The Early History of Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River
"Lessons Learned from My LaBarges: the Sternwheeler and the Captain"

Captain Joseph M. LaBarge
1815-1899
His career embraced nearly the whole history of steamboating on the Missouri River from 1831-1896

Joseph M. LaBarge
Marietta Ohio Regatta
Captain Peter McCarthy
Marietta, OH to Port of Nashville, MO
28 days
1176 miles
The Nancy Ann about to home port
The LaBarge at home port
Barbara’s LaBerge Family Tree

Robert de LaBerge 1643

Shared ancestor

me

Captain J. M. LaBarge 1815-1899
A MAP of NEW FRANCE
Containing CANADA, LOUISIANA &c. in N. AMERICA.
According to the Patent granted by the King of France to Monseur Crosat, dated the 14th of Sep. 1713. N. S. and registered in the Parliament of Paris the 24th of the same Month.
By H. Moll Geographer.
“As we were gently sailing down the still clear water (of the Mississippi), we heard a noise of a rapid into which we were about to fall. I have seen nothing more frightful, a mass of large trees entire with branches, … so impetuous that we could not without great danger expose ourselves to pass across. The agitation was so great that the water was all muddy, and could not get clear”

Fr. Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet
June 17, 1673
Manuel Lisa (1772-1820) from New Orleans. Spanish fur trader, Indian agent and partner in Missouri Fur Company.

Old Fort Manuel Lisa at the confluence of the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers.
St. Louis was the hub of fur trade to the world. It was founded in 1764 by Pierre Laclede, stepfather of Auguste Chouteau and co-founder of St. Louis.
The American Fur Company was founded in 1808 by John Jacob Astor. The company grew to monopolize the fur trade by 1830 and became one of the largest and wealthiest businesses in the country.
Louisiana Purchase 1803

Lewis and Clark
Corps of Discovery
1804-1806
Military Presence

Fur trade and goods

Maps/charts

Scientific Exploration

Westward Migration trade

Gold!
We gotta get **UP** that muddy river and back FAST!

Time for the age of the Steamboat
New Orleans
1811
built in Pittsburg

Nicholas and Lydia Roosevelt
First steamboat down the Mississippi to New Orleans.
Trip took from October 20, 1011 to January 10, 1812
Falls of Ohio at Louisville

New Madrid Earthquake
It was 3 years (1815) until the steamboat *Enterprise* made the first successful trip upriver from New Orleans to Louisville.

The *Zebulon M. Pike* landed in St. Louis in 1817 and became the first steamboat to make it up the Mississippi beyond the mouth of the Ohio.
It 3 years later in 1820, when the first steamboat, the *Independence* to navigated up the Missouri River landed in Franklin. 13 days to arrive with cargo of whiskey, flour and sugar...

Party!

The *Independence* continued on to Chariton and then back to St. Louis.

Now all believed it was possible and profitable to navigate the Missouri River by steamboat......
Two weeks later a military and science expedition headed by Major S. Long headed up Missouri with 4 steamboats and 9 keelboats.

**Western Engineer**
75’x13’ drew 19”

**Expedition**
Trip log by John Bush.
St. Louis to Council Bluffs
Bush describes everyday events on boat and most frequent were mention of cutting wood and getting off sand bars.

Engine recovered from the sunken *Missouri Packet* by Hawley in 1987
The Missouri Expedition was deemed a failure. It was over 10 years until steamboats headed back up river.

**Major problems:**

- Shallow water
- Running aground
- Snags
- Engine failure
- Steering
- Cargo space
- Upstream power limits

No plans or photos exist of these boats. But there are wrecks to study....
Between 1819-1897

Sunken boats 289 (400)
204 due to snags
25 burned, 1 collision

27 Boiler explosions 1834-1852
1,002 dead
(1852 Saluda at Lexington 100 dead)
Only 17 steamboats have been excavated and 3 are nearby:

- **Arabia**  Kansas City  1856  1988
- **Bertrand**  Desoto WR (Omaha)  1865  1969
- **Montana**  St. Charles  1884  2002
Typical Deck Layout

Flat hull  Hog chains
Lighter materials  Spare parts
Bulkheads/armour  Multiple engines
Rudders  Sternwheel
Spars  lighter wood
Let’s Talk About Wood

Yellow Stone 120’ x 20’

10 cords wood/day
(~40 tons, two 50 yr-old trees/cord)

St. Louis to Ft. Benton 85 days/RT

85 days x 20 trees/day = 1700 trees

Lifespan 6.5 years…..40,000 trees!

Consider: Montana 257’ x 48’ and this not wood used to build boat.
350 years old
The voyage of the *Yellow Stone* (built and owned by Astor) in 1832 was a landmark in the history of the West.

This trip demonstrated practicability of navigating the Missouri by steam as far as the mouth of the Yellowstone River where Ft. Union had been built in 1828.
Prince Maximilian and Karl Bodmer with the Mandan  1833

LaBarge Rock
LaBarge Passenger

Lincoln and beaver coat 1859
“We used to separate the men from the boys at the of the Missouri. The boys went up the Mississippi and the men up the ‘Big Muddy’”.

Capt. William L. “Steamboat Bill” Heckman