A Young Hoosier’s Adventures on the Mississippi River

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The instance of a young man of enterprise and standing, as a merchant, trader, planter, or even farmer, who has not made at least one trip to New Orleans is uncommon . . . . Every principal farmer along the great water courses builds and sends to New Orleans the produce of his farm in a flat boat. Thus a great proportion of the males of the West . . . have made this passage to New Orleans . . . . They have experienced that expansion of mind which cannot fail to be produced by traversing long distances of country, and viewing different forms of nature and society. Every boat, that has descended from Pittsburgh, or the Missouri, to New Orleans, could publish a journal of no inconsiderable interest. Rev. Timothy Flint, 1828

On December 20, 1834, a flatboat carrying 14,000 pounds of barrel-packed pork and beef, more than 350 chickens, and a variety of other agricultural products set off down the Wabash River headed to New Orleans. Among the five crew members was twenty-two-year-old Asbury C. Jaquess of Posey County, Indiana, who kept a journal of the voyage. Jaquess, like thousands of other young men, took the opportunity to leave family and farm for a few months, to see places to which he

'Timothy C. Flint, A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley (1828; reprint, Gainesville, Fl., 1970), quoted in Michael Allen, Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse (Baton Rouge, La., 1990), 170.

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The first page of Asbury Jaquess's journal

Courtesy Judith Lindell
had never gone (and might never go again), and to experience the adventures of life along the Mississippi River.

Asbury's desire to travel and see something of the wider world beyond the Wabash Valley may have come to him from his father. At the age of 12, Jonathan Jaquess, Jr., left his home in New Jersey and signed on as a cabin boy on a trading vessel. He eventually rose to command his own ship and was trading in the Caribbean when the Revolutionary War began. Jaquess served in a New Jersey regiment and fought in several major battles. In 1789, Jaquess moved with his second wife Esther and their three children from New Jersey to the Kentucky frontier. Esther soon gave birth to a fourth child, but she and the infant both died during the family's first year in Kentucky. In 1791 Jaquess married widowed Rebekah Fraser Rankin. The couple went on to have nine children, and by 1811, looking for more land for his own family and for other relatives who had settled nearby, Jaquess and a group of men bought a large tract of land in Posey County, Indiana. In 1815 the extended family group of forty-four people moved from Kentucky to Indiana; at the time of the move Jonathan and Rebekah's youngest child, Asbury Cloud, was only three years old.²

Jonathan Jaquess, Jr., in addition to being a successful farmer, became the first storekeeper in the township. As Jonathan and Rebekah's children grew and married, their father gave each of them a quarter-section of land. Sometime in the early 1830s, according to family histories, several families "formed themselves into a band for mutual benefit and welfare."³ They combined all of their crops and animal products for an entire growing year and decided to float the lot down to New Orleans in search of new markets and greater profits. It was this decision, acted upon in the year 1834, that also sent twenty-two-year-old Asbury Jaquess on a journey from Posey County, Indiana, to the port of New Orleans.

By the time the Davy Crockett floated out into the Wabash River and headed towards the Ohio, flatboats were among the most common vessels on the major rivers of the frontier. The first flatboats probably plied the Ohio in the 1780s; by the end of the first decade of the 1800s

¹Information on the Jaquess family comes from “Highlights from the Jaquess Files,” typescript in the possession of Judith Lindell, DeTour, Michigan; The Fraser Clan in America (Evansville, Ind., 1916); W. P. Leonard, History and Directory of Posey County (Evansville, Ind., 1882).
²History of Posey County, 89; Fraser Clan, 10.
more than 1,000 such vessels arrived in New Orleans every year. The boats could carry large amounts of cargo and were easy and relatively cheap to build. The arrival of steamboats in 1823 only increased the popularity of flatboats among entrepreneurs and farmers: a steamboat voyage from New Orleans was a much quicker way home than a long trek by foot or on horseback.

Jaquess and his crewmates were also the beneficiaries of thirty years of writing about the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and a decade of federal and state government improvements to aid navigation. In 1801, Zadok Cramer published *The Navigator*, a small volume which was improved and republished on a regular basis until 1824; Samuel Cumings then began publishing *The Western Pilot* based on Cramer's work, and by the 1834 the crew of the *Davy Crockett* would have had access to a yearly update. Each edition of the book detailed the bends and turns in the rivers, pointed out navigational difficulties, described towns and cities, and broke the voyage down by numbering each island in the rivers. Jaquess's journal follows these numbers as the *Davy Crockett* begins its trip down the Mississippi.

The flatboat that Jaquess's group sailed was on the large end of the common size range: 80 feet long and 17 feet wide (width usually ranged from 12 to 20 feet; length from 20 to 100 feet). The boat, like all flatboats, was steered with three large oars: the pilot controlled the main steering oar at the aft, and two large sweeps extended from the port and starboard. The *Davy Crockett* carried a mixed cargo, also common for the time: mostly corn and oats, packed beef and pork, and live chickens and turkeys. There were regional differences in boats' freight: flatboats

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5 Scholars put the cost of building an average flatboat at $1.00 to $1.50 per foot; Scheiber (below) estimates that a family group could build a boat in six weeks. See Leland D. Baldwin, *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (1941; Pittsburgh, Penn., 1980), 54; Harry N. Scheiber, "The Ohio-Mississippi Flatboat Trade: Some Reconsiderations," in David M. Ellis, ed., *The Frontier in American Development: Essays in Honor of Paul Wallace Gates* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969), 278-79.

6 On Cramer, see Baldwin, *The Keelboat Age*, 57-59; on government improvements to navigation, see Allen, *Western Rivermen*, 157-60.

7 For diagrams of flatboat construction, see Donald E. Carmony, ed., "Flatboat Building on Little Raccoon Creek, Parke County, Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 60 (December 1964), 305-322.
from just south of the Ohio River in Kentucky often carried whisky and tobacco.8

Nearly every evening, when the flatboat pulled out of the currents of the river and retired for a quiet evening along the banks, Asbury sat down to write in a small bound journal. He began most entries with the distance the boat had traveled during the day, the time it had left its morning site, and the time the crew finally arrived at rest for the evening. He noted contact with fellow travelers, sights along the rivers, and the steadily increasing flow of goods sold and traded. From time to time, the Davy Crockett lashed onto another flatboat, mostly, it would seem, for companionship and better cooking. And there was time for recreation, especially music, on days when the boat was floating peacefully downriver.9 On two occasions, the violent culture which sometimes persisted along the river caught Jaquess's attention. He recorded the death of Mike, the steward of another boat to which the Davy Crockett had briefly lashed, and he wrote in detail about the execution of a black man in Natchez.10

Jaquess seems to have learned the business aspects of river trading quickly. His journal reveals the daily calculations made by the farmer flatboatman, as he compared his costs and need for profit against the ever-changing market prices for his products. And as Michael Allen points out, farmers like the Jaquesses had to proceed with particular care because they did not possess the capital of businessmen who regularly traded along the rivers:

A little bad luck or a glutted market could ruin them. Moreover, their farming work at home limited them to one flatboat trip a year. Thus, the most a farmer flatboatman could hope for was enough extra cash to make a land payment or finance a few

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8See Baldwin, The Keelboat Age, chapter 2, "Boats and Boatbuilding"; for an example of a Kentucky flatboat's cargo, see John G. Stuart, "A Journal, Remarks or Observations in a Voyage Down the Kentucky, Ohio, Mississippi Rivers & c.," Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 50 (January 1952), 5-6.

9Baldwin regards music as having been an "indispensable" part of life for early flatboat men; The Keelboat Age, 90-93.

10See Thomas C. Buchanan, "Race and (In)justice on the Mississippi: An Episode from the Journals of the Davy Crockett," in this issue. Allen provides contrasting chapters on pre- and post-steamboat river cities; see Western Rivermen, chaps. 2 and 3.
Asbury C. Jaquess in later life

Courtesy Judith Lindell
improvements on his farm. In the volatile world of post-1823 flatboat entrepreneurs, farmer flatboatmen constituted the populous but vulnerable lower rungs of the business ladder.11

According to family history, the voyage of the Davy Crockett was profitable—profitable enough to attempt a similar shipment the next winter. Unfortunately, this flatboat, whose name has not been preserved, foundered before it reached the Mississippi. The Jaquess family seems never to have attempted the trip again. In April 1838 Asbury married Jane Ashworth and settled down to become a Posey County farmer and a pillar of the local Methodist church. The couple had ten children, seven of whom survived to adulthood. Their son Wilbur joined the 91st Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment and died during the Civil War. Jane died before her son, in 1859.12

The 1870 census of Posey County, Indiana, finds Asbury C. Jaquess still working his farm, having survived the death of his second wife (Jane Smythe, to whom he was married from 1867 to 1870), and living with his four youngest children—Rebecca, Ogden, Florence, and Jonathan—and a hired farm worker. The children, who ranged in age from 21 to 13, all worked with their father, either in house work or farm work.13

Asbury C. Jaquess died at the age of 82 in March 1895, still in Posey County, Indiana. He was remembered as “one of the leading and most advanced farmers of his day,” and “a man eminently of peace . . . generous and liberal to a fault.” Twenty years later, at a family reunion held on the original 1815 farmstead, he was remembered as the history keeper of the family.14 Modern readers are fortunate that, in addition to family papers, Asbury Jaquess preserved the little journal that chronicled the voyage of the Davy Crockett.

11Allen, Western Rivermen, 179.
12“Highlights from the Jaquess Files”; The Fraser Clan. Jane was the daughter of Moses Ashworth, the first appointed Methodist circuit rider in Indiana. See John E. Iglehart, “The Life and Times of John Shadr: Including the Introduction and Progress of Methodism in Southern Indiana,” Indiana Magazine of History, 17 (March 1921), esp. 16-18.
14Newspaper clipping in the possession of Judith Lindell; The Fraser Clan, 7, 10.