

# New Albany-Built Eclipse Made History With Her Fast Run From New Orleans

## Crowds On Silver Hills Cheered As Riverboat Beat Rival's Record

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New Albany was once the capital of the United States when it came to building fine river boats. Those days have been vividly recalled by several historians and all stories relating to this phase of New Albany history indicated that in the mid '80s steamboat men were the kingpins in the New Albany area. Even their houses, the majority still standing along Main Street, are reminiscent of the river, with their pilot houses surmounting the tall structures.

Most of the houses, still occupied, once belonged to river captains and boat building contractors. The homes were lavish and similar in many aspects to the ornate steamboats once built here.

### Provided Many Jobs

Many steamboats were built in New Albany, especially during the years between 1847 to 1867. During that span, 204 steamers were built, with five shipyards hiring a total of 200 skilled mechanics and their assistants. Cabin builders were another class of contractors who gave employment to a large number of workmen.

Furniture men were also largely benefited and gave employment to numerous mechanics and laborers. New Albany coppersmiths came in for a liberal share of work in completing the outfitting of the steamers.

Sites of the shipyards were the conveniently sloping shores between Main Street and the river. Among the shipbuilding companies was the one owned by

William Humphrey, who was the son of the architect of the famed old Revolutionary battleship, Old Ironsides.

The population between Main Street and the river was composed of carpenters and shipwrights, foundry workers and finishers.

#### Timber Close By

Timber was near at hand and there was a propitious level terrace behind the slope and a deep all-season channel. In those days men were clearing the nearby forests with a will because there was a constant market for keel logs, preferably those hewn from the boles of trees that had grown rapidly; this made them especially tough and sturdy.

Great vats boiled near the ways, and there was the pungent odor of soaking planks, which were applied to the hulls while dripping wet and pliable. Above the yards stood the foundries and, further removed, the furniture and cabinet-builders and the ship chandlers.

#### Eclipse Became Famous

In 1852, from this maze emerged one of the greatest passenger steamboats ever built. It was the Eclipse, destined to become one of the most famous riverboats in American history. Her hull was 365 feet long and her waterwheels measured 42 feet high.

In 1852 the art of building steamboats had been raised to that precarious peak where splendor was the chief aim. No luxury was withheld from the first-class passengers' cabins. The carpet in the highly ornamented ballroom cost an estimated \$5,000. It was designed in New Albany but was executed in far-off Brussels.

The Haviland potteries of Limoges had supplied the china, cream and white with golden E's in the name spelled in full on the larger pieces. Upon the tureens and the compotes a flying silver eagle was added. The silver was sterling and the gold leaf for the decoration of the interiors had cost another \$5,000.

#### She Was Queen

When she had come down off the ways, 120 men made up her crew, but she had to be proved. Although men tabbed her as the queen ship of all inland waters, she must prove her speed and staying power. All in all the Eclipse toted 1,288 tons and cost an estimated \$140,000.

The Eclipse, to prove her worth, puffed in all her majesty down to New Orleans and tried for a record-breaking upstream journey to New Albany. She made fairly good time, but another steamboat, the A. L. Shotwell came back and lowered the Eclipse record from New Orleans by seven hours.

The Eclipse, her head without crown, again sailed down to New Orleans, filled her boilers to capacity, spun her great wheels challengingly and came hard on the heels of the Shotwell. She was bent on gaining her laurels though her boilers burst.

### Crowds Await Finish

New Albany was agog and hundreds of citizens watched the bend down the river from Silver Hills, awaiting the appearance of the Eclipse with her two great smokestacks spewing smoke.

William Spurgeon, Eclipse captain, had pushed his crew all the way. He had tabulated the Shotwell's time and found he was ahead at Vicksburg, behind at Helena; gaining at Memphis, losing a bit at Cairo but ahead at Evansville.

Men on Silver Hills anxiously watched the breezes, disputed what passages she must have used to take full advantage of short-cuts and favorable currents.

Then suddenly, she sounded her blast and hove into sight around the bend, her graceful funnels streaming black smoke. As she passed Silver Hills, the hundreds there filled the air with cheers. It was a stirring sight, but many believed she had not exceeded the Shotwell's time.

### Eclipse Sets Record

As she glided into her berth near the foot of State Street, Capt. Sturgeon announced to the crowd that it had taken the Eclipse just four days, nine hours and 30 minutes to come from the Crescent City. She had beaten the Shotwell's record by almost two hours.

The popularity of the Eclipse was exceeded only by the famous steamboat, the Robert E. Lee, built here in 1866-67. The Robert E. Lee carried 1,227 tons, just 61 tons less than the Eclipse, but cost \$180,000.

Both those great ships have found an everlasting niche in New Albany history and they and their crews added glamour to the exciting era of steamboating on the inland waterways.

## Steamboat Era Passes

Ironically, the fate of the glamorous riverboats was being sealed just at the time the vessels were becoming faster and more luxurious.

The days after the Civil War brought a nationwide boom in railroad building. As the gleaming ribbons of steel were pushed across the inland waterways the great steamboat era began to fade.

New Albany's boat-building industry dwindled and disappeared. Workers and suppliers turned to other livelihoods. The steamboats on the river became fewer and fewer as the railroads took their passenger and freight business.

But New Albany has never ceased to cast an occasional wistful glance backward to the great, exciting days when the city was playing an important role in the drama of steamboating.