



Pittsburgh's Rivers: A Glimpse into History, Travel and Adventure

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Pittsburgh's rivers have meant many things to many people. For some, the waters have held fortune through trade and industry while for others, heavy spring rains or large ice jams brought the promise of flooding and destruction. From the early days of exploration through over two centuries of industrial development and travel, the rivers of Pittsburgh have held the promise of prosperity and adventure to those willing to navigate their waters.

As early as the 1730's, the land where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers met to form the Ohio was a meeting place for those who traded with the Indians. In 1753, George Washington, under orders from Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, explored the land at the confluence and wrote, "I spent some time in viewing the rivers and the land in the fork, which I think extremely well suited for a fort, as it has absolute command of both rivers. It has well timbered land all around and is very convenient for building." In 1754, a fort was constructed by a few Virginia Militia under the command of Captain Trent representing the Ohio Company and the first white settlement on the site of modern day Pittsburgh was established.

Although by 1790 there were nearly 130 families in Pittsburgh occupying 36 log houses, one stone house, one frame house and five stores, the area didn't see any real growth until the end of Indian hostilities in 1795. By the time the city was incorporated in 1816, the population exceeded 6,000 and the village by the rivers was fast becoming the hub of travel and trade.

As the population of the area grew, many towns along the rivers played an important role in the development of the region and the nation. Towns such as Elizabeth, Homestead and Clairton along the Monongahela prospered from their industries which depended on the river. Business was now becoming part of the river's history.

An Early Account of Doing Business on the River

One of the first known written accounts of river trade between Pittsburgh and New Orleans took place nearly 200 years ago. In the early spring of 1807, a group of farmers in Greensburg were in need of basic supplies such as coffee, tea, and flour but had little money to purchase these provisions. What they did have was an abundance of distilled whiskey but not much of a local market for the liquor. A businessman from Irwin named James Fleming, Sr. proposed a

solution to the farmer's plight: transport the whiskey from Pittsburgh to New Orleans on a flatboat to sell or trade for the much needed supplies. Fleming kept a well written account of his journey.

The voyage began on April 3, 1807 on the flat boat laden with 14 barrels of whiskey, totaling over 500 gallons, over 500 pounds of deer skins that would later be sold for ten cents a pound, and various supplies for the trip. Along the way, stops for trade and sales were made in Steubenville, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; Baton Rouge, Louisiana and then New Orleans. The river trip took seven weeks and, except for a "strong spring storm", was fairly uneventful. After traveling from Steamer ship from New Orleans to New York, home via stage coach, Fleming arrived back in Greensburg in August with a nearly \$200 profit for the farmers. Little did Fleming know, this same trip would be made countless times in years to come by riverboat captains, merchants, and packet boat travelers.

River Trade was Prosperous

It's hard to visualize a time when the air around Pittsburgh, especially at the Point, was thick with smoke. Smoke not from the area's steel mills but from the steamboats that clogged the three rivers and lined the shores of the Allegheny and Monongahela. During the 1830's Pittsburgh was the hub of industry in boat building as some of the finest steam ships and sternwheelers that sailed the Mississippi and beyond were constructed in the Pittsburgh area.

Mrs. V.D. Drynan, the 1929 Pittsburgh Civic Club President was quoted then as saying; "In 1837 before Pittsburgh was considered much, most of the boat building business was centered in Glenwillard or Shoustown as it was known then. The boatyards employed several hundred people and they were among the best boat builders on the river."

American writer Mark Twain helped conjure the images of life on the Mississippi River that was traversed by the grand paddle wheel steam boats. Not only were these ships ornate and graceful but they were also the powerhouses of the waterways. In the early days of river traffic, these steam driven workhorses moved massive amounts of materials.

The mid 19th century brought much prosperity to the trade companies who operated on the waterways. In one shipment from the upper Allegheny to Pittsburgh, over 3 million feet of board lumber was floated down river to be used for the construction of homes and buildings. The cost to move this material was about nine dollars per 1,000 feet. Another load saw 14,000 barrels of salt from mines in New York State transported south down the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers at a cost of 8 dollars per barrel. On the return trip to Pittsburgh and points north, many water craft were loaded with apples, cider, bacon and other useful household items as a river trip was rarely wasted with empty cargo bays or ship's holds.

While transportation companies often reaped great profits, the average roustabout or deck hand was paid about 50 cents a day. Work on the rivers was hard and dangerous and many were exposed to hazards including falling over board into the frigid and unforgiving waters or being crushed by tons of shifting cargo.

The opportunity for work on the rivers was plentiful. In 1918, the tonnage of materials transported on the Monongahela River exceeded the tonnage transported through both the Panama and Suez Canals combined. The Monongahela saw 17 million tons of cargo transported past Pittsburgh while both canals combined saw less than 15 million tons pass through their locks. This cargo included the fresh cut lumber from the Allegheny Forrest passing through Pittsburgh on its way south as well as steel produced in Homestead and Duquesne in route to destinations in the west.

Pittsburgh's Historic Wharf

The Monongahela River wharf has its own colorful past as many expeditions, western explorations and historically significant events began on the shore of the Mon. In 1770, George Washington made his exploration down the Ohio as he began his journey from the bank of the Monongahela near the point. It was also from the Mon Wharf that a steamboat made its first inland cruise from Pittsburgh in 1811.

Other events included the shipment of supplies to General Andrew Jackson's army in New Orleans during the War of 1812 by Major William B. Foster, father of one of Pittsburgh's favorite sons Steven Foster, and an 1817 visit from James Monroe, the first U.S. President to come to Pittsburgh. Many celebrations during the Civil War were held on the wharf as well as a great centenary celebration of steam navigation in 1911. At one time, the Monongahela Wharf was a popular open market for goods and produced shipped into the city and off-loaded at the river bank.

The River's Ghosts and Lore

Pittsburgh's river history includes many tales of strange events predate even modern river traffic as the early Indians believed that the Ohio River was a place where evil spirits dwelled in the dark and muddy water. An early story dating from 1786 tells of a "hole" at the bottom of the Ohio River near McKees Rocks. The Pittsburg Dispatch of 1910 reported "Just below the bend of the river is deep water which has been sounded by a line of 60 fathoms and no bottom found." Although the existence of a hole in the river was never proven, many swimmers and river boatmen fervently avoided the area.

Many Pittsburghers are aware of the story of the B-25 airplane that crashed into the Monongahela near Homestead in 1956, but most don't know of the many forgotten stories of eerie events and strange sightings handed down by riverboat captains and deckhands.

Another of these tales of the unexplained came from a steamboat captain in the 1930's who described an eerie yellow light in the rocks along the shoreline in the Ohio River just below Parkersburg. Many believed that it had something to do with the wreck of a packet boat in 1916. On a cold February night, the Kanawha capsized for no apparent reason and 17 people drowned. Shortly after the Kanawha went down, the strange yellowish light appeared. Many packet boats passing the place of the wreck would point it out to their passengers who too saw the eerie glow in the water.

The history of Pittsburgh's three rivers is as vast and far-reaching as the waterways themselves. From the early packet boat traveler on the Ohio, to the barge captain on the Monongahela, to the fisherman on the Allegheny, all Pittsburghers know how these great rivers have defined our community and shaped our history.