

## SPOTLIGHT

# A Page in History

## Riverboat captains found welcome on local shores

*"A Page in History" will chronicle some of the most distinguished and interesting former citizens who are now at rest in Sewickley Cemetery.*

*This article remembers some of the those who worked as captains and crew on ships along the Ohio River and made Sewickley their home. We will also examine the historic role the river played in the life of Sewickley, and this region.*

The Ohio River figures prominently in our history.

The Indians loved the beautiful river, and the French agreeing called it "la belle riviere."

In 1753, George Washington paddled past Sewickley to visit Logstown, (today Ambridge), during a mission to tell the French they must leave this region, which they eventually did after their defeat in the French and Indian War.

England then took control until defeat in the Revolutionary War left the land to the American colonists.

The river, serving as the most efficient path for transportation of passengers and freight in mid-continent America, carried the nation westward.

In 1793 "Mad Anthony" Wayne brought the Legion of the United States down the Ohio in a fleet of barges and canoes to train at Legionville (today Baden). This force defeated the Indians at Fallen Timbers in Ohio in 1794, freeing up millions of acres of land in the Old Northwest for settlement, and the rush west was on.

**Pittsburgh served** as the starting point for anything that would float to carry dreamers westward. Industry flourished there, including iron, glass and boat building.

Two hundred years ago, Meriwether Lewis came past in a 55-foot keelboat with a draft of 3 feet on the start of an expedition to open up yet more land west of the Mississippi River. By then there was a white settler at Sewickley to help the keelboat through a shallows near where the Sewickley Bridge

stands today. That settler was Henry Ulery, a retired German sea captain who had purchased 200 acres in 1798 and built a log house.

The first steam-powered boat on the Ohio was built in Pittsburgh in 1811 by Nicholas J. Roosevelt, a partner in the firm of inventor Robert Fulton. Her machinery was built in New York and transported in pieces over the Allegheny Mountains. She was named the "New Orleans" and designed for the New Orleans to Natchez trade.

**Within a few years**, the steamboat would penetrate to the headwaters of most tributary streams and become the best way to move passengers and freight. Early steamboats were simple in design but later became larger and more ornate culminating in the period of the 1870s and '80s enshrined in the work of Mark Twain.

The river at that time was crowded with the large packet boats, produce boats, shop boats, gospel boats, engineer boats, light and buoy boats, showboats, houseboats and yachts.

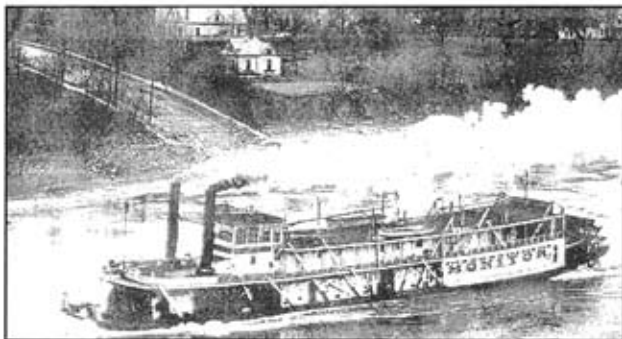
Boat-yards lined the shores. There were large yards at Shousetown on the shore opposite the mouth of Big Sewickley Creek (today Glenwillard), and just down the river at Freedom where Conway rail yard sits today.

There was a boatyard in Sewickley at the foot of Ferry Street that produced its first hull in April 1879, the steamer "Butte," meant for trade on the upper Missouri. In all, 17 hulls were built before the yard was destroyed by fire in 1883.

Until the 1930s, Sewickley was a typical river town with a landing at Chestnut Street and a riverfront hotel at the top of the wharf grade. After 1863, it was the Park Place Hotel and from the 1890s on the Elmhurst Inn.

River news was a prominent feature in newspapers from 1840-1920s. Life focused on the river.

There were two ferries at Sewickley, Lashell's at the foot of Chestnut Street and Sloops' at the foot of Ferry Street. Both were rendered obsolete by the 1911



**A steamer passing Chestnut Street landing**

*Photo courtesy of Sewickley Valley Historical Society*

completion of the Sewickley Bridge.

There was a Sewickley Canoe and Boat Club. At the foot of Walnut Street, a beach was developed with shallow water and a smooth gravel bottom.

By 1920, there were scores of little cottage camps at the site. Huge picnics were held. Excursion steamers brought bathers down from Pittsburgh for a day at the beach.

The relocation of the railroad closer to the river in 1927 required the dumping of slag for a rail bed that ruined Walnut Beach.

Throughout this period many owners, captains, pilots, mates and clerks connected with river trade were well known residents of the Sewickley Valley. Today they rest in Sewickley Cemetery.

**Captain David Gilmore** lived by the railroad where the middle school is now. He was captain of a packet in the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati trade, but he also travelled to St. Louis or New Orleans.

Captain George W. Cochran, also captain of a packet, lived next door to Gilmore. He was the burgess in Sewickley and led the movement in 1876 to create a fire department in the valley that still bears his name, the Cochran Hose Co.

Captain Jehu P. Smith who was a tow boat man built, in addition to his own house on Graham Street which is now gone, four nearly identical Italianate style houses for his children that still stand on Pebbles Street (numbers 304-322).

Captain John Clark Anderson went to California during the gold rush and then came back to be a mate, pilot and owner on the river. He was on the rivers during the Civil War and was a cousin

of Col. William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. He died Oct. 6, 1928, almost 101 years old, but not before he talked to F. T. Nevin, author of *The Village of Sewickley*, about the river society.

In 1866, Captain James Wilson Porter built the Second Empire House that still stands at 406 Pebbles St.

Four McDonalds, all pilots or captains, David, Marshall, Joe and John lived here. Marshall lived in Osborne. The McDonalds held an interest in the boatyard in Sewickley. Their boats moved coal from Pittsburgh to Louisville.

Captain Frederick Dippold lived on the river bank in Osborne. He was a pilot and navigator on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. He had a pilot house in his yard. His daughters became skilled pilots themselves.

Captain Frederick Way Jr. was Sewickley's Old Man of the River. He died in 1992, at age 91, and was a link with the old days on the river.

He was a captain for the Green Line Steamers and for Ashland Oil on towboats. In 1947 he helped to bring the "Delta Queen" from San Francisco to New Orleans through the Panama Canal for refitting as a Mississippi River tourist steamer.

**He was** the author of numerous books about the river including the incomparable Way's Packet Directory 1848-1963, documenting almost 6,000 steamboats on the inland waters.

He built a little steamboat in his back yard called the "Lady Grace" that he used to cruise up and down the river.

Between Captains Anderson and Way more than 100 years of river history in Sewickley is well documented.