Belle of Louisville Riverboats

Steamboat and River Connections to Black History

In the Louisville area, all the plantations (many of them are today historic sites you can visit), except the one now called Whitehall on Lexington Road, owned slaves at one time or another, and they all depended on the Ohio River for shipping farm products and for transportation. Other influences also connect river and steamboat history to Black or African-American culture, and here are a few that you can discuss as you travel on the *Belle of Louisville* or *Mary M. Miller*.

As You Travel

The 4th Street Wharf

Beginning at the downtown wharf, the history of nearly 200 years of steamboat travel includes Black men and women as workers on boats – often as roustabouts, musicians, maids, porters, waiters, cooks, and housekeepers. That was the common situation on many boats that traveled by and landed at the Louisville wharf between the early 19th and middle 20th centuries.

Second Street Bridge

It is believed that many Black men were hired to work on the Louisville Municipal Bridge’s construction when it was being built in 1928-1929. Today it is named the George Rogers Clark Memorial Bridge, and we commonly call it the Second Street Bridge.

Louisville Water Tower and Pumping Station

Construction on the Louisville Water Works Pumping Station #1 was begun in 1856 and completed in 1860, and was designed by Theodore Snowden and Charles Hermany. It is believed that Charles Hermany was a slave owner, so it is possible some of his slaves were involved in the building of the pumping station and water tower. We now refer to the complex of buildings as part of the Louisville Water Company, and the white section you can see is the original 1860 building. It currently houses a museum – the WaterWorks Museum – of the history of the water company, the building of the first commercial pumping station, and the introduction of the first water filtration system in the country.

Six Mile Island

Now owned by the state of Kentucky and serving as a wildlife refuge and habitat, Six Mile Island has served many purposes over the years. At different times, it has been a farm, an overnight boat landing area, and a location of illegal moonshine stills during Prohibition, and there is a legend that at one time it was used as a training ground for several thousand Black soldiers during the Civil War.

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Other Steamboat and River Connections

Music

The most active time for steamboat travel on the Ohio River was the 1820s to the 1920s – the steamboat era, and thousands of steamboats passed by and landed at Louisville each year during the peak years of the 1850s to the 1880s. Music on a steamboat was an essential part of entertainment and morale. People – especially crew members – were often on board for extended periods, and music helped pass the time. Instruments like fiddles, harmonicas, fifes, banjos, guitars, and horns could easily be found on board. Having evening entertainment and dancing for paying passengers was typical, and crew members could often be found playing and singing into the later evening hours.

During the big band era of the 20th century, musicians traveled on steamboats for weeks or months at a time, and they were often highly paid. They were considered essential to the success of a steamboat, since they both enticed people to buy tickets for short excursions and drew in returning passengers. With lots of competition, people could choose the cruise they wanted to take by the band and singers that were scheduled on board. Many famous musicians got their start and built their name by playing on steamboats in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, including such greats as Count Basie, Louie Armstrong, and Fate Marable. The music style we know today as New Orleans Jazz was developed by those musicians and others like them traveling up and down the Inland Waterway system of the country.

**Farmworkers and the River**

Riverside: Though our typical cruise does not go by Riverside, the Farnsley-Moremen Landing 13 miles downriver from Louisville, it was, at one time, one of the largest farms in Jefferson County, reaching 1500 acres at its peak. It is now a 300-acre historic site with a house built around 1837 by Gabriel Farnsley, some out buildings, an interpretive center, and a 19th century family chapel. Prior to the Civil War, Riverside was a large property with quite a few slaves. In the winter months with less farm work to do, the Farnsleys, mentioned in an old legal record, had a slave who served on a steamboat deck crew. Riverside was a very active steamboat landing during the 19th century, and it is very possible he was hired out onto a boat (or boats) during slow seasons. That was a common practice in the South on farms and plantations, since there are many navigable waterways in that part of the country and many rural communities along the rivers. Hiring out farm workers made some money for the slave owner at a slow time of the year, and, in some cases, made some money for the slave, as well.

On the boats, these farm workers were typically called roustabouts, and their main job was loading and unloading the boat.They had to be pretty sturdy, since, for example, a typical bale of hay weighed 110 pounds (#); a hogshead (large barrel) of tobacco could be as heavy as 800# – 1200#; a wooden crate of soap, candles, or nails could weigh 25# – 100#; and a bag of cottonseed could reach 120#.

The Farnsley-Moremen house included an upstairs traveler’s room that may have provided overnight housing for steamboat passengers and other travelers. At one time it may also have been used as a living or work space for slaves. In family oral tradition, a Civil War story is told of two nephews of Alanson Moremen, the owner of the property at the time of the Civil War. One nephew fought for the North, the other for the South, and they both showed up at the Moremen’s at the same time asking for refuge. As he had told all the family members that refuge would be given to anyone displaced by the war, Alanson granted asylum to his nephews as long as they followed the standing rule: leave all weapons at the door.

An unattached kitchen was built around the same time as the house, and bricks found during the archeological dig assisted in dating the building. The original building was torn down long ago, but an archeological dig identified the area where it stood and a reconstruction of the original kitchen has taken place. Close by, another archeological dig has exposed the foundations to some slave cabins located near both the house and the outside kitchen.

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Locust Grove: On the upper (east) end of Jefferson County, and a section of the Ohio River our boats pass on a three-hour cruise, is a part of the riverbank once owned by Locust Grove, now an historic site situated on 7.5 acres more than a mile from the river. Locust Grove had a landing for many years and at one time operated a ferry that crossed to the Indiana bank. It was a very prosperous 700-acre plantation that owned slaves, and they shipped many of their farm products up and down river by steamboat. Locust Grove was considered the most important landing above the Falls of the Ohio, while Riverside was considered the most important landing below the falls.

Black Captains in River History

While it is difficult to find the history of Black men who served as officers on boats, Cumberland Posey of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is an exception. Born in 1858, he was the son of former slaves. As a young man he took a job on a steamboat, became interested in the mechanics of boats, and achieved an Engineer’s license (believed to be the first license issued to a Black man) for steam operation. As an engineer, he became very familiar with boat construction, and eventually built and operated a large fleet of freight boats, especially coal boats. He was extremely successful as a businessman, and died in 1925 after leading a productive and happy life. It was common during that time for boat owners to be given the title of “captain,” and even at the end of his life, Posey felt reaching the level of steamboat captain was his greatest achievement.

His son, Cumberland Posey, Jr. was an accomplished athlete, playing football and basketball but eventually finding his career niche in baseball. He was well-known in his time, and played for the Homestead Grays then later purchased the team. He was born in 1890 and died in 1946.

While it has not always been the case across the country, today all departments of boat operation are open to men and women from any and all walks of life.

Abraham Lincoln’s River Connections

Abraham Lincoln, grew up in a time when river travel was commonplace, and he had several connections to river history. He was born on a farm near Elizabethtown, KY, and when he was nearly seven, his family moved to a farm in southern Indiana near the Ohio River. They lived there until moving to Illinois when Lincoln was 21 years old.

As a young teenager, Abraham was asked to join a flatboat crew taking a load of freight to New Orleans, Louisiana. As was typical in that day, since flatboats had no engines and could only effectively travel downriver with the current, at the destination both the cargo and boat were sold. Many of the numerous flatboats of the 19th century were used to build houses in towns like New Orleans, the hub of a major international shipping market. Upon arriving at New Orleans, Abraham witnessed a slave auction on the wharf and it impacted him for the rest of his life.

In 1841, Lincoln traveled to Louisville by steamboat for a three-week visit with Joshua Speed and his family. Joshua and Abraham had met when Abe entered a general store in Illinois looking for a job, and they were life-long friends from that point on. The Speed family owned Farmington, a large, successful hemp plantation south of Louisville, and were slave owners. Lincoln had many conversations during that visit, followed by long letters afterward, with Speed family members regarding slavery and his opposition to it.

From Farmington, he again traveled by steamboat returning to Illinois, and while on board watched a group of about a dozen slaves being transported by river, chained together “like so many fish on a trotline.” Their enslavement and their ability to make the best of the worst of the circumstances also greatly impacted Lincoln.

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Lincoln’s experiences through his life, and his fervent opposition to slavery, led him – as our 16th U.S. President – to fighting the violent and politically-charged battle to resolve the issue in a way the country could accept, and it happened during the Civil War. While the importation of slaves had already been prohibited for some time, the northern states had abolished slavery to one degree or another and each of the western states took their own stands against allowing slavery. That left the southern states that had declared themselves a separate “confederacy” as the force to be reckoned with. Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation into law on January 1, 1863, thereby prohibiting slavery in any state in rebellion to the Union, and essentially putting an end to the previously-legal practice of slavery in nearly all states. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865, but the work carried on. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery in the United States was signed into law in December, 1865.

Another Ohio River Connection

Though it’s a gruesome and wrenching tale, Muhammad Ali’s first attorney, Alberta O. Jones, was one of the first African-American women to pass the Kentucky State bar. She opened a successful practice and was appointed as Jefferson County’s first female prosecutor to the Louisville Domestic Relations Court in 1965, but was murdered and thrown off the Sherman Minton Bridge into the Ohio River that same year. Her death was originally thought to be accidental, but her recovered body showed several blows to her head. In her short life, she was a Civil Rights activist and made many significant contributions to American history. Her murder remains unsolved today.

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