

TRAVELING THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

July 12 to August 21, 1818



June 12, 1818

... We have been told that the trip up the river is not dangerous and that the captain, who has already been informed about our passage, is a very trustworthy man. The steamboats operate under very strict regulations. The men's quarters are entirely separate from the women's, so during the entire trip we shall be able to have neither Mass and Communion nor confession. We do not know yet when we shall leave.





July 1818

“OUR BOXES AND BAGGAGE ARE ALREADY ON BOARD THE STEAMBOAT FOR ST. LOUIS. WE DID NOT UNPACK ANYTHING, AS WE USED ONLY WHAT WE HAD IN OUR VALISES. THE URSULINES HAD OUR CLOTHES LAUNDERED EVERY WEEK, AND WE HAVE BOUGHT COTTON DRESSES OF LIGHT MATERIAL FOR THE TRIP UP THE RIVER. THEY ARE BLACK WITH A SINGLE WHITE THREAD RUNNING THROUGH THE GOODS.”

— PHILIPPINE DUCHESNE, RSCJ, IN A LETTER TO MOTHER BARAT

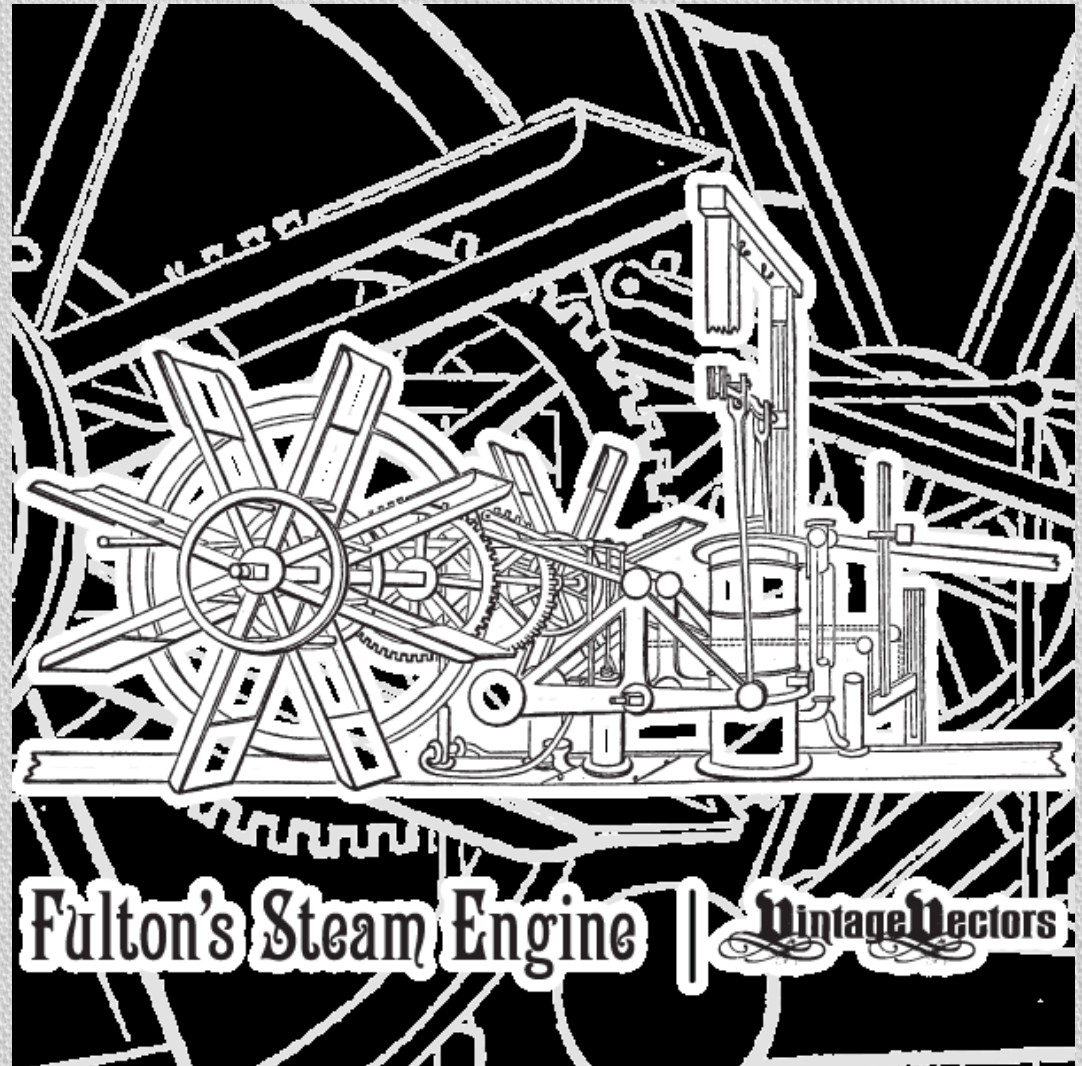
July 12, 1818

The *Franklin* pulls away from New Orleans with fourteen passengers, including the five nuns, who are engrossed with the beauty of their new world. The trip to St. Louis will take 40 days.



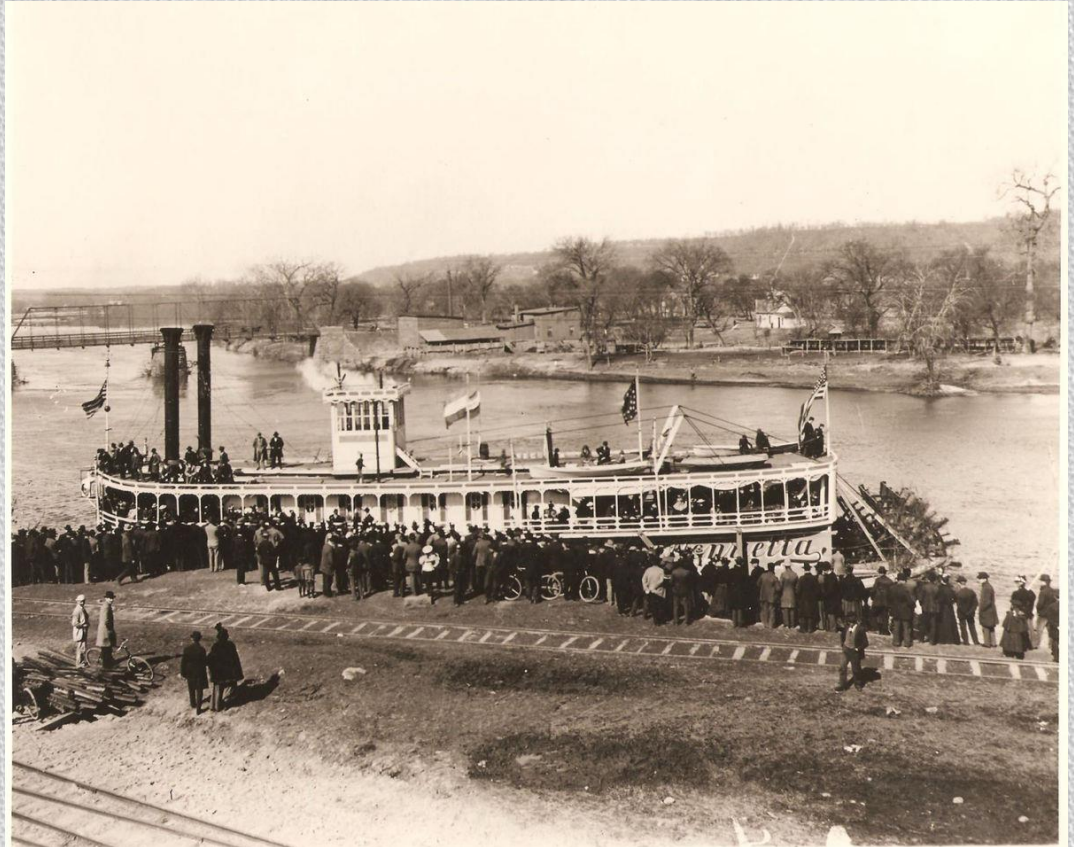
The *Franklin*

It was a new boat in its second season, and Captain Reed was flattered by the lively interest of the French nuns in everything he showed them. The machinery occupied almost the entire length of the first deck, leaving only a small space in the rear for “deck passengers.”



The *Franklin*

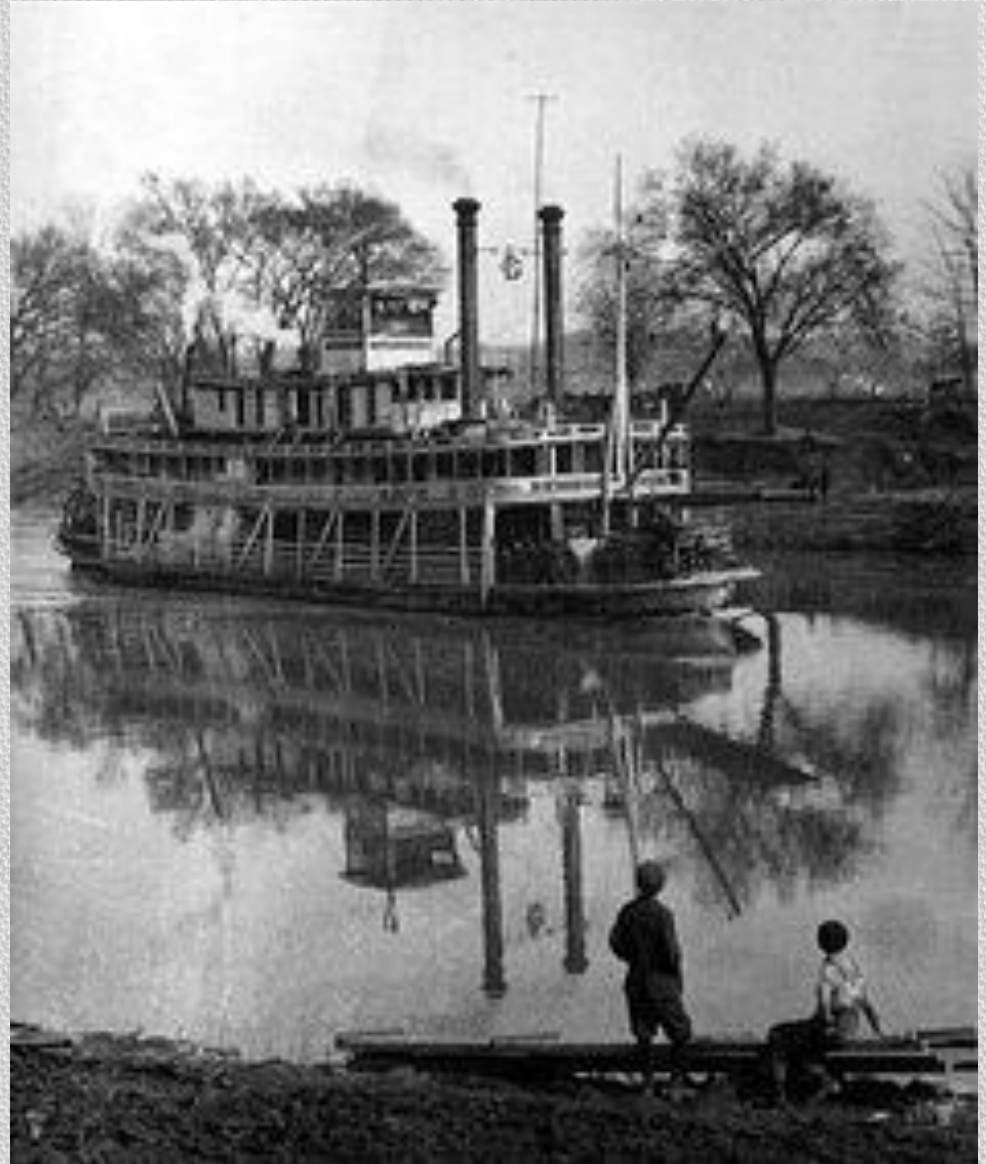
The domain of the cabin passengers was the second deck, where the ladies' parlor was well to the rear for the sake of safety in case of a boiler explosion. The pilot house and officers' quarters were on the top, or "hurricane," deck.



July 13, 1818

At the Donaldsonville landing Father Benedict Richard, destined to be the new pastor of St. Charles Borromeo parish, came aboard with two seminarians,

Evremond Harrissart, whom the nuns knew quite well, and Michael Portier.



The *Franklin*

The nuns had been assured that the river trip was not at all dangerous. But the fact that it took the Franklin forty days of navigation to reach St. Louis shows that perils abounded, for the Mississippi was so notoriously dangerous that travel by night was rarely attempted in the early decades of steamboating. Shallows and sand bars, planters and sawyers were practically everywhere and difficult to avoid. A snag could rip such a rent in the wooden hull that the boat would sink in a few minutes.



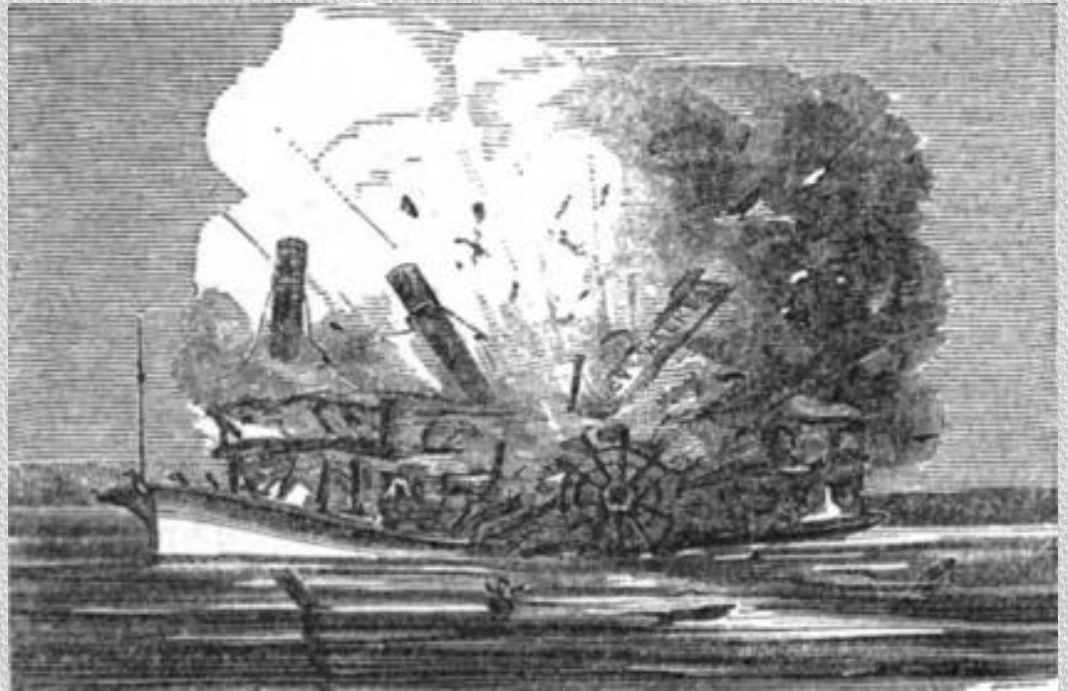
The *Franklin*

In summer and autumn when the river was low, shifting sand bars changed the channel continually and built up hidden traps on which boats ran aground and listed perilously, if not disastrously. Spring floods, carrying great loads of debris from upstream, occasioned troubles of another kind.



The *Franklin*

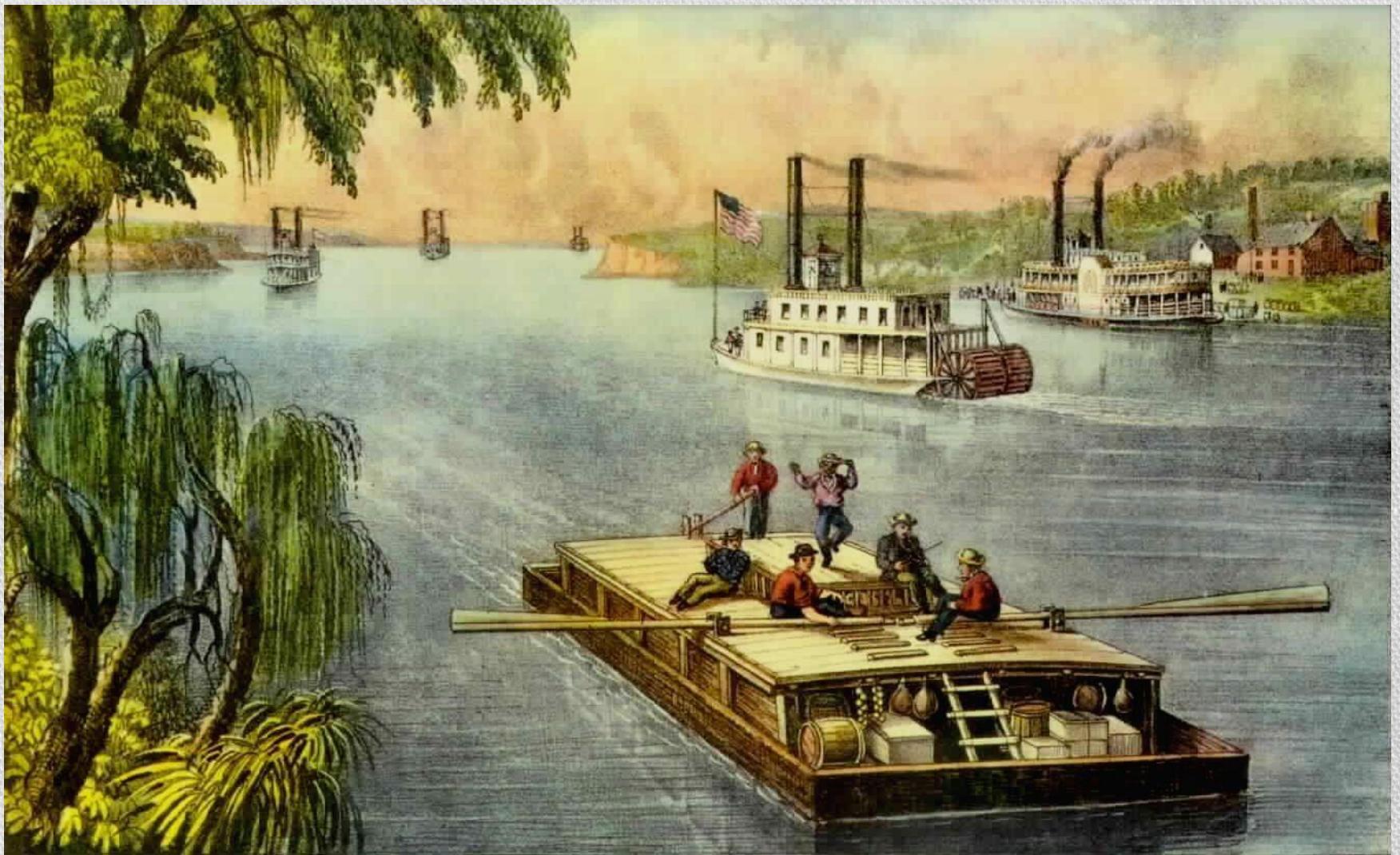
There were man-made dangers, too, on the river trip. Mechanical inefficiencies abounded, for the steamboat was still in a trial-and-error stage. Faulty boilers sometimes burst under high pressure of steam. Wood used for fuel threw off showers of sparks that often set fire to the highly combustible boats.



The Franklin

Crude sanitary conditions added danger to discomfort, for the steamboats became carriers of the dreaded epidemics that ravaged cities and towns along the river for nearly a century. Mother Duchesne would experience the rougher side of river travel in the years to come, but both the Franklin and the Mississippi were on their good behavior during the summer of 1818.





From the time the boat was loosed from its moorings and headed out into the stream, the nuns were engrossed in the beauty of this new phase of their new world.

The Mississippi

Here was a mighty
expanse of mud-
yellow water, so wide
that its fearful
swiftness was almost
unperceived, yet
holding
unpredictable
destruction in its
treacherous current.
Gulls soared or sailed
overhead or skimmed
the surface of the
water.



The Mississippi

Now and then on the lower stretches of the river, substantial plantation houses could be seen, gleaming white or creamy yellow in the sunshine, with stately avenues of trees leading from the river landing to the pillared gallery, with sugar houses and slave quarters, stables and carriage houses scattered at no great distance from the big house.



The Mississippi

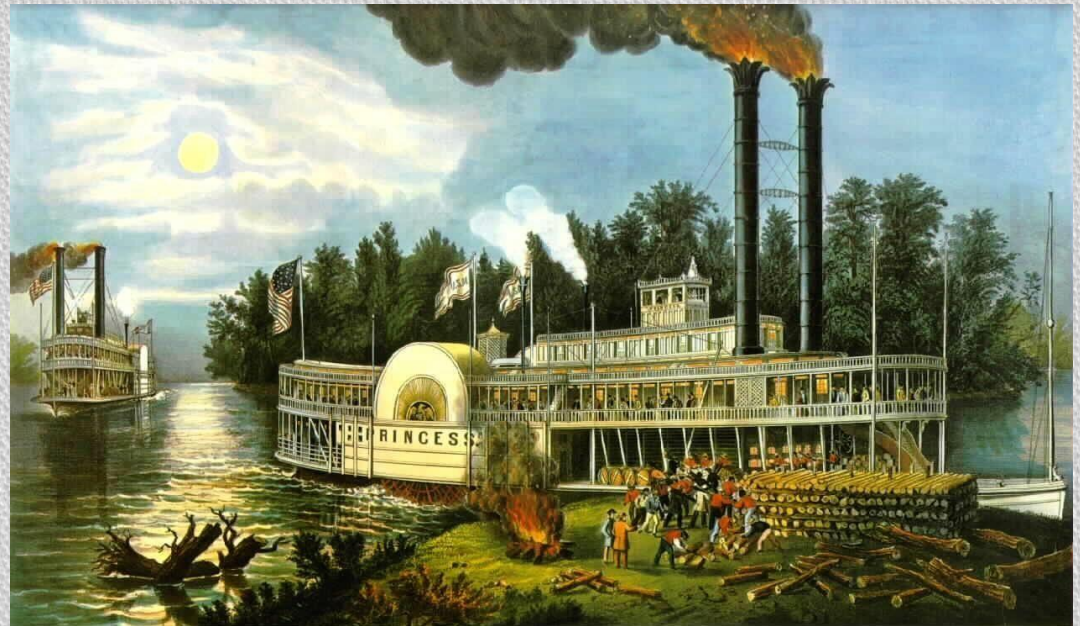
Tall, moss-draped cypress trees rose from swampy land sunk in brown ooze and formed an impenetrable forest wall. Sometimes the Franklin plowed along in their deep shade and the passengers found relief from the midsummer sun. Herons rose from the tangled thickets, startled by the splash of the paddle wheel that left a choppy white wake on the water. Swarms of mosquitoes attacked the passengers, and their stings were like sparks of fire, Mother Audé thought.



The Mississippi

As the steamboat took its zigzag course up the highway of the valley, it stopped now on one shore, now on the other, to take on passengers or freight or fuel wood.

At the frequent stops for refueling, the boat hands chopped in the forest while passengers hunted wild turkeys, ducks, and rabbits to add to the dinner menu.



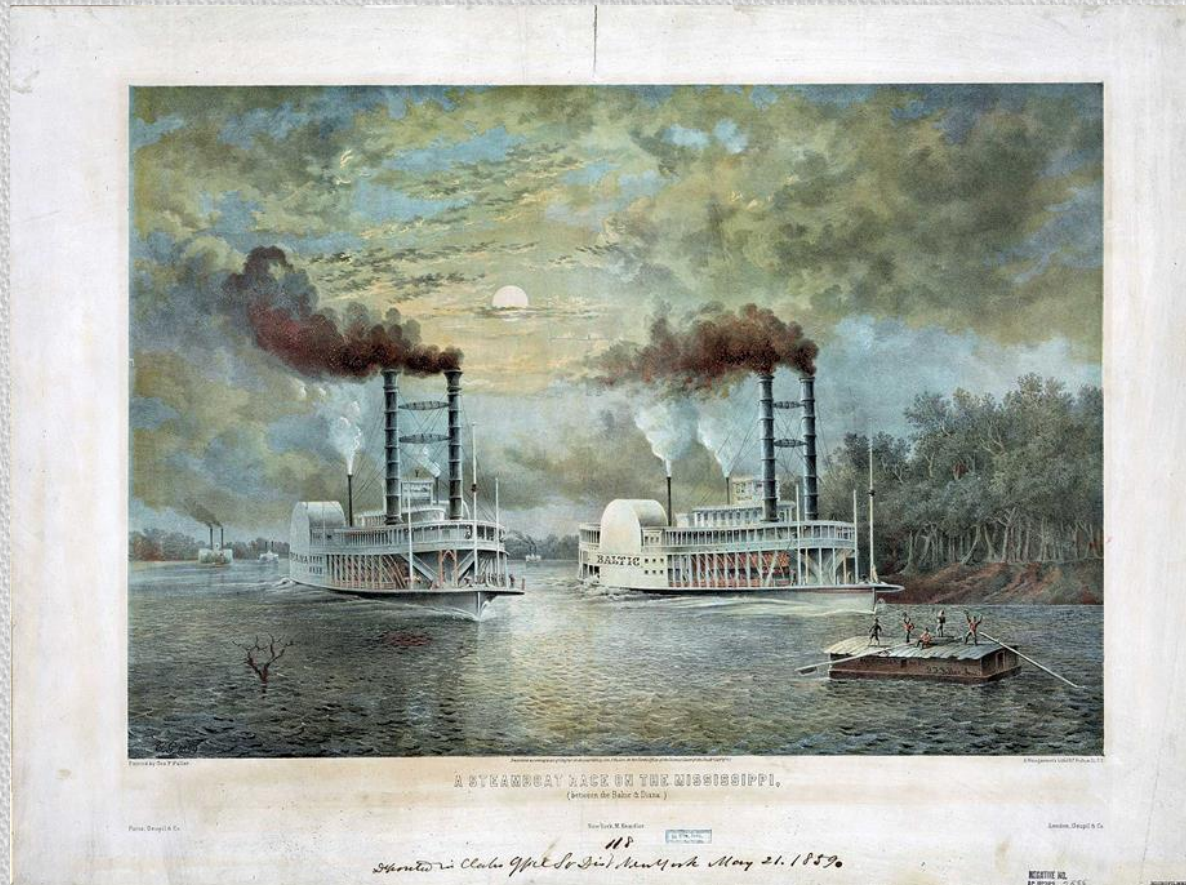
The Mississippi

When the river was lashed by summer storms, the angry waters were dark under the gray sky, but the Franklin rode them sturdily, and the nuns were unafraid, for they had weathered ocean storms far worse than those that struck the river in 1818.



The Mississippi

Fair weather meant oppressive heat, but sundown brought relief and the soft, still night, when a million stars hung low in the rich, dark sky above, or the golden moon rode behind the giant trees or shone in splendor on the rippling water, hiding its murkiness under a lustrous sheen.



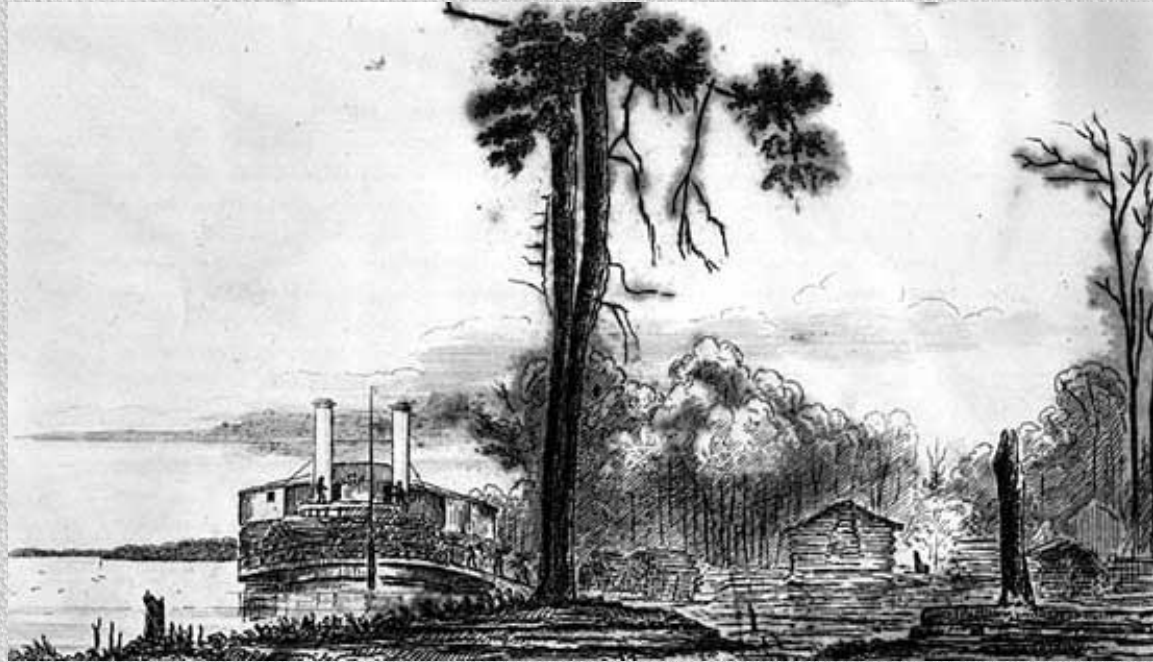
July 17, 1818

The high, green bluffs of Natchez came into view on July 17, and the Franklin drew in to the landing. During the day some drunken Indians on horseback rode down to the river bank, the men bedecked in native finery of skins and bright-hued feathers, the women wearing red calico and shining ornaments. The sight of them attracted and repelled Mother Duchesne.



The Mississippi

Here and there appeared a pioneer's clearing, a log cabin, a patch of cultivated ground. Further on, tilled fields, small orchards, and fenced pasture lands marked the outskirts of settlements and the industry of the pioneers. Early in August the Franklin passed the Arkansas border, and Missouri lay on the left bank.



August 19, 1818

The boat stops at
Sainte Genevieve,
where the nuns meet
Father Henri Pratte.



OLD SAINT GENEVIEVE — SETTLED 1735

The Mississippi

The long river trip was drawing to a close. As the limestone cliffs grew higher along the west shore the travelers strained to catch a glimpse of the spreading group of houses that was the town.



August 21, 1818

The nuns are welcomed to St. Louis by Bishop DuBourg and invited to stay at the home of General and Mrs. Bernard Pratte, who are parents of two sons and five daughters.





CALLAN, LOUISE. PHILIPPINE
DUCHESNE: FRONTIER MISSIONARY OF
THE SACRED HEART.
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