The Steamboat New Orleans

By Terri Blanchette, acting director of Education and director of School & Family Programs, Heinz History Center

By September 1864, the Cricket #6 reported back on patrol on the White River in Arkansas, where she served until war’s end the following year.

The Cricket #6 finally went out of commission on June 30, 1865, sold at public auction in Mound City, Illinois, on August 17, 1865, for $5,500 to William Thatcher. Repairs while in government service tallied $2,558.00. Listed in New Orleans in 1866, the Cricket was finally abandoned, off ships lists, and assumed dismantled by 1867.

The many Civil War-era vessels manufactured in Pittsburgh and southwestern Pennsylvania during the 1850s and ’60s played a crucial role in the winning of the war, but are long gone. Other than a couple pieces of the USS Wolverine in Erie, they’ve been wrecked or scrapped into oblivion.

1 Many early boats are recorded as “built at Pittsburgh,” though the hulls or boiler deck framing, for example, might have come from any number of locations. See S. Kussart, The Allegheny River, (Burgum, 1938); the firm of Snowden and Mason also won the government contracts to build the Monitor: Manayunk and Umpqua, however neither ship would serve during the Civil War. See Arthur Fox, Pittsburgh During the American Civil War, Chicora, Pa.: Meichling Bookbindery, 2002/2004/2008), pp. 86-87, and P.H. Silverstone, Civil War Navies, 1855-1883 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp. 6-7; 10, for further documentation regarding these two vessels; Tomlinson, Hartupee, and Company built the iron-clad Monitors: Marietta and Sandusky; see Fox, pp. 85-87, and Silverstone, pp. 114.


For California, Washington County, see: Dr. John K. Folmar, California, Pa. 1849-1881: History of a Boat Building Town, (California: Yohogania Press, 2009), and communication with Dr. Folmar on 11/9/09; Monongahela and the Ohio River Navigations Charts, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Pittsburgh District, January 1995.
As long as humans have inhabited North America, rivers have been their “highways.” Inland waterways provided food, sparked wars, and took travelers to new opportunities and ancestral homes. People traversed the waters in all manners: gliding, paddling, or poling their canoes, keel boats, and flat boats. However, one thing was certain—any trip of length was a one-way trip downstream. With the invention of the steamboat came the ability to do something that had forever seemed contrary to nature itself: float upstream.

Although the New Orleans was not the first steamboat—others operated as early as the 1780s in eastern waterways—it was the first to navigate the western waters of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. In March 1811, the New Orleans put afloat at a Pittsburgh shipyard near the Panhandle Bridge. The current span, built in 1903, carries the “T” rail into the city.

During the New Orleans’ inaugural voyage, from October to December, the first of the powerful New Madrid earthquakes struck. Besides the tremendous shaking and resulting damage to life and property, the quake caused panic for the crew and passengers as it shifted the very pattern of the Mississippi River, forcing the pilot to finish the voyage essentially “blind.” Familiar natural navigating signs such as trees, rocks, bends, and pools had all shifted or were gone entirely.

From its literally shaky beginning, the New Orleans and its ability to move people and cargo both down and up the mighty Mississippi opened up the west to commerce and settlement, bringing change to the American frontier.

On October 15, the Heinz History Center will commemorate the bicentennial of the New Orleans launching with the installation and dedication of a historical marker near the location of the original shipyard. Visit the events page at www.heinzhistorycenter.org for the time and location.

REFERENCES:


Dohan, Mary Helen. Mr. Roosevelt’s Steamboat: The First Steamboat to Travel the Mississippi (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1981), 591.


Latrobe, John H.B. A Lost Chapter in the History of the Steamboat (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1871).

7 The boat-building industry in the Pittsburgh vicinity during the Civil War has received little secondary documentation, the most noteworthy being Theodore R. Parker’s 1948 article, “Western Pennsylvania and the Naval War on the Inland Rivers, 1861-1863,” and his earlier work on “William J. Kountz, Superintendent of River Transportation,” both published 1938 in the forerunner of this journal, Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine. (Kountz built ships for over 20 years, more than any other single firm in southwestern Pennsylvania.) More recently I documented 120 Steamships built in Allegheny County in Appendix H (399-407), of Our Honored Dead, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania in the American Civil War, (Chicora, Pa.: Mechling Bookbindery, 2008 & 2009). For additional information on Kountz, see MSS-CA-518 Flat File at the HHC L&A.

8 Ibid, 23.

9 Ibid, p. 4. The first iron vessel, produced in the United States was the Codorus, built in 1825 by nail cutter John Elgar of York, Pa. In 1838, Charles W. Copeland of the West Point Foundry in New York produced the 222-ton steamer United States from native iron. The second rolled-plate iron ship made of native U.S. materials was the Valley Forge. This ship was manufactured by Robinson and Minus of Pittsburgh. The Valley Forge, launched in 1839 at Pittsburgh, was designed to ply the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, (Rodgers, pp. 8-9). The Codorus and Valley Forge however, were not U.S. Navy vessels.

10 Ibid, p. 92. Also see “Last Raid of a Rebel Pirate,” in Civil War Times, (April 2009), pp. 42-47; that describes the Michigan’s role during the Confederate raid on the Johnson’s Island POW camp in Lake Erie. See Bradley, Appendix A that documents shipwrecks, rescues, and collisions involving the USS Michigan.

11 Rodgers, 87.


13 Ibid, 127.

14 Ibid, 135.

15 The Maritime Museum in Erie, Pa., has a huge display of the USS Michigan and Wolverine material culture and photographs of the nearly 80 years of the ship’s history. In addition, impressive models of the Michigan and its later conversion to the Wolverine are also in the exhibit. The display is dominated by a section of the original iron bow of the ship, then the Wolverine, when it was disassembled in Erie in 1949. The author in May 2010 photographed the preserved bow on display at the museum.

16 Paskoff, 175-176.