours and 37 minutes. For the Natchez, there were no

crowds, no flags, but that night a gala banquet was held at the Southern Hotel with both Capts. Cannon and Leathers as guests of honor.

New Albany was jubilant. The local boat had made good – had set a record of 3 days, 18 hours and 14 minutes from New Orleans to St. Louis – a record that has never yet been broken. It was a fitting climax to New Albany's boat-building days because the Lee, as it turned out, was the last important steamer built here . . . the last and the finest.

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