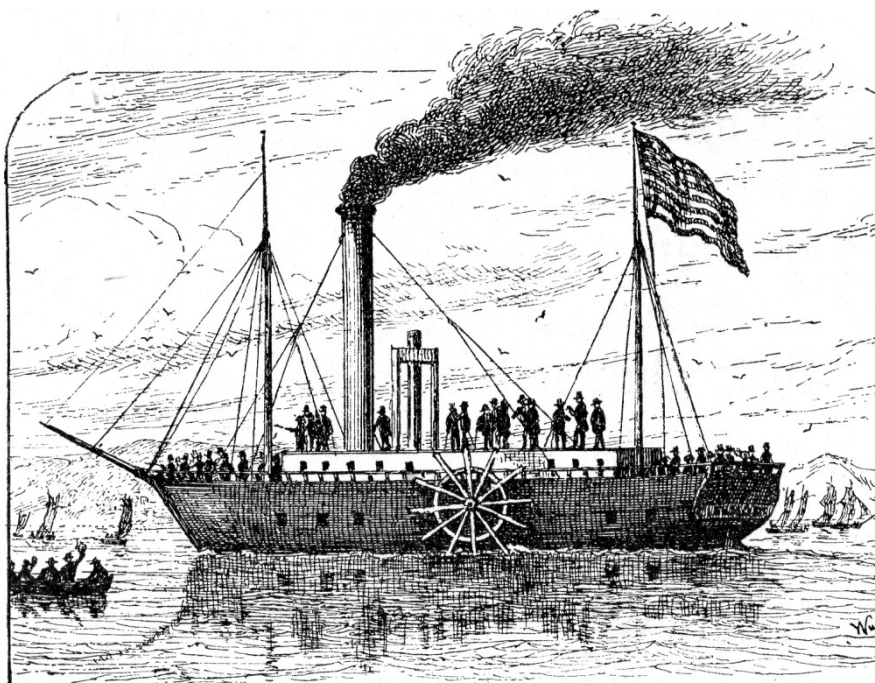


*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

May 1, 2013

### THIS WEEK: Steamboating on the Rivers in Iowa

**BACKGROUND:** Built at Wheeling, Virginia, in 1819, the steamboat *Virginia* was a small stern-wheeler of 109-132 tons, and was owned by Redick McKee, James Pemberton, and seven others. She was 118 feet long, 18 feet 10 inches beam, and her depth was 5 feet 2 inches. She had a cabin on deck but no pilot house, being guided by a tiller at the stern.



A ship similar to the *Virginia*

# Steamboating on the Rivers in Iowa

(From *The Story of Iowa: The Progress of an American State, Volume I*,  
By William J. Petersen)

## Chapter XVI

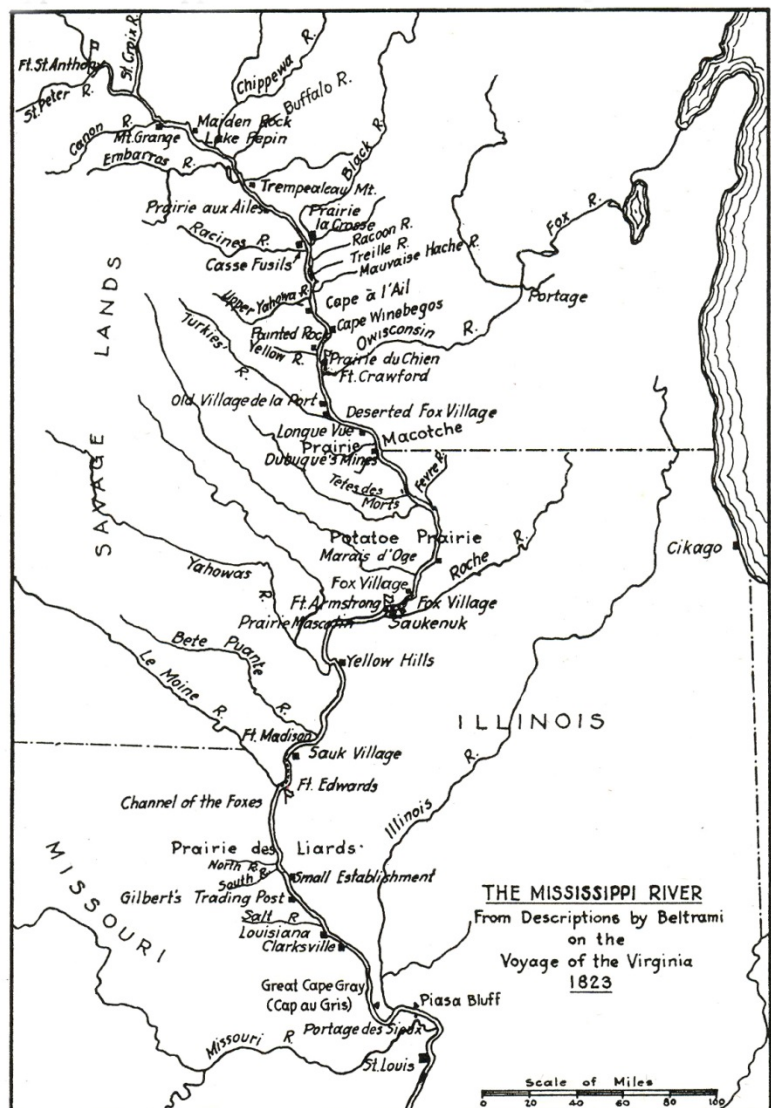
The steamboat was a potent factor in the conquest of the Mississippi Valley. And what a valley for the steamboat to conquer! In 1863, *Harper's Magazine* declared:

But the basin of the Mississippi is the Body of the Nation. All the other parts are but members, important in themselves, yet more important in their relations to this. The basin contains about 1,250,000 square miles. In extent it is the second great valley of the world, being exceeded only by that of the Amazon.

Latitude, elevation, and rainfall all combine to render every part of the Mississippi Valley capable of supporting a dense population. As a dwelling-place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe.

It was not until 1823 that the steamboat *Virginia* was able to stem the Upper Mississippi to what is now Fort Snelling. Churning her way over treacherous rapids, past a blazing forest fire and a storm-tossed lake, the first steamboat to navigate the Upper Mississippi above what is now Keokuk, reached Fort Snelling on May 10, 1823.

The *Virginia* required twenty days to make the 664-mile trip from St. Louis to Fort Snelling. She grounded on a number of sandbars and spent about five days getting over the Des Moines and Rock Island rapids. Wood was burned for fuel and the boat lay over frequently while fresh supplies were cut. Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian Agent at Fort Snelling, Giacomo C.



Beltrami, an Italian exile and adventurer, Great Eagle, a Sauk Indian chief, an unnamed woman missionary, and a Kentucky family bound for the lead mines of Galena are the only passengers known to have been aboard the boat.

The voyage of the *Virginia* established the practicability of navigating the Upper Mississippi by steamboat. Later in the year, she completed two more trips above the rapids, one to mouth of the St. Peter's and another to Fort Crawford. After these trips the government did not hesitate to utilize this quicker and more reliable way of moving troops and supplies.

### **Six Periods in Steamboating**

Although no hard and fast lines definitely divide the history of steamboating on the Upper Mississippi, six distinct periods stand out in fairly bold relief. The lead period embraces the quarter century following the successful trip of the *Virginia*. Immigration is characteristic of the second period. Hundreds of settlers, both native and foreign born, jammed Upper Mississippi steamboats for a score of years until the building of the railroad parallel with the river snuffed out a trade from which river captains had reaped their richest returns. The third period witnessed the shipment of heavy cargoes of grain southward and extended from 1865 until the early eighties. Then followed a period of steady decline, which culminated in 1910 with the sale of the equipment and four remaining boats of the Diamond Joe line for a paltry \$175,000. During the next seventeen years, the Streckfus Line excursion boats were the only real frequenters of the Upper Mississippi although a few short line packets managed to pick up a modicum of freight and passengers. The inauguration of Federal Barge Line service on the Upper Mississippi in 1927, the building of modern terminal facilities at such towns as Burlington, Rock Island, and Dubuque, and the nine-foot channel that resulted from the completion of the twenty-six locks and dams, combined to usher in the sixth period or towboat era. By 1941, the tonnage towed on the Upper Mississippi was immense, far surpassing that transported during the heyday of the steamboating before the Civil War.