

River Boats

RIVER BOATS HAVE BEEN USED by humans for thousands of years. They are any kind of boat designed for the lower water levels and quieter waters of rivers rather than open seas or the ocean.

In the 1800s, there was a boom of steam-powered river boats traveling along the Mississippi and other major rivers. These boats became icons of their time and region and have become an important part of our nation's history.

In the 1800s, the United States was just beginning its expansion to the west. People were moving out to the territories around the Mississippi river, seeking

farmland and opportunity. The steamboats became an essential part of connecting the new cities and towns that were growing along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The often beautifully designed boats would travel along the river stopping in many small towns, carrying wealthy passengers and all kinds of goods and supplies.

These boats had large furnaces in them where wood was burned to boil water, and the steam from the boiling water was used to drive the large paddle wheel in the back of the boat that carried it along. The two large smokestacks, breathing out steam, could be seen from miles away and were an impressive and exciting sight. The coming of a steamboat was a major event for many people living in small, and sometimes isolated, towns along the rivers.

🔍 Look at the picture below of a river steamboat from the 1800s and use it to help answer the questions on the next page.



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Questions

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient ... now and then we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates. These ambitions faded out, each in its turn; but the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained.

— Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

1 On the lower deck, several people are loading wood onto the boat. What do you think this wood is going to be used for?

- A** burning for the steam engine
- B** boat repairs
- C** sold as fire wood to towns along the river

2. What do you think is behind the siding of the boat where its name, *Ben Campbell*, is painted?

- A** the steam engine
- B** rooms for passengers
- C** the paddlewheel

3. Who do you think is the person in the cabin at the very top of the boat?

- A** the boiler engineer
- B** a passenger
- C** the pilot

 After reading the quote above by Mark Twain about his childhood along the Mississippi, why do you think steamboats were so exciting to children at the time?
