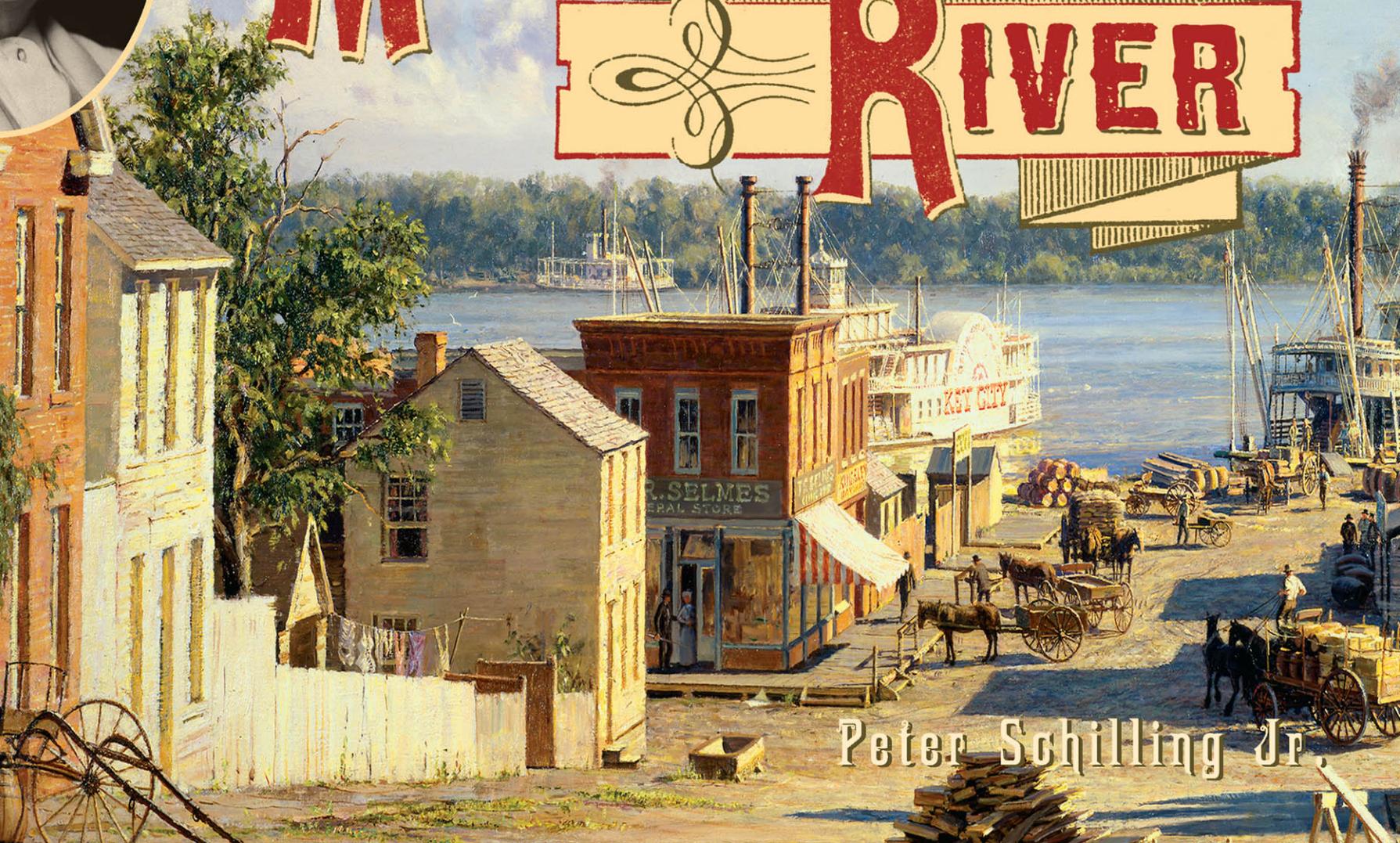
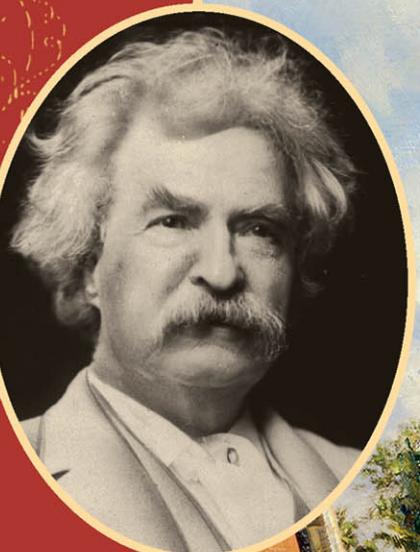


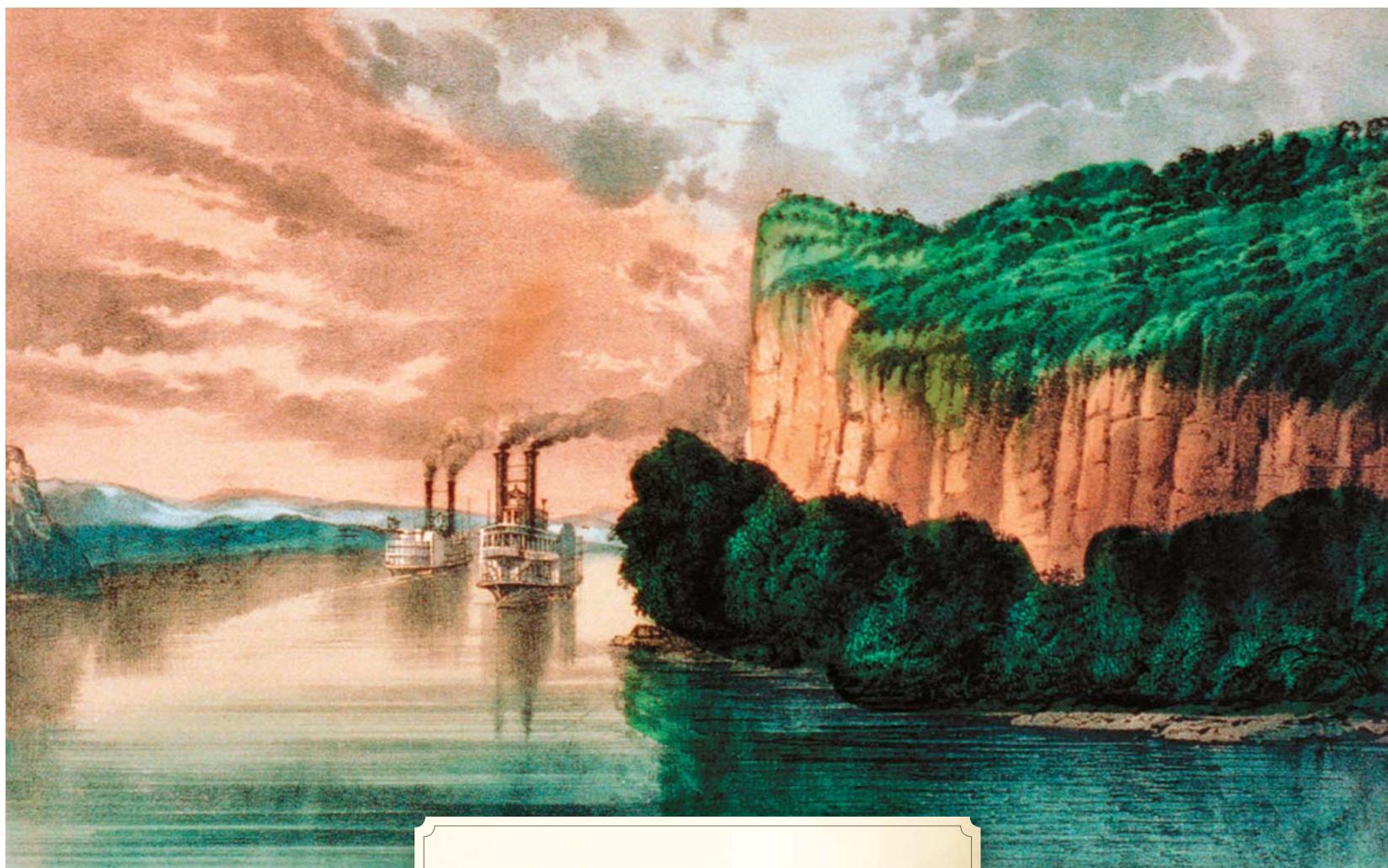
AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE BIG RIVER IN SAMUEL CLEMENS'S LIFE AND WORKS

MARK TWAIN'S  
**MISSISSIPPI**  
**RIVER**

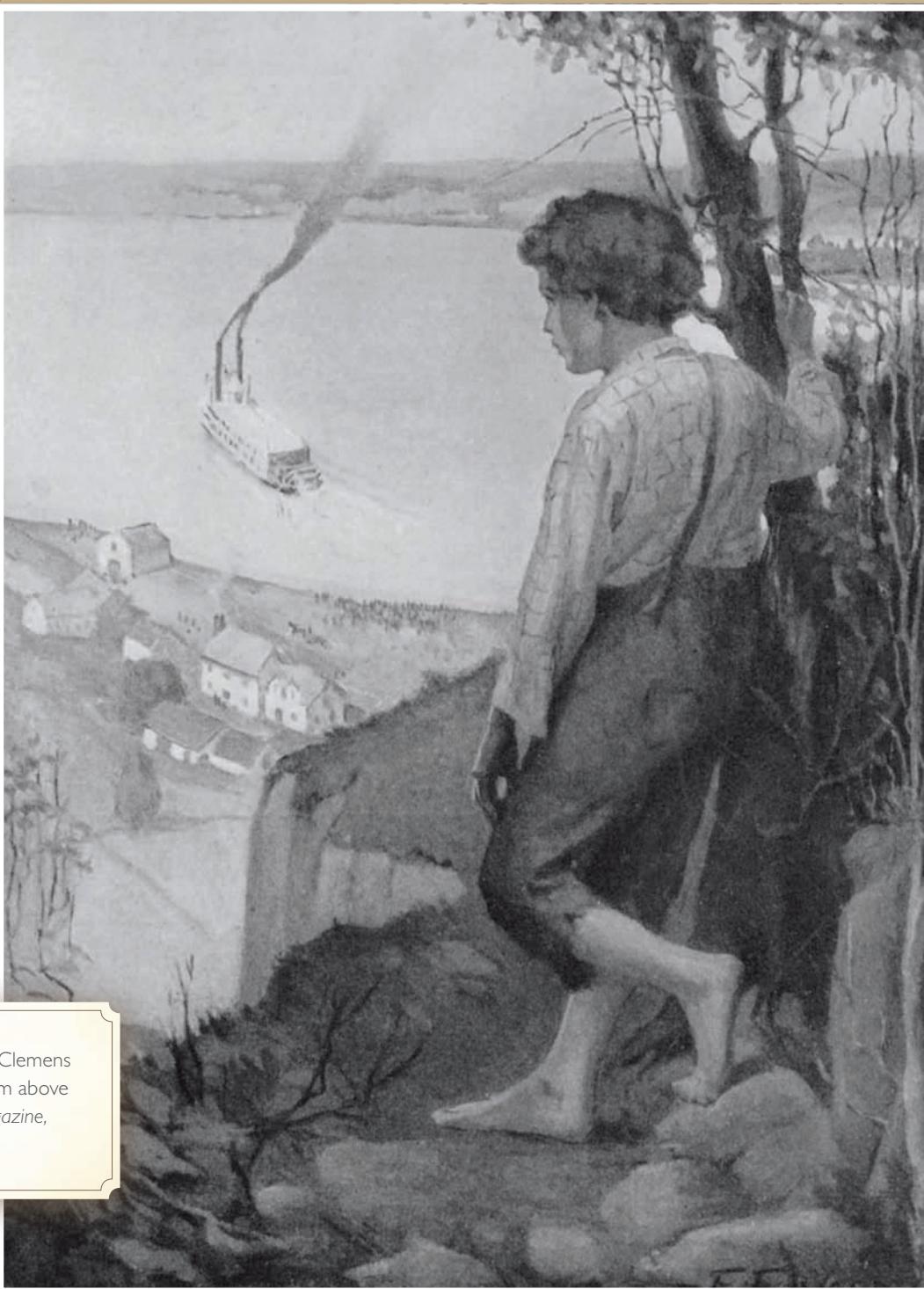


Peter Schilling Jr.





Two steamboats on the Mississippi River near Maiden Rock, Wisconsin, circa 1875. © Niday Picture Library / Alamy



An artist's depiction of young Sam Clemens looking wistfully at a steamboat from above Hannibal, Missouri. *St. Nicholas magazine*, November 1915.





# MARK TWAIN'S MISSISSIPPI RIVER

An Illustrated Chronicle of the Big River  
in Samuel Clemens's Life and Works

BY PETER SCHILLING JR.



Voyageur  
Press  


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## CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION -	
<b>MARK TWAIN</b>	
AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER	
6	
- CHAPTER 1 -	
<b>THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE RIVER</b>	
AND THE DAWN OF STEAMBOATING	
14	
- CHAPTER 2 -	
<b>MARK TWAIN'S</b>	
EARLY LIFE AND TIMES,	
1839–1856	
32	
- CHAPTER 3 -	
<b>MARK TWAIN'S STEAMBOATING YEARS,</b>	
1857–1861	
52	
- CHAPTER 4 -	
<b>MARK TWAIN'S RETURN TO THE RIVER IN 1882</b>	
AND <i>LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI</i>	
99	
- CHAPTER 5 -	
<b>THE RIVER IN <i>TOM SAWYER</i>,</b>	
<i>HUCKLEBERRY FINN</i> , AND <i>PUDD'NHEAD WILSON</i>	
126	
- CHAPTER 5 -	
<b>TWAIN'S LEGACY</b>	
AND THE RIVER SINCE HIS TIME	
158	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	172
INDEX	174
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	176

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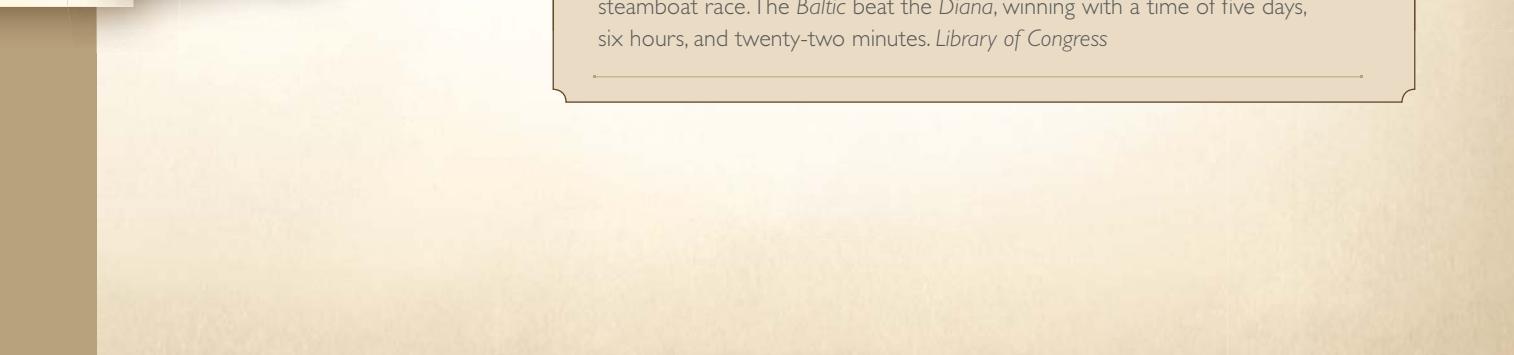


INTRODUCTION

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# MARK TWAIN and the MISSISSIPPI RIVER

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George F. Fuller's painting of the classic 1858 New Orleans-to-Louisville steamboat race. The *Baltic* beat the *Diana*, winning with a time of five days, six hours, and twenty-two minutes. Library of Congress



The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice.

And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day. Throughout the long twelve hundred miles there was never a page that was void of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher enjoyment in some other thing.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IX*

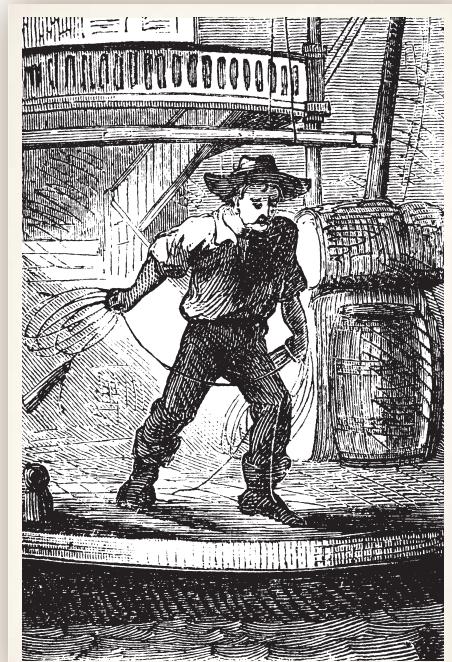
When we think of Mark Twain, we think of the Mississippi River. For those of us who have read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and possibly *Life on the Mississippi* (a memoir of his days as a steamboat pilot), Twain's name brings us back to those stories—back to Tom Sawyer's escape to Jackson's Island, Huck Finn's raft, and the determination of Sam Clemens as a cub pilot memorizing all 1,200 miles of the Mississippi—from Saint Louis, Missouri, to New Orleans, Louisiana, and then back north again. Millions of readers—from Ernest Hemingway to T. S. Eliot to children in grade school—have drifted along with Huckleberry Finn and Jim and the duke and the king into the increasingly treacherous South. Without question, the three river masterpieces that Samuel Langhorne Clemens left us—*Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Huckleberry Finn*—are as much a part of American literature as the Mississippi is a part of America's geography.

Twain's very name (his pen name, that is) is a direct reference to the river. "Mark twain" was a call that a steamboat's leadsman would cry when the depth was two fathoms (twelve feet). "Mark twain" was an ideal sounding mark for steamboats (for which scraping the bottom of river could spell disaster)—unless, of course, the river was supposed

to be much deeper, and then "mark twain" signified a sudden shallow point. Twain wrote of just such a moment in Chapter XIII of *Life on the Mississippi*:

Then came the leadsman's sepulchral cry  
"D-e-e-p four!"  
Deep four in a bottomless crossing!  
The terror of it took my breath away.  
"M-a-r-k three! . . . M-a-r-k three . . .  
Quarter less three! . . . Half twain!"  
This was frightful!  
I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.  
"Quarter twain! Quarter twain! Mark twain!"

Nowadays, the citizens residing in the constellation of towns along the Mississippi don't admit the river into their lives as they did in Twain's time. In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, for instance, people rocket in their cars and trucks over the iconic swath of river and don't even notice it. They shoot fireworks over the river on Independence Day and stop on the Stone Arch



Leadsman calling out, "By the mark twain" in *The Gilded Age*, which gives the best description of steamboat travel in any Mark Twain novel.



Tourists disembarking from a replica steamboat at Memphis, Tennessee. R. Kent Rasmussen

Bridge to admire Saint Anthony Falls, and restored steamboats carrying tourists go splashing down the river, absent the soot of Twain's time and the possibility of a deadly explosion in the boilers. All of this is mere sightseeing. Today, the barges that quietly sail by aren't staffed by people who are fishing for their evening meal, and the crew isn't on the lookout for small naked children swimming in the river and hiding amongst bales of cotton. And it isn't the fault of the Internet or smart phones: the river hasn't been the focus of children for more than a century.

In Twain's time, the river was alpha and omega, occupying the thoughts of most people who lived nearby from daybreak to sundown. It was unlike anything that exists today—at that time, it was the most important waterway in America and perhaps the world. It was at once a highway, a market, a graveyard, a site for holy baptism, and a playground for the poor and rich alike. The Mississippi was a no man's land where runaways and criminals and people suffering under the yoke of slavery could find refuge. And as it does today, back then it provided drinking water—albeit muddy drinking water.

It comes out of the turbulent, bank-caving Missouri, and every tumblerful of it holds nearly an acre of land in solution. If you let your glass stand a half an hour, you can separate the land from the water as easy as Genesis; and then you will find them both good: the one good to eat, the other good to drink. The land is very nourishing, the water is thoroughly wholesome. The one appeases hunger; the other, thirst.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XXII*

The Mississippi was a capricious god who provided fertile soil but whose meandering waters also swallowed property and wiped out whole towns. Children played in its current and were sucked beneath the surface and drowned. (Twain spoke of a number of playmates who

died, and drowning plays a part in all three of his classic river tales.) The people who lived by the Mississippi lived because of the great river, and if they didn't die because of the river, they certainly knew someone who had.

However, as the historian Lee Sandlin observed in *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*, the river that Twain knew when he was a boy and a young man on the steamboats had long since vanished when he wrote *Tom Sawyer*, the first of his great Mississippi epics. By then, the river was being dredged and leveed, its steamboats replaced by trains. Its cities—Hannibal, Missouri, in particular—were swelling beyond recognition, growing from villages of a few hundred to railroad hubs and manufacturing centers swarming with thousands. When Twain returned to the river in 1882 (the trip that dominates the last section of *Life on the Mississippi*), he knew very little of the river anymore. It was no longer as wild and crazy—nor as all-encompassing to its people—as it had been just a few decades earlier.



Twain saw the devastating power of the Mississippi River over and over again during his childhood and his tenure as a steamboat pilot. Here the river is shown during the flood of 1890 near Greenville, Arkansas. © Old Paper Studios / Alamy

## At Home in Hannibal

The heroes of Twain's river stories are from the fictional and the real-life Hannibal, where Twain spent his own childhood. Huck runs away but senses a home behind him and wonders about his fate; Tom yearns for



Apart from the Mark Twain Bridge, the river around modern Hannibal (left) looks much as it did in Mark Twain's time.  
R. Kent Rasmussen

Huck's supposed freedom, but must always come back to his stifling, though cozy, bed; and the Sam Clemens who went off to become a steamboat pilot simply can't wait to strut about Hannibal in his finery, just like the "creature" before him, that fellow teenager who struck out on the steamboats and returned as a source of profound jealousy for all the boys:

This creature's career could produce but one result, and it speedily followed. Boy after boy managed to get on the river. The minister's son became an engineer. The doctor's and the post-master's sons became "mud clerks;" the wholesale liquor dealer's son became a bar-keeper on a boat; four sons of the chief merchant, and two sons of the county judge, became pilots.

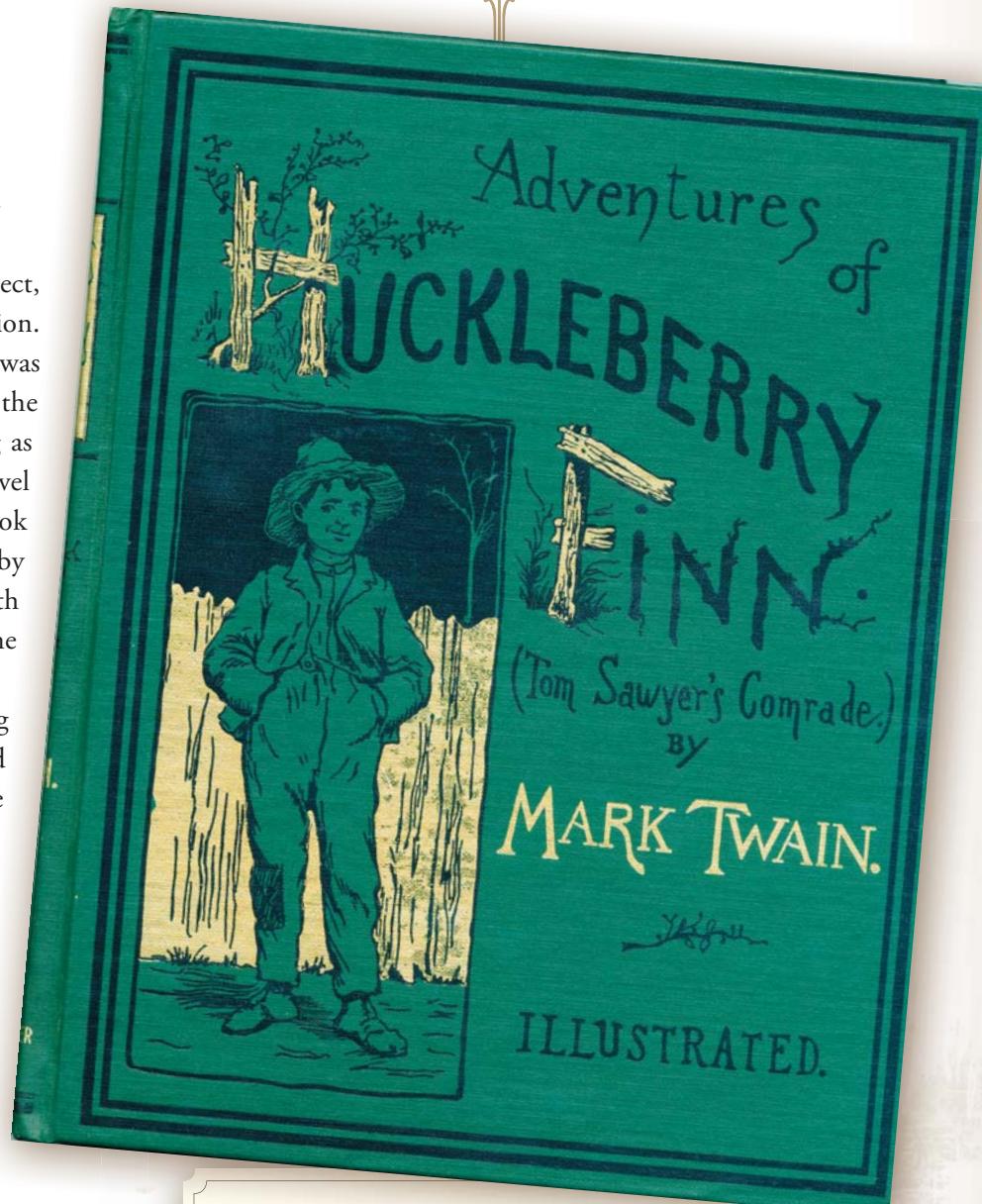
Pilot was the grandest position of all. . . .

So by and by I ran away. I said I never would come home again till I was a pilot and could come in glory.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IV*

Mark Twain did not dip into the Mississippi River as a subject, however, until many years after he had made writing his profession. Technically, he became a paid wordsmith in 1854, when he was publishing travel letters in his brother Orion's newspaper, the Muscatine, Iowa, *Journal*. From there, Twain spent years working as a journalist, short story writer, and then the author of popular travel narratives such as *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, which took his readers to the Holy Land by ship and the American west by stagecoach, respectively. A novel, *The Gilded Age*, came next, with a small sampling of Mississippi River prose, most notably in the celebrated chapter devoted to a steamboat race.

One day in 1874, Twain was out walking with a friend, telling tales of his time as a cub pilot on the Mississippi, when his friend remarked that this would make a brilliant series of magazine articles. (This was a good twenty years after Twain launched his career.) Twain contacted William Dean Howells, his friend and editor of the august *Atlantic* magazine, at the time the doyenne of East Coast literary journals, who instantly agreed that this would be a wonderful story for their readers. Twain began submitting tales of his exploits as a cub pilot to the *Atlantic* every month. This collection became known as "Old Times on the Mississippi." Twain later repurposed the collection as the soul of *Life on the Mississippi*. This series proved to be enormously popular. Life on the river broke his family's back financially (specifically his father John and brother Orion), but later, it made a fortune for Twain through his books.



Cover of the first American edition of *Huckleberry Finn*.  
Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



8369

The next decade was the most fertile of Twain's entire career: during it he published *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Life on the Mississippi* (1882), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Three of those five great works are his masterpieces. With the river as his subject, Twain could discuss his childhood, his aspirations, the loves of his life. He examined and described history, machinery, capitalism, slavery, murder, deceit, mystery, theater, and tragedy through the lens of life on the river. *Huckleberry Finn*, with its vivid portrayal of the antebellum South, racism, and the evils of slavery, is still controversial—130 years after its publication.

Twain knew that the Mississippi offered high adventure and low comedy. The river lingered everywhere and was the backdrop for scenes large and small.

Twain's books captured this country's imagination from the get-go, and what we know of him today—the cigars, the white suit, the great wisps of silver hair, and that mustache—we seek to keep alive even now. Mississippi River towns have schools and streets and bridges dedicated to the man.

---

Mark Twain wrote some of his most famous work in this octagonal study, including much of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*. The study used to be at Quarry Farm, but is now on the Elmira College campus in Elmira, NY.  
© Folio / Alamy

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Actors read from his books dressed as the author in a white suit, an affectation of his later years. People buy leather-bound and gilt-edged editions of his books and actually read them, which would certainly have amused the man who once said that a classic could be defined as a “book which people praise but don’t read.” People travel to Hannibal, to his home in Hartford, Connecticut, and even to the shack where he was born in Florida, Missouri. In these days of powerful computers that fit into pockets, of computer-generated movies, of a million

distractions from a million sources, people still read Twain. Dozens of editions of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* exist, from e-books to cheap paperbacks to lavish annotated hardcovers, and the first volume of his complete autobiography, withheld from the public for a century at his request, was a surprising *New York Times* bestseller. Readers by the thousands still enjoy transporting themselves back to the Mississippi River in the company of Twain, whether in the pilot-house of a steamboat or on a raft floating past Cairo, Illinois, in the fog.

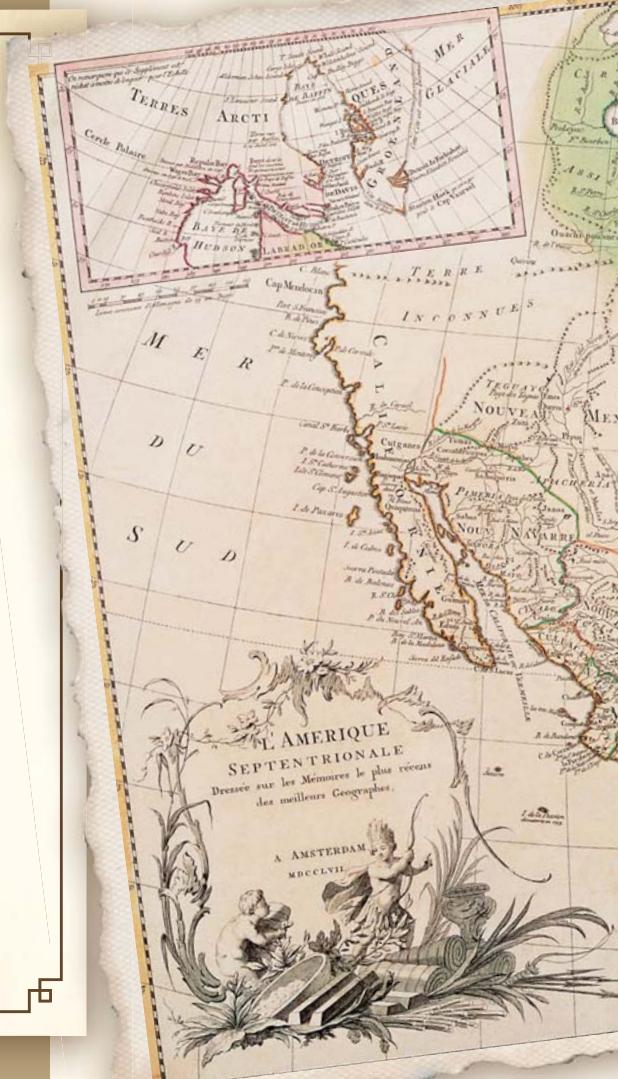


Tourists ride the *Mark Twain* paddlewheeler on the Mississippi River from Twain's hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. © Ilene MacDonald / Alamy



## CHAPTER 1

# The EARLY HISTORY OF THE RIVER and the DAWN OF STEAMBOATING



Mid-eighteenth-century map of North America. Corbis

Considering the Missouri its main branch, [the Mississippi] is the longest river in the world—four thousand three hundred miles. It seems safe to say that it is also the crookedest river in the world, since in one part of its journey it uses up one thousand three hundred miles to cover the same ground that the crow would fly over in six hundred and seventy-five. It discharges three times as much water as the St. Lawrence, twenty-five times as much as the Rhine, and three hundred and thirty-eight times as much as the Thames. No other river has so vast a drainage-basin: it draws its water supply from twenty-eight States and Territories; from Delaware, on the Atlantic seaboard, and from all the country between that and Idaho on the Pacific slope—a spread of forty-five degrees of longitude.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter I

The power of the Mississippi River, as a physical force and a mythological one, makes us yearn for stories as much as it whets our appetite for facts. Mark Twain was both a connoisseur of tall tales and an ink-stained newspaperman who understood the allure of hard numbers, and he knew that descriptions of this body of water, which so influenced everything in his life, were equal parts truths and “stretchers.” This duality is perhaps most apparent in *Life on the Mississippi*, which opens with its famous array of facts—most of them actually true.

Just as sometimes a minor event launches a world-changing war, the Mississippi begins as a mere trickle that belies its southern magnificence. Its headwater is Lake Itasca, a small, stream-fed lake located in upper



**ABOVE:** Minnesota's Lake Itasca, the ultimate source of the Mississippi River. *Library of Congress*

**RIGHT:** Henry Schoolcraft (1793–1864), who in 1832 established that Lake Itasca (which he named) is the primary source of the Mississippi River. *Library of Congress*





Itasca Lake, painted by Seth Eastman in 1853.  
© SuperStock / Alamy

Minnesota. There you'll find the only spot along the whole of the river's 2,320 miles where an able-bodied person can jump across the water. (It's so narrow, even children hop over the Mississippi.) In 1832, the geologist (and geographer, ethnologist, publisher, and explorer) Henry Schoolcraft, led by an Anishinabe guide named Ozawindib, was the first person to acknowledge that Itasca was the source of the great river, and it was he who gave the lake its name. (It is an amalgam of the Latin words *veritas* and *caput*, meaning "truth" and "head" respectively.) Quite a few decades later, Jacob V. Brower, himself a man of many

talents (historian, anthropologist, and surveyor), and who apparently settled any arguments over whether Itasca was in fact the headwater, helped establish Lake Itasca and its environs as a Minnesota State Park.

From this modest source, the river meanders north for a few miles, then slices east, seeming to vanish momentarily into wide Lake Winnibigoshish, before curving and wiggling southward through the state's vast forests. Farther south, it straightens out (relatively speaking), and then

widens and deepens just past the town of Brainerd. Continuing on, it digs itself out the only gorge in the whole of its journey, flowing between tremendous walls of limestone that give the river a dramatic appearance as it cuts through Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

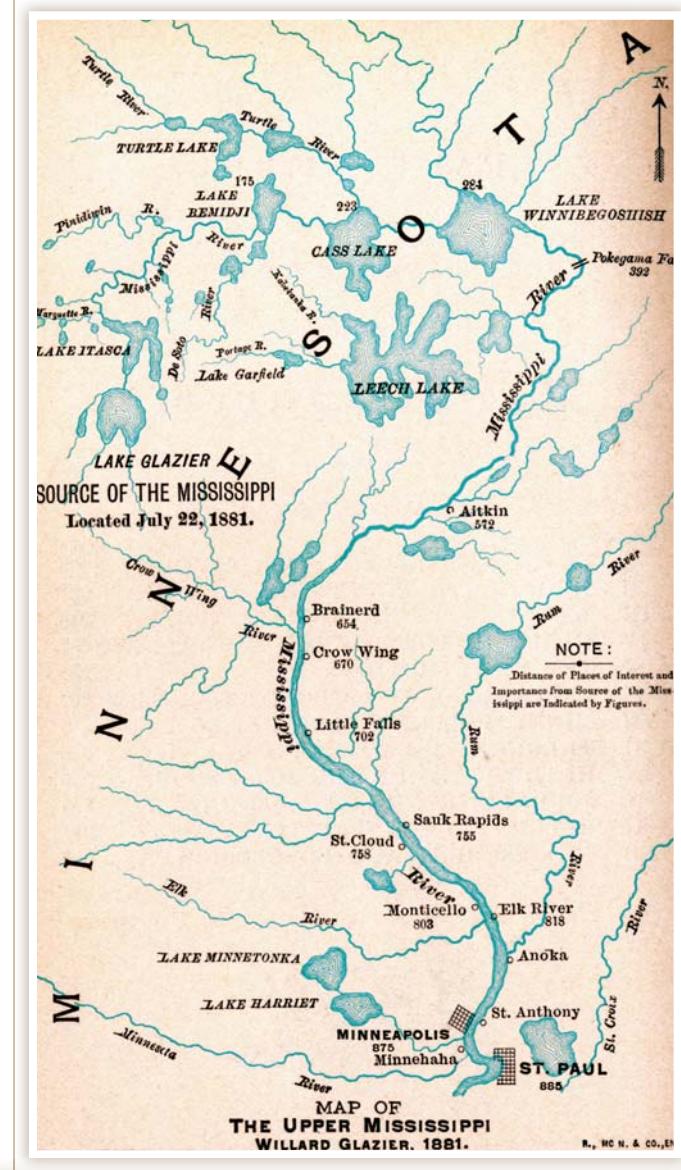
From there it winds through nine more states, controlled today by vast levees, through the cities of Saint Louis; Memphis, Tennessee; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and New Orleans before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, it pulls with it tremendous amounts of mud and silt, a good deal of which comes from the Missouri River, drifting the rest of the way before depositing its alluvium and creating its great fanlike delta in the Gulf of Mexico. In the late nineteenth century, when

*Life on the Mississippi* was written, the Mississippi created “four hundred and six million tons” of silt, which, “solidified, would make a mass a mile square and two hundred and forty-one feet high”—a monument that could exist nowhere outside of Twain’s imagination.

The mud further inspired Twain to claim that “scientific people” believe that the Mississippi originally terminated at Baton Rouge, but that the flow of silt gradually built the rest of Louisiana, creating the “youthfullest batch of country,” just over a “hundred and twenty thousand years” old. That would actually make Louisiana quite *old*, or at least older than the Laurentide Ice Sheet, the massive glacier that swallowed up most of Canada and a good central chunk of this country, and that carved out the valley and helped create the river. That ice sheet came to an end ten thousand to fifteen thousand years ago, according to scientists at Princeton University—a good many years *before* the supposed creation of the delta (and by extension, the river itself), according to Twain’s army of experts.

When the glacier eventually receded, it left behind a thick layer of sediment that has given the valley some of the most fertile soil on Earth. Additionally, as the ice sheet melted away, the runoff created all the thousands of rivers and streams that drained into what we know as the Mississippi, and these rivers, unrestrained by levees and channels, cut across the valley, slicing away land, adding land, and flooding the land, all of which further enriched the soil with sediment to make the valley a farmer’s paradise.

The Mississippi Valley is startling in its excess, pulling water from thirty-two states and a pair of Canadian provinces. In Twain’s time, when he was busy accumulating the data that opens *Life on the Mississippi*, six of those states were territories: among them the Dakotas, linked as one unit, and Oklahoma, known as Indian Territory. In the west, the valley stretches from Montana (and the thinnest slice of Idaho) straight down to New Mexico. In the east, the valley runs from the Appalachians in New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Virginia on down to



Headwaters of the Mississippi as surveyed during the 1890s.  
Willard Glazier, Headwaters of the Mississippi (1894)

the northwestern corner of Georgia. This is an impressive spread, but one that Twain inexplicably widened, and whose accommodating states he undercounted: “twenty-eight States and Territories; from Delaware, on the Atlantic Seaboard. . . .” It’s difficult to imagine, even for the time, anyone believing that Delaware drained into the Mississippi Valley; to do so, its rainwater would have to ferry across the Chesapeake Bay and then *ascend* the Appalachians before beginning its journey to the river: a pretty far-fetched yarn even by Twain’s standards.

More facts: Water in the Mississippi moves slowly: 1.2 miles per hour at Lake Itasca and 3 miles per hour in New Orleans, or about the speed at which a person walks. It takes a drop of water ninety days to hike the length of the river. At the headwaters, its flow rate is 6 cubic feet per second. The river’s



ABOVE: The Falls of Saint Anthony, future site of Minneapolis. Color lithograph by Henry Lewis. *William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 4.*

LEFT: Downtown New Orleans, Louisiana, from across the Mississippi River. © Vespasian / Alamy



RIGHT: In a 1944 report for the Army Corps of Engineers, Harold Fisk included fifteen maps of the Mississippi River—from Illinois to Louisiana—that show its former channels. The twisting braid of channels perfectly illustrates Twain's description of the river's behavior. View the maps on the website of cartographer William Rankin at [radicalcartography.net](http://radicalcartography.net). *Harold Fisk, The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River (1944)*



rate is 12,000 cubic feet per second as it roars over the Upper Saint Anthony Falls in the heart of Minneapolis, and an impressive 600,000 cubic feet plows through the river every second outside New Orleans. The muddy river provides water for eighteen million Americans. This tap water has been greatly cleansed since Twain's day, when he reported a gentleman complaining about the drinkability of "this slush" and claimed he could only get it down if he "had some other water to wash it with."

Today, the valley produces 92 percent of America's agricultural exports; 60 percent of all the grain shipped overseas goes for a ride down the Mississippi, where it reaches the largest port on the planet, the Port of South Louisiana. The river is home to 25 percent of all the species of fish on the continent, and 40 percent of North American birds follow the trail of the barges during their spring and fall migrations.

Before the Mississippi was dredged, leveed, straightened, and generally tamed in the twentieth century, it used to bend and twist across the fertile valley, wreaking havoc on farmers and sharecroppers and steamboat pilots alike.

The water cuts the alluvial banks of the "lower" river into deep horseshoe curves; so deep, indeed, that in some places if you were to get ashore at one extremity of the horseshoe and walk across the neck, half or three quarters of a mile, you could sit down and rest a couple of hours while your steamer was coming around the long elbow, at a speed of ten miles an hour, to take you aboard again.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XVII*

These are known as meander loops. On old maps the river appears to be a long string of elbows or a tangle of pasta. In the gorgeous tome *Geological Investigation of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*, cartographer Harold Fisk drew what looks like dozens of

multicolored boa constrictors winding over a green countryside—these are all the old paths of the southern river, and in the center, the leveed modern route is straight and clear in contrast. Once the river looped around thousands of elbows, carving away at land and shaping itself differently almost every day. However, after the Civil War, it surrendered itself to a fairly straight procession southward, thanks to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their domineering levees, which took away many of the curves and left the river as we know it now. If you take a drive or a stroll along the Mississippi's banks today, there's a good chance you're actually trespassing where Twain used to drive his steamboats as a cub pilot.

This untamed, meandering movement of the river is a reflection of an effect known as helicoidal flow, a corkscrew-like motion. The river valley south of Iowa is relatively flat, but with just enough contour to make the Mississippi twist about as the water seeks the low places. With helicoidal flow, the river moves fast on the outer curves of its banks, chewing away land, while on the inner curves the river plods along more slowly and deposits the silt it's eaten along the way. The Mississippi had, and continues to have (to a much lesser degree) the strange effect of having had almost symmetrical loops from helicoidal flow. Some loops widened and widened into U-shaped bends called oxbows. Meanwhile, the oxbows narrowed at the inner curves, so that eventually they cut through (or were cut through by a town's civic engineers or a wily farmer) to meet one another, thus cutting off the bend of the river. These were known, naturally, as cutoffs.

These cutoffs shorten the river at various intervals, devouring a person's property, cutting off small villages from the river (and subsequently, from the river trade), sometimes moving a town upriver, as in the case of the long-lost Mississippi hamlet of Delta, which Twain described as having shifted from three miles below Vicksburg to two miles upriver thanks to a cutoff.



When the river is rising fast, some scoundrel whose plantation is back in the country, and therefore of inferior value, has only to watch his chance, cut a little gutter across the narrow neck of land some dark night, and turn the water into it, and in a wonderfully short time a miracle has happened: to wit, the whole Mississippi has taken possession of that little ditch, and placed the countryman's plantation on its bank (quadrupling its value), and that other party's formerly valuable plantation finds itself away out yonder on a big island. . . .

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XVII

If your property sat on the inside of one of these loops, and the river cut through at the narrow point, you might find yourself in another state. In fact, every state through which the Mississippi flows uses it to serve as at least a partial border. So while your street address might remain the same after the cutoff, you'd be cut off your governor, your senator, and your flag, and your taxes would change overnight. And perhaps most significantly, before the Civil War, if you lived along the Missouri-Illinois border, you might go from resident of a slave state to one of a free state (or vice versa). For this reason, the Mississippi was known (among its many nicknames) as the Abolitionist River.

## Settlement and exploration

Like many people of his time, Twain saw the river's human history almost solely in terms of its relationship with European settlers. "Let us . . . say a word about its historical history—so to speak." In *Life on the Mississippi*, he began this "historical history" in 1542 with Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto's reaching the Mississippi; in reality, its history goes back much further.

Early Native Americans lived along the river as early as eleven thousand years ago, according to some archaeologists. After the glaciers retreated, during the period known as the Paleolithic, people flocked

to the Mississippi Valley for food. Eventually these societies coalesced into early villages, and then into larger communities engaged in fairly complex agriculture, the manufacture of ceramics, and the creation of governments, which fashioned treaties and agreements with other communities. These were the Native American peoples whom white European settlers encountered and eventually displaced—the Sioux and the Illini in the northern Mississippi region, the Chickasaw in what is now Arkansas, and farther south the Quapaw, Natchez, Choctaw, and Tunica—many of whom ran afoul of de Soto, who was credited with the river's "discovery."

"To say that De Soto, the first white man who ever saw the Mississippi River, saw it in 1542," Twain wrote in *Life on the Mississippi*, "is a remark which states a fact without interpreting it. . . ." About this Twain was correct, as he proceeded to pin that date on a larger temporal map, showing its relation to other significant events: Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the death of Raphael had happened less than twenty-five years earlier; Mary Queen of Scots was about to be born; jousting was all the rage; and people were being burned alive in the frenzy of the Spanish Inquisition; Miguel de Cervantes hadn't yet written *Don Quixote*; and William Shakespeare wasn't born. But here is also where Twain the historian with limited facts and Twain the storyteller collide: some historians recognize Alonso Álvarez de Piñeda as the first European to lay eyes on the Mississippi. Piñeda even mapped it, calling the river Río del Espíritu Santo, or River of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, many believe today that de Soto saw the Mississippi in 1541 and died a year later, not 1542 and 1543 as Twain wrote. What is known is that de Soto and his crew ventured through what we know today as the Deep South, en route to finding the river, attacking and being attacked by native peoples, kidnapping and plundering the same along the way.



In de Soto, we see the Spanish conquistador who roamed through southern North America looking for vast wealth and a route to China (probably to attain even more wealth). After arriving from Spain on a fleet of nine ships and landing in what is today southern Florida on the Gulf side, the explorer and his company followed rumors of gold. They traveled up from the panhandle and into what is now Georgia, and then went west, encountering various friendly and hostile native people, before alighting on the Mississippi. Twain was correct in dismissing this first sighting. “De Soto merely glimpsed the river, then died and was buried in it by his priests and soldiers.” De Soto considered the

river a great impediment, gave it no more thought than as an obstacle to overcome. He died of fever the next year. It is said that he was buried along the river in secret. The reason for this is said to be that, in earlier attempts to intimidate various native peoples, he had claimed to be a sun god. Naturally, if the sun god succumbed to fever, that would complicate life for the ragtag crew left behind.

De Soto (or, more accurately, his men) figured out the Mississippi was not a route to the Pacific, having floated downstream after their leader’s death and emerged in the Gulf of Mexico. They returned to Spain with maps and information, but Spain seemed uninterested. As

Twain wrote, “After De Soto glimpsed the river, a fraction short of a quarter of a century elapsed, and then Shakespeare was born; lived a trifle more than a half a century, then died; and when he had been in his grave considerably more than half a century, the *second* white man saw the Mississippi. In our day we don’t allow a hundred and thirty years to elapse between glimpses of a marvel.”

Years after Shakespeare’s birth, success, demise, and decomposition, commerce and religion would motivate a number of

In this 1853 oil painting, William Henry Powell imagined Hernando de Soto discovering the Mississippi River in 1541. The painting was commissioned by Congress and hangs in the Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D.C.  
© ClassicStock / Alamy

**RIGHT:** Late nineteenth-century painting of Jacques Marquette (1637–1675) and Louis Jolliet (1645–ca. 1700) descending the Upper Mississippi in 1673. *Willard Glazier, Headwaters of the Mississippi (1894)*  
**BELLOW RIGHT:** Imaginative late nineteenth-century illustration of Hernando de Soto's secret funeral on the Mississippi River in 1542. *Library of Congress*

Frenchmen to explore the Mississippi River. Twain wrote that René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, or Robert La Salle, was the first to envision the idea of the Mississippi as a commercial hub, imagining a series of trading posts along the river (and, again, a route to China). But in his first attempt, La Salle failed to reach the river, going only so far as the Ohio, in 1669. According to Twain, the Frenchman “spent several years and about all of his money” in trying to get an expedition going to the Mississippi.

“It always happens that when a man seizes upon a neglected and important idea, people inflamed with the same notion crop up all around,” Twain observed. And so it was that just a few years later, in 1673, the Jesuit priest Jacques Marquette and explorer Louis Jolliet (himself once a Jesuit novice) struck out at the behest of the French government in Canada to find souls to save and, certainly more pressing to France, resources to exploit—and, of course, that passage to China. Marquette and Jolliet, leaving Saint Ignace in what is now northern Michigan, crossed Lake Michigan, headed down Green Bay, paddled down the Fox River, and then portaged to the Wisconsin River, where they finally reached the Mississippi. Pushing south in their canoe, they moved swiftly over the swollen river, careful to take



notes and draw maps along the way. Twain wrote that at one point they were attacked by a giant catfish, were met by hospitable Indians, and made their way to the Gulf of Mexico. It's also true that the pair moved with incredible stealth, hoping to avoid Spanish soldiers, with whom their country was at war. Twain noted that through their exploits they came to believe that the Mississippi emptied to the Gulf (hopefully cancelling any more expeditions to China), but they never actually reached their destination. However, as Twain observed, "belief is not proof. It was up to La Salle to furnish the proof." Sadly, Jolliet may have actually possessed more evidence than just belief, but on his trip to Montreal to report his findings, his canoe was overturned in the turbulent waters of the Saint Lawrence River, and all the notes and maps they'd spent months creating were lost.

Now it was La Salle's turn to take advantage of this information. Thanks to the work of Jolliet and Marquette, La Salle could now actually



plan that chain of forts and could realize his dream of trading furs all along the Mississippi down to the Gulf, where they could be shipped to European markets and the East Coast of an emerging America. But despite La Salle's continuing bad luck—losing a valuable trading ship that nearly ruined him financially, among other troubles—he managed to throw together an expedition with Henri de Tonti, a soldier of fortune, that would traverse the entire river. On April 9, 1682, in the site that would become known as Napoleon, Arkansas (a town that would eventually vanish in the flood of 1874), La Salle and his priests declared that the river and the entire valley that fed it was to be known as La Louisiane in honor of King Louis XIV.

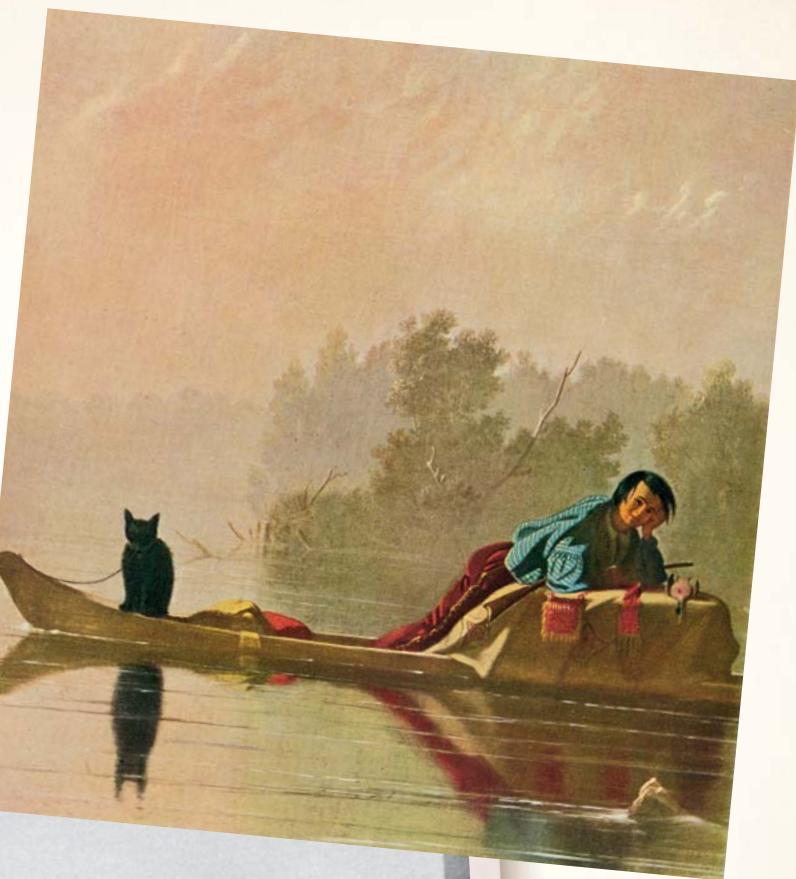
Then, to the admiration of the savages, La Salle set up a cross with the arms of France on it, and took possession of the whole country for the king—the cool fashion of the time—while the priest piously consecrated the robbery with a hymn. The priest explained the mysteries of the faith "by signs," for the saving of the savages; thus compensating them with possible possessions in Heaven for the certain ones on earth which they had just been robbed of. And also, by signs, La Salle drew from these simple children of the forest acknowledgments of fealty to Louis the Putrid, over the water. Nobody smiled at these colossal ironies.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter II*

Late nineteenth-century drawing of the Sieur de La Salle (1643–1687) claiming the Mississippi River in the name of France in 1682. Willard Glazier, *Headwaters of the Mississippi* (1894)

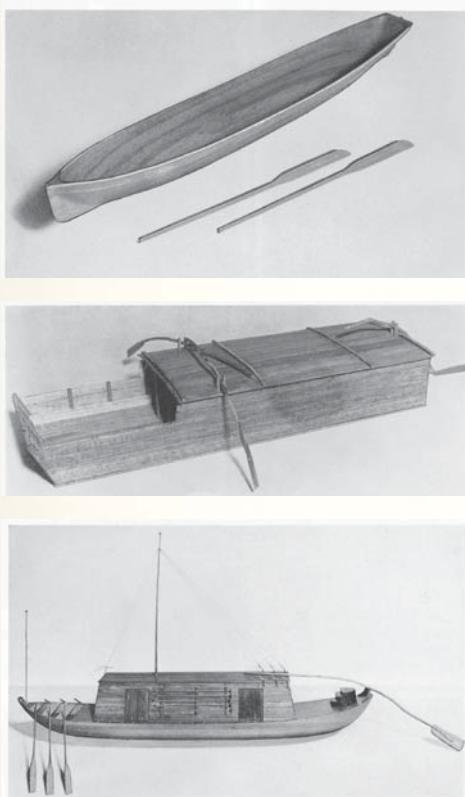
**RIGHT:** Detail from *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, an 1846 oil painting by George Caleb Bingham. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 20. The Missouri, which enters the Mississippi River north of Saint Louis, was likewise populated by the riverboatmen that Twain sketched so vividly.

**BELOW:** Reproduction of *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, an 1857 oil painting by George Caleb Bingham. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 18. In *The Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, James H. Baker wrote about riverboatmen: "Said one of these men, long past seventy years of age: 'I could carry, paddle, walk and sing with any man I ever saw. I have been twenty-four years a canoe man, and forty-one years in service; no portage was ever too long for me. Fifty songs could I sing. I have saved the lives of ten voyageurs. Have had twelve wives and six running dogs. I spent all my money in pleasure. Were I young again, I should spend my life the same way over. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life.'"





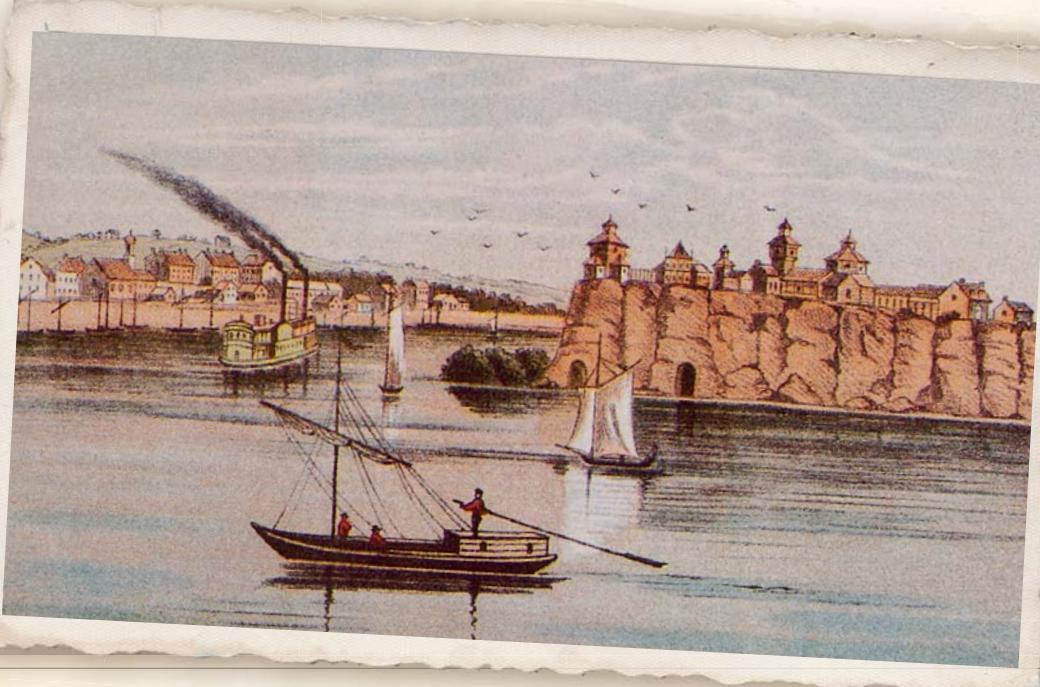
Raftsmen Playing Cards, an 1847 oil painting by George Caleb Bingham. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, frontis. In Chapter III of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain introduces readers to riverboatmen in a famous verbal duel. The opening volley: "Whoo-oop! I'm the old original iron-jawed, brass-mounted, copper-bellied corpse-maker from the wilds of Arkansaw!—Look at me! I'm the man they call Sudden Death and General Desolation! Sired by a hurricane, dam'd by an earthquake, half-brother to the cholera, nearly related to the small-pox on the mother's side! Look at me! I take nineteen alligators and a bar'l of whiskey for breakfast when I'm in robust health, and a bushel of rattlesnakes and a dead body when I'm ailing! I split the everlasting rocks with my glance, and I quench the thunder when I speak! Whoo-oop! Stand back and give me room according to my strength! Blood's my natural drink, and the wails of the dying is music to my ear! Cast your eye on me, gentlemen!—and lay low and hold your breath, for I'm bout to turn myself loose!"



**TOP:** Model of a pirogue, a boat used by voyageurs and trappers on the Mississippi. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 307

**MIDDLE:** Flatboat model. Flatboats carried supplies and typically had crews of ten. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 308

**BOTTOM:** Keelboat model. A keelboat journey from New Orleans to St. Louis took about three months. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 309



**ABOVE:** A variety of boats on the river at Fort Armstrong-Davenport in the mid-1800s. Color lithograph by Henry Lewis. *William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 41.*

## Early river traffic

“Apparently the river was ready for business, now,” Twain wrote, sarcastically, as the European settlers trickled in. Here we begin to see the advent of boats other than canoes and rafts, and the dawn of the age of the Mississippi River commerce that eventually created towns like Hannibal, and that led to the steamboat that so inspired Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

“The river’s earliest traffic was in great barges—keelboats, broadhorns. They floated and sailed from the upper rivers to New Orleans, changed cargoes there, and were tediously warped and poled back by hand.”

Actually, the river’s earliest traffic drifted downstream on canoes and pirogues (and also, as Twain correctly observed, poled tediously back north upon return), growing in size to larger rafts. In 1705, just a couple of decades past La Salle’s bold proclamation, the first recorded cargo of fifteen thousand bear and deer hides sailed down the Mississippi on a raft. The bullboat also emerged.



This was a round, bowl-like craft, made by stretching bison bull hide (hence the name) over saplings. These smaller vessels, about six feet in diameter, could carry almost three tons of hide and other supplies, while remaining fairly high in the water. Without rudders, they were paddled and poled down the river, and sometimes up, depending on the strength of the crew. But really, anything that could float was tossed on the river, in an attempt to take advantage of the current's ability to get you south in a hurry (and the fact that, despite the river's many dangers, this was a safer and swifter route than overland hauling—at least until the railroads came). Virtually every conceivable craft floated downstream—from the aforementioned canoes and rafts and bullboats to enormous, barge-size rafts, plus Mackinaws (rafts tapered at both ends), flatboats (rafts made with planks instead of logs), and keelboats (long, flat boats with keels, making for better navigation and protection against sandbars)—all making their way down and up the river. People lived and worked on the boats, large and small, and often you'd find a blacksmith or some other tradesman trying to make a living floating from one town to the next.

To read *Life on the Mississippi*, you might think Twain was concerned only with steamboat travel. Certainly steamboats inspired him. *Life on the Mississippi* can be

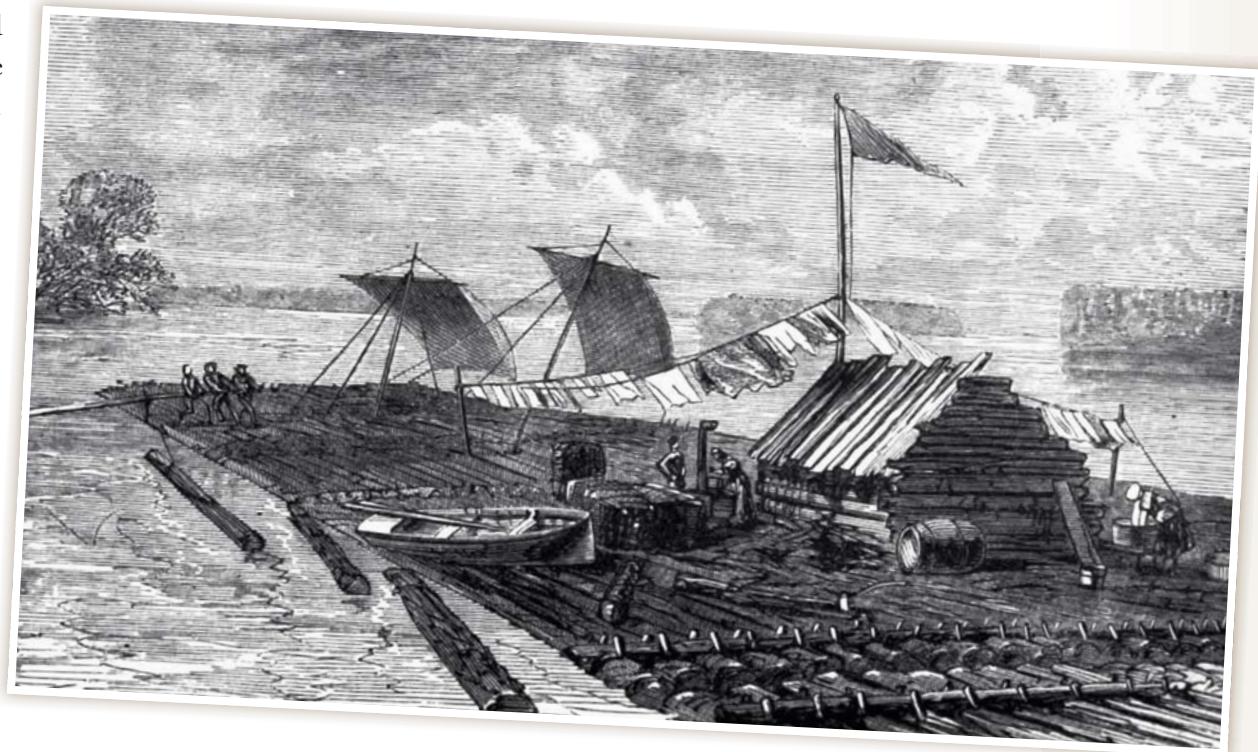
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Giant raft drifting down the Upper Mississippi during the nineteenth century. Willard Glazier, *Down the Great River* (1892)

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categorized as a book primarily concerned with life on the river as experienced on a steamboat—that was Twain's intention. But he loved all river craft. So we also see that *Huckleberry Finn* is a book concerned with other modes of water transportation. In that novel Twain included steamboats, flatboats, and rafts, large and small. And let's not forget that he also included an exciting raft scene in Chapter 3 of *Life on the Mississippi*—which itself was originally a part of Chapter 16 of *Huckleberry Finn*—in which he described these massive floating workshops.

I remember the annual processions of mighty rafts that used to glide by Hannibal when I was a boy,—an acre or so of white, sweet-smelling boards in each raft, a crew of two dozen men or more, three or four wigwams scattered about the raft's vast level space for storm-quarters,—and

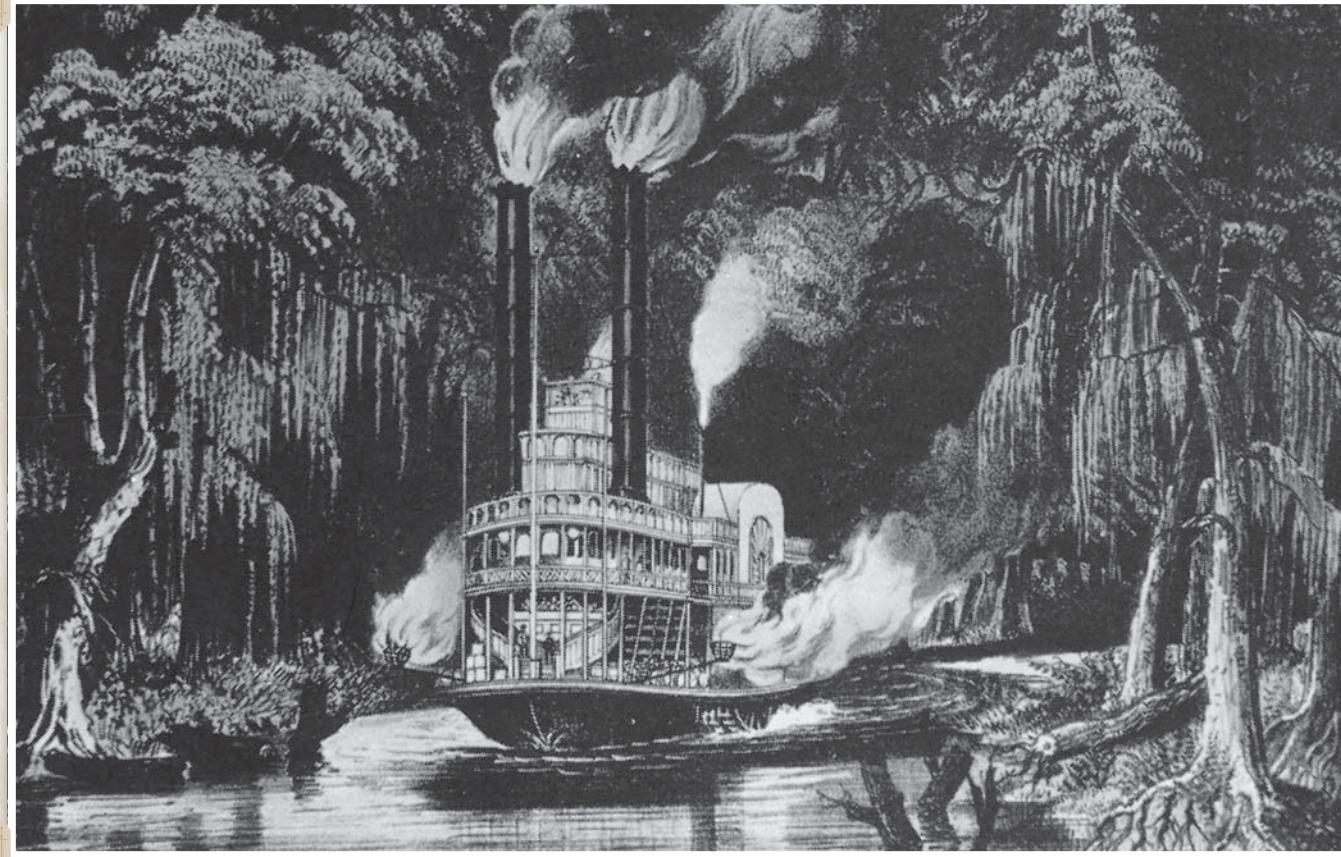


I remember the rude ways and the tremendous talk of their big crews, the ex-keelboatmen and their admiringly patterning successors; for we used to swim out a quarter or third of a mile and get on these rafts and have a ride.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter III*

The raft is different from a flatboat only in that it has sides and a bottom made from logs, as opposed to planks. In “Frescoes from

the Past,” Chapter III of *Life on the Mississippi*, we see that the giant raft was replete with an open fire pit, a cabin, tents, a flagpole (if the illustrations are to be believed), and room enough for fisticuffs, dancing, and even for people to get struck by lightning and chased down by dead babies floating in barrels (the preferred mode of river travel for ghosts, apparently). Though Twain piloted a steamboat for a good many years (and enjoyed its fantastic wages), he had a soft spot for the “lesser” vessels, too.



In steamboats, Charles Dickens saw not so much the beauty but the danger: “Passing one of these boats at night, and seeing the great body of fire...that rages and roars beneath the frail pile of painted wood ... one feels directly that the wonder is, not that there should be so many fatal accidents, but that any journey should be safely made.” *American Notes, 1842. Through the Bayou by Torchlight, lithograph, anonymous. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 140*

But “by and by the steamboat intruded.” When steamboats chugged down the river, they always mingled with other traffic, if only the rafts that wily children threw together to take their sometimes deadly mini-excursions around the river.

The first steamboat was built in 1806 by Robert Fulton. It was a ship called the *Clermont* (other sources refer to it as the *North River*, after the original name of the Hudson River), a sidewheeler that made a few successful commercial trips up and down the Hudson. It took five more years for a Fulton steamboat to finally navigate the waters of America’s greatest river. On October 20, 1811, Fulton’s company launched the *New Orleans* from Pittsburgh, sailing down the Ohio to the Mississippi and to the city for which the big boat was named.

With a weak engine and a hull design that kept the boat low in the water, the *New Orleans* had a rough go of it during the maiden voyage of nearly three months. The ship narrowly missed being affected by the chaos of the great earthquake that hit New Madrid, Missouri—the legend that the earthquake made the river run backward is exaggerated, but certainly the water would have seen unprecedented turbulence from the quake, which registered an estimated 7.0 on the Richter scale (to this day the most powerful one ever recorded in North America)—and outside Henderson, Kentucky, the ship had to gun its engines to outrun angry Chickasaws. A few days later a fire broke out that almost totally destroyed the ship.

Bad luck wasn’t the only problem, however: The *New Orleans* was destined to fail, thanks to its design. However, a man named Henry Shreve was paying very close attention to its attempts. A gruff, self-schooled man, Shreve was an innovator who saw that the *New Orleans*, as well as the *Enterprise*, a steamboat that he was later commissioned to pilot down the Mississippi to deliver arms to Andrew Jackson’s army in 1814, were inadequate for the Mississippi’s unique brand of navigation.

One of his innovations was placing the engine above the water, rather than below deck in the hold. Below-deck engines kept steamboats like the *Enterprise* and *New Orleans* low in the water, a poor strategy in a river that was studded with snags, sawyers, preachers (all three

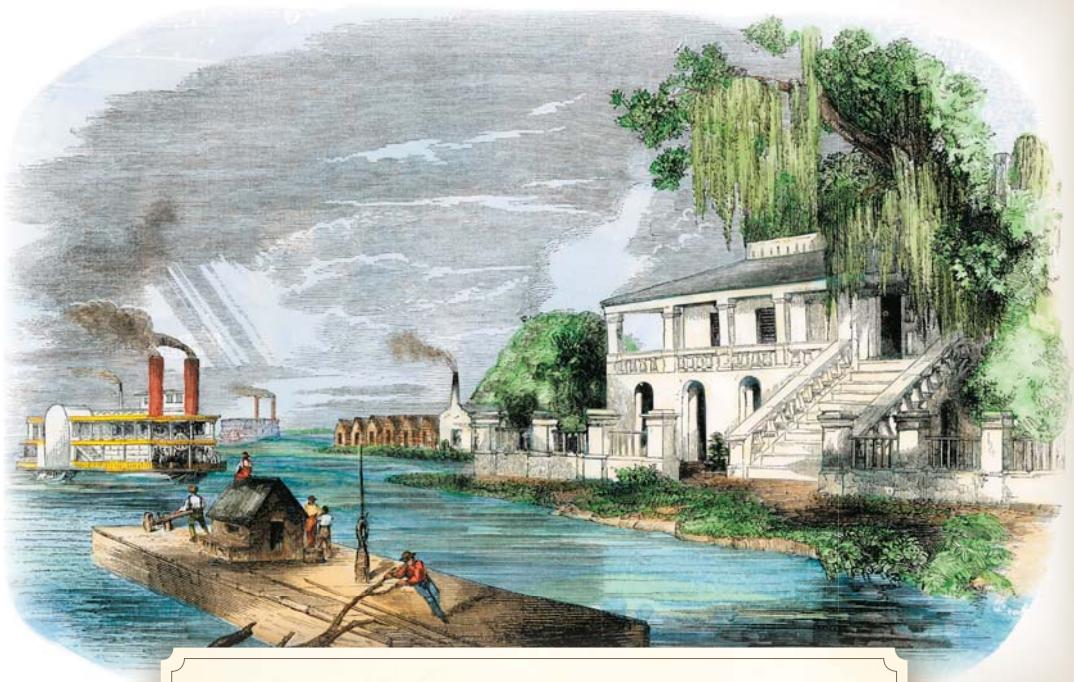


Snags (dead trees half-immersed in the river) were a great danger to steamboats. Perry T. Rathbone, Mississippi Panorama, Plate 183

forms of trees that ended up in the water and endangered boats), sandbars, and many more hazards that the river seemed to almost gleefully hurl in the path of steamboats. The Shreve-designed engines used high-pressure (as opposed to the low-pressure version of the aforementioned boats) and horizontal cylinders, which fit the boat better than vertical cylinders. Shreve incorporated all his innovations in his inaugural steamboat, the *Washington*, in 1816. In just two short years, most boats used Shreve specifications. Shreve went on to design snagboats to help remove dead trees from the rivers (perhaps the greatest impediment to steamboating at the time), and thanks to the many improvements he made to shipping and to the waters themselves, the Louisiana city of Shreveport bears his name.

Each and every day, these glorious steamboats would arrive in Twain's hometown of Hannibal on the banks of the Mississippi. The steamboats captured his imagination and fostered a love for the great river machines that would last a lifetime. The steamboat era was brief, however. By the time Twain published *Life on the Mississippi*, the steamboat's reign as the king of river travel and commerce had been over for many decades. The Civil War hastened its ending, and the more efficient railroad began to move up and down the river and carry passengers toward both coasts from towns as modest as Hannibal and Natchez, Mississippi.

And the boat *is* rather a handsome sight, too. She is long and sharp and trim and pretty; she has two tall, fancy-topped chimneys, with a gilded device of some kind swung between them; a fanciful pilot-house, all glass and "gingerbread," perched on top of the "texas" deck behind them; the paddle boxes are gorgeous with a picture or with gilded rays above the boat's name; the boiler deck, the hurricane deck, and the texas deck are



In this hand-colored woodcut of a nineteenth-century illustration, steamboats and a raft pass a sugar plantation on the Mississippi River. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy

fenced and ornamented with clean white railings; there is a flag gallantly flying from the jack-staff; the furnace doors are open and the fires glaring bravely; the upper decks are black with passengers; the captain stands by the big bell, calm, imposing, the envy of all; great volumes of the blackest smoke are rolling and tumbling out of the chimneys. . . .

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IV*





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CHAPTER 2

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# MARK TWAIN'S EARLY LIFE and TIMES, 1839—1856

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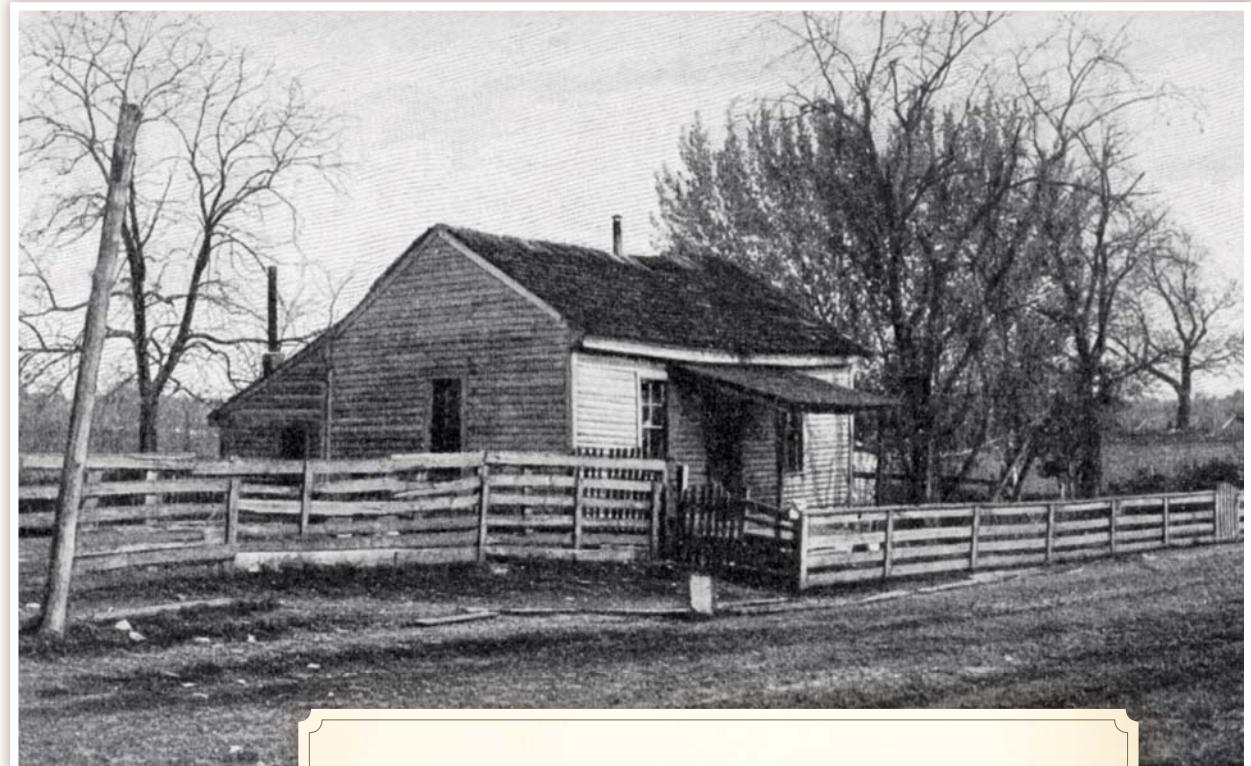


A sleepy Hannibal in the mid-1800s. Color lithograph by Henry Lewis. *William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 53.*

I was born the 30th of November, 1835, in the almost invisible village of Florida, Monroe County, Missouri. My parents removed to Missouri in the early 'thirties; I do not remember just when, for I was not born then and cared nothing for such things. It was a long journey in those days and must have been a rough and tiresome one. The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 per cent. It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town. It may not be modest in me to refer to this but it is true. There is no record of a person doing as much—not even Shakespeare. But I did it for Florida and it shows that I could have done it for any place—even London, I suppose.

—*Autobiography of Mark Twain, Chapter 1*

Despite Florida's not being situated on the river, and playing a much smaller part in his literature, Mark Twain held a warm regard for the "almost invisible village" of his birth, where his family had settled just before he was born. Years prior, his father, John Marshall Clemens, a man seemingly incapable of making a decent living, hauled his family from Kentucky to Eastern Tennessee and then to the western half of that state in a series of futile attempts to make a home and, if not his fortune, a solid salary as a storekeeper. When that failed, they headed north, to Louisville, Kentucky, and from there took a series of steamboats to Saint Louis. (Some of Twain's biographers speculate that Samuel Clemens was actually conceived on one of these steamboats.)



The Florida, Missouri, home in which Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born on November 30, 1835. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography* (1912)

From Saint Louis, they headed northwest to Florida, Missouri.

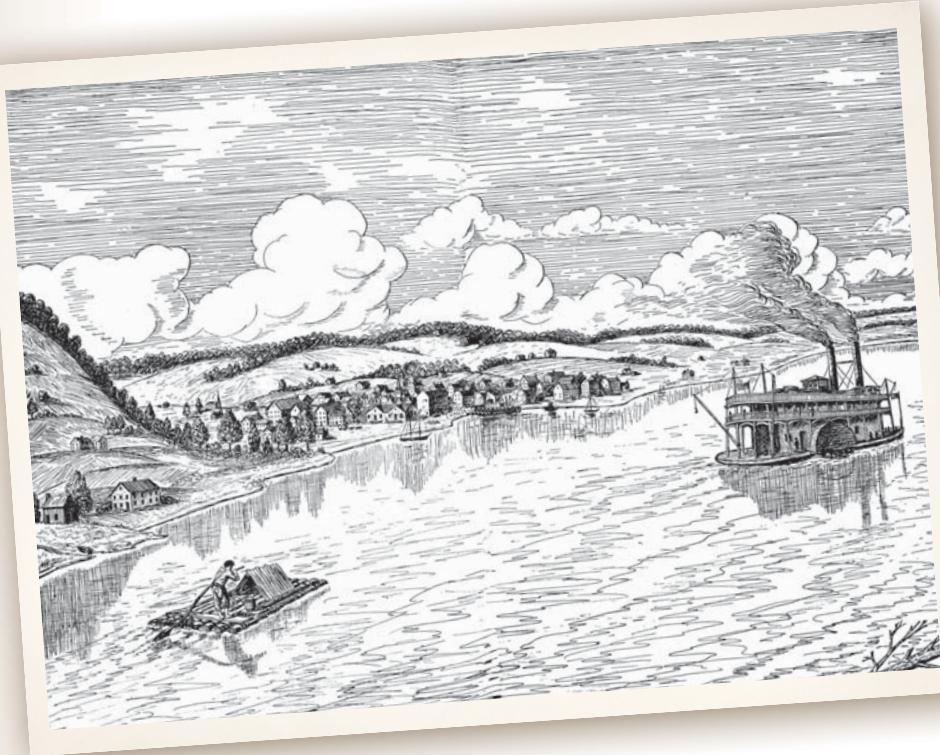
Twain's memories and good feelings about this hamlet were settled squarely on the farm of his uncle, John A. Quarles, where young Sammy ate well, laughed with the men and women serving as slaves (many of whom inspired characters in his later works, most notably Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*), and played in the fields surrounding the ranch. However, the Clemens house in the Florida town limits (if in fact the village had borders) was a rundown shack with a serious lean. "Heretofore I have always stated that it was a palace but I shall be more



guarded now," he observed upon visiting the place many years later. It was probably half a miracle it was still standing even then. Realizing that Florida wasn't going to provide for his growing family, John Marshall moved them again, to the town that would come to define the man who became known as Mark Twain. This was Hannibal—forty miles away and on the banks of the Mississippi River.

### Young Twain's Hannibal

After all these years I can picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning; the streets empty, or pretty nearly so; one or two clerks sitting in front of the Water Street stores, with their splint-bottomed chairs tilted back against the wall, chins



Drawing of Hannibal's riverfront during Mark Twain's time.  
Mark Twain: Son of Missouri, Minnie Brashear, 1934

on breasts, hats slouched over their faces, asleep—with shingle-shavings enough around to show what broke them down; a sow and a litter of pigs loafing along the sidewalk, doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds; two or three lonely little freight piles scattered about the "levee;" a pile of "skids" on the slope of the stone-paved wharf, and the fragrant town drunkard asleep in the shadow of them; two or three wood flats at the head of the wharf, but nobody to listen to the peaceful lapping of the wavelets against them; the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun; the dense forest away on the other side; the "point" above the town, and the "point" below, bounding the river-glimpse and turning it into a sort of sea, and withal a very still and brilliant and lonely one.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IV*

Hannibal was, and is today, a river town. When Sam Clemens was a boy, it stretched across a floodplain nestled among a variety of small bluffs and hills, with a grid of seven streets at its heart. The broad Mississippi lay to its east, and south of town was the much smaller Bear Creek, which widened and deepened as it flowed into the great river. Hannibal existed lock, stock, and barrel to serve the needs of the river and its people. Boats of every stripe came floating down and up the Mississippi, where they would stop and unload all varieties of merchandise, or take it with them to cities south and north. A town of just over a thousand souls, Hannibal saw the travelers, entertainers, and

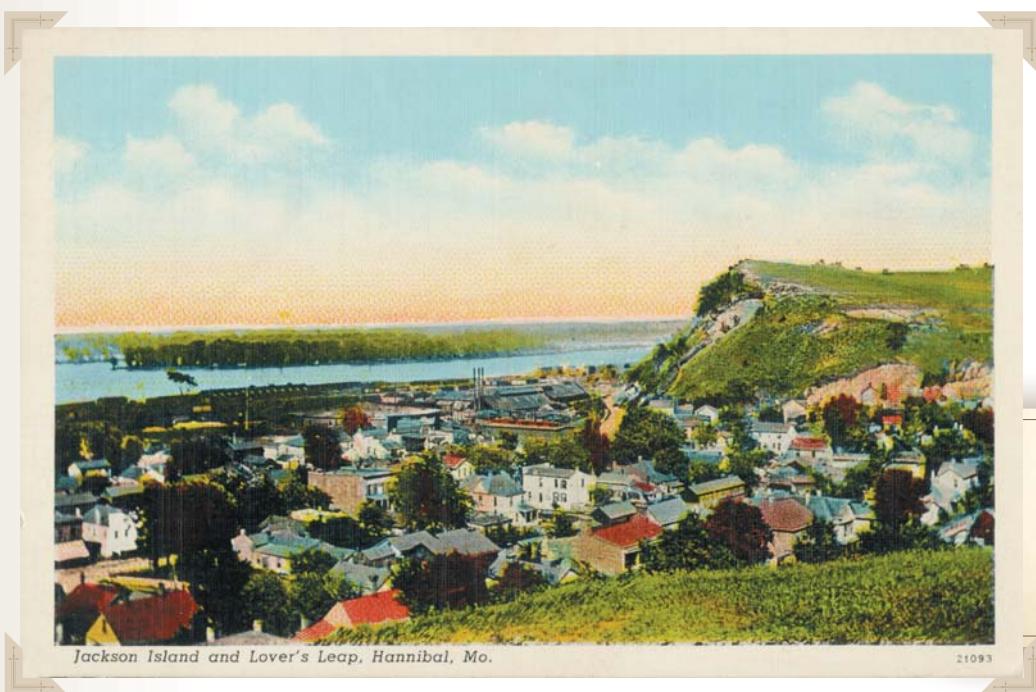
the packet ships hauling goods. Sammy's father, John Marshall, had it in his mind to organize the city's leaders to work to attract a railroad line heading toward both coasts, which would help increase Hannibal's stature as a business hub, and thereby serve his own fortune as well. (Eventually, his efforts were successful, though long after he went under financially and physically.) When the Clemens family arrived, in 1839, they were installed in the Virginia House, a hotel that John Marshall bought and hoped would do booming business as it was located right near the water. The family lived on the second floor, and to augment the business the elder Clemens opened a general store on the first floor.

But even though Hannibal was a thriving and bustling little town—especially compared to sleepy Florida—it was not yet such a place that people stepped off the steamboats that paddled through and spent long days and nights conducting business or pleasure. Rather, the big boats paused on their journeys at the town's many wharves,

but only a modest amount of goods were dropped off or picked up, maybe a passenger or two, and then they went on their merry way. In fact, Twain remembered the steamboats pausing just once or twice a day. Entertainers often wandered through, but John Marshall seemed destined to miss out on any of this largesse. Hannibal already had an established general store, and the very few tourists or businessmen who did visit avoided the Virginia House. Pork processing and lumber were the primary industries, neither of which would help the Clemens family fortune much, if at all.

Once or twice a day, the saddler used to go tearing down the street, putting on his coat as he went; and then everybody knew a steamboat was coming. Everybody knew, also, that [he] was not expecting anybody by the boat—or any freight, either; and [he] must have known that everybody knew this, still it made no difference to him; he liked to seem to himself to be expecting a hundred thousand tons of saddles by this boat, and so he went on all his life, enjoying being faithfully on hand to receive and receipt for those saddles, in case any miracle they should come.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter LV



Jackson Island and Lover's Leap, Hannibal, Mo.

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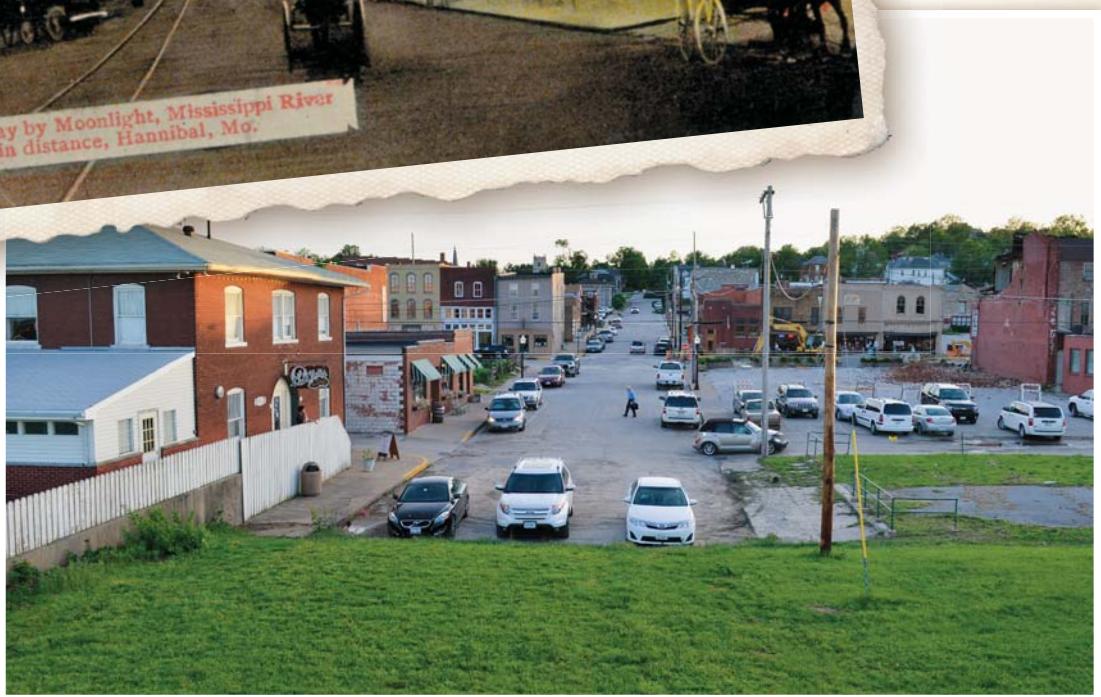
Living in the Virginia House, and, later, four years after moving to Hannibal, in the Clemens home on Hill Street, just one short block from the river, gave Sammy proximity to the river that would inspire him for the rest of his life. For Sam, Hannibal—and the Mississippi—was a place of joy and endless adventure, despite the

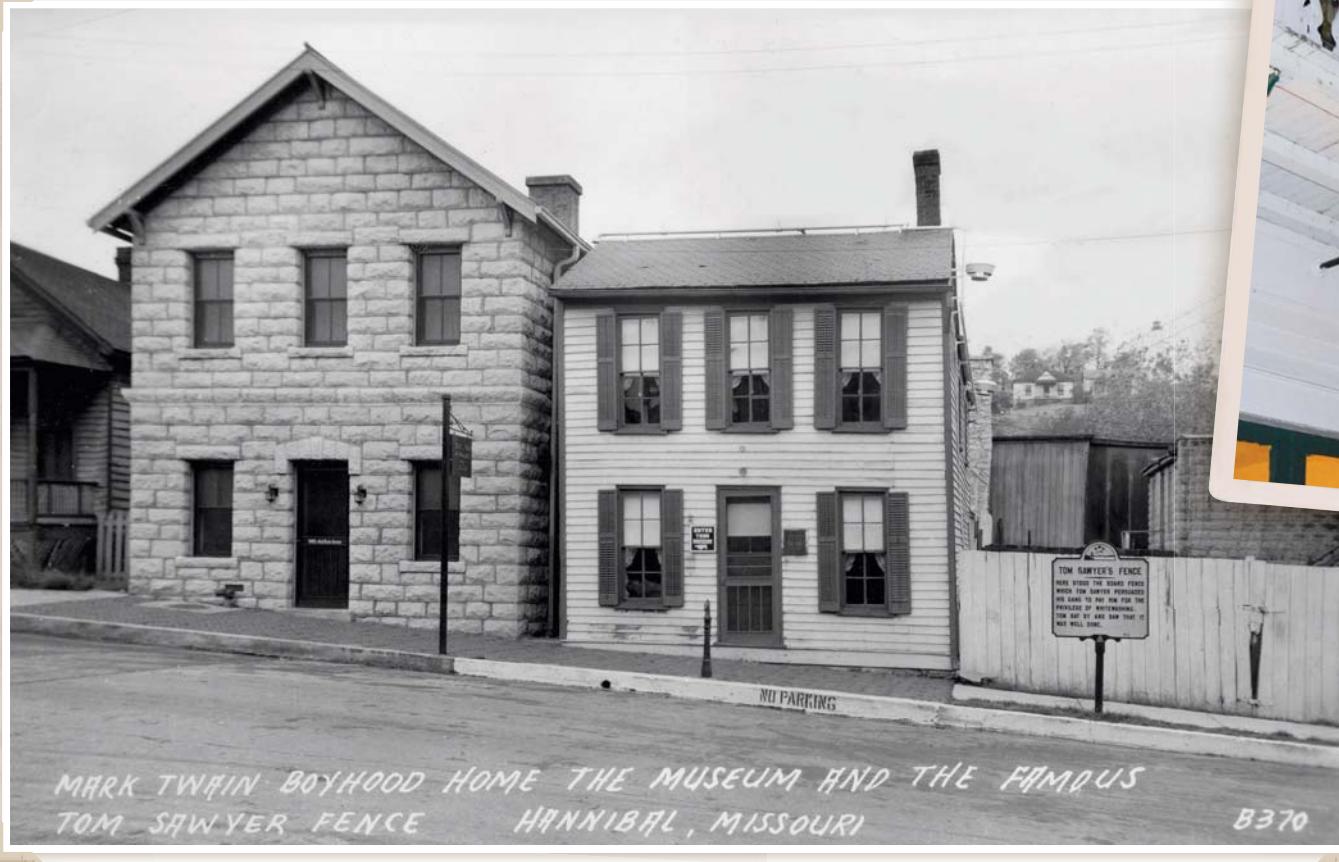
This 1939 postcard refers to Jackson's Island, just off central Hannibal, but that's the name Twain invented for his river novels. Not to mention that the fictional Jackson's Island is several miles downriver from fictional Saint Petersburg. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



**ABOVE:** Postcard of Hannibal's Broadway Street with the river in the background in 1915, when the street was far busier than it is now. *Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen*

**RIGHT:** View of Hannibal's old town from the levee shortly after hundred-mile-per-hour winds damaged an old building on Main Street in early 2013. *R. Kent Rasmussen*





**LEFT:** Mid-twentieth-century postcard view of Mark Twain's boyhood home before it was restored to its original appearance. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

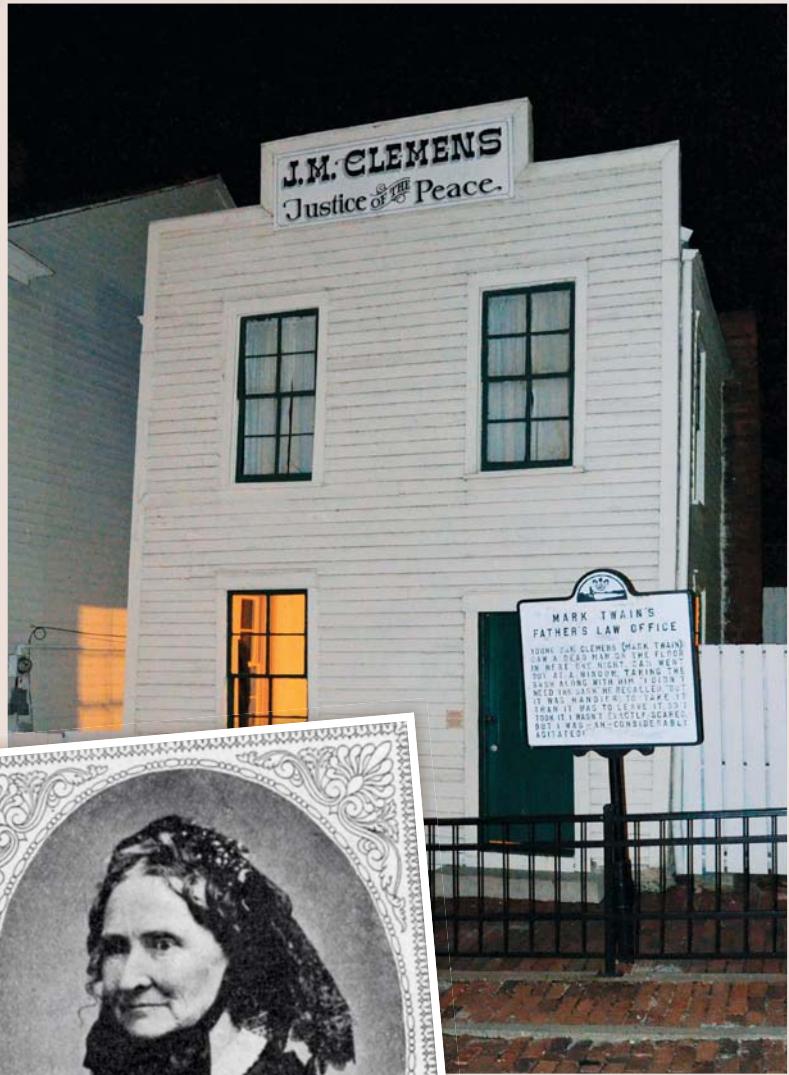
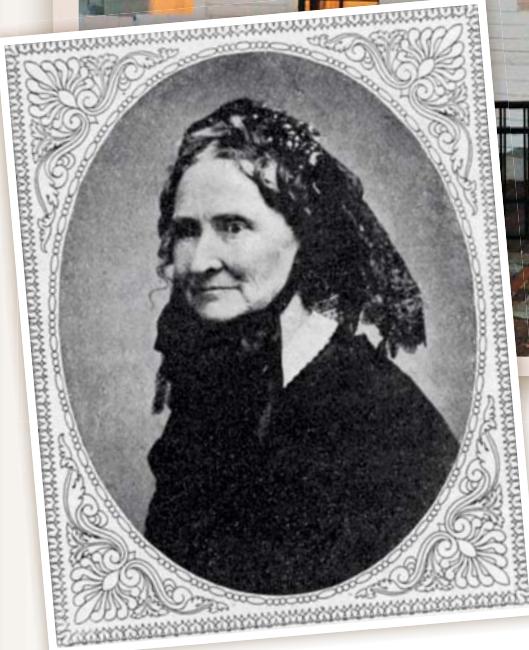


**ABOVE:** Grant's Drug Store (also known as the Pilaster House), in which Mark Twain's family briefly lived during the 1840s. R. Kent Rasmussen

family's hardships, which included money woes, as well as the death of three of his six siblings (a fourth, Henry, would perish later). “[W]hen I was a boy everybody was poor but didn't know it; and everybody was comfortable and did know it,” Twain later observed in his *Autobiography*.

Just as the river defined the livelihood in Hannibal for many adults, it was also a fantasy world for children. The Mississippi's aroma filled the air, and the currents shepherded any number of mysteries to the wharves of town. “The river astonished the children beyond measure,” Twain wrote in his first novel, *The Gilded Age*. “Its mile-breadth of water seemed an ocean to them, in the shadowy twilight, and vague ribald of trees on the further shore, the verge of a continent which surely none but they had ever seen before.” That was the great allure of the river—it both brought the world to and separated it from Hannibal, firing Clemens’ imagination and eventually leading him to seek out his fortune beyond the great waters.





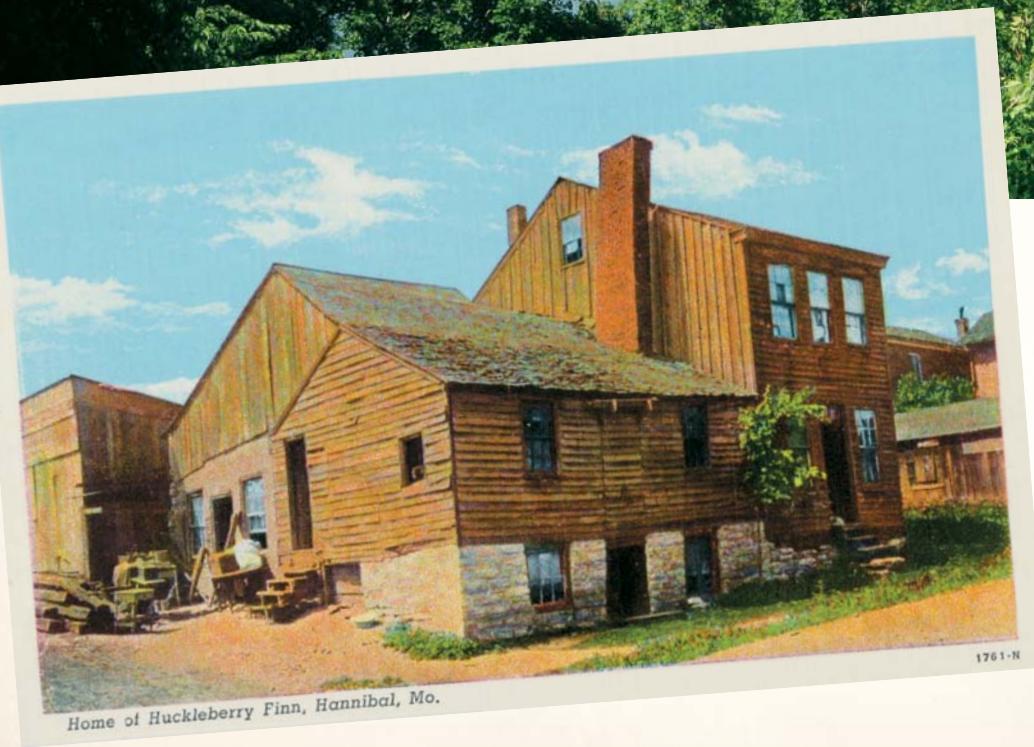
ABOVE: Chapter 18 of *The Innocents Abroad* describes a horrific experience Mark Twain had in his father's office when he was a boy. R. Kent Rasmussen

LEFT: Sam Clemens's mother; Jane Lampton Clemens (1803–1890). St. Nicholas magazine, November 1915.

With his circle of boyhood friends, most notably Will Bowen (perhaps his best friend, to whom he would later write many celebrated letters) and Tom Blankenship (the rough-and-tumble and nearly fatherless waif who was the direct inspiration for Huckleberry Finn), young Sammy would explore Hannibal's hills and bluffs and especially the waters. There, he “used to get drowned . . . every summer regularly, and get drained out, and inflated and set going again by some chance enemy.” In his *Autobiography*, Twain claimed that he had been saved from drowning *nine times*, prompting his mother, Jane Lampton Clemens, to note that “people who are born to be hanged are safe in water.” Twain seems to have forgotten who exactly fished him from the drink, with the exception of a slave woman on one instance and another time a young apprentice to a prominent citizen in Hannibal.

One day when I was playing on a loose log which I supposed was attached to a raft—but it wasn’t—it tilted me into Bear Creek. And when I had been under water twice and was coming up to make the third and fatal descent, my fingers appeared above the water and that slave woman seized them and pulled me out. Within a week I was in again and that apprentice had to come along just at the wrong time, and he plunged in and dived, pawed around on the bottom and found me and dragged me out and emptied the water out of me and I was saved again. I was drowned seven times after that before I learned to swim—once in Bear Creek and six times in the Mississippi. I do not know who the people were who interfered with the intentions of a Providence wiser than themselves but I hold a grudge against them yet.

—*Autobiography of Mark Twain*, “Friday, March 9, 1906”



ABOVE: View upriver from Hannibal from atop Cardiff Hill. R. Kent Rasmussen

LEFT: Color-tinted early twentieth-century postcard view of the home (center structure only) of Tom Blankenship, on whom Huck Finn is modeled. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



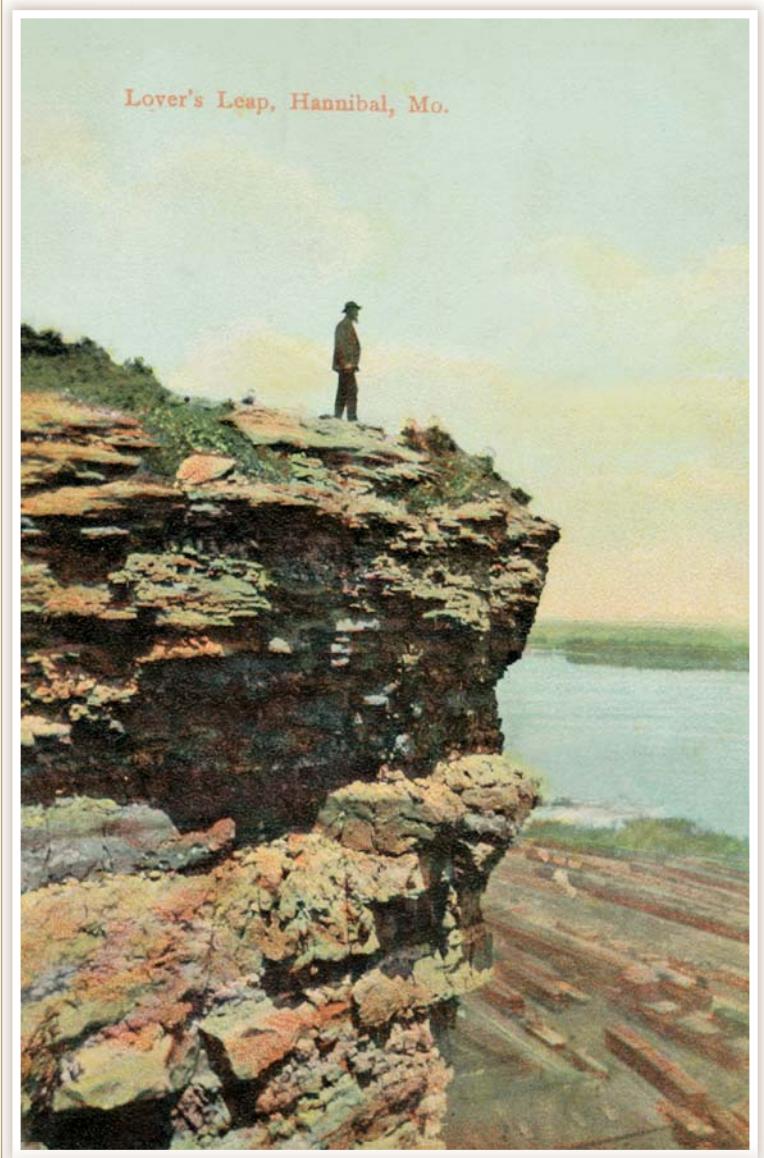
Directly across from Mark Twain's boyhood home in Hannibal is the home of his childhood sweetheart, Laura Hawkins. Today this is known as the Becky Thatcher House, because Tom Sawyer's object of affection was modeled on young Laura. (The silo complex in the background during the early 1990s is now gone.) R. Kent Rasmussen

Sammy Clemens was inexplicably safe in the water, but his friends and some of Hannibal's fellow citizens were not so lucky; drownings were a regular occurrence. These deaths weighed heavily on Clemens, then and throughout his life, and followed him into his literature—*Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*, among other of his works, feature moments when people, and especially young boys, either die horrific deaths by drowning or are believed to have slipped beneath the water forever. Tom Sawyer is thought to have drowned, and the threat of drowning follows Huck and Jim on their raft journey

down the Mississippi. And *Life on the Mississippi* has a section later in the book that really drives home the terror of the great river and its impact on young Sammy Clemens.

When I was a small boy, Lem Hackett was drowned—on a Sunday. He fell out of an empty flat-boat, where he was playing. Being loaded with sin, he went to the bottom like an anvil. He was the only boy in the village that slept that night. We others lay awake all evening, repenting.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter LIV



Early twentieth-century postcard view of the precipice south of Hannibal known as Lover's Leap. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

That same evening, storms raged outside, lightning and thunder that terrified the young Clemens into believing that God himself was trying to punish every boy in town for their many transgressions, especially him. In his fear, Sam tried in earnest to point out to God the various evils that his good friends had committed day in and day out, sins far worse than anything he, Sammy, had ever partaken in. He prayed fervently, promising to attend church and Sunday school regularly, and slather acts of generosity and kindness all over town like so much whitewash.

Dawn came, and with it the shock and surprise that all the other children whom he'd accused in the night had actually survived. In fact, Hannibal was relatively undisturbed.

Undisturbed, that is, until three weeks later, when a poor boy nicknamed Dutchy—this time a pious young thing whose churchgoing habits irritated Clemens and his gang—drowned. In a deep and muddy spot of the river, perfect for swimming, coopers (the men who make barrels) were soaking hoops of green hickory wood underwater in order to soften them to make them pliable for barrel staves. There, Clemens and his friends were having contests to see who could dive and remain underwater the longest, a game which seems today to be courting death itself. Dutchy, who was, according to Twain, a miserable failure at this contest, begged for another opportunity. The other boys had it in their heads to play a practical joke by hiding from him, so that when he emerged, hoping to redeem himself, no one would be there to witness the accomplishment.

Watching from distant blackberry brambles, the boys waited, holding in their laughter. But Dutchy never emerged. Realizing something was terribly wrong, they drew straws, and Clemens was chosen to dive in after the poor boy. Sam dove into the water, and, groping about in the muddy darkness, gripped the cold hand of his friend.

The boy had been caught among the hoop poles and entangled there, helplessly. I fled to the surface and told the awful news.



Some of us knew that if the boy were dragged out at once he might possibly be resuscitated, but we never thought of that. We did not think of anything; we did not know what to do, so we did nothing—except that the smaller lads cried, piteously, and we all struggled frantically into our clothes, putting on anybody's that came handy, and getting them wrong-side-out and upside-down, as a rule. Then we scurried away and gave the alarm, but none of us went back to see the end of the tragedy. We had a more important thing to attend to: we all flew home, and lost not a moment in getting ready to lead a better life.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter LIV*

Again, a storm raged in the night, and this time Sammy felt totally lost, as young Dutchy was about as pious a young fellow as could be imagined, and “if a boy who knows three thousand verses [of the Bible] by heart is not satisfactory, what chance is there for anybody else?”

*Life on the Mississippi* contains many “stretchers.” Many scholars believe the Dutchy story to be a falsehood, an exaggeration of sorts—though certainly Clemens lost friends to the Mississippi, most notably Clint Levering, the pal who was called Lem Hackett in the book. Later, in his short reminiscence “Villagers of 1840–3,” Twain succinctly (and sarcastically) notes that Levering “drowned. His less fortunate brother lived to have a family and be rich and respected.”

When we read Twain’s books that take place on and along the river, for the most part we are with him or his characters in the summer. Huck Finn floating on his raft, Tom Sawyer watching as the mistaken townsfolk shoot cannonballs hoping to raise his sunken body from the depths, Sam Clemens getting shouted at by the pilot Bixby in *Life on the Mississippi* . . . all of these are hot-weather tales. But though Missouri is a southern state, the great river often froze over in winter, and Hannibal would experience snow and other torments of northerly climes.

Writing in his *Autobiography*, Twain recounted a time when he went skating with his friend Tom Nash. River skating is unwise generally—then and now, as moving currents do not make for ice as thick as, say, on lakes or ponds—though the myriad ways in which children enjoyed the river in Twain’s time would give parents heart attacks nowadays. Not only did Sam and his friend go out skating, but they shot out onto the frozen water *after midnight* and without permission. “I cannot see why we should go skating in the night unless without permission, for there could be no considerable amusement to be gotten out of skating at midnight if nobody was going to object to it,” Twain later wrote. But as they skated along, the boys were suddenly confronted with loud noises.

About midnight, when we were more than half a mile out toward the Illinois shore, we heard some ominous rumbling and grinding and crashing going on between us and the home side of the river, and we knew what it meant—the river was breaking up. We started for home, pretty badly scared. We flew along at full speed whenever the moonlight sifting down between the clouds enabled us to tell which was ice and which was water. In the pauses we waited, started again whenever there was a good bridge of ice, paused again when we came to naked water, and waited in distress until a floating vast cake should bridge that place. It took us an hour to make the trip—a trip which we made in a misery of apprehension all the time. But at last we arrived within a very brief distance of the shore. We waited again. There was another place that needed bridging. All about us the ice was plunging and grinding along and piling itself up in mountains on the shore and the dangers were increasing, not diminishing. We grew very impatient to get to solid ground, so we started too early and went springing from cake to cake.

—*The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Chapter 8*

Early twentieth-century postcard view  
of ice clogging the Upper Mississippi.  
Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

So not only were the boys out flying along on a river of ice, but they were doing it at midnight—a *cloudy midnight*—and then, when things went poorly, they began to leap “from cake to cake,” presumably still on their ice skates. Unfortunately, Sammy’s friend Tom miscalculated, slipped, and fell into the icy cold waters. He was only a short distance from shore, and made it out, but this drenching left him terribly ill, and when he recovered he was deaf and mute. Later, he learned to speak again, though he was unable to hear himself. “When he supposed he was talking low and confidentially, you could hear him in Illinois,” Twain remembered. In fact, years later it was the elderly Tom Nash who was the last man to speak to Twain on the writer’s final visit to Hannibal, in 1902. “He came up to me, made a trumpet of his hand at my ear, nodded his head toward the citizens and said confidentially—in a yell like a fog horn—‘Same damn fools, Sam. Same damned fools.’”



### The caves of Hannibal

Just a few miles south of Hannibal was the Saltpeter Cave, later known as McDowell’s Cave. As a child, Sam Clemens stole away from home with his pals to the cave to play pirate and a variety of other role-playing games, to chase bats, and, at times, get hopelessly lost. It’s easy to imagine the cave’s allure—cool as air-conditioning in the brutal summers, strange and mysterious, this dark cavern was as appealing as both an amusement park and a horror movie are today, with perhaps a touch of the educational in it as well. Located just off the river, the cave



fired Twain's imagination and appears in four of his books, most notably *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. The cave also has a prominent cameo of sorts in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which closes in a famous (or infamous) gore-filled showdown in a cave, between the Knights of the Round Table and a Gatling gun.

The caves were renamed the Mark Twain Caves in 1886, when Judge E. T. Cameron began charging admission after the success of *Tom Sawyer* (with its climactic cave sequence). Prior to that, townsfolk by the dozens would take river ferries from Hannibal to the mouth of

the cave and, armed with candles, go wandering through the different "rooms"—"wonders dubbed with rather over-descriptive names, such as 'The Drawing Room,' 'The Cathedral,' 'Aladdin's Palace,' and so on," wrote Twain. They'd venture in during the daylight hours and then emerge, as one historian noted, giddy and coated in paraffin wax from their candles, just as night was falling. One may assume that these happy occurrences were either very carefully planned or led by an experienced guide—less joyous were the many times people became lost in the maze of narrow, and often squat, passages filled with bats.

An early postcard painting of a boater off Rock Island, Illinois, shows the darkness of the riverbank even on a moonlit night. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



ABOVE: Entrance to the cave south of Hannibal that Mark Twain used in both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. R. Kent Rasmussen  
BELOW: Visitors inspecting the inside of the Mark Twain Cave. R. Kent Rasmussen



"Injun Joe" the half-breed got lost there once, and would have starved to death if the bats had run short. But there was no chance of that; there were myriads of them. He told me all his story. In the book called "Tom Sawyer" I starved him entirely to death in the cave, but that was in the interest of art; it never happened. "General" Gaines, who was our first town-drunkard before Jimmy Finn got the place, was lost in there for the space of a week, and finally pushed his handkerchief out of a hole in a hilltop near Saverton, several miles down the river from the cave's mouth, and somebody saw it and dug him out. There is nothing the matter with his statistics except the handkerchief. I knew him for years, and he hadn't any. But could have been his nose. That would attract attention.

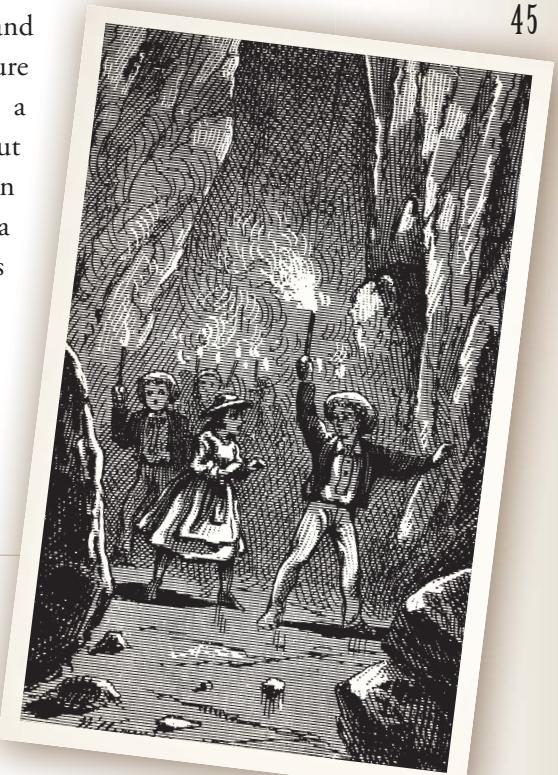
—*Autobiography of Mark Twain, "Random Extracts"*

Twain apparently loved those he called them "beautifully soft and silky; I do not know any creature that is pleasanter to the touch," a sentiment that can do nothing but cause distress for many a modern reader. Sammy would catch a bat, bring it home, and tell his mother that he had a surprise in his pocket. She never seemed to avoid putting her hand in the pocket, and then never seemed less than annoyed. "It was

bats, for

45

Tom, Becky, and other picnickers entering the cave in Chapter XXIX of *Tom Sawyer*.





Grave of the Hannibal resident from whom Mark Twain borrowed the name of Tom Sawyer's evil Injun Joe. R. Kent Rasmussen

remarkable,” he recalled in his *Autobiography*, “the way she couldn’t learn to like private bats. The more experience she had, the more she could not change her views.”

As if bats weren’t enough, the cave also contained corpses. An eccentric and pioneering doctor, Joseph Nash McDowell, bought the cave in the 1840s as a repository for bodies on which to experiment, and soon it became known as McDowell’s Cave. The cave’s natural coolness, even in the oppressive heat of Missouri’s summers, meant

that the bodies would be well preserved. The doctor was not a ghoul, but the founder of the Missouri Medical College (now a part of Washington University in Saint Louis), who sought an underground cavern where he could keep bodies for experiments. Since these were often difficult to obtain, he turned to working on the corpses of his own deceased children. When his fourteen-year-old daughter passed away, she was laid to rest in a copper chamber that he had filled with alcohol and which left the body preserved. According to Twain, this unit was attached to a rail that hung from the ceiling of the caves. “[I]t was said that loafers and rowdies used to drag it up by the hair and look at the dead face,” Twain recalled, perhaps with a bit of envy.

Because of these “loafers and rowdies,” and the rumors they spread around Hannibal, the townsfolk took it upon themselves to force Dr. McDowell to remove the bodies, though it is suggested by historians that the good doctor was as shocked as they were that people were disturbing his daughter’s grave—he wasn’t aware that anyone was wasting their time exploring the cave that legally belonged to him. Some scholars also believe that the unfortunate Dr. Robinson—the man who is murdered by Injun Joe while grave robbing in *Tom Sawyer*—is based loosely on Dr. McDowell.

### Traveling shows

The Mississippi River was also a highway for entertainers en route to the cities and towns and villages that dotted its banks. As we see in *Huckleberry Finn*, when the king and the duke glide into a “little one-horse town in a big bend” to produce their busted-up Shakespeare, the river was in many respects the only connection people had with entertainers—from vaudevillians to the minstrel shows to evangelists to a mesmerizer set on hypnotizing as many of Hannibal’s children as the Pied Piper.



The duke and king rehearsing their "Shakspearean Revival" in Paramount's 1920 film adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



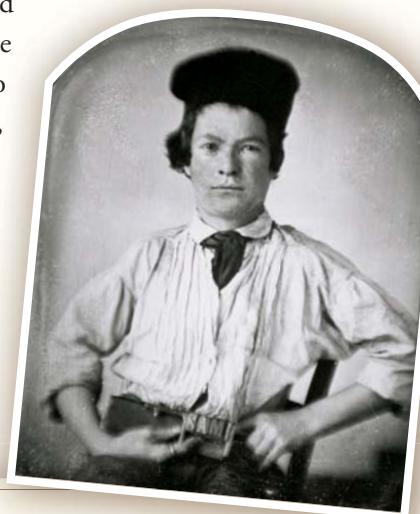
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Vaudeville company poster from the 1880s illustrating several steamboat scenes, including an explosion. Library of Congress

"He advertised his show and promised marvels," Twain wrote of the mesmerizer in his *Autobiography*. And so marvels were delivered. Fifteen-year-old Sam (Twain remembers this hypnotist alighting on the village in May, 1850), at "the age at which a boy is willing to endure all things, suffer all things short of death by fire, if thereby he may be conspicuous and show off before the public," attended three straight performances of Simmons the "enchanter." Jealously he watched a colleague of his, another young fellow named Hicks, become the subject of the mesmerizer's gaze. "I couldn't laugh; I couldn't applaud; it filled me with a bitterness to have others do it and make a hero of Hicks." On the fourth night, Sam leapt in with both feet. Supposedly under the entertainer's spell, on stage the young man ran from the threat of snakes, fire, saw steamboat races inside the tent, and fought catfish with a giant reel. He was, at first, afraid the mesmerizer would realize he was faking, until of course Sam realized it was *all* fake. And then, further realizing that Simmons appreciated these hysterics, Sam ratcheted up the drama and "set myself the task of terminating Hicks's usefulness as a subject."

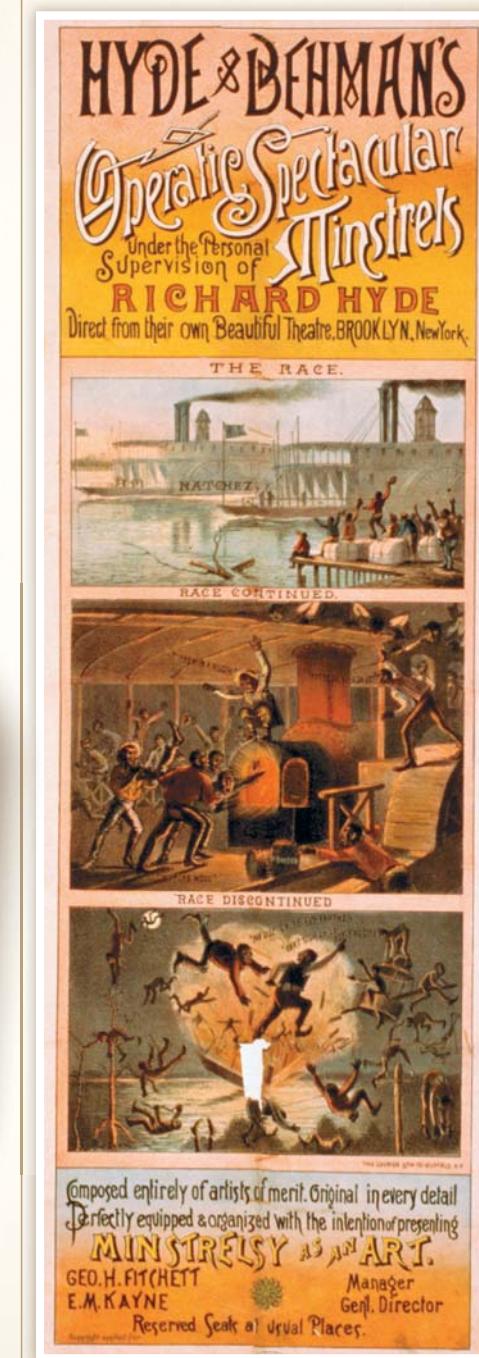
Sam succeeded brilliantly, bringing down the house by reading the mesmerizer's mind, allowing himself to be stuck with pins, and finally chasing after a school bully with a busted revolver, which the enchanter claimed Sam performed without "a single spoken word to guide him as he carried out what I mentally commanded him to do, to the minutest detail." Of course, everyone took him at his word, as Twain later admitted. "I tried my best to imagine what he wanted but nothing suggested itself."

In these early performances a young Sam Clemens forged the skills that would serve him well as a public speaker throughout his life. Before he'd published a single book, Twain was riding high on a series of magazine articles concerning the Sandwich Islands



**ABOVE:** Earliest known photograph of Sam Clemens, at the age of fifteen—the year he performed with a mesmerizer visiting Hannibal. (The daguerreotype print is actually a mirror image showing the metal type spelling "SAM" he is holding backward.) *Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library*

**RIGHT:** Based in New York City, Hyde and Behman's was a theater specializing in popular minstrel shows during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Library of Congress*





Huck and Jim in Chapter XXII of *Huckleberry Finn*.

(known today as Hawaii), and he set upon lecturing across the country, and almost instantly won accolades (and belly laughs). Humorists such as Artemus Ward and writers like Charles Dickens earned vast sums lecturing, and Twain soon became one of the most highly sought-after (and well-paid) speakers. Later, these skills, honed over decades, helped pull his family out of financial ruin, as Twain circled the globe, speaking to crowds in virtually every continent.

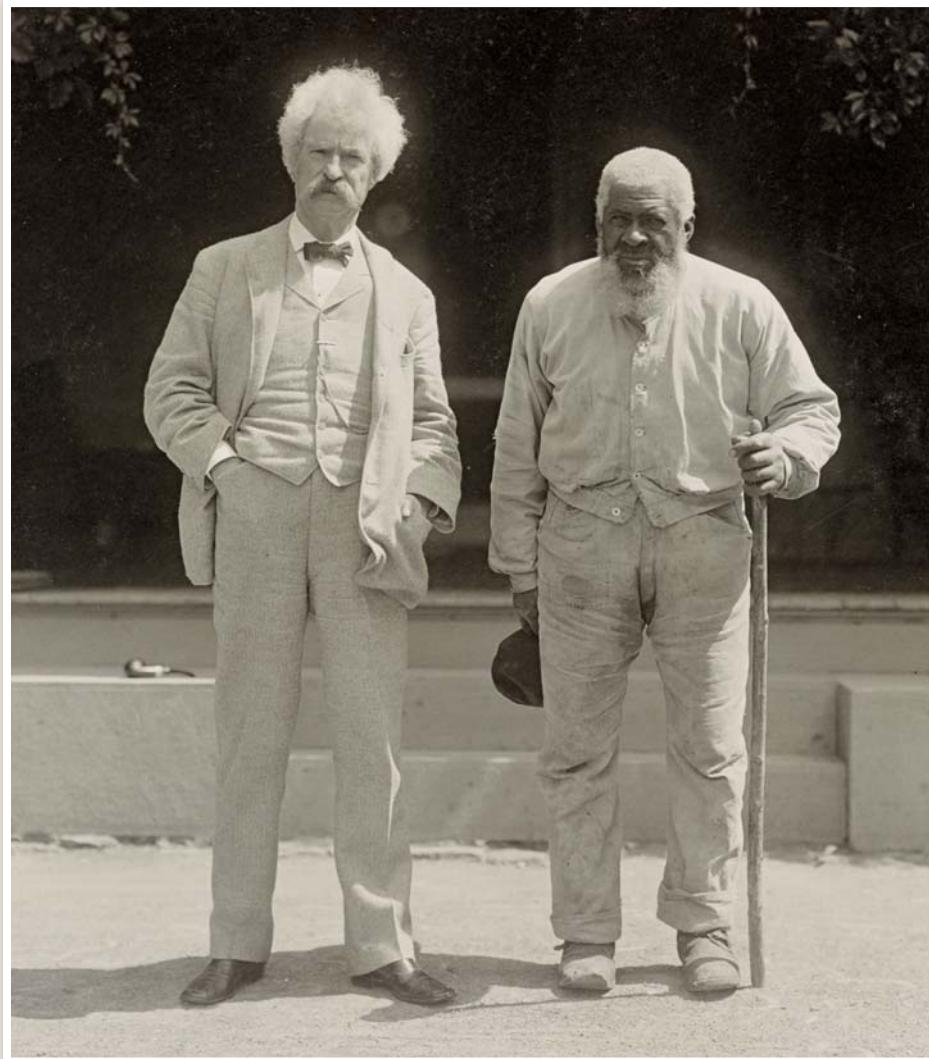
Circuses and the minstrel shows came to Hannibal as well via the river, the latter entertaining Twain so profoundly that all his life he would perform many of the show's songs and imitate the performer who left the greatest impression, a singer named Billy Rice. Comparing the minstrel show to opera, specifically Wagner, he opined, "If I could have the nigger show back again, in its pristine beauty and perfection, I should have but little further use for opera." Minstrel shows were enormously popular in the time of Twain's youth. In these shows, whites would lampoon the dialect of the black people trapped in slavery in the South, their manners, appearances, way of walking and dancing, and of course co-opting the beautiful songs.

Mark Twain had a very complex relationship with African Americans. On his uncle's farm in Hannibal, two of the family slaves, "Aunt" Hannah and "Uncle Dan'l," were held in high esteem, the latter riveting the children with his stories and ghost tales. "All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades," he wrote. "Uncle Dan'l" has "served me well these many, many years," Twain noted, as an inspiration especially for the character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. In his autobiography he observed one of these "comrades," a young boy named Sandy, who was incessantly singing and whistling, to young Sam's chagrin. When he complained to his mother about the noise, she chided him, saying, "when he sings it shows that he is not remembering, and that comforts me . . . [h]e will never see his mother again; if he can sing I must not hinder it, but be thankful for it."

Not that Twain was free of the racist views many white men held in his day. He groused about free black men when he first visited New York City, and later in life he continued to call the minstrel shows “the nigger show,” despite the changing social climate of the twentieth century.

The blacks working as slaves on his uncle’s farm brought Twain a whole new world of dialogue and storytelling, and no doubt made him hungry for more. His novels, especially *Huckleberry Finn*, are known for the brilliance with which they capture American dialogue—this, to a large degree, is what made Ernest Hemingway claim that “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.”

It was this commitment to using the genuine dialogue of people in his time that also made his masterpiece so controversial. Few know that *Huckleberry Finn* was in fact banned during Twain’s lifetime, thanks to a large degree to its language, most notably its use of the word *nigger* dozens of times throughout the book. Over the years the book has been pilloried and defended by both whites and blacks alike for the language. It has also been severely criticized for its strange ending, where Jim, dignified throughout, becomes the butt of a lengthy closing joke by Tom Sawyer (with a very passive Huck allowing the humiliations to continue). But perhaps it is its myriad ways of looking at slavery and racism, as well as Twain’s dedication to realistic dialogue, that helps *Huckleberry Finn* endure to this day.



Mark Twain and John T. Lewis at Quarry Farm, Elmira, New York, where Lewis was a tenant farmer. Lewis and Twain were long-time friends, and Lewis may have been a model for Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. Library of Congress



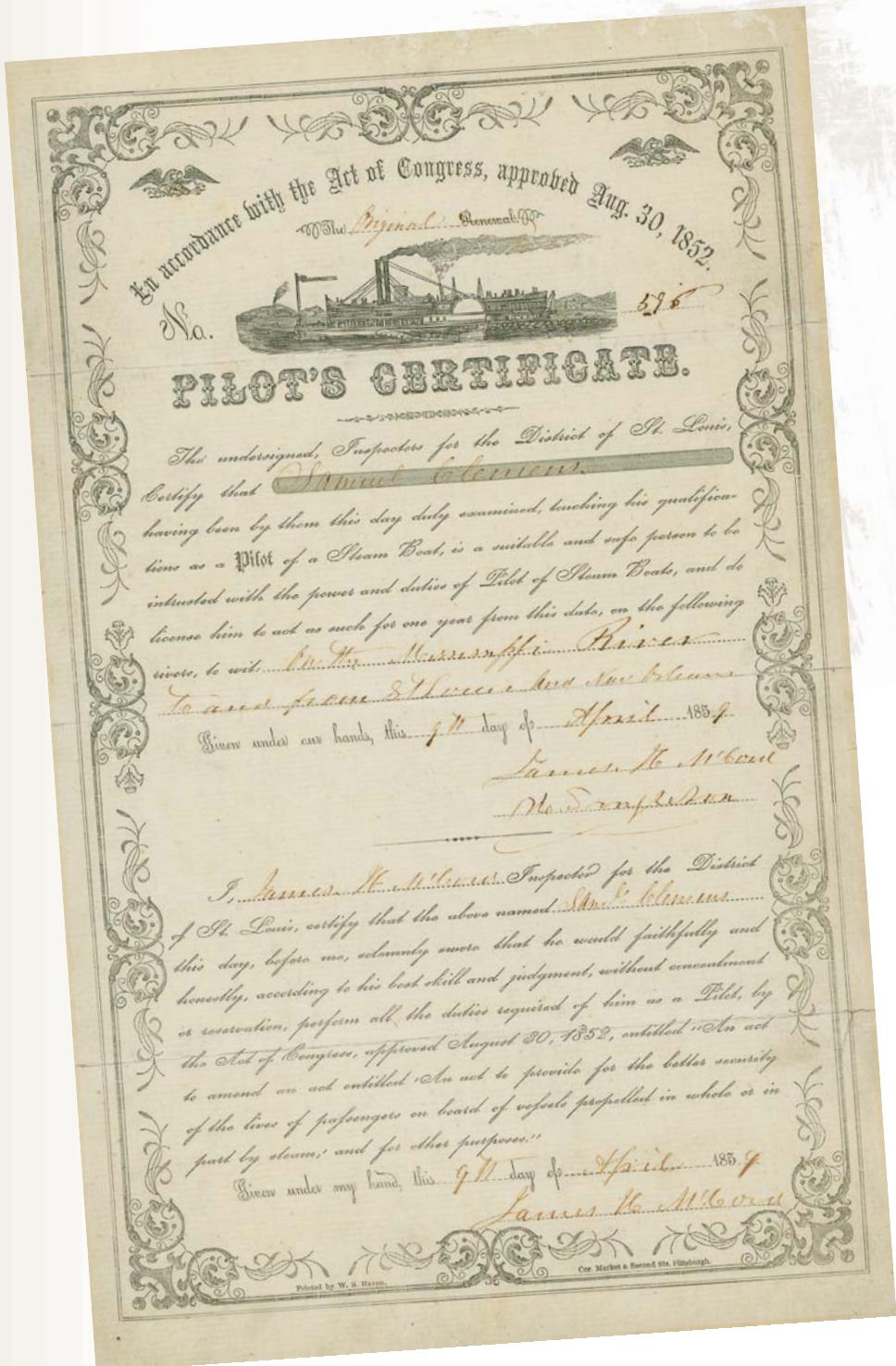
## CHAPTER 3

# MARK TWAIN'S STEAMBOATING YEARS, 1857–1861



**ABOVE:** The famous 1870 steamboat race between the *Robert E. Lee* and the *Natchez* took place when the steamboat era was already in decline, decades after Clemens was a boy daydreaming about becoming a pilot. The *Robert E. Lee* won, going a distance of 1,154 miles in 3 days, 18 hours and 14 minutes. © Stocktrek Images, Inc. / Alamy

**OPPOSITE:** Samuel Clemens's first license to pilot steamboats. Courtesy Mariner's Museum, Newport News, Virginia



[A] pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth. Kings are but the hampered servants of parliament and people; parliaments sit in chains forged by their constituency; the editor of a newspaper cannot be independent, but must work with one hand tied behind him by party and patrons, and be content to utter only half or two thirds of his mind; no clergyman is a free man and may speak the whole truth, regardless of his parish's opinions; writers of all kinds are manacled servants of the public. We write frankly and fearlessly, but then we "modify" before we print. In truth, every man and woman and child has a master, and worries and frets in servitude; but in the day I write of, the Mississippi pilot had *none* . . . So here was the novelty of a king without a keeper, an absolute monarch who was absolute in sober truth and not by a fiction of words. I have seen a boy of eighteen taking a great steamer serenely into what seemed almost certain destruction, and the aged captain standing mutely by, filled with apprehension but powerless to interfere. His interference, in that particular instance, might have been an excellent thing, but to permit it would have been to establish a most pernicious precedent.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IV*

Despite the various joys of childhood in Hannibal, Sam and his friends dreamed primarily of the day when they could escape—naturally, on a steamboat. Unfettered independence held great allure for both the young Sam Clemens, about whom the early steamboat sections of *Life on the Mississippi* are written, and Mark Twain, the older man who would pen that great book, which would revitalize his career. “Old Times on the Mississippi” opens with Twain’s reminiscences of boyhood, of how Hannibal sparked to life upon the arrival of a steamboat, and how these fabulous machines made the boys in town go crazy with dreams of adventure.

Mississippi River, Clinton, Iowa





ABOVE: Hannibal boys whose ambition is to work on the river. *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter IV

OPPOSITE: Popular twentieth-century postcard theme, showing boys dressed as Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn wistfully watching a steamboat. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

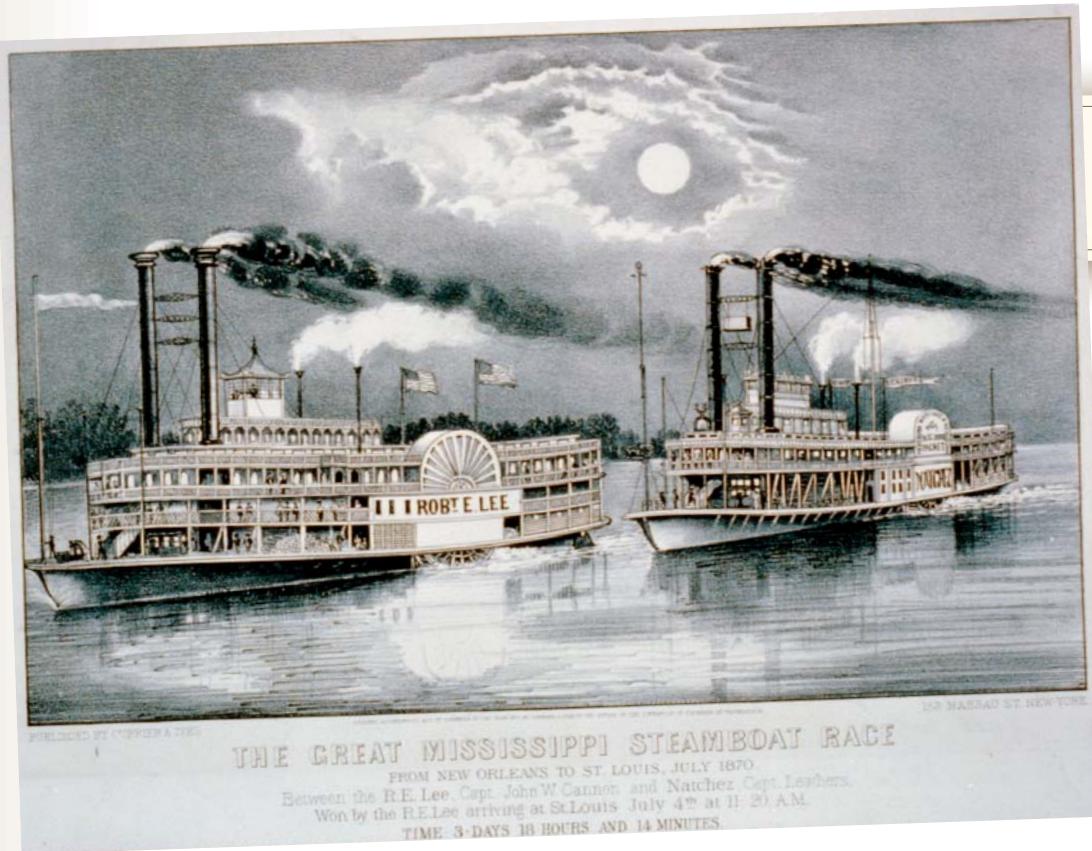
When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient. When a circus came and went, it left us all burning to become clowns; the first negro minstrel show that came to our section left us all suffering to try that kind of life; 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.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter IV

Sam Clemens lit out from Hannibal for good in 1853, when he was all of seventeen years old, landing for a few months in Saint Louis, where he set type. Already he had ambitions to travel, for over the course of the next four years he set type in New York City; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Keokuk, Iowa. In Iowa he worked for his brother Orion's newspaper for wages promised but never paid. Cursed or blessed with a ravenous ambition that would never desert him, Sam eventually abandoned his brother and signed on as a steamboat pilot's cub to learn the trade that would later inspire *Life on the Mississippi*.

For the citizens of small towns along the river, the steamboats were endlessly fascinating. As Louis C. Hunter wrote in his thorough 1949 study *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History*, “The steamboat not only introduced a rustic people to the age of machinery and steam but to most of those who lived along or traveled on the rivers it probably gave the first significant contact with art—at least art of a sort.” This “art of a sort” was indeed gaudy and extravagant, nothing subtle, bright gold paint, stained glass and brass rails, city folk and the pilots in their silks and polished leather. But the steamboat was much more than just this “art,” more than just something to look at. It encompassed, in a sense, everything.

[The steamboats] would be burning rosin and pitch pine (the sign of preparation), and so one had the picturesque spectacle of a rank, some two or three miles long, of tall, ascending columns of coal-black smoke; a colonnade which supported a sable roof of the same smoke blended together and spreading abroad over the city. Every outward-bound boat had its flag flying at the jack-staff, and sometimes a duplicate on the verge staff astern. Two or three miles of mates were commanding and swearing with more than usual emphasis; countless processions of



freight barrels and boxes were spinning athwart the levee and flying aboard the stageplanks; belated passengers were dodging and skipping among these frantic things, hoping to reach the forecastle companion way alive, but having their doubts about it; women with reticules and bandboxes were trying to keep up with husbands freighted with carpet-sacks and crying babies, and making a failure of it by losing their heads in the whirl and roar and general distraction. . . . The "last bells" would begin to clang, all down the line, and then the powwow seemed to double; in a moment or two the final warning came,—a simultaneous din of Chinese gongs, with the cry, "All dat ain't goin', please to git asho!"—and behold, the powwow quadrupled! People came

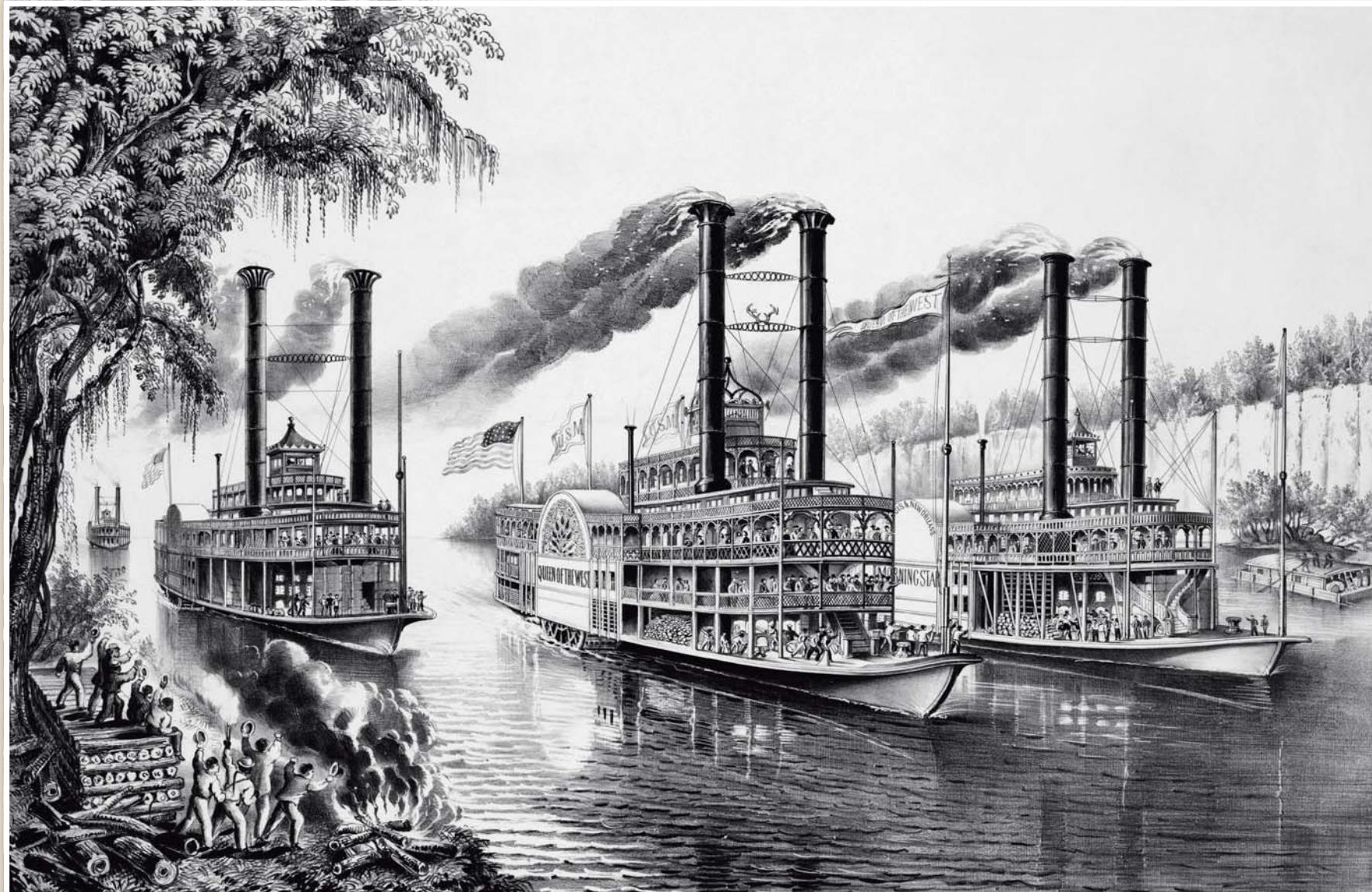
There are many paintings of the great race between the Robert E. Lee and the Natchez, showing steamboats at the height of their glory. Library of Congress

swarming ashore, overturning excited stragglers that were trying to swarm aboard. One more moment later a long array of stage-planks was being hauled in, each with its customary latest passenger clinging to the end of it with teeth, nails, and everything else, and the customary latest procrastinator making a wild spring shoreward over his head.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XVI*

As we see from Twain's observation of loading a steamboat in New Orleans, to venture onto one of these river vessels was an exercise in mayhem. The main deck would be filled with people, either loading that deck or the well-heeled passengers and officers struggling mightily to get past all this chaos and to the safety of the upper levels. Cargo of all sorts was brought aboard—every conceivable tool, machine, most farm animals and implements, kegs of nails, molasses, flour, bales of hay and cotton, and bags and bags and bags of grains and flours, all of this in a frenetic jumble with the less wealthy passengers who actually planned on riding amongst this cargo, and were busy fighting and jostling with one another for a comfortable space.

As Hunter observed, "here people labored ate, slept, amused themselves, suffered illness and hardship, and, not infrequently, died." When we think of steamboat stories, especially Twain's accounts in *Life on the Mississippi*, we're reading about life on the cabin and boiler



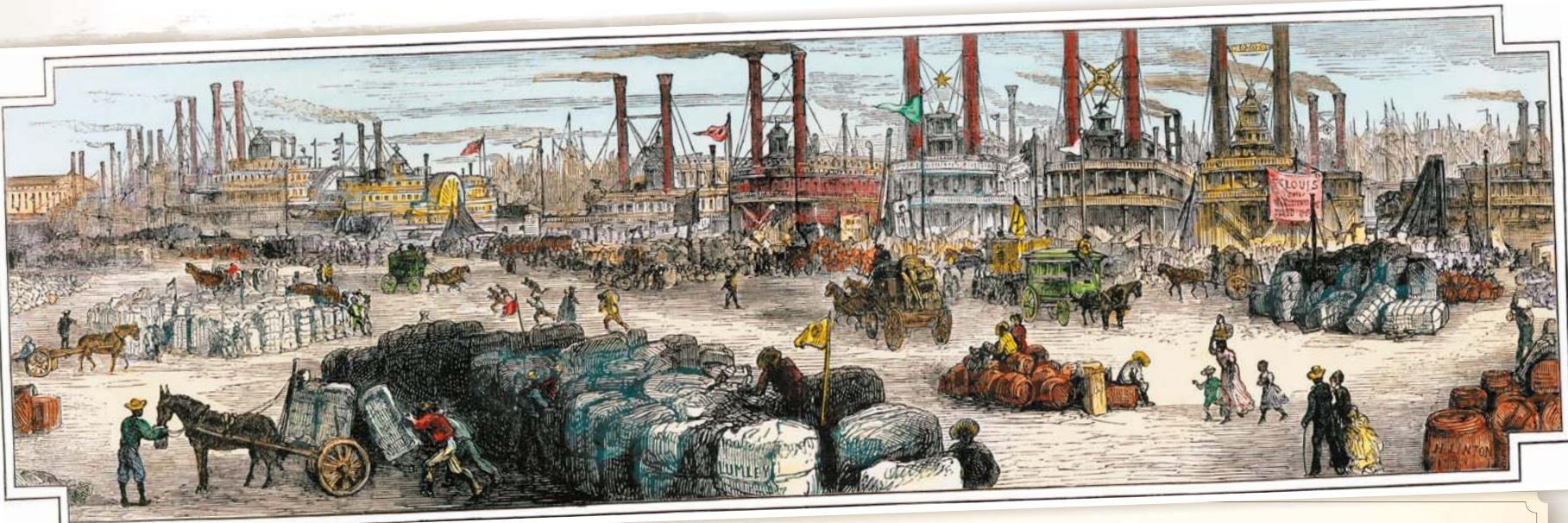
The Champions of the Mississippi - a race for the Buckhorns, print by Currier & Ives, artist Fanny Palmer (1812-1876). © Archive Images / Alamy



An early steamboat, the *Hiram Powers*, at Memphis in the mid-nineteenth century. Color lithograph by Henry Lewis. *William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work*, Plate No. 65

decks. When you boarded a boat, you stepped first upon the main deck, where all the cargo was loaded and where the deck passengers, about whom Twain wrote virtually nothing, found life a great deal harder than it was for the passengers of the upper decks. This traveling class was made up of immigrants, the poor, most of the crew who weren't officers, white and sometimes free black laborers—ironically, slaves were often kept off steamboats, as the risk of death was significant, and a dead white laborer was just a poor white person who lost their life; if

a person suffering under slavery were killed on a steamboat, this meant, to the white people who claimed ownership, a loss of property. Deck passengers foraged for their own food, either grabbing a meal in the towns on the river or when the boats stopped for wood. (Often, deck passengers agreed to gather wood along the way, among other labors, for a reduced fare, or none at all.) Sometimes, they packed meager supplies that ran out when there was trouble—if a boat got snagged on a submerged tree or rocks, often for days, there was that much less food.



Twain described bustling levees where steamboats lined up for freight in the mid-nineteenth century. Hand-colored woodcut of New Orleans. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy

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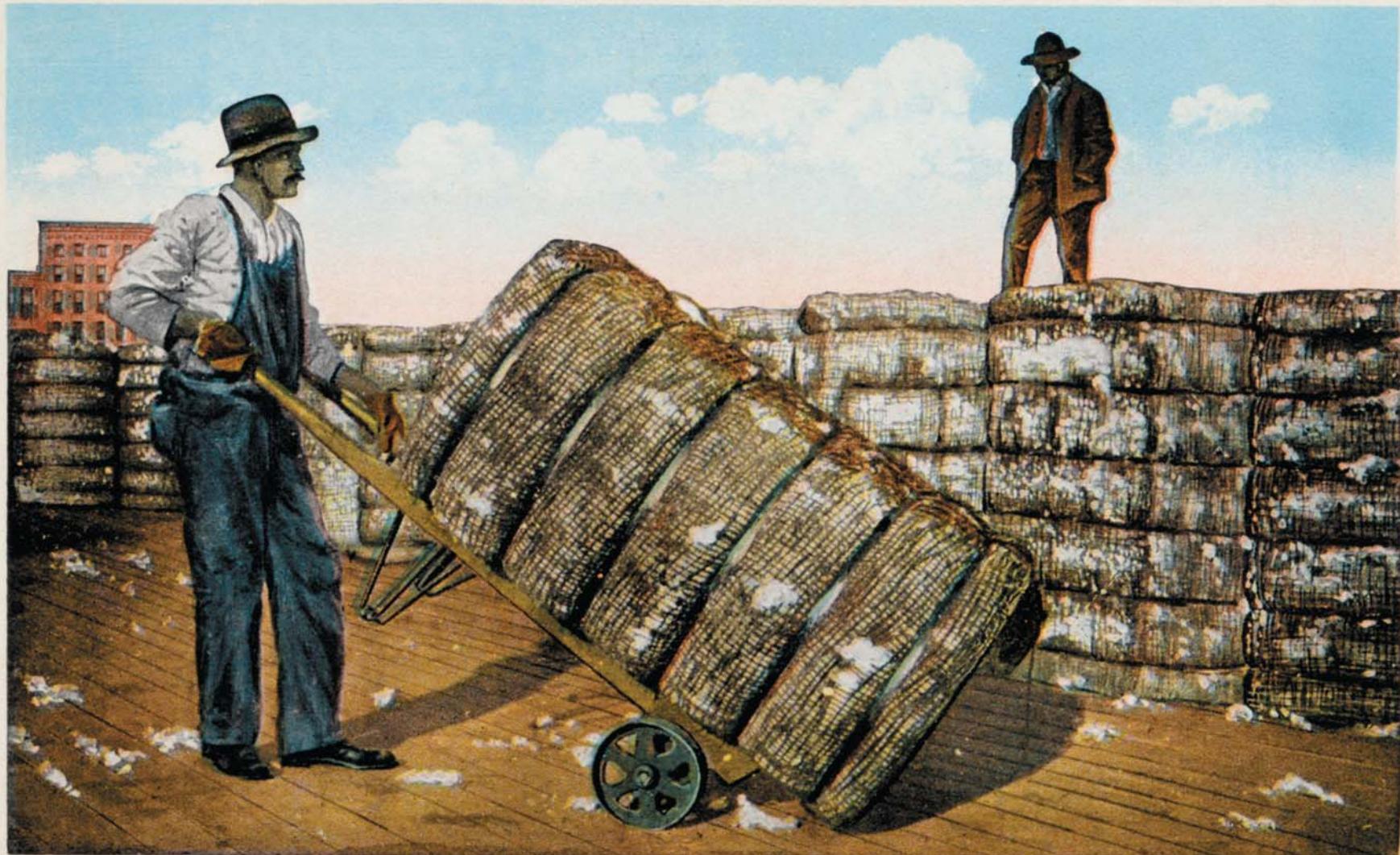
A single stove that was provided for heating was often fought over, and at the very least, patiently waited upon by deck passengers interested in cooking their provisions. The cabin deck had latrines; the lower decks were primitive in this regard, either buckets or nothing at all. The awful diet and unsanitary conditions also meant sickness and disease.

There were soft beds above; below on the main deck you had hay or cotton bales (if lucky), or space on the hard floor or a crate for which you likely had to fight with another tired passenger. As mentioned, because the Mississippi was often extremely shallow, the steamboat couldn't ride low in the water, and consequently the boiler and engines were above, on the boiler deck. Because the steamboats' primary source of income was freight, and, to a lesser degree, the rich cabin fares above, that meant that freight and fuel were crowded on the main

deck. The wealthier clients had full use of the cabin deck and, if that filled up, there were cabins on the boiler deck. The main deck had an enclosed space where freight was stored, and this was often full. Deck passengers—Hunter describes them as “dickers”—often didn't get to use this enclosed section, and instead had to crowd out in the open, even in poor weather.

On few occasions rotten, mealy bunks were provided, but these were miserable places to sleep. These rank cots, serving as living quarters for countless vermin and biting insects, meant that a backbreaking night on a cord of wood was preferable to an evening on a mattress in name only that literally squirmed with life.

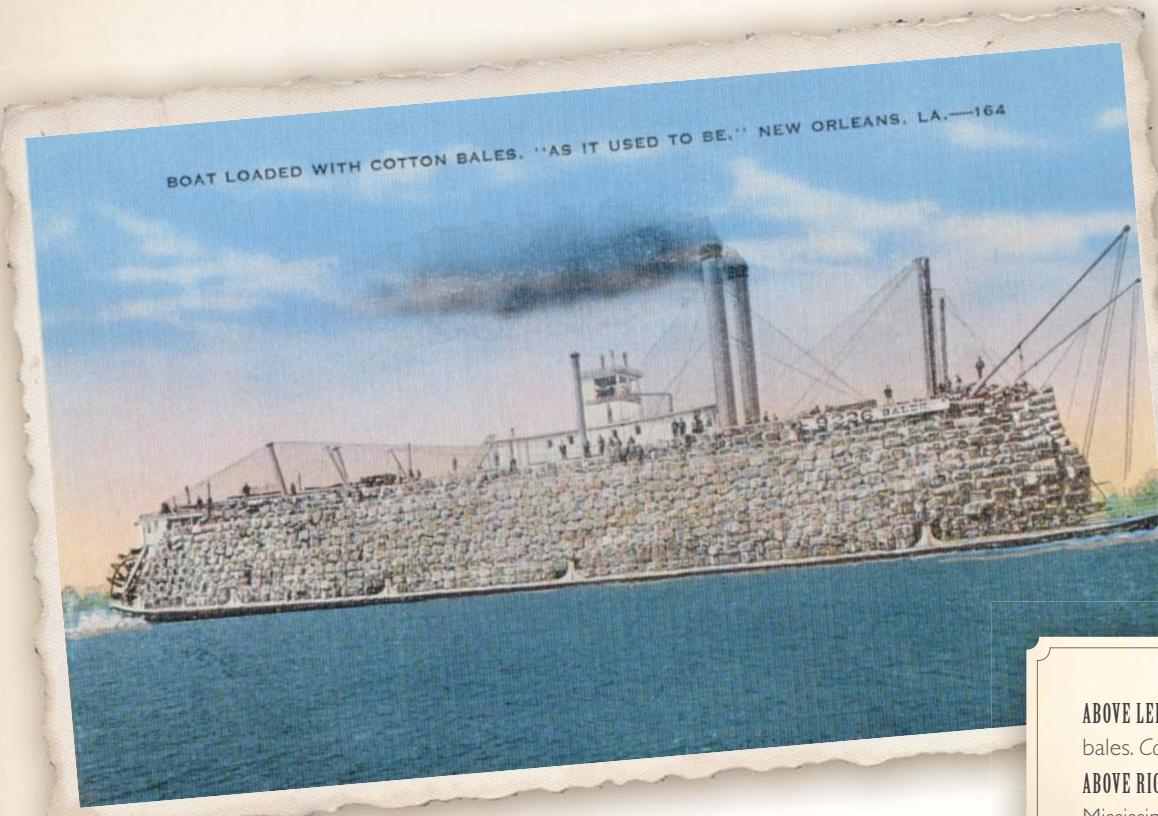
It is fascinating that Sam Clemens—who, like many young men seeking his fortune, was often broke—never rode on the main deck of



6. BALES OF COTTON READY FOR SHIPMENT.

Early twentieth-century postcard view of dockworkers handling cotton bales, which weighed about 500 pounds each.

Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



"GAMBLING DOWN  
BELOW."

a steamboat, at least not in any way that he later recounted in print. Certainly for a writer who made it a point to capture dialect, people, images, and experiences, whenever and wherever he could, the indignity of traveling on the deck passage must have been rich with possibility. In fact, there's scant evidence that his family, also broke, rode in the lowest and cheapest deck. But the Clemens family, while poor, lived in what biographer Ron Powers, author of *Mark Twain: A Life*, describes as "genteel poverty." While John Marshall Clemens was alive and failing miserably at nearly every financial scheme he tried, he still had a woman working for him as a slave and, despite his ailing wealth, always had a respectable place in the community of Hannibal. Twain's mother

**ABOVE LEFT:** Early postcard view of a steamboat carrying at least 2,000 cotton bales. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Gamblers on the lower decks of a steamboat. From *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter X

tried to maintain an air of middle class respectability for the family. After John Marshall's death the family struggled to get by with Orion working in Saint Louis, sister Pamela giving music lessons, and young Sam working odd jobs. Later, when Sam was in his young twenties and being paid nothing by his brother (at his failing Keokuk newspaper), he was frustrated and eager to leave Iowa behind—but even then he did not imagine himself stewing amongst the rabble on the main deck. Nor, as it turns out, did he have to. . . .

One day in the midwinter of 1856 or 1857—I think it was 1856—I was coming along the main street of Keokuk in the middle of the forenoon. It was bitter weather—so bitter that



The Keokuk office building in which Mark Twain worked for his brother as a typesetter during the mid-1850s. Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography* (1912)

that street was deserted, almost. . . . The wind blew a piece of paper past me and it lodged against a wall of a house. Something about the look of it attracted my attention and I gathered it in. It was a fifty-dollar bill, the only one I had ever seen, and the largest assembly of money I had ever seen in one spot. I advertised it in the papers and suffered more than a thousand dollars' worth of solicitude and fear and distress during the next few days lest the owner should see the advertisement and come and take my fortune away. As many as four days went by without an applicant; then I could endure this kind of misery no longer. I felt that I must take that money out of danger. So I bought a ticket for Cincinnati and went to that city.

—*Autobiography of Mark Twain*, “Thursday, March 29, 1906”

Whether or not this story is apocryphal, what *is* true is that Sam was working for some time with his brother with not a single penny in wages, and then he suddenly took to Cincinnati, and there's no evidence that he went there on deck passage. It's hard to imagine that Sam Clemens would have traveled that way and not have written of such an experience. Further, as we'll see in “Old Times on the Mississippi,” his trip on the *Paul Jones* was written from the perspective of a young man used to traveling in staterooms and cabins.

Above the main deck, a steamboat could have as many as four decks. The boiler deck was as advertised—it contained the boiler and much of the machinery, but also contained some staterooms, though the deck passengers and crew responsible for hauling the worst of the boat's cargo were not allowed on this deck and upwards. At the very top, naturally, existed the pilot-house, from which Sam and pilot Bixby—his instructor, the best character in “Old Times”—would drive their boat up and down the Mississippi. The “texas” was also at the top, and was where the officers and staff slept. Sometimes, the tennessee included the pilothouse, on other boats this was attached to the top of the tennessee.



Pilothouse of a modern steamboat replica. R. Kent Rasmussen

Just below that was the hurricane deck, from which the Texas rose, and below that the cabin deck.

The cabin deck was luxury defined. On the cabin decks were staterooms that were relatively comfortable—certainly not on par with a hotel, simply due to space considerations, but plush nonetheless. They were well lit, airy, decorated beautifully, segregated into sections for women or men. A saloon, vast restrooms, a barbershop, and kitchen were situated on this deck. The dining room was equally beautiful, with elegant tables, chairs, silverware, the finest crystal, and heavy cotton tablecloths. The boat's owners (often the captain, who might be part-owner) made sure the place was decorated lavishly with stained glass,

tapestries, curtains, and chandeliers. In these rooms the passengers and prostitutes and gamblers wore silks and high hats. The officers—captains and pilots especially—worked on or above this level, ate well, and towered over the boat both literally and figuratively.

She was a grand affair. When I stood in her pilot-house I was so far above the water that I seemed perched on a mountain; and her decks stretched so far away, fore and aft, below me, that I wondered how I could ever have considered the little "Paul Jones" a large craft. There were other differences, too. The "Paul Jones's" pilot-house was a cheap, dingy, battered rattle-trap, cramped for room; but here was a sumptuous glass temple; room



enough to have a dance in; showy red and gold window-curtains; an imposing sofa; leather cushions and a back to the high bench where visiting pilots sit, to spin yarns and "look at the river;" bright, fanciful "cuspadores" instead of a broad wooden box filled with sawdust; nice new oil-cloth on the floor; a hospitable big stove for winter; a wheel as high as my head, costly with inlaid work; a wire tiller-rope; bright brass knobs for the bells; and a tidy, white-aproned, black "texas-tender," to bring up tarts and ices and coffee during mid-watch, day and night. Now this was "something like;" and so I began to take heart once more to believe that piloting was a romantic sort of occupation after all.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter VI*

And yet, this was still the Wild West, and the American travelers would sometimes be made up of men and women with some means at their disposal, but few manners. Rules prohibiting whittling the furniture or going to bed with your boots on your feet were enforced as best as possible, though the sheer number of scofflaws would eventually wear away this splendor.

To pilot one of these floating castles was once Sam Clemens' dream. Sammy watched bitterly as a "worldly" boy roughly his age ended up on a steamboat. "This thing shook the bottom out of all my Sunday school teachings," Twain recalled. Here was a young lout, ignorant of church, who landed a job on a steamboat and proceeded to "swell around the town in his blackest and greasiest clothes," burden every sentence with "steamboat technicalities," and brag of his continued exploits in Saint Louis, the big city. "Two or three of the boys had long been persons of consideration among us," Twain wrote, "because they had been to Saint Louis once and had a vague general knowledge of its wonders, but the day of their glory was over now. They lapsed into a humble silence, and learned to disappear when the ruthless 'cub'-engineer approached." This horrible boy turned out to be a blessing

in disguise, for he had turned daydream into reality for himself, and proved it could be done.

Twain claimed that he ran away from home to seek his fortune in Saint Louis, going "meekly aboard a few of the boats that lay packed together like sardines" along the wharves, but failed to land work piloting (or any other work for that matter.) However, there's scant evidence of that he ever ran away, despite the close of Chapter IV in *Life on the Mississippi*: "I had comforting day-dreams of a future when I should be a great and honored pilot, with plenty of money, and could kill some of these mates and clerks and pay for them." His dreams would be realized (not the murderous part, of course), but not until he was in his early twenties.

### The education of a steamboat pilot

The story of how Twain came to be a steamboat pilot is a bit like his portrayal of the Mississippi: it contains some truth and some stretchers.

I was in Cincinnati, and I set to work to map out a new career. I had been reading about the recent exploration of the river Amazon by an expedition sent out by our government. It was said that the expedition, owing to difficulties, had not thoroughly explored a part of the country lying about the headwaters, some four thousand miles from the mouth of the river. It was only about fifteen hundred miles from Cincinnati to New Orleans, where I could doubtless get a ship. I had thirty dollars left; I would go and complete the exploration of the Amazon. That was all the thought I gave to the subject. I never was great in matters of detail.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter V*

Intriguingly enough, the story that young Sam thought he'd take thirty bucks and singlehandedly explore the Amazon was just that—a



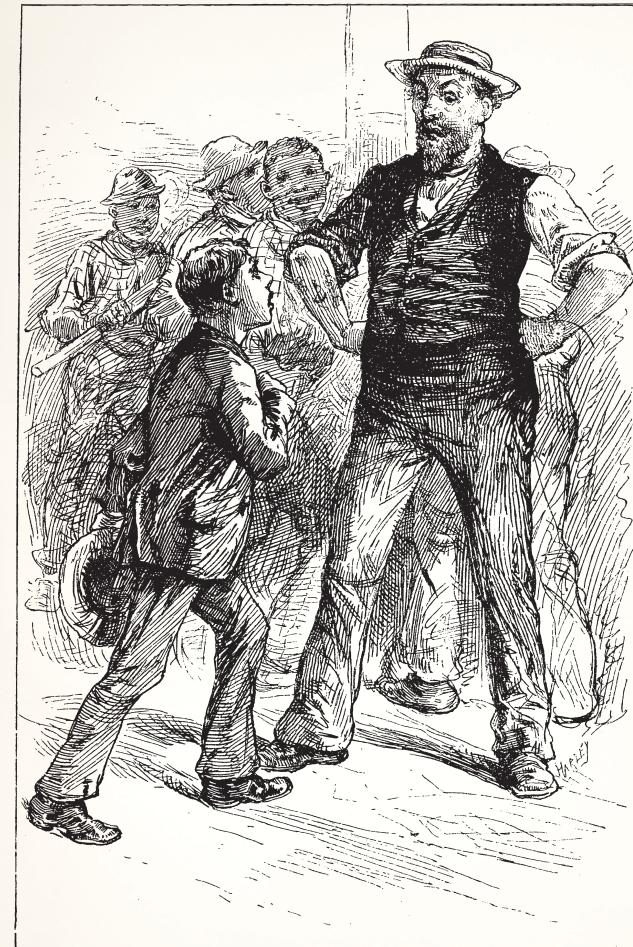
story. The reality is perhaps even more astounding, at least by today's standards. Sam did indeed want to reach the Amazon—because he had hopes of opening up a cocaine trade. "I was fired with a longing to ascend the Amazon. Also with a longing to open up a trade in coca with all the world. During months I dreamed the dream, and tried to contrive ways to get to Para and spring that splendid enterprise upon an unsuspecting planet." On April 15, 1857, he hopped on the steamboat *Paul Jones*, and moved down the Ohio and then the Mississippi toward New Orleans. From there he would board a ship that would take him to South America and become the king of the cocaine trade in the United States. Leaving Cincinnati, he booked cabin passage and strutted along the way, showing off his status as traveler to the laborers in the little towns along the river's banks.

When we stopped at villages and wood-yards, I could not help lolling carelessly upon the railings of the boiler deck to enjoy the envy of the country boys on the bank. If they did not seem to discover me, I presently sneezed to attract their attention, or moved to a position where they could not help seeing me. And as soon as I knew they saw me I gaped and stretched, and gave other signs of being mightily bored with travelling.

I kept my hat off all the time, and stayed where the wind and the sun could strike me, because I wanted to get the bronzed and weather-beaten look of an old traveller. Before the second day was half gone, I experienced a joy which filled me with the purest gratitude; for I saw that the skin had begun to blister and peel off my face and neck. I wished that the boys and girls at home could see me now.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter V*

As the boat made its journey down the river, Sam began to flit about the *Paul Jones*, hoping to learn something. When the boat got hung up



"TELL ME WHERE IT IS — I 'LL FETCH IT!"

The naive passenger astonishing the mate in Chapter V of *Life on the Mississippi*.

on some rocks in the middle of the river, and was stranded there for four days, Sam occupied himself by trying to ingratiate himself with the boat's crew. Merely by being in the company of the captain, officers, pilots, deck hands, and mates, he "was now beginning to feel a strong sense of being a part of the boat's family, a sort of infant son to the captain and younger brother to the officers." He tried in vain to assist the "big stormy mate," when the mate shouted for someone to bring him a capstan bar. Sam, standing nearby and in total awe, presumed that he could be the one to go and grab the bar, shouted, "Tell me where it is—I'll fetch it!" The mate stared at the young man with shocked contempt, muttering, "Well, if this don't beat hell," before going about his business as if Sam weren't there.

"I crept away, and courted solitude for the rest of the day," Twain wrote, sounding dumbfounded and defeated all those years later as he recounted the memory.

With the *Paul Jones* stuck on rocks for all that time, the trip to New Orleans "fooled away about two weeks in making the voyage." During this time Sam Clemens seemed to have taken an inventory of his situation.

I soon discovered two things. One was that a vessel would not be likely to sail for the mouth of the Amazon under ten or twelve years; and the other was that the nine or ten dollars still left in my pocket would not suffice for so imposing an exploration as I had planned, even if I could afford to wait for a ship. There it followed that I must contrive a new career.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter VI*

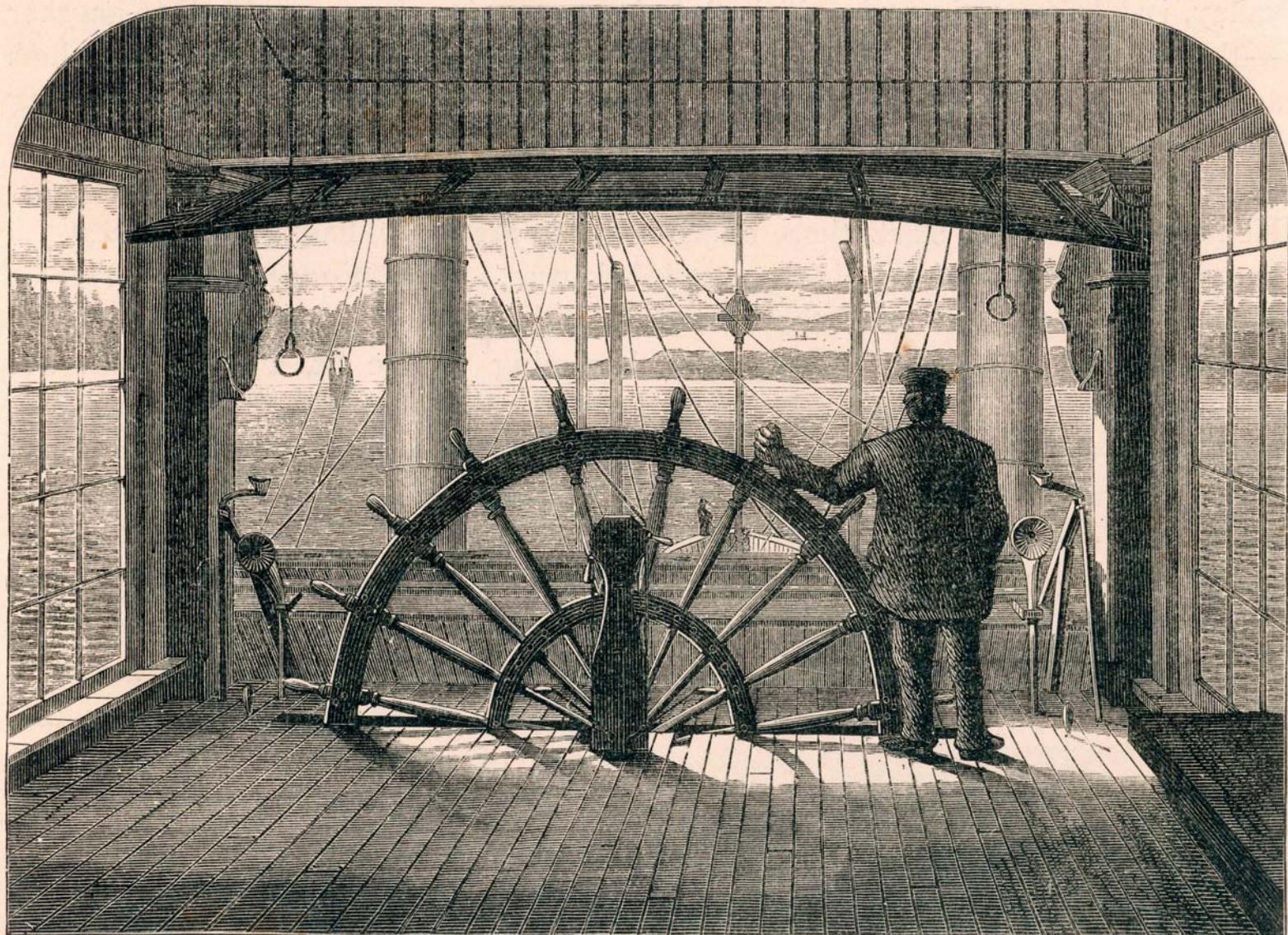
So reality intruded, as it must in everyone's life. Sam Clemens realized the futility of his scheme and saw, perhaps for the first time, that his boyhood fantasy of becoming a river pilot could actually be achieved.

With this in mind, he "planned a siege against my pilot, and at the end

of three hard days he surrendered." Sam was remarkably fortunate, for the man in question was the great Horace Bixby, one of steamboating's most legendary figures. Bixby's skill and knowledge of the river was astounding, but he was also a patient and demanding teacher who shaped Clemens into a reliable pilot. Bixby was thirty-one years old and Sam twenty-one when they began the apprenticeship. Bixby had started his own illustrious career as a mud clerk—an apprentice clerk, the kid who ran errands, counted the freight as it came and went, and was roused at all hours of the day or night at the whim of his superiors. (It was the dirtiest work of an officer's level; hence its name.) According to Powers, Bixby became a pilot—a full pilot—in a matter of months after mud-clerking: a remarkable feat.

The actual agreement between the men was not precisely a "siege." Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's first authorized biographer, interviewed Bixby in 1910. According to the old former pilot, Clemens was polite, coming up to Bixby and inquiring about taking him on as an apprentice. "I wouldn't like it," Bixby grumbled. "Cub pilots are more trouble than they're worth." Sam proceeded to take a seat in the pilothouse and carry on a pleasant conversation with the man. Then they stumbled on common ground: Sam's lifelong friend, Will Bowen (along with his brothers) was a steamboat pilot, and Will "did his first steering for me," Bixby recalled. Warming up to the kid with the pleasant drawl (at which Bixby poked light fun), he invited Sam to stand by him and chat. Bixby peppered Sam with questions, asking him if he drank, gambled, or swore. ("Not for amusement; only under pressure," Sam said in answer to the last question.) Bixby also asked the boy if he chewed or smoked tobacco. ("No, sir, never; but I must smoke.") In these reminiscences, Bixby noted that his foot was sore, and he was glad to let Sam take the wheel as he rested.

Powers argues that this discussion happened in New Orleans, after Sam traveled the length of the river and discovered that the trip to the



The Pilot-House of the "Great Republic." [Page 259.]

This is the place young Sam dreamed about: the pilot house of a steamboat. © Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy



Amazon was a pipe dream. Furthermore, Clemens was dead broke and about to be run in for vagrancy, and it was while Bixby was in town, waiting on another boat, that young Clemens began to lay “siege” on the pilot. From there, they took the steamship *Colonel Crossman* to Saint Louis, and it was on this trip that Sam convinced Bixby to take him on as a cub, or that he began his training having already won the elder pilot over.

Wherever and whenever this occurred, the terms were thus: Bixby wouldn’t teach him for anything less than five hundred dollars, with one hundred down and the rest paid out of his future wages. In Saint Louis, Sam was able to secure the hundred from William A. Moffett, his brother-in-law, which he promptly gave to Bixby, and they headed south again, this time on the steamer *Crescent City*.

I entered upon the small enterprise of “learning” twelve or thirteen hundred miles of the great Mississippi River with the easy confidence of my time of life. If I had really known what I was about to require of my faculties, I should not have had the courage to begin. I supposed that all a pilot had to do was to keep his boat in the river, and I did not consider that that could be much of a trick, since it was so wide.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter VI*

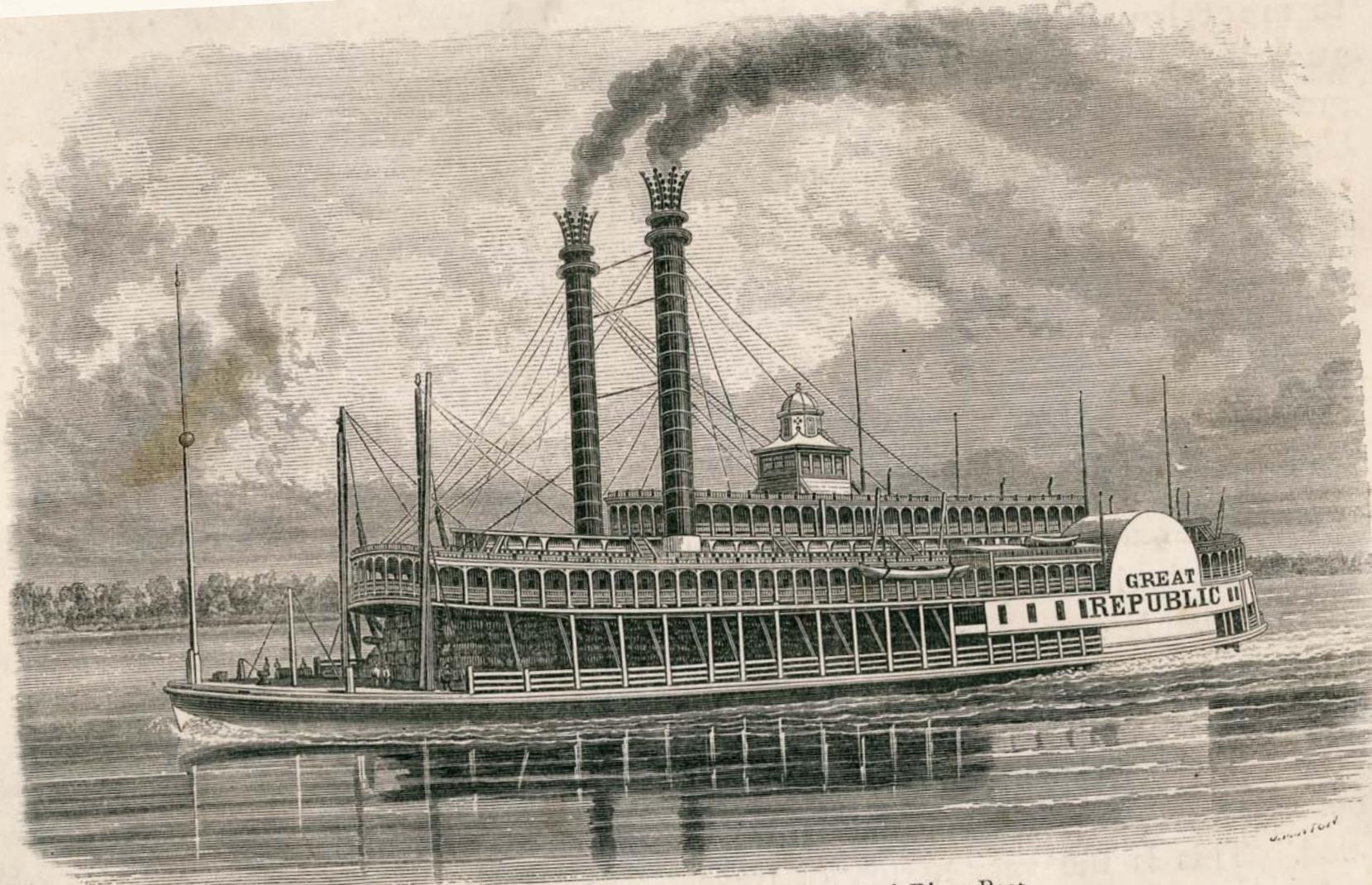
According to Louis C. Hunter’s *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, a typical steamboat in the time of Sam’s apprenticeship was roughly 235 tons and carried a crew of twenty-six men—more if the ship was specifically designed to attract cabin passengers rather than cargo (though there was always cargo). The boat’s officers were a captain, pilots (usually two), a clerk, a pair of engineers, and a mate. If the boat was extremely large, and had a crew in excess of a hundred (rare, but sometimes seen), there would be a second and third mate and third and fourth engineers. Often, regardless of the size, the clerks would have

apprentices—the aforementioned mud clerks—and pilots would have their cubs.

The engineers on a steamboat were somewhat of a paradox. “The captain and the pilot gave orders;” Hunter wrote, “the engineer took them, and he often took the blame for accidents which in all justice should have been borne by his superiors.” Engineering was hard work, hot as hell, filthy, greasy, and often fatal. If a steamboat’s boilers blew (an all-too-common occurrence), it stands to reason that the engineers and firemen (the men who fueled the boat) would be killed at once, standing in such close proximity. The pilot’s breadth of knowledge was remarkable, but the engineer had to know the machine that moved the boat like the back of his hand, noting sounds and reading gauges and checking the boiler for bulges that often were the most subtle portents of disaster, while responding quickly to these clues and with the perfect solution. And while the pilot was celebrated in books like Twain’s (and others), the engineer was locked away, putting his life on the line and making sure the engines ran.

For African Americans, working on a steamboat meant not only a rise in fortune in terms of wages, but an improvement in social standing as well. “It was a proud thing to be of the crew of such stately craft as the ‘Aleck Scott’ or the ‘Grand Turk,’” Twain wrote. “Negro firemen, deck hands, and barbers belonging to those boats were distinguished personages in their grade of life, and they were well aware of that fact, too.” This observation was from the antebellum South, where many of these men were working, free, even past the Missouri-Illinois border where the river was bordered on both sides by slave states.

For Sam Clemens, becoming a cub pilot meant setting aside the glory, the preening, and posturing. It was time to get to work and begin studying the river. Yes, *all* the river—all twelve hundred miles of it paddling northward to Saint Louis, and all twelve hundred miles paddling south to New Orleans; during the daylight when the sun



The Steamer "Great Republic," a Mississippi River Boat.

The steamboat Great Republic. © Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy



This pilothouse of a twentieth-century steamboat has features not known in the previous century,  
but its helm would have been familiar to Mark Twain. Library of Congress



ABOVE: Twain had to learn every inch of the river—including sandbars where a steamboat could run aground. © Danita Delimont / Alamy

BELOW: Floating trees were among the signs Clemens had to learn to read as a steamboat pilot. R. Kent Rasmussen



reflected off the water and into his eyes and during the pitch-black night when he could barely make out his hand in front of his face, much less the banks fifty yards away; when the water was high and when it was low; in short, the river, millions upon millions of feet of the Mississippi River, memorized in full.

Bixby had begun training Clemens right away, quietly pointing out markers as they traveled upstream from New Orleans. Almost every foot of their trip was to be studied: the surface of the water, the trees, the banks, and the docks all spoke of some important marker that could make or break a trip. But Sam was barely paying attention. At this point, he still thought that piloting a steamboat meant driving the great vessel through the middle of a fat expanse of deep water, and little more. On his first night he groused loudly when called from bed in the middle of the night: “I knew that boats ran all night, but somehow I had never happened to reflect that somebody had to get up out of a warm bed to run them.” And then he inwardly gloated when Bixby was ordered to lay up the boat at the lower end of a plantation in pitch-black darkness. “All I desired to ask Mr. Bixby was the simple question whether he was ass enough to really imagine he was going to find that plantation on a night when all plantations were exactly alike and all the same color. But I held in.”

Good thing, too, for not only did Bixby bring this giant boat perfectly up to the dock, but did so with the ease of a fellow rowing a skiff in broad daylight, “and not only that, but singing,” Twain wrote.

Despite the senior pilot’s expertise, Sam still thought him odd (or at least Twain wrote it that way for effect), taking his lessons and brushing them off as so much small talk. Throughout the trip, Bixby had been pointing out markers all along the way, and later, when he grilled his cub on these important points on the river, Clemens was at a complete loss to recall . . . *anything*.



Bixby, the master pilot, instructing the cub pilot, Clemens, in Chapter VI of *Life on the Mississippi*.

"What's the name of the first point above New Orleans?" I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.

"Don't know?"

This manner jolted me. I was down at the foot again, in a moment. But I had to say just what I had said before.

"Well, you're a smart one," said Mr. Bixby. "What's the name of the *next* point?"

Once more I didn't know.

"Well, this beats anything. Tell me the name of *any* point or place I told you."

I studied a while and decided that I couldn't.

"Look here! What do you start out from, above Twelve-Mile Point, to cross over?"

"I—I—don't know."

"You—you—don't know?" mimicking my drawling manner of speech. "What *do* you know?

"I—I—nothing, for certain."

"By the great Caesar's ghost, I believe you! You're the stupidest dunderhead I ever saw or ever heard of, so help me Moses! The idea of *you* being a pilot—*you!* Why, you don't know enough to pilot a cow down a lane."

Oh, but his wrath was up! He was a nervous man, and he shuffled from one side of his wheel to the other as if the floor was hot. He would boil a while to himself, and then overflow and scald me again.

"Look here! What do you suppose I told you the names of those points for?"

I tremblingly considered a moment, and then the devil of temptation provoked me to say:

"Well—to—to—be entertaining, I thought."

—*Life on the Mississippi. Chapter VI*

Bixby raged, and in his anger almost sent the *Paul Jones* (the boat Twain remembered them sailing upon in "Old Times on the Mississippi", though he may have been confusing it with the *Crescent City*) into a trading-scow, which unleashed a "volley of red-hot profanity" from the smaller boat's crew. "Never was a man so grateful as Mr. Bixby was: because he was brim full, and here were subjects who would *talk back*." After Bixby was relieved of his bile, he gave Sam some advice that helped his piloting immensely: "My boy, you must get a little memorandum-



A portrait of Sam Clemens  
as a young pilot. © Mary Evans  
Picture Library / Alamy



The numerous islands of the Upper Mississippi give the river a very different look than that of the Lower Mississippi. Steamboat pilots had to know them all.  
*Library of Congress*

book, and every time I tell you a thing, put it down right away. There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart."

And yet, even this was not enough, for as Sam discovered, he needed to know every point, every landmark, and even the shape of the river and its banks. It's important to remember that much of this learning—though certainly not all of it—regards travelling *upstream*. Boats traveling from Saint Louis to New Orleans would, as Sam had lazily imagined, travel in the center of the river, where the currents were swiftest and the water deepest. Coming back, however, was another story—the boat needed to grip the banks, away from the currents, in

order to travel fast and use much less fuel, as paddling against a current is a tremendous effort, especially for something the size of even a small steamboat. But even heading southward, you had snags and sawyers and rocks, not to mention other smaller watercraft and competing steamboats (all of which were present in both directions). If a boat was slow, one must go around it, and then it behooved a seasoned pilot to make certain the craft didn't run aground on some rocks or a sandbar or get torn apart by a submerged tree.

But powering upriver was more of an effort, and, as Bixby pointed out, the pilot was a man who must know the river so well that the one

in his mind trumps the one that lay there before his eyes. He must be able to see in the darkness as well as the light. Bixby was not suggesting that a pilot drive down the Mississippi in broad daylight with his eyes closed, but taking a giant boat up a narrow stretch of river on a moonless night was essentially the same thing. "It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night," he explained to the increasingly perplexed Sam. "Everything else is blotted out and gone. But mind you, it hasn't the same shape in the night that it has in the day-time." In other words, the little memorandum-book that Bixby wanted his apprentice to fill up with important facts was also worthless about half the time.

When Sam appeared overwhelmed by this task, Bixby analogized that it was the same as following a hall at home in the dark. Naturally, the cub complained that there's a tremendous difference between knowing your own home in the dark and knowing twelve hundred miles of river in pitch-black darkness. "On my honor," the pilot said, "you've got to know them *better* than any man ever did the shapes of the halls in his own house." Which prompted Sam to cry that he wished he was dead, but eventually conceded to trying to learn this information.

"Well, pile it on me; I might as well have it now as another time."

"You see, this has got to be learned; there isn't any getting around it. A clear starlight night throws such heavy shadows that if you didn't know the shape of a shore perfectly you would claw away from every bunch of timber, because you would take the black shadow of it for a solid cape; and you see you would be getting scared to death every fifteen minutes by the watch. You would be fifty yards from shore all the time when you ought to be within fifty feet of it. You can't see a snag in one of those shadows, but you know exactly where it is, and the shape of the river tells you when you are coming to it. Then there's your

pitch-dark night; the river is a very different shape on a pitch-dark night from what it is on a starlight night. All shores seem to be straight lines, then, and mighty dim ones, too; and you'd *run* them for straight lines only you know better. You boldly drive your boat right into what seems to be a solid, straight wall (you knowing very well that in reality there is a curve there), and that wall falls back and makes way for you. Then there's

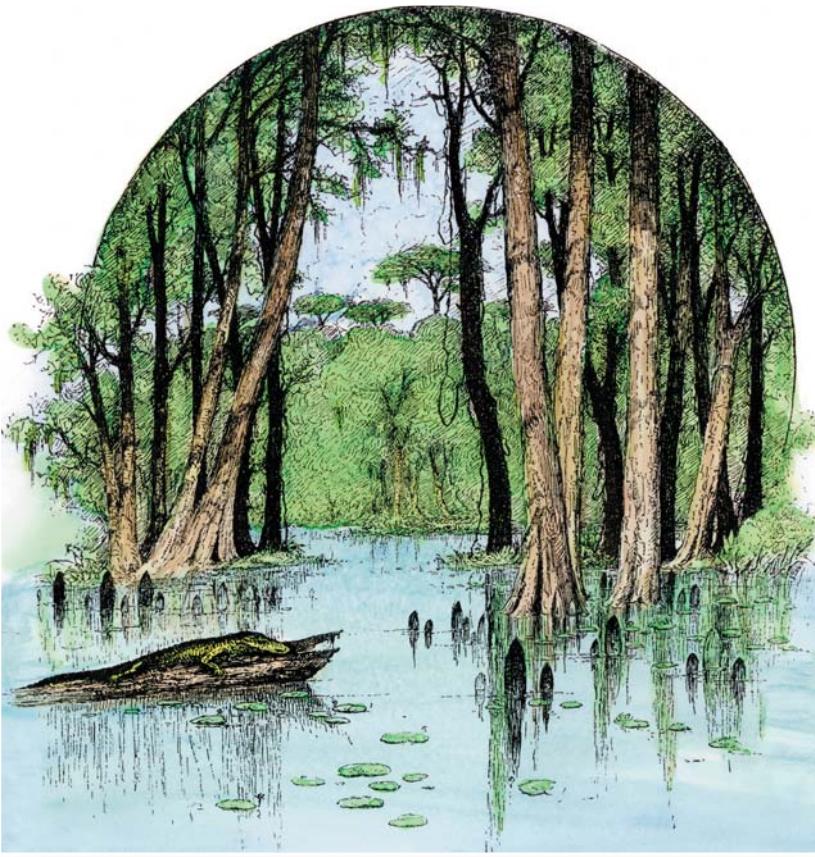


A LIGHT KEEPER.

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A boatman lighting a river warning light in Chapter XXX of *Life on the Mississippi*.

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As he learned to navigate the river, Twain also would have seen some of its wildlife. Alligators make an appearance in the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy

your gray mist. You take a night when there's one of these grisly, drizzly, gray mists, and then there isn't *any* particular shape to a shore. A gray mist would tangle the head of the oldest man that ever lived. Well, then, different kinds of *moonlight* change the shape of the river in different ways. You see"—

"Oh, don't say any more, please! Have I got to learn the shape of the river according to all these five hundred thousand different ways? If I tried to carry all that cargo in my head it would make me stoop-shouldered."

"*No!* you only learn *the* shape of the river; and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's *in your head*, and never mind the one that's before your eyes."

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter VIII*

Vexing as this was, Bixby was living proof that a pilot could retain this information. Obviously, this wasn't going to be a quick learn, but a process. Twain later observed that not only did learning to pilot take time and intense observation, but that he lost valuable moments *sleeping*, for crying out loud. Despite this, a pilot, such as one Mr. W., who relieved Bixby at the wheel, could ascend to the pilothouse in the darkest of nights and know exactly where he was along the river. This unnamed pilot took over for Bixby, twelve minutes late ("an unpardonable sin among pilots"), and the senior pilot was so angry he simply stormed off. Sam, alarmed, remained in the pilothouse rather than heading off to bed himself. "So I stood around," Twain wrote, "and waited to be asked where we were." The anonymous gentleman didn't ask him anything, which Sam mistook for pride. So he waited and waited . . . and then fell asleep.

The next morning, after Bixby discovered his charge upstairs in the pilothouse, obviously there all night, he began berating his apprentice for being an ass. As he reiterated, knowing the river is not the skill of an



Bird's-eye view of Saint Louis, Missouri, circa 1859, as seen from above the Mississippi River. This is the size of the city when Clemens knew it as a steamboat pilot. Color lithograph by A. Janicke & Co., St. Louis. Library of Congress

otherworldly intelligence or possessor of a photographic memory, but of the average pilot. Mr. W. knew the river, just as Sam should know. "You've got to, on the river!" Bixby cried.

In the course of this narrative, we see not only Twain's admiration for both the great Mississippi River and the steamboats that once dominated the waters, but for this incredible teacher. "When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography, I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before—met him on the river," Twain wrote. Bixby was a remarkable character, his facilities stunning to us all these years later (and even then, as a fellow pilot remarked of Bixby at the time, "by the Shadow of Death, but he's a lightning pilot"). But where Bixby could have simply been a savant of the pilothouse, a genius beyond approach, able to remember every broken twig on every cottonwood along the twelve hundred miles of river banks, instead he's a man of superior skills who sought to, and succeeded in, teaching Sam the same skills. "When I say I'll learn a man the river," he boasted, "I mean it. And you can depend on it, I'll learn him or I'll kill him."

This is perhaps evidenced best when Bixby twice turned the wheel over to Sam in "Old Times on the Mississippi." In one instance, he pushed the young man to ride the boat right into what Sam believed would be disaster, thinking the ripples on the surface of the river communicated a "bluff reef"—a ridge of a sandbar that can wreck a ship—when in fact Bixby knew the steamboat would paddle across nothing but water. This was a "wind reef," the wind having made the surface appear to have that treacherous sand below, to Sam's relief (and to his continuing understanding of the river). But the next trick was even better. By now, Clemens had been studying the river up and down, cramming every conceivable fact into his head. He was beginning to see that the senior pilot's memory, while certainly impressive (truly better than most), was nonetheless something that a cub pilot could in fact attain.

Let a leadsman cry, "Half twain! half twain! half twain! half twain!" until it becomes as monotonous as the ticking of a clock; let conversation be going on all the time, and the pilot be doing his share of the talking, and no longer consciously listening to the leadsman; and in the midst of this endless string of half twains let a single "quarter twain!" be interjected, without emphasis, and then the half twain cry go on again, just as before: two or three weeks later that pilot can describe with precision the boat's position in the river when that quarter twain was uttered, and give you such a lot of head-marks, stern-marks, and side-marks to guide you, that you ought to be able to take the boat there and put her in that same spot again yourself!

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XIII*

This was much a boast as it was an observation, the fruits of Bixby's relentless instruction. Indeed, Sam Clemens *learned* the river, and it was Horace Bixby who taught him, thoroughly. In the second great moment when he handed the wheel to Sam, we see one of the many methods by which he was able to achieve this remarkable goal.

Sam was steering with Bixby hovering, the young man's "nose as high as a giraffe" with confidence, when the pilot decided to go below, and asked his cub if he could handle the wheel all by himself. "This was almost an affront," Twain recalled. "It was about the plainest and simplest crossing the whole river." Sam sarcastically responded that he could "run it with my eyes shut" and Bixby asked him about the depth in this spot. "I couldn't get to bottom there with a church steeple," the cub said. Good enough: Bixby went below.

Mr. Bixby, unknown to me, of course, sent somebody down to the forecastle with some mysterious instructions to the leadsman, another messenger was sent to whisper among the officers, and then Mr. Bixby went into hiding behind a smokestack where



St. Louis in the mid-nineteenth century, by Henry Lewis. *William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 59*



he could observe results. Presently the captain stepped out on the hurricane deck; next the chief mate appeared; and before I got to the head of the island I had fifteen or twenty people assembled down there under my nose. I began to wonder what the trouble was. As I started across, the captain glanced aloft at me and said, with a sham uneasiness in his voice,—

“Where is Mr. Bixby?”

“Gone below, sir.”

But that did the business for me. My imagination began to construct dangers out of nothing, and they multiplied faster than I could keep the run of them. All at once I imagined I saw shoal water ahead! The wave of coward agony that surged through me then came near dislocating every joint in me. All my confidence in that crossing vanished. I seized the bell-rope; dropped it, ashamed; seized it again; dropped it once more; clutched it tremblingly once again, and pulled it so feebly that I could hardly hear the stroke myself. Captain and mate sang out instantly, and both together,—

“Starboard lead there! and quick about it!”

This was another shock. I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating to starboard, and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsman’s sepulchral cry:

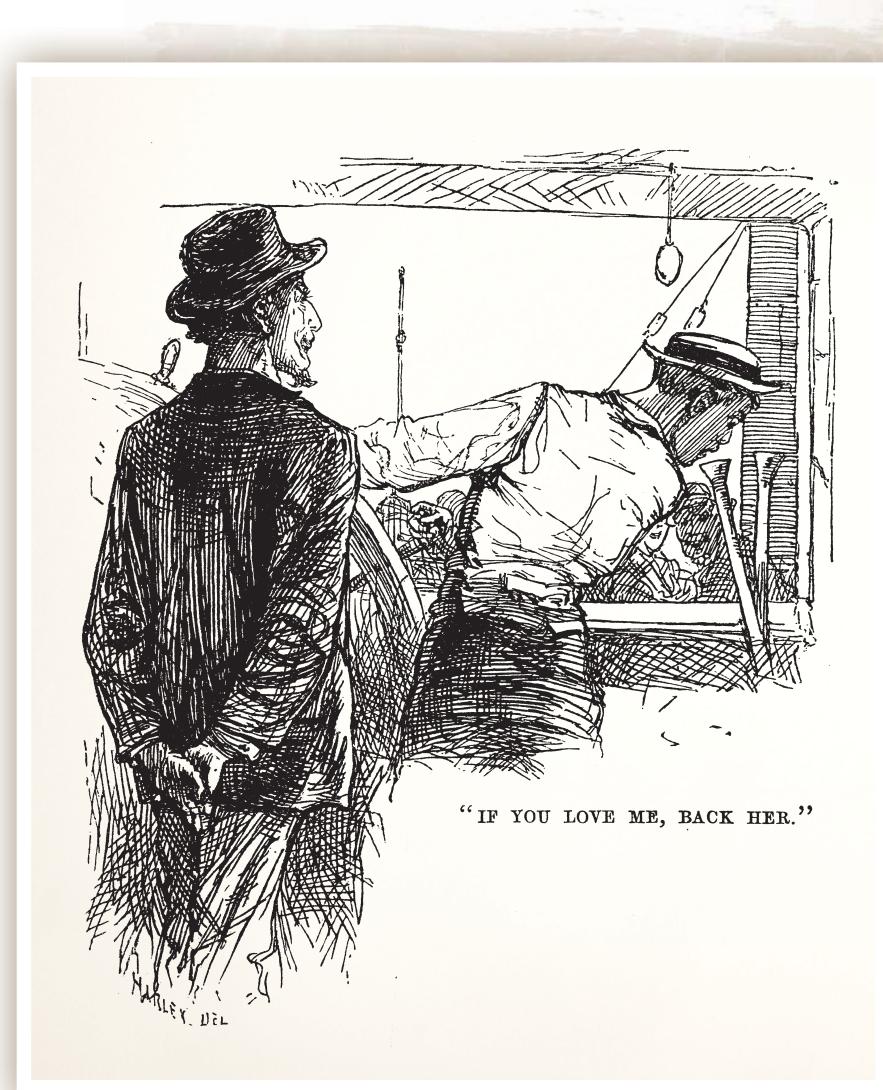
“D-e-e-p four!”

Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

“M-a-r-k three! . . . M-a-r-k three . . . Quarter less three! . . . Half twain!”

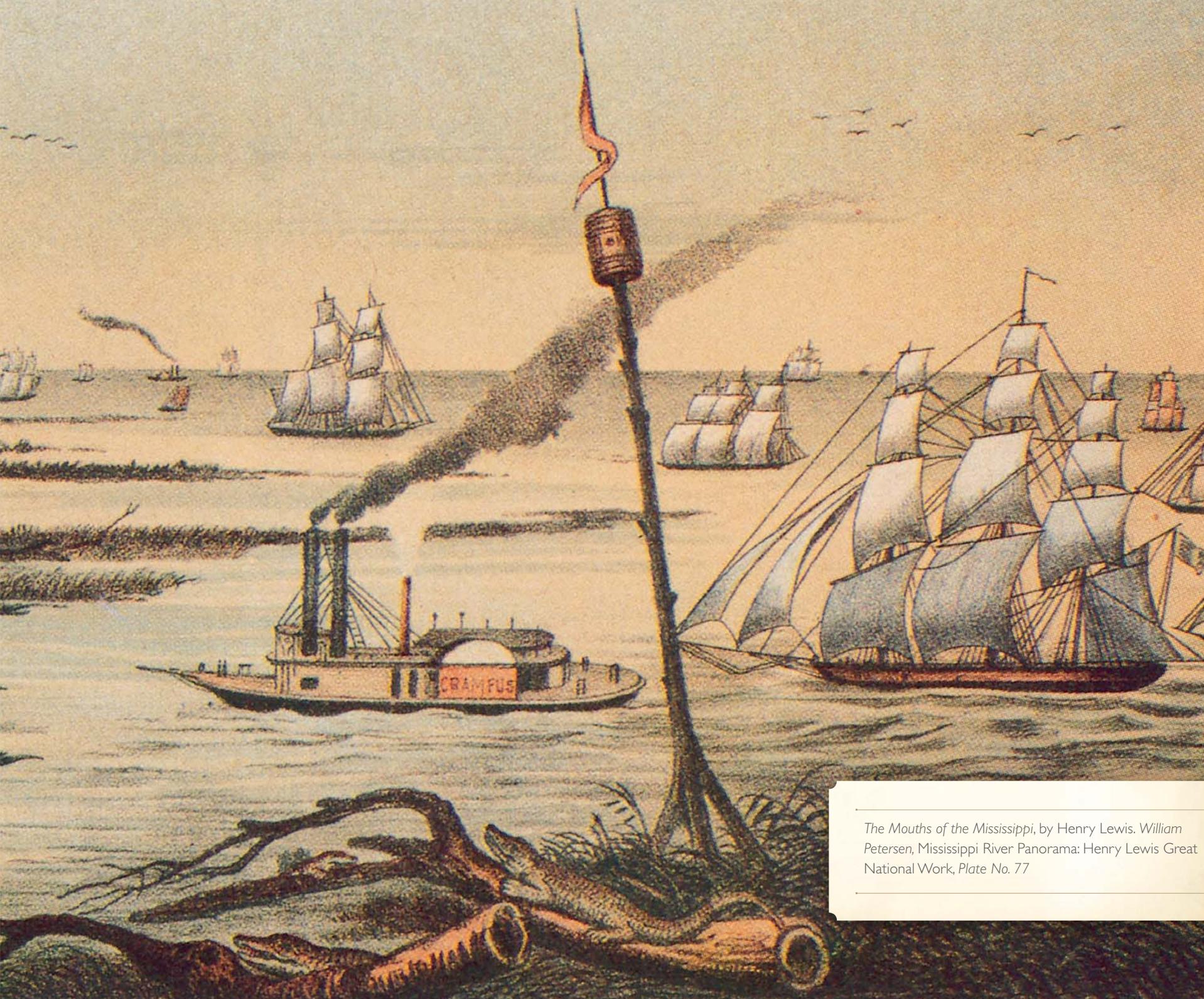
This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

“Quarter twain! Quarter twain! *Mark* twain!

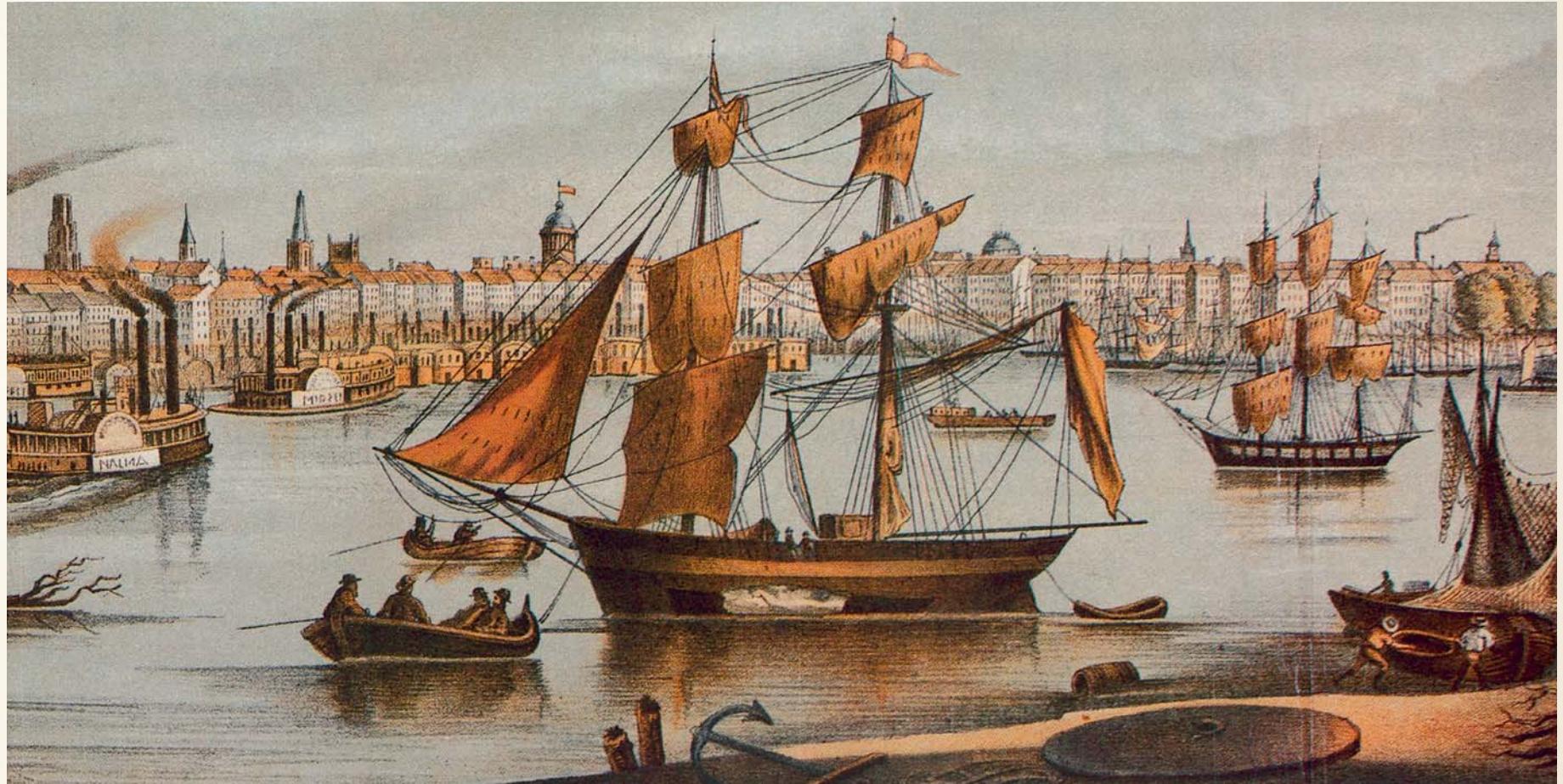


“IF YOU LOVE ME, BACK HER.”

The cub pilot panicking in Chapter XIII of *Life on the Mississippi*.



*The Mouths of the Mississippi*, by Henry Lewis. William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 77



The busy port of New Orleans, mid-nineteenth century, by Henry Lewis. Note the mix of steamboats, rowboats, sailing ships, and other craft.

William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 78



A simple incised nameplate marks the grave of Mark Twain's piloting mentor, Horace Bixby (1826–1912) in Saint Louis's Bellefontaine Cemetery. R. Kent Rasmussen

I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

“Quarter *less* twain! Nine and a *half*!

We were *drawing* nine! My hands were in a nerveless flutter. I could not ring a bell intelligibly with them. I flew to the speaking-tube and shouted to the engineer,—

“Oh, Ben, if you love me, *back* her! Quick, Ben! Oh, back the immortal *soul* out of her!”

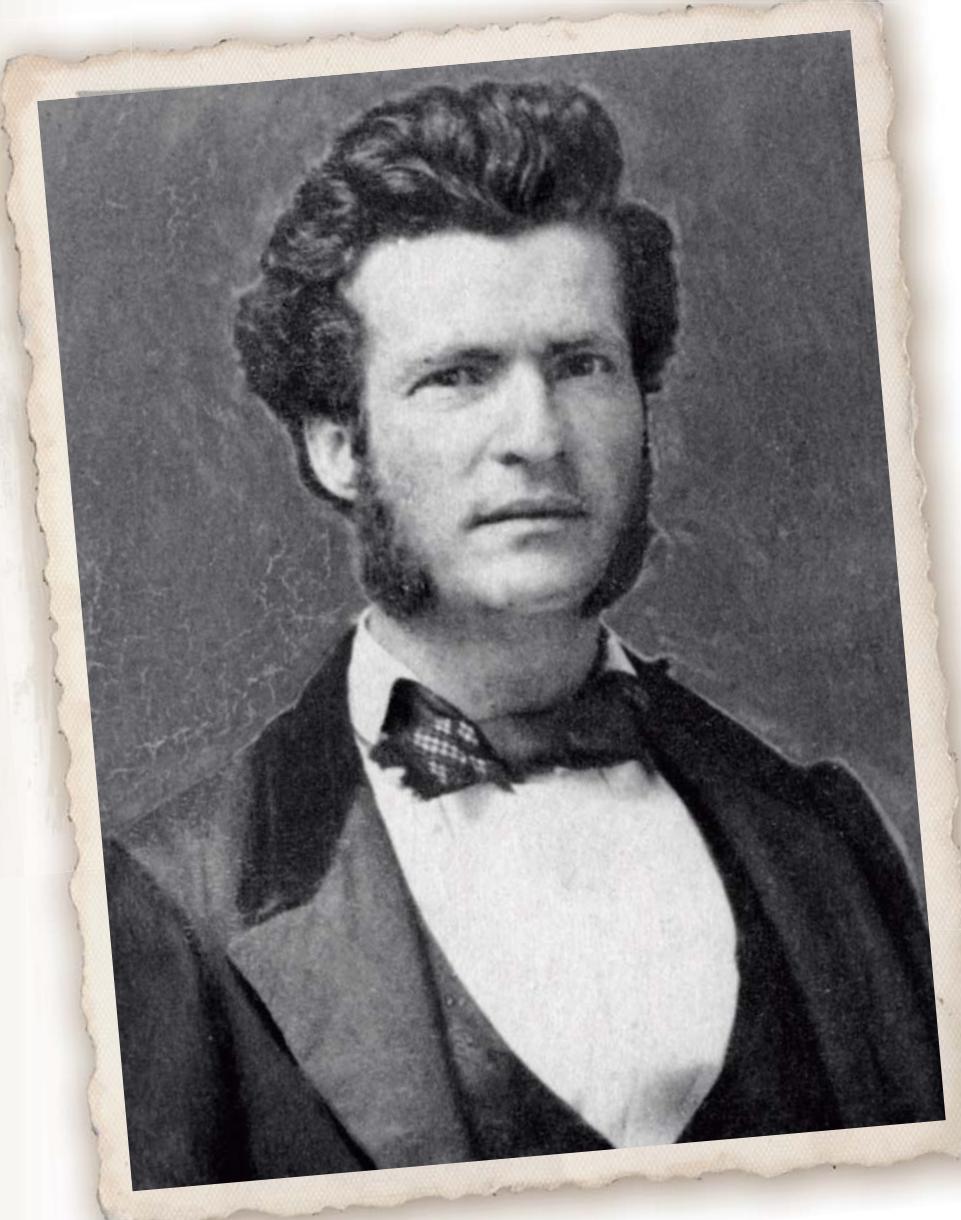
I heard the door close gently. I looked around, and there stood Mr. Bixby, smiling a bland, sweet smile. Then the audience

on the hurricane deck sent up a thundergust of humiliating laughter. I saw it all, now, and I felt meaner than the meanest man in human history. I laid in the lead, set the boat in her marks, came ahead on the engines, and said:—

“It was a fine trick to play on an orphan, *wasn’t* it? I suppose I’ll never hear the last of how I was ass enough to heave the lead at the head of 66.”

“Well, no, you won’t, maybe. In fact, I hope you won’t; for I want you to learn something by that experience. Didn’t you *vknow* there was no bottom in that crossing?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”



Samuel Clemens in 1858, when he was still a cub pilot. Library of Congress

“Very well, then. You shouldn’t have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any.”

It was a good enough lesson, but pretty hardly learned.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XIII*

In spite of his complaints and anxieties, Sam turned out to be a good pilot. On April 9, 1859, Samuel Clemens became a licensed steamboat pilot, and he ran his first boat just under a month later.

Though they saw little of each other in the many years after Sam left the steamboat trade, Bixby and Twain remained lifelong friends, and enjoyed reminiscing about one another to various members of the press.

“If I have seemed to love my subject,” Twain wrote of piloting many years later, “it is no surprising thing, for I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since, and I took a measureless pride in it.” This pride was shared by his teacher, for years later, in an interview the year of Twain’s death, Bixby recalled that “he was a good pilot, and he learned it from me.”

The river gave Clemens a great occupation until the dawn of the Civil War, when a cannonball fired over the bow of the boat he was piloting, the steamer *Nebraska*, helped convince him that his fortunes lay elsewhere. (In fact, the Union blockades and the advent of the railroad along the Mississippi helped ensure that the steamboat era was short-lived anyway.)



A year after Clemens ended his career as steamboat pilot, river transport became considerably more dangerous, as shown in this lithograph of the Union's navy bombarding Island Number Ten on April 7, 1862. © Everett Collection Inc / Alamy



"CLIFTON" AND "WESTFIELD," ALTERED NEW YORK CITY FERRY-BOATS.

"OWASCO."

"HARRIET LANE."

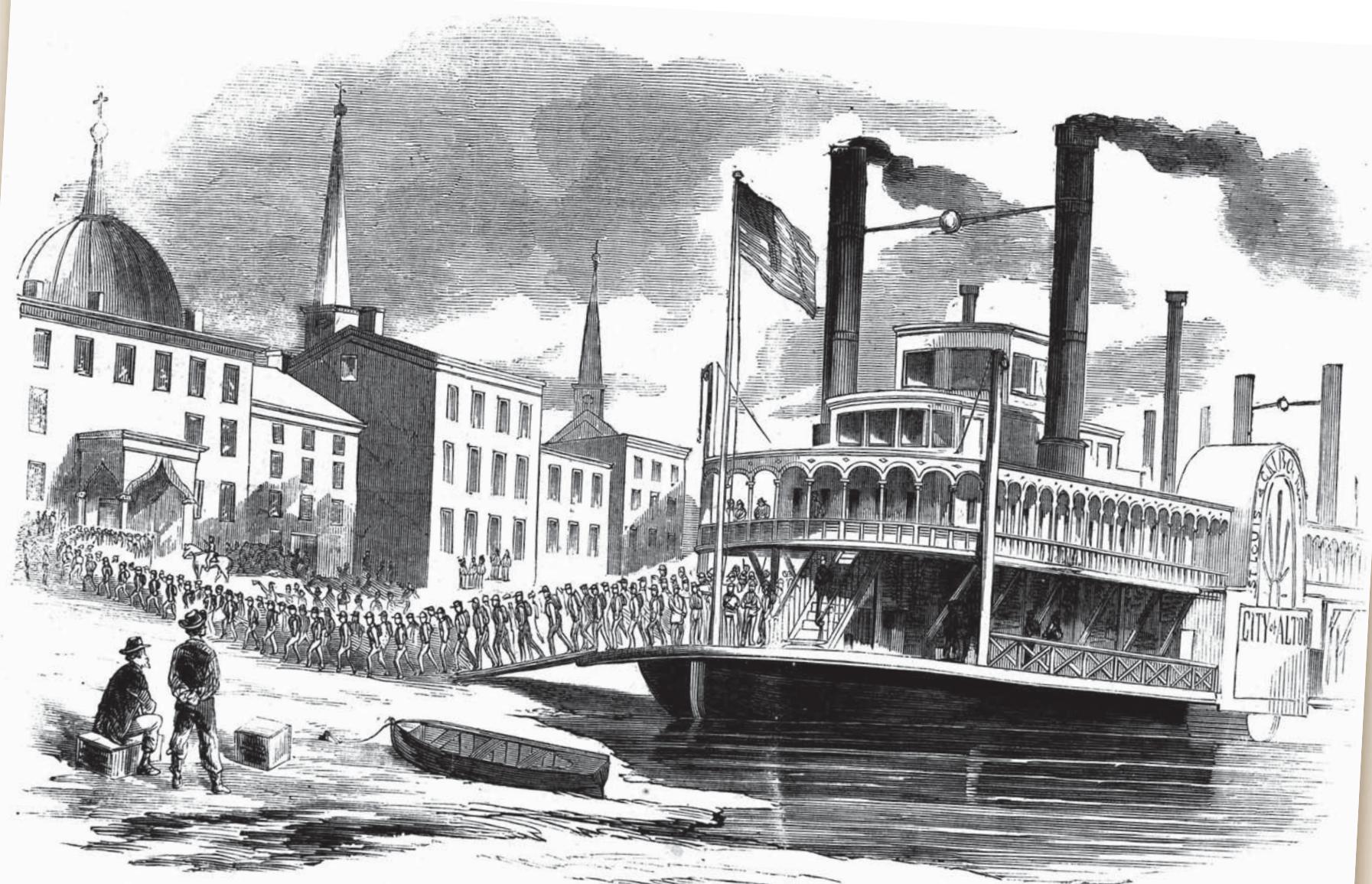
MORTAR-STEAMERS ATTACKING THE WATER-BATTERY OF FORT JACKSON.

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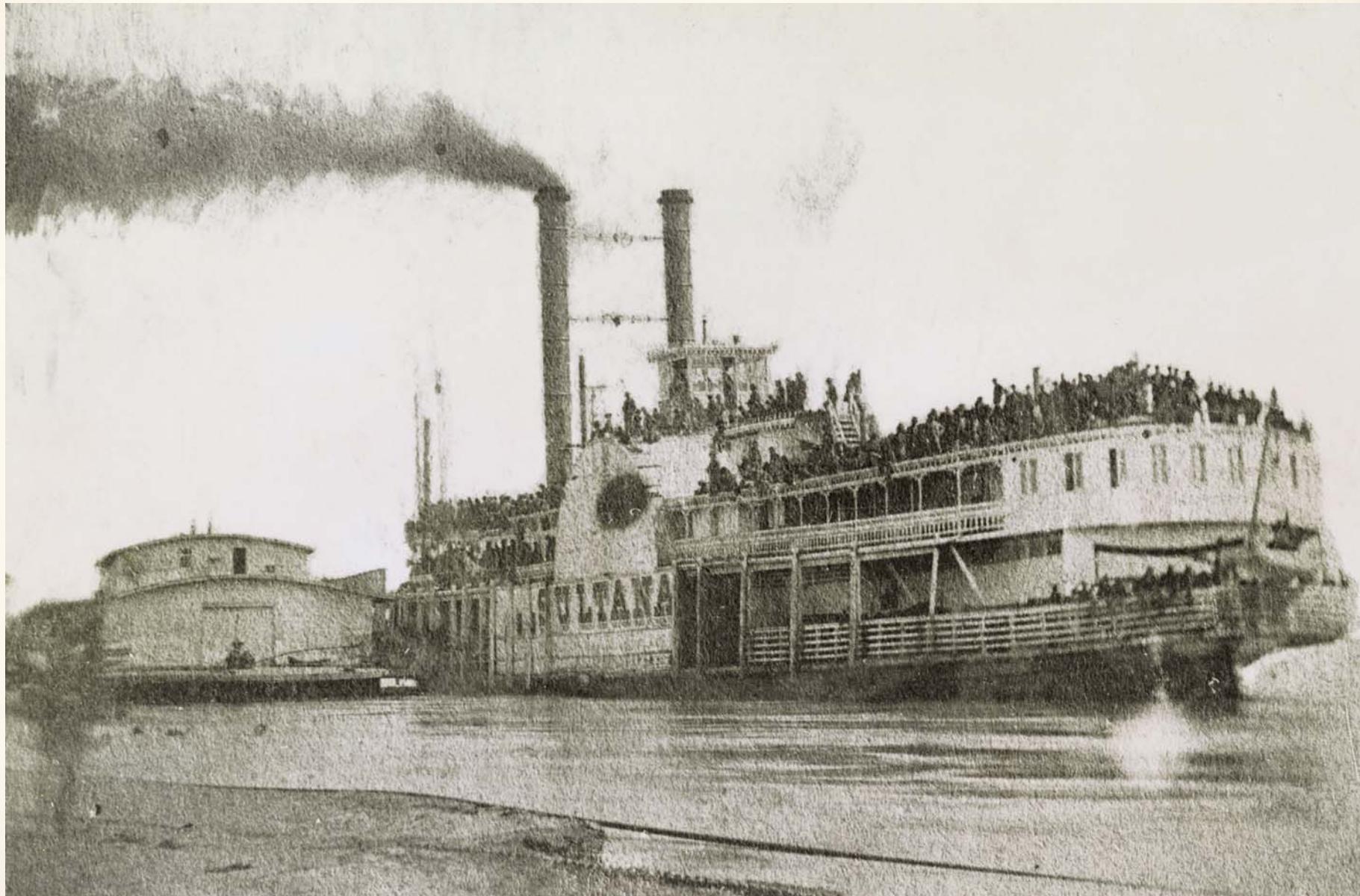
ABOVE: Louisiana's Fort Jackson under bombardment from Union Navy vessels in April 1862. Library of Congress

OPPOSITE: Union troops disembarking from a steamboat at New Orleans, which fell to the Union in April 1862. Library of Congress

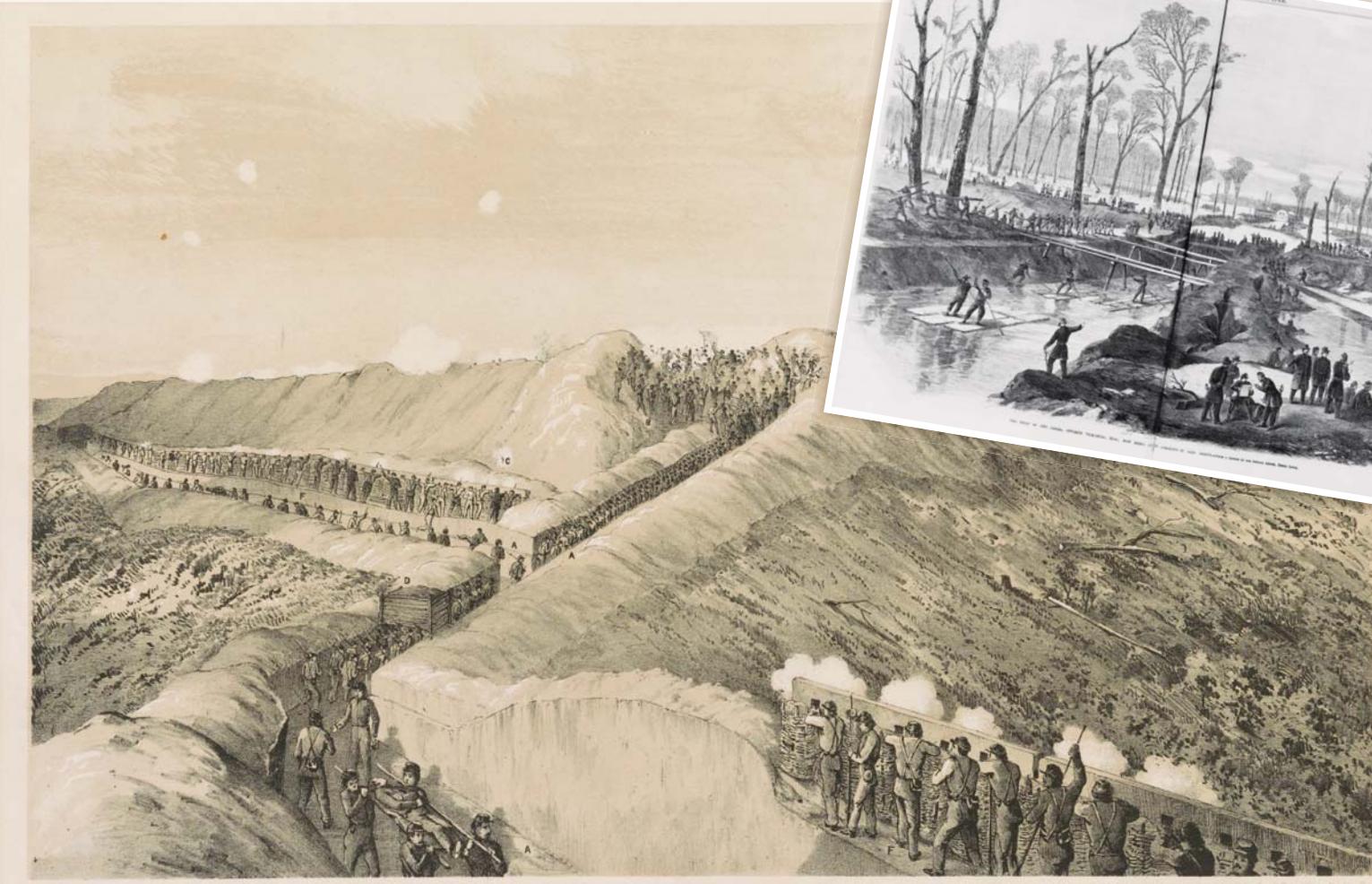
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ARRIVAL OF THE TWENTY-SECOND INDIANA VOLUNTEERS, COLONEL J. C. DAVIS, AT ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI.—[SKETCHED BY JAMES GUIRE.]



The worst maritime disaster in U.S. history occurred in April 1865, when the steamboat *Sultana*, overloaded with Union soldiers returning from Confederate prison camps, exploded, burned, and sank near Memphis, Tennessee, killing nearly 1,550 people—more than would die on the *Titanic* in 1912. Library of Congress



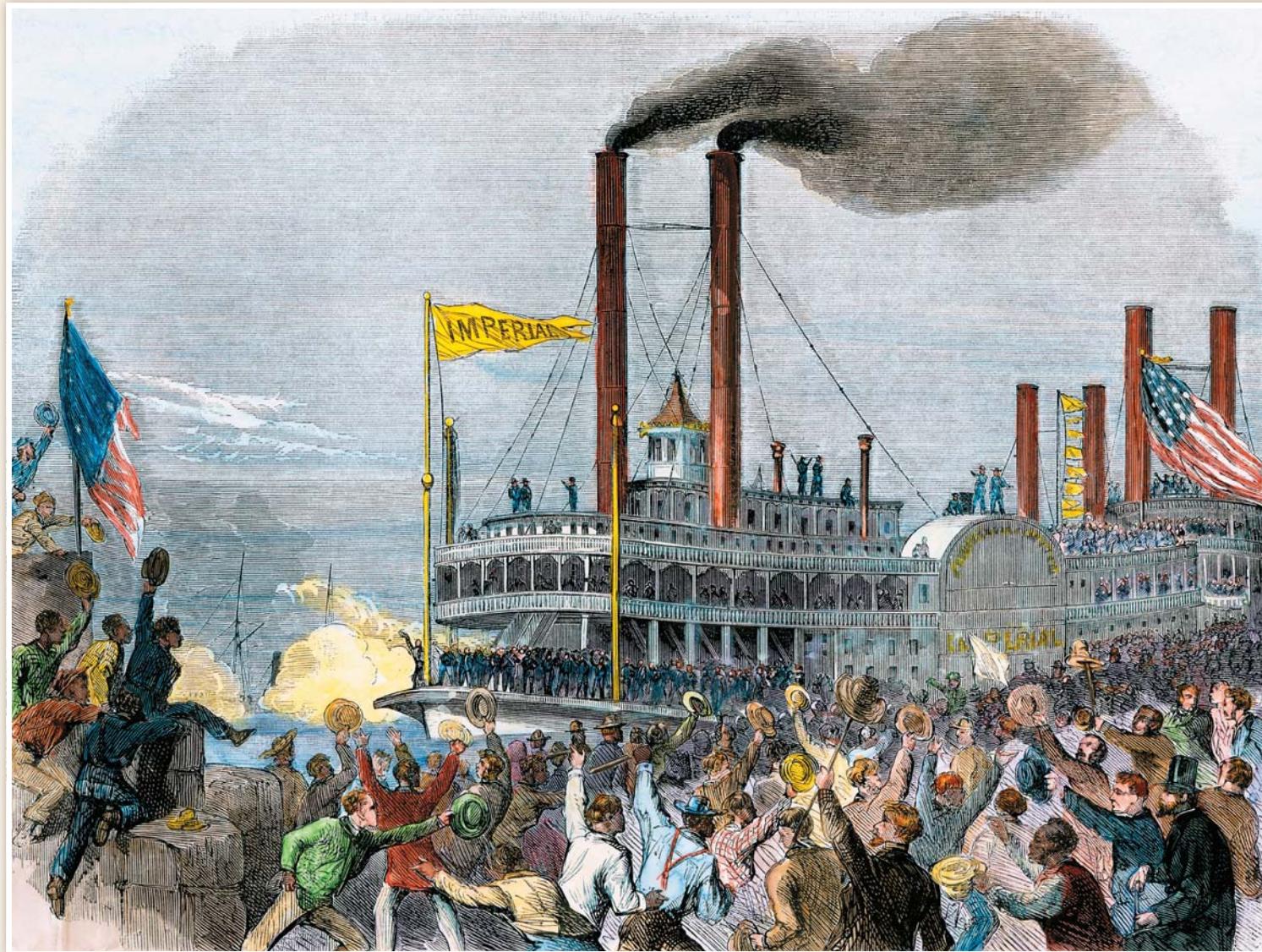
### The Siege of Vicksburg, The Fight in the Crater of Fort Hill, after the explosion, June 25 63.

Gen. LOGAN'S Division, Gen. McPHERSON'S Army Corps.

ETCHED BY A. E. MATHEWS, 23RD REG. O. V. I.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POSITION. A, A, A. The way in approach to the Rebel Fort Hill. B. The engagement in the crater of Fort Hill. C. Rebel Hand Grenades exploding. D. Traverse. E, F. Gabions behind which are the Sharpshooters.

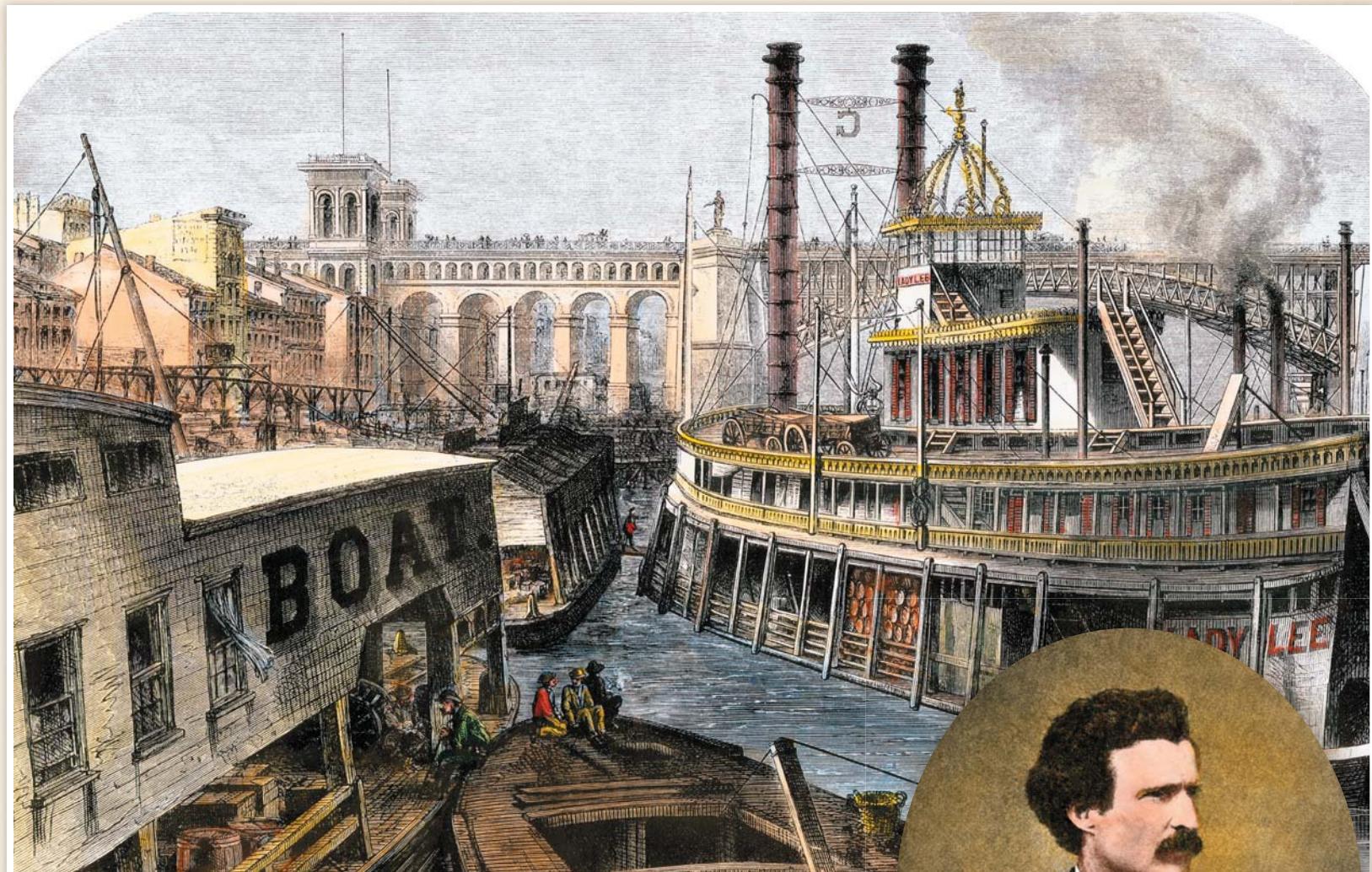
This sketch shows General Grant's Union troops moving across Fort Hill during the late June 1863 siege of Vicksburg; the inset shows Union soldiers cutting canals to aid in their siege. In Chapter XXXV of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain described the bombardment of Vicksburg during the Civil War and wrote: "Vicksburg held out longer than any other important rivertown, and saw warfare in all its phases, both land and water—the siege, the mine, the assault, the repulse, the bombardment, sickness, captivity, famine." Library of Congress



ABOVE: A welcome at the docks for the steamboat *Imperial*, arriving in New Orleans from Saint Louis after the fall of Vicksburg, 1863. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy

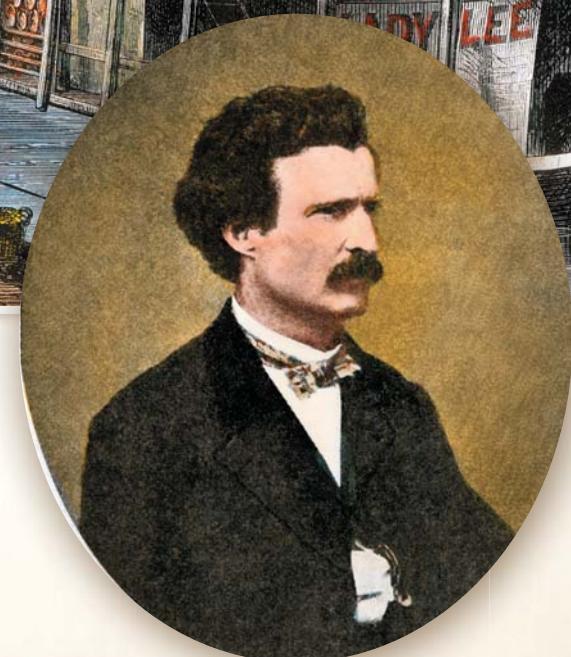
OPPOSITE: A bird's-eye map of New Orleans in 1863. © The Protected Art Archive / Alamy





**ABOVE:** Steamboats wait for freight in Saint Louis after the Civil War. Hand-colored woodcut of a 19th-century illustration. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy

**RIGHT:** After his career as a steamboat pilot, Clemens was a reporter for the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise*. 1864. © North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy







He headed west, with his brother Orion, to Nevada. His brother had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory, and Sam, flush with a steamboatman's wages, footed the bill for the both of them and accepted yet another unpaid position as aide. It was in Nevada and San Francisco, California, that he found his fortunes waxing and waning (Orion proved as hapless a Secretary as he was a publisher), but he began to make a name for himself as a writer, working as a reporter with the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise*, where he first used his nom de plume.

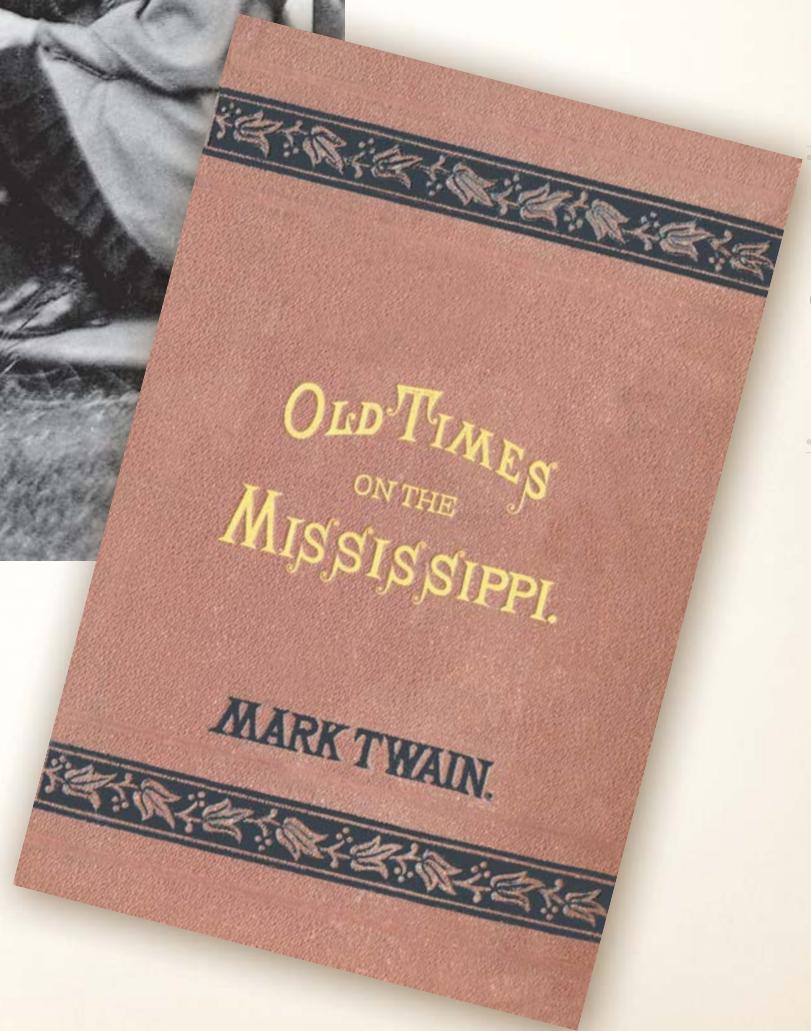
Twain's next years blazed like the comet that had welcomed him to the world. For the Sacramento *Union* newspaper he sailed to the Sandwich Islands, and it was another paper, the San Francisco *Alta California*, that sent him ferrying across the Atlantic to the Holy Land, which became the subject of his first book, *The Innocents Abroad*. He published a collection of humorous tales anchored by "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," lectured across the country, and married his soulmate, Olivia Langdon. By 1874 he'd published two acclaimed and successful humorous travelogues, the second being the

Mark Twain's Hartford, Connecticut, home at the time he wrote *Life on the Mississippi* and *Huckleberry Finn* has been described as "steamboat gothic."  
© Philip Scalia / Alamy



ABOVE: Mark Twain with his family on the porch of his Hartford home in 1884. Left to right: daughter Clara, wife Livy, daughter Jean, Twain, and daughter Susy. Getty Images

RIGHT: A Canadian publisher issued several pirated editions of a collection of Mark Twain's "Old Times on the Mississippi" articles from the *Atlantic Monthly*.  
Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



High Rock from Romance Cliff, Dells of the Wisconsin River.—28

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When Twain wrote about life as a steamboat pilot, he described the beauty and romance of the river as well as its darker side. In this postcard, a steamboat travels through the Dells—a gorge through Cambrian sandstone—on the Wisconsin River, a tributary of the Mississippi. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



classic western narrative *Roughing It*, and a strange novel, *The Gilded Age*, that he wrote with Charles Dudley Warner. Eager to settle down, Twain moved his growing family to Hartford, Connecticut, to Nook Farm, a giant house his family had built, but that seemed to be in the midst of an eternal upgrade.

Just under thirty-nine years old, he was happily married, with two daughters. (A son, Langdon, was born in 1870 but died eighteen months later.) However, extravagant living and bad investments had created financial woes and nearly drained Twain's bank account (and devoured his wife's inheritance). Perhaps worse, he wrote to a friend that he'd "pumped himself dry" and lost inspiration on *Tom Sawyer*, of which he'd written four hundred pages.

But things changed in October, while he walked through his acreage with his friend Joe Twichell. "I got to telling him about old Mississippi days of steamboating glory & grandeur as I saw them . . . from the pilot house," he wrote his friend and *Atlantic* editor William Dean Howells, describing that afternoon's constitutional. Mr. Twichell was immediately struck by the idea, telling Twain (in a manner that seems like something only Twain himself would say), "What a virgin subject to hurl into a magazine!" Howells was immediately taken with this proposal, and the serialized "Old Times on the Mississippi" appeared in the *Atlantic* each month, from January to June of the next year, skipping July and concluding in August.

The essays that made up the series "Old Times on the Mississippi" are available to readers today—just pick up *Life on the Mississippi* and read Chapters IV through XVII. *Life* is actually cobbled together from

a number of different sources; in addition to the "Old Times" essays, Twain added bits from works in progress (there's a section of what was to be Chapter XVI of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the lost treasure story that was to be in *A Tramp Abroad*) as well as original material.

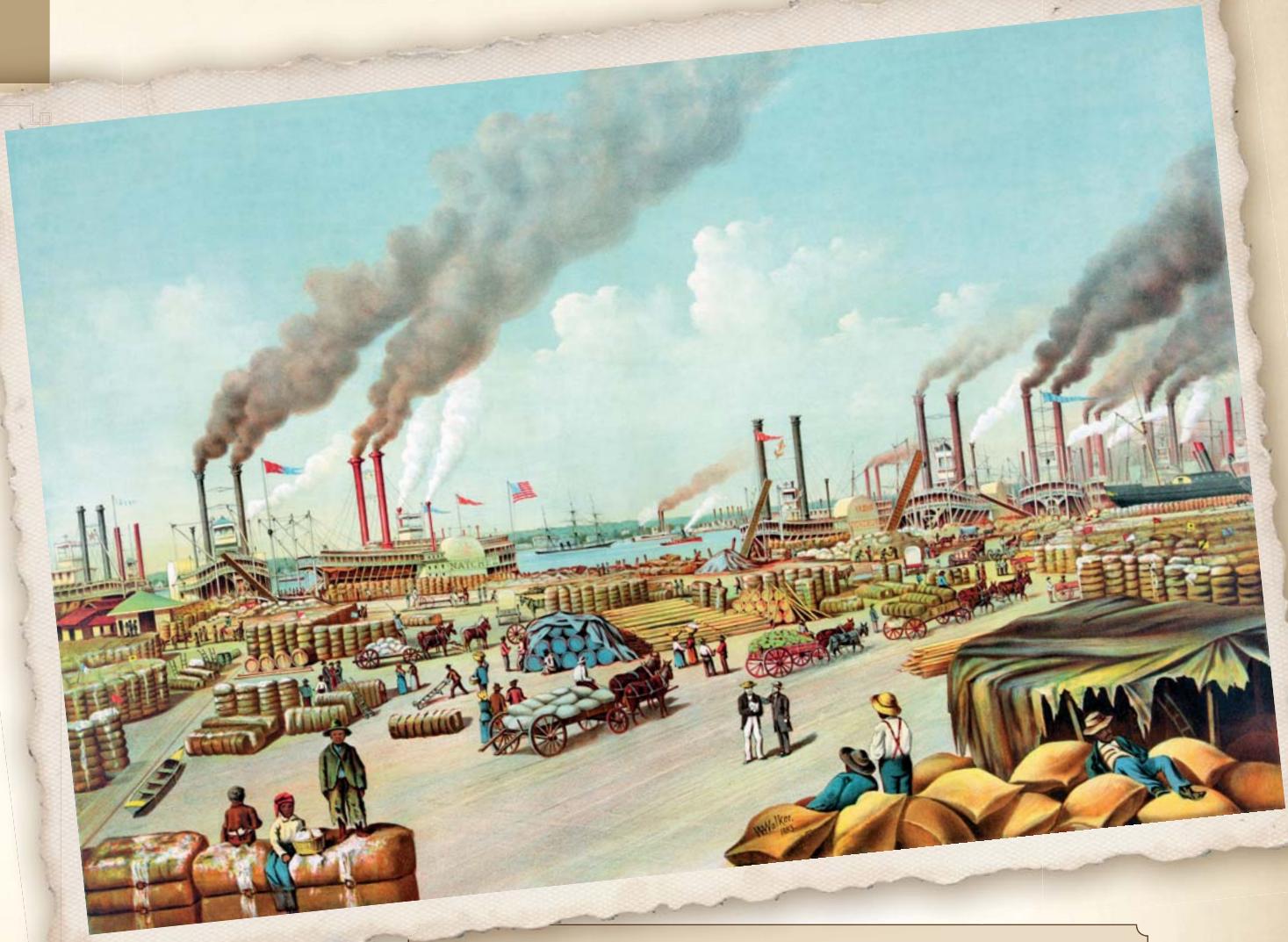
Twain was galvanized by the river, not simply because he adored the Mississippi, but because he realized that he'd uncovered something entirely new. At first glance, the Mississippi would appear to be overworked, even in Twain's time. Historian Lee Sandlin notes that "whole libraries had been devoted to the river long before [Twain] started writing about it," and Timothy Flint, author of the massive 1826 tome *A History and Geography of the Mississippi River*, worried in his journals that he was treading down the same "beaten track" with that book, published before Twain was even born and fifty years before he got started on his Mississippi River epic. And yet, Twain knew "Old Times on the Mississippi" would stand out because he had an angle. "Any muggins can write about Old Times on the Miss of 500 different kinds," he bragged to Howells, "but I am the only man alive that can scribble about piloting of that day—and no man has ever tried to scribble about it yet."

When Twain sat down to write *Life on the Mississippi*, his memory, trained under the sharp eye of Horace Bixby, served him well. For Twain, the Mississippi River was a conduit, bringing incredible people and amazing stories into his life. Upon the river he witnessed tremendous adventures, human triumphs, and personal, life-changing tragedies, and from it he drew inspiration for his best books.



## CHAPTER 4

# MARK TWAIN'S RETURN TO THE RIVER in 1882 and *LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI*



The Levee, New Orleans, a Currier & Ives print by artist William Aiken Walker, shows the busy New Orleans dock circa 1884, when steamboats were still used for shipping goods—though Twain, on his 1882 trip along the Mississippi, saw that the heyday of steamboats was already long gone, most of their business usurped by the railroads. © Archive Images / Alamy

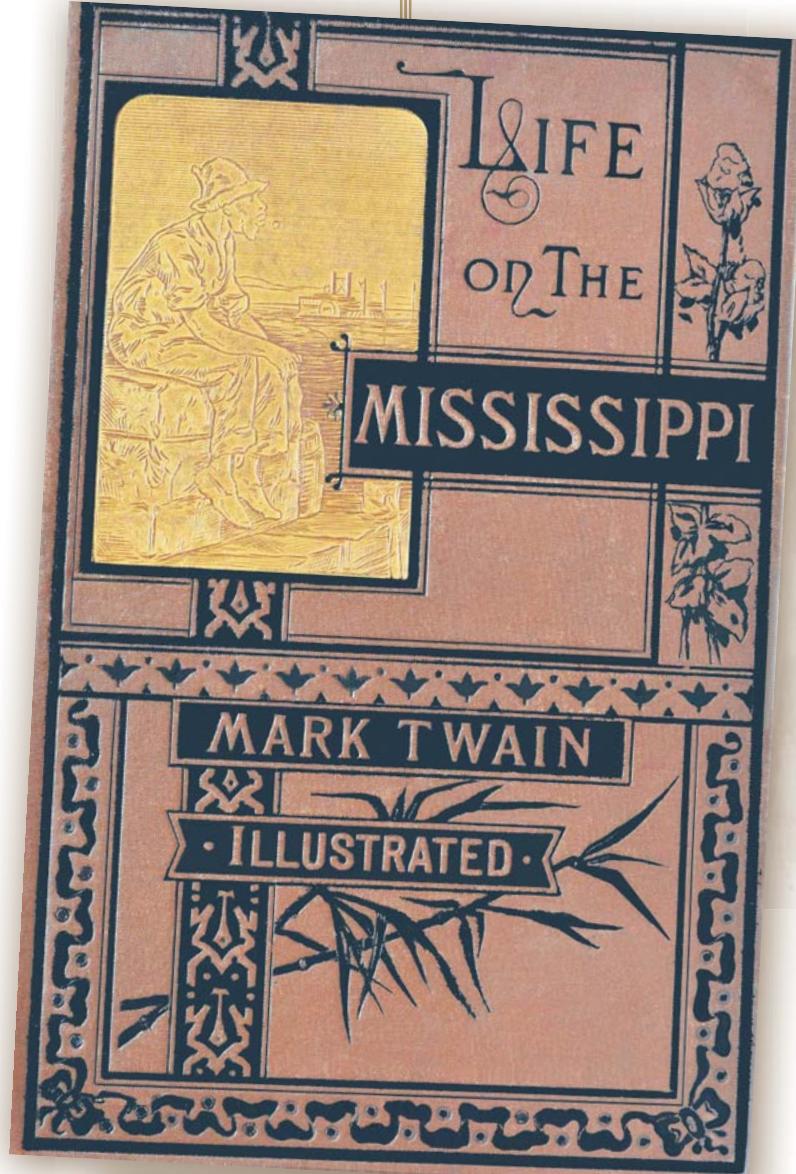


The octagonal study in which Mark Twain did most of his important writing now stands on the Elmira College campus. R. Kent Rasmussen

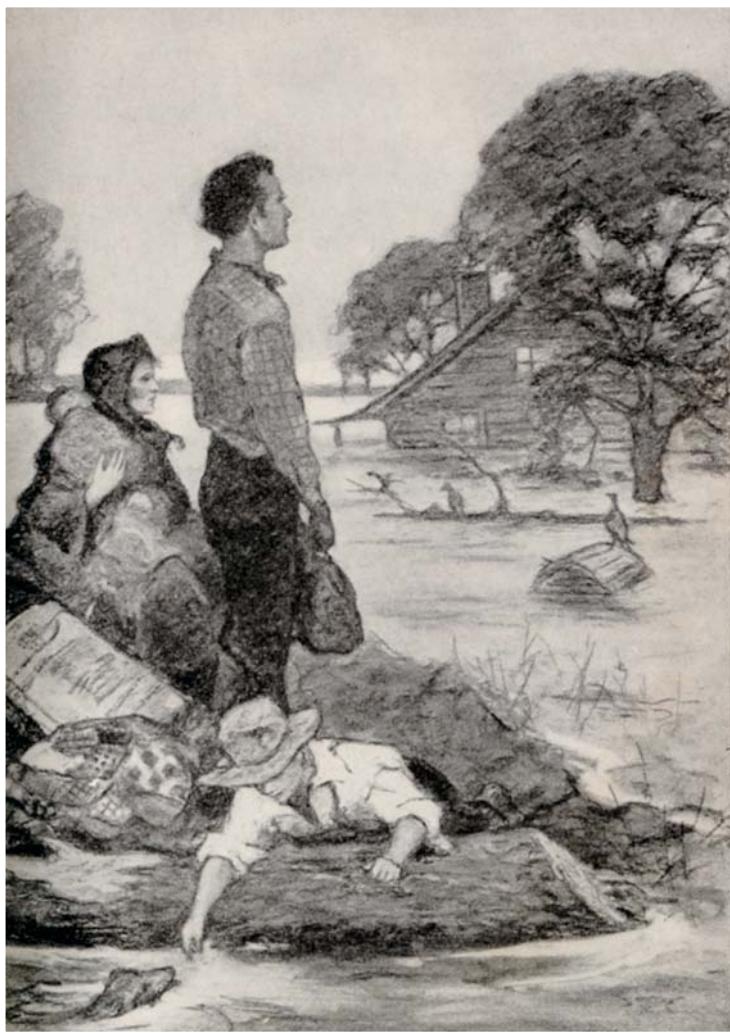
After twenty-one years' absence, I felt a very strong desire to see the river again, and the steamboats, and such of the boys as might be left; so I resolved to go out there. I enlisted a poet for company, and a stenographer to 'take him down,' and started westward about the middle of April.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXII

This was the spring of 1882, and Twain's "poet" and "stenographer" were James Osgood, a publisher who had helped get *The Prince and the Pauper* onto bookshelves, and a Connecticut teacher named Roswell Phelps, who may have indeed been pressed into service for his stenographical abilities. Just prior to the trip, Twain signed a contract with Osgood to publish *Life on the Mississippi*. From New York City, the trio hauled west on a locomotive to Indianapolis, took a connecting



First American edition of *Life on the Mississippi*.  
Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



In the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain wrote about a severe flood he encountered during his 1882 steamboat travels, and the tragic fate of the people in the path of the floodwaters. This image is from a 1920 Harper & Bros. edition illustrated by Walter Stewart. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

train to Saint Louis, and from there boarded a steamboat south to New Orleans. Then they then returned on a big boat, this time going all the way north to Saint Paul, Minnesota.

*Life on the Mississippi* is made up of three parts: a collage of historical and statistical notes that open and close the book, those facts and figures that Twain hoped would give the reader a sense of the majesty of the river, in solid numbers; the “Old Times on the Mississippi” portion, his first-person account of learning the piloting trade that makes up Chapters IV through XXI; and the more rambling and pensive sections that make up the bulk of the book, from Chapters XXII through LX. When Twain wrote “Old Times on the Mississippi” for the *Atlantic*, he was thrilled about recalling his steamboating years, and those chapters are a riot of fun and fascination, full of amazing characters performing amazing feats. But when he decided to expand that series of articles and turn them into what became *Life on the Mississippi*, he knew he would need to return to the river he once knew and loved, not only to update the reader on the vast changes to the waterway since he piloted it, but to rekindle his memory and get enough material to fill those four hundred-plus pages. The result is that, in those later chapters, we see the river in a new light. After Clemens abandoned piloting in 1861, the government electrified the riverbanks with Edison’s light bulb (thus eliminating the pitch-black nights that only trained pilots would know as they did the halls in their own home), and sent armies of engineers to tame its many bends and curves with levees.

When Twain returned in the spring of 1882, the Mississippi was linked by rail, and now the fabulous steamboats paddled beneath bridges. There were no more slave states and free states; the Civil War had brought that to a close, and harrowing tales of personal hardship in the aftermath of that conflict would pepper his new narrative. “Old Times” had men screaming and shouting at one another, venting their spleen with a hail of colorful blasphemies, but in the second part of the



book, violence was no longer just comedic—it was deadly. Twain wrote about flooding that destroyed homes and lives, mindless blood feuds, and, closest to home, the steamboat explosions that killed thousands of people—including Twain's beloved younger brother, Henry. Where "Old Times on the Mississippi" is nothing but fun, much like *Tom Sawyer*, the rest of *Life on the Mississippi* has *Huckleberry Finn's* complexities—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the profoundly sad.

Twain made the decision to travel incognito as best he could, hoping, perhaps against hope, to be able to see the river and enter the pilothouse as simply a man, and not the man who had recently published *Tom Sawyer*, nor the man who was America's finest humorist, chronicler of the big river, and a genuine national celebrity. Right away, things didn't go well in this regard: in Saint Louis he tried to register under a false name, but the clerk wouldn't have it, saying, "It's all right; I know what sort of room you want. Used to clerk at the Saint James, in New York." "How odd and unfair it is," Twain reflected. "Wicked impostors go around lecturing under my *nom de guerre*, and nobody suspects them; but when an honest man attempts an imposture, he is exposed at once."

According to Twain, Saint Louis had "just about doubled its size" since he'd left, and he regretted a missed opportunity from his youth:

The first time I ever saw St. Louis, I could have bought it for six million dollars, and it was the mistake of my life that I did not do it. It was bitter now to look abroad over this domed and steeped metropolis, this solid expanse of bricks and mortar stretching away on every hand into dim, measure-defying distances, and remember that I had allowed that opportunity to go by. Why I should have allowed it to go by seems, of course, foolish and inexplicable to-day, at a first glance; yet there were reasons at the time to justify this course. I was young and heedless, and naturally given to pleasure-seeking than to



UNDER AN ALIAS.

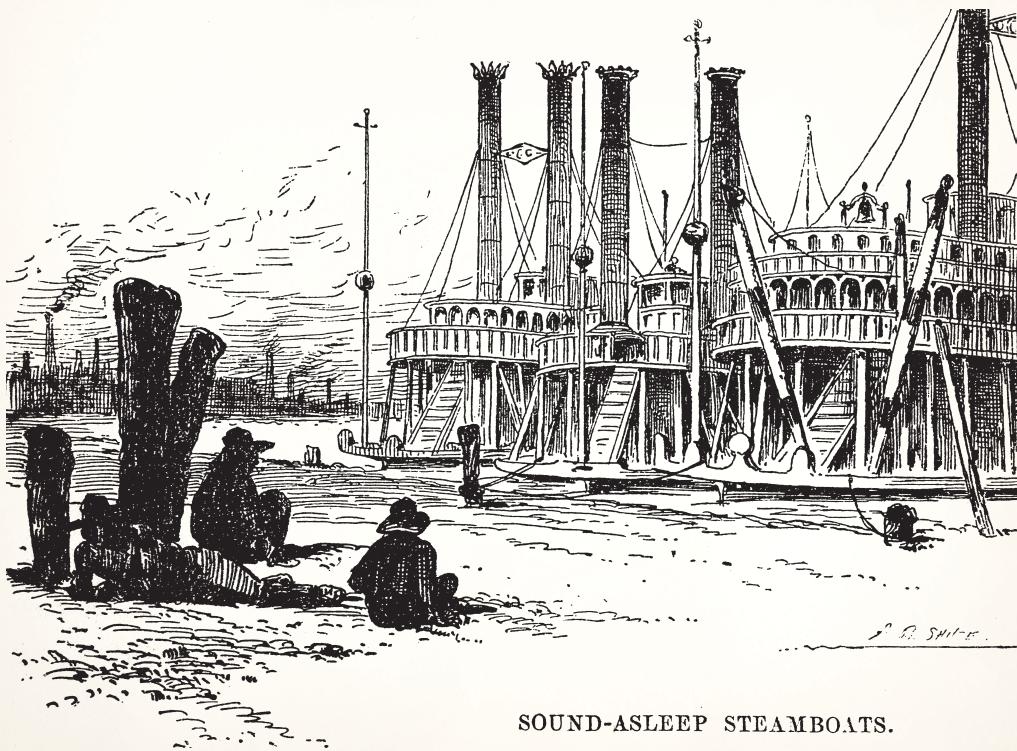
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Mark Twain trying to register at a hotel under an alias. From *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXII

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The Eads Bridge over the Mississippi River, built in 1874, connects Saint Louis, Missouri, and East Saint Louis, Illinois. When built, it was the longest arch bridge in the world—and one of the first of many bridges that changed the face of the Mississippi as Twain had known it. © Historical Art Collection (HAC) / Alamy



Steamboats docked at Saint Louis. From *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXII

providing for the future; it was impossible to foresee that out of that smutty village would grow the imperial city of to-day; and besides, I had only thirty-five dollars, anyway. Still, if I had known then what I know now, I would have borrowed.

—*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXII

As Twain wandered about Saint Louis, there were surprises to be found—namely, the burly steamboatman was gone from the billiard rooms. “I saw there none of the swell airs and graces, and ostentatious displays of money, and pompous squanderings of it, which used to distinguish the steamboat crowd from the dry-land crowd in the bygone days,” Twain observed. “In those days, the principal saloons were always populous with river men; given fifty players present, thirty or thirty-five were likely to be from the river.” As he continued on his peregrinations, the “change of changes” that affected Twain the most regarding Missouri’s biggest city was to be found on the levee. It was there he discovered that the steamboat era had come to an end, killed by the locomotive. “Half a dozen sound-asleep steamboats where I used to see a solid mile of wide-awake ones!” he wrote. “This was melancholy, this was woful.” No wonder that he could not find any steamboatmen.

He was absent because he is no more. His occupation is gone, his power has passed away, he is absorbed into the common herd, he grinds at the mill, a shorn Sampson and inconspicuous. Half a dozen lifeless steamboats, a mile of empty wharves, a negro fatigued with whiskey stretched asleep, in a wide and soundless vacancy, where the serried hosts of commerce used to contend! Here was desolation, indeed.

The towboat and the railroad had done their work, and done it well and completely. The mighty bridge, stretching along over our heads, had done its share in the slaughter and spoliation. Remains of former steamboatmen told me, with wan satisfaction,

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century steamboat landing  
on the Lower Mississippi. Library of Congress.  
Color tinting © R. Kent Rasmussen

104





that the bridge doesn't pay. Still, it can be no sufficient compensation to a corpse, to know that the dynamite that laid him out was not of as good quality as it had been supposed to be.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XXII*

As Twain wandered around the docks, he found the area nearly deserted, ragged, the sidewalks broken and caked with mud, “dead past resurrection.” Trains had come, ferrying freight and passengers in every direction, and reducing the time it took to get freight from Saint Louis to New Orleans by about half. To add insult to injury, towing-fleets, similar to the barges we see even today on the Mississippi, hauled freight in about the same time as the steamers for a price the old paddlewheels could not match. The few steamboats that did exist were now in the hands of “two or three close corporations well fortified with capital.” Pilots had lost much of their power; now the captain was the best-paid member of the crew. Twain lamented the end of the era of the steamboat and its people—the pilot who used to strut about in his finery in the shops and saloons, the rough-and-tumble mates fighting over billiards, and even the lowly woodsman, who must have seen his business (of supplying wood for the boilers) vanish into almost nothing. “Mississippi steamboating was born about 1812; at the end of thirty years, it had grown to mighty proportions; and in less than thirty more, it was dead! A strangely short life for so majestic a creature,” Twain wrote.

### The steamboat's sad decline

Twain observed that the steamboat captains used to be “biggity” toward the men handling freight on shore—the big boats could set their own wages, and determine how much to haul or, in many cases, to leave behind. But those days were gone. As a former steamboat clerk explained to Twain:

“Boat used to land—captain on hurricane roof—mighty stiff and straight—iron ramrod for a spine—kid gloves, plug tile, hair parted behind—man on shore takes off hat and says:—

“Got twenty-eight tons of wheat, cap'n—be great favor if you can take them.’

“Captain says:—

“'Il take two of them’—and don't even condescend to look at him.

“But now-a-days the captain takes off his old slouch, and smiles all the way around to the back of his ears, and gets off a bow which hasn't got any ramrod to interfere with, and says:—

“Glad to see you, Smith, glad to see you—you're looking well—haven't seen you looking so well for years—what you got for us?’

“Nuth'n,’ says Smith; and keeps his hat on, and just turns his back and goes to talking with somebody else.

“Oh, yes, eight years ago, the captain was on top; but it's Smith's turn now.”

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter LVIII*

“My idea was, to tarry a while in every town between St. Louis and New Orleans,” Twain wrote. “To do this, it would be necessary to go from place to place by the short packet lines. It was an easy plan to make, and would have been an easy one to follow, twenty years ago—but not now. There are wide intervals between boats, these days.” Twain and his colleagues searched high and low for the perfect ship. The problem was that the steamboat trade had lightened considerably since its halcyon days, and most steamboats just barreled out of Saint Louis and then hit the bigger cities until terminating in New Orleans.

I wanted to begin with the interesting French settlements of St. Genevieve and Kaskaskia, sixty miles below St. Louis.



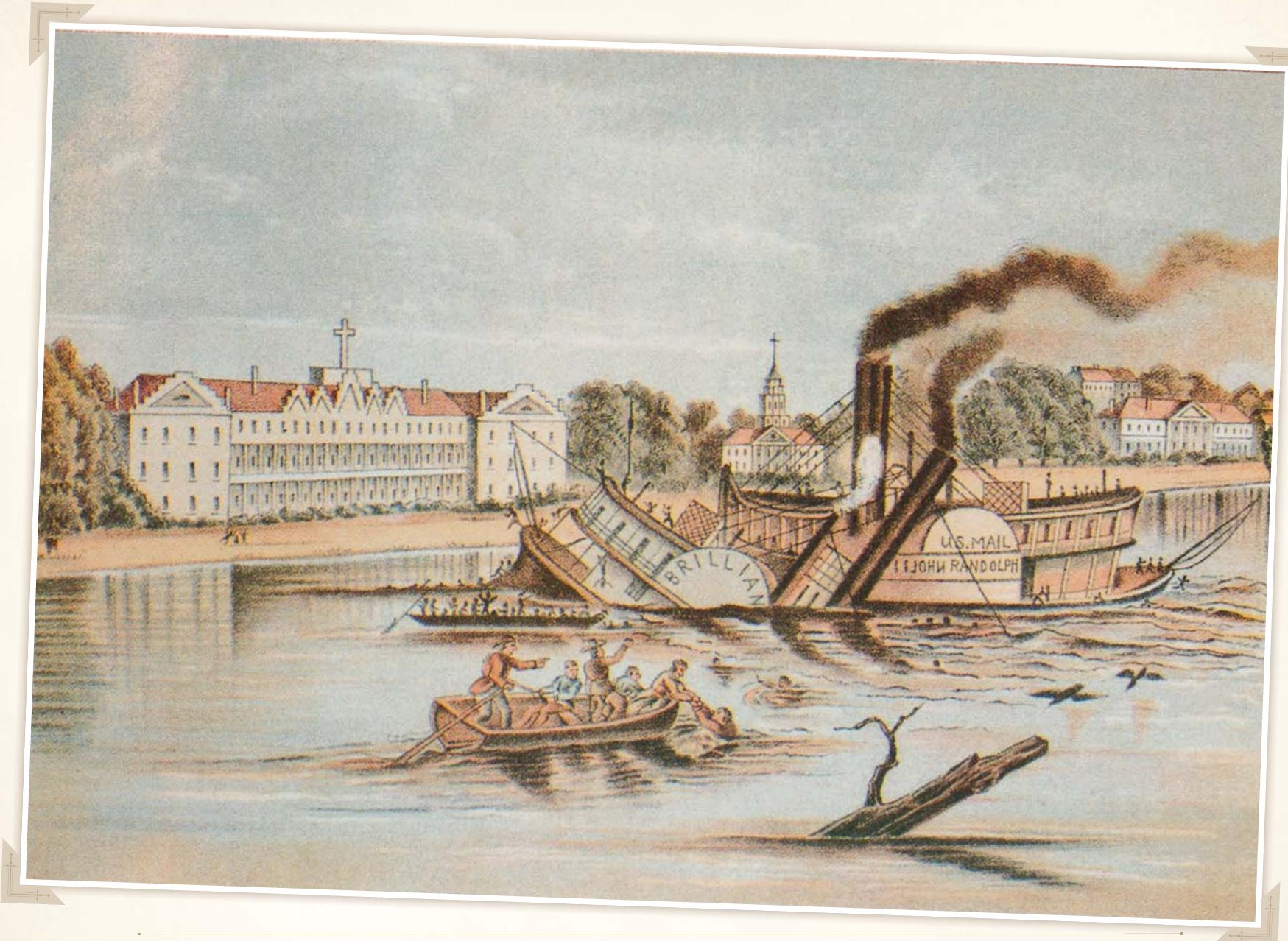
The pilot of the *Gold Dust* gives up trying to impress the passenger (Mark Twain, trying to travel incognito) and suggests he take the helm. From *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXVI.

There was only one boat advertised for that section—a Grand Tower packet. Still, one boat was enough; so we went down to look at her. She was a venerable rackheap, and a fraud to boot; for she was playing herself for personal property, whereas the good honest dirt was so thickly caked all over her that she was righteously taxable as real estate. There are places in New England where her hurricane deck would be worth a hundred and fifty dollars an acre. The soil on her forecastle was quite good—the new crop of wheat was already springing from the cracks in protected places. The companionway was of a dry sandy character, and would have been well suited for grapes, with a southern exposure and a little subsoiling. The soil of the boiler deck was thin and rocky, but good enough for grazing purposes.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XXIII*

Since this boat was not to be put into service, they had to abandon “the novelty of sailing down the river on a farm.” Instead, they booked passage on the *Gold Dust*, bound for Memphis, ignoring many of the small towns along the way.

And here the technology of 1882 really began to assert itself. The boat backed out of Saint Louis at 8:00 at night en route to Memphis. “In the thick darkness, a blinding glory of white electric light burst suddenly from our forecastle,” he observed, and he was further shocked by the swiftness of the steam-powered derrick that loaded the boats—gone were the dozens of stoop-shouldered men being shouted at by an angry, profanity-loving mate as they struggled with crates, bales of cotton, livestock, and other freight. Furthermore, as the boat headed downstream and darkness fell, the *Gold Dust’s* lights weren’t the only thing that kept the river bright—the shore was illuminated as well. “For now the national government has turned the Mississippi into a sort of two-thousand-mile torch-light procession,” Twain noted. To make the



Steamboats were not particularly safe: boiler explosions and punctured hulls were all too common. *Convent of the Sacrament*, by Henry Lewis.

William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 74



trip even smoother, government snagboats had begun pulling out all the dead trees from the water. “With these helps, one may run in the fog now, with considerable security, and with a confidence unknown in the old days.”

To make matters more heartbreak ing for the former pilot (who longed for the romance of the darkness and the danger), the Anchor Line, one of the few major corporations that ran steamboats during Twain’s return voyage, had begun paying its captains more than its pilots, who were stuck in the pilothouse the whole trip. “Verily we are being treated like a parcel of mates and engineers,” Twain wrote, and you can almost see the tears in his eyes. “The Government has taken away the romance of our calling; the Company has taken away its state and dignity.”

And the river was nearly empty then. “All day we swung along down the river, and had the stream almost wholly to ourselves. Formerly, at such a stage of the water, we should have passed acres of lumber rafts, and dozens of big coal barges . . .” among many other watercraft. “Far along in the day, we saw one steamboat.” Upon inspection with a spyglass, Twain found that the steamboat was named the *Mark Twain*.

As the boat paddled downstream, Twain could not resist the urge to wander up to the Texas, obviously in the hopes of taking the wheel again. Upon entering the pilothouse, Twain “inspected” the pilot of the *Gold Dust*, who did the same in return. “Every detail of the pilothouse was familiar to me,” he wrote, with the exception of a tube that allowed the man behind the wheel to hear the engine-bells more clearly. After a few pleasantries, the pilot warmed up to Twain, who avoided specific questions in the hope that he would appear as merely a passenger, and not a former steamboat man. The pilot took the bait. “He drifted, by easy stages, into revealments of the river’s marvelous eccentricities of one sort and another, and backed them up with some pretty gigantic illustrations.”

Such as the river washing away a sixty-foot wall of solid rock. Or the alligator boat that sails by the *Gold Dust*, “to dredge alligators with.” “Are they so thick as to be troublesome?” a seemingly naïve Twain asked, no doubt doing his level best to keep from snickering. The pilot was more than obliging—he related the tumultuous history of the “thickness” of alligators in the Mississippi and the need to dredge them out, proceeded to give Twain a list of the “A 1 alligator pilots” (which included Twain’s mentor, Horace Bixby) who “could tell alligator water as far as another Christian could tell whiskey,” and then chided our man when he pointed out that a “dredged” alligator would simply return to the water. “If you had had as much experience with alligators as I have, you wouldn’t talk like that,” the pilot said, probably shaking his head at the depth of Twain’s remarkable ignorance. “You dredge an alligator once and he’s *convinced*.” Not to mention the fact that most of the alligators are taken by the government to turn into army boots, and therefore unable to clog the river anymore. At least according to the pilot.

The pilot further claimed that he had been blown up in a steamboat nine times, “flung through the roof of the same cabin in Walnut Bend three times in five years.” Though Twain wrote of this as a hilarious aside, the subject must have been painful to him—for twenty-four years earlier, in 1858, his own brother, Henry, just nineteen years old, was killed in an explosion on the steamboat *Pennsylvania*.

Throughout his life, Twain carried a great deal of guilt around with him regarding Henry’s death, as he had convinced the young man to join his older brother on the boats. After all, what could be a greater occupation? Certainly young Sam understood that riding on a steamboat had its dangers, dangers that young Henry would have known about as well. “However calamitous individually and impressive in the aggregate,” wrote Louis C. Hunter in *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, “disasters due to fires, snags, and collisions were quite overshadowed in

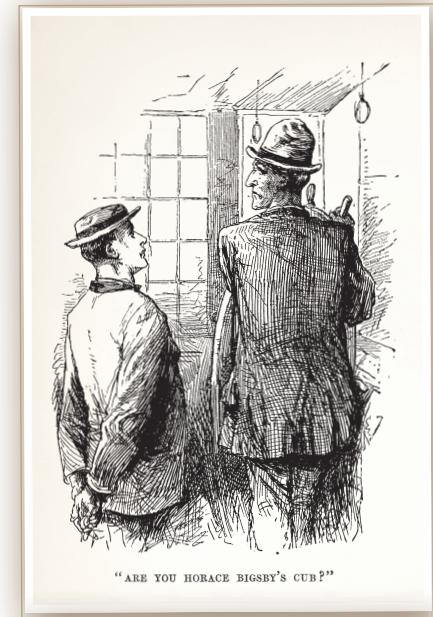
the public mind by accidents caused by the bursting of the steamboat's boilers." Up to 1852, boiler explosions were the cause of one-half of all steamboat fatalities, and their occurrence no doubt covered the front page of newspapers across the country.

Though Henry probably would not have joined his brother on the *Pennsylvania* without the elder's prompting, it was certainly not Sam's fault that his brother died. However, the circumstances by which Sam, still a cub pilot, was taken off the *Pennsylvania* were remarkable.

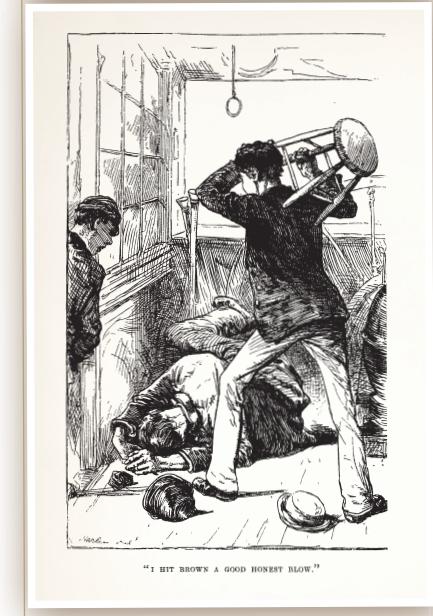
There were times in his apprenticeship with Horace Bixby when Sam had to work with another pilot. Because of this, he ended up on the *Pennsylvania*, which was piloted by a gruff and unpleasant man named simply Brown, "a middle-aged, long, slim, bony, smooth-shaven, horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-finding, mote-magnifying tyrant" who did nothing but torment Sam from the get-go, insulting his home town, his family, even the shoes on his feet.

But Sam endured with his mouth shut tight until an incident on board the *Pennsylvania*. The captain of the boat sent Henry, who was a mud clerk (working only for room and board in the hopes of eventually becoming a purser), to the pilothouse to alert the always-angry Brown to stop at a landing in order to deposit or receive some goods. But Brown was near deaf—he didn't hear Henry. When the captain stormed up to demand that the pilot turn the boat around (naturally after missing the landing), Brown complained that Henry did not deliver the message. Sam contradicted him, even going so far as to call Brown a liar. After turning the boat around (no small feat at any stretch of the river, narrow or wide, deep or shallow), Brown seethed. Later, when Henry managed to make his way to the pilothouse for an errand, Brown grabbed a lump of coal and tried to smash it over Henry's head.

Sam Clemens essentially went berserk. In a very satisfying moment of almost cartoon violence, the younger pilot bashed a stool over the aggressor's head, and then, realizing he had committed "the crime of crimes" (namely, attacking a pilot on duty) Sam instantly calculated that since he was "booked for the penitentiary sure," he might as well go the distance. "Consequently I stuck to him and pounded him with my fists a considerable time,—I do not know how long, the pleasure of it probably made it seem longer than it really was." Brown fought back, but poorly, before realizing that the *Pennsylvania* was sailing down the river at full speed without anyone at the wheel. He broke free and leapt up to steer the boat to safety. Satisfied that the boat was safe, Brown took a telescope and held up the "war-club" and ordered Sam out. "But I was not afraid of him now; so, instead of going, I tarried, and criticised his grammar; I reformed his ferocious speeches for him,



"ARE YOU HORACE BIGSBY'S CUB?"



"I HIT BROWN A GOOD HONEST BLOW."



As a cub pilot, Clemens had several unpleasant encounters with the pilot Mr. Brown. After Brown struck Clemens's brother, Henry, Clemens pummeled Brown. From *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapters XVIII–XIX.

and put them into good English, calling his attention to the advantage of pure English over the bastard dialect of the Pennsylvanian collieries whence he was extracted."

This should have been the end of Samuel Clemens' piloting career, and if you believe Twain the writer, it should have landed the young man in jail. Instead, the captain, who loathed Brown, actually encouraged Sam to beat up the pilot once they went ashore, and that he, the captain, would pay any expenses related to that kind of fun. When Brown complained that he would not stay on the same boat as Sam, and that "*one of us has got to go ashore,*" the captain calmly pointed out that it might as well be the pilot.

This was not to be. Docked in New Orleans, the captain of the *Pennsylvania* couldn't find a new pilot to replace Brown, and compromised, instead placing Sam on the *A. T. Lacey*, which sailed north a couple of days later. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain sadly recounts sitting on the docks with his brother, fatalistically talking about steamboat explosions. "We decided that if a disaster ever fell within our experience we would at least stick to the boat, and give such minor service as chance might throw in the way." Neither could have known that this opportunity would indeed befall the younger Clemens.

A few days later, as Sam's boat pulled into Greenville, Mississippi, someone shouted that the *Pennsylvania* had blown up off Ship's Island, sixty miles south of Memphis, with "a hundred and fifty lives lost!" Naturally alarmed, but unable to do anything but keep at his job heading upstream on the *Lacey*, Sam waited anxiously. In Napoleon, Arkansas, a local newspaper listed the ship's dead and injured and unhurt—Henry was listed among those who'd escaped without damage. But later, another edition listed Sam's younger brother not only as injured, but beyond help.

As the *A. T. Lacey* steamed toward Memphis, the sights were horrific—corpses floated by amidst the ruins of the great boat. The *Pennsylvania*'s boilers had exploded, blowing apart the first third of the



"HENRY AND I SAT CHATTING."

In Chapter XX of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain recalled a conversation with his brother about steamboat explosions, just a few days before Henry was fatally injured in the explosion of the *Pennsylvania*.

Steamboat landing at Memphis, Tennessee,  
around 1900. Library of Congress





LEFT: Hannibal graves of (left to right) Mark Twain's sister-in-law, Mollie Clemens; brothers Orion and Henry Clemens; and parents, Jane Lampton and John Marshall Clemens. Inset: Detail of Henry's tombstone. R. Kent Rasmussen

ABOVE: General Ulysses Grant (lower right) at the siege of Vicksburg, described in Chapter XXXV of *Life on the Mississippi*. Library of Congress



VICKSBURG.



**FAR LEFT:** Cave in which townsfolk sought safety during the siege of Vicksburg. *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXXV

**LEFT:** Inside a Vicksburg cave. *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XXXV

boat, including the pilothouse. Many of the victims had been killed instantly; others had been burned, including the awful fate of having their lungs seared when they breathed in the escaped steam (Twain wrote that one of his friends, George Ealer, the copilot of the *Pennsylvania* avoided this fate by covering his face with his coat—most were not so fortunate). Brown had been killed, his last words being “My poor wife and children!” Henry, who had been sleeping in a bunk over the boilers, was blown into the air, scalded, and fell back onto the boat and was beaten by falling debris. Somehow he managed to make his escape onto the banks of the river, where he waited with other victims in thick, hundred-degree heat for help to arrive.

In Memphis, Sam raced to the Memphis Exchange, where a makeshift hospital had been set up to treat the survivors. “The physicians examined

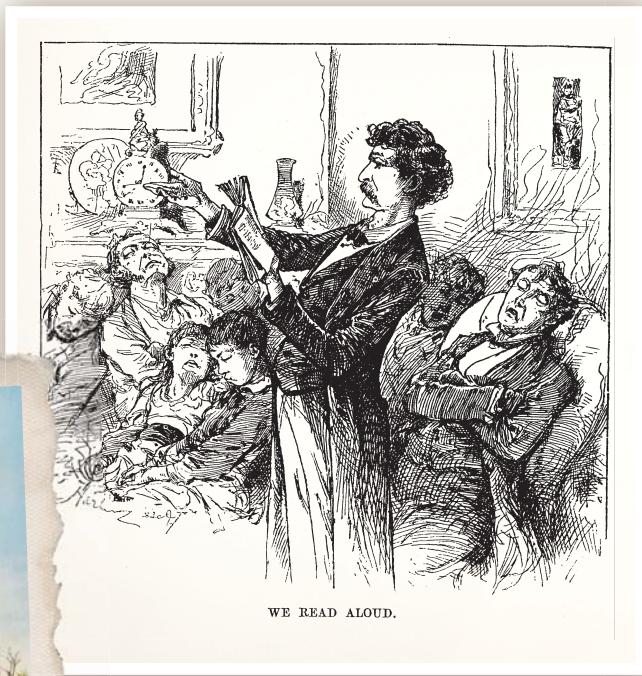
his injuries and saw that they were fatal,” Twain wrote, “and naturally turned their main attention to patients who could be saved.” Poor Henry clung to life for six days before dying. Biographer Ron Powers observed that Twain wrote of Henry’s death numerous times in his life, and changed the story of the brother’s death each time. That Henry fell from the sky onto the ship (the prevailing belief), that he escaped on a raft to shore, that he was going to recover in Memphis but that an inexperienced doctor fed him too much morphine (at Twain’s insistence), or, in *Life on the Mississippi*, that the boy fell in the water, thought himself unhurt, and swam back to help others and fatally injured himself in the process. What we know is that this event haunted Twain the rest of his life.

*Life on the Mississippi* has many moments in which Twain observed the dark side of steamboating. Twain would forever blame himself for

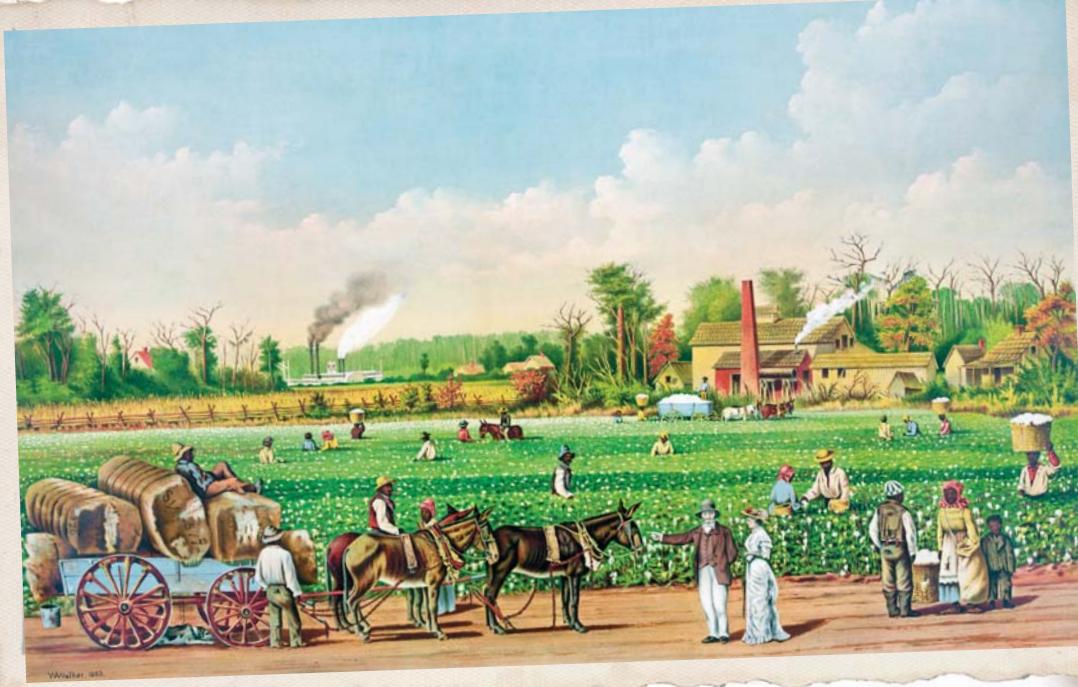
Henry's death—in fact, he usually found a way to take responsibility for the death of everyone close to him. For Twain, the river brought life just as it delivered death on a regular basis (in both literal and figurative ways). The second half of *Life on the Mississippi* more closely resembles the often melancholic *Huckleberry Finn*, each of which has a narrator who seems fixated on death. Here, from the explosions to the murders to the sad tale of Captain Poe and his wife, Twain reveals a river that resembles the mythical Styx.

Where in the “Old Times on the Mississippi” section we see snags and sawyers as impediments that challenge the likes of brave men like Horace Bixby, here we see Poe and his wife living on a “small stern-wheel boat,” which hits a snag in the river and “sank with astonishing suddenness; water already well above the cabin floor when the captain got aft.” With a reporter’s eye for facts and little emotion, Twain wrote

that “[Captain Poe] cut into his wife’s stateroom from above with an axe; she was asleep in the upper berth, the roof a flimsier one than was supposed; the first blow crashed down through the rotten boards and clove her skull.” This, just pages after a story of two neighbors fighting over fence posts, of all things, with one neighbor slitting the throat of



WE READ ALOUD.



LEFT: Steamboats still ply the Mississippi River in this 1884 lithograph color print of a cotton plantation. Twain passed many plantations like this when he returned to the river in 1882.  
© Archive Images / Alamy

ABOVE: Another sketch full of Twain’s self-deprecating humor from *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain’s reading (presumably from his works) has put his audience to sleep. Chapter XLVII

the other, who survived this attack and then proceeded to shoot his assailant dead.

The river was also home to many notorious Civil War battles, especially in the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, which underwent six weeks of bombardment in the summer of 1863, and was famous for its people enduring a Union blockade in caves.

Twain interviewed a few of the townsfolk, who spoke of their hardship with near-indifference. One man described the endless bombardment as if it were rain, and even told of inviting a neighbor over for a rare, rationed drink of whiskey, and shaking hands with the man when a shell burst nearby. The shrapnel sliced off the poor fellow's arm and left the storyteller with it dangling in his own hand. "And do you know the thing that is going to stick the longest in my memory," he admitted to Twain, "and outlast every thing else, little and big, I reckon, is the mean thought I had then? It was 'the whiskey is *saved*.'" Twain described how the diaries that were full of detail in the first few days of the siege gradually thinned out, "life in terrific Vicksburg having now become commonplace and matter of course."

The *Gold Dust* eventually made its way to New Orleans, where Twain was feted and banqueted, and where he "encountered the man whom, of all men, I most wished to see—Horace Bixby." His old teacher hadn't seemed to age; he had "the same slender figure, the same tight curls, the same decision of eye and answering decision of hand, the same erect military bearing; not an inch gained or lost in girth, not an ounce gained or lost in weight, not a hair turned. It is a curious thing, to leave a man thirty-five years old, and come back at the end of twenty-one years and find him still only thirty-five." Despite enjoying the company of the old pilot, before long the trio headed back north, on to Saint Paul and a part of the river that was still a stranger to him. But first, they were scheduled to stop in another city—Twain's fabled hometown of Hannibal, Missouri.

At seven o'clock in the morning, Twain and his friends stepped off "one of the fast boats of the St. Louis and St. Paul Packet Company" and looked around. "That picture of it was still as clear and vivid to me as a photograph."

It was Sunday morning, and everybody was abed yet. So I passed through the vacant streets, still seeing the town as it was, and not as it is, and recognizing and metaphorically shaking hands with a hundred familiar objects which no longer exist; and finally climbed Holiday's Hill to get a comprehensive view. The whole town lay spread out below me then, and I could mark and fix every locality, every detail. Naturally, I was a good deal moved. I said, "Many of the people I once knew in this tranquil refuge of my childhood are now in heaven; some, I trust, are in the other place."

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter LIII*

Here, Twain met a variety of the town's citizens, men and women he once knew, all of whom have, of course, have aged (just as he had aged considerably). One "elderly gentleman" related the fates of many of Twain's school chums and various townspeople—some died, some prospered, and one was a "perfect chucklehead; perfect dummy, just a stupid ass," who inexplicably went on to become the first lawyer in the state of Missouri. This prompted the old man to rage on about the fools in Saint Louis, and how that city would elevate even the most ignorant humans to the highest status. Twain, thinking the old fellow didn't recognize him, inquired about young Samuel Clemens. To this, the gentleman replied, "Oh, he succeeded well enough—another case of damned fool. If they 'd sent him to St. Louis, he'd have succeeded sooner."

From Hannibal, Twain headed north, and he used this trip into uncharted territories (for him) to make observations on the railroad,



Cotton and other goods awaiting transshipment at New Orleans during the late nineteenth century.

Library of Congress





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"MARK TWAIN" AT HIS BOYHOOD HOME, HANNIBAL, MO.

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LEFT: Mark Twain posing in front of his boyhood home during his last visit to Hannibal in 1902. Library of Congress

ABOVE: Colorized postcard view of Mark Twain being photographed in front of his boyhood home in 1902. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

which he disliked, and to list the cities and towns and share some Native American legends he'd picked up along the way. Twain had never ventured this far north in all of his many journeys—impressive, considered he'd been to each coast, and Hawaii and Europe already. Before rattling off his terse observations of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, he explained the almost shocking (to him) growth of these “suddenly” cosmopolitan cities.

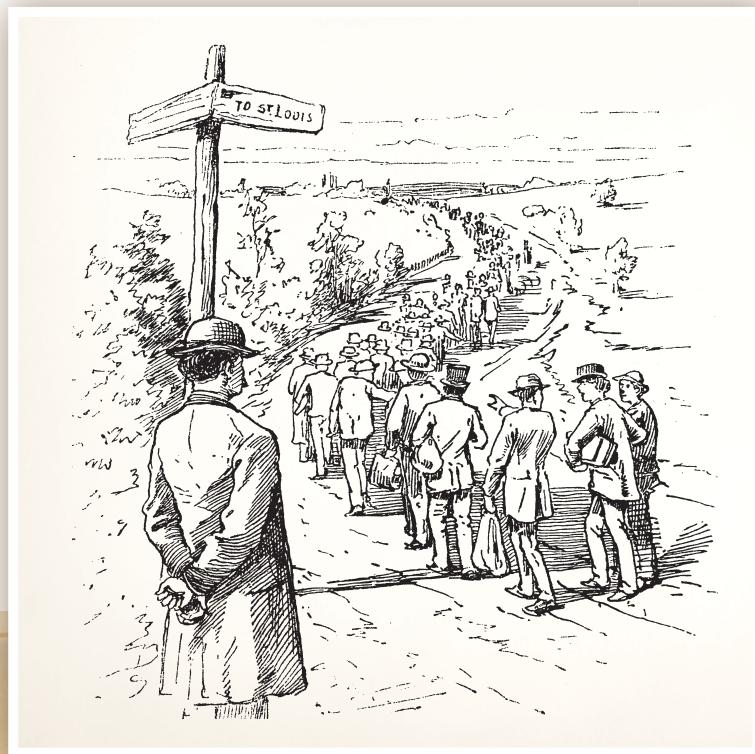
The foreign tourist has never heard of these; there is no note of them in his books. They have sprung up in the night, while he slept. So new is this region, that I, who am comparatively young, am yet older than it is. When I was born, St. Paul had a population of three persons, Minneapolis had just a third as

120



ABOVE: In Chapter LIII of *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain meets up with an old man in Hannibal who tells him—not realizing who Twain is—that Sam Clemens was "...another case of damned fool. If they'd sent him to St. Louis, he'd have succeeded sooner." Here, a sketch showing fools marching to Saint Louis.

LEFT: La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1873—much as it looked to Mark Twain nine years later.  
Library of Congress





Excursion boat at La Crosse during the 1980s. Library of Congress



**ABOVE:** A bird's eye map of Winona, Minnesota, in 1874—about eight years before Twain visited this region for the first time.

Note that steamboats are still a part of the landscape; however, their downfall, the railroad, is also pictured. © The Protected Art Archive / Alamy

**OPPOSITE:** The Stone Arch Bridge in downtown Minneapolis (still standing today) was under construction when Twain traveled through in 1882.

This image is from 1907. Library of Congress

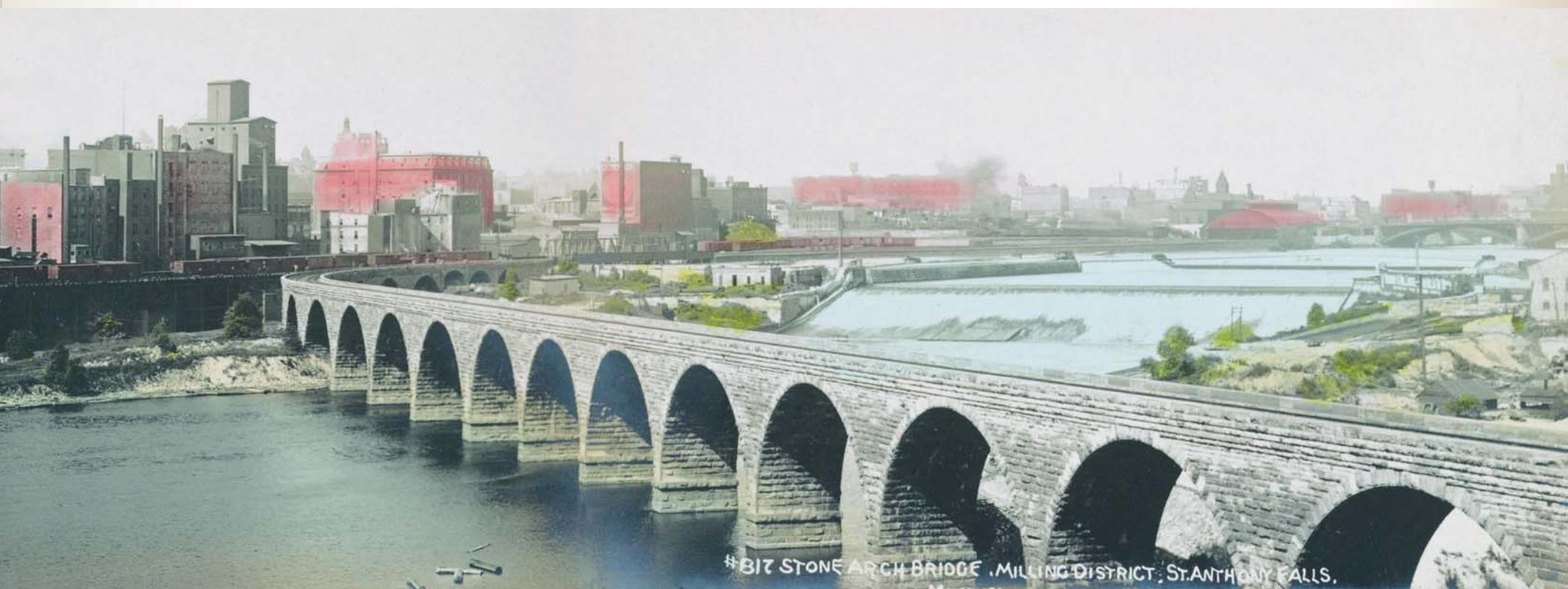
many. Then the population of Minneapolis died two years ago; and when he died he had seen himself undergo an increase, in forty years, of fifty-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine persons. He had a frog's fertility.

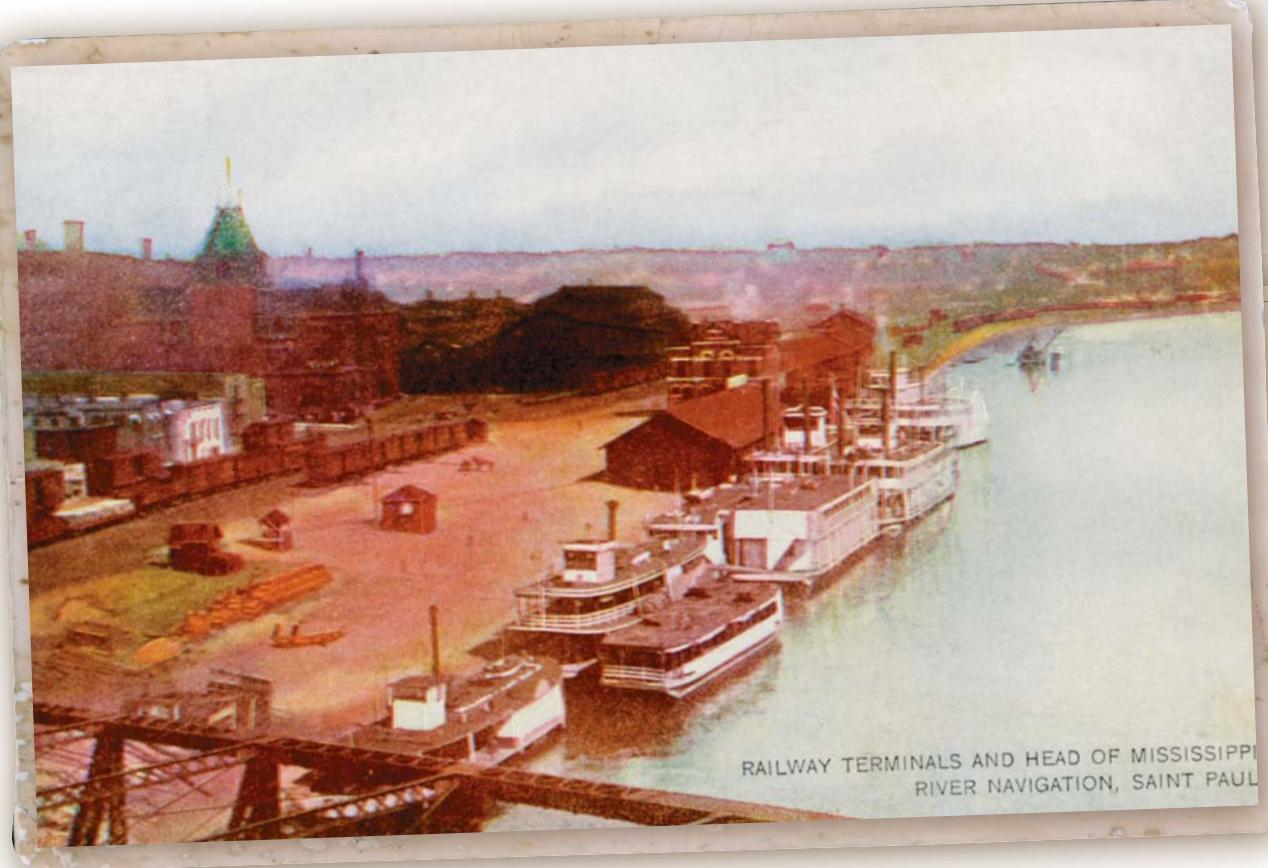
—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter LVIII*

After Twain's brief travels to the northern regions of the river, his journey back in time was successful. The river he'd known as a steamboat pilot was gone, and yet, even with the destruction of the Civil War, the taming of the river's banks by levee and electric light,

and the diminished stature of the pilot, the Mississippi still held him in sway. From his many notebooks (and razor-sharp memory) he would recreate the Mississippi River and its people for *Life on the Mississippi*.

I had myself called with the four o'clock watch, mornings, for one cannot see too many summer sunrises on the Mississippi. They are enchanting. First, there is the eloquence of silence; for a deep hush broods everywhere. Next, there is the haunting sense of loneliness, isolation, remoteness from the worry and bustle of the world. The dawn creeps in stealthily; the solid walls of black forest soften to gray, and vast stretches of the river





Turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcard view of a steamboat landing and railroad terminus in Saint Paul, Minnesota.  
Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

open up and reveal themselves; the water is glass-smooth, gives off spectral little wreaths of white mist, there is not the faintest breath of wind, nor stir of leaf; the tranquillity is profound and infinitely satisfying. Then a bird pipes up, another follows, and soon the pipings develop into a jubilant riot of music. You see none of the birds; you simply move through an atmosphere of song which seems to sing itself. When the light has become a little stronger, you have one of the fairest and softest pictures imaginable. You have the intense green of the massed and crowded foliage near by; you see it paling shade by shade in front of you; upon the next projecting cape, a mile off or more, the tint has lightened to the tender young green of spring; the

cape beyond that one has almost lost color, and the furthest one, miles away under the horizon, sleeps upon the water a mere dim vapor, and hardly separable from the sky above it and about it. And all this stretch of river is a mirror, and you have the shadowy reflections of the leafage and the curving shores and the receding capes pictured in it. Well, that is all beautiful; soft and rich and beautiful; and when the sun gets well up, and distributes a pink flush here and a powder of gold yonder and a purple haze where it will yield the best effect, you grant that you have seen something that is worth remembering.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter XXX*

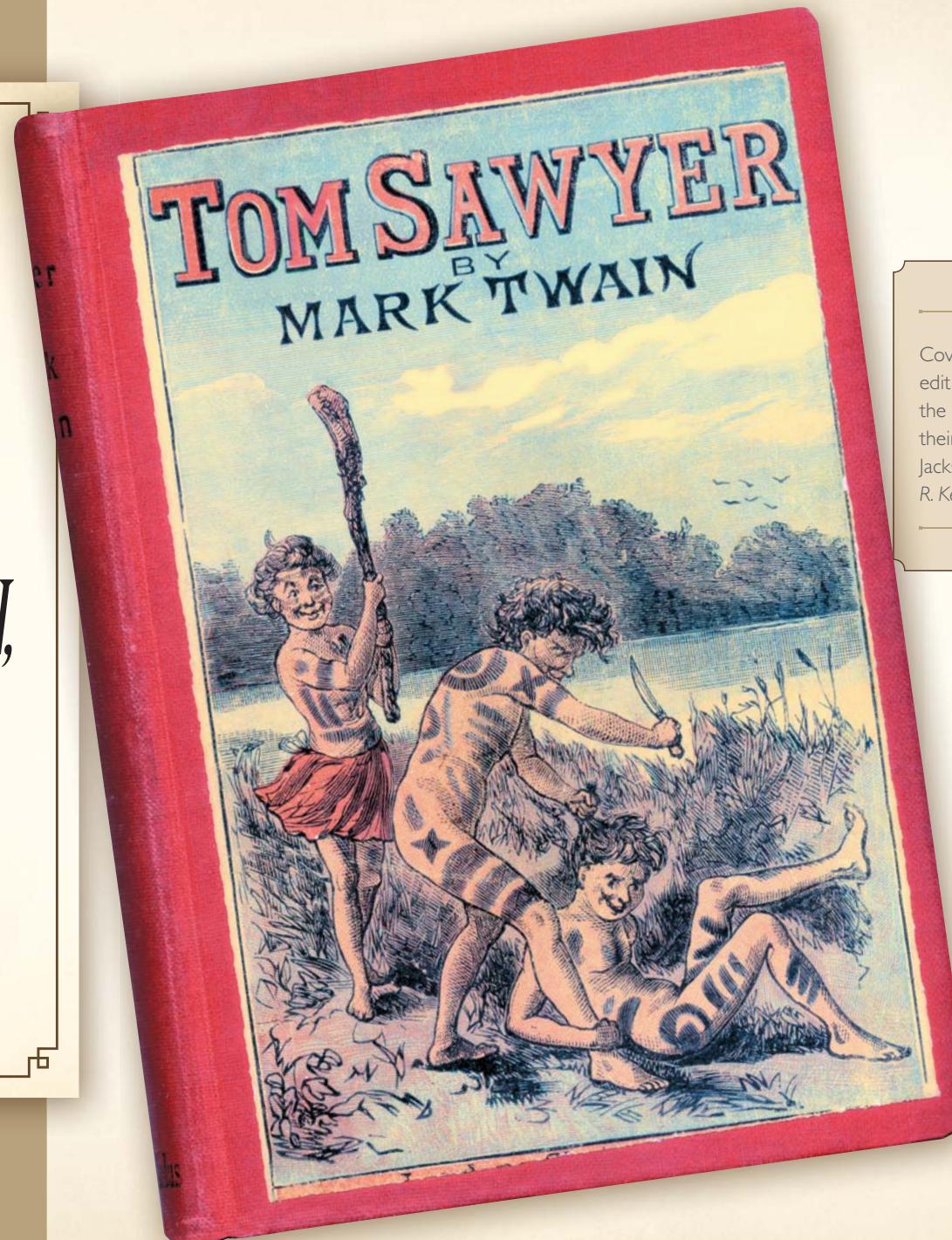


The Delta Queen at sunrise on the Mississippi River near Memphis. © Nathan Benn / Alamy



## CHAPTER 5

# The River in *TOM SAWYER*, *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*, and *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON*



Cover of an early English edition of *Tom Sawyer* depicting the boys playing Indians during their pirate adventure on Jackson's Island. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window—and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft.

— *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter XIX

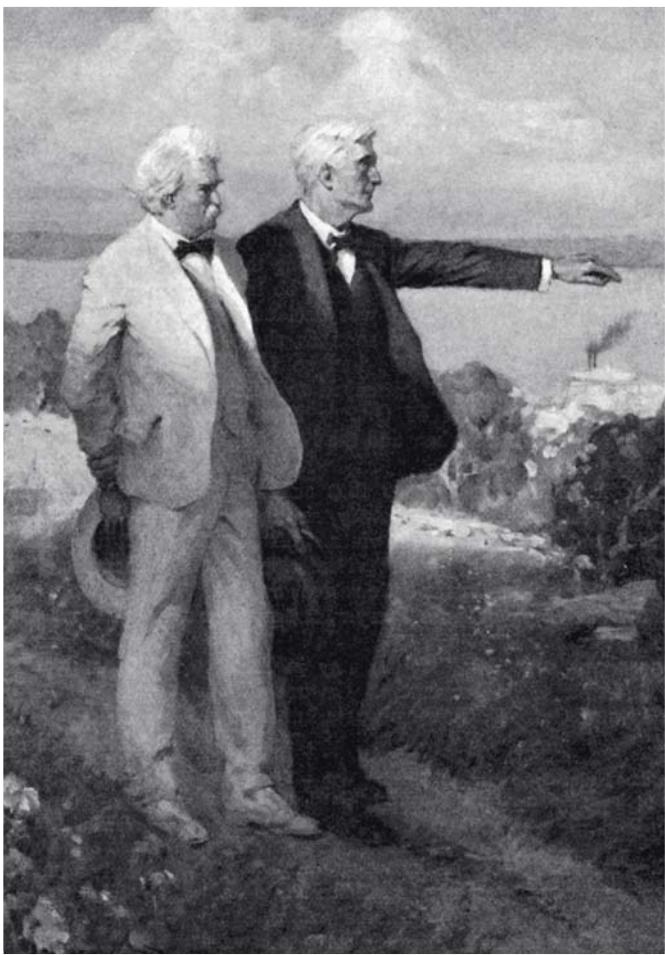
Buoyed by the success of “Old Times on the Mississippi” in the *Atlantic*, Mark Twain began to retreat deep into his past, to his boyhood in Hannibal and especially his jaunts on the big river. From this wellspring of memory came two of his most beloved works, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and a later novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, whose bitter ending served as a stark contrast to *Huckleberry Finn*'s closing compromises. In these three books, the Mississippi River is as essential as any character: it serves as a playground for children, a highway to freedom for one man, and the road to a living hell for others.

There is a startling contrast between *Life on the Mississippi* and the two boyhood adventures, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. All three use the river to drive their narratives, but the waterway in question is profoundly different in

the novels as compared to the (mostly) nonfiction narrative. *Life on the Mississippi* gave readers the river from the elevated view of the pilothouse on a steamboat (and from the many history books and newspapers of the time), and it revealed characters whose feats seemed not only heroic but almost otherworldly. A young Sam Clemens learned to pilot all those thousands of miles of river, blindfolded if need be. Who among us could accomplish such feats? *Life on the Mississippi* also seems like a distant reminiscence, which of course it is, spun to us by a master craftsman. It could almost be said that while *Life on the Mississippi* gives the reader an intellectual grasp of this most famous American waterway, *Huckleberry Finn* comes close to making a person actually *feel* the river.



Fanciful mid-twentieth-century postcard view of Hannibal's riverfront. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen



In his famous novels, Twain takes the reader to the Mississippi River he knew as a boy. Here, an artist imagined Mark Twain with his boyhood friend John Riggs looking at the river from above Hannibal during Twain's 1902 visit. *St. Nicholas magazine*, September 1916.

Twain's most famous novels bring the reader right to the water. We leave the steamboat to loaf on the banks of the river's islands, play and hunt for turtle eggs on sandbars, bake in the hot sun, endure raging storms while battling whitecaps, drift on the skiffs and dugouts and especially rafts, stare at the stars above, and even, at one point, dive deep underwater to avoid the murderous paddles of a steamboat. Where readers watched with a humorous distance at the villages along the banks in *Life on the Mississippi* or snickered while Horace Bixby unloaded a torrent of abuse on some annoyed raftsmen, in *Huckleberry Finn* the reader accompanies Huck into these "one horse towns," takes in a show from the many (awful) performers who ply their trade on the river, and actually gets to experience a steamboat from the perspective of a raftsmen. Twain gave readers a sense of belonging in *Huckleberry Finn*—we believe, for a time, that we could drift down the river on a raft. Huck Finn speaks directly to us as we read, as if we're sitting right there on his raft, feet dangling in the water as he rambles on.

We meet Tom and Huck in the enormously popular "history of a boy" (Twain's description), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the first of four books in which we follow these two scamps. (In addition to its famous sequel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the others are *Tom Sawyer Abroad* from 1894 and *Tom Sawyer, Detective* from 1896.) Essentially, Tom Sawyer is the young Samuel Clemens, with various attributes of his close friends thrown in for good measure, especially lifelong friend Will Bowen (though Bowen is specifically the inspiration for Tom and Huck's pal, Joe Harper.)

Over the years, as the popularity of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* grew and their influence deepened, various denizens of Hannibal came forward to claim that they provided the inspiration for Tom or Huck. According to Michael Patrick Hearn's *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, Twain enjoyed reading the obituary for one Alexander C. Toncray, which claimed the deceased was the rag-clad hero. "So Huck

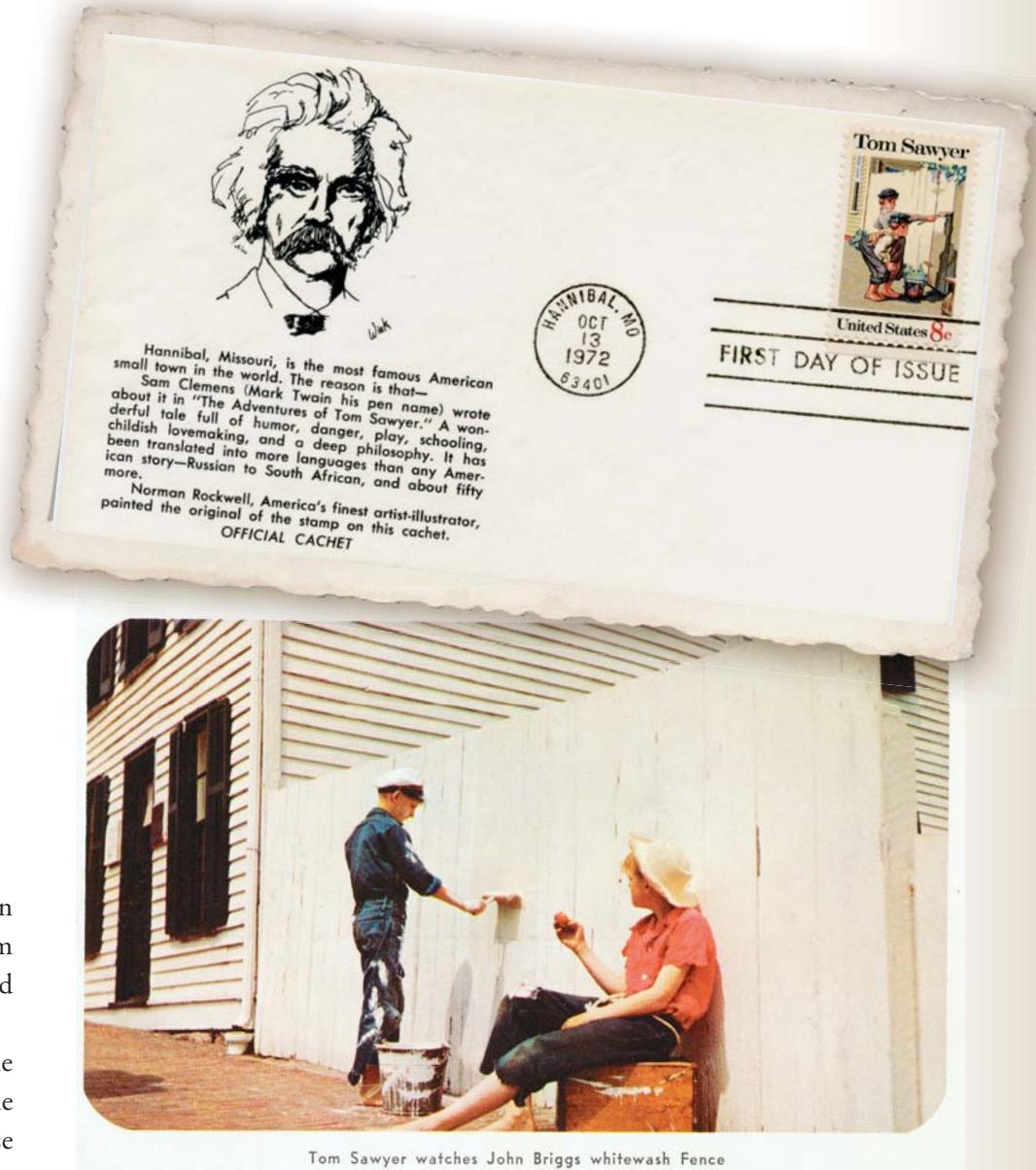
Finn has died again?" Twain said. "To think that a boy who had so many hair-breadth escapades at an age when life was worth living adventurously, should calmly go West and have heart failure!" However, perhaps tired of the endless claims to being Huckleberry Finn's inspiration, Twain laid out the truth once and for all—he was Tom Blankenship, the child of the town drunk.

In Huckleberry Finn I have drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community, and by consequence he was tranquilly and continuously happy and was envied by all the rest of us. We liked him; we enjoyed his society. And as his society was forbidden us by our parents the prohibition trebled and quadrupled its value, and therefore we sought and got more of his society than of any other boy's.

—*The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Chapter 14*

Again we see Twain's hunger for total independence—this description of Tom Blankenship is strikingly similar to the steamboat pilot from *Life on the Mississippi*, who "in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth."

The names of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn have double meaning. Interestingly enough, as pointed out by Hearn, the huckleberry is not, in fact, native to Missouri; Twain first tasted these berries in Connecticut. Hearn suggests that they were considered an "inferior fruit," but it would not be a stretch to imagine that Twain fell in love with these smaller, uncultivated, yet more flavorful members of the blueberry family (grown not on farms but in the wild woods) and was inspired. For the hero of the first novel, Twain chose a river term, much like his own nom de plume. *Sawyer* is yet another name for the





submerged trees in the Mississippi that wreaked havoc on steamboats. Sawyers' roots were slightly attached to the floor of the river, and they would bob about, sawing through the water and air (and usually into the bottoms of careless steamboats).

## Meeting Tom Sawyer

In *Tom Sawyer*, the hero is never described. As illustrated in the original edition by True Williams, Tom's got fairly curly hair and cherubic cheeks, and he wears checkered pants that are rolled up above the ankle, no shoes, and often a hat. Many of the boys look similar. But Twain makes sure that our first visit with Huckleberry Finn is truly astounding.

Huckleberry was always dressed in the cast-off clothes of full-grown men, and they were in perennial bloom and fluttering with rags. His hat was a vast ruin with a wide crescent lopped out of its brim; his coat, when he wore one, hung nearly to his heels and had the rearward buttons far down the back; but one suspender supported his trousers; the seat of the trousers bagged low and contained nothing; the fringed legs dragged in the dirt when not rolled up.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Chapter VI

Let's not forget that the boy is hauling with him *a dead cat*, which, to make matters even more spicy, was *purchased* from another boy for a blue ticket (given to children who recited Bible verses at the local church) and a *bladder* that he "got at the slaughter house." Certainly these aromatic trinkets add to Huck's "perennial bloom."

Unlike its sequel, virtually all of *Tom Sawyer* takes place in Saint Petersburg, which stands in for Hannibal—its name has been suggested as referencing heaven (the city of Saint Peter, guardian of the pearly gates). It is not until Chapter XIII, when Tom, heartsick over his



An early illustrated English edition of *Tom Sawyer*.  
© David Hancock / Alamy

mistreatment at the hands of his puppy-love interest Becky Thatcher, decides to flee his aunt and the town as a whole, make for Jackson's Island, and become a pirate. He does this with his friend, Joe Harper, who is himself despondent over a whipping for drinking some cream, as well as Huckleberry Finn, who "joined them promptly, for all careers were one to him; he was indifferent." The boys prepare for the journey, each comrade bringing something to the game—Tom steals a ham and "some trifles," Joe hauls over an entire side of bacon ("and had just about worn himself out with getting it there"), and Huck has a skillet, tobacco, and some corn cobs to make into pipes later. Each pirate takes on an alias: Tom is the "Black Avenger of the Spanish Main," Joe is the "Terror of the Seas," and Huck is "Finn the Red-Handed." Tumbling down the side of a bluff at midnight (the easy path to the river "lacked



HUCKLEBERRY FINN.

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Huck Finn's first appearance, in Chapter VI of *Tom Sawyer*, illustrated by True Williams.

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the advantages of difficulty and danger so valued by a pirate"), the boys hop on a raft abandoned by partying raftsmen and, with Tom captaining and Huck and Joe at the oars, they push off downstream to an imagined freedom—away from scolding parents, disapproving society, and the indifferent Becky Thatcher.

The river was not high, so there was not more than a two- or three-mile current. Hardly a word was said during the next three-quarters of an hour. Now the raft was passing before the distant town. Two or three glimmering lights showed where it lay, peacefully sleeping, beyond the vague vast sweep of star-gemmed water, unconscious of the tremendous event that was happening. The Black Avenger stood, still with folded arms, "looking his last" upon the scene of his former joys and his later sufferings, and wishing "she" could see him now, abroad on the wild sea, facing peril and death with dauntless heart, going to his doom with a grim smile on his lips. It was but a small strain on his imagination to remove Jackson's Island beyond eye-shot of the village, and so he "looked his last" with a broken and satisfied heart.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XIII*

There is some dispute as to the real "Jackson's Island." Some scholars, such as Hearn, believe that it was Glasscock Island, a few miles down the river from Hannibal, and long since swallowed up by the Mississippi. Powers, among others, believe it's Sny Island, nearer to Hannibal. Jonathan Raban, an Englishman who traveled the length of the river in 1979, studied the geography and concluded that Twain was referring to Gilbert's Island, larger and about eight miles downstream.

Whatever its inspiration in real life, Jackson's Island functions as an Eden in both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, a paradise of harmony between man and beast and a stark contrast between so-



Tom and Becky escaping from the cave in Chapter XXXII of *Tom Sawyer*.

called civilization and the natural world. After the boys have slept the night away in *Tom Sawyer*, the eponymous hero wakes, momentarily confused, before realizing he's on this island paradise, where there exists a "delicious sense of repose and peace in the deep pervading calm and silence of the woods," a place of total harmony.

Now, far away in the woods a bird called; another answered; presently the hammering of a woodpecker was heard. Gradually the cool dim gray of the morning whitened, and as gradually sounds multiplied and life manifested itself. The marvel of Nature shaking off sleep and going to work unfolded itself to the musing boy. A little green worm came crawling over a

dewy leaf, lifting two-thirds of his body into the air from time to time and "sniffing around," then proceeding again—for he was measuring, Tom said; and when the worm approached him, of its own accord, he sat as still as a stone, with his hopes rising and falling, by turns, as the creature still came toward him or seemed inclined to go elsewhere; and when at last it considered a painful moment with its curved body in the air and then came decisively down upon Tom's leg and began a journey over him, his whole heart was glad—for that meant that he was going to have a new suit of clothes—without the shadow of a doubt a gaudy piratical uniform. Now a procession of ants appeared, from nowhere in particular, and went about their labors; one struggled manfully by with a dead spider five times as big as itself in its arms, and lugged it straight up a tree-trunk. A brown spotted lady-bug climbed the dizzy height of a grass-blade, and Tom bent down close to it and said, "Lady-bug, lady-bug, fly away home, your house is on fire, your children's alone," and she took wing and went off to see about it—which did not surprise the boy, for he knew of old that this insect was credulous about conflagrations and he had practiced upon its simplicity more than once. A tumble-bug came next, heaving sturdily at its ball, and Tom touched the creature, to see it shut its legs against its body and pretend to be dead. The birds were fairly rioting, by this time. A cat-bird, the northern mocker, lit in a tree over Tom's head, and trilled out her imitations of her neighbors in a rapture of enjoyment; then a shrill jay swept down, a flash of blue flame, and stopped on a twig almost within the boy's reach, cocked his head to one side and eyed the strangers with a consuming curiosity; a gray squirrel and a big fellow of the "fox" kind came scurrying along, sitting up at intervals to inspect and chatter at the boys, for the wild things had probably never seen a human being before and scarcely knew whether to be afraid or not. All Nature was wide awake and stirring, now; long lances of sunlight

Tom, Huck, and Joe Harper rafting to Jackson's Island in Chapter XIII of *Tom Sawyer*.

pierced down through the dense foliage far and near, and a few butterflies came fluttering upon the scene.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XIV*

This is a Tom Sawyer who, despite his near-hyperactivity in much of the book—chasing after Becky Thatcher, doing cartwheels, busting up his house and shimmying out windows—falls into a state of almost trancelike repose on Jackson's Island and with the creatures that live there. Tom does not chase after the animals, is not like a modern-day bird watcher, inching closer to get a better view, but instead, after waking from a deep and healthy sleep, he is virtually covered in the island's fauna, which actually seek *him* out—like the green worm coming to him “of its own accord.” Birds, bugs, squirrels, and foxes all welcome the boy to their domain, and he sends the ladybug off with a song.

But Tom wouldn't sit still for very long—in fact, the very next sentence after that scene sees our hero waking his pals, and then they “clattered away with a shout” to play pirate (no doubt scattering all the bugs, birds, and foxes that had gathered around.) This island is indeed paradise for the boys, who feel no despair when their raft—which



appears to be the only means by which they can get home—has drifted away, and “this only gratified them, since its going was something like burning the bridge between them and civilization.”

After a day of hiking the island, feasting (on bacon, fried fish caught from the river, and cold ham), swimming, and eventual homesickness, they are somewhat startled by a series of resounding booms. In a scene that Twain essentially repeats in *Huckleberry Finn*, we see a ferryboat, crowded with concerned souls, and a cannon being fired across the water.



Sometime between 1902 and 1908, Mark Twain posed with Anna Laura (Elizabeth) Hawkins Frazer, a childhood sweetheart and the inspiration for the character of Becky Thatcher. Library of Congress

They sprang to their feet and hurried to the shore toward the town. They parted the bushes on the bank and peered out over the water. The little steam ferry boat was about a mile below the village, drifting with the current. Her broad deck seemed crowded with people. There were a great many skiffs rowing about or floating with the stream in the neighborhood of the ferry boat, but the boys could not determine what the men in them were doing. Presently a great jet of white smoke burst from the ferry-boat's side, and as it expanded and rose in a lazy cloud, that same dull throb of sound was borne to the listeners again.

"I know now!" exclaimed Tom; "somebody's drownded!"

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XIV*

According to Hearn's *Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, this practice emerged from a combination of American and British superstitions. Twain noted in *Life on the Mississippi* that people believed that, for whatever reason, the river would hold a drowned body underwater and not allow it to rise. However, according to superstition—and a widely held one if we're to believe Twain, as the whole town comes out to participate in both cases—if you shot a cannonball across the water, the resulting shock waves would burst the victim's gallbladder and make the corpse float to the surface.

In both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the guardians of the boys—Aunt Polly and the Widow Douglas, respectively—sound the alarm that the boys have vanished, and are perhaps dead, "drownded" as Huck calls it. Tom's "death" means that he gets to experience the desire of anyone who ever romantically thought to kill themselves—that is, to see your offending friends and relatives weep and speak of you in heroic terms, coupled with the extra remorse of the various crimes and misdemeanors you've inflicted on the deceased. After the boys add everything up and realize that they are in fact the "drownded" ones,

Tom and his friends watch a steam launch searching for their drowned bodies in Chapter XIV of *Tom Sawyer*.

"they felt like heroes in an instant" and spend the evening gloating over their triumph and wishing they were ashore to witness the mass grieving. Tom, however, isn't content to merely brag to his pals—after his comrades are asleep, he swims across the narrow water to the Illinois side of the river, and then steals a ride on the ferry boat back to Saint Petersburg, to see if he can get some information on their "deaths."

Shortly before ten o'clock he came out into an open place opposite the village, and saw the ferry boat lying in the shadow of the trees on the high bank. Everything was quiet under the blinking stars. He crept down the bank, watching with all his eyes, slipped into the water, swam three or four strokes and climbed into the skiff that did "yawl" duty at the boat's stern. He laid himself down under the thwarts and waited, panting.

Presently the cracked bell tapped and a voice gave the order to "cast off." A minute or two later the skiff's head was standing high up, against the boat's swell, and the voyage was begun. Tom felt happy in his success, for he knew it was the boat's last trip for the night.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XV*



Readers for generations have marveled at the pluck and intelligence of the titular hero of *Tom Sawyer*. At their young age (never mentioned, but guessed at between ten and fourteen), we see that Tom and Huck can swim with the expertise of a lifeguard, can build a raging fire (in *Tom Sawyer*, Twain mentions matches, but this is clearly a convenience, not a necessity as it would be today—and in *Huckleberry Finn*, fires are built from scratch), can captain a raft and row a skiff, can fish with immediate results, and possess a thorough knowledge of the schedule of the town's ferryboat and the submerged dangers of the river. Not once does the reader question any of these realities. Tom and Huck are skilled boys, and it is this capability that allows them this freedom.



Tom swimming in the Mississippi after sneaking home in Chapter XV of *Tom Sawyer*.

Tom sneaks into Saint Petersburg and creeps up to his house and watches Aunt Sally and Joe Harper's mother through an open window, where he sees them weeping and speaking kindly of him, bringing the boy to tears as well. Content, he steals a skiff from the ferry and paddles furiously back to the island in time for breakfast, where he surprises his pals who wonder if he's deserted them. On this second day of escape, Twain presents us with perhaps the most bizarre (and by today's standards, alarming) joy of island life—the turtle egg feast.

After dinner all the gang turned out to hunt for turtle eggs on the bar. They went about poking sticks into the sand, and when

they found a soft place they went down on their knees and dug with their hands. Sometimes they would take fifty or sixty eggs out of one hole. They were perfectly round white things a trifle smaller than an English walnut. They had a famous fried-egg feast that night, and another on Friday morning.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XVI*

After three nights, the trio encounters both homesickness (even Huck, who yearns for a night sleeping in his sugar barrel) and a ferocious storm. This is the one instance where our heroes have it worse than Huck does in his book—for the most part, this escape has been all

fun and games. But Missouri is famous for its raging summer storms and tornadoes. As mentioned, they drove Sam Clemens nearly mad as a child, when he assumed God was punishing him for his transgressions. When Huck and Jim face a downpour in *Huckleberry Finn*, they're able to retreat to a nice cave on Jackson's Island, where they can make a fire and watch the heavens burst forth. "It was one of these regular summer storms," Huck says, and describes it with all the love of a veteran storm chaser, without a hint of fear. "Jim, this is nice," I says. 'I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread."

Contrast this with *Tom Sawyer*, in which our heroes, sleeping by the fire, wake to the sound of thunder and impending disaster as they race for the old sail they're using as shelter.

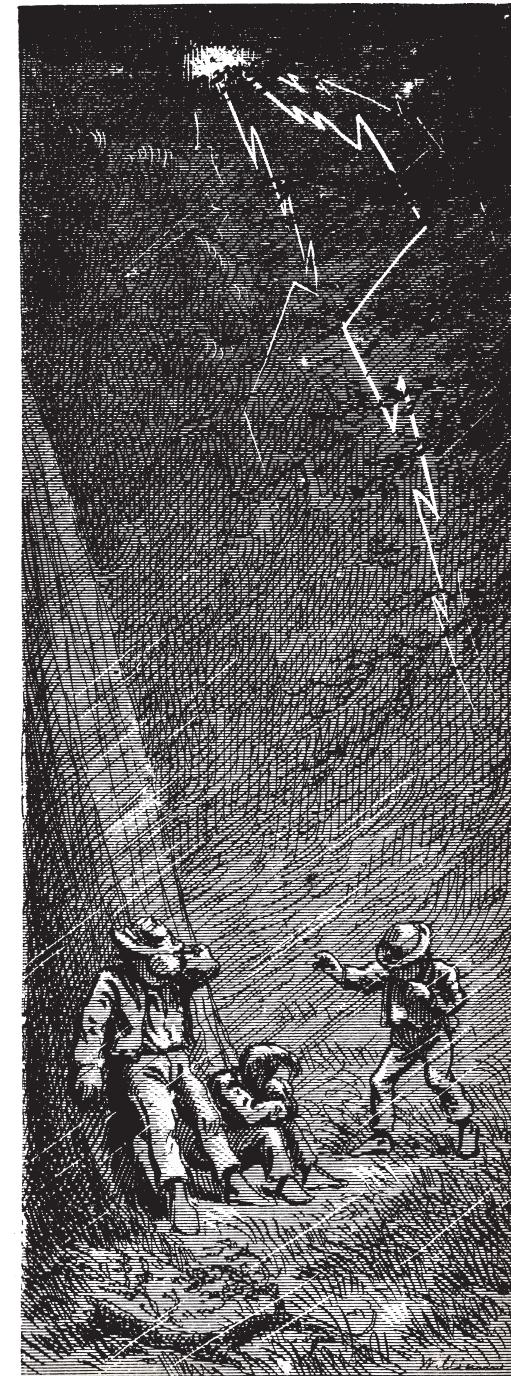
"Quick! boys, go for the tent!" exclaimed Tom.

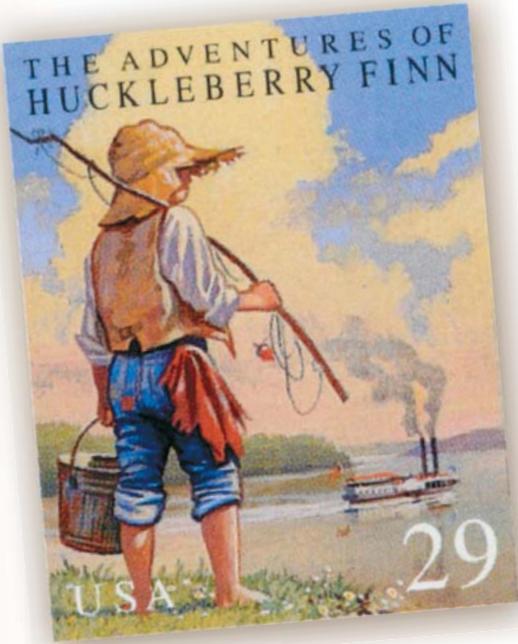
They sprang away, stumbling over roots and among vines in the dark, no two plunging in the same direction. A furious blast roared through the trees, making everything sing as it went. One blinding flash after another came, and peal on peal of deafening thunder. And now a drenching rain poured down and the rising hurricane drove it in sheets along the ground. The boys cried out to each other, but the roaring wind and the booming thunder-blasts drowned their voices utterly. However, one by one they straggled in at last and took shelter under the tent, cold, scared, and streaming with water; but to have company in misery seemed something to be grateful for. They could not talk, the old sail flapped so furiously, even if the other noises would have allowed them. The tempest rose higher and higher, and presently the sail tore loose from its fastenings and went winging away on the blast. The boys seized each others' hands and fled, with many tumblings and bruises, to the shelter of a great oak that stood upon the river bank. Now the battle was at its highest. Under the ceaseless conflagration of lightnings that flamed in the skies, everything below stood out in clean-cut and shadowless distinctness: the bending trees, the billowy river, white with foam, the driving spray of spume-flakes, the dim outlines of the high bluffs on the other side, glimpsed through the drifting cloud-rack and the slanting veil of rain. Every little while some giant tree yielded the fight and fell crashing through the younger growth; and the unflagging

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Tom and his friends cower under a tree as a storm rages over the island in Chapter XVI of *Tom Sawyer*.

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U.S. postage stamp  
issued for a children's  
literature series in 1993.  
*Collection of  
R. Kent Rasmussen*

thunder-peals came now in ear-splitting explosive bursts, keen and sharp, and unspeakably appalling. The storm culminated in one matchless effort that seemed likely to tear the island to pieces, burn it up, drown it to the tree tops, blow it away, and deafen every creature in it, all at one and the same moment. It was a wild night for homeless young heads to be out in.

—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter XVI*

## Huckleberry Finn and the river

In contrast, Jackson's Island was much more of a haven for Huck. The opening of *Huckleberry Finn* could not be more different from *Tom Sawyer* than if Huck had floated into outer space rather than down the Mississippi River. Where Tom is happy, in love, and possessed of an almost hyperactive imagination, Huck is brooding, fixated on death,

conflicted about his guardians (the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson), and literal to an extreme. And then comes one of the most odious human beings in all of Twain's literature—Pap, Huck's biological father (he is little else to the boy), a drunken, violent, and altogether evil man who abuses Huck and kidnaps him away from the Widow. Hauling Huck across the river to a shanty lost away in the thick, nearly impenetrable woods on the Illinois side, Pap spends his days drunk and beating the poor boy, even locking our hero into the cabin when the old man needs to go to town for more whiskey. Despite these troubles, Huck sees promise in the arrangement, admitting that he was happy to be away from the stifling environment of the Widow's home, and that "I was used to being where I was, and liked it, all but the cowhide part."

But Pap is more than just a drunk, he's a raging alcoholic who almost murders Huck in one of his whiskey-fueled sprees, screaming and slicing the air with a clasp-knife until he falls dead asleep. After realizing that the situation is unsafe, the boy seeks to head out on his own. Unlike Tom, whose "escape" is mere fantasy, made more difficult for the sheer fun of it, here we see that Huck hasn't got a choice, and his path to freedom requires genuine ingenuity. For if he goes back to the Widow Douglas, his father will kidnap him again; if he remains, Pap might stab him to death. The Mississippi is the only safe place for the boy.

But Huck knows he can't just hop in a skiff and sail off downstream. Locked in the shanty, Huck slowly digs his way out of the cabin, plotting his escape like the Count of Monte Cristo that Tom fantasizes about. Finally free, Huck then takes an ax and practically destroys the cabin, wrecking the door to make it appear as though someone has smashed through. He then shoots down a wild pig, slathers its blood around the cabin, on his jacket, and then on an axe he leaves behind (and on which he also places some of his pulled out hair for good measure.) Huck then drags a sack of rocks to the riverfront to make it appear as



139



Huck (Lewis Sargent) fishing in the 1920 film adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

if he was murdered and his body was hauled to the river and tossed by thieves—which also then covers up his theft of all the provisions he'll need in his flight. His lazy days with Tom end up paying dividends: “Jackson’s Island is good enough for me,” Huck admits. “I know that island pretty well, and nobody ever comes there.”

After all that work fabricating a crime scene, not to mention hauling all the provisions to the dugout canoe, Huck is exhausted, and falls dead asleep in the little dugout canoe he’s using to sail the river. He wakes much later, and the moon is out. “Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and *smelt* late.” Suddenly, hearing “that dull kind of regular sound that comes from oars working in rowlocks” he sees a skiff bearing down on him—his father, “and sober, too, by the way he laid to his oars.”

To hide, Huck paddles hard near the shore until he reaches the village, and then shoots out to the middle of the river, again hiding in the bottom of his canoe, smoking and staring up at the sky as the current drives him downstream. *Huckleberry Finn* is made up of these moments, large and small, stitched together—typically on the shore our hero encounters the worst kind of human behavior, which he narrowly escapes again and again, followed by a moment of peace and tranquility on the great river.

I got out amongst the drift-wood and then laid down in the bottom of the canoe and let her float. I laid there and had a good rest and a smoke out of my pipe, looking away into the sky, not a cloud in it. The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knew it before.

—*Huckleberry Finn, Chapter VII*

Much of the river is a new experience for Huck—“I never knew it before”—just as it is for the reader. As he makes his way down the Mississippi, Huck will find many new discoveries, about the river, about



humanity at its best and (usually) worst, and most of all about himself. His stop at Jackson's Island marks the beginning of his profound friendship with Jim, and it was drawn both from literature that young Samuel Clemens admired and one of his own horrifying experiences.

The opening of Chapter VIII is strikingly similar to Chapter XIV in *Tom Sawyer*—a sleepy boy, having just awakened, taking in the world and ruminating on his life. Hearn, in *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, points out that the illustrations for that chapter are nearly identical, and indeed they are—True W. Williams' illustrations show a cherubic Tom sitting at the base of a tree, staring outward in thought (in *Tom Sawyer*), while E. W. Kemble's Huck does nearly the same (in *Huckleberry Finn*). While bugs and birds and foxes all celebrate Tom's arrival, here only a pair of friendly squirrels chatter happily at Huck. But Huck has left people thinking he's been killed, and so, once again we see a ferryboat sending cannonballs into the water, in the hopes of raising the boy's dead body. This time, however, Huck's hungry, and it's a testament to his rich, more reality-based imagination that there's bread soon to arrive. Again, another strange British superstition rears its head, this time in the form of a loaf of bread floating on the water. Supposedly, a hollowed-out loaf of bread filled with mercury and prayed over by a pastor will float to a body. Huck knows this, and expects such a loaf to come downstream, which it does. And, as Huck points

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Huck relaxing in his canoe after fleeing from his abusive father in Chapter VII of *Huckleberry Finn*.

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out, maybe there's something to praying over the bread—for it really does reach its intended target.

I was having a good enough time seeing them hunt for my remainders, if I only had a bite to eat. Well, then I happened to think how they always put quicksilver in loaves of bread and float them off because they always go right to the drownded carcass and stop there. So says I, I'll keep a lookout, and if any of them's floating around after me, I'll give them a show. I changed to the Illinois edge of the island to see what luck I could have,





and I warn't disappointed. A big double loaf come along, and I most got it, with a long stick, but my foot slipped and she floated out further. Of course I was where the current set in the closest to the shore—I knowed enough for that. But by-and-by along comes another one, and this time I won. I took out the plug and shook out the little dab of quicksilver, and set my teeth in. It was "baker's bread"—what the quality eat—none of your low down corn-pone.

I got a good place amongst the leaves, and set there on a log, munching the bread and watching the ferry-boat, and very well satisfied. And then something struck me. I says, now I reckon the widow or the parson or somebody prayed that this bread would find me, and here it has gone and done it. So there ain't no doubt but there is something in that thing. That is, there's something in it when a body like the widow or the parson prays, but it don't work for me, and I reckon it don't work for only just the right kind.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter VII*

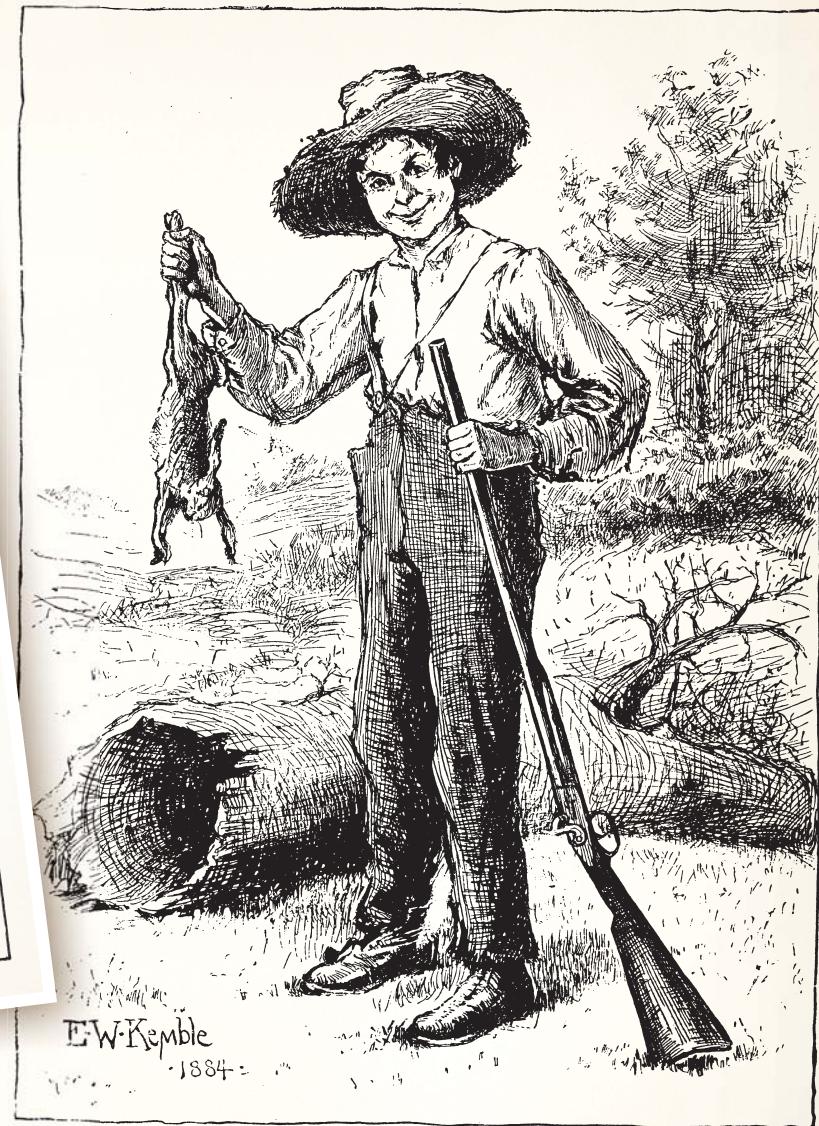
It's amazing not only to consider that the boy is eating bread that once had poisonous mercury in it, but that a loaf of any bread would withstand floating in water for any length of time before dissolving completely. Seeing the boat descend toward the foot of the island and then make its way back, Huck is content with the knowledge that no one will probably be looking for him there. "I got my traps out and made me a nice camp in the thick woods." And so, Huck spends three days and nights on the island, making fires and living off his provisions, and once again turns to the river for solace. "I went and set on the bank and listened to the currents washing along, and counted the stars and drift-logs and rafts that come down, and then went to bed; there ain't no better way to put in time when you are lonesome."

Only he's not alone. In a scene reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe's finding the footprints of Friday in the sand, Huck stumbles on a still-

warm campfire while out hunting. Terrified it's left over from someone looking to nab him, he races through the undergrowth, feeling "like a person had cut one of my breaths in two and I only got half, and the short half, too" and quickly loads all his provisions into his canoe, and then scrambles up a tree, rifle in hand, waiting. After spending a long, sleepless night worrying, he decides that he "can't live this way" and heads out to find out exactly who is also living on Jackson's Island with him.

Of course, the other inhabitant is Jim, who had labored for Miss Watson as a slave, and Huck's good friend from back home. The boy is elated—"I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome, now"—but superstitious Jim is shocked to see the "dead" Huck emerge from the forest, and begs the ghost boy to leave him alone. After convincing Jim that he's real, alive, and not a ghost, they enjoy a good breakfast before Jim admits that he's run away.

This moment, and the ensuing days the two spend on the island, mirrors a more horrific tale that Sam actually lived through as a child, and one that probably influenced *Huckleberry Finn*. In 1847, when Clemens was twelve years old, a fugitive slave named Neriam Todd stole away to Sny Island. There, Bence Blankenship (the older brother of Tom, the boy who inspired the character of Huck Finn) discovered the man, and decided to help him. Bence stole food for Neriam, ignoring the moral and financial implications of this act—not only was there was a bounty on Neriam's head, money that a poor family like the Blankenships could have used, but there was also the added pressure of punishment, as abolitionists who helped escaped slaves were often beaten or jailed. In fact, Sam's father once sat on a jury that convicted some abolitionists to twelve years in prison at hard labor for trying to help some slaves escape. According to biographer Ron Powers, after a few weeks of Bence's support, a group of woodcutters accidentally stumbled upon poor Neriam, and they not only killed but mutilated him, most likely with the tools of their trade, and tossed his body into



Frontispieces of the first American editions of (left) *Tom Sawyer* (illustrated by True Williams) and (right) *Huckleberry Finn* (by E.W. Kemble). Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

the water between the island and the free Illinois shore—a grotesquely ironic move that may have been lost on these murderers. But the body was caught in the shallows until Clemens and some friends, picking blackberries on the banks of Bird Slough, a sandy, brackish part of the river, watched in horror as the bloated corpse rose out of the depths and seemingly chased them. Perhaps Sam knew Neriam; at the very least he knew Bence and the Blankenship clan, one of whom (Tom) he held in the highest regard. Bence spent weeks squirreling away provisions for Neriam, no doubt forging a relationship with the man. One has to wonder if Tom Blankenship was ever involved, and how much of this Bence (or Tom) shared with Sam. One can only imagine the impact this must have had on everyone involved—Bence seeing a man he helped care for not only killed but brutally murdered, and Sam, a bright and intelligent young man, a boy prone to considering the moral implications of just about everything, no doubt contemplating his roughshod, poverty-stricken friend (Bence) ignoring a fat reward to care for a slave. It does not stretch the imagination too much to think that perhaps *Huckleberry Finn* was Twain's way of rewriting Neriam's tragic history—the slave who actually manages to find his freedom with the help of a Blankenship.

While on the island, Huck and Jim witness the "June rise", that time when the Mississippi floods its banks, and wreaks havoc on the towns along the river, washing over them, grinding away the banks and dragging down trees that have grown too close to the water (and that later kill various ships and especially steamboats as snags, sawyers, and preachers). In fact, the water gives them the spacious raft that will carry their story along. "One night we catched a little section of a lumber raft—nice pine planks. It was twelve foot wide and about fifteen or sixteen foot long, and the top stood above water six or seven inches, a solid level floor." Later, the engorged river even pulls down a two-story house, which floats by Jackson's Island. On their dugout canoe, Huck

and Jim investigate, and find a murdered man inside—and though we don't know it yet, the dead man is Pap, killed in what some critics consider to be a brothel, thanks to the profane graffiti on the wall and the women's underwear strewn about. They find quite a treasure there in the house, though—candles and buttons, hatchets and a Barlow knife, fish line and hooks and a bunch of other "truck," including some dresses that Huck uses to pretend to be a girl, in order to go back to town and get the lowdown on both of their situations. In this disguise he discovers that Jim is the prime suspect for Huck's "murder," and they flee down the river.

As we've seen in *Life on the Mississippi*, the big river served as a highway transporting any number of travelers, entertainers, preachers, freight, fuel, food . . . and also human chattel. The Mississippi was a focal point of "the peculiar institution" of slavery; for slaves, being sold "down the river" is almost the worst thing imaginable. Jim has fled from Miss Watson based solely on the rumor that she was planning to sell him down the river, a notion so odious that Twain made it the focus of both this masterpiece and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* later. Which may raise a question to the reader; why would a runaway slave like Jim want to ride a raft southward, deep into the heart of the South?

Different critics have asked this question—considering that Illinois is right across from Jackson's Island, wouldn't that make more sense? And yet, as noted earlier, when Huck is hauled to his Pap's shanty in the woods on the Illinois side, we see that this is territory thick with woods and undergrowth, and nearly impossible for anyone—especially a runaway slave with no tools or supplies, and most likely not even any shoes on his feet—to maneuver. Not to mention that runaways were often nabbed even in Illinois, and hauled back home. As Hearn points out in *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, Illinois was a border state that vigorously upheld the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed that federal marshals in free states had to arrest and



144



A wood engraving of the flooding Mississippi River bursting the crevasse at Bonnet Carre, Louisiana, in 1871. Library of Congress



144

FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER

MAY 15, 1871

return alleged slaves in the free states, or face an onerous fine. Jim's goal is to hit Cairo, at the tip of Illinois, and then escape further north, up the Ohio River. As noted later in Chapter XV, "We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble." Later we also hear of Jim's plan to work and buy back his wife and children, who may be closer to Cairo than Hannibal.

The river, then, is salvation, a break from the awful humanity boiling on the banks of the Mississippi, the so-called civilization. And where *Life on the Mississippi* was a primer on piloting a steamboat the length of the nation's greatest river, *Huckleberry Finn* teaches us how to drive a raft, from safety matters—keeping a lantern lit—to telling time without a clock in sight. It also teaches us how to travel when trying to avoid people—good advice for "dead" boys and runaway slaves.

"When the first streak of day begun to show, we tied up to a tow-head in a big bend on the Illinois side, and hacked off cotton-wood branches with the hatchet and covered up the raft with them so she looked like there had been a cave-in on the bank there." Huck and Jim travel at night, loafing pretty much in the open during the daylight hours, resting and catching fish while hiding out at tow-heads, which are "baby" islands crowded thick with cottonwoods, fast-growing trees that clog up riverbanks across America. At night, they travel on the raft that our intrepid heroes have turned into a floating oasis, a respite from the cruel world.

Jim took up some of the top planks of the raft and built a snug wigwam to get under in blazing weather and rainy, and to keep the things dry. Jim made a floor for the wigwam, and raised it a foot or more above the level of the raft, so now the blankets and all the traps was out of the reach of the steamboat waves. Right in the middle of the wigwam we made a layer of dirt about five or six inches deep with a frame around it for to hold it to its place; this was to build a fire on in sloppy weather or chilly; the wigwam would keep it from being seen. We made an extra steering oar, too, because one of the others might get broke, on a snag or something. We fixed up a short forked stick to hang the old lantern on; because we must always light the lantern whenever we see a steamboat coming down stream, to keep from getting run over.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter XII*

There's no evidence that Twain ever made a trip down the Mississippi while on a raft such as this, but it serves as a wonderful vessel upon which our heroes—and the story—floats down the river. Their raft is but a "section" of a "monstrous long raft," slowly plowing its way south—in fact, this is the raft scene in Chapter III ("Frescoes from the Past") in *Life on the Mississippi*, written for *Huckleberry Finn* but left

out of the final manuscript. "She had four long sweeps at each end, so we judged she carried as many as thirty men, likely. She had five big wigwams aboard, wide apart, and an open camp fire in the middle, and a tall flagpole at each end. There was a power of style about her. It amounted to something being a raftsman on such a craft as that."

Even the smaller section of the raft, with its boarded "wigwam," is a secure place during a ferocious storm. "We stayed in the wigwam and let the raft take care of itself," Twain wrote in *Huckleberry Finn*. As they reach a chain of islands in a treacherous part of the Mississippi, they come across the wreck of the steamer *Walter Scott*—a not-so-subtle jab on the writer that Twain loathed.

Huck is a bit greedy, here, eager to climb aboard the ship and see what sort of fun loot he can find, despite the danger—the *Walter Scott* is lying at a grim angle in the water, bobbing about on a snag, and a strong risk to break away and sink entirely in the swollen waters, taking to a watery grave anyone within it. Jim advises staying off the craft, but Huck "felt just the way any other boy would a felt when I see that wreck laying there so mournful and lonesome in the middle of the river. I wanted to get aboard of her and slink around a little, and see what there was to see."

Jim agrees, reluctantly, and they sneak aboard only to find a pair of criminals holding another man, possibly a co-conspirator, hostage, and threatening to kill him. This is a nasty gang, and clearly, based on the dialogue, the "victim" here is being held thanks to what sounds like a betrayal on his part. (Huck and the reader are overhearing this entire conversation.) These thieves may have worked for the notorious John Murrell, whose gangs terrorized the inhabitants and travelers of the Mississippi River area for a decade or more. According to Lee Sandlin's exciting history *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*, as well as Chapter XXIX of *Life on the Mississippi* ("A Few Specimen Bricks"), Murrell (Twain spells it Murel) was the premiere criminal of



his age (he thrived in the early part of the nineteenth century, dying in 1844)—a master of disguise, a horse thief, bank robber, and head of the very strange Mystic Clan, which might be considered a union of criminals along the river, numbering over a thousand men at one point.

Murrell's worst crime was “stealing” slaves. He would convince a man working under slavery to escape (with his help) and then be sold to another white man, with the slave and the bandit splitting the proceeds later . . . when they help the slave escape again. Usually, the process would then repeat, until Murrell would grow tired of this or felt the act had worn thin, and then he murdered the slave and dumped his body in the river. Comparing him to Jesse James, the most famous criminal in all the “cheap histories,” Twain noted, in *Life on the Mississippi*, that “Murel was his equal in boldness; in pluck; in rapacity; in cruelty, brutality, heartlessness, treachery, and in general and comprehensive vileness and shamelessness; and very much his superior in some larger aspects.”

Huck and Jim escape the would-be killers, but once again the river offers up its own share of dangers. Much has been written about how the Mississippi is a place of refuge for Huck, but in the novel we see many instances of trouble, such as a thick and terrifying fog that separates the two momentarily and worse—for Jim—makes them drift right by Cairo, Illinois, the point at which Jim believes he'll find his freedom. Figuring that the shoreline's too treacherous (both in terms of it being too overgrown but also now they're between Missouri and Kentucky, both slave states), they decide to rest and then make the arduous trip upstream in their canoe. But where the river gave them the raft, it now takes the canoe as a delayed payment—it's gone when they wake from an afternoon nap. At night, floating down the river on their raft, they go searching for other rafts that might have a canoe to sell, when, in one of *Huckleberry Finn*'s most alarming scenes, a steamboat paddles directly into their path.

We could hear her pounding along, but we didn't see her good till she was close. She aimed right for us. Often they do that and try to see how close they can come without touching; sometimes the wheel bites off a sweep, and then the pilot sticks his head out and laughs, and thinks he's mighty smart. Well, here she comes, and we said she was going to try and shave us; but she didn't seem to be sheering off a bit. She was a big one, and she was coming in a hurry, too, looking like a black cloud with rows of glow-worms around it; but all of a sudden she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us. There was a yell at us, and a jingling of bells to stop the engines, a pow-wow of cussing, and whistling of steam—and as Jim went overboard on one side and I on the other, she comes smashing straight through the raft.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter XVI

The role of this steamboat is in stark contrast to that of the majestic, even noble steamboats in *Life on the Mississippi*—but it is more realistic, in that it shows the dark possibilities of the boat. The crash forces Huck to the shore, momentarily believing that Jim is dead, and into the maw of the violent feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons. The University of California Press edition of *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that the battles here take place at a bend in the river right on the Tennessee and Kentucky borders and were based on a genuine feud between the families Darnell and Watson.

Huck is taken in by the friendly Grangerfords and becomes fast friends with the boy, Buck (whose name is just one letter removed from our hero.) The family puts up a delicious dinner spread of “cold corn-pone, cold corn-beef, butter and butter-milk—that is what they had for me down there, and there ain't nothing better than ever I've come across yet” and even lets the boy smoke. It seems almost as if this was a



An illustration of one of the immense rafts Twain wrote about in *Huckleberry Finn* and other works. Dubuque, by Henry Lewis. William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 32



Many types of watercraft traveled up and down the Mississippi before and during the steamboat era. This covered raft might have held dry goods. Warsaw, by Henry Lewis. William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 51

society that could accept our hero with all his faults. Everything seems wonderful, until the boys encounter a rival Shepherdson on a horse in the woods. Narrowly escaping death, the boys flee for the Grangerford home, where Huck learns about the awful feud.

Soon as I could get Buck down by the corncribs under the trees by ourselves, I says:

"Did you want to kill him, Buck?"

"Well, I bet I did."

"What did he ever do to you?"

"Him? He never done nothing to me."

"Well, then, what did you want to kill him for?"

"Why nothing—only it's on account of the feud."

"What's a feud?"

"Why, where was you raised? Don't you know what a feud is?"

"Never heard of it before—tell me about it."

"Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the *cousins* chip in—and by-and-by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time."

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,  
Chapter XVIII

Naturally, this is an alarming situation, made even more acute when Miss Sophia, a Grangerford, asks our hero to go to a local church and get a testament she left behind . . . and which has a message hidden inside from Harney Shepherdson, one of her family's many murderous rivals. The letter will deliver instructions





for a secret rendezvous that will unleash some of the worst violence in *Huckleberry Finn*.

I crept along down the river bank a piece, and found the two bodies laying in the edge of the water; and tugged at them till I got them ashore; then I covered up their faces, and got away as quick as I could. I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter XVIII*

Fortunately for Huck, the raft had only been damaged, not destroyed. Huck and Jim push off for the middle of the Mississippi, and our hero feels safe only when he's "two mile below there" and has a great supper out on the raft with Jim. Twain closed the chapter with perhaps the second most famous line from the book, "You feel mighty free and easy on a raft," before transitioning into the famous opening of Chapter XIX, considered one of the most beautiful passages in all of American literature.

Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. . . .

A little smoke couldn't be noticed, now, so we would take some fish off the lines, and cook up a hot breakfast. And afterwards we would watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along, and by-and-by lazy off to sleep. Wake up, by-and-by, and look to see what done it, and maybe see a steamboat, coughing along up stream, so far off towards the other side you couldn't tell nothing about her only whether she was stern-wheel or side-wheel; then for about an hour there wouldn't be nothing to hear nor nothing to see—just solid lonesomeness. Next you'd see a raft sliding by, away off yonder, and maybe

a galoot on it chopping, because they're most always doing it on a raft; you'd see the ax flash, and come down—you don't hear nothing; you see that ax go up again, and by the time it's above the man's head, then you hear the *k'chunk!*—it had took all that time to come over the water. So we would put in the day, lazing around, listening to the stillness. Once there was a thick fog, and the rafts and things that went by was beating tin pans so the steamboats wouldn't run over them. A scow or raft went by so close we could hear them talking and cussing and laughing—heard them plain; but we couldn't see no sign of them; it made you feel crawly, it was like spirits carrying on that way in the air. Jim said he believed it was spirits; but I says:

"No, spirits wouldn't say, 'dern the dern fog.'"

Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit the pipes, and dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things—we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us—the new clothes Buck's folks made for me was too good to be comfortable, and besides I didn't go much on clothes, nohow.

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window—and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live life on a raft.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter XIX*

But the bliss of living on the Mississippi is short-lived, as the duke and king emerge from the woods. These two frauds are being chased by hounds for the various swindles they've been perpetrating on a small town by the river. Huck and Jim allow these men on board, and instantly

Bird's-Eye View of Cairo, Illinois



Mid-twentieth-century postcard view of Cairo, Illinois, when the town was much larger than it had been during the period in which Huckleberry Finn was set.  
In the novel, Jim and Huck are aiming for Cairo, but they drift past it in the fog. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

these two lay claim to the raft. They make our heroes their subjects, who have to wait on these thieves hand and foot.

For the most part, the novel then takes the reader off the river and into various awful towns, to meet the worst of people. Finally, Huck and Jim are separated when the king sells Jim to the Phelps family of Arkansas. Huck tries to think of a way to help his friend escape before weighing the moral implications of stealing him away or warning Miss Watson.

I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knewed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter XXXI*

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Huck and Tom fishing in Chapter XL of *Huckleberry Finn*.

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Huck's tearing up the letter to Miss Watson might be the most studied moment in all of American literature. Huckleberry Finn's actions here are spiritually, socially, and morally remarkable—he truly *believes* that hell exists, knows what is done to abolitionists and people who help runaway slaves, and yet, in his heart, he also knows that his love for Jim transcends the evil of his community. This boy is willing to burn in hell for eternity and face the wrath of his friends and family for Jim. As Hearn observed, "in vowing to help a slave escape, Huck denies his people, his country,



ABOVE: Jim in despair, thinking Huck is lost, in Chapter XV of *Huckleberry Finn*.

BETWEEN: Huck, Jim, and a doctor tending Tom's bullet wound in the 1920 film adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

and his God." Writers as diverse as Robert Louis Stevenson, T. S. Eliot, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison, among many others, have admired this moment and argued over its significance in literature for over a century.

From this point, *Huckleberry Finn* moves farther inland, to the Phelps farm, for a very strange and almost ridiculously coincidental meeting with Tom Sawyer. Huck wants to help Jim escape from the Phelps (who turn out to be relatives of Tom's), but Tom, as usual, seeks adventure, and makes a game of this harrowing situation. We do not return to the river or to the often melancholy tone of the beginning of the book until the very end, when Tom, Huck, and Jim flee to the raft, only to discover that Tom has been shot in the leg during their escape. Upon this discovery, Jim demands they turn the raft to shore to find a doctor, whom Jim will assist in helping remove the bullet. Only at the very end do we discover that Miss Watson has actually died, freeing her slaves in her will, including Jim. This rather sugary ending is broken only once, subtly, in the very last paragraph, when Huck admits that he might "light out for the Territory" to escape the punishing civilization of his Aunt Sally.

### The river in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the Mississippi is a passage to freedom. But in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain's 1894 novel, the river provides a one-way ticket to the worst plantations in the Deep South. Being sold "down the river" was one of the worst things imaginable for a person suffering under slavery, so awful that even the white children of Hannibal—who, for the most part, had been well trained to accept slavery as a kind, benevolent, and even holy institution (as preached in the town's churches)—found it abysmal. This fear, and the understanding that slavery was a penetrating evil for everyone involved, became more and more prevalent in Twain's consciousness. And so, because *Huckleberry Finn* was also ostensibly a children's book, or at the very least an adult



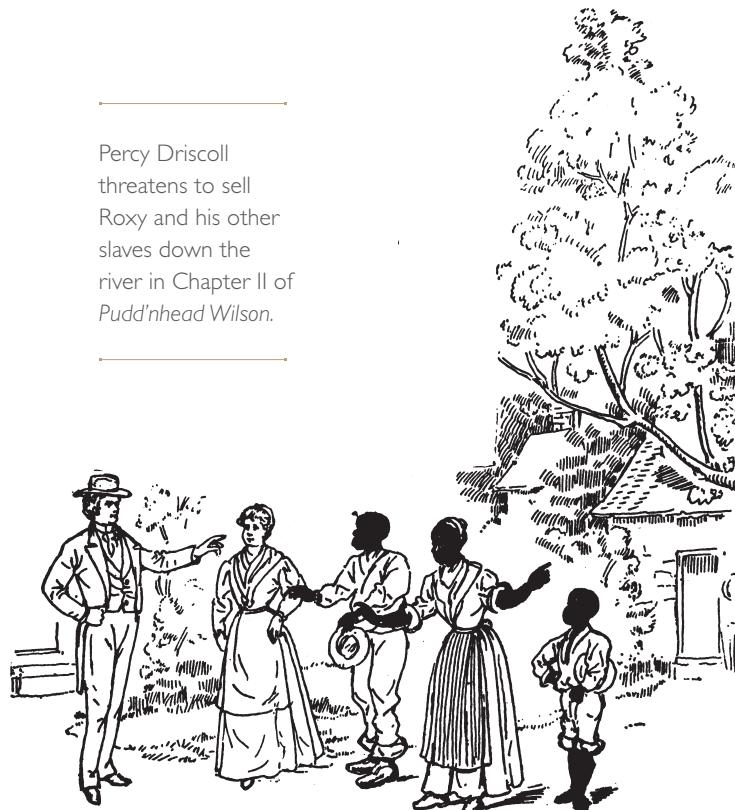
sequel to what is definitely literature for children, he used *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to make his points about slavery direct and to the point. It was, perhaps, an opportunity to exorcise the demons he'd carried with him since he was a boy.

I vividly remember seeing a dozen black men and women chained to each other, once, and lying in a group on the pavement, awaiting shipment to the southern slave market. Those were the saddest faces I ever saw. Chained slaves could not have been a common sight, or this picture would not have taken so strong and lasting a hold upon me.

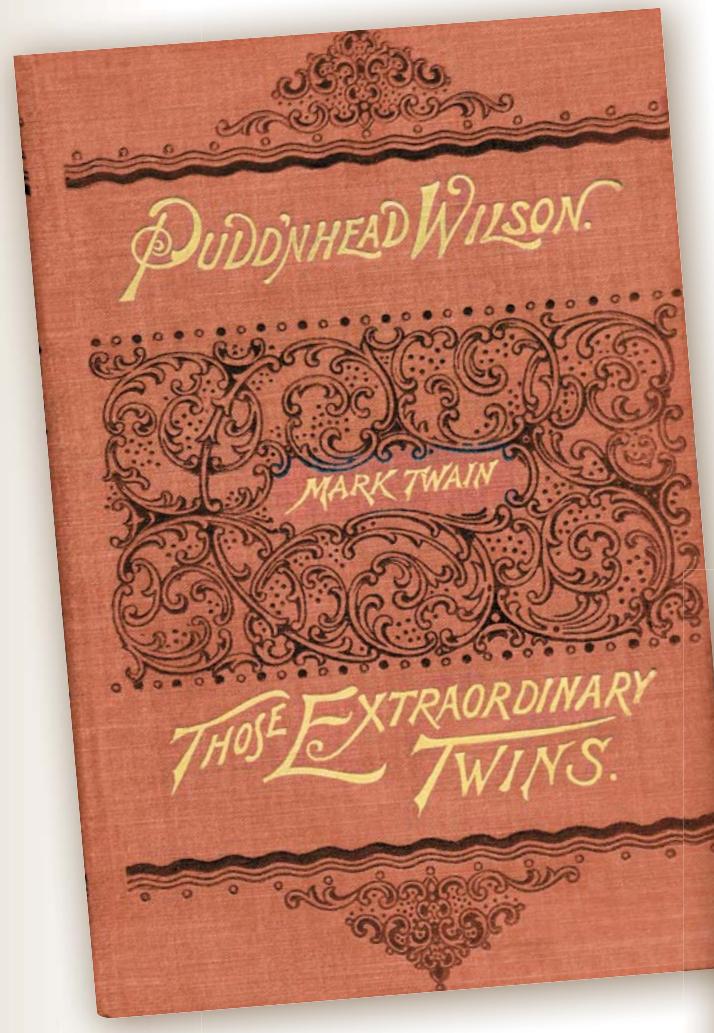
— “Jane Lampton Clemens”

The eponymous *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a minor character in a strange mystery that involves fingerprinting, identical Italian twins, duels, and children switched at birth, but its driving force is the fear of being sold down the river. Here, a slave woman named Roxana, who is one-sixteenth black and appears to be white, has a child at roughly the same time as her owner, Percy Driscoll. One day, Driscoll discovers that some money has been stolen by one or more of his slaves, and he threatens to sell the whole group down the river. Roxana, or Roxy (as she is called throughout the book) is terrified—even when the culprits confess, and are then sold (but not down the river), her terror of being sent downriver is so acute that she decides to commit suicide. Pausing on her way out the door to throw herself in the river, Roxy notices the similarity between the two babies, and decides instead to switch them. So she dresses Valet de Chambre (or Chambers), who is her child, in the finery of a white baby, while Driscoll's boy, Thomas à Becket, gets put in rags. And now her child—who will forever be known as Tom—will never get sold down the river. No one sells white people down the river.

Percy Driscoll threatens to sell Roxy and his other slaves down the river in Chapter II of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.



Over time, Roxy earns her freedom. She “retires” to work on a steamboat, traveling up and down the river in what must have seemed incredible splendor and freedom. One can only imagine how Roxy must have felt, after the oppression of slavery—unable to go anywhere without permission, whipped or beaten for any transgression—to be her own person, paid for her work, able to come and go at her leisure, working on a luxurious steamboat. Here was a way for a free former slave—especially an attractive woman who looks to anyone as if she's white—to earn a living, and one that was especially sophisticated.



ABOVE: First American edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen

RIGHT: Frontispiece to "Those Extraordinary Twins," which was included in the first American edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

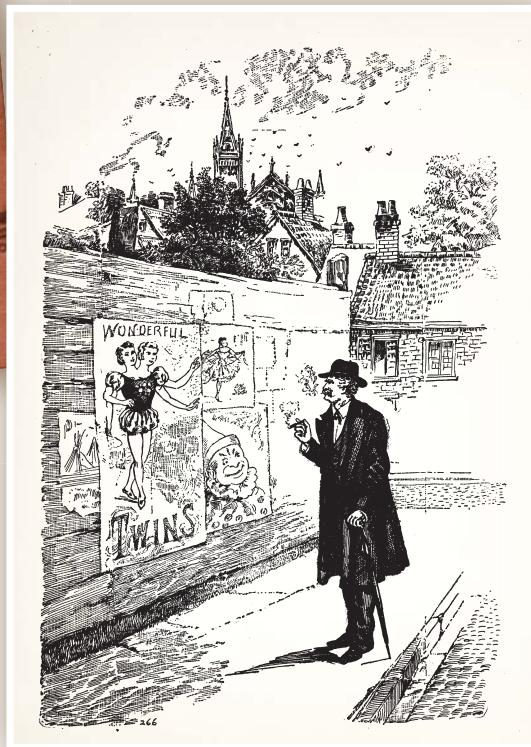
At the time she was set free and went away chambermaiding, she was thirty-five. She got a berth as second chambermaid on a Cincinnati boat in the New Orleans trade, the *Grand Mogul*. A couple of trips made her wonted and easy-going at the work, and infatuated her with the stir and adventure and independence of the steamboat life. Then she was promoted and became head chambermaid. She was a favourite with the officers, and exceedingly proud of their joking and friendly ways with her.

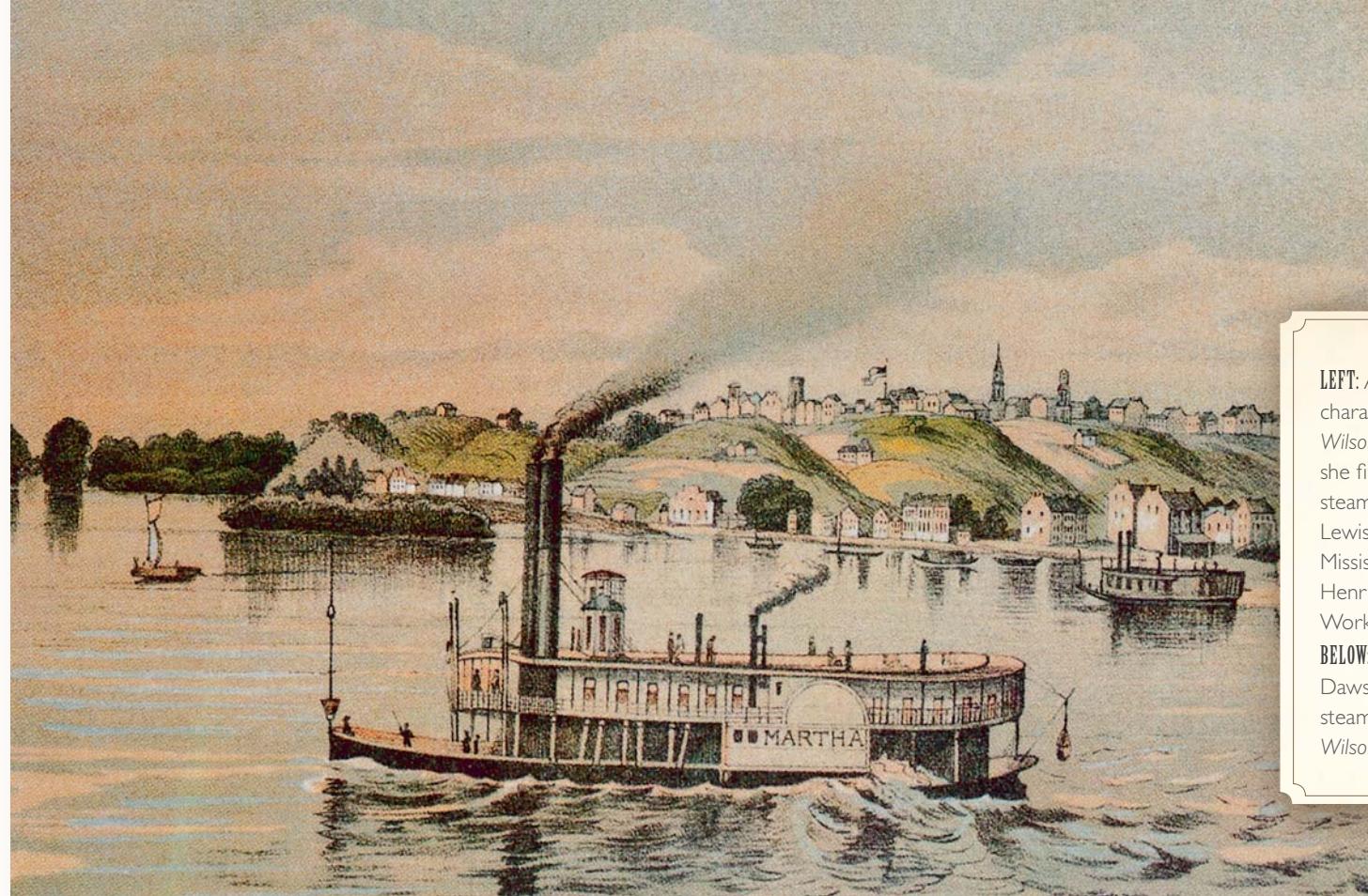
—*Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Chapter VIII

This joy lasts for eight years, when rheumatism cuts short her career in her mid-forties, and a bank's financial shenanigans wipe out the savings Roxy had squirreled away from her job on the *Mogul*. Her idea is to get a small stipend from Tom—her actual son, though he does not yet know that they are related—every month.

In her mind it's something he would willingly distribute, as it was she who cared for him his whole childhood. Instead, Tom has been spoiled and is a vicious, lazy human being—in debt, cruel to everyone, lacking even a trace of pity. He refuses Roxy, but she reveals his dark secret—he is her son, a black man, and poor Chambers, the slave, is actually white.

Through a series of pretty crazy events (involving those fingerprints, the twins, and a murder) Tom is revealed not only to be a killer, but his true racial identity is known. And no one is happy. "The real heir"—Chambers, the white slave—"suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation." He can't read, and his manners and dialogue are that of an undereducated black man raised in slavery. "Money and fine clothes





**LEFT:** After Roxy, the main character in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, earns her freedom, she finds work on a steamboat. *Quincy*, by Henry Lewis. William Petersen, Mississippi River Panorama: Henry Lewis Great National Work, Plate No. 52

**BELOW:** Roxy returning to Dawson's Landing on a steamboat. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

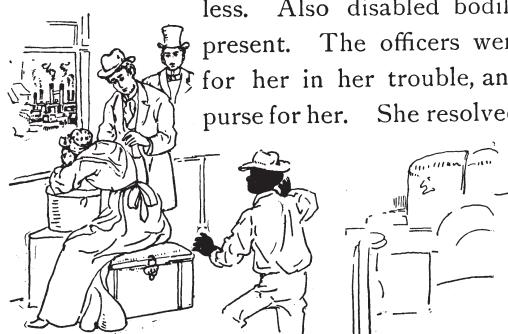
could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only made them the more glaring and more pathetic." Chambers does not enjoy sitting in the white pew, or sitting at the dinner table, feeling "at peace nowhere but the kitchen." Roxy is heartbroken, for her son is a murderer and evil. (Though hopefully Chambers, whom she raised as her own, will support her in her dotage.) But Tom, spoiled as a child, grown up to be as odious as an antagonist could be, suffers an ironic justice. Wracked by incredible debts that will not be satisfied by a life spent in prison, a judge sympathizes with his creditors, and brings Tom's case to the Governor. "As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river."





During eight years she served three parts of the year on that boat, and the winters on a Vicksburg packet. But now for two months she had had rheumatism in her arms, and was obliged to let the wash-tub alone. So she resigned. But she was well fixed—rich, as she would have described it; for she had lived a steady life, and had banked four dollars every month in New Orleans as a provision for her old age. She said in the start that she had "put shoes on one bar' footed nigger to tromple on her with," and that one mistake like that was enough; she would be independent of the human race thenceforth forevermore if hard work and economy could accomplish it. When the boat touched the levee at New Orleans she bade good-by to her comrades on the *Grand Mogul* and moved her kit ashore.

But she was back in an hour. The bank had gone to smash and carried her four hundred dollars with it. She was a pauper, and homeless. Also disabled bodily, at least for the present. The officers were full of sympathy for her in her trouble, and made up a little purse for her. She resolved to go to her birth-

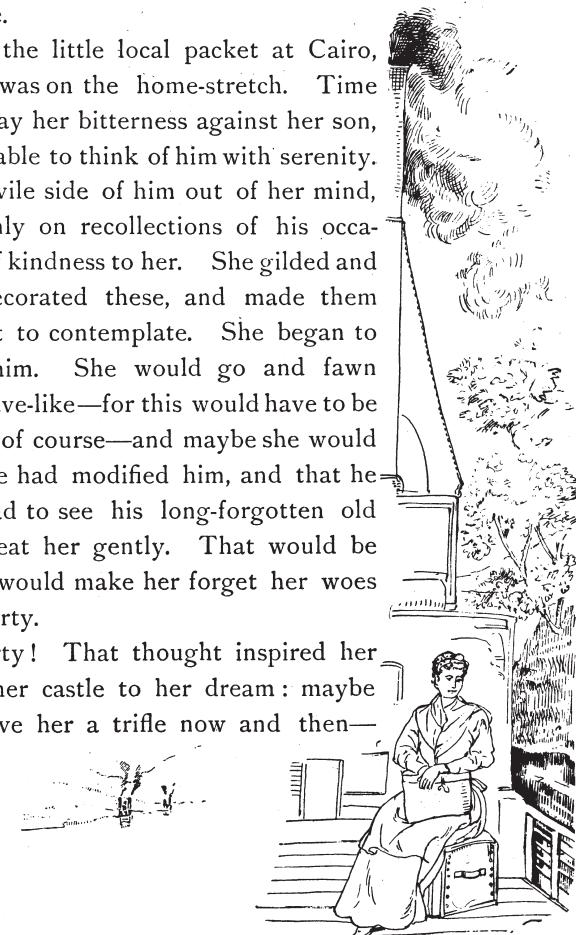


The margins of the first edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* contained hundreds of line drawings by F. M. Senior and C. H. Warren.

place; she had friends there among the negroes, and the unfortunate always help the unfortunate, she was well aware of that; those lowly comrades of her youth would not let her starve.

She took the little local packet at Cairo, and now she was on the home-stretch. Time had worn away her bitterness against her son, and she was able to think of him with serenity. She put the vile side of him out of her mind, and dwelt only on recollections of his occasional acts of kindness to her. She gilded and otherwise decorated these, and made them very pleasant to contemplate. She began to long to see him. She would go and fawn upon him, slave-like—for this would have to be her attitude, of course—and maybe she would find that time had modified him, and that he would be glad to see his long-forgotten old nurse and treat her gently. That would be lovely; that would make her forget her woes and her poverty.

Her poverty! That thought inspired her to add another castle to her dream: maybe he would give her a trifle now and then—



For Mark Twain, the Mississippi River was both a childhood paradise and a graveyard; a bringer of joy and destruction; a power beyond human control but used for human ends, good and bad. © Hemis / Alamy



When we consider the river in these four books—*Life on the Mississippi*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—it is apparent that the river Mark Twain experienced must have affected him profoundly with almost every encounter. These books capture the river as Twain knew it: from *Tom Sawyer*, we see it as his playground, a paradise where he and his friends could cavort at their leisure, carefree, a boy's life of almost limitless possibility and joy, the terrors (of Injun Joe and thunderstorms) merely the scares of a good ghost story. Within the first half of *Life on the Mississippi*, the river retains its shape as a place of almost limitless joy—Twain said on many occasions that being a steamboat pilot was

the best job he'd ever had, which is saying a lot considering what he accomplished as a writer. Piloting a steamboat was almost like a game, a very difficult and exacting game, but pure fun nonetheless.

But Twain was not blind to the darkness that streamed to the river like the waters of the Mississippi Valley—*Huckleberry Finn*, the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* all speak to the river's dark heart. And through the characters of Huckleberry Finn, Jim, and Roxy, we find an author who refused to turn away from his country's ugliest and most damnable moments and as a result produced works that resonated in his time and for a century after.



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## CHAPTER 6

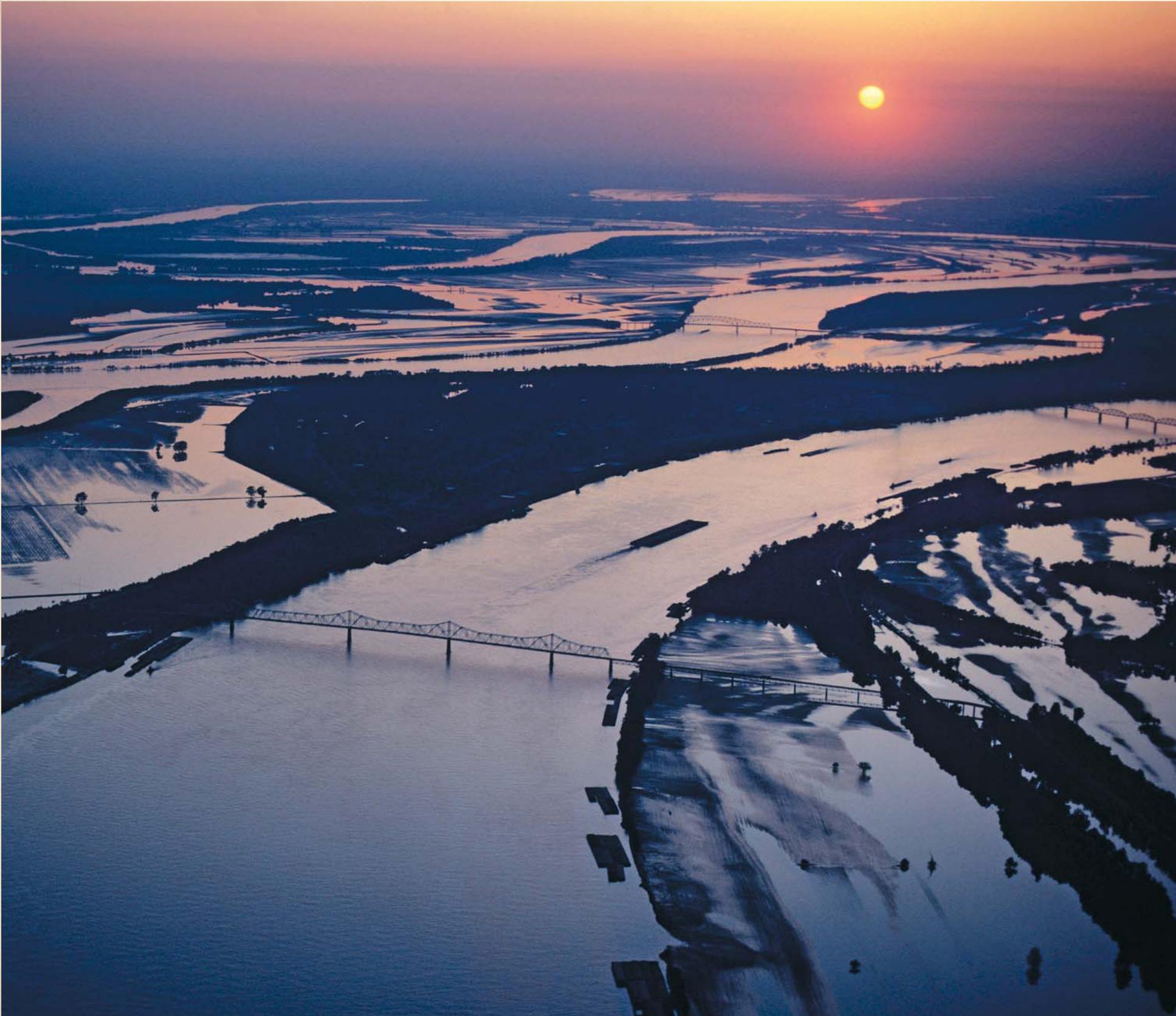
# TWAIN'S LEGACY and the RIVER SINCE HIS TIME

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Mark Twain at Quarry Farm during his last visit to Elmira in 1903.  
Library of Congress

OPPOSITE: Sunset over the Cairo, Illinois, at the confluence of the Mississippi River and the Ohio River.  
© Nathan Benn / Alamy





The man they called Ed said the muddy Mississippi water was wholesomer to drink than the clear water of the Ohio; he said if you let a pint of this yaller Mississippi water settle, you would have about a half to three quarters of an inch of mud in the bottom, according to the stage of the river, and then it war n't no better then Ohio water—what you wanted to do was to keep it stirred up—and when the river was low, keep mud on hand to put in and thicken the water up the way it ought to be.

The Child of Calamity said that was so; he said there was nutritiousness in the mud, and a man that drunk Mississippi water could grow corn in his stomach if he wanted to. He says:

"You look at the graveyards; that tells the tale. Trees won't grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a Sent Louis graveyard they grow upwards of eight hundred foot high. It's all on account of the water the people drunk before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don't richen a soil any."

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter III*

**T**wain's river writings remain the works by which he is best known, capturing the Mississippi of his time and keeping it in our consciousness forever. But the river itself has changed, and changed dramatically, since he last visited Hannibal in 1902. In fact, the meandering river has all but vanished since Twain's death. The twentieth century saw the river tamed, to a degree, with a vast system of levees that were supposed to keep the river from snaking across the floodplains; experts disagree (and disagree with vehemence) over the success of this giant civil engineering enterprise. Today, the river is studded with dams and locks, crisscrossed with bridges, and has a dredged channel—at least nine feet deep—running through it like the spine of a rattlesnake. The Mississippi River Commission was created in 1879 with the hopes of investigating solutions for flooding and erosion, and ultimately built almost 1,500 miles of levees. But it was not until the disastrous flood

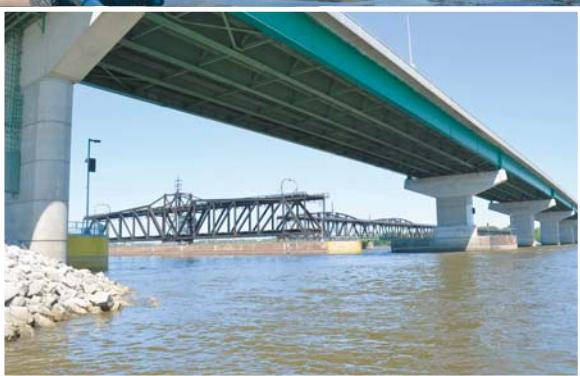
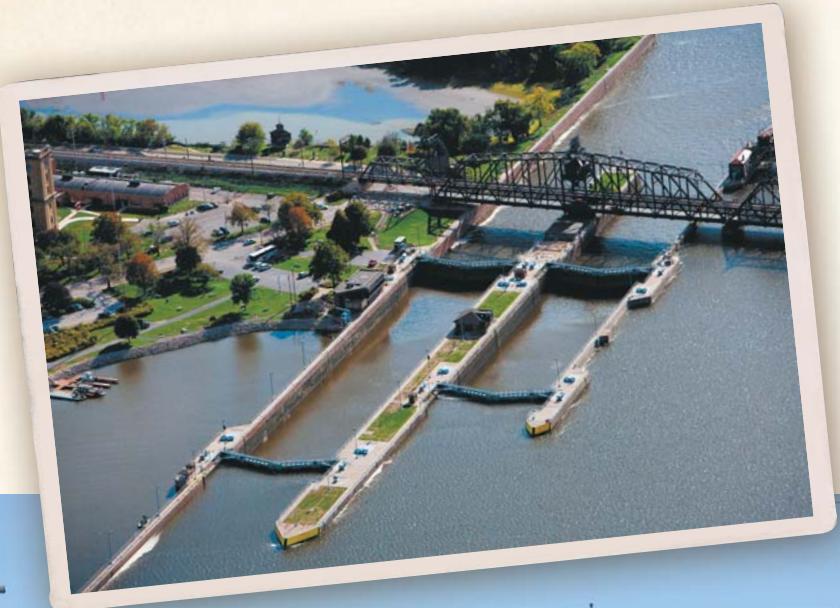
of 1927, and the subsequent Flood Control Act of 1928, that the river was "controlled" by almost 3,500 miles of levees, weirs, spillways, and other controls. The success of these controls is certainly debatable—many experts believe the 1973 Mississippi River flood was a direct result of the government's attempt at keeping the river in line.

"The mighty bridge, stretching along over our heads, had done its share in the slaughter and the spoilation," Twain wrote in *Life on the Mississippi*, lamenting the railroad, which put the nail in the coffin of the steamboat trade. He would be astounded today to find more than two hundred bridges crossing his favorite waters—from pedestrian and bike bridges to a few dozen railroad bridges, but mostly automobile crossings, ferrying in excess of a million cars and trucks over the river.

Sadly, the Mississippi's water is also vastly different. Twain wrote that the river was so thick with sediment it needed "some other water to wash it with" in order to drink; and today the water is even thicker. The percentage of sediment by volume has doubled since the 1930s due to the loss of wetlands, increased farming, and the expansion of cities (according to a 2013 National Park Service report). Nitrate from fertilizer runoff from farms and cities has damaged the water and reduced the amount of oxygen available to aquatic life. The excess nitrate has become so pervasive that it has created an almost seven-thousand-square-mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. The nitrate fuels massive algae growth, and when that algae dies off, it robs the water of oxygen, and suffocates whatever marine life lives within its borders.

The tug of war over control of the Mississippi River—over managing pollutants, flood control, wildlife, and even over the spread of flying Asian carp—which is said to have invaded the fabled river—would have certainly been fodder for Mark Twain's often acidic pen.

On the positive side, the river has seen the successful return of many of the native species of flora and fauna that were once lost to



**TOP LEFT:** Lock and Dam No. 15 on the Mississippi River, at Davenport, Iowa, and Rock Island, Illinois. © Aerial Archives / Alamy

**TOP RIGHT:** More than 100 years after Twain's time, it is barges instead of steamboats that transport goods up and down the Mississippi. Despite their massive size, barges are still at the mercy of the river and can be stalled by flood or drought. © DOD Photo / Alamy

**MIDDLE LEFT:** Lock at Keokuk, Iowa. All the locks and dams on the Mississippi are above the river's confluence with the Ohio River. R. Kent Rasmussen

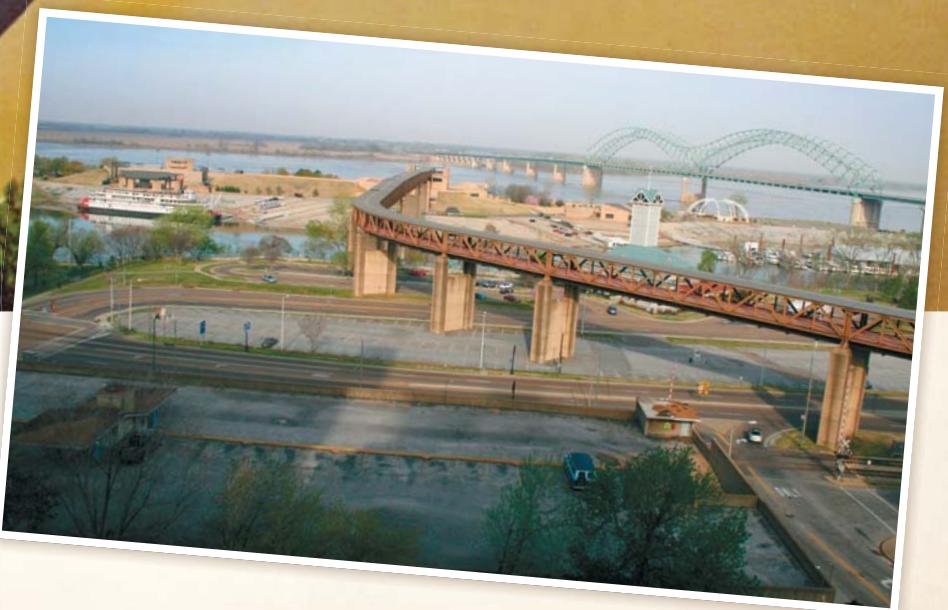
**MIDDLE RIGHT:** Gate in the massive levee wall that protects Saint Louis against floodwater. R. Kent Rasmussen

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Train and vehicle bridges connecting Keokuk, Iowa, with Illinois. R. Kent Rasmussen



**ABOVE:** Mid-twentieth-century postcard view of the famous "triple bridges" connecting Memphis (above) with Arkansas.  
*Collection of R. Kent Rasmussen*

**RIGHT:** Twain would not recognize much of the river today, including the built-up area of Mud Island in Memphis, Tennessee, with its highways and parking lots and the Hernando DeSoto bridge. © Tony Charnock / Alamy.





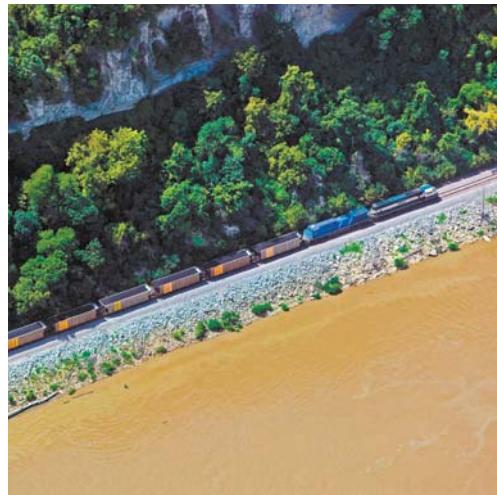
Despite efforts to tame and contain the Mississippi River, it periodically spills over its banks, with devastating consequences. Images from past floods (clockwise from upper left): Mississippi refugees in 1897 (*Library of Congress*); a flooded road near Cairo, Illinois, in 1927 (© Everett Collection Inc / Alamy); a flooded church in New Madrid, Missouri, in 1912 (*Library of Congress*); and people stranded by the floods of 1912 (© Everett Collection Inc / Alamy).





**ABOVE:** The Mississippi River carries fertilizer runoff to the Gulf of Mexico, where the chemicals have created a dead zone that was the size of Connecticut in 2013 (roughly 5,800 square miles).  
© NASA/Landsat/Phil Degginger / Alamy

**RIGHT:** Near the Missouri-Illinois border, a railroad—the nail in the coffin for steamboats—runs along the bank of the Mississippi River.  
© Aerial Archives / Alamy



pollution—perhaps most notably the hugely successful return of bald eagles. The river continues to attract tourists and inspire visitors, and many cities have rebuilt waterfronts that were once in decline.

### The last work of Samuel L. Clemens

Mark Twain's final years were made up of various tinkерings, a few novels started and never completed, essays and letters, but mostly with dictating the bulk of his autobiography. He had fallen in love with dictation as a method of writing. "Start it at no particular time in your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment," Twain later wrote, reflecting on the decidedly nonlinear method. "It's the first time in history such a method has been discovered." Stenographer Josephine Hobby and Twain's chosen biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, were the people with whom he felt most comfortable in confiding the vicissitudes of his incredible life.

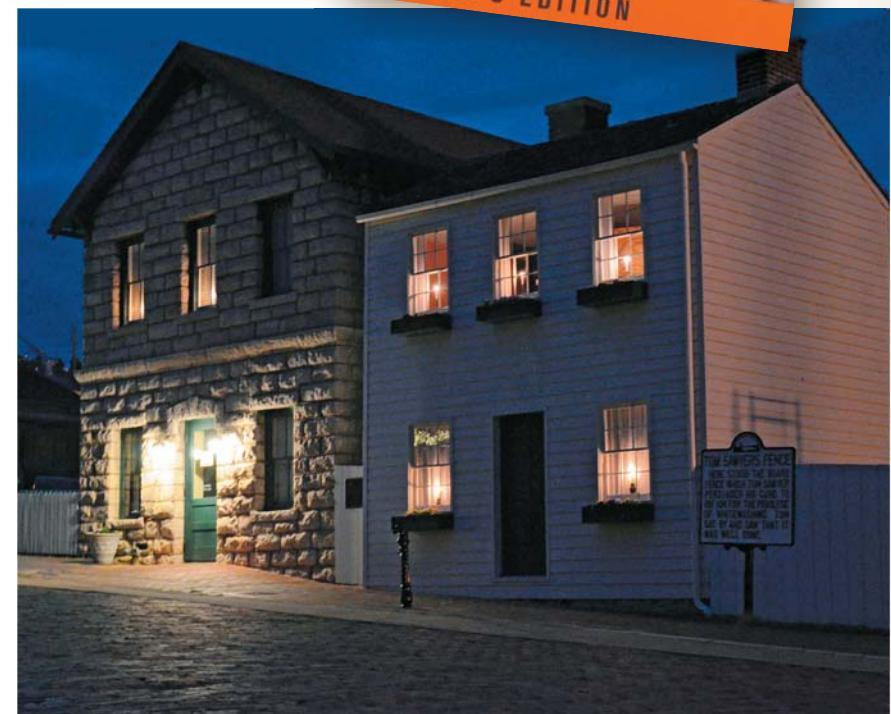
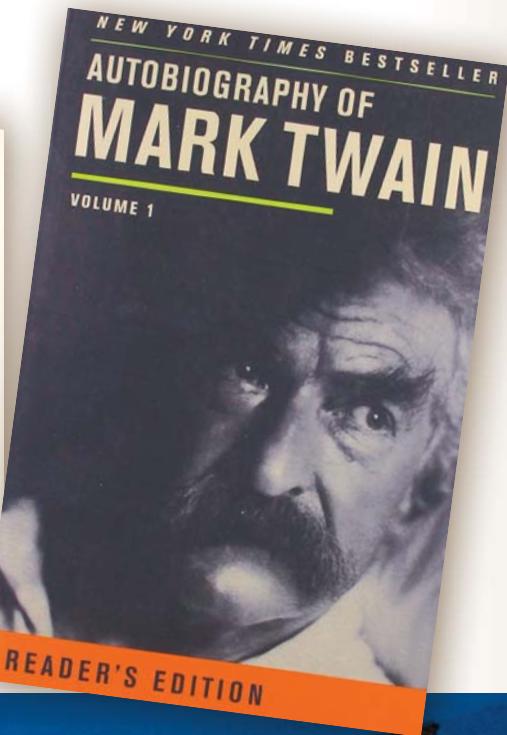
Twain began this process in 1904, often "writing" in his silk robe, or from his prodigious bed, smoking all the while. His intent varied depending on his moods—at times he believed the publication of his autobiography, which he felt contained controversial passages, should be delayed for anywhere between one to five centuries after his passing. "To-morrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs & assigns burned alive if they venture to print it this side of A.D. 2006," he wrote in a letter. But the allure of money was too great, and he first published some chapters in the *North American Review* in 1906, four years before Halley's Comet flew by to claim its favorite son. After Twain's passing, in 1910, the three most prominent editions were released in the ensuing years; the first, edited by his friend Paine, was the most innocuous; the second, edited by Bernard DeVoto, had some of the more wicked pieces intact; and then came a chronological version edited by Charles Neider.

A century later, in the fall of 2010, the initial volume of the University of California Press edition of the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* was released. Few people, least of all the publishers, expected it to have the immediate popular impact that it did. The response to this iteration of his memoirs was meteoric—or perhaps cometlike is a more apt description. The reading public was galvanized, eager for some “new” Twain, and rushed to bookstores, who sold out the limited first run and prompting many more printings. This scholarly tome, with its introduction of almost sixty pages and nearly two hundred pages of notes, rocketed to the top of the Amazon and *New York Times* bestseller lists, was lampooned by the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, and was even referenced in a *Saturday Night Live* skit. According to Benjamin Griffin, one of the *Autobiography*’s editors, the first volume of the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* is most popular book the University of California Press, with a history of more than a hundred years, has ever published. In the first three years, it sold more than half a million copies.

Mark Twain had a sense that his books would continue to be read and enjoyed well past his own time on Earth. The fact that the *Autobiography* contained secret information never before released, coupled with the enduring popularity of Twain’s books, drove the new *Autobiography*’s sales. Indeed, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* continually sell well and are printed again and again in new editions by various publishing houses (as they’re all in the public domain, these companies don’t have to pay for the right to publish, say, *Life on the Mississippi* or any of his other works). And people don’t just want to read his books; they’re also eager to visit his home and even see the river and its environs as he did. Hannibal has changed, of course, in the more than 100 years since his last visit, despite the fact that many in the town make a decent living trying to preserve it as it was when he was a boy. Hannibal has a thriving business in Mark Twain tourism, with the Mark Twain Boyhood Home

**RIGHT:** The first of the University of California Press’s projected three volumes of Twain’s complete autobiography sold nearly 300,000 copies its first year.

**BELOW:** Mark Twain’s restored boyhood home (at right), next to the former Mark Twain Museum.  
R. Kent Rasmussen



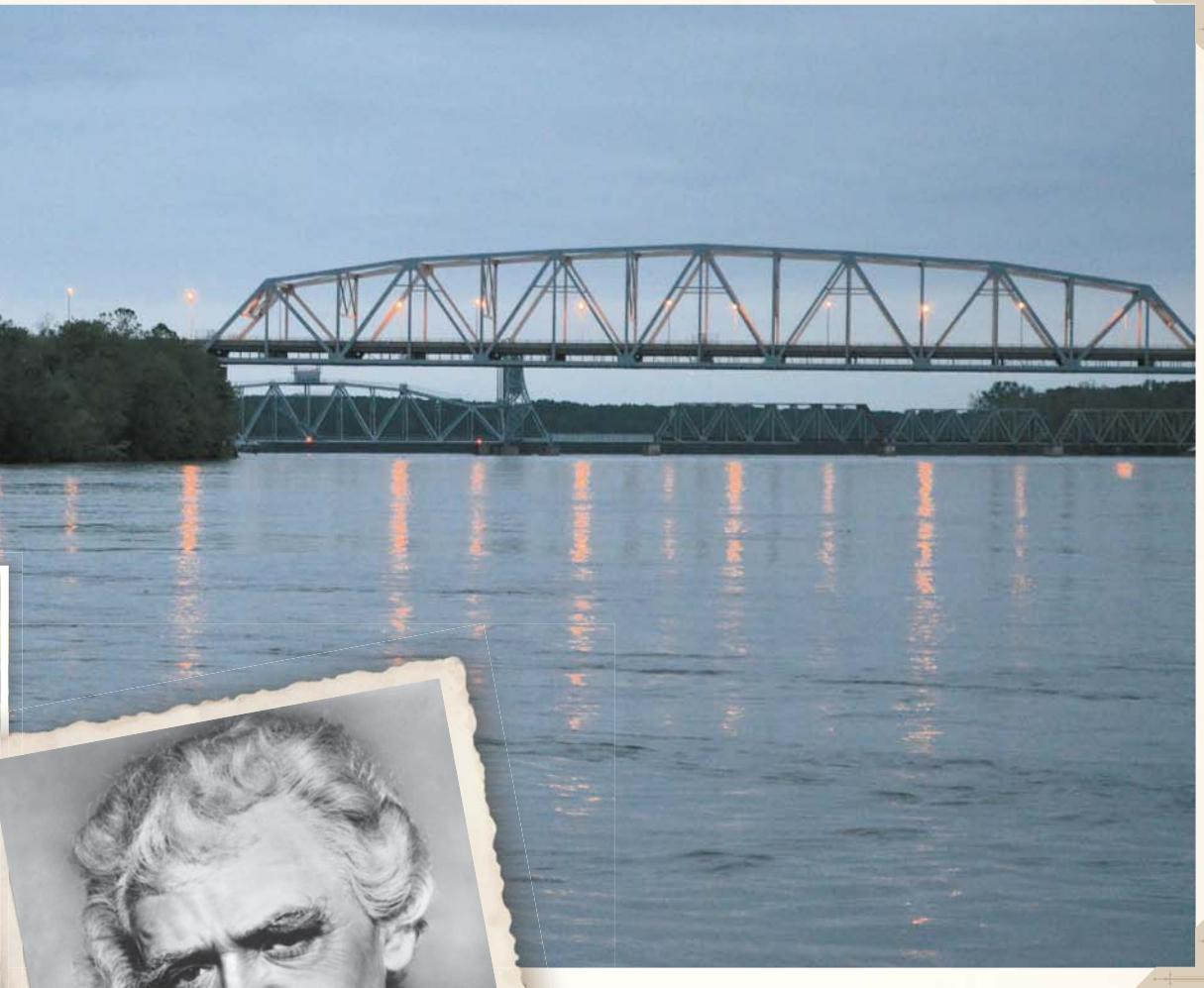
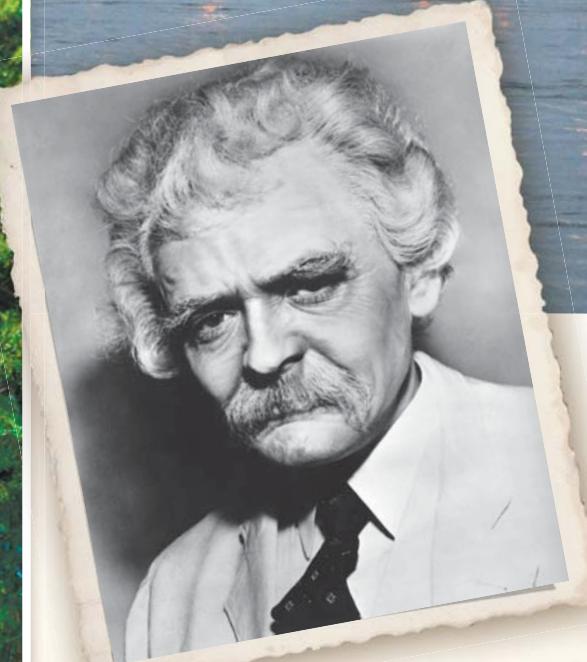
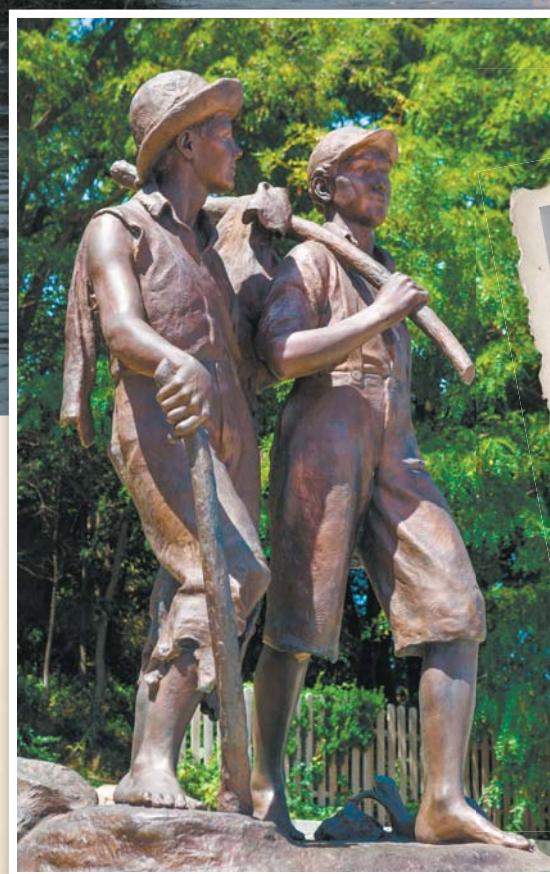


**TOP:** One of many Hannibal area businesses exploiting Mark Twain themes.  
R. Kent Rasmussen

**ABOVE:** Hannibal's modern *Mark Twain* excursion boat. R. Kent Rasmussen

**RIGHT:** Statue of Mark Twain as a steamboat pilot erected on Hannibal's riverfront in 2003. R. Kent Rasmussen





**ABOVE:** Mark Twain excursion boat at its high-water moorage, near the new Mark Twain Memorial Bridge, which opened in 2000. R. Kent Rasmussen

**FAR LEFT:** In 1926 Frederick Hibbard created this sculpture of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, which stands on Main Street in Hannibal, Missouri. © Ian Dagnall / Alamy

**LEFT:** Hal Holbrook made up as Mark Twain in 1960, six years after Holbrook began performing his one-man show. In 2014, Holbrook celebrated 60 years of being Mark Twain. © Everett Collection Historical / Alamy



and Museum, the Mark Twain Cave Complex just south of town, and the annual National Tom Sawyer Days, which includes jumping frog races and fence painting contests, thus proving that the boy hero of Twain's novel was so successful at making that chore seem like fun that it continues to fool kids for more than a century. In Hannibal, you can watch a local Twain impersonator throughout the summer months—no doubt inspired by Hal Holbrook, whose one-man show is now legendary. Holbrook, who has been performing as Mark Twain since 1954, has

memorized hours of Twain's writing. Considering Clemens used "Mark Twain" as his pseudonym from 1863 until his death in 1910 (forty-seven years), it could be (and has been) said that Hal Holbrook has been Mark Twain longer than Sam Clemens was.

Twain's work has been turned into movies, television shows, plays, and radio programs, and it has inspired generations of authors, including Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Kurt Vonnegut. It is a measure of his talent and his popularity that he was

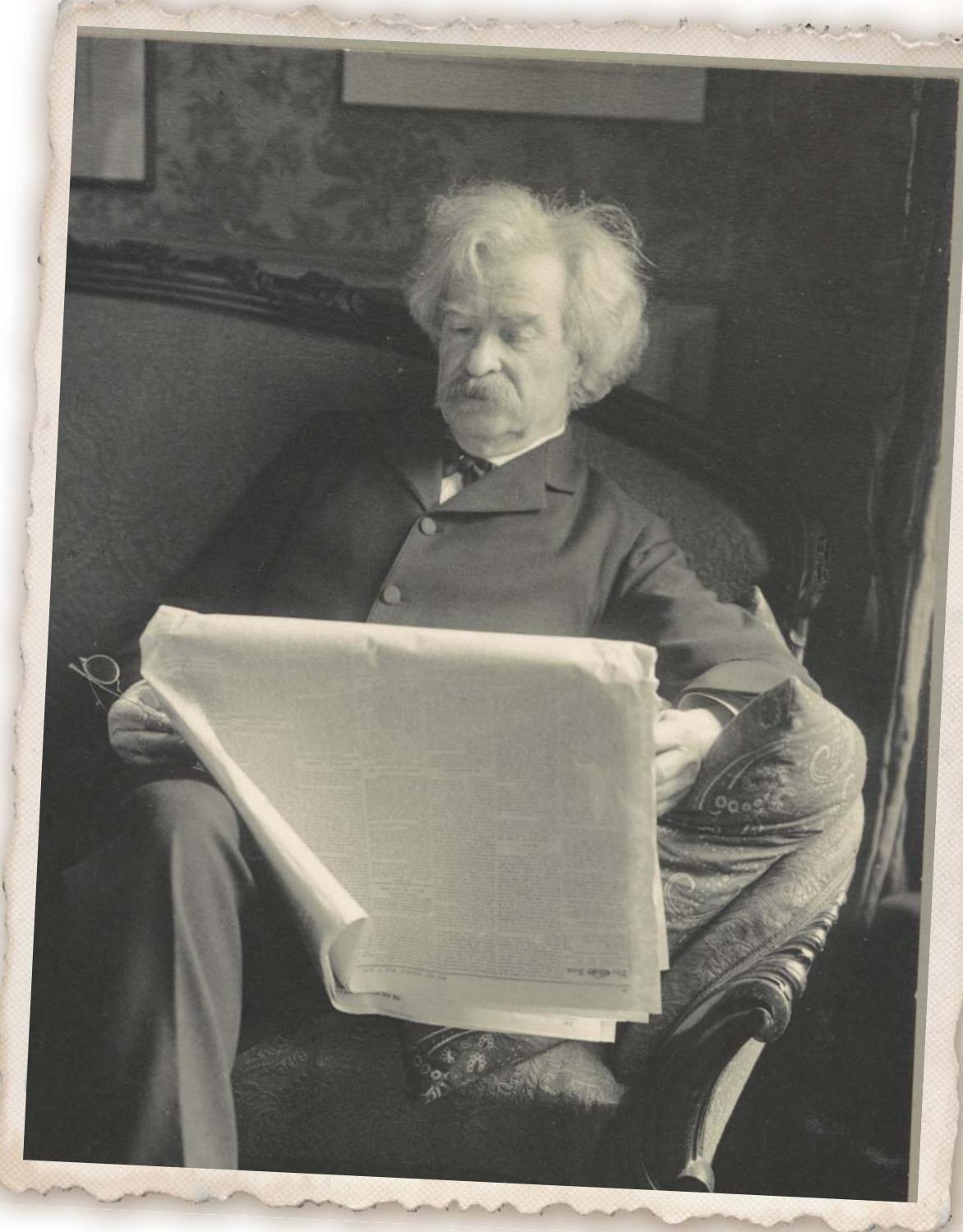
able to bring to life the Mississippi River, one of the defining landmarks of the continental United States. He brought the river into the imaginations and lives of people who lived thousands of miles from it and would never see it, and he continues to be part of the river's mystique, from Minneapolis to Saint Louis and all the way down to New Orleans. So powerful is *Huckleberry Finn* that it could be said that whomever gazes upon the Mississippi River—any time of the day or night—can only see it through the eyes of that boy floating on a raft through that slow, muddy water. “You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.”

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**LEFT:** Hannibal's Riverview Park lookout point, looking upriver, around the 1930s. *Library of Congress*

**RIGHT:** Mark Twain, seated, reading a newspaper. Photographed circa 1902 by Charles E. Bolles. *Library of Congress*

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What makes the Mississippi River belong to Mark Twain, more than any other writer, was his willingness to embrace its multitudes. He could carry the reader into a warm, sunlit childhood on its banks, or point to the graphic horror of a young boy murdered by a rival clan; examine both the steamboat trade and the slavery trade; and layer on sentiment while in the next sentence peel it away to reveal inner truths. By his own admission, Twain embraced the river romantically as a youth, but as he aged he grew more weary and cynical, and as he came to know the Mississippi intimately, he lost much of his innocence. "I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived," he wrote. "All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of that majestic river!" But his loss was our gain. Mark Twain's strength as a writer lay in his decision to share the profundity of Mississippi River life, to share both the beauty and the deep losses that he and others endured along the thousands of miles of river, from north to south and back again.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! I still keep in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance

the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal . . .

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: This sun means that we are going to have wind to-morrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling "boils" show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there . . .

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat.

—*Life on the Mississippi, Chapter IX*



Sunset over the Upper Mississippi. R. Kent Rasmussen

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# INDEX

174



A. T. Lacey (steamboat), 110  
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*  
caves and, 44  
“deaths” of the heroes, 134–138  
drowning and, 40  
inspiration for, 128–129  
“Jackson’s Island” in, 130–133  
Mississippi River in, 127–128, 130, 133–134, 157  
names in, 129–130  
African Americans, 33, 50–51, 68, 104, 143–144, 146, 151–152  
alligators, 108  
*Alta California* (San Francisco, CA), 94  
*The Annotated Huckleberry Finn* (Hearn), 128  
*Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 33, 37, 38, 42, 45, 49, 165  
  
Baton Rouge, LA, 17  
Bear Creek, 34  
Becky Thatcher House, 40  
Bixby, Horace, 66, 68, 71–72, 74–76, 78, 80, 83–84, 116  
Blankenship, Bence, 141, 143  
Blankenship, Tom, 38, 39, 128, 143  
boat types, 27–31  
Bowen, Will, 38, 66, 128  
Brower, Jacob V., 16  
Brown, pilot of *Pennsylvania*, 109–110, 114  
bullboats, 27–28  
  
canoes, 27–28  
Cavelier, René-Robert, 23  
caves, 43–46  
circuses, 50  
Civil War, 31, 84, 116  
Clemens, Henry, 108–110, 114–115  
Clemens, Jane Lampton, 38  
Clemens, John Marshall, 33, 35, 61  
Clemens, Orion, 94  
*Clermont* (steamboat), 30  
*Colonel Crossman* (steamboat), 68  
*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 44

Crescent City (steamboat), 68  
cutoffs, 20–21  
  
Delta, MS, 20  
de Soto, Hernando, 21–22, 22, 23  
de Tonti, Henri, 24  
DeVoto, Bernard, 164  
drowning, 40–42, 134  
“Dutchy” story, 41–42  
  
Ealer, George, 114  
*Enterprise* (steamboat), 30  
  
financial difficulties, 61, 94, 97  
Fisk, Harold, 20  
flatboats, 27, 28–29  
Flint, Timothy, 97  
Flood Control Act of 1928, 160  
flooding, 160, 163  
Florida, MO, 33–34  
Frazer, Anna Laura Hawkins, 40, 134  
Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, 143–144  
Fulton, Robert, 30  
  
*Geological Investigation of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River* (Fisk), 19, 20  
*The Gilded Age*, 37, 97  
Glasscock Island, 131  
*Gold Dust* (steamboat), 106, 108, 116  
  
Hannibal, MO  
caves of, 43–46, 45  
drowning danger and, 38, 40–42  
Mississippi river and, 34–35  
pictured, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 43, 118–119  
Twain’s 1882 return to, 116, 118–119  
Twain’s last visit, 160  
Twain’s legacy and, 165, 165, 166, 167, 168  
winters in, 42–43  
Hartford, CT, 94, 95, 97  
Hawkins, Laura, 40, 134  
Hearn, Michael Patrick, 128–129, 134  
Hemingway, Ernest, 51  
  
*A History and Geography of the Mississippi River* (Flint), 97  
Hobby, Josephine, 164  
Holbrook, Hal, 167, 168  
Howells, William Dean, 97  
*Huckleberry Finn*  
caves in, 44  
death and, 101, 115, 134–136  
“death” of the hero, 134–136, 140–141  
drowning in, 40, 134–136  
family feud in, 146, 148–149  
inspiration for, 128–129, 141, 143  
legacy of, 169  
Mississippi River in, 127–128, 133–134, 138–141, 143–146, 149, 157  
names in, 129–130  
rafts in, 28  
slavery and, 50–51, 140–141, 143–144, 151–152  
steamboats in, 146  
traveling shows in, 46  
Hunter, Louis C., 55–56, 59, 68, 108  
  
Injun Joe character, 45, 46  
*The Innocents Abroad*, 94  
  
“Jackson’s Island,” 130–133  
Joliet, Louis, 23–24  
  
keelboats, 27, 28  
Keokuk, OH, 55, 61, 62  
  
Lake Itasca, 15, 16, 16, 18  
Lake Winnibigoshish, 16  
Langdon, Olivia, 94, 95  
La Salle, Robert, 23–24, 24  
lecture tours, 49–50  
Levering, Clint, 42  
Lewis, John T., 51  
*Life on the Mississippi*  
composition of, 97, 100  
death of Henry Clemens and, 110, 114–115  
drowning and, 40–42  
on Hannibal, MO, 34

information about the river in, 15, 17, 21  
 on John Murrell, 145–146  
 rafts in, 28–29  
 the river in, 34, 40–42, 157  
 slaves and, 143  
 on steamboat piloting, 53, 64–65, 72, 75–76,  
 78–80, 83–84, 129  
 on steamboats, 31, 55–56, 63–64  
 steamboat trip to write, 105–106, 108, 116, 120,  
 123–124  
*Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* vs., 127  
 trip to St. Louis to write, 99–101, 103, 105  
 Louis XIV, 24  
 Lover's Leap (Hannibal), 41

Mackinaws, 28  
*Mark Twain* (steamboat), 108  
*Mark Twain: A Life* (Powers), 61  
 Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum, 166, 168  
 Mark Twain Cave Complex (Hannibal), 44, 168  
 Marquette, Jacques, 23, 23, 24  
 McDowell, Joseph Nash, 46  
 McDowell's Cave (Hannibal), 43  
 meander loops, 20  
 mesmerism, 49  
 Minneapolis, MN, 120, 122, 123, 124  
 minstrel shows, 50–51  
 Mississippi River  
 age of, 17  
 cutoffs, 20–21  
 headwaters, 17  
 meander loops, 20–21  
 nicknames of, 21  
 speed of, 18, 20  
 Twain legacy and, 169–170  
 twentieth century changes in, 160

Mississippi River Commission, 160  
 Moffett, William A., 68  
 Murrell, John, 145–146

Napoleon, AR, 24  
 Nash, Tom, 42–43  
 National Tom Sawyer Days, 168

Native American legends, 120  
Native Americans, 21–22  
Neider, Charles, 164  
New Orleans, LA, 18, 18, 91  
*New Orleans* (steamboat), 30

“Old Times on the Mississippi,” 53, 62, 72, 91  
100–101, 115, 127

Osgood, James, 99  
Ozawindib, 16

Paine, Albert Bigelow, 66, 164  
*Paul Jones* (steamboat), 62–66, 72  
*Pennsylvania* (steamboat), 108–110, 114

Phelps, Roswell, 99  
pirogues, 27, 27  
pollution, 160, 164  
Powers, Ron, 61, 66, 68, 114, 141  
*The Prince and the Pauper*, 99  
*Pudd’nhead Wilson*, 127, 143, 152–155, 157

Quarles, John A., 33

racism, 51. *See also* African Americans  
rafts, 27–29, 144–145  
railroads, 31, 116, 120, 160, 164  
*Roughing It*, 97

Saint Louis, MO, 92, 100–101, 103, 105  
Saint Paul, MN, 120  
Saltpeter Cave (Hannibal), 43  
Sandlin, Lee, 97, 145  
Schoolcraft, Henry, 15, 16  
Shreve, Henry, 30–31  
slavery, 33, 50–51, 140–141, 143, 144, 146,  
St. Anthony Falls, 18, 20  
steamboats  
African Americans and, 58–59, 68  
dangers of, 100–101, 108–109, 114–116  
decks of, 62–64  
decline of, 103, 105–106, 108  
engineers, 68  
in *Huckleberry Finn*, 146

- passengers on, 58–59
- piloting, 84
- pilot training on, 64–66, 68, 71–72, 74–76, 78
- as river conveyance, 28, 29, 30–31
- trip of 1882 on, 105–106, 108, 116, 120, 123–124
- Twain's early impressions of, 53, 55–56

*Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (Hunter), 55, 68, 108

*Territorial Enterprise* (Virginia City, NV), 92, 93, 94  
“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” 94  
Todd, Neriam, 141, 143  
*Tom Sawyer Abroad*, 128  
*Tom Sawyer Detective*, 128  
Toncray, Alexander C., 128–129  
traveling shows, 46, 49–50  
Twichell, Joe, 97

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 20  
Union (Sacramento, CA), 94

- Vicksburg, Battle of, 116
- “Villagers of 1840–3,” 42
- Virginia City, NV, 92, 93, 94
- Virginia House, 35

Warner, Charles Dudley, 97  
*Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*  
(Lee), 145  
Williams, True, 130

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