

LOUISVILLE'S RIVER

The Falls of the Ohio are the only natural obstruction to navigation on the Ohio River (which is 981 miles long.) As such they are the reason that Louisville exists! They forced boats to stop, unload their goods and passengers, and then try to “Shoot” the rapids if the water level was high enough. That only occurred a few months of the year (usually Dec – April), so often they would have to wait out the dry spells. This is the reason that 4 towns developed in the area: Louisville, KY; across the river, Jeffersonville, IN; Portland & Shippingport, KY; and across the river, New Albany, IN. These towns vied for importance and development. Louisville eventually won out this struggle once the canal redefined the way traffic moved on the river.

The name “Falls” is somewhat a misnomer, since they actually were a series of rapids. The water level falls 26 feet over 2 miles of the river, with coral beds sitting on top of a limestone base. To make things even more difficult for travelers, the “Falls” were frequently less than 2 feet deep in many places, which made any travel over the Falls nearly impossible. Experienced pilots helped boat captains make it through the rapids by utilizing the “Chutes” over the Falls. Attempts in the dark or during storms were extremely risky, creating the need for the U.S. Life Saving Station and one of the earliest Marine Hospitals in the Country.

The River brought many changes to Louisville. Through the years, the changes in types of boats affected the city and its culture. Steamboats brought new routes for trade, new products were introduced to the area, and Kentucky products were able to cross great distances in short periods of time.

While Steamboats are not as popular as they were 100 years ago, the River still carries huge amounts of commercial traffic. In fact the Portland Canal has more traffic and is responsible for moving more goods than the Panama Canal. One can't look at the Ohio River near Louisville without seeing a barge these days, and the barges now carry far more than they used to. Barges are able to transport large amounts of goods using much less resources. A typical barge now carries 15 bays, which is equal to 225 rail cars or 870 trucks!

The Falls of the Ohio are nothing like they were 200 years ago. Certainly nature has played a part in that, but early in the 1800's the city leaders and government saw the need to create a canal around the Falls. There were 5 main improvements made to the Falls and the Canal. These have taken over the busy port known as Shippingport. Several islands have vanished from the area. And the Hydro-electric Plant and Dam redirect water away from the original canal beds that were once covered by the Ohio River in what was known as the Indian Chute. This is on the Indiana side of the Falls, and was one of the more popular routes over the Falls when the water level was high enough to allow river traffic. It is now part of the The Falls of the Ohio State Park in Indiana.

Crossing the River became important for businesses by the late 1800's. Several bridges were built in order to connect the areas, especially to allow railroad traffic to pass. These bridges connected the cities which had sprung up along various landings along the river at the top and bottom of the Falls, on both sides of the river. Jeffersonville & Louisville were on the north side of the Falls, and New Albany and Portland were on the south side. Cartage business grew as more travelers came through the region. Connections across the river were made by

railroads, bridges, and ferries, with both sides recognizing the importance of moving people and goods across the River.

During the Civil War, the river became a symbol of freedom for slaves, of national security, and transportation of supplies, goods and troop reinforcements for the Union forces. Dr. Blaine Hudson, noted underground railroad historian, was convinced that the location with the most traffic of any underground railroad river crossings was just below the Falls of the Ohio in Louisville. A common saying was “Sold down the River” which was usually used as a threat to problem slaves. Since Louisville was one of the busiest slave markets (just behind Cincinnati) many slaves were literally “Sold down the River” to the plantations of the South. Lincoln said “I must have Kentucky” which expressed his understanding that holding this border state would bring the success of the war. Boats were outfitted to cruise the river, and even shelled some areas. In addition, many supplies and troops were moved to the South through Louisville, with its easy access to the railroads and River.

Ship Building became a big business in the area. Howard Ship Yards made hundreds of steamboats that traversed the Ohio River and elsewhere, but the company suffered financial problems during the depression and was sold to the government and became Jefferson Boat & Machine Company. During WWII they created LST's for use during the war. Later it was sold again and renamed Jeffboat; it is the largest inland boat building and repair station in the US., and currently owned by ACL, American Cruise Lines.

Louisville's history has been marked by many of the weather events affecting the River. Its' long history of floods and icing on the River are often related, since the snow & ice melting often causes flooding, or causes an Ice Gorge. During an Ice Gorge the Ice is pushed upwards by the force of the water underneath causing ice dams, which stop the flow of water and can cause flooding behind the dam. When the ice starts to melt, then the force of the water breaks the ice dam. Walls of water rush down the river carrying large chunks of ice, like a tsunami, destroying anything in its path. The most notable of these occurred at the end of January 1918, when many steamboats were destroyed along the Ohio River. That date marked one of the final death tolls of the Steamboat Era.

The floods, droughts and Ice events in Louisville's history were normal occurrences. 1937 is worst flood in Louisville's history. It was in fact not just Louisville that suffered, but all along the entire length of the Ohio River. 70% of the residences in Louisville were under water, and the rest had no heat or other utilities. Louisville's floodwall was proposed shortly after the 1937 flood, but due to the war it was delayed and not completed until 1947, 2 years after the 2nd worst flood on record in Louisville. Somehow that flood has been mostly forgotten, or lumped somehow into the flood of 1937. But there were many other floods in Louisville, notably those in 1884, 1907, 1913, 1964, and 1997.

The history of Louisville will be forever entwined with the history of the Ohio River.