

Building a keelboat



Middle School

La Traveler's

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For hundreds of years before there was written history, Indians had used the Mississippi River for travel. Then the Europeans came, across the Appalachian Mountains, to settle and farm the rich soil along the Mississippi and the rivers that feed into it. They, too, used the great river for travel.

When they were ready to take their goods to market, they built flatboats, which were really just rafts. They loaded the flatboats with goods and let the Mississippi River's current float them all the way down to New Orleans.

When the farmers arrived in New Orleans, they sold their goods. Then, they sold the wood from their flatboats. The flatboats were no longer useful to the farmers. The same strong current that helped the farmers go south made it very difficult for the flatboats to go north.

Going North on the River

Once farmers reached New Orleans and sold their goods, they had two choices. One choice was to walk home. For many, this walk started with a 500-mile trek north on a road called the Natchez Trace—"trace" is another word for "road." The Natchez Trace was a rough road that ran from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee.

Thieves and murderers lurked along the Natchez Trace. Their targets were the returning farmers, who carried the money from the sale of their goods in New Orleans. To protect themselves, farmers traveling the Natchez Trace often traveled in groups of a dozen men or more. The farmers also sewed the coins they'd received in New Orleans into their shirts or pants for safekeeping.

After all, for some, the money they made in New Orleans was all the cash their families had for the year.

According to one story, that trick worked at least once. A group of farmers camping out for the night were attacked by robbers. The farmers jumped up and ran away. The robbers

gathered up everything the farmers left behind. Later, as they followed the trail the robbers left, one of the farmers found his pants, which the robbers had thrown away. Still safely sewn into the pants' waistband were the farmer's four gold doubloons!

Because of the dangers of the Natchez Trace, some farmers used part of their profits to buy a ticket on a keelboat. Keelboats were long, narrow boats that were pointed on both ends. Unlike flatboats, keelboats could go north on the Mississippi. This is how they did it: On either side of a keelboat was a narrow walkway. Four or five men stood on this walkway. Each man held a long pole. At the same time, each stuck his pole through the water, into the river bottom. Then, each man leaned his shoulder against his pole and pushed as he walked toward the back of the boat. These poles pushing together moved the boat northward, against the current of the Mississippi River. When the men reached the back, they lifted their poles and hurried forward again. Then, they repeated the motions again and again, all day long.

Keelboats also could be rowed like rowboats or sailed like sailboats. Sometimes, when the water was too deep or the current too fast, the men tied a rope to the boat, got out onto the bank, and pulled the boat through the water.

It took a month to float goods from a Pennsylvania farm down the rivers to New Orleans. It took three or four months to pole a keelboat back to Pennsylvania. This meant that when a farmer left to sell his goods, he might be gone from home for four or five months—even longer if he walked back on the Natchez Trace!

Steamboats on the River

In New York, a different kind of boat had already shortened the time it took to travel by water. In 1807, partners Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston put the nation's first steamboat into the Hudson River. It was called a steamboat because its engine ran on the steam created by boilers full of

water heated with burning coal. Soon, that steamboat and others were regularly huffing and puffing up and down the Hudson River, carrying people and goods from place to place.

In the spring of 1811, work began in Pittsburgh on a new steamboat. Robert Fulton named it the *New Orleans*. Soon, the new steamboat was launched into the Ohio River. It traveled down the Ohio, then down the Mississippi to New Orleans.

No one doubted that the ship *New Orleans* could get to the city of New Orleans. However, many doubted that it could get back. "You have visited us in a steamboat, but we see you for the last time," one mayor cried as the *New Orleans* steamed past his town. "Your boat may go down the river, but as to coming up, the very idea is an absurd one."

The *New Orleans* faced many challenges on its maiden voyage. Perhaps the greatest challenge came one night when the boat was tied up on the Ohio River. Suddenly, the boat trembled, and the waters of the river slammed against the river's banks. It was an earthquake. In fact, it was the worst earthquake ever to hit the central United States. It shook the earth all that night and all the next day.

The *New Orleans* continued down the Ohio and into the Mississippi, and the earth continued to shake. Whole parts of the riverbank fell into the water. Old islands disappeared. New islands popped up. The passengers watched as animals ran along the shore or drowned in the river, trying to escape the unceasing quaking.

Eventually, the *New Orleans* sailed past the danger zone and went on to the city for which it was named. And, to the amazement of many, it successfully made the return trip. The *New Orleans* immediately began regular service between New Orleans and Natchez. Within ten years of the arrival of the *New Orleans*, hardly a keelboat was left on the Mississippi River. People and their goods could now travel faster by steamboat.

Building a keelboat

Your assignment: Lightly color with pencil colors the keelboat pattern below. Write your name and hour across the bottom of the boat. Once completed, cut out the pattern along the lines and tape or glue the boat together. Turn in complete, built boat at the beginning of class tomorrow.

