

Summary of River Transportation in Iowa

History of Iowa and Its Rivers

River transportation has been and continues to be an integral and important part of life in Iowa.

Indigenous People and Rivers

American Indian tribes, such as the Otoe-Missouria, Meskwaki, Sauk, Dakota, Ho-Chunk, Omaha-Ponca and Potawatomi, came to Iowa by following the river valleys. They depended on the rivers because many of the things they needed to survive could be found by the rivers and streams. From fresh water for cooking, drinking and gathering edible plants to animals they hunted for clothing and food. They also used the trees along the shores for building shelters and canoes, and the stone and clay found along some river banks to make ceremonial pipes and paint.

American Indians on the land heavily-relied on river transportation to move between villages or to go on long hunting trips. The river valleys were full of the animals they needed for clothing and food, such as beavers, ducks, geese, fish and freshwater clams. Deer and buffalo came to the water's edge to drink. Although the river valleys were plentiful hunting places, the American Indians who used the spaced only took what they needed to survive because of their deep connection to the land and wanted to cooperate with the "spirits" they believed existed in nature. Some tribes also buried their dead near the rivers. On the bluffs along the Mississippi and Turkey rivers, some tribes made the mounds in the shapes (or effigies) of animals.

Rivers made it easier for white men of European descent to travel to American Indian lands, such as Julien Dubuque. He was searching along the Mississippi for deposits of lead. The rivers also brought European and American fur traders. Trappers brought boats carrying iron tools, blankets and guns that many tribes accepted in trade. The fur trade brought the these tribes things they needed and wanted, but it also emboldened white settlers to colonize their land and eventually, forcibly remove the Indigenous people from their homes and way of life.

Early American River Transportation

Since colonial times, Americans needed some means to transport farm and industrial products to market and to import those necessities they could not produce locally. During the colonial period, people traveled on foot and horseback or in carriages and small boats. They transported their goods by pack mule, wagon, and hand- or wind-propelled boats.

Iowa is the only state with four border rivers, the Mississippi, Missouri, Des Moines and Big Sioux. The ability to navigate these rivers was of great importance in the settlement of Iowa before railroads. Steamboats traveled into Iowa border waters even before Iowa was legally open for settlement. Steamboats and flatboats brought thousands of early settlers to the new land of Iowa. Steamboats brought supplies to the new Iowans and transported their produce and products to market.

Towns Developed Along the Rivers

Along Iowa's major rivers, towns boomed and prospered. They became trade centers where goods could be sold and sent downriver to market. Plans were made to build locks and dams on major rivers to further develop steamboat transportation, but these schemes collapsed with the difficulties of building a lock system and the arrival of the railroad.

Steam

An important improvement in water transportation came during the early part of the 19th century when the steam engine revolutionized the nation's system of transportation. Iowa's settlement pattern reflects the great transportation revolution created by steam power. Although many settlers did come overland to Iowa by horse or ox-drawn wagon, steamboats already dominated the great rivers, bringing newcomers as well as goods.

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The steamboats that brought new settlers were enjoyable transportation for those who could afford to pay the price of comfort, but low-priced deck passage was just another hardship to be faced by many westward travelers. Steamboat travel was not without hazards; snags and explosions were among the dangers. Deck passenger conditions were cramped and unsanitary. Disease often spread rapidly through the group of travelers.

Traveling by steamboat on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers was common in the 1800s. The huge boats could carry many passengers and large amounts of freight. Most river travel was between the years of 1846 and 1866. Long before Kanesville or Council Bluffs were settlements on the Missouri river, the steamboat the Western Engineer arrived in the area in 1819. By the 1830s steamboats had navigated the Missouri River to the mouth of the Yellowstone River. During the gold rush to Montana in the 1860s, steamboats traveled far up the Missouri to early mining towns. Steamboats carried plows and seed to new farmers settling in Nebraska in the 1850s and 1860s.

Steamboat companies often made huge profits by carrying tons of cargo to rapidly growing communities. The lure of huge profits led steamboats to travel in unsafe river conditions and at unsafe speeds. This led to many accidents and groundings. The exact number of steamboat accidents in Iowa Rivers is not known. When railroads started carrying freight across the country, the days of the steamboats were over. By August 1872 the count of steamboats under the Burlington Railroad Bridge was 147, while the 1,108 engines and trains crossed over that bridge during the same month. The last Iowa steamboat to carry goods was the coal-fired sternwheeler the Loan Star in 1967. Barges still carry some goods on the river, but trains and trucks carry most of the freight in America. The few steamboats still gliding along the rivers today are usually carrying tourists on short trips.

Missouri River

The Missouri was a dangerous river. Dead trees fell into the river and got stuck on the bottom. Sometimes these snags stuck out of the water. Then the captain did his best to steer around the dead trees, but sometimes they were hidden underwater. The jagged limbs could rip open the bottom of a steamboat. The current on the Missouri was fast, and the channel — the deepest part of the river — shifted from place to place. Sometimes captains accidentally ran their boats up onto the sandbars. Bad storms hit the river in the summer. Hundreds of steamboats were wrecked on the Missouri. Irregular river depth, sandbars and snags made steamboat travel on the Missouri slow and dangerous.

Mississippi River

The Mississippi was not as dangerous. The current was calmer and the channel was deeper. However, the Upper Rapids and Lower Rapids were serious obstacles to navigate. Sometimes terrible accidents happened on the Mississippi too. Steamboats collided or caught on fire. Sometimes the boilers exploded. Passengers were blown apart or scalded by the hot water.

Through the years, transportation improvements like railroads and automobiles have replaced river travel as a major form of transporting people. However, with development of the lock and dam system on the river (starting in 1913 when the first lock and dam was built near Keokuk,) the upper Mississippi River's system of 29 locks and dams continues to be a major method of commerce in the United States. Many industries engaged in bulk shipping take advantage of the low-cost transportation of goods available on the river. Downstream traffic carries grain such as corn, wheat, oats, barley and rye to New Orleans where it is transhipped to ocean vessels and transported around the world.

While Iowa's rivers are not used for transporting goods and people at the volume they once were, they are still important to Iowa's economy. The Mississippi continues to serve as a major avenue for transporting goods. People all over the world depend on products that are transported up and down the Mississippi River.