

The Steamboat Bertrand and Missouri River Commerce

Maria Howe
Iowa State University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2015 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution

Recommended Citation

Howe, Maria. "The Steamboat Bertrand and Missouri River Commerce." *The Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015), 81-83.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12175>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

South under the control of select northern denominational leaders" (148). Religious independence melted away before the exigencies of war. Perhaps Wesley's most chilling accounts are those showing what happened to Unionist clerics in the Upper South. Although the evidence is not fully explicated, Wesley proposes that "there were more than a few wartime murders of denominational ministers throughout the South, murders of and by both Confederates and Unionists. The bulk of such atrocities were carried out in the Upper South, and a majority of them featured victims who were in the Unionist clergy" (164). The suppression of religious speech and the outright murder of ministers—regardless of side or cause—form a vital part of Wesley's case regarding the decay of wartime clerical authority.

His concluding chapter, "Black Church Leaders and Politics in the Civil War," is a disappointment and puts in jeopardy the scope of his argument. Wesley rightly problematizes the idea that "black leaders" thought in any single way about important political issues—such as colonization or the recruitment of troops—but misses the ways the war empowered rather than diminished them. It offered many such opportunities, perhaps nowhere more powerfully than when a group of 20 black ministers met with General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton in Savannah, Georgia, on January 12, 1865. Sherman and Stanton took the meeting in order to help solve the refugee problem plaguing Sherman's invading armies. The black ministers proposed land ownership as one solution, and Sherman delivered for them. Four days after that historic meeting, Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 opened the door for freed people to lay claim to thousands of acres of abandoned plantation lands. Black ministers, too, exerted new power in officiating at the weddings of thousands of freed people (a ministerial office denied them under slavery) and by running for elective office during Reconstruction. Had Wesley counted more fully the experiences of black ministers and church leaders, his overall assessment of the damage the war did to clerical authority might have been more carefully circumscribed.

The Steamboat Bertrand and Missouri River Commerce, by Ronald R. Switzer. Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. 376 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Maria Howe is a doctoral candidate in the Rural, Agricultural, Technological, and Environmental History Program at Iowa State University. Her research focuses on the intersection of environmental and legal history in the rural Midwest, with a specific focus on federal water projects.

On April 1, 1865, the day before Jefferson Davis was forced to flee Richmond as Union troops captured the Confederate capital, a steamboat over a thousand miles away bound for the distant Montana mining frontier hit a snag in the Missouri River and sank. While the Civil War was drawing to a close, with General Lee's surrender at Appomattox just a week later, the story of this ill-fated steamboat reminds us that commerce on the Missouri River was nevertheless thriving. Although the sinking of the *Bertrand* was not unique at the time – indeed, it was only one of several steamboats that sunk in that month alone on a short stretch of the river north of Omaha – the excavation of the *Bertrand* over a hundred years later did offer a unique lens into the material culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Ronald R. Switzer, an archeologist and retired National Park Service superintendent, has undertaken the daunting task of making accessible that treasure trove of over 300,000 artifacts in *The Steamboat Bertrand and Missouri River Commerce*.

The centerpiece of the book is chapter six, which catalogs the cargo unearthed in the *Bertrand* wreckage. Buried under feet of sand and clay in a dried meander of the river, the excavation crew found such varied items as Bourbon Whiskey Cocktail, London Club Sauce, mining and agricultural implements, and munitions. Switzer traces the history of the artifacts, exploring their invention, manufacture, marketing, and intended use. According to Switzer's research, much of the cargo that was destined for the mining camps and military forts in Montana Territory was produced in the eastern United States and consisted predominantly of staples, foodstuffs, and materials needed on the frontier, not luxury items.

The remaining chapters provide context for these archeological findings. Chapter one documents the steamer's construction in West Virginia; its early trips to river cities like St. Louis, Cairo, Paducah, and New Orleans; and the various shifts in its ownership among merchants along the way. In chapter two, Switzer assesses the economics of Missouri River trade between St. Louis and Ft. Benton, the last main stop on the river. Making this trip promised high profits, as supplies on the frontier were in high demand, but also presented substantial economic risks. Navigation routes constantly shifted due to seasonal flooding and the resulting silt, snags, and meanders that floods produced, yet boat owners were often only willing to pay to insure a portion of their cargo. Chapter three presents firsthand accounts of the sinking, and chapters four and five offer biographies of the officers, crew, and passengers

onboard, as well as the consignees of the cargo waiting upstream. Chapter seven briefly addresses the decline of steamboat commerce by the 1870s as railroads expanded westward.

Ultimately, the trail of the *Bertrand* impresses upon readers the many connections that existed within the vast steamboat network that covered the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri river valleys. Switzer successfully demonstrates how that network linked commerce, transportation, and migration throughout the region, and provides insight into the peak of the steamboat era and the final years before the first transcontinental railroad heralded the steamboat's decline. The book would have benefited from additional attention to more recent secondary literature on the subject. It lacks mention of Adam Kane's book, *The Western River Steamboat* (2004), which was part of a series on nautical archeology. Switzer does engage with William Lass's *The History of Steamboating on the Upper Missouri* (1962) but fails to mention Lass's more recent work, *Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature's Highway, 1819–1935* (2007). Bibliographical references to newer syntheses of western history, like Anne F. Hyde's *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (2011), also would have strengthened the book.

These suggestions notwithstanding, Switzer's work provides a valuable resource for scholars focused on the steamboat era, Missouri River commerce, nineteenth-century material culture, or the trans-Mississippi West. Switzer's explanations of the design of light-draft steam-driven river vessels will appeal especially to those interested in the history of technology. Anyone familiar with the *Bertrand* Discovery Site in Missouri Valley, Iowa, will also enjoy learning more about this fascinating capsule of the past. Overall, the work provides an excellent companion to the first assessment of the *Bertrand* written in 1974 by Jerome T. Petsche, to whom the book is dedicated.

The Maid Narratives: Black Domesticity and the White Families in the Jim Crow South, by Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, and Charletta Sudduth. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. xviii, 298 pp. Illustrations, references, index. \$36.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Valerie Grim is professor and chair of the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University. Her research and writing have mostly focused on African American women in the rural U.S. South, but she is also the author of "African Americans in Iowa Agriculture: A Portrait," in *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (2001).

For some time now, we have known that black and white life in the American South was quite intertwined. Despite the terror of slavery,