

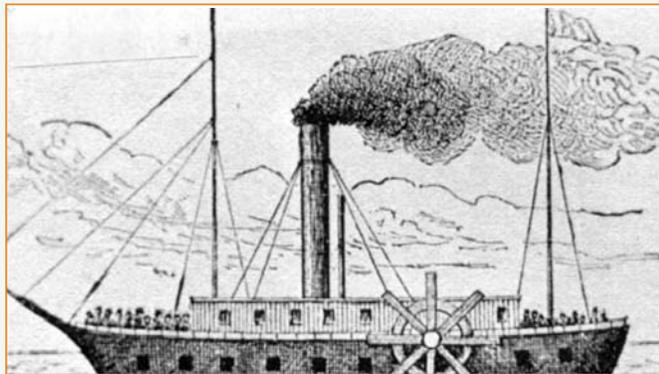
A Groundbreaking Steamboat Voyage

The Mississippi River brings to mind the image of majestic steamboats rolling lazily along from town to river town. Yet the very first steamboat ever to attempt a passage on the Mississippi almost didn't survive its remarkable voyage. The 116-foot-long craft, named the *New Orleans*, was designed in 1811 by Robert Fulton with funding from Robert Livingston. Four years earlier these two men had cooperated on a project that produced the first successful steamboat on the Hudson River. Their attempt to test a

Mississippi River steamboat was a trial indeed. Under the eerie glow of a comet, the builders launched the experimental craft in August of 1811, near Pittsburgh. Nicholas Roosevelt, ancestor to two presidents, commanded the *New Orleans* throughout its 2300-mile voyage. Roosevelt's pregnant wife insisted on making the entire journey with him. In just the first few weeks the crew

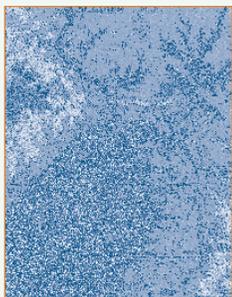
endured a terrifying descent over rapids, was threatened by a war party from the Chicksaw tribe and then, before dawn on 16 December 1811, they awoke to the sound of the earth literally being torn apart. The main force of the largest earthquake

ever recorded in America was concentrated almost directly under the spot the *New Orleans* had chosen to anchor for the night. Large islands, small towns and complete forests disappeared down the river as the *New*



One of Robert Fulton's early Mississippi steamboats

Orleans rode out the tempest in midstream. After the quake subsided and the river settled on its course, the steamboat continued to feel its way on down the Mississippi. On 10 January 1812, the *New Orleans* pulled up to the public wharf at New Orleans, Louisiana. Fulton, Livingston, and Roosevelt had conquered the Mississippi River with their fire-powered craft and opened a new era of trade, travel and exploration in the American West. Plus, during the voyage, the captain's wife delivered a baby boy!



The great quake was centered near New Madrid.

History's First Watercraft

What did humankind's very first watercraft look like? The first rustic vessel constructed by our prehistoric ancestors was probably made of two logs lashed together by a vine (one log would be a log, not a boat). This two-log craft could be called a raft, and each additional log lashed on would lend stability and offer more room for passengers and their goods. Rafts have continued to serve as some of our most functional (although not always prettiest) watercraft, and have contributed to all areas of our maritime heritage.

Rafts carried America's early settlers (with their goods and animals) along the rivers throughout the frontier. Before the arrival of the Europeans, Inca kings transported their hordes of gold and silver across the lakes and along the coastlines of South America aboard elaborate rafts. Makeshift rafts have

served as platforms for science and discovery and have rescued countless survivors from shipwrecks, floods and deserted islands.

The passengers and crew of the ship *Medusa*, wrecked near the coast of Africa in 1816, constructed a makeshift liferaft from parts of their vessel. One hundred fifty hopeful people boarded this crude raft but only ten men survived the two weeks of storms, violence, and even cannibalism among the castaways.

In 1947, Thor Heyerdahl, a Norwegian explorer, built a balsa wood raft, named *Kon-Tiki*, and sailed it across the Pacific in an attempt to prove that ancient peoples in South America could have populated the Polynesian Islands.

Today, after tens of thousands of years, the lowly raft continues to serve as the most basic of working watercraft throughout the world.

