

Talisman Brought Excitement To Springfield - For A While

by Tom Emery
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The arrival of the steamer Talisman in 1832 brought excitement to Springfield and other cities along the Sangamon River. However, the joy was short-lived. Though area settlers hoped the Sangamon was suited to boat traffic, the river proved unnavigable, a blow to the economic prospects of the area.

The Talisman, described by historian Benjamin Thomas as “a small cabin steamer,” first made news in the area in early 1832. That January 19, an advertisement in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette announced that “the splendid upper cabin steamer Talisman

will leave for Portland Landing, Springfield, on the Sangamo River and all the intermediate ports and landings,” including Beardstown and Naples.

St. Louis papers also carried the same ad. The boat was under the sail of Capt. Vincent A. Bogue, who also owned the cargo, and operated by master J.M. Pollock. Settlers hailed the announcement with great enthusiasm, and the population spiked almost immediately. New towns were laid out, and land values skyrocketed.

As promised, Bogue left Cincinnati on February 2 and sailed into Beardstown in early March. He was met with a boatload of men with long-handled axes, who were to go ahead of the Talisman, cutting off overhangs and clearing snags on the Sangamon. One of the cutters was Abraham Lincoln.

Although the trip was arduous, an adoring crowd of men and boys, some on horseback and others on foot, followed the Talisman. The group included Lincoln’s future law partner William Herndon, and remained as the vessel passed New Salem and docked at a mill owned by Bogue at Portland Landing, five miles from Springfield. To celebrate the arrival, a huge reception and dance was held at the courthouse in Springfield, which became a society event.

On March 29, the Sangamo Journal in Springfield touted “the result has clearly demonstrated the practicability of navigating the river by steamboats of a proper size; and by the expenditure of 2,000 in removing the logs and drifts and standing timber, a steamboat of 80 tons...will make the trip in two days from Beardstown to this place.”

The Journal complimented “our farmers, our mechanics, our merchants, and professional men, for the rich harvest in prospect.”

Though the paper conceded that “the boat experienced some difficulty from drifts and leaning timber on shore, which made her trip somewhat tedious,” that “Springfield can no longer be considered an inland town.”

Brimming with optimism, the Journal concluded that “the results which must follow the successful termination of this enterprise to our county, and to those counties lying in the neighborhood...would be impossible to calculate.” Those predictions, of course, would prove premature.

A poem on the Talisman was even published in the Journal. With exaggeration apparent, the rhyme lauded the boat’s “daring prow,” how the captain “nor cared, nor feared the dangers great,” and the immediate jump in prices and demand, including “good liquors” that “went off slick.” The April 5 edition of the Journal also included an original song on the boat.

The boat remained at Portland Landing for a week until receding water forced a return trip. Rowan Herndon, a New Salem businessman and former boatsman, was hired to pilot the vessel back to Beardstown, with Lincoln as his assistant.

The return trip was even harder than the sail upriver. With river levels falling, the Talisman made only four miles a day, and part of the dam had to be removed at New Salem for the boat to float over. Finally, Herndon and Lincoln made it back to Beardstown, where they each received forty dollars for their efforts. The pair then walked back to New Salem.

Between April and June 1832, Bogue ran a series of ads in the Journal, promoting a variety of “fresh and seasonable goods” that had “just arrived per steamboat Talisman.” The stock included sugar, coffee, tea, liquor, cheese, salt, fish like mackerel and shad, gunpowder, “painted water buckets,” white pine boards, window glass, and grindstones. Delivery could be made at Springfield or Portland Landing, with sales “on reasonable terms.”

Alongside those announcements were ads from Springfield mercantile dealer Mather & Lamb, offering goods “just received per Steam Boat Talisman.” Included were “40 kegs of nails,” 25 barrels of “prime” New Orleans sugar, and “5 tons assorted bar iron.”

Thomas notes that New Salem peaked in 1832 but by the next year, the village was already on the way down. The Talisman never proved worthwhile and helped to bankrupt Bogue, who also suffered from failed land speculation. As a result, Thomas wrote that Bogue “fled the country.” Lincoln had signed a note “for the benefit of creditors” of Bogue, and was later sued for the debt. The episode was one of many financial struggles for the future President in his New Salem years.

In the 1980s, a replica steamboat, also named the Talisman, was an attraction on the river outside New Salem, just off Route 97. The new vessel provided a fun experience for passengers who paid the fare to sail on the Sangamon, just like the settlers had hoped to do 150 years before. But like its predecessor, the new Talisman also was hampered by the rise and fall of the river levels, a neverending problem on the shallow Sangamon.

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