

NOTES ON THE NAVIGATION OF IOWA RIVERS¹

In the early days most of the Mississippi River tributaries were used by trappers, traders, frontier merchants, and farmers, to transport furs, grain, vegetables, and pork to markets at St. Louis and New Orleans. Canoes, crude rafts, keelboats (pushed upstream with long poles), and flatboats carried the cargoes to downstream markets and returned with stoves, nails, salt, groceries, gunpowder, whisky, and other manufactured articles.

As early as 1800 the Northwest Fur Company had established a fur-trading post at Redwood (present site of Des Moines), two hundred miles upstream from the mouth of the Des Moines River. From this post, Jean Baptiste Faribault made annual trips to the Mississippi with large canoe-loads of furs and pelts from 1800-1803. On the Iowa River enterprising traders poled keelboats as far up as Napoleon (south of Iowa City) at which point Indians

¹ The historical data herein presented were collected by the writer while in the employ of the United States Engineer Office at Rock Island as a part of information used in connection with the work of that office. Permission was received to utilize the original notes for preparation of this paper after they had served their official purpose for the office. The article was written on the writer's own time and is based on a survey of historical materials available in the various publications of the State Historical Society of Iowa, county histories, guidebooks, some newspapers, Territorial, State, and Federal memorials, resolutions, acts, and surveys, and a few interviews. No effort was made to locate records of steamboat companies, log books, and the correspondence of river men and of shippers and buyers. William J. Petersen's *Iowa—The Rivers of Her Valleys* has appeared since this study was made.

As considerable information has already been presented on Des Moines and Cedar River traffic in Tacitus Hussey's *History of Steamboating on the Des Moines River, from 1837 to 1862*, in the *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. IV, pp. 323-382, and in Russell C. Grahame's *Voyages of the Black Hawk in The Palimpsest*, Vol. IX, pp. 157-169, navigation on these streams is only briefly discussed here.

gathered to sell furs and to buy necessary supplies. Colonel George Davenport, an Indian trader, who built his home near Fort Armstrong on Rock Island, sent canoes up the Iowa and Cedar rivers in search of furs in the 1830's. Prior to 1859 keelboats had been pushed to Keosauqua and Des Moines on the Des Moines River, and small keelboats and mackinaw boats had reached Brighton on the Skunk River, Maquoketa on the Maquoketa River, and Elkader on the Turkey River.² Several local entrepreneurs built small flatboats at Westport and Ivanhoe on the Cedar River and engaged in trading groceries and manufactured articles for wheat, pork, and corn.³

² H. H. Sibley's *Memoir of Jean Baptiste Faribault in Minnesota Historical Collections*, Vol. III, pp.168-179; John C. Hartman's *History of Black Hawk County, Iowa*, Vol. I, p. 376; Johnson Brigham's *History of Des Moines and Polk County, Iowa*, Vol. I, p. 5; Jacob Van der Zee's *The Roads and Highways of Territorial Iowa* in *THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, Vol. III, pp. 195-197; *History of Johnson County, Iowa* (1883), p. 586; *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Souvenir, 1889); F. M. Irish's *History of Johnson County, Iowa*, in the *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. VI, p. 197; *History of Linn County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, 1878), p. 492.

³ L. A. Brewer and B. L. Wick's *History of Linn County, Iowa*, p. 425. As early as 1839 Federal action was taken to secure the improvement of the Cedar River and to connect it by canal with the Mississippi. Section 2 of an act of Congress of March 3, 1839, empowered the Secretary of War "to cause a survey of Red Cedar river, within the said Territory, and an estimate to be made, with a view to the improvement of the navigation thereof above the town of Moscow, and the connection of the said navigation with the river Mississippi by a canal, extending from the vicinity of said town to some suitable point in or near the town of Bloomington; and to defray the expense of said survey and estimate, the sum of fifteen hundred dollars be, and the same is hereby, appropriated, out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated." Jacob Van der Zee, in his article *The Roads and Highways of Territorial Iowa*, pp. 196, 197, states that the appropriation for a canal survey was made in answer to a petition from the Bloomington and Cedar River Canal Company and that the enterprise was never completed despite the agitation of Muscatine citizens for river improvements.

Interest by the early Territorial and State legislatures of Iowa in protecting the navigable status of such Iowa streams as the Iowa, Cedar, Des Moines, Skunk, Maquoketa, Wapsipinicon, and others is indicated by the

Traders along the smaller streams often constructed flatboats and keelboats during the winter months, and waited for the spring high water to float their cargoes to market. During the trading period when merchants accepted grain and meat in payment for dry goods, stoves, nails, hardware, etc., pork was bought from farmers at one dollar and a half to two dollars and a half per hundred pounds and corn and wheat at from ten to fifteen cents and from thirty-five to fifty-five cents per bushel. The rough-hewn boats that carried the produce to market were often sold for lumber or for the Mississippi River trade.⁴

Log rafting also played a small part in this early traffic. Along the Cedar River in Benton and Black Hawk counties red cedar trees were cut for lumber and the logs were formed into rafts at a point above the present site of Cedar Rapids and rafted to St. Louis. This lumber cutting was often engaged in by unscrupulous adventurers who invaded the Cedar River area before it was permanently settled.⁵

At Brighton, on the Skunk River, settlers had visions of the growth of a great shipping center when during 1843-1844 cattle were slaughtered and the meat shipped along with cargoes of potatoes, wheat, pork, and flour, on keelboats that had been hastily constructed along the stream. Dam obstructions and unfortunate losses of cargoes result-

numerous early laws and resolutions declaring the streams navigable and providing for chutes in dams for the passage of logs and boats and for proper draws in bridges. The reversal of this policy of treating streams as navigable may be seen in later laws when bridges are authorized without draws, and streams are declared to be non-navigable. This reversal of State policy occurs after the development of and the extension of railroads.

⁴ H. W. Lathrop's *Early Steamboating on the Iowa River* in the *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XIII, p. 46.

⁵ *History of Black Hawk County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, 1878), p. 308; J. C. Hartman's *History of Black Hawk County, Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 376, 377.

ing from treacherous navigation conditions practically ended such traffic before 1850.⁶

In northeast Iowa, the firm of Thompson, Sage, and Davis constructed a mill at Elkader on the Turkey River in 1849. When the millowners were unable to ship their cargo of flour because of the absence of roads, they purchased a keelboat, pushed it upstream to the mill, and then floated their flour to Cassville and Dubuque. After the completion of a road to Clayton City, the flour was taken across country by wagon and shipping by river was abandoned.⁷

The rapid influx of settlers into Iowa during the late thirties and early forties resulted in the opening of new markets for manufactured articles. Enterprising steamboat captains and owners lost little time in attempting to reach the new settlements. The absence of roads and the difficulties connected with overland travel offered unusual opportunities for profit in the steamboat trade.

Probably the earliest cargo shipped by steam on the Des Moines River was on the steamboat *S. B. Science* in the fall of 1837. The cargo consisted of flour, meal, pork, groceries, and whisky, all of which were in demand by new settlers who needed supplies to carry them over to their first crop year. The *Revenue Cutter* and the *Des Moines Belle* entered the Des Moines traffic in April and May, 1844. Five years later the *Revenue Cutter* was reported to be the only boat in operation on the Des Moines when it made four trips to the upper river. On return trips to St. Louis the *Revenue Cutter* carried as much as sixty tons of freight.⁸

⁶ C. C. Heacock's *Local Reminiscences of the Early History of Brighton, Iowa*, pp. 30, 33.

⁷ See R. E. Price's *History of Clayton County, Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 446, 447.

⁸ Hussey's *History of Steamboating on the Des Moines River, from 1837 to 1862*, in the *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. IV, pp. 328, 333, 339.

The decade preceding the Civil War saw the "boom period" of steamboat navigation on the Des Moines River. Forty steamboats entered the Des Moines River trade in the fifties as the establishment of permanent homes resulted in increased demands for such luxuries as curtains, dried fruits, stationery, and for staples such as shoes, hardware, stoves, sheet iron, soda, ale, glassware, soap, molasses, nails, coffee, flour, sugar, and dry goods. Corn, pork, and wheat often purchased for southern slaves continued to be typical downstream cargoes.

The high water year of 1858 was one of unusual activity on the Des Moines River. On the third of June three steamboats — the *Alice*, the *Clara Hine*, and the *Skipper* were reported tied up at the Des Moines wharves. By September 16, 1858, Des Moines had recorded the arrival of sixty steamboats. During May steamboat arrivals were so frequent that they "excited little remark". In May 1858, Captain F. E. Beers startled settlers along the Upper Des Moines by piloting a sidewheeler steamboat, the *Rolling Wave* from Fort Dodge to Des Moines.⁹

The river season of 1859 was a busy one. The *Clara Hine*, the *Colonel Morgan*, the *Flora Temple*, the *Des Moines City*, the *Defiance*, and the *Charles Rodgers* were all in the Des Moines River trade. The *Charles Rodgers* and the *Des Moines Belle* made trips to Fort Dodge in May and June of 1859 with cargoes of lumber, tobacco, salt, and flour. The arrival of the *Charles Rodgers*, a small boat of fifty tons, at Fort Dodge stirred hopes in the hearts of the more optimistic of Fort Dodge citizens that millions were to be made on the river trade. Waterway enthusiasts de-

For a discussion of the improvement of the Des Moines River for navigation see Jacob A. Swisher's *The Des Moines River Improvement Project* in THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XXXV, pp. 142-180.

⁹ *Muscatine Daily Journal*, September 16, 1858; *Fort Dodge Sentinel*, May 15, 1858; *The Iowa Weekly Citizen* (Des Moines), May 26, 1858.

manded the immediate repeal of a law that declared the Des Moines River navigable only to Des Moines and urged that action be taken to secure an appropriation for cleaning the river of obstruction from Des Moines to Fort Dodge. The season of 1860 was so dry, however, that steamboats did not dare to venture to Fort Dodge even for a bonus, and citizens there abandoned the hope that the Des Moines River might be made navigable to Fort Dodge.

By 1861 most of the upper river steamboats had deserted the Des Moines River to transport soldiers and supplies on the Mississippi. The *Des Moines Belle*, the *Add Hine*, and the *Des Moines City*, all of which ran from the railway terminal at Ottumwa to upstream points, were the only remaining boats. The approach of railroads, the improvement of roads, and the demand for steamboats in southern waters made the business risky and unprofitable and brought such traffic to a close before the end of 1862.¹⁰

The arrival of the steamboat *Ripple* at Iowa City on June 20, 1841, opened such traffic on the Iowa River. On April 12, 1842, the steamer *Rock River* arrived at Iowa City and proceeded fifteen miles upstream with "100 merry-makers" aboard. These early attempts at steam

¹⁰ A. G. Leonard's Scrapbook (newspaper clippings) in the State Department of History and Archives, Des Moines, Iowa; H. M. Pratt's *History of Fort Dodge and Webster County*, Vol. I, p. 229; G. D. R. Boyd's *Sketches of History and Incidents Connected with the Settlement of Wapello County, from 1843 to 1859, Inclusive*, in the *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. VI, p. 130; *Fort Dodge Sentinel*, May 7, 1859. For accounts of steamboat navigation to Fort Dodge, notice of organization of a steamboat company for purchase of a steamboat to run to Fort Dodge, and articles advocating the improvement of the river between Des Moines and Fort Dodge, see *Fort Dodge Sentinel*, May 29, June 24, July 17, August 21, 28, 1858, April 7, 23, 1859; C. F. Davis' *The Voyage of the First Steamboat from Keokuk to Fort Dodge* in the *Annals of Iowa* (Third Series), Vol. VII, pp. 141, 142; J. M. Dixon's *Centennial History of Polk County, Iowa*, pp. 11, 326; *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), April 14, 1882; and Hussey's *History of Steamboating on the Des Moines River, from 1837 to 1862*, in the *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. IV, p. 365.

navigation were soon followed by the *Agatha* in 1844, a steamboat 119 feet long, 19 feet wide, 3-foot draught; the *Maid of Iowa*, 115 feet long, 18.4 feet wide; and the *Emma* all of which carried supplies to Iowa City merchants and took out wheat and pork.¹¹

On the lower Iowa River during the Mexican War, Joe Luckett of Todd Town organized a company for the operation of a barge line between St. Louis and Wapello. The boats were named in honor of Mexican War heroes. The *General Scott*, the *General Taylor*, and the *General Wadsworth* were loaded with pork and grain and taken to St. Louis where they were reloaded with goods for Wapello merchants and towed back to the mouth of the Iowa River by steamboat. The barges were then "poled" up the Iowa River. This barge line was in successful operation for several years.

When the stage of water permitted, other steamboats continued to arrive at Iowa City from 1848-1851. The *Piasa*, the *Herald*, the *Magnet*, and the *St. Croix* docked at Iowa City during this three-year period. The *Daniel Hillman*, the *Archer*, and the *Uncle Toby* shipped freight from St. Louis and Wapello to Iowa City during the 1851 high water. From 1851 through 1853, steamboats arrived frequently at the foot of "Gawky Street" in Wapello.¹²

In 1858 the ferryboat *Muscatine* carried fence rails and lumber for building to Wapello. Three years later, the

¹¹ *Iowa City Standard*, June 24, 1841; Lathrop's *Steamboating on the Iowa River* in the *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XIII, pp. 44, 45; Louis Pelzer's *Iowa City: A Miniature Frontier of the Forties* in THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XXIX, p. 18; *Iowa Capitol Reporter* (Iowa City), March 9, 1844.

¹² Arthur Springer's *History of Louisa County*, Vol. I, pp. 210-214; *Iowa Democratic Enquirer* (Muscatine), July 12, 1851; Daniel S. Curtiss's *Western Portraiture and Emigrant's Guide, A Description of Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa* (New York, 1852), p. 187; Bruce E. Mahan's *Bridging the Cedar* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. IV, pp. 308, 309.

steamers *Orion*, *Blackhawk*, and *Eureka* docked occasionally at Wapello. The *General Halleck*, the *Forest Queen*, and the *Catawa* were listed as Wapello arrivals during 1862. By the close of the Civil War the only remaining Iowa River steamboats in operation were the *Turtle*, engaged in the lumber trade, the *Iowa City*, the *Swallow*, the *Lily*, the *Gussy Girdon*, the *Try Us*, and the *Enterprise*. The *Enterprise*, a pleasure craft, operated on the upper Iowa until September 13, 1882, when it was destroyed by fire.¹³

From 1844 to 1853 a few attempts to navigate the Cedar River were made by steamboat captains eager to ship surplus produce and to sell manufactured articles to farmers situated along the banks. In 1844 the *Maid of Iowa* ascended the Cedar as far as Washington Ferry. Five years later the steamboat *Hawkeye* was reported to have arrived in Cedar Rapids. The *Uncle Toby*, a 109-ton boat, made its way through the over-hanging willows and brush to Cedar Rapids in 1853.¹⁴

Scheduled steamboat trips, however, were not made on the Cedar until 1858 when the *Cedar Rapids*, a single-deck sternwheeler 155 feet long by 26 feet wide and equipped with four engines, made twelve trips from Cedar Rapids to St. Louis. The *Cedar Rapids* towed lumber, carried passengers, and pulled barges loaded with oats, wheat, corn, and flour from Cedar Rapids and other Cedar River settlements to St. Louis.¹⁵

¹³ Springer's *History of Louisa County*, Vol. I, pp. 210-214; *Muscatine Daily Journal*, July 20, 1858; *Iowa City Daily Republican*, July 14, 1881; *History of Johnson County, Iowa* (1883), p. 673.

¹⁴ *Iowa Capitol Reporter* (Iowa City), October 22, 1842; *Bloomington Herald*, August 2, 1844; *Louisa County Times*, April 29, 1851; L. A. Brewer and B. L. Wick's, *History of Linn County, Iowa*, pp. 426-430.

¹⁵ *The Weekly State Reporter* (Iowa City), September 29, 1858; Brewer and Wick's *History of Linn County*, pp. 426-428; *Muscatine Daily Journal*, July 23, 1858; *Vinton Eagle*, May 8, 1858.

The *Export*, later rechristened the *Black Hawk*, ran regularly between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo carrying freight and passengers in the fall of 1858 and the summer of 1859. Settlers came from great distances to La Porte, Vinton, and other Cedar River towns to get hardware, salt, drugs, white lead, flour, and other articles. Downstream cargoes of the *Black Hawk* usually consisted of two or three thousand bushels of grain and other produce such as eggs, vegetables, butter, and furs. During the season of 1859 the *Black Hawk* traveled 6000 or 7000 miles, making twenty-four round trips between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo and netting \$2000 profit.¹⁶

The only remaining boats in active service between Cedar Rapids and Vinton in 1863 were the *Surprise*, a small freight steamer, and the *Nettie Munn*, a stern-wheeler 70 feet long and 12 feet wide. The *Carrie Wallace*, a small sternwheeler steamboat, built about 1870, was used for Sunday school excursions, picnics, and in the wool and lime trade. The *Nettie Munn* blew up at Kelsey's Landing in 1867 and the *Carrie Wallace* was wrecked by a boiler explosion at Brock's Landing in 1876. Other boats that operated on the Cedar River were the *Kitty Clyde*, the *Rose*, the *Climax*, a sidewheeler, the *General Weaver*, and the *Lady Franklin*.¹⁷

A few attempts to navigate some of the smaller Iowa streams by steamboat were enough to convince even the

¹⁶ Grahame's *Voyages of the Black Hawk* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. IX, pp. 157-168; Charles A. Laurance's *Pioneer Days in Cedar Rapids, 1860-1880*, pp. 116, 117; Brewer and Wick's *History of Linn County*, p. 430.

¹⁷ Price's *History of Clayton County*, Vol. 1, p. 96; Heacock's *Local Reminiscences of the Early History of Brighton, Iowa*, p. 28; Albert M. Lea's *Notes on Wisconsin Territory with a Map*, pp. 27, 32, 33; Frank Barnes's *Early Steamboating on the Maquoketa River* in J. W. Ellis's *History of Jackson County*, Vol. I, p. 586; *Muscatine Daily Journal*, May 17, 1862; A. T. Andreas's *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa* (1875), p. 361; Charles Edward Russell's *A-Rafting on the Mississippi*, pp. 22, 23.

most optimistic that such traffic was impracticable. In June of 1854 a small steamboat was run down the Turkey to the dam at Hastings and back to Elkader. Sand bars and the low stage of water so interfered with the boat's progress that the craft was removed to Clayton and used as a ferryboat. Along the Skunk, local farmers claimed that steamboats occasionally ascended that stream to the vicinity of Mt. Pleasant during high water but that no regular schedule was ever followed. An attempt to bring the *Maquoketa City* from Pittsburgh up the Maquoketa River to Maquoketa failed in 1860. The boat was taken to within walking distance of Maquoketa but at that point it was necessary to take it back to the Mississippi. In 1862 a steamboat called the *Enterprise* ran up the Maquoketa River on a tri-weekly basis. The *Echo*, the *Maquoketa Belle*, and a number of small barges that operated on the Maquoketa River during the Civil War seem to have been the only serious attempts to navigate this shallow stream.¹⁸

It may be concluded that attempts were made to navigate nearly all of the Mississippi tributaries of eastern Iowa by steam prior to the establishment of adequate roads. However, most of the successful attempts at steam navigation (with possibly the exception of the Des Moines, Iowa, and Cedar rivers) were confined to such high water years as 1844, 1851, and 1858, when several major floods occurred on most of the middlewestern streams. Bar and dam obstructions, low water, the arrival of railroads, and the improvement of roads ended dreams of canals and of steam navigation for many Iowa cities and towns before the end of the Civil War.

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