

Joseph Kinney

Steamboat Captain

Maryellen McVicker



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Introduction

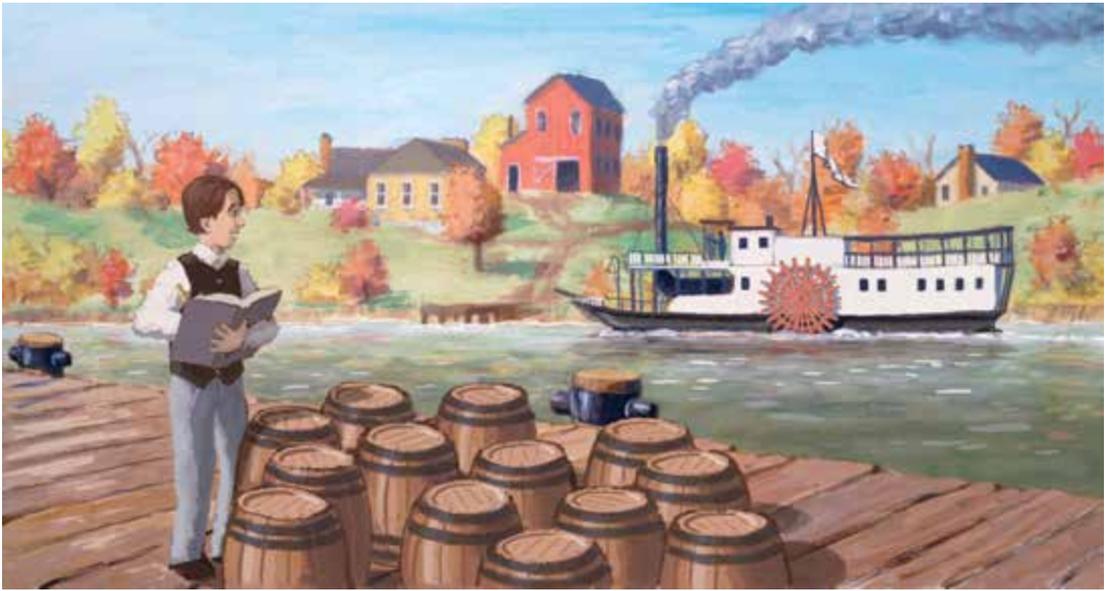
In the nineteenth century, the United States was a young country full of people eager to head west and settle new territories. The North American continent was so big that people thought it would take five hundred years to settle. But it took less than one hundred years, due in large part to the invention of new ways to travel during the Industrial Revolution.

People had always used rivers to travel from one place to another, but it could take a

long time to float downriver. To travel upstream, people had to paddle against the current, or use poles to push against the river bottom and ropes to tow it from the river bank. When steam engines were added to riverboats, suddenly people could travel much more quickly. People flocked to this new technology to head west and settle the country.

In the early 1800s, people thought life on the river was very exciting. As a boy, Joseph Kinney watched the steamboats on the Ohio River and dreamed of becoming a steamboat captain. It took many years, but finally Joseph was able to own his own steamboat and travel the rivers.

Joseph Kinney became very well known and respected on the Missouri River, and was one of the few steamboat captains who was able to stay in business during the Civil War. He also played an important role in changing the design of steamboats so the boat was not as wide. This allowed steamboats to navigate on narrow rivers and to travel farther west. ❖



Chapter 1

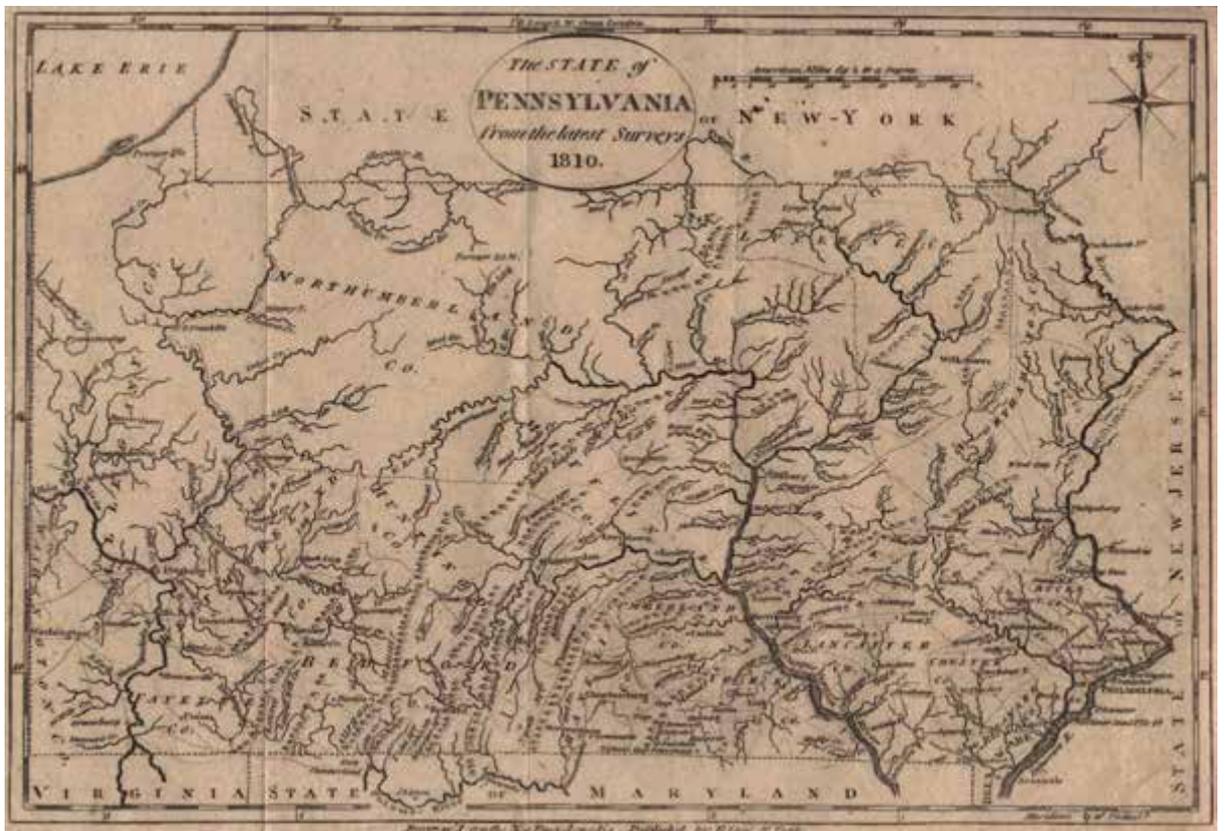
Life Along the River

Joseph Beeler Kinney was born on October 30, 1810, in Washington County, Pennsylvania. His parents were James Kinney and Margaret Beeler Kinney. His father was born in Great Britain and had come to Pennsylvania, where he worked as a teacher and a surveyor. Washington County, where the Kinneys lived, is in western Pennsylvania on the border with Ohio. George Washington had explored the area and helped to establish

forts there during the French and Indian War of the mid-1700s. After the colonies became the United States, the new county was named for the early explorer and hero of the Revolutionary War.

When Joseph Kinney was born, the United States was a very young country, with only seventeen states. Western Pennsylvania was becoming more settled, mostly with German, Scots-Irish,

Western Pennsylvania had some roads connecting forts and settlements, but farmers also used the rivers to ship their produce to people in other settlements.





Chapter 2

Joseph's First Steamboat

Steamboats were a new invention in the early 1800s, made possible by the earlier invention of steam-powered engines. In England in the late 1700s, textile factories began to use steam engines to run machines. This meant that workers could spin thread and weave it into fabric very quickly. This time was called the Industrial Revolution because technology changed so

much and so quickly. Those changes made huge differences to the way people lived and worked. Many of the new machines helped people do work faster, so it did not take as many hours to make things and some tasks did not require as many people to do them.

The new steam engines also made a big difference in transportation. A steam engine worked by heating water until it produced steam, and the steam caused a piston to go up and down, which caused a wheel to turn. At first, steam engines were powered by burning wood, but later people began to burn coal, which was hotter and burned longer than wood. This meant steam engines could be bigger, and the larger steam engines could be used to move things that were much bigger. On a steamboat, the steam engine turned giant paddlewheels that acted like lots of constantly moving oars and made the boat go forward.

Steamboats looked very exciting, with their giant paddlewheels and tall smokestacks,



Chapter 4

Steamboat Owner

In 1856, Joseph Kinney built his first steamboat, a sidewheeler that was 200 feet long, and named it the *William H. Russell*. Captain Kinney traveled the Missouri River between St. Louis and Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, stopping at Weston and Jefferson City on the way. Most steamboats of the time were about 250 feet long and could carry 300 or 400 passengers, plus about 700 tons of freight. Until the 1850s, most steamboats

were side-wheelers, with a big paddlewheel on each side. Many steamboats on the Mississippi were very large, but steamboats on the Missouri, which was more difficult to navigate, were usually smaller.

Working on a steamboat was dangerous, so captains and crews were well paid. Captains and crews working on the Missouri made about twice as much as captains and crews on the Mississippi. Steamboat owners also needed to make money, because the boats did not last a long time. There were many wrecks, and the average steamboat on the Missouri River only lasted about four years.

For the next twenty years, Joseph designed, built, and operated steamboats. He noticed that steamboats had trouble on narrower parts of the river, so he decided to move the paddlewheel to the rear of the boat, which made the boat narrower. This design, called a stern-wheeler, had been used in early steamboat designs, but for many years most steamboats were side-

Legacy

Golden Age of Steamboats

The time from the early 1800s until the 1880s is often called the “steamboat era,” because the new steamboats were revolutionizing transportation in the United States. At a time when steamboating was difficult and dangerous, Joseph Kinney was respected as one of the best-known steamboat owners and captains on the Missouri River. Joseph Kinney dreamed of a life on the rivers from the time he was young. He was willing to try new ideas and take chances in his business. His brother-in-law Andrew Clark said, “Captain Kinney was the most daring, the most resourceful and the most successful of all the Missouri River captains.”

Timeline

- 1807 Robert Fulton launches the *Clermont*.
- 1810 Joseph Kinney is born on October 30 in Pennsylvania.
- 1817 First steamboat arrives in St. Louis.
- 1819 First steamboat reaches the Old Franklin/Boonville area.
- 1820s, late Joseph moves to Indiana and works for his uncle.
- 1830 The first railroad is built in the United States.
- 1841 Joseph marries Mary Collins.
- 1842 Joseph and Mary's daughter, Mary Jane, is born.
- 1843(?) Joseph's wife, Mary, dies.
- 1844 Joseph moves to Boonville and opens a shoe store.
- 1845 Joseph marries Matilda Clarke.
- 1846 Joseph and Matilda's first child is born, Joseph Beeler Kinney. Between 1849 and 1868 ten more children, including twin daughters Cora and Kate, are born, and by 1872, six of Joseph and Mathilda's children have died.
- 1850 Joseph and Matilda move to St. Louis and open a store.
- 1856 Joseph has the *William H. Russell* built; over the next several years, Joseph becomes successful in steamboat business.
- 1860 Joseph launches his first stern-wheel steamboat, the *Cora Kinney*.
- 1861–65 Civil War; Joseph is one of three steamboat captains operating on the Missouri River.
- 1869 Joseph and Matilda have a house built and name it Rivercene.
- 1882 Joseph sells his last boat and retires.
- 1892 Joseph Kinney dies.
- 1896 Matilda Kinney dies.

For Further Reading

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From US National Register of Historic Places Inventory: p. 38, exterior view of Rivercene; p. 39, front hall and staircase, Rivercene; p. 40, woodwork and painted frieze, first floor of Rivercene.

Courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City: p. 42, George Caleb Bingham, *Mrs. B. W. Clark (Mary Jane Kinney) and Her Brother (Joseph Beeler Kinney?)*, oil on canvas, 1874. Gift of Mrs. Nelly B. Hussey in memory of her mother, 53-56. Photo by Robert Newcombe.

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Joseph Kinney

As a young boy in the early 1800s, Joseph Kinney watched the riverboats on the Ohio River and dreamed of being a steamboat captain. Joseph worked at different jobs and saved his money. Finally he was able to buy a steamboat. He became its captain and carried people and freight up and down the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. He loved being a steamboat captain, traveling as far south as New Orleans and as far west as Fort Benton, Montana. Captain Kinney was so successful that eventually he owned a whole fleet of steamboats and built a beautiful mansion in Boonville.

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