

Back in the Country...

Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

Early Days on the Upper Ohio River The Sewickley Valley



“One vast and continuous forest shadowed the fertile soil, covering the lands as the grass covers a garden lawn sweeping over hill and hollow in endless undulation...”

Francis Parkman 1760

“The whole country abounds in Bears, Elks, Buffaloes, Deer, Turkies, etc., an unquestionable proof of the goodness of its Soil.”

Thomas Hutchins 1778

“Our path had led us along the north bank of the pleasant river Ohio, almost the whole way from Pittsburgh, & frequently within sight of the river. The soil is luxuriant, the growth principally white and black oak, Chestnut, Black Walnut, Hickory &c. The sweetest red plums grow in great abundance in this country, & were then in great perfection. Grapes grow spontaneously here, and wind around the trees.”

Reverend David McClure 1793

“A fine broad river always, but in some parts, much wider than others, and then there is usually a green island covered with trees, dividing it into two streams. Occasionally we stopped for a few minutes, maybe to take in wood, maybe for passengers at some small town or village, but the banks are for the most part deep solitude, overgrown with trees which are already in leaf and very green. For miles and miles and miles, these solitudes are unbroken by any sign of human life or a trace of human footsteps, nor is anything seen to hover about them but the blue jay, whose color is so bright and yet so delicate that it looks like a flying flower. At lengthened intervals, a log cabin with its little space of cleared land about it, nestles under a rising ground and sends its thread of blue smoke curling up into the sky...Sometimes the ground is only just now cleared, the felled trees lying upon the soil, and the log house only this morning begun...The river has washed away its banks and stately trees have fallen down into the stream. Some have been there so long that they are mere dry, grisly skeletons. Some have just toppled over and, having earth yet about their roots, are bathing their green heads in the river and putting forth new shoots and branches. Some are almost sliding down, as you look at them, and some were drowned so long ago that their bleached arms start out from the middle of the current, and seen to try to grasp the boat and drag it under water.”

British author Charles Dickens 1843

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The first Europeans to penetrate the wilderness surrounding the Upper Ohio River Valley was a small group of New York fur traders. The year was 1692 and soon, others would follow.

Pushing inland from Britain’s coastal colonies, land hungry Europeans displaced native peoples who were continually forced westward. Crossing the Appalachian Mountains; Shawnee, Delaware and Seneca populations converged in the Upper Ohio Valley as early as the 1720s when Logstown was established between modern Ambridge and Baden, Beaver County. The largest settlement on the Ohio, it was occupied by a mix of Woodland tribes and European fur traders. Logstown was not only a place of trade, but also the place of diplomacy where representatives of France, Britain and Colonial governments met with native peoples.

*In place of scarce coins and cash, animal pelts and hides were used as currency at frontier trading posts. Prices were set in "bucks," the hides of male deer. One buck=two doe hides=six raccoon pelts=four fox pelts and so forth. Buck is sometimes used to mean a dollar.*

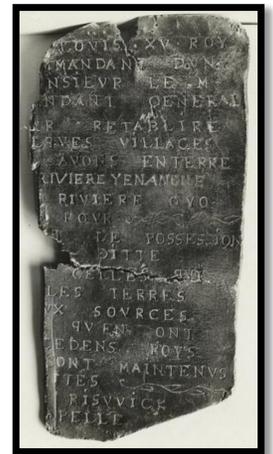
Both France and Britain laid claim to the Ohio River Valley. Having discovered the Mississippi River, France claimed both it and its watershed, which includes the Ohio River. The French quickly recognized the Ohio's value as the link between French Canada and the port of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi. The French were not interested in colonization. Their interest was in the lucrative fur trade.

Britain's objective was quite different. It wanted to grow its colonies and laid claim to the Ohio Country based on treaties with native tribes. Each nation felt it had a legitimate claim to the vast wilderness and its untapped resources. In addition to the French/British dispute, there was an ongoing territorial dispute between the Virginia and Pennsylvania colonies with each claiming ownership of what is now Southwestern Pennsylvania.



In 1749, a French military expedition under the command of Celeron de Bienville famously descended the Allegheny and Ohio rivers, burying several lead plates on which ownership of the watershed was claimed for King Louis XV (right). The expedition was known to have camped at Logstown, but not before expelling the British traders in residence.

(Pictured is Washington's Fayette County grist mill built 1776.)



To counter French claims to the Ohio Valley, a group of Virginia and London businessmen, which included George Washington's brothers, established the Ohio Company and received a charter from the English king for several hundred thousand acres on the south side of the Ohio River. The intention was to sell land to both speculators and settlers. George Washington himself had vast holdings in what is now Washington and Fayette counties.

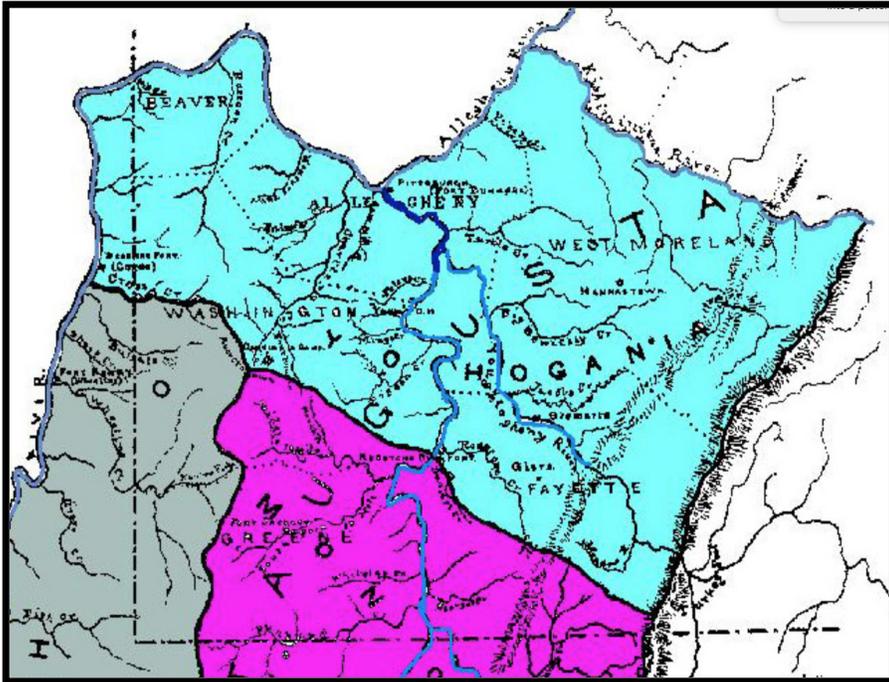
Concerned with the growing French presence along the western frontier, the governor of Virginia instructed twenty-one-year-old George Washington to deliver a letter (below) to the French at Fort LeBoeuf in present day Erie County, Pennsylvania. In it, the governor demanded that France abandon the forts being built in the disputed territory. Not surprisingly, the request was ignored and within a year Britain and France would be at war, with native peoples forced into choosing sides.

*"The Lands upon the River Ohio, in the Western Parts of the Colony of Virginia, are so notoriously known to be the Property of the Crown of Great-Britain; that it is a Matter of equal Concern and Surprize to me, to hear that a Body of French Forces are erecting Fortresses, and making Settlements upon that River, within his Majesty's Dominions ...."* Governor Dinwiddie 1753

For seven years (1754-1763), Britain and France, along with their Indian allies, fought for control of the North American continent. The war ended with Britain taking control of Canada, the Great Lakes and lands East of the Mississippi River. With the cessation of hostilities, there began a steady flow of settlers over the Alleghenies into the Ohio Valley and beyond.

*"I noticed particularly, one family of about 8 in number. The man carried an ax and gun on his shoulders, the Wife the rim of a spinning wheel in one hand, and a loaf of bread in the other. Several little boys and girls, each with a bundle according to their size. Two poor horses, each heavily loaded with some poor necessities, on top of the baggage of one was an infant rocked to sleep in a kind of wicker cage, lashed securely to the horse. A cow formed one of the company, and she was destined to bear her portion of service, a bed cord was wound round her horns, and a bag of meal on her back."*

Reverend David McClure 1773



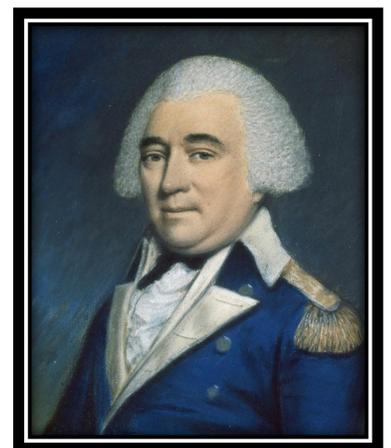
Because there was no set boundary between Pennsylvania and Virginia, much of what is now Southwestern Pennsylvania was claimed by both colonies. Virginia divided the disputed region into three counties where it issued land grants and established courts and churches. Fort Pitt was renamed Fort Dunmore. A large number of early settlers arrived from Virginia and Maryland. Pittsburgh and land on the south side of the Ohio River were once part of Yohogania County, Virginia as shown on the map from **Family Search** (left).

Once the French and Indian War ended in 1763, the British team of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon began their five-year mission of marking the boundary between the colonies of Delaware, Pennsylvania and Maryland. It was not until 1784, however, that the Pennsylvania/Virginia dispute was resolved by extending the Mason-Dixon Line further West and Virginia ceding the disputed territory (above).

At the time of the 1790 census, the nation's first, approximately 75,000 persons occupied this corner of Pennsylvania, with nearly 400 residing in the frontier settlement of Pittsburgh.

The wilderness North of the Ohio and West of the Allegheny rivers was settled later than lands on the opposite sides of the rivers. The area was considered unsafe due to ongoing conflicts between Americans and native peoples during the years following the Revolutionary War (1775-1783).

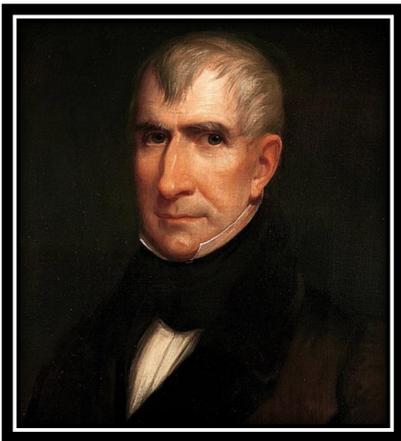
Alarmed by ever growing numbers of settlers spreading across their lands, tribes North of the Ohio River, in what was referred to as the Ohio Country, formed a confederacy in a doomed attempt to stem the flow of new arrivals. After American troops repeatedly failed to subdue the tribes, President Washington called Revolutionary War General Anthony Wayne (right) out of retirement to train an army that could defeat the native peoples.



The newly formed Legion of the United States trained in Pittsburgh during the summer of 1792 before moving into its winter camp that was built near the former Logstown site. A strict disciplinarian, Wayne selected the isolated location to keep his troops away from the distractions of Pittsburgh, which he considered a sinful “frontier Gomorrah.”

Legionville was the U. S. Army’s first basic training camp and consisted of 500 buildings spread across thirty-five-acres overlooking the Ohio. It was reached by both water and the old Indian path that hugged the river’s north shore. With the arrival of approximately 2,000 troops, the path was transformed into a rough military road that connected the camp and Pittsburgh. This rough roadway was forerunner to the present Beaver Road. One might imagine troops sloshing across the Sewickley creeks while on training exercises.

The men trained throughout the winter and spring of 1792-93 before moving down river into Ohio where in 1794, they dealt the final blow to the tribal confederacy. The 1795 treaty resulted in native peoples migrating further West, out of the Ohio Country, opening Western Pennsylvania and the future State of Ohio to settlement.



Among those who trained at Legionville were future President of the United States William Henry Harrison (left) and noted explorer William Clark of the historic Lewis & Clark Expedition (right).



Also at Legionville were two men who later settled in the Sewickley area. Frederick Merriman made his home in what became Bell Acres while William Richey resided in then Ohio Township.

A Richey Family story tells how William was on a mission to Pittsburgh when he was confronted by an Indian. Each took aim at the other and the Indian was killed. According to the family, Richey hid the dead man’s rifle in a hollowed tree before returning for it years later. The rifle remained in the family for several generations.

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“[The Ohio River] has some ugly rifts and shoals which we found somewhat difficult to pass...The water is rapid in some places, gliding gently in others, and quite still in others.”

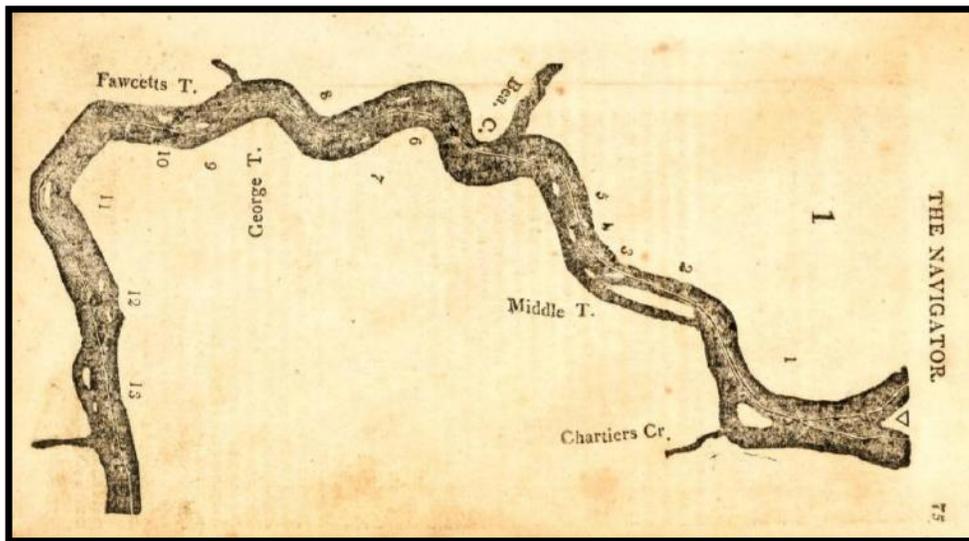
George Washington 1770

(Undated post card view of the Ohio River near Sewickley, Pennsylvania.)



It was not until the late 1920s, after the Army Corps of Engineers completed a series of lock and dam projects, that the river appeared as it does today; a smooth, broad, deep channel that allows for year round navigation. Until then, despite attempted improvements, the shallow Ohio was littered with boulders, gravel beds, sandbars, snags and flood debris. Islands, both large and small, were strung along its course and there were countless numbers of rapids, referred to as ripples or riffles.

The six-mile stretch between Kilbuck Run in Glenfield, Allegheny County, and the Big Sewickley Creek, which serves as the boundary between Allegheny and Beaver counties on the river's north shore, is generally known as the Sewickley Valley. It consists of a narrow strip of bottomland sandwiched between the river on one side and steep wooded hillsides and deep ravines on the other



In 1801, Zadok Cramer began publishing maps intended to help river pilots safely navigate the many obstacles found in the Ohio and adjoining rivers. This map from his 1814 edition of **The Navigator** illustrates the Upper Ohio beginning at Pittsburgh, shown in the lower right corner. White circles indicate islands and the thin line running through the riverbed represents the boat channel. Numbers correspond to written descriptions. #2 on the map indicates Neville Island (long circle) and Middletown refers to Coraopolis. Other islands that once stood between Coraopolis and the Beaver River (Bea. C.) are also drawn. Shown (left) is Cramer's advice on navigating around Neville Island.

At the head of this island, is a bar putting out towards the right shore, therefore you must keep about one-third of the river to your right, and at the *first ripple*, opposite Baldwin's stone mill, leave a breaker or rock a little to your right. Thence bear towards the island, to avoid the *second, or Horse-tail ripple*, which is about half way down the island, leaving a bar to the right, and some breakers to the left.

No. 2 is a fine large island, about six miles long, possessing several good farms and other improvements. It belongs to the family of general Neville of Pittsburgh. Hog island, No. 3, just below and joined to No. 2 by a bar.

As depicted on Cramer's map, the Ohio flows Northwest from Pittsburgh through the Sewickley Valley before reaching Cairo, Illinois, nearly a thousand miles distant. Here, it joins the Mississippi River before continuing another thousand

miles South to the city of New Orleans and the warm open waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Conditions on the Upper Ohio were such that travelers oftentimes journeyed overland from Pittsburgh to Wheeling before boarding boats for downriver destinations.

Merriman's Bar.

Merriman's Bar—who has not heard tell
Of that ill-omened spot with its evil spell?
When the water is low, its white sands gleam
'Mid the waters swift of Ohio's stream.
When the water is high 'tis lost to sight,
Like a thief that's hid in the shades of night.
And then neither sunshine nor friendly star
Betrays the location of Merriman's Bar.

Merriman's Bar. At the very name
A shudder convulses the mariner's frame.
"Ah me!" he sighs. "What a dead soft snap
I'd have were it not for that old death trap!
What a pleasure a sailor's life would be
If from breakers and snags his course were free,
And no vagrant plank or wand'ring spar
Told tales of wreck on Merriman's Bar."

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The Upper Ohio was shallow. River travel often came to a standstill until there was enough rainfall or snowmelt to provide a sufficient water level. During dry summer months, it was possible to walk and drive wagons across the rock filled riverbed. One noted crossing was at Osborne. Winter ice also prevented river travel, leaving Spring and Fall as the best times to travel.

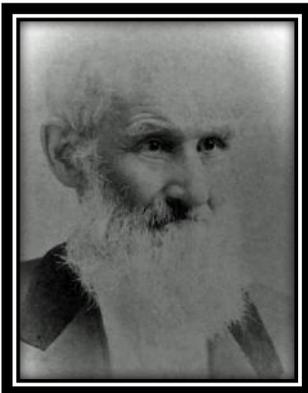
Widely scattered sand and gravel bars were formed from sediments deposited by flowing water. The riverbed itself was strewn with boulders, gravel and forest debris, all challenging even the most experienced river pilots. Ten miles below Pittsburgh, near the lower end of Neville Island, between Glenfield and Haysville, was the half mile long Merriman's Bar, the scene of numerous mishaps.

(Verses appear in **Songs of Everyday** (1900))

Swift flowing waters tumbling over White's Ripple and Whollery's Trap were the next obstacle travelers had to contend with while passing through the Sewickley Valley. There was good reason the rapids at Whollery's, a misspelling of Ulery, was widely known as a trap.

After you get through the Hog island chute and floating near the left shore a short distance, the channel bears to the right considerably, and at the distance of half or three quarters of a mile below Hog island, having about two-thirds of the river to your left, you pass the Third or Woolery's ripple, or trap.

Henry Ulery was a German sea captain and having arrived in the area shortly before 1800, was one of Sewickley's earliest residents. His home overlooked the river near the foot of Chestnut Street. In the years before boats were powered by steam engines, manpower was needed to move craft upstream against the currents. To make the task easier, an anchor or "deadman" was sunk into the rocks to which long ropes were attached and used by boatmen to pull their craft upstream. Because Ulery charged boatmen large sums of cash to use his deadman and ropes as they struggled to make their way up river, this set of rapids was labeled Whollery's (Ulrey's) Trap.

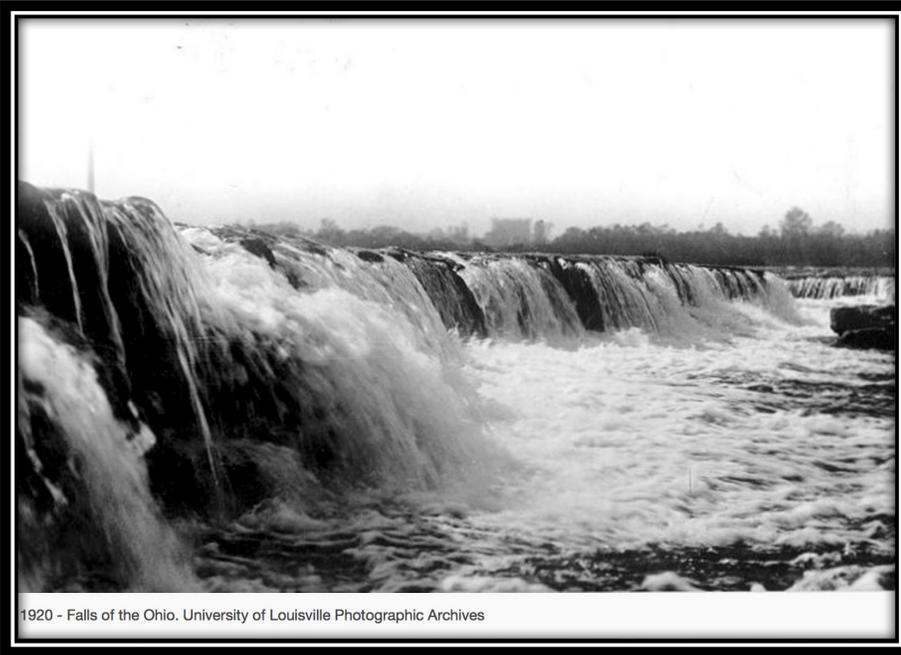


In 1829, Bruce Tracy (left) built a home on the river, near the present Sewickley Bridge. It became the location of a boat landing operated by Tracy. It was here that passengers and freight were loaded and unloaded. A smaller landing was found at the foot of Edgeworth Lane.

A half mile long gravel bar known as Deadman's Island occupied the river between Sewickley and Leetsdale. Cramer wrote, *"This island, though very small, forms a considerable impediment to this part of the river. The channel is uncommonly crooked, narrow, and difficult to hit; hence, the greater care is required."* During times of high water, the island was submerged with only the tops of small willow trees visible. Oil lanterns were once hung on the branch of a sugar maple to mark the Deadman rapids.

In 1929, the Army Corps of Engineers opened the Dashields Lock and Dam that were built over Deadman's Island and named in honor of David Shields, an early Sewickley Valley resident.



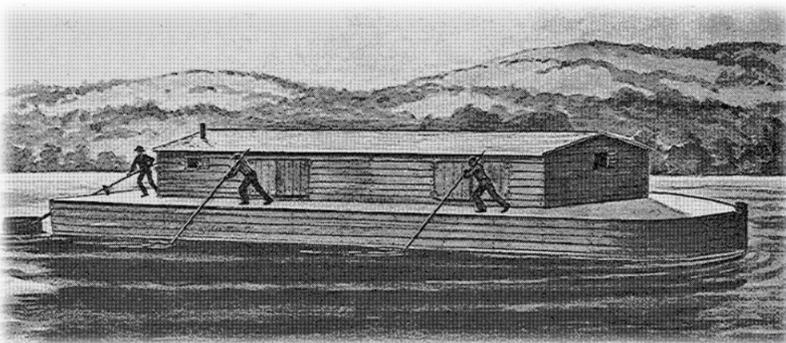


A month was once needed to make the six-hundred-mile trip from Pittsburgh to the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, Kentucky (left) where travelers and cargo were offloaded before re-boarding on the opposite side of the Falls. A down river trip from Pittsburgh to New Orleans might take as many as three months, depending on water levels.

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Following the French and Indian War and continuing into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, untold numbers of settlers crossed the Appalachians in search of land. Because of their riverside locations, Brownsville and Elizabeth on the Monongahela River and Pittsburgh at the Forks of the Ohio became important boat building centers and jump off points for travel into the new nation's interior. Pittsburgh was aptly named Gateway to the West.

Abundant forests provided the timber needed for building the boats needed to carry families and freight down river, with many going as far as New Orleans. Among the earliest forms of river transport were keelboats that hauled salt, whiskey, pelts, flour, corn and other trade goods from the Upper Ohio to southern markets before making the return trip laden with sugar, molasses and dry goods.



Used to carry both freight and passengers, covered keelboats (left) were built to be poled, rowed or pulled upstream. Until the appearance of steamboats in 1811, keelboats were the only means of traveling against river currents.

*"In 1776, Messrs. Gibson and Linn descended by water from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, to procure military stores for the troops stationed at the former place. They completely succeeded in their hazardous enterprise, and brought back a cargo of 136 kegs of gunpowder. On reaching the Falls of Ohio on their return in the spring of 1777, they were obliged to unload their boats, and carry the cargo round the rapids, each of their men carrying three kegs at a time on his back. The powder was delivered at Wheeling, and afterwards transported to Fort Pitt."*

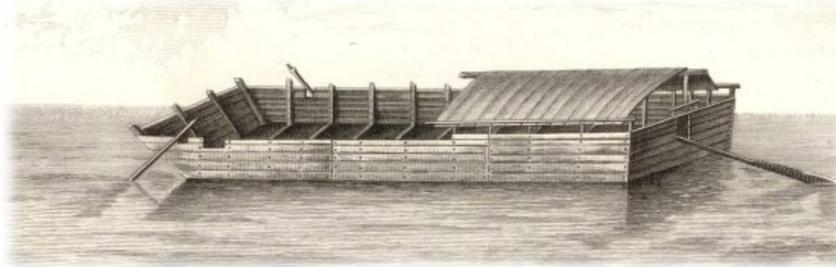
**Hall's Statistics of the West**

In addition to natural dangers posed by weather and the river itself, travelers faced additional threats from robbers and hostile Indians. A 1794 newspaper announcement for transport on the Ohio between Cincinnati and Pittsburgh sought to assure passengers of their safety.

*"No danger need be apprehended from the enemy, as every person on board will be under cover made proof against rifle or musket balls, and convenient port holds for firing out of. Each of the boats are armed with six pieces carrying a pound ball, also a number of good muskets, and amply supplied with plenty of ammunition: strongly manned with choice hands, and the masters of approved knowledge. A separate cabin from the that designed for the men, is partitioned off in each boat for accommodating ladies on their passage. Conveniences are constructed on board each boat, so as to render landing unnecessary, as it might, at times, be attended with danger."*

11 January 1794 **Centinel of the Northwestern Territory**

Although flatboats shared a flat bottom with keelboats, they differed in their use and design. Little more than rafts with two or three-foot-high sides, flatboats were popular with families who were intent on making a new home on the frontier. Loaded with household goods and livestock, this type of craft was built for a one-way trip down river. Upon reaching its destination, the craft was dismantled and the lumber used to build a house, leaving the crew to make its way back home, sometimes on foot. Return trips to Pittsburgh from New Orleans could take months.



Joining the untold numbers of flat and keel boats on the river were timber rafts. Lumbermen working in the thick forests that lined the Upper Ohio would square felled tree trunks and lash them together to create rafts that were floated down river to New Orleans boat builders and European markets. Log drivers controlled the rafts with poles and oars.

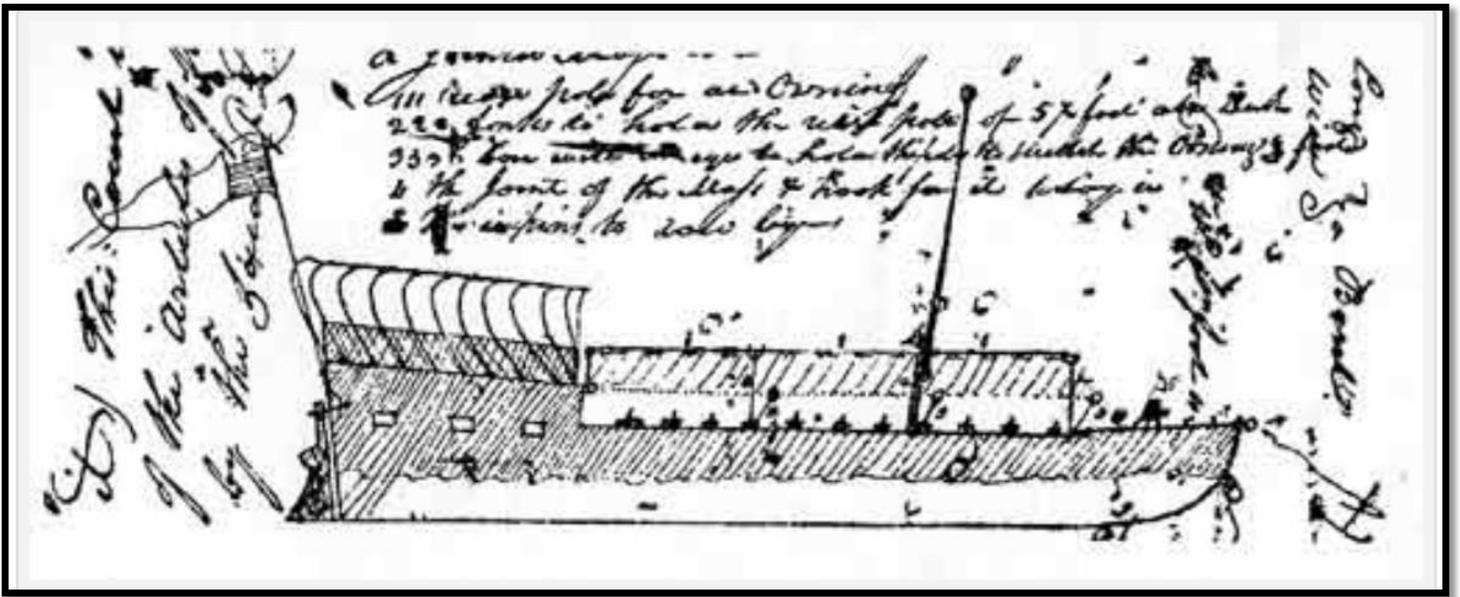


(Undated post card showing a log raft.)

Store boats also travelled the river, stopping at isolated settlements to sell their merchandise. At the end of the journey, the boat might either be sold for its lumber or towed back upstream for future use.



Perhaps the most famous keelboat built and launched in Pittsburgh was the one constructed during the summer of 1803 for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Captain Meriwether Lewis arrived in Pittsburgh from Virginia to take possession of the craft before traveling down river to join his second in command William Clark at the Falls of the Ohio. From there, the men continued to Illinois where they trained until beginning their exploration of the West in the Spring of 1804. Below is Clark's sketch of the keelboat.



Lewis' correspondence with President Jefferson provides a description of conditions on the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Wheeling. It has been written that at the time, there were no more than six inches of water in parts of the river.

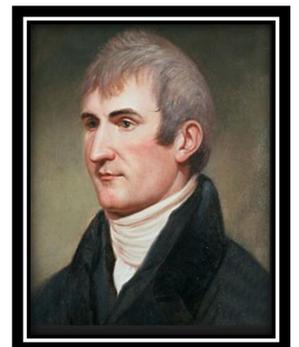
*"Left Pittsburgh this day at 11 ock with a party of 11 hands 7 of which are soldiers, a pilot and three young men on trial they having proposed to go with me throughout the voyage. Arrived at Bruno's Island 3 miles below...."* 30 August 1803

*"When the Ohio is in its present state there are many obstructions to its navigation, formed by bars of small stones, which in some instances are intermixed with, and partially cover large quantities of drift-wood; these bars frequently extend themselves entirely across the bed of the river, over many of them I found it impossible to pass even with my empty boat, without getting into the water and lifting her over by hand; over others my force was even inadequate to enable me to pass in this manner, and I found myself compelled to hire horses or oxen from the neighboring farmers and drag her over them; in this way I have passed as many as five of those bars, (or as they are here called riffles) in a day, and to unload as many or more times. The river is lower than it has ever been known by the oldest settler in this country. I shall leave this place tomorrow morning, and loose no time in getting on."* Written in Wheeling, [West] Virginia 8 September 1803



A blue and gold Pennsylvania State Historical Marker stands near Pittsburgh's convention center in recognition of the expedition's starting point. One might wonder if Lewis and his men noticed Ulery's deadman anchor or if anyone on shore that day paused to watch the larger than usual keelboat making its way down river and into history.

(Captain Meriwether Lewis)



*“For many years, keel-boats were used, and some of the old inhabitants remember hearing the cheery songs of the keel-boatmen as they labored at their tasks going up and down the Ohio. The number of Keel-boats employed on the upper Ohio is said to have been one hundred and fifty. It required about a month to make the trip between Pittsburg and Louisville.*

*Steamboats were used in 1817. The first one that came to this place from Cincinnati was the “Constitution,” but it never reached Pittsburg, as it ran aground on the bar at “Dead Man.” Two years afterwards the machinery was hauled away.*

*The first boat with a whistle passed Sewickley in 1837. It was called the “Uncle Sam,” and there are still some of the early residents left who remember the excitement in Sewickley and vicinity when its shrill tones were first heard...*

*The boat ran aground in “White’s Riffle,” near the old Tracy Landing, and the whistle was blown again and again. Through the valley and over the hill-top it echoed and re-echoed, causing a feeling of terror and alarm. Mr. Jacob Fry announced to his family and neighbors that the end of the world had come, and Gabriel was blowing his trumpet, telling them to fall on their knees and improve the short time left in prayer. A general belief was that it was the cry of a wildcat so some of the men left their sugar-making and ran here and there with pitchforks, while Moses Hendricks, accompanied by a friend, took his gun and went as far as “Crow’s Run” to shoot the animal. At last word was brought from the neighbors near the river what was the cause of the outcry, and quiet and peace were restored.”*

Agnes Ellis **Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life**

The Ohio is one of America’s most historic rivers. It was the highway that opened the new nation’s frontier to exploration and settlement. As the age of keelboats and flatboats gave way to steamboats, river traffic through the Sewickley Valley continued to grow as the Upper Ohio River became a leading manufacturing center and inland port. The river and river men have, from earliest days, helped shape and define the Sewickley Valley.



Below is the link to a ten minute 1941 educational film that depicts the building of a flatboat and subsequent river journey. Found on the **Internet Archive** website, it is an example of films once shown in classrooms.

[https://archive.org/details/flatboatmen\\_of\\_the\\_frontier](https://archive.org/details/flatboatmen_of_the_frontier)