

THE

HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

Mississippi's Bicentennial
1817—2017

July 2017

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, July 20, 2017, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be Judge Robert L. Lobrano, grandson of Katherine Lobrano. *Reservations are required* and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, July 19,** to make your reservation in order to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people and to apprise us of the number of lunches to order. Lunch is \$12.00, payable at the door, and it is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef.

ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is still a few months away, it's not too early to begin thinking about and planning the Cemetery Tour. The 23rd Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on Halloween night, Tuesday, October 31, 2017, at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Second Street in Bay Saint Louis. Needed are volunteers to prepare the cemetery for the tour, to portray citizens buried there, and to act as guides. To volunteer, please call 228-467-4090. All actors and guides must be members of the Historical Society.



The steamboat *Natchez*

A Maritime History of Hancock County (1830-1870)

The Steamboat Era

By
James Keating, M.D.

The vast American frontier of the early 19th century, which included Mississippi and Alabama, had no adequate inland transportation infrastructure such as roads, ferries, canals, or bridges. Waterways became the necessary thoroughfare to the heartland. The newly invented steam engine provided boats or "steamers" the ability for the first time in history

to travel up rivers such as the Mississippi and Pearl practically and conveniently. Steamboats were a transformative stimulus to growth and commerce in the United States and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The census population figures between 1820 of 1,594 and 1860 of 3,134 people reflect this remarkable increase of population in Hancock County. In this era there was an irrepressible spirit of optimism and adventure in Americans who were ready and able to explore and settle these newly acquired lands.

Steamboats were embraced fearlessly as a means of transportation in spite of the inherent dangers of this new invention. For example, one night in 1855 the steamboat *Creole*, carrying 150 passengers, arrived

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“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

in Shieldsboro (Bay St. Louis) at 1:00 A.M. in the middle of a hurricane. After safely unloading twenty passengers in very angry seas, the wharf collapsed with the loss of all the unloaded baggage and freight which had been deposited in the pierhead warehouse. Also lost was an old cake vender, a woman who had refused to leave this shelter for fear of losing her little stock of baked goods intended for sale to these passengers.

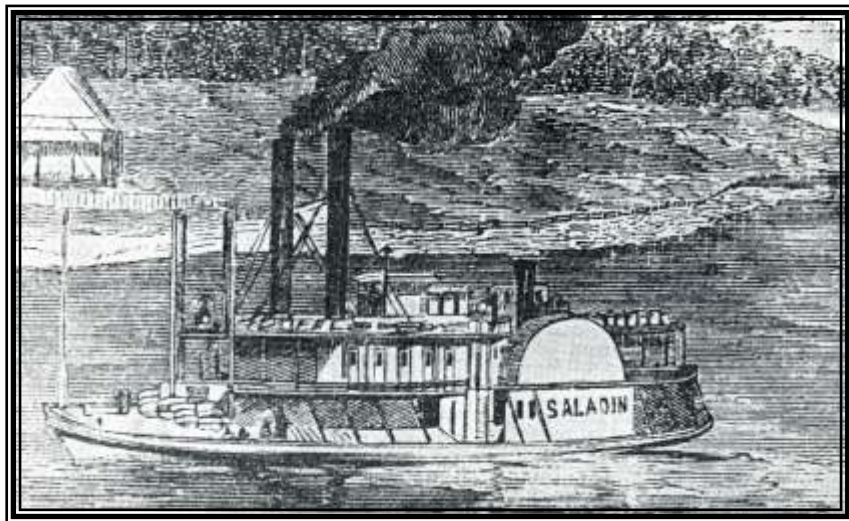
Then Captain Post decided to run for cover across the Bay of St. Louis to Henderson Point off Pass Christian. Unfortunately, two hours later the full force of the storm broke the anchor cables, and the steamboat swirled into the open waters causing pandemonium on all decks. Suddenly, a passing schooner appeared out of nowhere and almost collided with the *Creole*. Captain Post then solicited the assistance of a local fellow mariner, Captain Pierre Jontelle, to help him pilot the steamer into the protected inlet of nearby Bay Portage because with the elevated tide and blinding rain there were few reliable visible landmarks. The *Creole* miraculously reached this relatively safe harbor, and after a while, the winds abated much to the relief of all on board.

Immediately, Captain Post steamed into the Bay thinking the danger was over, but the boat was actually in the eye of the storm, and soon thereafter it was caught in more vicious winds now coming from the opposite direction. The Captain now scurried into the Jordan River and barely escaped destruction again. The next day the *Creole* steamed to Mobile noting that all the landings along the way were destroyed.

Severe storms weren't the only hazards these boats encountered. Boiler explosions, collisions,

snags, and shallow shoal water were also common hazards. The life expectancy of a steamboat in the early 19th century was only four years. Nonetheless, steamboat captains could not resist the temptation to race these vessels when in common channels. On July 5, 1852, the *St. James* and the *California* found themselves side by side in the Rigolettes, traveling from Bay St. Louis to New Orleans. The smaller *St. James* increased her speed to full steam throttle ahead and gained on the larger *California* by one quarter of a mile. Suddenly, her boilers exploded, and the upper deck was shattered and burst into flames. The shrieks of the passengers on the *St. James* were heard by all those on the *California*, and “the suspense and anxiety became agonizing.” Thirty passengers died in this tragedy. The *California* proceeded to rescue the other passengers and crew. This explosion was the worst steamboat accident in all of Lake Pontchartrain history.

It is interesting to note there is an important difference between a steamship and a steamboat. A steamship was a large vessel with a deep draft hull with or without auxiliary sails which was capable of ocean travel. It was driven by side wheels or, later in this period, by a screw propeller, but never by a stern wheel. A steamboat was a smaller vessel which had a flat bottom with a shallow draft and was driven by either side wheels or a stern wheel, but never by a propeller. Sternwheelers could navigate narrow waterways and made ideal tugs that would shoulder and push barges. Steamboats also had names related to their specific functions such as packet (mail), towboat, ferry (passengers), snagboat, fueller, and showboat. Most of the “steamers” on the Pearl River and the Gulf Coast were sidewheel steamboats.



This sidewheel steamboat is an example of the kind which traveled up and down the Pearl River and along the Gulf Coast carrying freight and passengers to and from New Orleans.— *photo and text from a newspaper clipping (May 5, 1975) found in the vertical file of the Hancock County Historical Society, no title of the newspaper recorded*

It is inviting to consider the anatomy of a typical large steamboat. The architecture included a lower main deck which housed the steam engine, other machinery, fuel wood, freight, livestock, deck hands, slaves, and low fare ticket holders. The second level was the saloon deck reserved for the first class passengers. On this deck small staterooms opened out into a central great saloon where all the social activity such as dining and gambling took place. The third deck called the "Texas" had cabins and a small saloon for the ship's officers. The top level contained the wheelhouse and often two large.

New Orleans profited from the up and down river traffic it accrued because of its location on the Mississippi River. But there was an economic hinterland of trade and commerce with towns and rivers draining into Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf Coast. Boats from these areas approached the port of New Orleans through Lake Pontchartrain instead of battling the strong currents of the mighty Mississippi River. The city of New Orleans could be reached from the

lake by two canals called the Old and New Basin Canals. In addition, a dedicated steamboat landing was constructed at Milneburg which was connected to the French Quarter by a five mile short line Pontchartrain Railroad built in 1831. It was also called Port Pontchartrain and was located at the site of the old "Pontchartrain Beach" at the northern end of Elysian Fields Avenue. The locomotive, affectionately known as *Smokey Mary* pulled twelve cars loaded with passengers, baggage, and freight back and forth several times a day.

The steamboats that operated on the Pearl River were smaller than those on the Mississippi River and were adapted to the narrow and shallow waterways. They often had only a main deck and a covering boiler deck in the fifty to one hundred ton range. By 1840 there was regular steamboat traffic on the Pearl River. The *Choctaw* (130 tons) was the first steamboat to travel this river to Jackson in 1835. This boat could operate on the upper Pearl River only during the rainy season. Three steamboats

were consigned to carry the building materials from New Orleans for the capital building in Jackson in 1836. In addition Jackson received goods aboard other steamboats such as the *Denmark* and the *Grand Gulf*. A few small steamboats were built in the boatyards in Pearlinton, but most of these vessels on the Pearl were built at shipyards in the Northeast region of the United States.

The towns along the Coast such as Bay St. Louis were known as the "Watering Holes," and they enjoyed regular steamboat service after 1830. Steamboats stopped at Martin and Toulme's Wharf at Washington Street. In 1842 this wharf was extended eighty feet into the bay so steamboats could land there in all seasons and tides without danger of running aground. The first class Bay St. Louis Hotel located on present day South Beach Boulevard and Union Street was opened by 1842 for guests. By 1855 a dedicated local steamboat made a daily trip to New Orleans.

The New Orleans-Mobile line employed large (500-1000 ton) vessels and would also make stops at the Watering Holes when appropriate. Steamers for Bay St. Louis and Biloxi were mid-sized (50-500 tons), heavier than the Covington and Pearl River steamers, and had names such as *Georgia* (326 tons), *St. Charles* (374 tons), *Mobile* (259 tons), and *Creole* (364 tons). These local mid-sized steamers were sidewheelers, and they traveled only as far east as East Pascagoula. An 1859 advertisement in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* offered daily service to Bay St. Louis for the US Coast Packet Steamboat *Creole* commanded by Captain A. P. Boardman for cabin fare of \$2.00, children and servants \$1.50, and deck passengers \$1.00.

The steamboat era ended abruptly with the advent of the railroad on the Gulf Coast in 1870.

The Railroad Empire will be the subject of the next article in this Bicentennial series.

SOURCES:

Ellis, Dan. *The Great Gulf Coast: Sails, Trails, and Rails*. Charleston,: CreateSpace, 2016.

Groene, Bertram. "An Overview of Fifty Years of Steam Boating from 1853-1900," Vertical File, Hancock County Historical Society.

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Scharff, Robert, *Louisiana's Loss, Mississippi's Gain*. Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick Pub. Corp., 1999.

Sullivan, Charles. *Hurricanes of the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. Perkinston, MS: MGCCC Press, 2011.

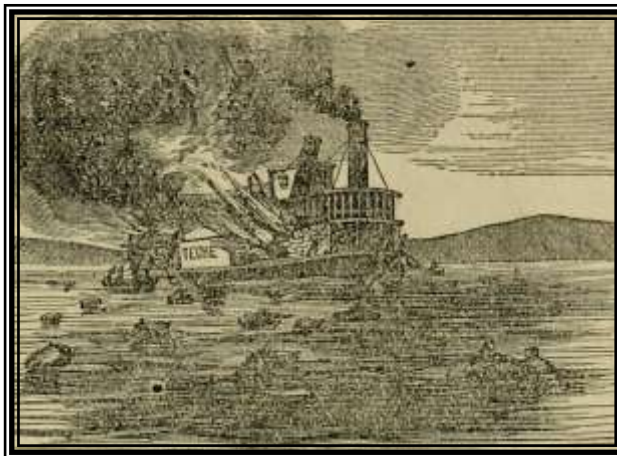
"Survey of the Lower Pearl and West Pearl Rivers, *Steamers*, Vol. 3, Vertical File, Hancock County Historical Society.

Steamboat Explosions

By
Eddie Coleman

Not all explosions of steamboat boilers were due to races between steamers. Others were caused by an extreme pressure build up of an unknown origin as related by Alicia Maggard in the following excerpt from her article "Perilous Innovation":

In the late spring 1825, New Orleanians were awaiting a boat that would never arrive. The steamboat Teche touched at Natchez on May 4, took on passengers, and stacked bales of cotton ever higher on its decks. The night was dark and visibility poor, so the Teche came to anchor some 10 miles downriver. Sleeping passengers and paddlewheels were still until just after two in the morning,



when conditions improved and the captain ordered a head of steam raised to resume the journey.

A tremendous shock and a violent crack startled the crew and awoke the passengers. Excessive pressure had built up in the boat's cast iron boilers, triggering an explosion and spraying scalding water that killed several crewmen and passengers instantly. The wooden hull caught fire, and these flames were the only light to guild survivors of the initial blast as they abandoned the sinking, ruined Teche. Some swam for shore, while others survived by clinging to bobbing bales of cotton that were thrown from the decks to save them from burning. By first light, only about 50 of the 70 passengers on board were accounted for. The remaining 20 would, like the Teche, never reach New Orleans.

This rendering of the explosion of the steamboat *Teche* comes from p. 65 of *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*. Further information of the horrors of explosion may be found on pp. 63-67.

SOURCE:

Lloyd, James T. *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*. Cincinnati: James T. Lloyd & Co., 1856

Often remains of these disasters rested forever on the river bottom. However, some remnants of steamboat engines and other parts lost in explosions and collisions were salvaged and reused as replacement parts for other vessels.

SOURCE:

Maggard, Alicia. "Perilous Innovation," *The Historic New Orleans Collection Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, Summer 2017, pp. 4-5.

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Are you looking for a Christmas or a birthday gift? You're in luck. The Hancock County Historical Society will be raffling off a Men's GX Genesis bicycle. The drawing will be held at the Christmas Tea in December. Tickets can be purchased for \$1.00 each or six for \$5.00 at our monthly luncheons or weekdays at the Loblano House.



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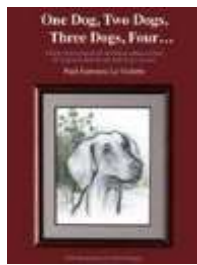


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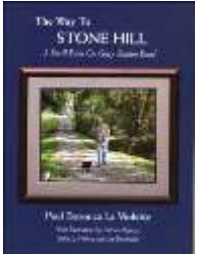


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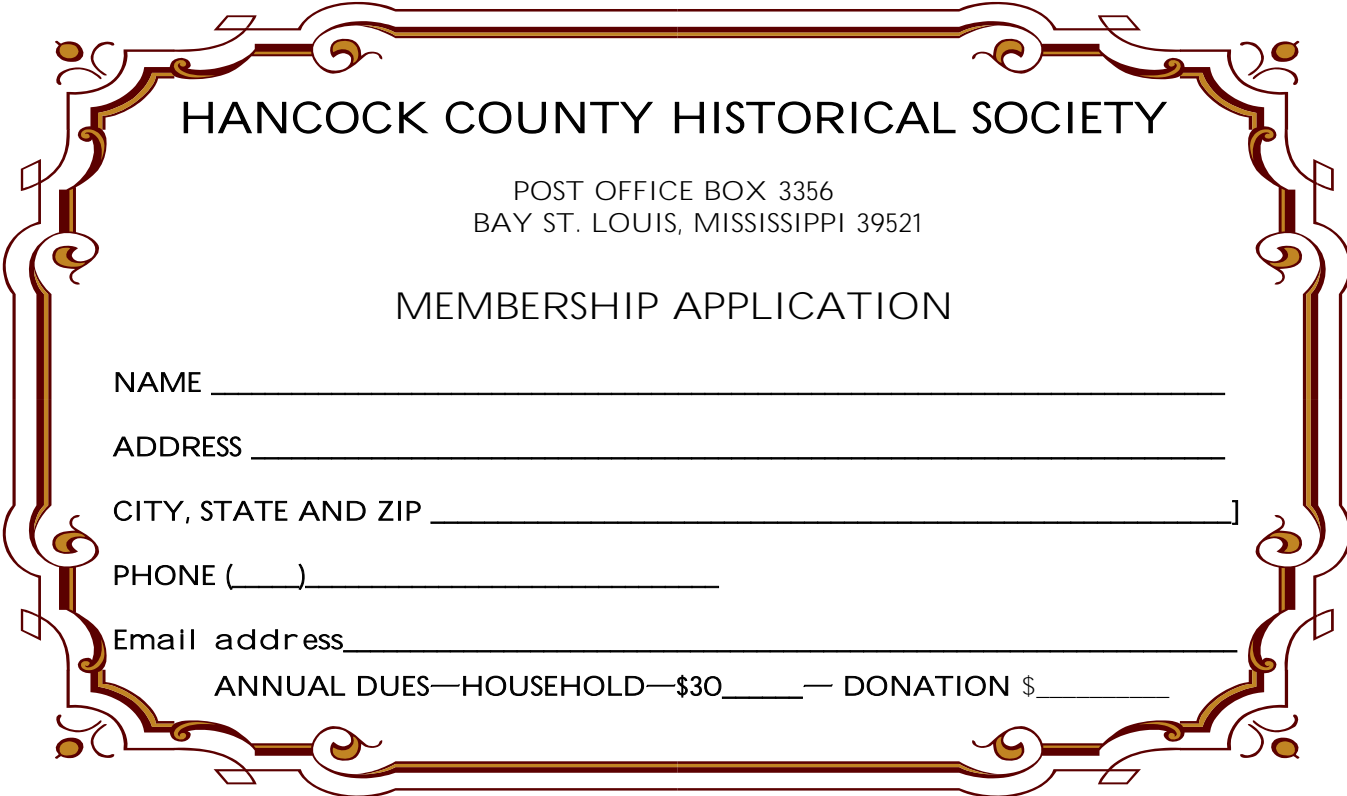
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