Figure 1 | An illustration of John Fitch's steamboat appearing in *Fifty Years on the Mississippi…* By E.W. Gould.

FITCH'S FIRST SUCCESSFUL STEAMBOAT.

For the records

Rollin' up the river

Many genealogists are able to find their immigrant ancestors on transatlantic passenger lists. While these lists often do not contain much information, they do provide proof that the ancestor was indeed an immigrant, as well as when and where they reached the United States. However, how did that ancestor make it to their final destination?

If your St. Louis immigrant ancestor arrived in New Orleans around the middle of the nineteenth century, they most likely took a steamboat up the Mississippi River. Many immigrants bound for St. Louis and other points on the river and its tributaries landed at the port. Cotton, molasses, and other agricultural products from the south left on ships from New Orleans bound for trade centers in Europe. They would typically offer cheap passage to immigrants on the return trip. Around 550,000 immigrants passed through the Port of New Orleans between 1820 and 1860, making it the second leading port of entry after New York in the United States by 1837. Many were German, but there were Irish, French and others as well. Although it was longer than the journey to other ports and could be more hazardous, the price was right for those immigrants whose ultimate destination was St. Louis.

Unfortunately, very few records of these river steamboat passengers exist. The best we can do is to learn about and imagine what this final stage of their journey on a western steamboat might have been like.

History of the steamboat

Rivers have always been used for transportation, carrying people and goods from one place to another. In fact, Missouri

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is the Indian word for "town of the large canoes." Other early North American riverboats included flatboats (traveled up-river) and keelboats (traveled up and downriver). River travel was often slow, as speed depended on the river current and manpower. Traveling upstream meant poling the boat against the current—fastening rope attached to the boat onto trees at the shoreline and pulling. On some rivers, this was so difficult that boat owners sold their vessels upon reaching their destination and returned home overland.

This changed with the development of steam-powered boats in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. European inventors began experimenting with steam by the early 1700s. In 1769, James Watt of Scotland invented an engine powered by steam, and it was not long before others were experimenting with using it to power a boat. The first vessel moved by steam in the U.S. was a small boat made by John Fitch. He launched in the Delaware River at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on July 20, 1786. A steam engine moved connected oars placed vertically and attached to the sides of the boat. (Fig. 1)

The man usually credited with inventing the steamboat is Robert Fulton. While Fulton and his partner Robert Livingston did not invent it, they did successfully adapt the ideas of those that came before them. They opted for the round paddlewheel design we think of today. Fulton's first ship, the *Clermont*, made its first voyage on the Hudson River in 1807. It traveled at around four miles per hour and covered the distance between New York City and Albany in eight hours. The town of Fulton, Missouri, which is located just north of the Missouri River, is named for him. Fulton and Livingston were also the owners of the first steamboat to travel on the Mississippi River, the New Orleans, which traveled from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to New Orleans in 1811.

Henry Shreve was the inventor and captain who opened the Mississippi River and its tributaries to steamboat navigation. Early steamboats traveled on the rivers of the eastern United States. Shreve recognized the differences between the eastern and western rivers. Steamboats built for the rivers in the east were too deep and had too little power for the western rivers. Boats for western rivers needed to be flatter in order to navigate the shallow water and many snags. His design became the prototype for all western steamboats. His first steamboat, the Washington, launched in 1816. The city of Shreveport,
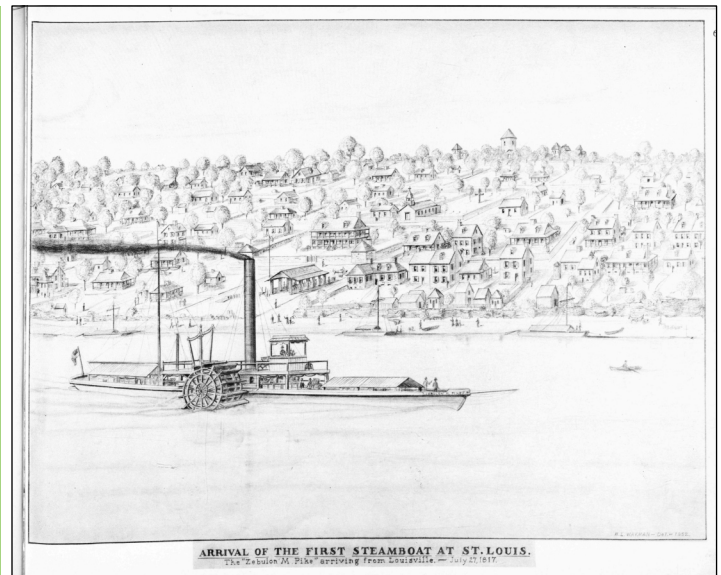

Figure 2 | The Zebulon Pike was the first steamboat to reach St. Louis in 1817. Source: *A Pictorial History of St. Louis* by Norbury L. Wayman.

Louisiana on the Red River is named in his honor.

On August 2, 1817, the first steamboat reached St. Louis. It was the *Zebulon Pike,* named after the general and explorer. (Fig. 2) Paddlewheel steamboats soon ruled the Mississippi and other western rivers and began the Golden Age of Steamboats. Steamboats touched off a commercial revolution in the west and created a new way for immigrants to reach the city. Steam power also became the standard on larger transatlantic ships, which were fitted with a screw-driven propeller instead of a paddlewheel. Steamboat transportation grew quickly, and by the 1830s, it was common to see more than 150 steamboats at the St. Louis wharf at one time. The year 1852 saw 3184 steamboats dock in St. Louis. (Fig. 3)

Steamboat specs

The western steamboat was both a passenger and freight carrier. Freight included a variety of goods and crops going up the river from the south (including cotton, sugar, and molasses) and those from the north (including grain, corn, and pork) going down the river. Some boats were also mail carriers. Boats that made regular trips between points at stated intervals were called packet steamers or packets. Those with paddlewheels on the side were sidewheelers, while boats with
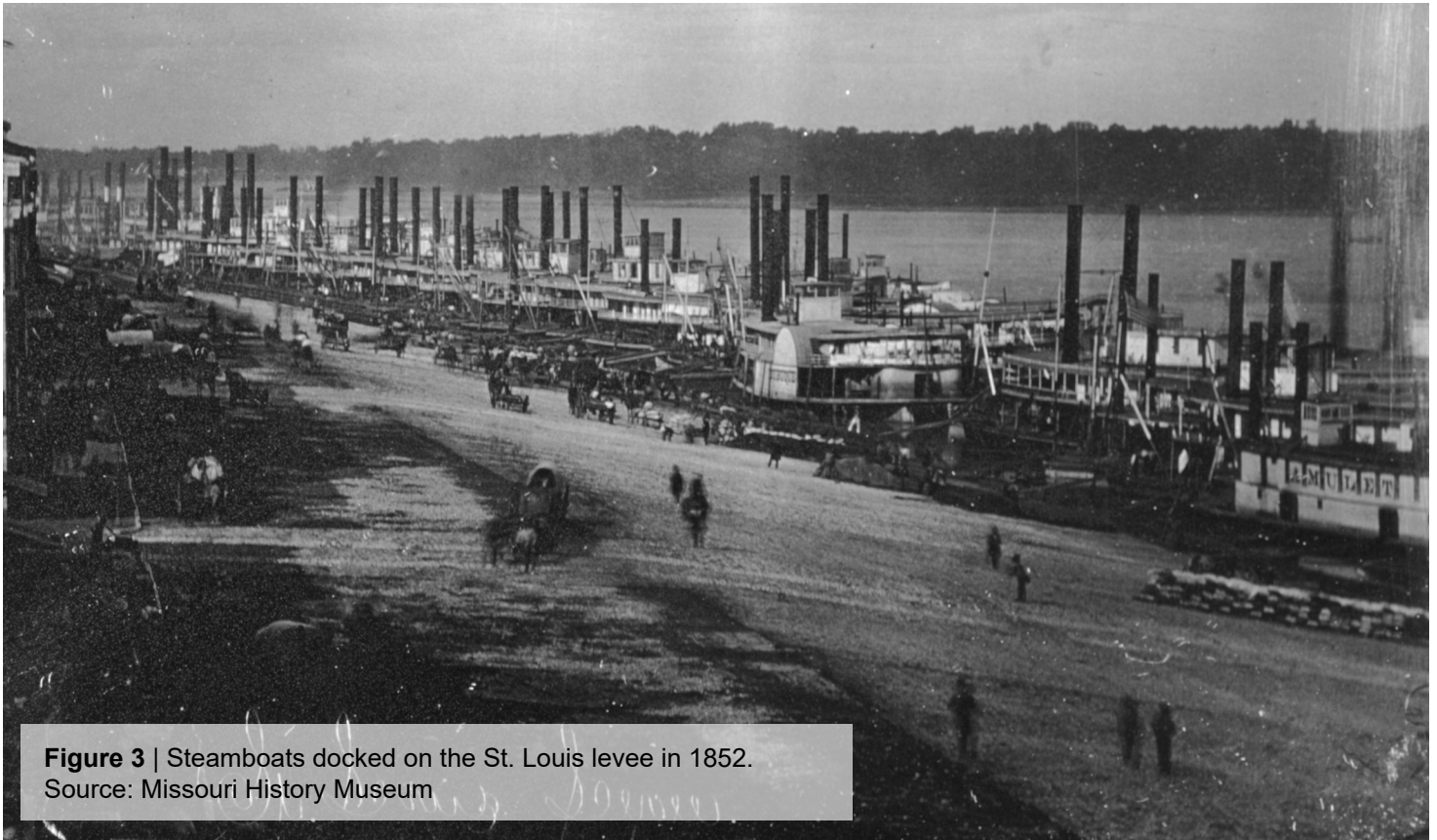
Figure 3 | Steamboats docked on the St. Louis levee in 1852. Source: Missouri History Museum

a paddlewheel at the rear were sternwheelers. The wheels were large and fitted with paddle blades along the outside.

A western steamboat had a shallow hull on which the main deck was located. The main deck contained the boilers, engines, freight, and deck passengers. The deck above, or the "boiler deck," is where the cabin passenger accommodations were located. The uppermost deck contained the pilothouse, the room from which the captain or pilot steered the vessel. In addition to the paddlewheels, the other very recognizable feature on a river steamboat was its smokestacks. Some steamboats also included intricate "gingerbread" filigree decorations on the exterior.

The boat was moved by pushing the wheels through the water using engines powered by the steam. The boiler was filled with water and a fire was stoked high enough underneath to make steam using wood, and later, coal. The steam was fed into a piston cylinder, which moved a crankshaft. The crankshaft then moved a flywheel, which turned the paddlewheel(s). Excess steam was vented out of the stacks. Steam-

boats traveled at a speed of four to eight miles per hour, with later boats traveling up the 15 miles per hour.

Passengers and crew

Steamboats were noisy, busy places. They could be described as a "microcosm" of American life at the time. "A 'world in miniature' was the phrase with which literary travelers were wont to describe the western steamboat and such in truth it was. . . Here was a freedom of intercourse among persons of different rank and from different walks of life which impressed foreign observers as symbolic of the egalitarian quality of American life. This easy mingling of people of widely different station must not, however, be allowed to obscure the fact that steamboat society was, in a manner of speaking, organized on a class basis, with the dividing line between the upper and lower classes roughly drawn at the level of the boiler deck."[1]

In the early 1850s, the average vessel had a crew of twenty-six. The crew of the steamboat fell into three groups–officers,

cabin crew, and deck crew. Officers typically included the captain, a clerk, two pilots and a mate, and were almost exclusively born in the United States. The cabin crew was the equivalent of a hotel staff on the river, and included cooks, stewards, waiters, cabin boy and chambermaids. The deck crew comprised half or more of the entire crew, and bore the brunt of the hardships and dangers of steamboat life. The firemen were charged with wooding and firing. Deck hands or roustabouts loaded and unloaded freight, operated pumps, and handled mooring lines. Early cabin and deck crews were also usually native-born and included slaves, while later crews were made up mostly of immigrants.

Steamboat passengers fell into two categories—cabin passengers and deck passengers. If your ancestor had the money, they may have been a cabin passenger. Cabin passengers received all-inclusive hotel accommodations from the time they stepped on board until they reached their destination. They enjoyed a plush, ornate main cabin with staterooms on either side. (Fig. 4) These were usually double occupancy accommodations, and separate for men and women. Depending on the grandeur of the boat, toilet facilities either consisted of a communal area or individual chamber pots. Waste was emptied directly into the river. Clean water was a challenge, so wine, beer, or spirits usually accompanied the meals. The food on board could be quite extravagant. One traveler, writing on a trip from St. Louis to Louisville, Kentucky in 1833, reported that at a single meal, thirty-one different dishes were placed before the twenty-two passengers at the table. A saloon was typically located within the main cabin, with gambling and card-playing two of its most popular activities. A larger boat may have even had a library, a small orchestra, or a Sunday morning sermon.

Most immigrants, however, were deck passengers. On ocean vessels, these accommodations were known as steerage, but on riverboats, they were called deck passage. The deck might also include migrating households from within the United States, such as farmers, artisans and laborers, and their families. Deck passage was the lot of the common person. They were also more numerous, often at around five deck passengers to one cabin passenger. Captains frequently overloaded boats with deckers to offset losses of cabin passengers or freight.

Figure 4 | Cabin passengers enjoyed luxurious accommodations on the *J.M. White.* Source: T*he Mississippi Steamboat Era in Historic Photographs: Natchez to New Orleans 1870–1920* by Joan W. and Thomas H. Grady

The deckers did not experience the luxury of the cabin passengers. They were not provided bedding or food. Deck passengers rode on the main deck alongside the freight and machinery. The decker was obliged to find a resting place on or about piles of boxes and barrels. (Fig. 5) The main deck offered little privacy and minimal shelter from the elements. Tarps and canvas curtains gave some protection, but did little more than temper the severity of the cold when traveling during the winter months. Little attention was paid to the cleanliness of the deck. A stove was usually supplied for the combined purpose of cooking and heating, as well as a bucket for scooping water out of the river. Deckers could pay extra for food, but most brought their own. Foods that traveled well, such as sausages, dried herring, crackers, cheese, and a bottle of whiskey usually made up the bill of fare. Early boats also required deck passengers to assist in wooding and firing. On later voyages, deck passengers could volunteer and have their
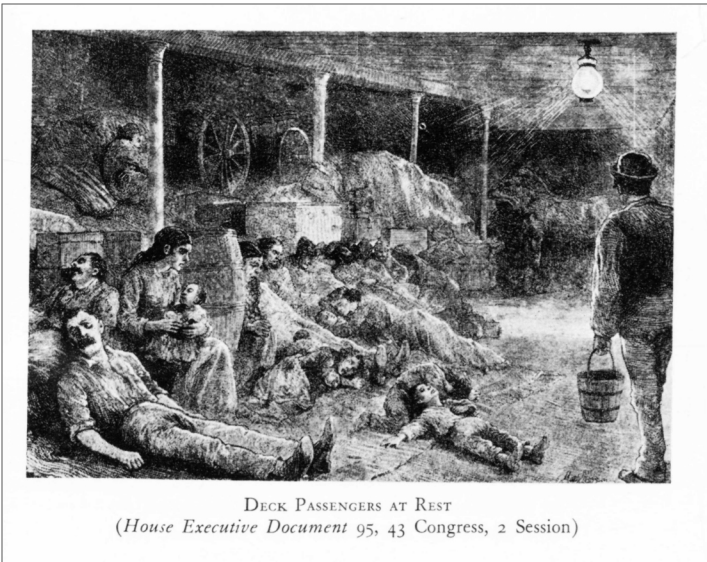
Figure 5 | "Deckers," passengers who could not afford a cabin, had accommodations in the open air on deck. Source: *Steamboats on the Western Rivers* by Louis C. Hunter.

fare reduced.

Laws applied to steamboats and the deck area in particular. A minimum of 15 square feet was to be devoted to each deck passenger in an enclosed, warm and vented area. These rules, however, were often broken and immigrants rarely sued.

Disorders occasionally occurred onboard steamboats, but the floating society as a whole was fairly well behaved. Gambling disputes, illicit relations and theft were the most common issues. Steamboat "justice" consisted of a court with three jurors chosen by the passengers. The most common punishment was a fine.

Disease was one of the worst side effects of river steamboat travel. Steamboat decks often bred disease, including cholera, smallpox and yellow fever. Diseases were often brought over by transatlantic passengers and moved upriver, but the low-lying, humid city of New Orleans also bred disease itself. Due to the hardships and lack of nutrition among most of the deck passengers, disease spread easily. Captains sometimes tried to hide cases from passengers and crew, as they would desert if word spread of an outbreak.

The St. Louis cholera outbreak of 1849 was caused, at least in part, by steamboat travel. The city was put on notice in January that cholera was spreading in New Orleans. Up to 800 immigrants per day were arriving in St. Louis at this time. Some of these newcomers would stay, while others headed west for the gold mines. With housing at a premium, many new arrivals temporarily stayed along the river in unhealthy conditions. Passengers brought cholera, and when added to the poor housing conditions and absence of sewers and garbage collection in the city, it was a deadly combination. The disease quickly spread from the immigrants to St. Louisans in the spring. By May, the *Missouri Republican* newspaper had given up publishing the names of the deceased and began just printing daily death figures. On July 18 alone, 88 burials were reported in the city. In the end, the outbreak killed approximately 7–10% of the city's population.

Logistics

Once a newly arrived immigrant was cleared and ready to make their way upriver, they needed to find a steamboat and a ticket. The larger packet lines had offices on the wharf. Smaller, transient ships would often advertise by turning their wheels or puffing their smokestacks in order to catch the attention of passing immigrants. Advertisements would also appear in local newspapers. (Fig. 6)

After securing a ticket, a traveler may have experienced several stops along the way to their ultimate destination. Ports on the way upriver from New Orleans included Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Natchez, Mississippi; Vicksburg, Mississippi; Greenville, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; Cairo, Illinois; Cape Girardeau, Missouri and Chester, Illinois. Larger cities had fixed levees where multiple boats would dock, while smaller stops consisted of just a muddy slope or a wharf boat. Passengers could also take a number of tributaries, including the Ohio River, to cities like Louisville, Kentucky and
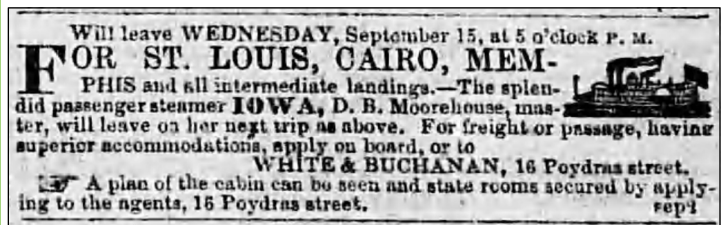

Figure 6 | Newspaper advertisement for the *New Orleans Crescent,* Sept. 11, 1852.

Cincinnati, Ohio. (Fig. 7) Those bound for points west could take the Missouri River, and for points north, continue on the Upper Mississippi.

In 1832, the round trip between St. Louis and New Orleans took 24 days, and the price for cabin fare was $20 down-stream and $25 upstream. Trips became faster over time due to steamboat improvements, and fares fell due to the industry expanding. By 1850, cabin fares from New Orleans to St. Louis were as low as $12–$15. The chief and almost only virtue of deck passage was its cheapness. In 1850, the passage between New Orleans and St. Louis cost as little as $3. Deck prices were usually about one-fourth cent per mile. Prices for all passengers would vary and fluctuated with the season, stage of the rivers, and competition.

Accidents

Steamboats were not always the safest mode of travel. A steamboat could hit a "snag" (a fallen tree hidden just under the surface of the water). Collisions occasionally happened, as some areas of the rivers were narrow with no uniform "rules of the road" for steamboats. Fires could erupt when sparks from the ship's furnace landed on combustible cargo such as hay, gunpowder or spirits. The most destructive acci-dent, however, was an explosion. If the pressure of the steam became greater than the boiler could sustain or the safety valve could relieve, an explosion would occur. Explosions were responsible for the greatest loss of life and property on the rivers.

An 1867 investigation recorded 133 sunken boats on the Mis-sissippi River between Cairo, Illinois and St. Louis, Missouri, a stretch that boatmen called the "graveyard." This amounted to a steamboat sunk for every mile of the river. Deck passen-gers suffered the most during these accidents, as they were more exposed and had a harder time escaping the lower deck.

The St. Louis Fire of 1849 began when a steamboat caught fire on the wharf. The *White Cloud* was docked near Cherry Street, located just north of the current Martin Luther King Bridge. The fire leapt to the next boat, and the wind quickly whipped the flames from one boat to the next. In thirty min-utes, 23 steamboats were ablaze. The embers ignited the freight and wooden shanties near the shore. The fire then
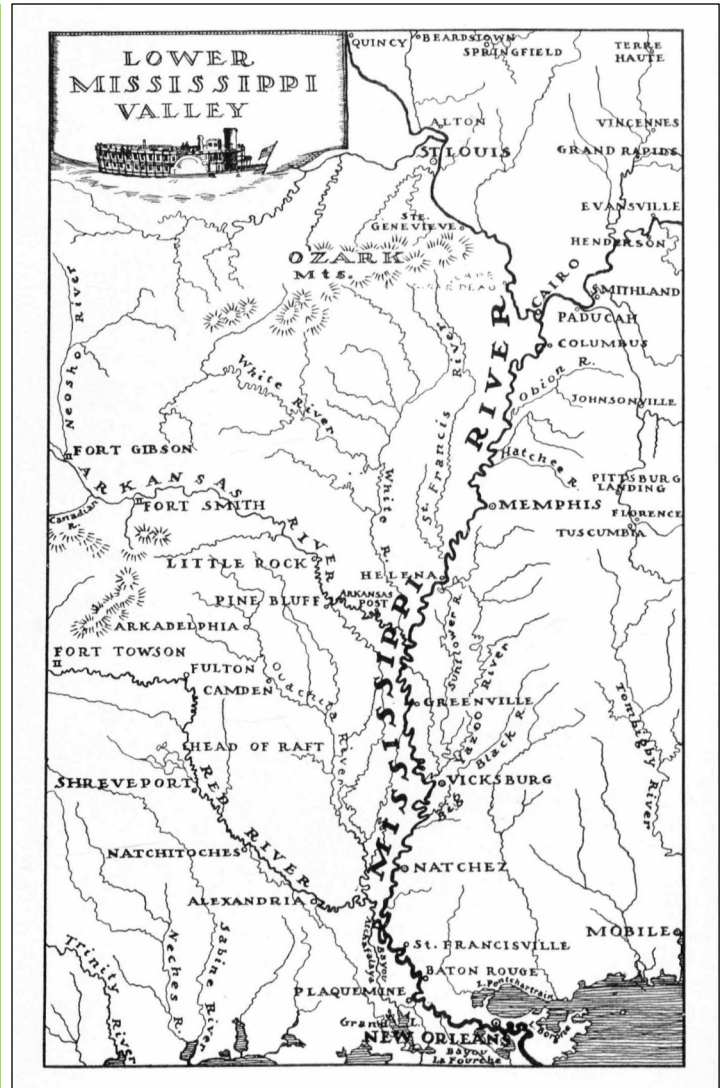

Figure 7 | Map showing port cities on the lower Mississippi and its tributaries. Source: *Steamboats on the Western Rivers.*

spread west and south and destroyed over 400 buildings. A controlled explosion by a volunteer firefighter spared the (Old) Cathedral and the newly built (Old) Courthouse, but cost him his life. New building codes were put in place after the fire, requiring structures to be built out of brick or stone.

The worst maritime disaster in United States history was the destruction of the Mississippi River steamboat *Sultana*. It was traveling north from Vicksburg, Mississippi on April 27, 1865 when three of its four boilers exploded. The boat was carrying over 2000 passengers, mostly newly freed Union prisoner of war soldiers, when its capacity was just 376. The Sultana

burned and sank near Memphis, Tennessee, killing over 1000 people.

Occasionally, during the winter months, ice would cause problems. In St. Louis on February 27, 1856, a sheet of river ice broke up and moved, dragging more than 100 steamboats with it. The Daily Missouri Republican reported, ". . . the destruction commenced. . . (the steamers) were torn away from shore as easily as if they had been mere skiffs, and floated down with the immense fields of ice. The shock and crashing of these boats can be better imagined than described."[2]

Steamboat captains themselves sometimes added to the dangers of travel by racing. One of the most famous steamboat races on the Mississippi River was in 1870 between the steamboats *Natchez* and *Robert E. Lee* from New Orleans to St. Louis. (Fig. 8) The *Robert E. Lee* was victorious. Although thrilling for the passengers, these races were dangerous for everyone on board.

Decline

Due to the blockade of Confederate ports during the Civil War, immigration through New Orleans stalled, and it never regained its momentum. Although steamboats ruled trade and travel for a time, a newer form of transportation eventually replaced them—the railroad. The same steam engine used to power boats could also be used to power trains. Steamboats began experiencing competition from railroads as early as the 1830's. At that time, however, there were only about 23 miles of track in the United States. By 1880, there were around 93,000 miles of railroad track. The rapid expansion of railroads made travel from eastern ports more appealing, as immigrants could now arrive at those ports and more easily make their way to cities like St. Louis by train. Transportation of goods, smaller numbers of immigrant passengers, and leisure travel picked up after the war, with some of the grandest boats ever seen built in the 1870s and 1880s. Steamboats still traveled the Mississippi River even into the 1920s and 1930s. By this time, however, powerful diesel barges had begun to dominate river transport. Leisure steamboat travel could still be experienced throughout the 20th century, however, on steamers like the famous St. Louis Admiral.
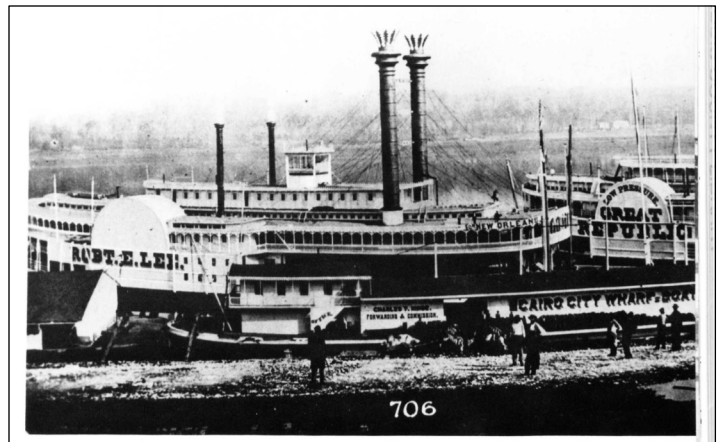

Figure 8 | The *Robert E. Lee,* shown in this photo, won a steamboat race against the *Natchez* in 1870. Source: *The Mississippi Steamboat in Historical Photographs: Natchez to New Orleans, 1870–1920.*

Impact on the country

The great steam-powered boats of the nineteenth century played an important role in the expansion and development of the United States, including the St. Louis area. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 gave the United States an immense area of land (including New Orleans), and steamboats provided a way to populate it. Cities grew along the rivers to make trade and transportation easier, and those already established, like St. Louis, grew exponentially. The population of St. Louis was 10,049 in 1820 and grew to 351,189 by 1870. Steamboats also helped to bring the new nation together, allowed for more regional specialization, and created a balance of power between the east and the west. While traveling the United States, French politician Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his journal, "There isn't anyone who does not recognize that the discovery of steam has added unbelievably to the strength and prosperity of the union, and has done so by facilitating rapid communications between the diverse parts of this vast body."[3] While steamboats no longer rule the nation's waterways, they will always remain one of the most important advances in transportation, and they brought our ancestors to where they would begin their new lives.

For more information

Some boats kept passenger lists, along with freight and crew lists. However, "Many boats were rather 'lackadaisical' about

their business. Riverboats were much like a Greyhound bus these days. People were getting on and off in all manner of landings and towns."[4] Later steamboats were required to keep lists, but just the number of passengers was sufficient for shorter voyages.

Nearly all passenger lists have been lost. Any that do exist, along with other steamboat records, are located in archival manuscript collections, particularly in libraries and museums located in the river valleys. These include items such as first-hand accounts of boatmen and passengers, articles, photographs, wharf records, books, literature, and folklore.

The History & Genealogy Department offers several print items for general steamboat research; please see the online library catalog <webpac.slcl.org>. *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* by Louis C. Hunter (R 386.3 H945S) and F*ifty Years on the Mississippi* by E.W. Gould (R 386.2 G696) are recommended. If you do happen to know the steamboat your ancestors traveled on, you can look up information about specific boats in *Ways Packet Directory, 1848–1983: Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System Since the Advent of Photography,* compiled by Frederick Way (387.243 W357W) or in *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* by James T. Lloyd (R 387.2 L793L). If you suspect you may have a St. Louis ancestor who worked on a steamboat, *Your Ancestor a River Captain?* compiled by Herman Radloff and Alexander Coyle (R977.866 R129Y) might be worth a look. When researching steamboats, keep in mind that sometimes more than one ship with the same name existed. News of steamboats was often recorded in the newspapers of port cities, and St. Louis County Library patrons have both in-library and remote access to the Newspapers.com database. The nearest steamboat collection repository is the Herman T. Pott Inland Waterways Library, located at the St. Louis Mercantile Library on the campus of the University of Missouri-St. Louis <https://bit.ly/30ACmU1>. Many items in the col-

LIBRARY HOLIDAY CLOSING

- **Thursday, Nov. 25** | Thanksgiving Day
- **Friday, Nov. 26** | Day after Thanksgiving
- **Friday, Dec. 24** | Christmas Eve
- **Saturday, Dec. 25** | Christmas Day

lection have been digitized. Finally, if you are interested in traveling in your ancestors' footsteps, leisure steamboat companies still offer cruises on the Mississippi River.

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Classes

Classes are free and open to the public. Registration is required. Register online <https://bit.ly/3jJ8bxq> Classes will be conducted by Zoom.

Wednesday, December 1, 6:30 p.m.

Exploring the Ancestry Library Edition Database

The Ancestry Library Edition Database is a powerful tool for genealogical research. Find out how to take advantage of Ancestry's capabilities in your research. | Register <https://bit.ly/2Z7o3pe>

Wednesday, December 15, 6:30 p.m.

Getting More Out of FamilySearch

Basic search techniques will miss most records in FamilySearch. Learn to navigate unindexed image collections, search the FamilySearch catalog effectively, and use advanced search features to tap into hard-to-find records. *Prerequisite: FamilySearch Basics or equivalent research experience.* | Register <https://bit.ly/3jgITJV>

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OF NOTE

Remote access to Ancestry Library Edition database ends Dec. 31

The library's vendor for the Ancestry Library Edition Database has announced that it will end remote access on Dec. 31, 2021. The database, usually only accessible at library branches, was made available remotely to St. Louis County Library patrons during the pandemic. Researchers can continue to use Ancestry Library Edition for free on public computers at any St. Louis County Library branch and on wireless devices connected to the library's WiFi network. A library card is not required.

Manager of History & Genealogy announced retirement

Scott Holl, manager of the St. Louis County Library History & Genealogy Department, has announced his retirement, effective Dec. 31, 2021. His last day in the library will be Dec. 17. He was hired as assistant manager of the department in March 2007 and has served as manager since Aug. 2014.

AUTHOR EVENT
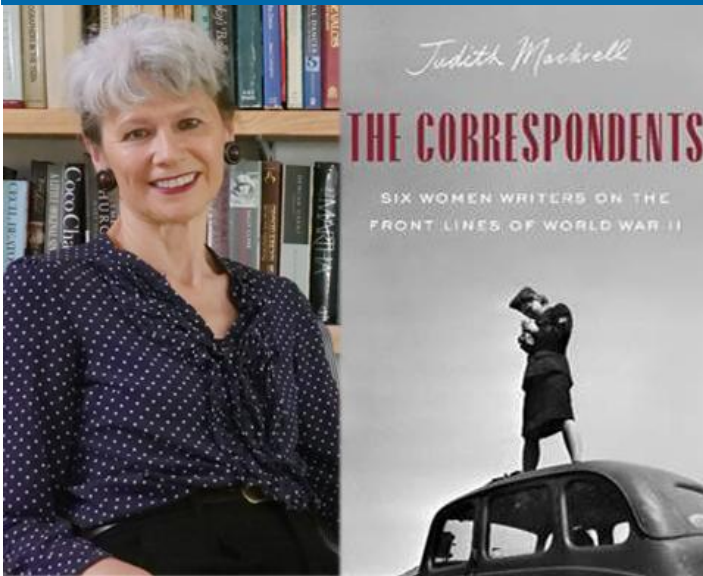
Judith Mackrell

The Correspondents: Six Women Writers on the Front Lines of World War II

Video premiere: November 30, 7:00 p.m. on www.facebook.com/STLCoLibrary

On the front lines of World War II, a contingent of female journalists were bravely waging their own battle. Barred from combat zones, these women were forced to fight for the right to work on equal terms with men. *The Correspondents* is the story of six remarkable women journalists covering World War II action.

PastPorts is published by History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library, located on Tier 5 of Library Headquarters.

Current and past issues can be downloaded from the web <http://www.slcl.org/pastports>.

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History & Genealogy services

The following H&G services are free and available to researchers who are unable to visit the library.

Lookup service

H&G can provide photocopies, prints, or digital scans of many library materials from indexed sources or when given a specific citation:

- Up to 30 pages from one book or one article from a journal issue. Staff can also photocopy or scan tables of contents and index pages.
- Microfilmed records—A list of microfilm available in the H&G collection can be viewed online <https://bit.ly/3jrqw3j>.
- Print outs from database records if patrons cannot access the database at home.

Please use the online lookup request form <https://bit.ly/2UQXJKE> to submit requests.

Print collection

More than 27,000 books in the collection can be checked out. The entire collection is included in the library's online catalog <http://webpac.slcl.org>. Books with call numbers that do not begin with "R" are available to check out. Patrons can request books online or by calling 314-994-3300.

Research guidance

H&G staff members can provide research assistance by phone.

Book-a-Genealogist

Researchers encountering brick-walls or who would like assistance in developing a plan to achieve specific research goals can schedule a phone consultation with an H&G staff member. Requests can be made using the online Book-a-Genealogist form <https://bit.ly/3fQbB0r>.

Database access

Many library databases can be used at home by St. Louis County Library card holders living in the metropolitan area. The Ancestry Library Edition database, normally restricted to in-library use, can be accessed remotely on a temporary basis. View the list of genealogical databases on the library's website <https://bit.ly/37GRBtF>.

For more information, please contact the History & Genealogy Department at 314-994-3300 or genealogy@slcl.org.