

New Albany Ship Yards 1859

New Albany on the Ohio
By Betty Lou Amster, 1963

New Albany Takes the Horns

Although the iron horses of mid-century had the inside track on transportation changes that were to scuttle riverboat traffic, New Albany's tie with the Ohio River was at its peak in 1856.

Like a fruit ripened to perfection, this apple of New Albany's economy was rich, sought-after . . . and just about to fall.

But the busy wharfmaster did not know it as he collected fees from the packets that loaded and unloaded at the crowded wharfboat.

Over half the city's population did not know it, as they budgeted the family dollars coming directly from the "million dollar" steamboat industry.

And if shipbuilders Jacob Dowerman & Thomas Humphreys, William Jones, Charles Wible, John Evans, Peter Tellon & Jacob Alford, and George Armstrong had any suspicion, they were too busy turning out 22 packets in that peak year of boat-building to worry much about the future. These master builders could lay a hull in six weeks with 75 carpenters, shipwrights and laborers to help in each yard; even so, the six builders were laying down three boats at a time to keep up with the demand.

When it was all over – when the railroad and the Civil War combined to sink the last effort to revive the golden age of steamboats – men would sit in the coffee houses on market nights and look for the fault. Some said New Albany never had the capital to buy up enough timber in the spring, when it was cheap and available; this limited the master builders' capacity to fill all the orders that came their way. Others criticized the master builders for extending credit on the big boats for the Southern trade – money never to be seen after the war.

But most talk centered around the big year – 1856 – when New Albany was undisputed leader of the Falls Cities in boatbuilding and second only to Pittsburgh on the Ohio . . . when she built twice the craft turned out at Louisville . . . when the big Phoenix Foundry hired 150 men and paid \$1,000 a month in wages, and four other foundries were good money makers, too . . . when cabin builders – Hart & Stoy, Thomas & Beeler, Hipple, Smith & Company, Payne & Company, Howard & Cash – had plenty of work for all the carpenters in town . . . and John Shrader and George Porter paid well for furniture makers and cabinet builders.

When it was all over in the 1860s, when New Albany had built over \$12 million worth of river craft, wives of the builders, captains and pilots gathered in their gracious homes on

Main and Bank Streets – homes which carried traces of Southern architecture – and remembered the beautiful things that had gone into the floating palaces . . . the *Leviathan* . . . the *Eclipse* . . . the *Robert E. Lee*. They talked of the brocatelles . . . the \$20-a-yard satin . . . the rosewood paneling . . . Limoges china . . . Wilton carpets . . . silver from Sheffield and Reed & Barton.

In many cases families found room in their homes for treasured pieces of the grand décor from the grand salons of the golden days of the steamboat age . . . families of rivermen Jacob Hangary, John Fawcett, J. Wesley Conner, Augustus Genung, Ephraim Hollis, William F. Tuley, Samuel Montgomery, John Waltz, John F. Matheny, Andrew Anderson, J. R. Hughes and the Meekins – Charles, James and Martin.

And they all talked wherever they gathered – ruffians at the Montezuma and Shades taverns; the gentry in their parlors or at the new Woodward Hall – of the boats that “took the horns.”

Taking the horns was a tradition in steamboating; when a fast packet bettered the time of an earlier record setter, the prize was a mounted set of stag horns. On one popular race stretch from New Orleans to Natchez, three New Albany-built boats “took the horns”: the *Sultana* . . . the *New Princess* . . . and the fabled *Robert E. Lee*, who also captured the horns for the New Orleans-St. Louis run in the historic race with the *Natchez*.

And who in New Albany could ever forget the night of March 25, 1856, when everyone turned out on the wharf or up on the Silver Hills look-out to herald the arrival of Captain Meekin’s *Baltic*. The New Albany-built boat beat the Louisville-built *Diana* up from New Orleans by two hours and seven minutes. Although her finish line was Portland, the *Baltic* swung wide toward the New Albany bank in a gallant, tooting gesture for her rooters; New Albanians fired a cannon in salute.

Or who would forget – or settle – the controversy that raged around two New Albany-built boats in their race against the clock from New Orleans. The *Eclipse* was a \$375,000 luxury boat – longer than a football field, with paddle wheels higher than a four-story building. She had a monthly payroll of over \$4,500 . . . a crew of 121 . . . and 140 cabins. Built and outfitted with the finest equipment at the Dowerman yards in 1852, she was the talk of the river. And she made good time on the 1,500-mile course; some say four days, nine hours and 30 minutes.

But the *A. L. Shotwell* – off John Evans’ ways – beat her time in 1853 by one minute . . . some say. The *Shotwell* took the horns, at any rate, and her time was never bettered.

By 1870, when the *Lee* engaged in her famous race with the *Natchez*, New Albany boosters were more concerned about Louisville claiming the glamorous speed queen for their own than they were about *Natchez* captain Tom Leathers’ complaint of “foul.” Although it is true that her owner – Captain John Cannon – took the *Lee* to Portland for the name painting to avoid anti-Southern sentiment in New Albany, the *Robert E. Lee* was a New Albany-built boat from the first pattern scratched in the sand to the finished, feathered tops of her twin stacks.

That Captain John Cannon came to New Albany to build the *Lee* tells the story of the city's perfection in boatbuilding. Cannon wanted a fast boat to settle an old score with Leathers. New Albany had proved she could build fast boats: in 1858, among 11 packets on the "Lightning Line" from Louisville to New Orleans, nine had been built in New Albany.

Captain Cannon wanted a safe boat; a boat that would hold up in support of his \$250,000 investment. The average life of a steamboat was five years - if her boilers did not blow, or she did not go aground in the tricky bayou country of the southern markets. New Albany boats were known for their quality.

He also chose New Albany because her position below the Falls had made her a "nursery" for boats destined for the southern trade . . . and the *Lee* was built to carry 6,000 bales of cotton, draw only five feet of water, and "still make railroad time."

Another choice centered on the informal building practices. Cannon could outline in general what he wanted and New Albany's master craftsmen got the picture right away. Blueprints were not the order of the day. Patterns were made from rough sketches; a scale model of the hull was constructed and the men worked from the model.

Many of New Albany's builders were in the trade before they came to town. One of these was Matthew Robinson. Robinson was a shipbuilder in South Shields, England before he came up to New Albany from New Orleans in 1817 - the year famous riverman Henry Shreve built the *Ohio* on the basic design that would be followed for the next 50 years. Robinson got to New Albany in time to work on the *Volcano* in 1818, with the DeHart brothers. He opened a "molding floor and warehouse for boat stores at Fourth and the Water" that year; in 1826 the council allowed him to establish a "boat yard" in front of his house if it did not interfere with normal passage on the street.

The yards were as informal in appearance as were the arrangements with the builders: they looked like lumber yards - sprawling, disorganized layouts with logs drayed in to be whip-sawed into planks or hewn into timbers. Big vats were there for boiling the oak planks, put on the hull while wet. Pillow blocks supported cribs for the level needed to lay the keel.

By 1840 - after Robinson had died and his family rented out the ways - boatbuilding had become more specialized. There were hull-layers, engine builders, outfitters, cabin makers, etc. The master builders contracted around the yards for the special needs of a given boat. By mid-century, the river front was full of yards from Fifth to the Lower Albany ways and New Albany's reputation as a boatbuilder center was secure.

So secure was New Albany's reputation, that the famous engineer and inventor James B. Eads - builder of the bridge at St. Louis and designer of the underwater diving bell - chose the city for execution of his radical designs.

In 1858 Eads placed an order in New Albany for two of his unique designs - Submarine 11 and Submarine 12. These craft were for his salvage fleet which worked the lower Mississippi waters; they cost about \$10,000 and were especially equipped for underwater work.

This distinction pleased *The New Albany Ledger*; their river news of January 13, 1858, reported: "Eads and Nelsons new diving bell boat Submarine 12 raised steam yesterday and everything worked like a charm. She will leave with her substitute No. 11 in tow about the latter part of the week for St. Louis. They are the specimen of Hoosier mechanism, and just as good a job as you can scare up anywhere."

Earlier, in 1828, Henry Shreve, after convincing Congress of the need to clear the Ohio for the traffic he knew would come, talked the lawmakers into an appropriation for snag boats. A number of these were built at New Albany – two-hulled affairs, fastened with chains and crossbeams.

Many of the boats were built for New Albany men – captains and merchants. Such was *the E. H. Fairchild*, built in 1857 for J. H. Fawcett, Ephraim and August Whistler and John Peyden – with one-eighth share held by a Louisville firm.

Ownership was often complex. Shares changed hands as fortunes rose and fell. Although a risky and expensive investment, it could be a profitable one; if all went well a boat could pay her owners back in 20 weeks. Because the average boat cost over \$50,000, group ownership was common: the *Magenta*, for instance, had 24 owners.

Most of the boats were financed by out-of-town captains and downriver packet lines. Louisville, in fact, riled the local press with a claim that most of New Albany's boat business was the result of "Louisville money."

Many of the captains from the South stayed in New Albany during the construction of their boats, often bringing their families along to enjoy the "healthy climate." The old Hale Tavern – by 1850 an elaborate establishment grown up around the first home of Mrs. Phoebe Scribner – contained 52 rooms and a great hall on the third floor. In the steamboat era it was called the High Street House. As many as 100 boarders often sat down to dinner there, summoned by the tolling of a bell in the yard. Local street boys had a cry to accompany the ringing of the bell: "Run-run-pig-tail-done." Innkeeper Jacob Anthony featured fine cuisine and provided gay dances in the big upper hall. Another popular boarding house for rivermen was the Israel House. Local day boarders – J. H. Haines, John E. Crane, William McKnight, J. H. Stotsenburg, Dr. Charles Bowman, Captain Hangary and others – mingled with the out-of-town captains and merchants to swap the latest river news.