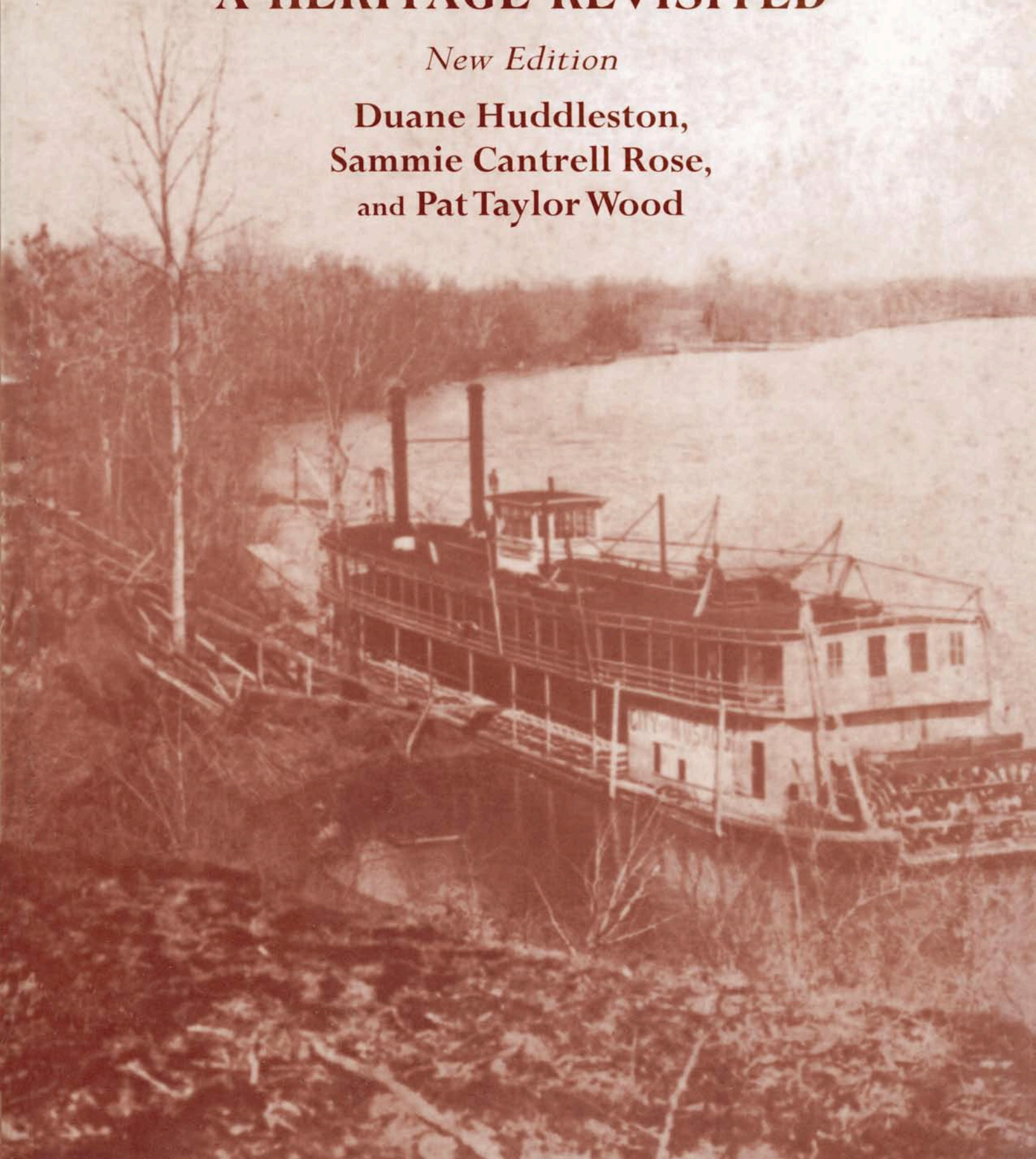


# STEAMBOATS AND FERRIES ON THE WHITE RIVER

## A HERITAGE REVISITED

*New Edition*

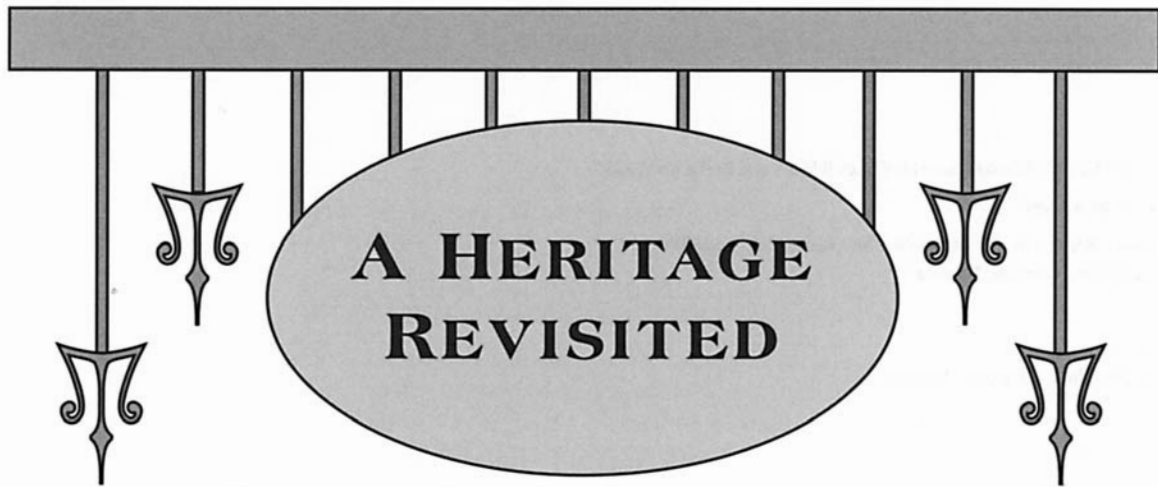
Duane Huddleston,  
Sammie Cantrell Rose,  
and Pat Taylor Wood



**STEAMBOATS AND FERRIES  
ON THE WHITE RIVER**



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*New Edition*

Duane Huddleston, Sammie Cantrell Rose,  
and Pat Taylor Wood

The University of Arkansas Press    Fayetteville    1998

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*Dedicated to Duane Huddleston, the consummate historian,  
and to our husbands, Chuck Wood and Frank Rose, for their ever present support.*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No project of this nature can ever be accomplished without the assistance of many. This book is no exception. While there is inadequate space to list everyone, there are some individuals we feel compelled to recognize. The late Elmo Ingenthron is one of them. Two of a kind, Duane Huddleston and he corresponded for years about their historical pursuits. Mr. Ingenthron's love of history and his elation in sharing it with others made an early impression upon us.

Once our interest was whetted and we were on the trail of the steamboats and ferries, Wilson Powell, of the *Batesville Guard*, provided the encouragement needed to propel us forward at just the appropriate time. A good judge of character, he seemed to recognize that we were hooked by the subject. We owe him a huge debt.

The late Mrs. Lady Elizabeth Luker, former curator of the Jacksonport Courthouse Museum in Jacksonport, also rendered invaluable information on the Lower White River, as did Paul Yarber and his daughter, Cora Lee Looney.

We cannot exclude Linda Pine of the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Archives and Special Collections, who was delightfully helpful and patient with our research. This book would not have been complete without the photographs from the Huddleston Collection housed at University of Arkansas, Little Rock. We are indebted for their use.

A special thanks goes to those individuals who graciously allowed us into their homes and gave so generously of their time to share with us their memories of the White River. Not only was their information unique, the opportunity to visit with them was a special treat for us.

Lastly, we must thank Mary Huddleston, who trusted us enough to share her husband's research with us. Duane died in 1982, but he left a lasting legacy of historical research, particularly in the field of steam travel in the White and Arkansas Rivers. It has been a joy to incorporate his writings with ours. We hope this book brings as much joy to the reader.

*Sammie Rose and Pat Wood*



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## INTRODUCTION

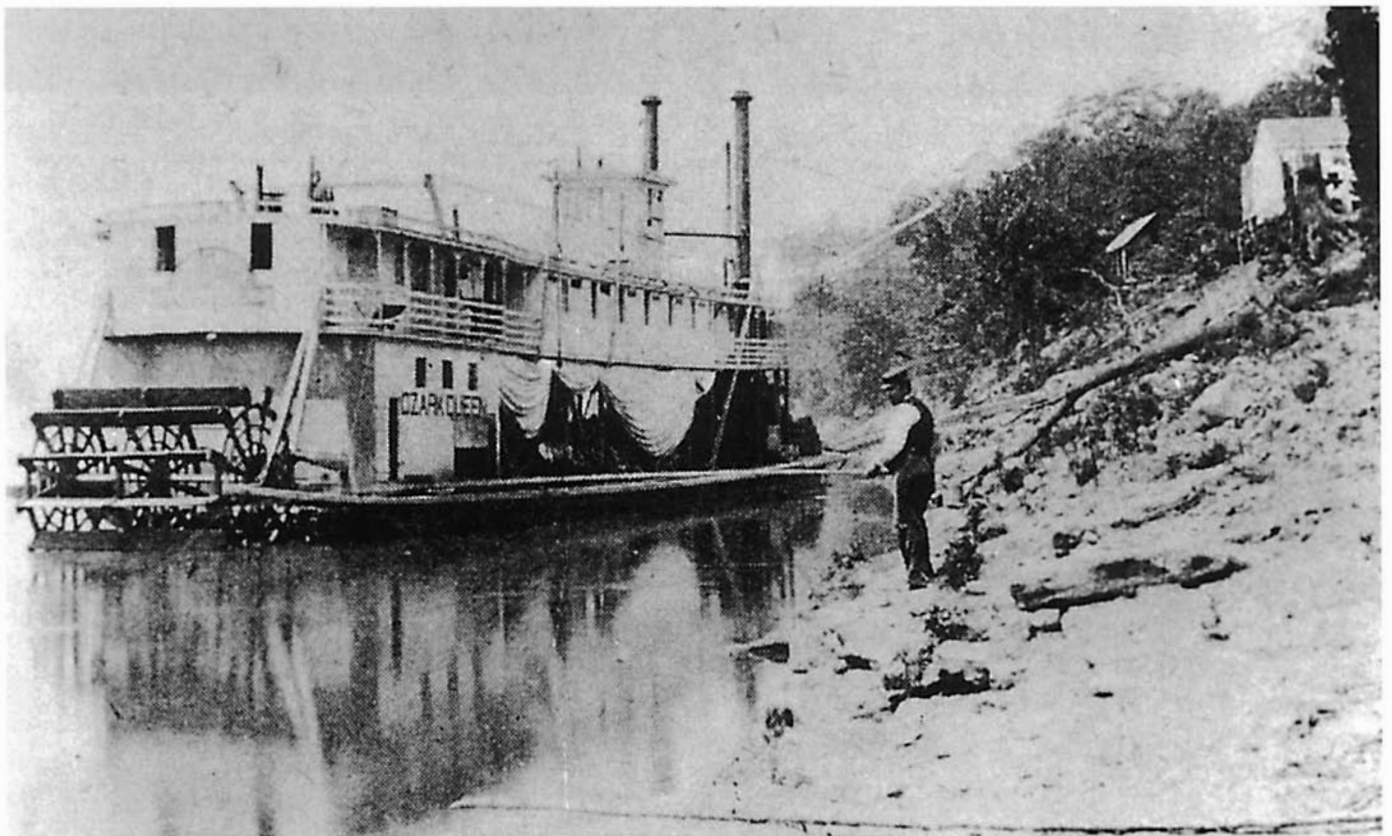
*I christen thee Ozark Queen. Glide smoothly to thy home on the beautiful White. Float lightly, speed swiftly and safely! Long live the Queen.*

These words of little June Glenn rang crystal as the water beneath the vessel she was christening, and with surprising strength the young girl shattered a bottle containing sparkling White River water against the bow of the steamboat. The air was filled with hearty cheers from the assembled crowd when the craft glided to the water's edge and was cradled by the river.

By Miss Glenn's side at the Batesville, Arkansas, landing stood a gray-haired gentleman with a broad smile upon his face. The date was September 12, 1896, a year that had been particularly disastrous for rivermen who traveled the upper reaches of the White River. The gentleman was Charles B. Woodbury, one of the most competent and well-liked steamboat captains in the region.

Captain Woodbury was enchanted by the challenge and beauty of the Upper White as it wandered through the heart of the Ozark Mountains, hence the name for this his newest steamboat. He would continue to navigate the river until his death in 1903.

Local citizens came by wagon, bicycle, horseback, buggy, and on foot for this gala occasion, gathering well ahead of the designated launch time. Their excitement reflected the importance of steam travel along the White River. This mode of transportation began on the river in 1831 and became a major contributing factor in the settlement and economic development of the area. Steamboats remained a primary method of travel into the twentieth century when the arrival of rail transportation put them out of



*Ozark Queen shown at unknown landing on Upper White River in 1896. Built at Batesville by Capt. Charles B. Woodbury, the boat ran as far as Lead Hill from 1896 until railroad was built to Cotter in 1903. It then ran in Lower White from Newport to Rosedale, Mississippi, through 1904.*

Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society and the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Archives and Special Collections.

business. Ironically, they played a significant role in their own demise by carrying supplies for the construction of the railroad.

Prior to the arrival of the steamboats, ferries had been built along the course of the White. For pioneer travelers who found it necessary to cross the waterway, the sight of a ferry to “carry” them across, rather than having to ford the river, was like an answer to a prayer, particularly in times of heavy rains. A number of the ferries were originally built because of the need by farmers to reach a portion of their land that lay on the opposite shore. Many of these farmers shared their crafts with neighbors and travelers, becoming the first ferry operators. Members of their families assisted at times and often followed in their relatives’ footsteps. Since they were established sites, ferry landings frequently became the regular steamboat stops as well.

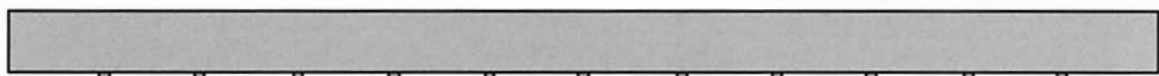
There is something about river travel that captures our hearts. Perhaps it is the thought of gliding idly along reflecting on nature’s beauty as we are gently carried by the current. It is a misleading image, for river travel can be far from gentle. Beguiling, yes; gentle, no. Ask any riverman and he will delight in plying you with stories of a river’s challenge. It is a challenge that exists today and was even more demanding during the period we are about to discuss. Despite such peril, however, waterways in the 1800s offered a far better means of travel than the overland alternative along the animal trails that served as primary pathways through a vast woodland covered with a carpet of dense undergrowth.

With this book, we pay homage to the steamboats and ferries that operated on the White River and to the courageous men who built and navigated them. We wish to share with our readers the beauty and magnificence of these vessels and the pioneering spirit of their rivermen. They were major players in the development of a region. We will carry you to a time when life may have seemed slow-paced but was actually quite the opposite; a time when physical survival was a constant battle and the difficulties of a struggling, young society were ever present; the time of river traffic on the White. While our story is regional, it is representative of happenings that occurred in many portions of this country during the period discussed—events consequential in the building of our nation.

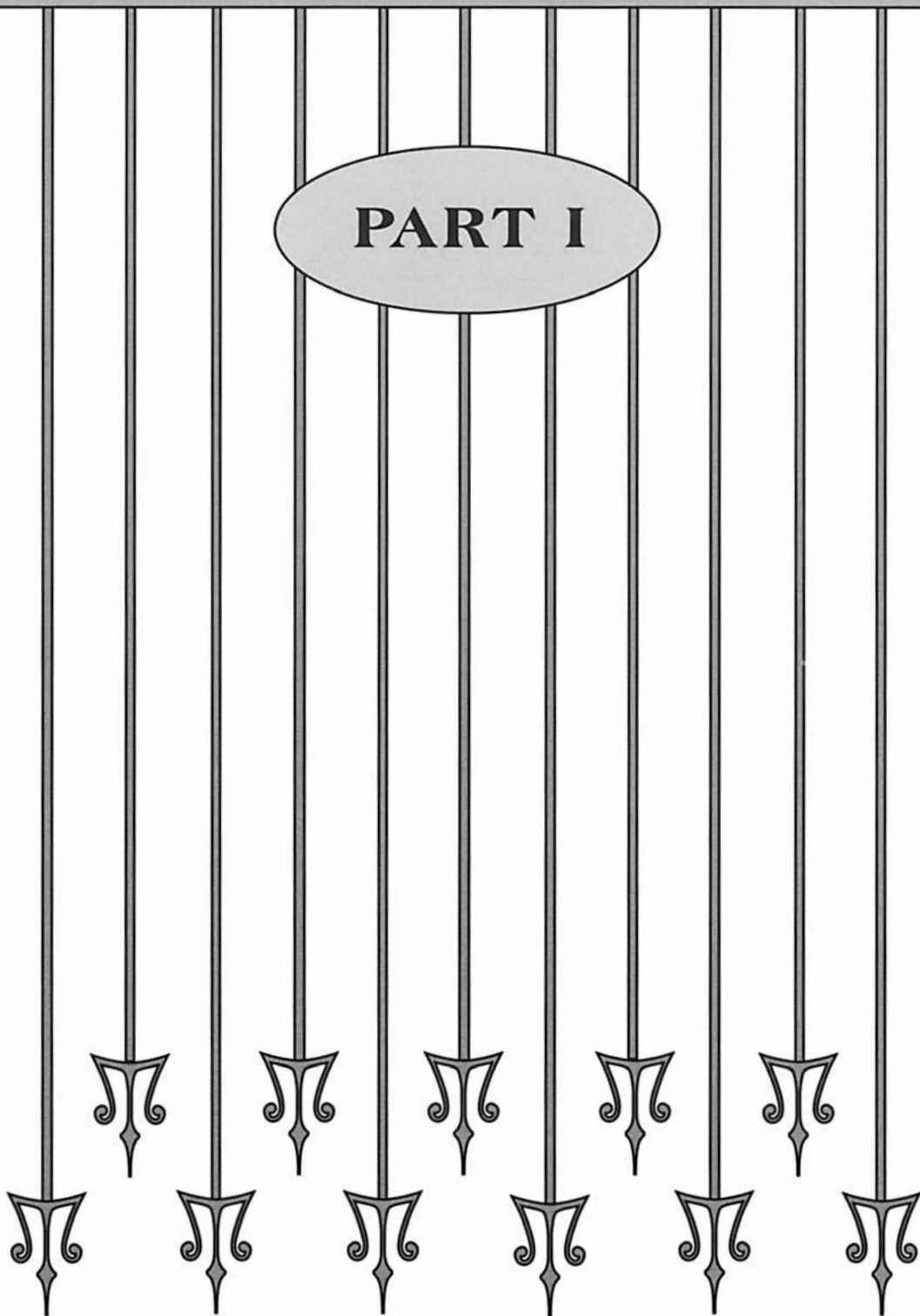
Within these pages, we pay homage, as well, to an enchanting, beguiling, beautiful, and occasionally terrifying part of our environment, the White River, a waterway that continues to contribute substantially to the welfare of its people.

Because we feel your rendezvous with the steamboats and ferries will be enhanced by a review of the water craft that were the forerunners of the steamboats, we have begun our book with a brief discussion of keelboats and flatboats, the vessels that served the wilderness White River basin and remained on the river for some time following the arrival of steam travel.

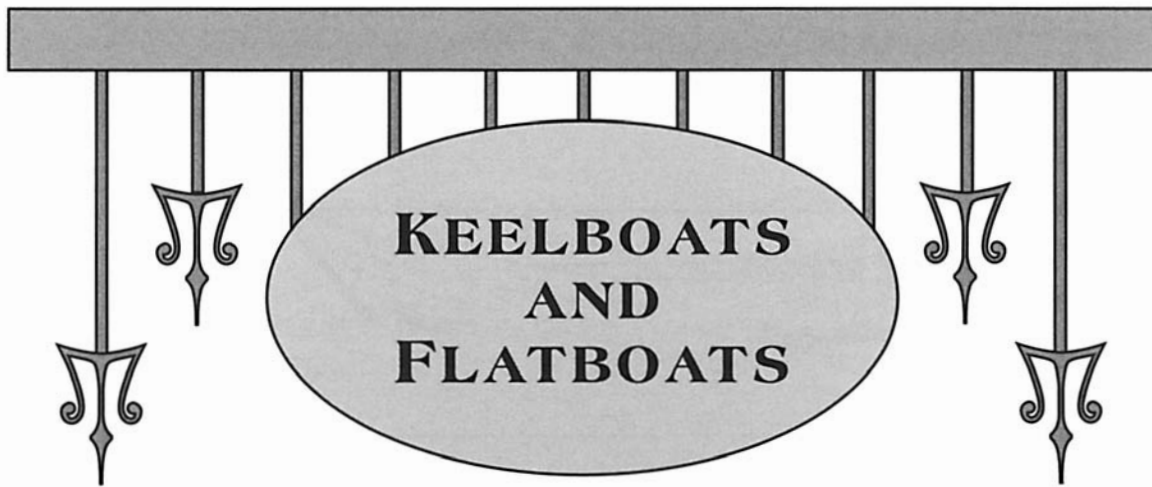
“Float lightly, speed swiftly and safely” through this adventure along the White.



**PART I**







## KEELBOATS AND FLATBOATS

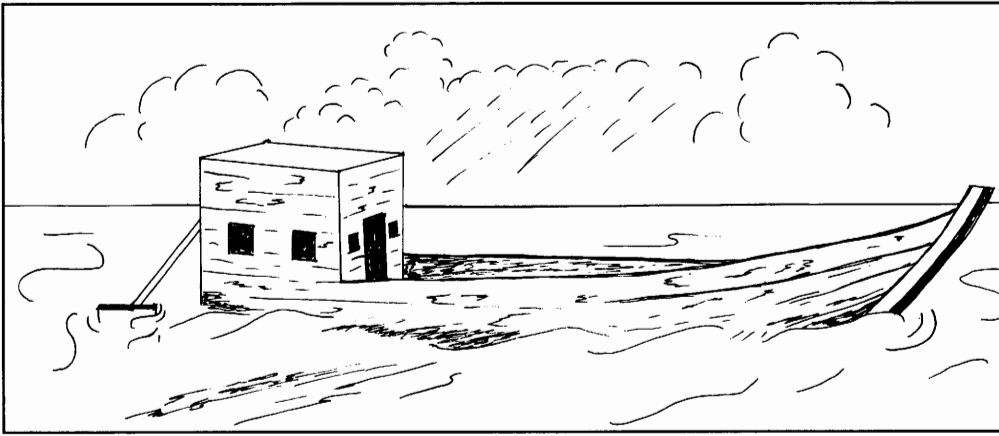
The White River originates in a quiet meadow surrounded by densely wooded hills near the hamlet of Boston, in the Boston Mountains of Arkansas. The rivulet grows from this spring branch into a major regional waterway that travels 720 miles before emptying into the Mississippi River. Like a child eager to roam but reluctant to leave home, the White meanders through much of the Ozarks before departing the rounded old hills to flow across the Arkansas delta region on its journey to the Mississippi.

Simply judging by direction of flow, one might have difficulty knowing the White River's final destination. If the waterway chose a "crow's route" to the Mississippi, the trip would be a much shorter one, a journey of only 225 miles. The White, however, prefers to follow the natural valleys rather than cut a course of its own as many rivers do, hence the 720 miles mentioned earlier. After departing the meadow near Boston, the river heads west on its roving trip, then saunters north to Fayetteville. Flowing northwest from Fayetteville, it crosses the Arkansas-Missouri border and turns east to wander through the Missouri counties of Barry, Stone, and Taney. As though on a playful romp, it then zigzags along the Missouri-Arkansas line before rambling through the hill country of northeast Arkansas on its way to Batesville. At Batesville the river bids farewell to the mountains and travels across the Arkansas delta until it empties into the Mississippi. Like a drover going to market, White River gathers water from a multitude of streams along the way. Brimming with such contributions, the enlarged river spills into the Mississippi below Helena, just above the mouth of the Arkansas River. Flowing near one another at this point, the two rivers are connected by a channel called the Arkansas Cut-Off. The channel forms a huge island around which a craft can circle, if desired, by traveling up the White River from

its mouth, through the cut-off, down the Arkansas, and up the Mississippi to the White's mouth again. The cut-off was greatly utilized by early river travelers and by steamboat commerce.

Prior to the 1800s, the countryside through which the White River flowed was a rugged wilderness that contained an abundance of wildlife. Since there were no roads and limited trails, the river became the highway of commerce for early explorers and trappers. While the fur trade along the White had become well established with the building of a trading post by Francois d'Armand in 1766 at the river's mouth, few white people lived in the area until after the Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812. The white men who arrived at this time were a new breed, seeking land to clear and cultivate. They brought with them their families, household goods, tools, and supplies and came to stay. Many traveled in keelboats down the Ohio, the Tennessee, and the Mississippi Rivers to traverse the White. They brought their dreams of a new life in a land full of promise and found the White River region to be a domain that offered bountiful rewards for those willing to work.

The keelboats bringing these early pioneers were large, heavy-timbered crafts with rounded bottoms. They ranged in size from forty to seventy-five feet long and from eight to twelve feet wide. They laid on a keel that was three or four inches thick, strong enough to withstand scraping over sandbars and bumping into snags along the trip. A cargo box for freight storage occupied a major portion of the boat, but space was left on either side for the crew to walk when poling the vessel. Cargo boxes were usually about four or five feet high and extended from ten to twelve feet from each end. Many of the larger boats also had an additional covered area to provide rooms for passengers.



*Keelboats, though shallow draft, could carry heavy loads. The boats were built of heavy four-inch-square timbers that extended from bow to stern along the bottom of the boat. This timber, known as the keel, was placed so as to take the shock of a collision with underwater objects without wrecking the boat. They usually ranged from forty to seventy feet long and seven to nine feet wide.*

Sketch by Sammie Rose.

The keelboats were propelled by oars, pushed by setting poles, and on occasion, equipped with sails. The usefulness of the sails on a tree-lined waterway such as the White River, however, was minimal. The setting poles for the boats ranged from ten to twelve feet in length, with their lower ends covered in iron to better handle the constant stress placed upon them. On the upper end was a knob to somewhat protect the shoulder of the user. The crew members manning the instruments placed the poles on the river bottom, then walked in single file, starting at the bow, along the gunwales on each side of the cargo box, and pushed the boat ahead. When the stern was reached, the crewmen walked rapidly forward again and the process was repeated. In times of calm currents, oars could be used to propel the boat. The pilot or captain guided the craft by a long, heavy, wide-bladed oar that was placed in a pivot on the stern and usually extended beyond the top of the cargo box.

All of the keelboats were also equipped with a cordelle, a rope fastened to the bow of the craft, with which the vessel could be pulled upstream, if necessary. The line was quite long to lessen the likelihood of the boat's being drawn toward the shore. A cordelle was particularly needed when the river was too deep for poling the vessel, in times of swift water, or in times of extremely low water. Due to the dense vegetation in many areas along the White, the crewmen would often have to first clear a path along which to walk before they could tow the boat. In such situations, crew members would disembark, chop a trail if necessary, then throw the cordelle over their shoulders, and walk in a stooped position along the riverbank or gravel bar, dragging the boat behind them until the difficult portion of the river was passed. If it was impossible for the boatmen to haul the keelboat, two or three of them would carry the end of the rope up the river and tie it to a tree. The crew remaining on the boat would then drag in the line, thereby pulling the craft forward. Such a process was called warping. A cordelle was also utilized by steamboats for the same navigational problems.

Although keelboats were useful and offered a degree of comfort when floating downstream, the vessels drew resounding curses from their helmsmen as they struggled to navigate the White. The river, with its many sharp bends and rapids, provided

a major challenge to the keelboat pilots, especially when traveling up the river in the unwieldy craft. Long stretches of calm water were interspersed with impressive shoals along the river's path. Sometimes all three of the above means of propelling the vessel were used to traverse six or eight miles a day. While three men could usually navigate a keelboat downstream, six to ten men were required to propel one upstream. Despite such difficulties, it was the keelboat that brought many of the early settlers to the White River region, and the craft continued in use on the river for a number of years.

Though there were many keelboat operators on the White, John Lafferty was one of the first to establish a trading post on the upper river. Lafferty, who was from Sumner County, Tennessee, had explored the river as early as 1802 and was no stranger to keelboats. In 1808, Lafferty and his oldest son, John, were living at Arkansas Post, though the rest of their family remained in Tennessee. At the time, his keelboat was running between St. Charles, on the Missouri River, and points along the Cumberland River in Tennessee and was under the command of Charles Kelly, later commander of the steamboat *Volant* in the White River.

In the fall of 1809, Kelly took a hunting party on the keelboat from St. Charles to Arkansas Post, then up the White to above what is now Independence County. The party returned to the post in the spring of 1810, and John Lafferty accompanied Kelly back to Tennessee, where Kelly married Lafferty's oldest daughter. Kelly and his wife were back at Arkansas Post by September of 1810 in anticipation of the entire family's move to the Upper White.

By December of that year, the Lafferty property at Arkansas Post was sold and the family had settled on the south bank of White River opposite what was to become known as Lafferty Creek, about forty-five miles above the mouth of the Black River. The landing and trading post there served as the base for Lafferty's keelboat operations on the White River. The landing was almost destroyed by the New Madrid earthquake of 1811. A bottomless well was created on the property by the turbulence. There was a tremendous shaking, and muddy water rose from one side of the river to the other followed by a gigantic explosion near the south bank of the river where the well appeared. The basin was sounded

for over two hundred feet with no sign of finding the bottom. Lafferty's enterprise proved unsuccessful and a financial suit brought against him in 1812 struck a fatal blow to the business. When he died, his administrator's bond was only four hundred dollars.

Robert Bean, who operated a trading hut at the mouth of Rocky Bayou near the present town of Guion, Arkansas, was one of Lafferty's primary competitors for the White River trade. The presence of his business was recorded as early as 1810 and was still in existence when Schoolcraft toured the region in 1819. Goodspeed, another early historian, states that John Reed and Bean operated trading posts at the mouth of Poke Bayou, now Batesville, in 1812 and 1814, respectively.

The largest trader and keelboat operator on the White River prior to 1819 was John C. Luttig. Luttig was an agent for Christian Wilt of St. Louis. Luttig had, at one time, been quite a prosperous Baltimore, Maryland, shipping merchant, but he moved to St. Louis in 1809 and became employed by the Missouri Fur Company. In 1813, Christian Wilt persuaded Luttig to work for him. His first assignment was a trading expedition along the White River. During 1814, convinced by Missouri's Governor Clark, one of the company's partners, Luttig briefly returned to the Missouri Fur Company, but he soon rejoined Wilt's endeavors on the White River at the trading post established near the mouth of Poke Bayou. The initial inventory for the post, valued at \$2,388.37, was conveyed by keelboat.

Utilizing Poke Bayou as his base, Luttig ran his keelboat up and down the river, trading with Indians, hunters, and settlers. In September of 1814, he returned to St. Louis with one thousand dollars worth of pelts and hides and, due to lack of space, left behind at his post five thousand pounds of buffalo tallow and other unsold goods. Entries in his ledgers of that period included the following:<sup>1</sup>

1814	Sept 5	By cash for 317 Raccoon skins	\$91.63
	Sept 7	By Ditto per J. C. Luttig	16.12
	Sept 17	245 lb. tallow at .12½	31.75
	Oct 8	260 bearskins at .87½	227.50
	Oct 8	127 lb. Beaver at \$2	254.00
	Oct 8	17 Otter skins	20.00
	Oct 28	46 galls Bears Oil \$1	46.00

Quickly transacting his business in St. Louis, Luttig left for the White River post with a large invoice of merchandise. The shipment included an ample supply of whiskey and several yards of Levant silk, which Wilt felt should bring four dollars a yard at the Poke Bayou post. Evidently, a taste for refinement was arriving in White River country. Luttig was also traveling on a new keelboat, the expenses of which were listed as follows:<sup>2</sup>

1814	Sept 7	Paid boat hands	\$221.00
	Sept 7	Paid Patroon	15.00
	Sept 7	Provisions for boat	60.00
	Sept 7	Cash paid Patroon in full	19.05½

Sept 7	Invoice #2 per J. C. Luttig	1723.57¼
Sept 9	Store-Herculaneum-	
	45 gal. Whiskey @ .80	36.00
Sept 24	Cash per 337 Galls Whiskey	294.87¼
Oct 28	P. Lindell & Co. for a Boat	300.00

After his return to Poke Bayou, business boomed. In late December of 1914, Luttig was apparently so busy he was forced to hire another riverman, John Duncan, and his keelboat to transport a large shipment of freight down the White and up the Mississippi to the mouth of the Ohio River. The cargo carried by Duncan included one thousand pounds of shaved and unshaved deerskins, numerous other animal pelts, three barrels of tallow, buffalo tongues, beef, salted trout, turkey wings, hams, and venison. The decision to pay another keelboatman rather than use his own boat, thereby avoiding the loss of trading time up and down the White while the craft made the long journey, must have been a difficult one for Luttig. It also proved to be a wrong one.

Duncan's keelboat took thirty-five days to travel from the Poke Bayou trading post to the mouth of the White River and up the Mississippi to the Ohio. At the Ohio's mouth, Duncan was supposed to be met by an agent of Christian Wilt; however, the connection was not made, resulting in the boat being taken to Kentucky. By the time the hides and pelts were sold and the remaining cargo was shipped to Wilt in St. Louis, there was a considerable financial loss. Wilt was particularly disappointed with the small amount of tallow included in the shipment, but Luttig had been unable to purchase more because the Osage had "put on their war paint" and prevented other Indian tribes and the white men in the area from hunting buffalo.

On April 16, 1815, Luttig wrote Wilt about recent tradings with the Indians. In his correspondence, Luttig spoke of particular dealings with the Delaware. The first of the tribe had arrived that day, and, while he had only traded thirty-two dollars of merchandise, he expected the bulk of the Delaware Nation, under Chief Pompus, to arrive shortly with about one thousand beaver and five hundred raccoon pelts to barter. Due to warfare among the Indians and high waters along the White, the corn crop that year had been seriously affected, so Luttig knew the demand for corn was high. Wisely, he had purchased a large quantity of the crop on Spring River, providing him with a strong bargaining position at the time. He felt he could show profits of five thousand dollars from his dealings with the Delaware.<sup>3</sup>

The Shawnee were another of the Indian tribes with whom Luttig dealt. In 1815, there were three settlements of Shawnee living near the White River, one located near the mouth of Livingston's Creek, one at the mouth of Pine Bayou, and one near the mouth of the Big North Fork (Norfork) River. Colonel Lewis was the Shawnee chief at the North Fork settlement. Luttig was evidently working with Colonel Lewis on the possibility of mining lead in that area. In his April 15 letter to Wilt, Luttig requested that Wilt secure a claim for lead mines on the lower North Fork of White River and that the permit be placed in one of three names: Colonel Lewis, Luttig, or Wilt.