
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The New Orleans Enigma.

By George Swetnam

FOR almost a century steamboat builders and operators on America's inland rivers were divided over the relative merits of sidewheel and sternwheel propulsion. And for at least as long, scholars have argued over the question of whether the *New Orleans* — the first such craft on these waters — was a sternwheeler or a sidewheeler.

The reason for this uncertainty appears obvious: No one from 1811 to 1814 — the first steamboat's day — nor anyone who had seen her, appears to have left a direct statement on the point.

During this century of argument, scholars seem to have been about equally divided as to whether the *New Orleans* was driven from the stern or the sides. John H. Morrison, in his *History of American Steam Navigation* (New York, 1903, reprinted 1958, p. 190) and G. L. Eskew, in *The Pageant of the Packets* (New York, 1929, p. 29) both assert the *New Orleans* had sidewheels, but neither cites any authority on the point. On the other hand, George T. Fleming's *Flem's Views of Old Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1905) has a drawing (p. 33) purporting to be of the *New Orleans*, a sternwheeler; and Fred E. Dayton, in *Steamboat Days* (New York, 1925, p. 334), says flatly (again without citing any authority), "The drive was by stern wheel."

Faced with this problem, many writers (including the present one in *Pittsylvania Country* [New York, 1951]) have chosen to ignore it, or failed to recognize it, or simply stated or implied that it could not be solved. E. W. Gould (*Fifty Years on the Mississippi* [St. Louis, 1889]) quotes J. H. B. Latrobe's highly erroneous address of 1882 before the Maryland Historical Society, as do others. R. E. Banta (*The Ohio* [New York, 1949]) ignores the question. Louis C. Hunter (*Steamboats on the Western Rivers* [New York, 1969], p. 50n) dismisses the question as "not of great importance," but adds that "the weight of evidence favors the view that the first western steamboat was a sidewheel boat."

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Replica of the New Orleans, completed in 1911 to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the first steamboat on the western rivers. Note that the boat is correctly built as a sidewheeler.

For Pittsburgh's steamboat centennial in 1911, a replica of the *New Orleans* was built at Elizabeth as a sidewheeler. But on the lower Mississippi she was — sometime in the next five years — altered to be a sternwheeler (Frederick Way, Jr., *Way's Directory of Western River Packets* [Sewickley, Pa., 1950], p. 223), perhaps from a desire for authenticity. Way's stated position has always been that the *New Orleans* was a sidewheeler.

Evidence that the question is still open is to be found in the latest encyclopedia of American rivers, in which C. W. Stoll ("The Ohio River," *Rolling Rivers*, Richard A. Bartlett, ed. [New York, 1984], p. 163) states that "no one today knows whether it was a sidewheeler or a sternwheeler."

Yet during the entire period the conclusive evidence has been available to anyone who might wish to research deeply, and for twenty-five years has been reprinted for all to see, although it would appear to have been missed just because it was not in the form of a direct statement that "the *New Orleans* was a . . . wheeler."

The clinching evidence is to be found in the detailed account of the craft's sinking. It was written as a notice "To the Public" at Baton Rouge (two miles from the scene) on July 14, 1814, the day of the disaster, and signed by ten passengers who were aboard the *New Orleans* at the time of the accident. This notice was published at New Orleans on Tuesday, July 26, 1814, by the *Louisiana Gazette*, which had printed a brief account of the loss the preceding Saturday.

The notice, running to about a half column in length, gives in detail the events after the boat left Baton Rouge on July 13; that it stopped at Clay's landing, two miles upstream and on the opposite side, and tied up to take on wood and make mechanical repairs. But during the night the river level fell from sixteen to eighteen inches, and at departure time the ship was fast on a stump — so fast that efforts to free her resulted in such damage that she sank.

The key evidence is to be found in where the stump had pierced her hull: "The Capt. . . . immediately satisfied himself it was a stump, and found it by feeling with an oar about 15 or 20 feet abaft the wheel on the larboard side."

If the final phrase was intended to modify "wheel" the craft was evidently a sidewheeler. But in any case, the location of the damage "about 15 or 20 feet abaft [behind] the wheel" is conclusive. If the stump had been so far behind a stern wheel the hull would never have been touched.

For twenty-five years now this evidence has been readily available in a facsimile of the *Gazette* account in Leonard V. Huber's *Advertisements of Lower Mississippi River Steamboats* (Pawtucket, R.I.: Steamship Historical Society of America), p. 2. Let us hope that future writers become aware of it, and put the question to rest. ■