

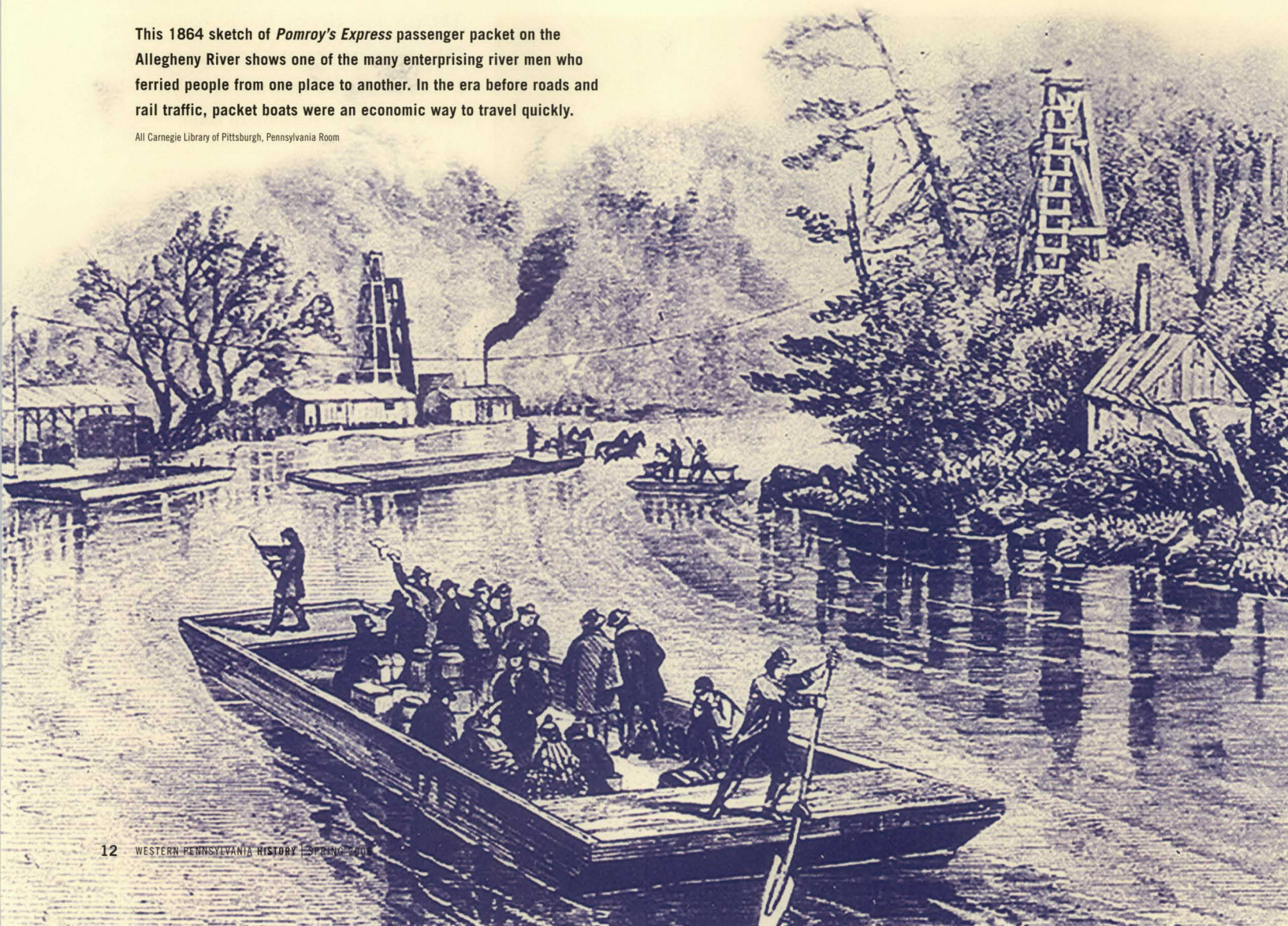
# Pittsburgh's Rivers: A Glimpse into History, Travel, and Adventure



By Daniel Burns

This 1864 sketch of *Pomroy's Express* passenger packet on the Allegheny River shows one of the many enterprising river men who ferried people from one place to another. In the era before roads and rail traffic, packet boats were an economic way to travel quickly.

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Prior to the building of the dams and locks, river levels were inconsistent and often too low for boat traffic. Many times, boats had to wait for river levels to rise from seasonal rains before they could embark on their voyages. This 1896 photo shows boats waiting for higher water near Pittsburgh's Point.



Pittsburgh's rivers brim with meaning. For some, the waters have held fortune through trade and industry, while for others, heavy spring rains and large ice jams caused only flooding and destruction. From the early days of exploration through two centuries of industrial development and travel, the rivers of Pittsburgh have brought adventure and prosperity to its citizens.

"I spent some time in viewing the rivers and the land in the fork, which I think extremely well suited for a fort, as it has absolute command of both rivers. It has well timbered land all around and is very convenient for building." This from young

George Washington when, under orders from Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, he explored the land at the confluence in 1753. The next year, a fort was constructed by a few Virginia militia under the command of Captain Trent representing the Ohio Company, and the first white settlement on the site of modern-day Pittsburgh was established.

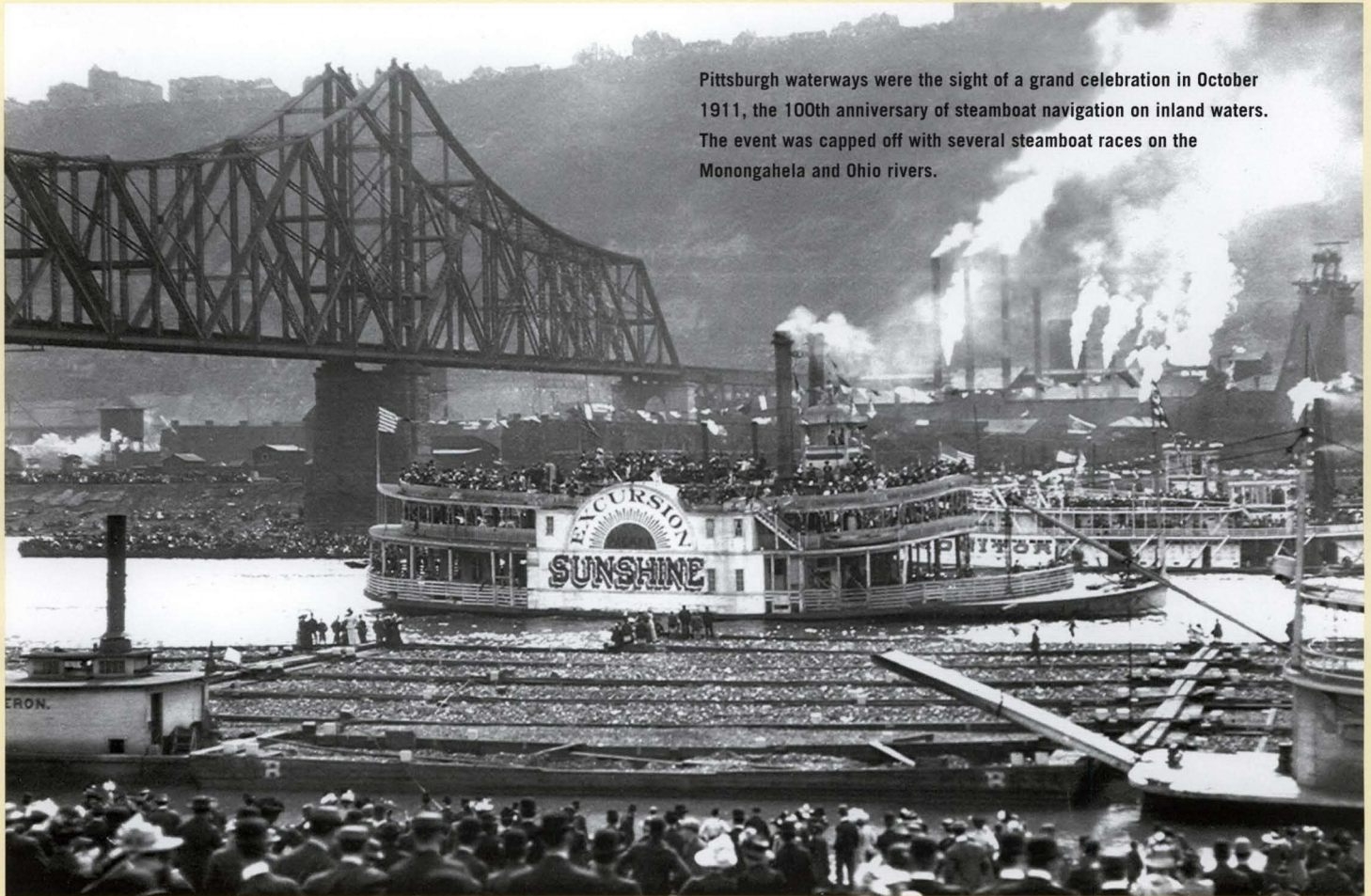
By 1790, nearly 130 families occupied 36 log houses, one stone house, one frame house, and five stores, but the area didn't see substantial growth until the end of Indian hostilities in 1795. By the time the city was incorporated in 1816, the population topped 6,000 and the village by the rivers became a hub of regional travel and trade. Other

nearby settlements likewise prospered from natural resources and growing industries: steel-making towns along the Monongahela River such as Homestead, Duquesne, and McKeesport; coal mining towns along the Allegheny such as Cheswick; and fired clay made into glass, tile, and enameled porcelain in such Ohio River towns as Beaver and Monaca.

One of the first known written accounts of river trade between Pittsburgh and New Orleans dates to 1807, when a group of farmers in Greensburg needed coffee, tea, and flour. They didn't have much money to purchase these provisions, but did have an abundance of distilled whiskey. With







Pittsburgh waterways were the sight of a grand celebration in October 1911, the 100th anniversary of steamboat navigation on inland waters. The event was capped off with several steamboat races on the Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

little demand locally for the liquor, Irwin businessman James Fleming, Sr., proposed transporting the whiskey by flatboat to New Orleans where it could be sold or traded for much-needed supplies.

Fleming's journal reads more like a ship's log than a diary, but tells us much. The voyage began on April 3, 1807. The flatboat was laden with more than 500 gallons of whiskey in 14 barrels and 500 pounds of deer skins that would later be sold for 10 cents a pound. Stops for trade and sales were made in Steubenville, Louisville, and Baton Rouge. The trip took seven weeks and, except for a "strong spring storm," was fairly uneventful. Fleming returned via steamer ship to New York, then crossed the Alleghenies by stage coach, returning with nearly \$200 in profit for the farmers. This same trip would be made countless times in years to come by

riverboat captains, merchants, and packet (passenger) boat travelers.

### Smoke and Steam

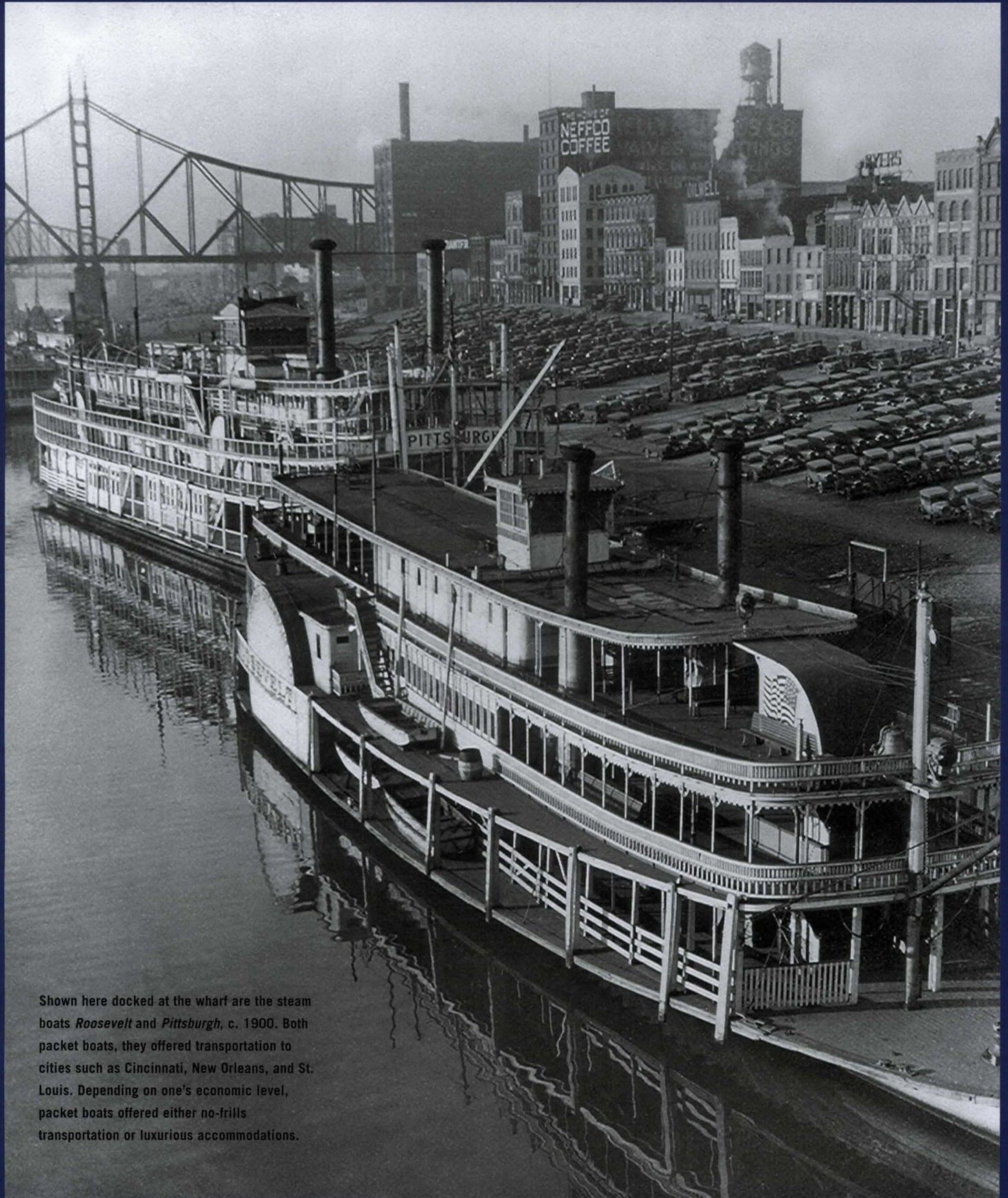
It's hard now to visualize a time when the air around Pittsburgh, especially at the Point, was thick with smoke. The dark skies, at least at first, were not a result of steel mills but from the steamboats that clogged the wharves of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers. By the 1830s, Pittsburgh was the hub of boatbuilding; it's said that some of the finest steamships and sternwheelers that plied the Mississippi and beyond were constructed here. Mrs. V.D. Drynan, president of the Pittsburgh Civic Club, recalled in a 1929 speech, "In 1837 before Pittsburgh was considered much, most of the boat building business was centered in Glenwillard or Shoustown as it was known then. The

boatyards employed several hundred people and they were among the best boat builders on the river." Not only were these ships ornate and graceful, but they were also the powerhouses of the waterways. In the early days of river traffic, these steam-driven workhorses moved massive amounts of materials.

The mid-19th century brought prosperity to the trade companies operating on the waterways. In one shipment from the upper Allegheny to Pittsburgh, more than three million feet of board lumber was floated downriver to be used for the construction of homes and buildings. The cost to move this material was about \$9 per 1,000 feet. Another load saw 14,000 barrels of salt from mines in New York state transported south down the Allegheny and Ohio rivers at a cost of \$8 per barrel. On the return trip to Pittsburgh and







Shown here docked at the wharf are the steam boats *Roosevelt* and *Pittsburgh*, c. 1900. Both packet boats, they offered transportation to cities such as Cincinnati, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Depending on one's economic level, packet boats offered either no-frills transportation or luxurious accommodations.





points north, many water craft were loaded with apples, cider, bacon, and other household items; a river trip was rarely wasted with empty cargo bays or ships' holds.

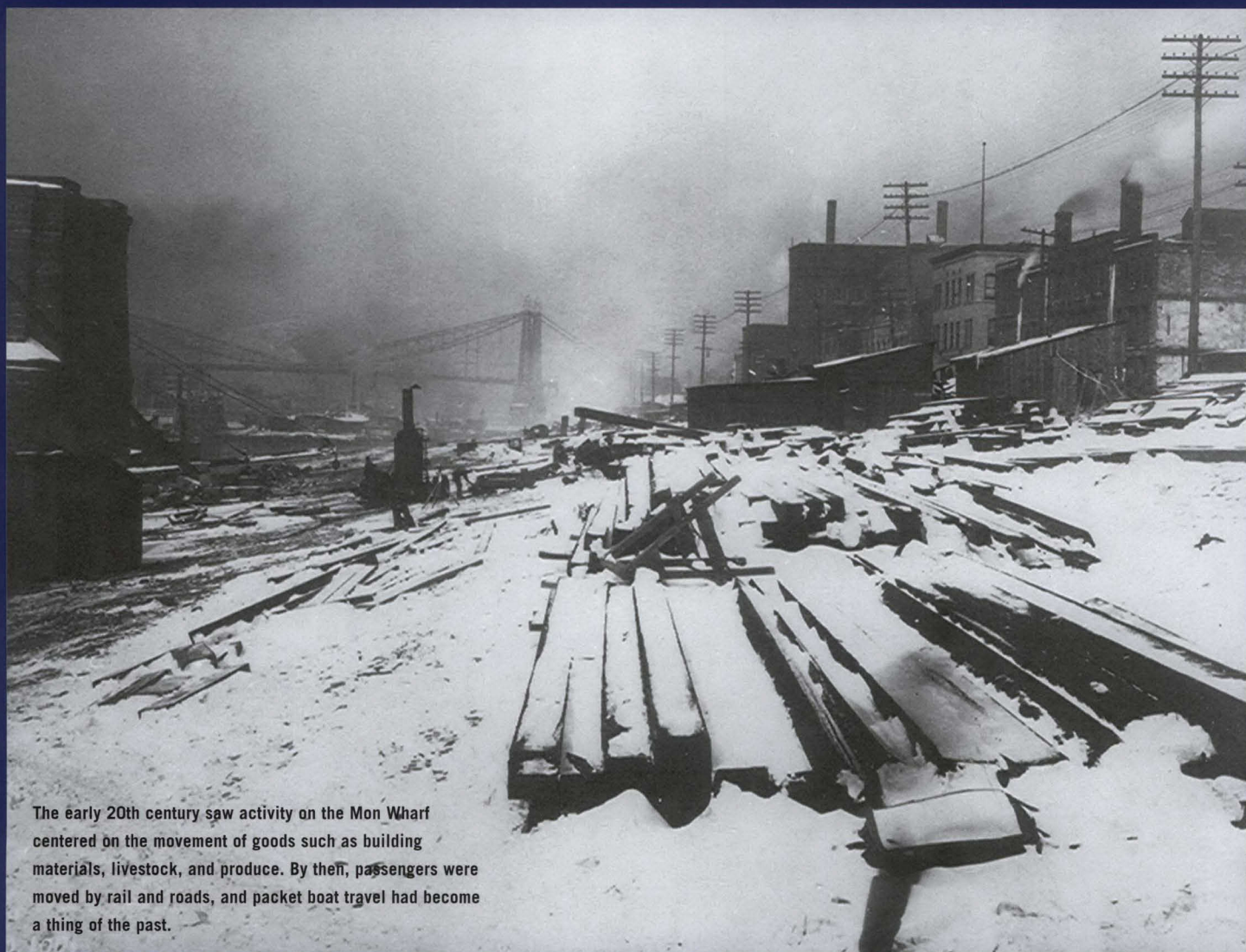
Work on the rivers was plentiful. In 1918, the tonnage of materials transported on the Monongahela River exceeded that transported through both the Panama and Suez canals combined. The Monongahela saw 17 million tons of cargo transported past Pittsburgh while both canals totaled less than 15 million tons through their locks. This cargo included fresh cut lumber from the Allegheny Forest passing through Pittsburgh on its way south, as well as steel heading west to growing cities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Chicago.

While transportation companies often reaped great profits, the average roustabout or deck hand was only paid about 50 cents a day. Work on the rivers was hard and dangerous, with hazards ranging from falling overboard into the frigid waters to being crushed by tons of shifting cargo.

### Monongahela Wharf

The Monongahela River Wharf has its own colorful past as many excursions, expeditions, and western explorations began on its shores. In 1770, George Washington made his exploration down the Ohio, beginning his journey from the bank of the Monongahela near the Point. It was

also from the Mon Wharf that a steamboat made its first inland cruise from Pittsburgh in 1811. Other events included the shipment of supplies to General Andrew Jackson's army in New Orleans during the War of 1812 (by Major William B. Foster, father of Pittsburgh native Steven Foster), and an 1817 visit from James Monroe, the first U.S. President to come to Pittsburgh. Many celebrations during the Civil War were held on the wharf as well as a great centenary celebration of steam navigation in 1911. At one time, the Monongahela Wharf was a popular open market for goods and produce shipped into the city and off-loaded at the river bank.



The early 20th century saw activity on the Mon Wharf centered on the movement of goods such as building materials, livestock, and produce. By then, passengers were moved by rail and roads, and packet boat travel had become a thing of the past.





In October 1929, Pittsburgh celebrated the completion of a system of 50 locks and dams. These additions to the rivers ensured a constant nine-foot river channel from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Illinois. The event was marked with boat races, passenger excursions, and a parade.



### Tall Tales

Pittsburgh's river history includes tales of strange events — not only the oft-told sight of the B-25 ditching (and then disappearing) near Homestead in 1956, but forgotten stories of eerie events and strange sightings handed down by riverboat captains and deckhands, even stories predating modern river traffic. Native Americans believed evil spirits dwelled in the dark and muddy waters of the Ohio. Another story, this from 1786, told of a “hole” at the bottom of the Ohio River near McKees Rocks. More than a century later (in 1910), the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* was reporting, “Just below the bend of the river is deep water which has been sounded by a line of 60

fathoms and no bottom found.” Although the existence of a hole in the river was never proven, swimmers and boatmen fervently avoided the area.

Another tale of the unexplained came from a steamboat captain in the 1930s who described an eerie yellow light in the rocks along the shoreline in the Ohio River just below Parkersburg. Many believed it had something to do with the wreck of a packet boat in 1916. On a cold February night that year, the *Kanawha* capsized and 17 people drowned. Shortly after the boat went down, the strange yellowish light appeared. Many packet boats passing the place of the wreck would point it out to passengers curious

about the eerie glow.

The history of Pittsburgh's three rivers is as vast and far-reaching as the waterways themselves. From the mysterious mound-building Indians who were gone before Europeans arrived, to early packet boat travelers, to barge captains, to people fishing right up until today, Pittsburghers are still learning how the three great rivers have defined the region and shaped the city's history. ☼

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