

GREATER JEFFERSONTOWN

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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December 2015 Meeting

The December meeting will be held **Monday, December 7, 2015**. We will meet at 7:00 P.M. in the meeting room of the Jeffersontown Library at 10635 Watterson Trail. The speaker will be Robert Prather who is going to tell us about *The Strange Case of Jonathan Swift and the Real Long John Silver*. Swift was a miner in the 1700s and is said to have owned the largest mansion in Alexandria, Virginia. Was the mine in Kentucky or Virginia or Tennessee? Some traditions say it is/was in Kentucky.

What is the true identity of the mysterious silver miner? Sources of information provided in Kentucky history books were generally attained through verbal accounts; therefore, no written verifiable description has ever been provided to disclose the miner's full identity. Mr. Prather says that the identity of the mysterious silver miner is revealed in his book. The author also states, "As with all folk stories and legends, only basic information regarding any particular story is passed on by verbal accounts and in most instances the stories have been embellished and altered from one telling to the next." Swift's mining activities took place during the late 1700's, so how much truth has survived?

The Greater Jeffersontown Historical Society meetings are now held on the first Monday of the even numbered months of the year. Everyone is encouraged to attend to help guide and grow the Society.

February, 2016 Meeting

As part of Black History Month along with the Jeffersontown Branch Library we will have a program presented by local author, Carrider Jones, "Voices from Historical African American Communities Near Louisville, Kentucky."

October Meeting

Kadie Engstrom, Education Coordinator for the *Belle of Louisville*, has worked with the historic steamboat *Belle of Louisville* in several capacities since 1972, and has been Education Coordinator since 1992. She has written books, articles, and other resources concerning community history, steamboats, Ohio River history, the *Belle's* history, and the history of Life-Saving Station #10. She is the author of *Pathway Through the Past, a Timeline of the Development of History in the Metropolitan Area*. In addition, Kadie has developed and facilitated educational experiences for children and adults, including community presentations and exhibits, classroom and on-board programs for students, and workshops for teachers.

Most people learned in history class that the first steamboat, the *Clermont*, was invented/built by Robert Fulton and his was the first successful commercial steamboat. But the idea of a steamboat goes back much further than Fulton. The first steam powered vessel in the US goes back to August of 1787, when John Fitch tested his steamboat on the Delaware River in New Jersey. The invention was verbally supported by both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson which gave the vessel real power.

John Fitch, who owned property outside of Bardstown, was the first in the US to launch a steam powered vessel that worked. His propulsion system was based on how you powered a canoe. You put the paddle in the water and pushed back on the water to move forward. His vessel had a wheel mounted on each side with six paddles attached to it, and he was able to reverse the engine to go forward and backward. Now the vessel could go up and down river with comparative ease. No longer would boats only float down river at the whim of the current and at the final destination be torn apart, now the same boat would be able to take loads back up river.

But Fitch had a problem, he was abrasive and pushy, but most of all he was a bad businessman and he had problems keeping financial backers. In 1888 he launched his second steamboat on the Delaware and this one had a wheel with paddles attached at the stern of the boat. He ran trips on the Delaware River with the boat carrying thirty passengers, and his boats made commercial trips between New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Fitch had a very important talent. He served in the Revolutionary War under Washington as an armorer. He designed and built guns – he knew metal and how and what kind to use in an application. He knew how to build boilers for steam. Fitch would build four steamboats, and in 1791 he was granted a patent. But the patent wasn't a broad patent for the invention of the steamboat, but for his design of a steamboat, and others were also awarded design patents. So with the loss of a monopoly for steamboat invention Fitch lost his investors. He stated he was the real inventor of the steamboat, but that got lost in history. On July 2, 1798, despondent over his lack of recognition for inventing the commercial steamboat, Fitch took his own life.

In his journal Fitch wrote that someone else would get the recognition he had sought and that person has been Robert Fulton. Fulton would take Fitch's and other steamboat builders' designs to build his first boat, the *North River Steamboat* that he launched on the North River, as the Hudson River was known as at the time in 1807. It made a 150 mile run between New York City and Albany. So how did Fulton end up being named the inventor of the steamboat if all he did was to ride on the backs of the real inventors? Ahh, the media, a newspaper reporter writing a biography of Fulton, said Fulton invented the steamboat, and his first boat was named the *Clermont*. And now we know the rest of the story.

A new technology was born – steam power, and it became huge. Steam moved boats up river at the colossal speed of three, then up to eight miles per hour. Even at three mph, it was faster than a person or a horse could carry a load without resting. Moving cargo by water was the way to go. Trains didn't come along for another forty to fifty years.

But there were still problems even when steam was perfected. Boats had to have a sufficient level of water to float in, and there were many times when Mother Nature didn't cooperate and the rivers were either too shallow or flooded to move cargo by boat. But even when boats had to wait weeks for the rivers to be at the correct level, shipping by steamboat was still cheaper than moving it by horse and wagon overland.

Boat owners could build and outfit a boat and pay off the expense after just two trips. It became big business and the new "thing." By the 1850s when steam was perfected, one historian has said the building and outfitting boats and crew, and the business of provisioning of the passengers and crews of the boats was the second largest employer in the nation. But this fact wasn't plastered everywhere as it might today, the boating industry was so commonplace, so every day, it wasn't perceived as being something to be remembered.

Along navigable rivers, almost everyone living along them was involved in some way or another with the steamboat industry. Most of the steamboats had flat bottoms; especially the smaller boats that

could operate in, or would draw, as little as nine inches of water and the big boats could draw as much as ten feet of water. So, on a small or shallow river you could operate a small boat and make a good profit.

When the first steamboat, the *New Orleans*, started operating on the Ohio River in 1811, the east coast was already crowded and more new emigrants were flowing in every day. Most were farmers and good farm land on the coast was difficult to find. Washington and Jefferson had supported the steamboat because they realized that the steamboat was the way to move people and goods out to the far west in places like Kentucky. Remember, Jefferson had completed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and sent William Clark and Meriwether Lewis on the Voyage of Discovery to explore and hopefully find a water route across the country that would ease the movement of commerce and people to the west.

It is thought that 8,000 to 10,000 steamboats were built during the 1800s, with almost 75% of them operating on the Ohio River. So the steamboat's coming to the Western Waters opened up the country to economic development, moving people and cargo on all of America's navigable rivers. In what we call Kentuckiana today, there were more than eight shipyards operating at some period of time, more on the Indiana side than the Kentucky side. They were pouring out the steamboats because they were so much in demand. And it was a very lucrative and profitable business for this area. The Howard Shipyard in Jeffersonville, opened in 1834, built over 1,100 steamboats in their time. Considering it took about a year to build and outfit a large boat, to build 1,100 of them is something. Some of the most famous steamboats were built in the Howard Shipyard, but that is something that has been lost in history. And remember they were just one in the area where there were at least eight, and along the 981 miles of the Ohio River there were several areas that were considered ship building centers in their time. It was a huge industry that could bring incredible wealth.

What happened later? Well, the *Belle of Louisville* was built in the early twentieth century as were many other steamboats. The majority of steamboats were built in the nineteenth century. When the railroads came along and the transcontinental routes were connected, freight and people were more easily moved to areas away from rivers and the demise of the packet boats, as they were known, was started. A train could move at 30-40 miles per hour as opposed to the eight miles per hour for a boat and reach more places.

It was forty-five years between the invention of the steamboats and the steam locomotive, which at first was a "backyard toy." It took a while to develop the railroads, and the transcontinental routes, and the steam locomotive trains, and move the freight routes from water to land, but it all happened over time.

The building of steamboats didn't stop when the trains came along, instead it moved from the packet boat to the towboat – a new use of technology. It was realized that barges could be loaded with goods

and more freight could be moved by pushing a group of barges with boats with more power and bigger paddle wheels. And as we all know steam towboats with paddle wheels moved to diesel powered boats with propellers.



The *Belle* was built in 1914 as the *Idlewild*, renamed the *Avalon* after WWII, and she is the oldest operating Mississippi River paddler type of steamboat in the world. She is not the oldest steamboat in the world, but she is the oldest of her type in the world. The last steam packet boat built

by the Howard Shipyard was in 1923, and the last packet steamboat in the country was built in 1940. The *Belle* still has her original steam engines, and they were used engines at that time. They have been refurbished a couple of times, but they are the original engines that were built in 1890, twenty-four years old when they were installed in the *Idlewild*.



The era of the steam powered boat saw a resurgence in the 1970s, with the *Julia B. Swain* in 1971, based in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, the *Mississippi Queen* in 1974, later gutted and sold for scrap in 2009, the *Natchez* in 1974, based in New Orleans runs day cruises, and the *American Queen* in 1994, an overnight cruise boat on mainly the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

The *Delta Queen* built in 1926, was another type of steamboat, an overnight cruiser with staterooms like the *American Queen*. Because of her wooden construction the Coast Guard Service would not renew her worthiness permit in 2008, stating she was a fire trap. She was sold and based in Chattanooga as a floating hotel and restaurant until 2014, when she was again sold to a group that calls itself the Delta Queen Steamboat Company. On April 7, 2015, the *Queen* arrived in Houma, Louisiana for refurbishing at an estimated cost of ten million dollars to restore her to overnight cruiser status. That can't happen until the new owners get a congressional exemption to the new fire safety "SOLAS" regulations. If everything falls into place the plan is to base the *Delta Queen* in Kimmswick, Missouri, a small river town outside St. Louis. She was designated a National Landmark in 1989.

The *Belle* is still running, even with 120 year old equipment, and now she is an excursion boat. Her early livelihood was as a packet/freight vessel, she never ran excursions, had state rooms, or carried overnight passengers. By the 1930s her life as a packet boat was mostly done. Most freight movement transferred to land with the railroads and the new invention, the truck. So to keep earning income, the *Belle (Idlewild)* became an excursion vessel, and became a "tramp." She moved up and down river from town to town, staying a few days running excursions, then moved on. In river language that type of boat was called a tramp. She tramped for many years and did very well financially. In 1931 the *Idlewild* spent the season in Louisville running cruises to Rose Island and Fontaine Ferry amusement parks. After that year, she spent the next three years on US rivers, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, returning to the area in 1934.



In 1948 the *Idlewild* was renamed the *Avalon* and in 1949 she was sold to a group of Cincinnati investors. She became the most travelled steamboat in the country over the next thirteen years, but started to lose money and in 1962 the Cincinnati owners announced they were going to sell her for scrap. It was a sad state of affairs, because at the time she was the last of the original old steamboats still operating. But a newspaper reporter, *the media*, stepped in and thought this would be a great public relations event and suggested the *Avalon* be auctioned off. With two days to spare he got a court order to stop the demolition, and

she went on the auction block where the *Avalon* was purchased by Jefferson County government under the leadership of County Judge Marlow Cook, who rightfully thought it would be a great symbol for the area.

At that time the city and county governments were not one entity, and the Louisville's mayor and the city council thought the boat to be more than a tad scruffy and did not want to put up any money. Former Mayor Charles Farnsley stepped in and convinced the mayor and city council it would be a

great opportunity. The *Avalon* was purchased for \$34,000 and renamed the *Belle of Louisville*. Her scrap value was estimated to have been about \$1,500. That media reporter's idea sure helped the investor group pay off some bills. Seeing that the original cost of the *Idlewild* was \$85,000 in 1914, it was a great bargain, because she is priceless today. On April 30, 1963 the *Belle of Louisville* started her new life competing against the *Delta Queen* in the first Great Steamboat Race on the Ohio River during Kentucky Derby Week.

Jefferson County Executive Marlow Cook had the right idea, if you create a symbol and make it your own, people will come. Since that first cruise, over 7,000,000 people have ridden on the *Belle*. To get to that first sailing took many craftsmen, money, and volunteer hours. When the *Belle* arrived in Louisville they didn't even know if her boilers and engines could be saved, much less run. Public relations people in Louisville and in the *Delta Queen* organization made plans for the steamboat race and publicized it in January of 1963, even before the *Belle's* boilers had been fired up. Tickets were ten dollars and 500 were expected to be sold. Just over 100 tickets were sold.

Two days before the race the Coast Guard made an inspection of the boat, and deemed her not cruise worthy. You can't even push the start button. They left a list of items to be corrected for her to run, promised to come back in two days, and if enough had been done they would consider giving permission for her to run the race. Just two hours before the race, the Coast Guard gave the permission to just run the race, nothing more. When every item on the list was completed, the *Belle* could run regular cruises.

Out she went, really hardly able to run, much less race. But the *Belle* went up and down the river under her own power, didn't win, but completed the course. To the community and the powers that be, she was a winner and the rest is history.

Questions and Answers:

When did the antlers come in?

It started in the mid-1800s. When you've got this many boats running on the river, most are going to want to say mine is the fastest and bestest. Competition was fierce for business. You had to prove your boat was the fastest and the best way was to race. Most races were impromptu, but many were staged at an agreed and published time and place. Antlered animals were fast and agile animals, so antlers and horns became the symbols of the fastest boat. So if your boat was wearing the horns as it became to be known on the river, everyone knew yours was the best and got more attention. This was important because the fastest boats usually got the most business and the best contracts. Usually the antlers were retained on a boat for a year or they were lost to another boat in another race.

The Great Steamboat race was never staged (think – fixed), and sometimes the *Belle* beat the *Delta Queen*. It was always a contest, but sometimes the *Belle* had to rely on “circumstances” to beat a much larger and powerful *Delta Queen*, but it was always a contest. The *Belle* wears a set of retired elk antlers that were really worn out and the *Delta Queen* wears the newer replacement set she won in the last race between the two boats in 2008. The *Spirit of Jefferson* wears a set of antlers because of races she has won.

Did steam come to Europe or the US first?

The first use of steam commercially was to pump water out of mines in Europe in the 1700s. Europe was working on steam before the US. Most development came out of England and France. In the late 1700s you think England was going to sell us plans and equipment? Fulton learned all of his know-how in Europe then came over here. Steam was pretty much perfected by the mid-1800s and has changed much since then. Mark Twain was a steamboat pilot from 1850 to 1861. If he were alive today he could pilot the *Belle*. The exception is the *Belle* has a power steering system – a steam

powered steering system. Twain would have killed for such a steering system. Turning the wheel was not that easy.

Did Europe embrace steamboats like the US?

Once the steam locomotive was developed in Europe the railroads took over in a short period, as opposed to the US where transferring commerce from water to rail took a much longer time. There were more population centers along our rivers, and it took time to build the railroads out into the countryside. Also, the rail gauges were different and that was by design by the owners. Freight had to be changed between competing lines which took time and money. It wasn't until May of 1869 when the transcontinental lines were completed that a standard gauge became more common. Don't forget steam packet boats were still being built into the 1920s and 30s. And diesel engines also were starting to be used.

Ten, fifteen years ago General Electric Corp. sponsored rides on the *Belle* for school children, does any other corporation do that now?

Kadie said to her knowledge none do. Metro Parks is the closest entity to do that now,

Contact Us

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Happy Holidays

We want to wish everyone a happy holiday season!





This is a copy of a framed photograph GJHS member, Patty Archer, recently purchased at a local Peddler's Mall and presented it at the meeting. Kadie Engstrom said it was probably from a newspaper photo taken after 1870 because the Fourteenth Street Bridge or Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge is in the background. She knew of the steamboat *Columbia* and guesses the area pictured is around First or Second Street. At the right below the bow of the *Columbia* is the ramp to the Louisville Ferry. Looks like the donkey carts may have come off of it. The station that the "Heroes at the Falls" worked out of was located down past the other steamboats.