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The Green River of Kentucky

Helen Bartter Crocker

Western Kentucky University

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For Ken
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EARLY KENTUCKY writers often refer to the valley of the Green River as “Green River Country,” suggesting a geographic and cultural unity that was more apparent than real. Cutting a wide east-west swath from the Appalachian foothills to the heart of the western Kentucky coal fields, the Green River valley extends from below the Tennessee border in the south to the Ohio River in the north. Echoing the valley’s geographic contrast, its people, too, developed a diversity that defied the labeling of more unified areas.

The first example of diversity was the pattern of valley settlement: the southwest bank of the river attracted Revolutionary War veterans from Virginia and North Carolina claiming the land as military pay, while the northeast bank was more often settled by westward-moving Kentuckians or Pennsylvanians. During the Civil War the Green River separated the forces of the North and South, and valley loyalties were so divided that both armies blocked local river trade for security purposes. After the war the valley’s diversity continued in the churches and politics, navigation and agricultural clashes, upriver and downriver jealousies, and environmentalist-industrialist infighting.

Despite their historical and geographical differences the people of the Green River valley developed a measure of unity. They showed a common pride in clearing the virgin forest, farming the rugged terrain, and developing a reputation for making newcomers feel at home. In the process they developed a sense of community, a community drawn together by the moving magnet of the river.
The boast that their river had the greenest color, greatest depth, and best fishing of any river around could be heard from one end of the valley to the other. Sometimes they overcame their traditional individualism to cooperate in getting their river improved for navigation.

Thus a composite picture of the people living in the Green River valley is one of both unity and diversity. Historians who try to describe valley residents must balance these qualities, knowing that they are influenced by the distortion of their view. Perhaps no single historian can see the valley objectively or in its entirety.

The Indians who first inhabited the Green River valley left no written record of their experiences there, but they continued to claim the area for hunting. This made settlement difficult for the American pioneer who reached the valley about 1780. Nevertheless he began the record of life beside the Green River of Kentucky when he described his wilderness location for relatives left behind.

As the sons and grandsons of the pioneers continued to record Green River history, it became apparent that each generation approached the stream differently. The original settlers floated their boats downstream whenever the waters were high enough to get safely over the rocky shoals. Their sons, interested in bringing steamboats to the valley, convinced the state legislature to improve the Green River and its major tributary, the Barren, for slack-water navigation by a series of locks and dams.

When the Civil War made the rivers armed highways, federal authorities closed them to commercial traffic. During the industrial revolution that followed, a local corporation gained a near-monopoly of river trade. This prepared valley residents for federal control, and the Corps of Engineers undertook extensive improvements around the turn of the century. When the Great Depression nearly ended river trade, local citizens' groups sought to convince the government of the valley's industrial potential. The need for cheap fuel in the 1950s and 1960s inspired federal funds for flood-control dams in the
upper river and the modern locks in the lower river that opened up coal barging and recreation for the generations that followed.

For each Green River historian who set out to record the interaction between water and people, the view has been a different one. Those living near the Ohio River have seen the river as a small, insignificant stream that merely brought valuable hardwoods and coal to Ohio River markets. In contrast, those living in small, isolated valley towns have always viewed the river as an important artery of transportation and communication.

Much of the present study was done at Western Kentucky University at Bowling Green, which occupies a central position between Green River’s headwaters in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and its terminus at the Ohio River. It is ironic that Bowling Green, the largest city in the valley and for many years head of navigation, is on the Barren River rather than on the Green itself. Yet Bowling Green residents recognized the tremendous influence of the Green River and faithfully preserved its history.

My research also took me to many other valley towns, where I discovered the uncommon friendliness of river people and their delight in exchanging river stories. Their enthusiasm for river history was contagious as they consistently stopped whatever they were doing to describe the river’s effect on their lives and those of their ancestors.

When so many valley residents have unselfishly shared their river knowledge, it is difficult to single out a few who have been especially helpful to my study. Agnes Harralson of Central City has a collection of river lore second to none and a shrewd understanding of river people that made her a matchless river guide. James R. Hines of Bowling Green, not only a grandson of one of the most successful steamboat captains on the Green River but also a respected towboat operator, graciously granted me hours of interviews. Professor J. Crawford Crowe,
former head of the History Department of Western Kentucky University, inspired my first river study, a master’s thesis on the cultural impact of Green River steamboats.

The librarians of the Kentucky Library at Western Kentucky University have been exceedingly helpful, and the Louisville Corps of Engineers has shared its extensive records. C. W. Burkman, David Orrahood, Gayle Carver, D. D. Baker, Charles Stewart, E. O. Pearson, Jr., Joe Hines, Julia Neal, and a host of others have shared their time and river materials with me. Western Kentucky University’s Faculty Research Committee extended the financial assistance that made my extensive river travels possible. Finally, without the patient assistance and inspiring example of Professor Lowell Harrison, this study would never have been completed.
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The Green River of Kentucky is one of the navigable streams born in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Flowing west and then north for some 370 miles, it cuts widely across west-central Kentucky until it finally reaches the Ohio River, 197 miles above its confluence with the Mississippi. Though the Green River drains nearly one-fourth of Kentucky, as well as a portion of northern Tennessee, no large population centers have developed along its banks. Except for the lower third of the river, there is little industrial development, and it retains much of the unspoiled loveliness that first greeted the Kentucky pioneers.

Soon after Kentucky's first settlement at Harrodsburg was secured in 1775, the American pioneers began moving toward the Green River valley. By 1780 they had pushed fifty miles south and west until they reached a stream that the Indians had named for its green color. With their inaccurate maps, the pioneers set out to explore the river, leaving the first extant records of the valley. These records show that the surrounding area has changed considerably since the pioneers first saw it; the forests have been cleared, the prairie grasses have disap-
peared, and many Indian and buffalo trails have become divided highways.

Yet the river remains basically the same. Though polluted and dammed, its waters continue to flow as relentlessly as time itself. The unusual greenish tint that no doubt inspired its name returns whenever lack of rainfall allows the silt to settle. Sycamore, beech, and willow trees lean gracefully over the banks, just as they did in centuries past, and are buried in the same watery graves. The rocky falls and sharp bends the pioneers described so vividly continue to delight the eye and to complicate navigational efforts.

The Green River played a vital role in the lives of the early settlers. Old landings, mill dams, and decaying, hand-operated locks show clearly that the river was a source of power and a valued link to the outside world. In addition, the pioneer frequently depended on the river or one of its tributaries to define his wilderness location. The earliest settlers thus came to think of themselves specifically as Green River valley residents, and this shared identity marked the beginning of a unique river culture.

The American pioneer was not the first to settle on the Green River's banks, for an aboriginal people had left stone tools and weapons, burial grounds, and great garbage heaps of mussel shells scattered throughout the valley. While the Indians had not resided in the valley for perhaps 3,000 years, their eighteenth-century counterparts continued to claim the valley for hunting the abundant supply of wildlife found there.

The earliest settlers soon learned that the Indians, led by the Shawnees from the north and the Cherokees from the south, had no intention of surrendering their claim to the valley without a struggle. One of the first settlers to make this discovery in the upper Green River valley was William Montgomery. He had used the influence of his son-in-law, Benjamin Logan, to get 1,400 acres lying "over the Knobs" from Logan's own station. Because he
had seen no recent signs of Indians, Montgomery failed to build a stockade around his settlement. He paid dearly for this oversight when Indians attacked in February 1781, killing him and several others in the group.¹

The early pioneers of the lower Green River valley met similar resistance. In 1782 a Pennsylvania group set out, by way of the Ohio and Green rivers, for the “Long Falls” of Green River (the site of Calhoun). As they approached Yellow Banks (Owensboro), they were badly frightened by Indians approaching them in canoes. John Rowan, later master of “My Old Kentucky Home” at Bardstown, recalled the war whoops and hideous yells that accompanied the attack. Arming themselves with axes, the Rowans resisted the demands that they come ashore, but the Indians continued to harass them until they reached their Green River destination.²

Despite the danger of Indian attacks there were several successful settlements in the Green River valley by 1780. Vance’s Station was located about fifteen miles from the mouth of the Green River; another was situated on Brush Creek, and still others were established at the sites of Russellville and Hodgenville. Within two or three years there was also a fortified settlement at Hartford, a group at Severn’s Valley (Elizabethtown), and a cluster of settlements at a Green River crossing that later became Greensburg.

During the 1780s a great migration of Virginians, North Carolinians, and Pennsylvanians moved beyond the first Bluegrass settlements in Kentucky into the Green River valley. As typical representatives of this migration, Henry Rhoades and James Forgy came by two very different routes. Rhoades left Pennsylvania by an Ohio River flatboat in 1783, stopped briefly at Bardstown, and then moved on to what the Indians called the “Big Falls” of Green River (Skilesville). Forgy, a North Carolina native, outfitted an ox cart to begin the difficult forty-day journey to Mud River, one of the Green River’s major tributaries.³
Like Forgy and Rhoades, most Green River pioneers traveled either overland through the Cumberland Gap or by an Ohio River boat. Many who came through the Gap took the Cumberland Trace, which connected central Kentucky with the large settlement developing at Nashville, Tennessee. Those who followed the river route often left their boats either at Maysville or the Falls of the Ohio (Louisville). From Maysville the overland route passed through the Bluegrass; those stopping first at Louisville generally took the Cumberland–Ohio Falls Trace, a route the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L & N) later found to be the most easily traversed one between Louisville and Nashville. Still others came entirely by water, descending the Ohio River and then ascending the Green.

By 1810 all but nine of the twenty-eight counties drained by the Green River were chartered. The population of the seven largest towns was Russellville, 532; Glasgow, 244; Elizabethtown, 181; Henderson, 159; Bowling Green, 154; Greensburg, 132; and Hartford, 110.

The Revolutionary War exerted tremendous influence on the early settlement of the Green River valley. It removed the British restrictions which prevented crossing the Appalachian Mountains. Furthermore, Revolutionary War veterans were encouraged to settle in the Green River valley when Virginia awarded many of them 200 or more acres in the area “bounded by the Green River, the Cumberland Mountains, the Carolina line, the Tennessee River and the Ohio River.” This act, passed in May 1779, opened all unclaimed lands south and west of the Green River to veterans’ claims, except those granted the previous year to Richard Henderson.4

In addition to the military bounties the Virginia legislature awarded up to 400 acres in the Green River valley to those who had already “really and bona fide settled themselves [built a cabin] . . . upon any waste or unappropriated lands.”5 With this kind of encouragement the
area south and west of the Green River, referred to as the "Green River country," began to attract large numbers of war veterans and free land claimants.

After Kentucky became a state in 1792, its legislature continued Virginia's encouragement of Green River settlement. After 1795, for example, those living on unclaimed land could buy 200 acres for only thirty dollars per hundred acres. Two years later an act "for encouraging and granting relief to settlers" stated that anyone who had cleared and fenced two acres and had grown a crop of corn before July 1798 could still purchase up to 200 acres for only forty dollars per hundred.

The Kentucky legislature's permissive attitude toward land claims in the Green River valley resulted in the same kind of land disputes that plagued the earlier settlements in eastern and central Kentucky. Without an orderly system of land survey and sale, overlapping claims were inevitable. Nevertheless, when settlers refused to have their land surveyed within the allotted time, the legislature came to their relief by passing an act granting them more time and declaring their tardy surveys legal.

Another reason for the land disputes along the Green River was the difficulty surveyors encountered in finding landmarks. Sometimes there were only river and creek boundaries, as was the case with Henderson's 200,000-acre grant in the northwest Green River valley. When a Henderson Company surveyor divided the grant into lots, he was forced to use trees and stakes for landmarks. When the trees died or the stakes were moved, serious land disputes resulted.

Unfortunately, the land disputes and Indian attacks were only part of the general atmosphere of lawlessness on the Green River frontier. Many of the Revolutionary War veterans who moved to the area continued to settle their differences with guns. While few actually did fit the "horse thieves and savages" description that a Bluegrass planter applied generally to the inhabitants of the Green River country, the settlements were so scattered it was
difficult to enforce local laws. The Green River frontiersmen who feared their land claims were illegal were quite satisfied that the only real seat of authority was in faraway Frankfort. Their experience with the state’s land laws convinced them that this authority, too, could often be safely ignored. The result, according to ornithologist John James Audubon, was that the area attracted many “depraved immigrants” who were looking for a place to practice their “evil propensities.”

Two Green River outlaws, the Harpe brothers, were the best known of these “depraved immigrants,” and their atrocities made them notorious in Tennessee and Illinois as well as in Kentucky. The principal scene of their activity was described by Judge James L. Hall, who first published their story, as being south of the Green River. Subsequent accounts of the Harpes fascinated the residents of the Green River valley, who kept their exploits alive in folk ballads, fireside tales, and serious histories.

Micajah (“Big”) Harpe and Wiley (“Little”) Harpe first got into trouble in Kentucky in 1798. After serving brief jail terms in Danville, they moved into the Green River valley. Near the Barren River, they killed a young boy and cut his body into pieces, which they tossed in a sinkhole. A few days later a man named Stump noticed smoke rising across the river from his home, about eight miles from Bowling Green. Presuming he had new neighbors, Stump entered the Harpes’ camp “with a turkey over his shoulder, a string of fish in one hand and his fiddle under his arm.” The Harpes repaid his neighborliness by stabbing him, cutting his body open, and filling it with stones before throwing it in the Barren River.

When $300 was offered for their capture and a detailed description of the two men was distributed, the Harpes masqueraded as itinerant preachers. Moving into the lower Green River valley, their first stop was Moses Stegal’s cabin near the present site of Dixon in Webster County. Although Stegal was not at home, the Harpes
convinced his wife to give them overnight lodging. Before morning she and her baby had been tomahawked and the cabin burned, but Mrs. Stegal lived long enough to report that the Harpes were responsible. When a posse pursued them, Little Harpe escaped, but Big Harpe was killed near Pond River. As a warning to other outlaws, the posse hung his head on a tree at the intersection of the roads from Henderson, Hopkinsville, and Morganfield. The skull remained there for several years, and the settlement which grew up nearby, named Harpshead, was one of the first valley towns included on Kentucky maps.

Besides the Harpes, the valley attracted other outlaws who were less brutal and also less renowned. Among them was a Henderson justice of the peace named Samuel Mason, who spread murder and thievery all the way to the Natchez Trace, the road Green River flatboatmen took on their return from New Orleans. It is not surprising that frightened valley residents adopted the "Kentucky style" for settling differences, which was to "shoot your insulter at first sight." The Green River pioneer’s struggle with outlaws, Indians, and hotly contested land claims might have discouraged him if he had not believed that he had found a land of tremendous promise. From the size of the trees, the quality of the grass, and the huge wildlife population, there was every reason to believe the area could produce an ample food supply for his family. His crude maps suggested that the river had great potential as a navigable stream, though he soon learned that this was true only under certain conditions. The pioneer became convinced that understanding these conditions was of paramount importance to his future.

The characteristics of the Green River were quite different from those of the rivers east of the Appalachians. In addition to the "greenish tints of its singularly beautiful and pellucid waters," the river was also unusually deep in places. Between its confluence with the Rough River and the Long Falls, for instance, it was measured at about
200 feet. There may have been deeper rivers, but the local boast that it was the deepest little river in North America went undisputed.

In addition to its great depth the Green River had two other navigational advantages: it provided a direct access to the Ohio-Mississippi river system and it rarely froze. Pioneer James Weir prophesied in 1798 that the latter advantage would make the Green River "a place of great trade in time to come."\(^1\)

Yet several characteristics of the Green River promised to make navigation difficult: it was crooked and narrow, with an unpredictable water flow. At times the water in some stretches became too shallow to float even a small boat, while at other times there were dangerous floods. Trees constantly fell into the river, littering it with submerged logs or "snags." Finally, the riverbed had numerous rocky obstructions, or "falls," as it descended 100 feet from its upper reaches to its mouth, forcing the pioneer to wait for water high enough to float his boat safely over the treacherous rocks.

The pioneer learned the surface characteristics of the Green River long before he had any accurate way to measure its scope. He had no idea, for example, that the river drained so large an area—9,430 square miles of Kentucky and 377 square miles of Tennessee—more of Kentucky than any other Ohio River tributary. Neither was the Green River pioneer aware of the potential seriousness of floods, for before the forests were cut they were less disastrous. As early as 1826, however, an observer blamed the area's slow development on the fact that "the lands are very low and often overflowed."\(^1\)

The pioneer explorer discovered that the Green River had several important tributaries, though not as many as one might have expected for a river of its length and volume. In the headwaters several small streams entered the Green, such as Casey Creek, Russell Creek, Pittman Creek, and Little Barren River. A bit downriver, near the
Mammoth Cave area, the feeders were usually underground streams, except for Nolin River and Bear Creek. Then, about halfway to the Ohio River, a tributary nearly as large as the Green itself joined it from the south. This was the Big Barren River, the Green’s major tributary and the one that later became a vital link in its navigation system. The confluence of the Big Barren and the Green rivers marked the beginning of the Green River’s lower reaches. Here three more large tributaries—Mud River, Pond River, and Rough River—entered the Green before it emptied its waters into the Ohio River.

As he traversed the river valley the pioneer skillfully evaluated the lands he saw, for he had developed a keen eye for clues of drainage, fertility, and mineral deposits. Long before geographers divided the area between the Pennyroyal and the Western Coal Fields, the settlers observed differences between the lower and upper valleys. In the lower valley, coal seams were visible along creek beds and hillsides, but the area was otherwise almost completely covered with forests. On the other hand, most of the upper valley fell within the Pennyroyal region, so named for a blue flower that grew there profusely. It had a large treeless area known as the Barrens, and numerous caves, sinkholes, and underground streams, the topography that geologists later recognized as karst.

The pioneer discovered the most amazing example of karstic topography, Mammoth Cave, in 1797, but he had no idea that it was the world’s most extensive cave system. It was quite a mystery to him how the cavernous limestone sometimes collapsed to form sinkholes or funnel-shaped depressions in the earth, which occasionally “swallowed” unwary animals. This erodable limestone also formed the disappearing streams that the pioneer so aptly called “Sinking Creek” or “Lost River.” It is believed that the Green River itself was once an underground stream until its limestone ceiling caved in,
bringing the water to the surface. Then it became a surface outlet for the area's underground network, making the whole erodable system highly active.

The other distinguishing feature of the upper valley was the large grassy area known as the Barrens. The term barren was not meant as a reference to the area's infertility, but was simply the term used for the lack of trees. Historians and geologists agree that this condition was partially the result of fires set by Indians trying to improve grazing conditions. Another factor may have been that the rapid runoff of surface water into sinkholes and underground streams made the vegetation so dry that lightning easily ignited it. It is not known how long the area had been unforested, but apparently it was an unnatural condition, for trees began growing there as soon as the fires were discontinued. By 1830 timber covered most of the uncultivated land, but the term barren survived in the names of Barren County, and Little Barren and Big Barren rivers.

The Green River valley contained much fine farmland, especially in the Barrens, the southwestern Pennyroyal, the river lowlands, and the northern portion of the Western Coal Fields. The area's climate was conducive to good farming, with a growing season of about 210 days, a mean temperature of fifty-seven degrees, and more than forty inches of rainfall yearly. The only immediate deterrent to farming was the heavy forest covering most of the area.

The Green River pioneers' indiscriminate cutting of these forests began the long process of destroying a valuable natural resource. Geologist-historian Nathaniel S. Shaler claimed that the finest hardwood forests he had seen anywhere were in western Kentucky. He recalled seeing much "noble ship-building lumber" along the Green River "going to utter waste" in order to make room for tobacco crops.16

Other natural resources along the Green River were brought to the pioneers' attention by the Indians or wild
animals who used them. In this manner salt, an expensive frontier item, was discovered along the Mud and Barren rivers. The pioneers also found sulphur springs, believed to have medicinal value, by following deer tracks near Campbellsville and in Daviess County. The animals themselves were an important natural resource, for they assured the pioneers a steady supply of meat. Bears, buffalo, turkeys, and deer, as well as smaller game, were abundantly available throughout the valley.

There is little evidence that the Green River pioneers developed the valley’s natural resources commercially. A few barrels of salt, a few barges of coal, and some timber were sold, but billions of tons of coal, considerable iron ore, and possibly the largest asphalt deposits in the eastern United States were left untouched.

After settling in the valley most pioneers had little contact with the outside world. Occasionally they saw travelers who used the Pennyroyal plains as a corridor between the Ohio valley and Nashville, or a flatboatman who was carrying goods to market. But the contacts were largely local ones, and the area’s population was generally homogenous. As a result, strong ties of local tradition developed, increasingly held together by the people’s common relationship with the river.

There were several examples of the developing cultural unity in the Green River valley. With few churches, towns, or roads, the settlers suffered alike in their spiritual and social isolation. Religious camp meetings met many of their needs, and the Great Revival movement that began on Gasper River, a tributary of the Big Barren, spread quickly throughout the valley. In national politics they voted for Thomas Jefferson, as most Kentuckians did, believing that his Republican party best represented frontier interests. In state politics, however, a growing desire to be independent from Bluegrass influence was obvious when they supported Felix Grundy’s plan to replace Kentucky’s district and quarter courts with local circuit courts. While this actually weakened the quality of
local justice, the Green River pioneers were satisfied that it better served their local interests.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite a growing awareness of the valley's special needs, the Green River pioneers did little to alter or control the river for their own convenience. If they wanted to cross it, they simply looked for a shallow place rather than building a bridge, and such river crossings as Bowling Green, Greensburg, and Munfordville became bustling commercial centers. In the lower river where the deep waters made crossing difficult, the inhabitants provided ferries. For example, Shoemaker's ferry, not far from Rumsey, carried travelers to the Owensboro road. Another, fifty miles upstream at Rockport, was established in 1817 to carry travelers toward rapidly developing Hopkinsville, on the western edge of Green River country.

Until about 1820 the Green River had limited ability to carry goods to market by flatboat or keelboat. When the Kentucky legislature passed the first act to improve the Green River in 1808, it was a direct response to local demands for the removal of natural obstructions. By this act, local "titheables" were required to spend three days a year removing fish pots, snags, and overhanging trees from the river. In 1811 an amendment extended the work to nearly all the river, as far as the mouth of Knoblick Creek in Casey County.\textsuperscript{18}

Similar acts called for removing obstructions in the tributaries of the Green River. The legislature declared Mud River navigable to Wolf Creek, Rough River to Long's Ferry, and Drake's Creek to John Harris's "merchant mills."\textsuperscript{19} In pioneer Kentucky the word navigable was a very loose term; it simply meant that these rivers were capable of carrying goods downstream during seasons of high water.

The early pioneers' complacent attitude toward the Green River's limited navigability was shaken, however, when word reached the valley about the wonderful steamboats plying the Ohio River. Reports that the first
one reached Louisville from Pittsburgh in 1811 and that another actually came upstream from New Orleans in 1815, convinced local leaders that their river must be made navigable for steamboats at all seasons of the year. By the end of the 1820s many valley residents had contacted serious cases of steamboat fever.

Thus by 1830 the inhabitants of the Green River valley were no longer willing to accept the river as it was. They set out to alter and control their environment, particularly their river. They wanted year-round navigation, upriver as well as down. Most of all, they wanted to bring steamboats to the valley. Their determined efforts marked the end of the Green River valley’s pioneer era.
Kentucky Improves the Wild River 1833-1868

The steamboat fever of the 1820s inspired the most dramatic physical changes and the most colorful river culture in all Green River's history. The inhabitants of the valley were no longer satisfied to wait for high water to carry steamboats safely over the rocky obstructions. Thus they convinced the state legislature to make the Green River its pioneer project in internal improvements. By 1842 a series of four locks and dams on the lower Green River, and one on its major tributary, the Barren River, completed the slackwater system as far as Bowling Green.

Many Kentuckians of that era viewed the Green and Barren improvements as an extravagant and unnecessary project. They criticized the legislature for using funds set aside for schools, for borrowing large sums from Kentucky banks, and for selling bonds at high interest rates. Many doubted that the system would ever return all this money to the state treasury, as its promoters promised. When the project failed to pay even the interest on the debt, it was difficult for the state's practical minds to
regard the improvements with anything but contempt. Later generations, however, realized that the state's original improvements were of inestimable value for encouraging valley development. For one thing, steamboats carried both ideas and goods along the river and exchanged them for new ones at the great trading centers of the Ohio-Mississippi river system. Lands bordering the river, which were worth only four dollars an acre in 1820, were often worth more than twenty dollars an acre by the 1860s. The improvements encouraged the first commercial mining of iron and coal, and convenient river landings such as Rumsey, South Carrollton, and Woodbury became thriving trading centers. Bowling Green benefited especially from the improvements, and as head or terminus of the system its population jumped from 815 to 4,575 between 1830 and 1870.

As early as 1830 Bowling Green businessmen recognized the rivers' potential and led the initial drive to improve them. Their spokesman was James Rumsey Skiles, who gained the reputation of being a progressive, liberal, and broad-minded man. Skiles first warned local rivermen that the Barren River in its natural state was not suitable for steamboat navigation. This inspired volunteers to work—often up to their necks in water—until they cleared the river enough that steamers could reach Bowling Green when the water was high. In January 1828 the first one arrived, a tiny, single-stacked affair named the United States. James Pitts, a business associate of Skiles, was the captain, and his arrival inspired a wild celebration.

Skiles, who was born in 1800, was quite fittingly named for his maternal grandfather, steamboat inventor James Rumsey. Rumsey, encouraged by George Washington, first demonstrated his steamboat on the Potomac River in 1787, twenty years before Robert Fulton launched his Clermont. Skiles was less impressed with his father, a wealthy merchant in Warren County, and showed little interest in entering the family business. Instead, he
turned his attention to establishing steamboat connec-
tions for Bowling Green.

Though Skiles was a poor student who never com-
pleted his law training, he became an expert in river
improvements. His exhaustive research convinced him
that the Green and Barren rivers could be improved by
canalization, a method developed by New York and
Pennsylvania canal engineers. The series of locks and
dams used in canalization conserved adequate water for
dry seasons and allowed steamers to bypass rocky shoals
safely. While Skiles understood the mechanics of can-
alization perfectly, he unfortunately had little idea what it
would cost to apply it to the 175 river miles that separated
his hometown, Bowling Green, from the Ohio River.

Skiles's enthusiasm for slackwater navigation was con-
tagious. In 1830 local river leaders organized the first
group that carried the name "Green and Barren River
Navigation Company." According to its charter, the com-
pany would begin constructing locks and dams as soon as
it sold $60,000 worth of stock. Kentuckians had experi-
enced widespread bankruptcies in the 1820s, however,
and were reluctant to gamble on uncertain river improve-
ments. Undaunted, the company reduced its stock sub-
scription to $45,000 and sent Skiles to Frankfort to enlist
state financial support.² Skiles, who had been a member
of the Kentucky House of Representatives from 1825 to
1828, was well equipped for the task. Soon he convinced
the 1833 legislature to allocate $526 for a Green and
Barren river survey, and Abner Lacock, a Pennsylvania
canal engineer, was hired to do the job.

Lacock's report was optimistic. He saw little that the
"plastic hand of nature" had not done to make the Green
River navigable and estimated that most of the lower river
could be improved for only $69,000. Two locks and
dams—Number 1 at Spott's Falls (Spottsville), nine miles
from the Ohio River, and Number 2 at Vienna (Cal-
houn)—would provide slackwater navigation as far as the
falls at the mouth of Mud River (Rochester), 107 miles
from the Ohio River. For an additional $30,000, he claimed, the state could extend the system to Bowling Green by adding two more locks on the Green River—Number 3 near the Mud River's mouth, and Number 4 near the confluence of the Green and Barren rivers—plus one on the Barren River itself. Lacock's report was a signal victory for Skiles; the state ultimately adopted the extended plan for five locks and dams that made Bowling Green the head of Green River navigation.

In 1833 the state appointed Skiles chairman of a local Board of Commissioners to oversee the Green River project, and for the next seven years his reports served as a convenient forum for his river views. In the first report he claimed that Lacock's plan would improve the rivers for about $733 a mile or about one-fifth what a railroad of that length would cost. Whether the state leaders who read his report accepted his ridiculously low estimate or not, they did allocate $35,000 in 1834 to begin the first two locks and dams. Skiles was elated and began to enjoy his river-promoter role a bit too much for some of his associates in Bowling Green.

The legislature hired two additional canal engineers from Pennsylvania to oversee the work. Their specifications called for locks 140 by 36 feet to be built of masonry, timber, iron, rock, and gravel. In December 1833 the contract for Number 2 was let, stipulating that it be completed within one year. High hopes prevailed at first, with no one suspecting that the unique problems of river canalization would extend the time three additional years. The state generously appropriated $50,000 in 1834, to be used only for the first two locks and dams. This stipulation was aimed at Skiles, who was trying desperately to get the other three started.

When the Number 2 project was not completed within the one-year limit, Skiles sought to justify the delay. There was no question, he told the legislators in 1835, but that the work would be finished if they would provide enough time and money. He called the lawmakers' atten-
tion to the cholera epidemic that finally killed the con-
tactor and several of the workers, delaying the work.
Skiles assured them that this was only a temporary delay
and urged them to keep investing in the project.

The state expenditures on the Green River did not go
unnoticed by river leaders in other Kentucky valleys, and
they began pushing for similar improvements. As a result,
the legislature appointed a state Board of Internal Im-
provements in 1835, giving it $1 million to begin work
and authorizing it to sell bonds for additional funds.

Skiles, who was named a member of the state board, felt
so confident that the Green River system would be com-
pleted that he began preparing Bowling Green for its
future role as head of steamboat trade. He financed the
construction of wharves, warehouses, and depots and
organized the Portage Railroad to move river goods to the
center of town. This work was not in vain, for in De-
cember 1836 the Board of Internal Improvements con-
tracted for the three additional locks and dams to com-
plete the slackwater system to Bowling Green.

The legislature then sent Skiles to Pennsylvania to
recruit more engineers. It was on this trip that he hired
Alonzo Livermore, who perhaps did more than anyone
except Skiles himself to make the Green and Barren
project a reality. As soon as he arrived, the energetic
Livermore surveyed the entire valley and was so im-
pressed with the rivers' navigational possibilities that he
suggested adding at least a dozen more locks and dams.
These would extend the Green River's slackwater to
Greensburg, 275 river miles from the Ohio River, and into
the upper Barren, where a short canal could then join it to
the Cumberland River. His ambitious plan would pro-
vide continuous navigation for some 500 miles of the
Green, Barren, and Cumberland rivers.

After Livermore began working on the Green and
Barren rivers, however, he was less optimistic about their
easy improvement. As a Pennsylvania canal-builder, he
had never encountered the dramatic and frequent
flooding that was common on Appalachian-fed Kentucky rivers. These "freshets," as Livermore called them, stopped his work every month during the summer of 1835, and he complained that it was increasingly difficult to rehire laborers when the flood waters receded.4

Despite frequent delays, the state's interest in the project remained high until the financial depression of 1837. As late as February of that year, in fact, the legislature had allotted it over $140,000, which was more than any other internal improvement received that year. After that, however, it cut appropriations sharply, for the state's banks had suspended specie payments, and the Board of Internal Improvements could no longer sell its bonds. The legislature announced that no new internal improvements would be started, squelching Livermore's ambitious plans to reach Greensburg and the Cumberland River. No doubt it was Skiles's hurried efforts to get the five original locks and dams under way that exempted them from the new ruling.

As the depression of 1837 deepened, the Board of Internal Improvements complained about the Green and Barren project's slow progress. In 1838 its members visited the five locks and dams and found them less than half-finished. Because the board's funds were almost depleted, its members decided to take drastic action to avoid the abandonment of the project altogether. As a last resort they sold bonds in eastern cities at ruinously high interest rates, borrowed $200,000 from Kentucky banks, and dipped into the funds set aside for Kentucky schools.

Locks Numbers 2 and 3 were finally declared operable in 1838, but the Green River project continued to have serious problems. At Lock Number 1, for example, high water backed up from the Ohio River so often that the work could not proceed until late summer. Then an epidemic attacked 200 of the workers, forcing the contractor to postpone work again until cooler weather. At Lock Number 3 a construction accident killed fifteen
workers, and the contractor died suddenly at Number 4. Altogether, these incidents convinced local workers that river work was unhealthy. To compound the labor problem, the state was often tardy in paying salaries, and Skiles warned that this destroyed "that confidence and energy so necessary for great enterprise and prompt action." Many state and local leaders began entertaining serious doubts that the system would ever be completed.\(^5\)

In order to watch over its limited funds, the legislature switched the financial control of the Green River project from the local Board of Commissioners to the Kentucky Board of Internal Improvements. Though the local board could continue superintending the works, it was miffed that the state should imply that it had handled funds carelessly. Skiles, in an effort to justify the local board's large expenditures, reminded the legislators of the recent "revolution in moneyed matters," which made the original estimates entirely too low. In fact, some of the local commissioners invested their own money in the project when state funds were inadequate to continue work. These arguments were of little avail, for in 1838 the local board lost financial control.\(^6\)

The state Board of Internal Improvements, according to its reports, had as much trouble financing the Green River project as the local board. In order to justify its continual need for money, the board noted that the project had already increased the value of nearly worthless Green River land to $33 million, from which the state collected yearly taxes of 1 percent. If the legislature would just be patient, the board promised, the Green and Barren system would eventually be a real economic asset to the state.

Engineer Livermore quite bluntly told the legislature that the project was doomed unless it provided adequate funds. He appreciated the fact that the state had already spent an average of $88,000 on each of the five locks and dams, but he needed another $77,500 to complete them.
This was the first realistic estimate of the cost of the improvements, and the impatient Livermore made no apologies for it. Instead, he charged that the legislature spent nearly twice as much on the Kentucky River, where labor was more plentiful, floods were less frequent, and sickness was "trifling" when compared to conditions on the Green.\footnote{7}

The continued frustrations that state and local leaders experienced in the project finally led them to seek a scapegoat, and Skiles was chosen. It was Skiles, after all, who had led them into this ill-fated project, and it was he who had disbursed most of the state’s funds. Skiles admitted he had a reckless nature and detested keeping careful records. His detractors, however, called him a slick-talking opportunist who carelessly squandered state funds.

As a result of these attacks, Skiles failed to gain a reappointment to the state Board of Internal Improvements in 1839. When he tried again the next year, his old business associate, Captain Pitts, fought against his appointment, charging that Skiles had used his influence to get a Barren River lock and dam located where it would further his own business interests. Pitts, the first person to pilot a steamboat to Bowling Green, had since become a Kentucky senator. He was undoubtedly jealous of Skiles’s river leadership when he got up a petition against Skiles in Warren County, which included an incriminating letter from Warner L. Underwood. Although Underwood was Skiles’s uncle, there had been hard feelings between them ever since Skiles insulted Underwood’s brother, Joseph, when they served together in the Kentucky House of Representatives.

While the Senate committee reported the evidence against Skiles was inconclusive, the full Senate voted against his appointment out of respect for the prestigious Underwoods’ opinion. Party loyalties played an important part in Skiles’s defeat, for he stubbornly remained a Democrat in Whig-controlled Kentucky. Led by the able
Henry Clay, the newly organized Whigs convinced a majority of Kentuckians that the Democrats were responsible for the depression of 1837. Green River valley Whigs, like the Underwoods, resented the fact that a Democrat got so much local credit for the Green and Barren river project. A retired Whig congressman charged that Skiles had actually "Fultonized" Captain Pitts out of his rightful place of honor as the one responsible for bringing steamboats to Bowling Green.\(^8\)

Skiles's reputation sank still lower when his attackers discovered $12,000 missing from the Green and Barren River Commissioners' accounts. Again, a Senate committee was appointed to investigate Skiles, and again he was declared innocent of malicious intent. According to the committee's investigation, a friend of Skiles had inadvertently deposited the money for Skiles in the wrong account, and Skiles had failed to catch the error. The committee ruled that Skiles was indeed responsible for the money, but advised the legislators to take into account the time he spent supervising the project "to the neglect and detriment of a splendid private fortune."\(^9\)

Despite the chaotic conditions surrounding the final work, the Green and Barren project was finally declared complete in October 1842. Whig governor Robert Letcher boasted that not only did the Green River work, but its tolls were bringing a profit into the state treasury. He did not try to take credit for the system's mechanical problems, however, which more than used up all the so-called profits. In fact, the expenses continued to be so large that the Board of Internal Improvements waited until 1847 to tally up the project's final cost. Instead of the $733 a mile that Skiles predicted it would cost, the final figure was nearly $5,000 a mile and totaled $859,126.79.\(^{10}\)

As soon as the locks and dams were functioning, the lower Green River valley began enjoying fairly regular steamboat service. The Governor Breathitt, for example, arrived at Bowling Green on December 29, 1842, with a
“full freight” of groceries and on New Year’s Day departed for New Orleans with a promise to return regularly. About the same time a Captain Coombs, the first in a long line of Green River captains of that name, established steamboat connections with Louisville.¹¹

During the first few years steamboat captains experimented with a variety of schedules and routes. A few exhausting trips to New Orleans, Louisville, or Cincinnati convinced them that the nearest Ohio River port, Evansville, Indiana, was the best place to trade their goods. Some early steamboats to establish Evansville-Bowling Green routes were the Governor Breathitt, the General Warren, the Glasgow, and the General Worth. In addition, the Lucy Wing, an elegant little boat built at Rumsey, made frequent local runs. When the water was high enough, an occasional steamboat ventured well above the slackwater system. For example, the Sallie Anderson made an appearance at Greensburg in 1851.

The lockkeepers’ records from the mid-nineteenth century show that the Green River valley was in the earliest stages of commercial development, for steamboats brought at least five times more tonnage into the valley than they carried out. Imports were mostly household goods, such as salt, flour, apples, potatoes, seed, liquor, and furniture; exports consisted simply of the local farmers’ surpluses in cattle, hogs, tobacco, and grain.

Tolls for passing the state-owned locks were relatively low and varied little during the period. The following is a sampling of charges for passing all five locks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item shipped</th>
<th>1843</th>
<th>1847</th>
<th>1867</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult passenger</td>
<td>$0.50</td>
<td>$0.88</td>
<td>$1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One ton of salt</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One horse</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One cow</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No matter what the state charged, however, toll receipts never paid the $102,000 annual interest on the state’s loan
for the rivers' improvement and often failed to cover the system's repair bills.\textsuperscript{12}

While the state continued its financial struggle with the rivers, Skiles faced bankruptcy. Ever since 1830 he had neglected his personal affairs, and his investments suffered disastrously during the 1837 depression. Unequipped either by temperament or early necessity to practice his father's business shrewdness, Skiles failed to keep a record of his expenses while working for river improvements. Thus, while this work took nearly all his time for several years, the state did not pay him enough to keep up the good riding horse he needed for superintending the works. But in 1844 Skiles, the once-proud entrepreneur, finally sent the state a request for back salary. Several prominent Kentuckians sent testimonies on his behalf urging he be paid at least enough to cancel his $12,000 state debt.

It was fortunate that Skiles's friends came to his defense, for he was in no condition to do so by 1844. His sudden disinterest in the river, his halfhearted effort to prevent the foreclosure on his land, and his church's veiled charge that he was "tempting his fellow man to indulgences" suggested Skiles suffered something of a nervous collapse early in the 1840s. He himself admitted that his health was broken, and he was drinking heavily to ease his pain.\textsuperscript{13}

When the legislature ordered the Board of Internal Improvements to settle Skiles's accounts, he was allowed $1,200 for each of his seven years' service as chairman of the Green and Barren River Commissioners, which reduced his debt to the state from $12,000 to $3,600. If he produced a detailed account of his expenses, the board suggested canceling the entire debt. It is significant that there was no longer even a suggestion by state leaders that Skiles had used his influence to enrich himself, for his financial plight made that seem unlikely. In fact, many of his former adversaries thought it a cruel paradox that
nearly everyone in the Green River valley was enjoying the fruits of Skiles's labors except Skiles himself.

The state’s settlement was a generous one, considering the problems Skiles’s pet project continued to cause Kentucky. In an effort to solve some of the mechanical problems on the Green River system, the state board hired Livermore in 1849 to return long enough to oversee a complete overhaul. Still, the system remained inefficient, with only two or three steamboats making regular weekly trips between Bowling Green and Evansville. Livermore believed business would increase if plank roads were laid to the outlying towns of Hartford, Glasgow, Scottsville, Russellville, Elkton, Hopkinsville, Madisonville, and Greenville. The legislators promptly rejected this plan, however, when they learned it would cost $800,000.

During the 1840s and 1850s the state did try several less expensive ways to increase the Green and Barren system lock receipts. For example, the legislature passed a law fining steamboat captains $400 if they failed to declare their full cargo. Then it appropriated funds for regular dredging of the lock approaches to encourage more regular use of the system. In addition, state engineers experimented with the lock gates to keep them from rotting so quickly. First, they coated solid oak gates with coal tar, and when that failed they imported cypress gates at what was considered an enormous price—$800 a pair. Despite these efforts, the system’s mounting expenses destroyed all hopes of making the river project self-supporting.

The Civil War compounded Kentucky’s troubles with the Green and Barren slackwater system. Both the Union and Confederate forces refused to pay tolls, and the gunboat crews easily intimidated the lockkeepers. Because the belligerents allowed little commercial traffic, the state collected less than $400 in toll fees during the war years, while damages to the line exceeded $36,000.
The Civil War also divided the Green River valley culturally, as local rivermen were forced off the river that traditionally tied the valley residents together. No longer an economic and social entity, the valley became a microcosm of national divisions. Families, churches, river towns, and even boat crews split between the warring factions. Though Kentucky remained in the Union, there was considerable Confederate support around Bowling Green when it became Kentucky’s Confederate capital in 1861.

For five months—from September 18, 1861, to February 14, 1862—the Green and Barren rivers literally divided the Union and Confederate forces. As Union armies held the northeastern banks, the Confederates fortified Bowling Green as the center of their northernmost line, stretching from the Mississippi River to the Appalachian Mountains. A breach in that line occurred in February 1862, when General Ulysses S. Grant’s forces took Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, followed by Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. Because it appeared that Nashville, also on the Cumberland, would fall next, the Confederate forces abandoned Kentucky for fear enemy forces would surround them.

Before leaving the area, however, the Confederates jammed Green River Lock Number 3 with logs and Barren River Lock Number 1 with huge boulders to prevent Union gunboats from entering southern Kentucky by way of the Green River. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, a native of the Green River valley, was ordered to blow up Lock Number 3, but local residents convinced him that a log jam would achieve the same effect without permanently destroying the slackwater system.

The Union forces which followed in the wake of the Confederate retreat were equally anxious to control the Green and Barren rivers, for they were essential arteries of supply after the Confederates destroyed the L & N bridge over the Barren River. The federal authorities suspected many local rivermen of being southern sym-
pathizers and officially closed the rivers to all traffic except their own, including the mail boats which might carry “contraband of war.”

When the war ended in 1865 commercial traffic gradually returned to the valley, but rivermen complained that the locks and dams were in a dangerous condition. State leaders announced, however, that the only way they could afford to repair the system was to get the United States government to pay them for using the rivers toll-free during the war. David R. Haggard, chairman of the Board of Internal Improvements at that time, had a more immediate solution to the problem. He and several Kentucky legislators were interested in organizing a private navigation company to take over the system and relieve the state of its burden.

On March 9, 1868, the legislature chartered the Green and Barren River Navigation Company, authorizing it to lease the improvements for the next thirty years. State leaders felt justified in their action because the treasury lacked the $36,000 needed to repair the system’s war damage, and there was little hope the United States government would pay its estimated $50,000 war debt.

The state’s lease to a private navigation company, which sanctioned a near-monopoly of river trade, was an unfortunate ending to a significant era in Green River history. Nevertheless, Kentucky’s effort to improve the river was a notable achievement, and economic losses to the taxpayers were slight when compared to the advantages of steamboat navigation. Travel, access to markets, and the resultant exchange of ideas gave the Green River residents their first regular contacts with the wider world. These also reinforced the concept of Green River valley citizenship, and neither war nor the shifting of river control could change that. Their debt to Kentucky for improving the wild Green River was indeed a large one, for it expanded their horizons more dramatically than any other development in the valley’s history.
The Monarchs of Green River
1868-1888

THE DECADES that followed the Civil War marked an important turning point in the life of the Green River valley, for Kentucky gave up control of the rivers, leasing them to a private corporation. Then, for a twenty-year interlude, a small group of businessmen—dubbed the "monarchs of Green River" by a local editor—made the rivers profitable for the first time. They were so profitable, in fact, that competing river interests charged they had a monopoly of river business and asked the United States government to take over control. The efforts to destroy the Green and Barren River Navigation Company's lease convinced valley residents that they must accept a revolutionary concept—federal control of the rivers.

Before the Green River citizens could accept federal control of the river system, however, they had to alter their post-Civil War attitudes. In 1868 Kentuckians were still bitter that the federal government had freed their slaves without compensation and extended the Freedmen's Bureau to the state despite the fact she never seceded from the Union. They also resented the federal
military commander’s compounding their labor shortage by issuing former slaves free passes on steamboats, trains, and stagecoaches to find employment elsewhere. Finally, federal authorities suspended the writ of habeas corpus in Kentucky and refused to seat some Kentuckians in the United States Congress. These actions united the valley firmly against Radical Republican rule in Washington, and the Democrats emerged as the dominant party. At first mostly former Confederates supported the party, but by 1867 enough ex-Whig slaveholders had joined them to assure one-sided Democratic victories in almost every local election.

The Green and Barren River Navigation Company, chartered by the Kentucky legislature in 1868, benefited from the political and economic consolidations within the Democratic party at this time. All the original incorporators were Democrats who had in some way supported the Confederacy, and several were newly elected Kentucky legislators. Their use of political position to gain economic advantages was not unusual, however, for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* complained that the state legislature spent entirely too much of its time chartering private corporations like theirs.

The incorporators chose an astute politician—William Payne, a state senator from Bowling Green—to devise a charter that would give them firm control without arousing legislative opposition. The fifty-one-year-old Payne was a former teacher, lawyer, and judge who was at the peak of his influence. A skillful writer, he began the charter with the assumption that the rivers had “always been a charge upon the State,” and there were no prospects for making them self-supporting. Then he proposed that the line could be kept operating without public expense “by letting it to an incorporated company.”

Actually, Kentucky could well afford to keep up the system, but Payne simply took advantage of his fellow legislators’ contempt for river improvements when he composed the charter.
The company's original incorporators were mostly steamboat captains, but several were politicians, and a few were lawyers and businessmen. Their association began quite accidentally in the fall of 1867 at the Van Meter Brothers' Bowling Green office. Charles and William Van Meter were sons of pioneer riverman Jacob Van Meter, who operated a profitable ferry near the Bowling Green boat landing. The younger Van Meters had become successful steamboat captains, developing an extensive retail business along the Barren River. The men who gathered in their office that day agreed that the state was letting the rivers deteriorate. When someone suggested they ask the legislature for permission to keep the rivers in order themselves, they decided to think about it overnight. The next day they returned to the office and agreed to send a committee to Frankfort to arrange for leasing the rivers.

The Navigation Company's committee had no difficulty with the state Board of Internal Improvements, for its chairman, David R. Haggard, was interested in becoming an incorporator himself. While overseeing the state's internal improvements, Haggard accumulated some valuable Green River property, and he, too, was worried about the state's indifference to the rivers. Probably no one had so thorough a grasp of the Green and Barren line's potential as Haggard. When the legislature refused to keep the system repaired, Haggard suggested that "it would not be, perhaps, bad policy to let it out to a responsible company for 20 or 30 years." While his name was prudently left off the first list of incorporators, he was apparently supporting the group when he wrote that this company should be made up of men "eminently practical and perfectly acquainted with the details of slackwater navigation, and boatmen at that."2

One of the men Haggard had in mind was his own superintendent of the Green and Barren line, Captain John Sproul. Sproul was raised by the South Union
Shakers, but in 1838 he took a job working for the state constructing the original Green and Barren locks and dams. When the first steamboats began plying the rivers regularly, he became a deckhand, working his way up to captain and owner of several vessels. Because he, like Haggard, had accumulated extensive river property he wanted protected, Sproul served as local superintendent for a mere $600 a year, a salary Haggard considered an insult for a man so familiar with the line.

In addition to these mature rivermen, the Navigation Company had a young, ambitious incorporator named C. G. Smallhouse, who later became its president. Smallhouse was also on Haggard's staff in 1868 as toll-collector at Lock Number 2. At thirty-two, he was probably the youngest incorporator, but he had somehow accumulated $10,000 to invest as security for the company's $500,000 bond.

Another relatively young man, William Brown, Jr., put up the largest security for the company—$60,000. Brown recently inherited this money from his father, who had been one of the first contractors for the Green and Barren improvements and was Sproul's predecessor as superintendent of the line. The elder Brown invested heavily in river property until he was one of the valley's largest landholders. Although there is no evidence that he dealt dishonestly with state funds, he, like Haggard and Sproul, used his position advantageously. His son was obviously convinced there was still money to be made on the rivers.

After these shrewd and experienced men got their charter through the legislature on March 9, 1868, Governor John W. Stephenson advised them to meet again, elect officers, adopt a seal, and execute a $500,000 bond, with $200,000 as security. On April 4 the incorporators complied, electing Payne president and Charles Van Meter secretary and treasurer. In addition to Payne, two other legislators joined the original incorporators, making
a total of fourteen members. On April 9, exactly one month after the legislature chartered the company, the governor sent a notice to all state officers operating the Green and Barren rivers that “the improvements, its tools, machinery, water powers, rights, privileges and franchises” had been transferred to the Navigation Company “for the full term of thirty years.”

Company leaders knew that they could never profit from tolls alone, but their charter gave them a better chance than the state had ever had of doing so. Payne worded it so that they collected according to passing boats’ tonnage, rather than according to freight. This was an effort to stop the common practice of cheating the toll-collectors by failing to declare all items aboard. The company avoided this by simply charging a flat toll for each ton a boat weighed when filled to capacity of “50 cents at the first lower lock, and 30 cents at the second, and 20 cents at the third, and 10 cents at the two upper locks, and same for returning.” At these rates it cost typical Green and Barren steamboats approximately $400 for a round trip through all five locks, which made it impossible for them to compete with the Navigation Company’s boats passing the locks toll-free.

Another advantage the company’s charter gave it over the state was the right to develop the valley’s resources, such as coal, timber, and agricultural products, as well as the packet trade. They borrowed money to purchase a steamboat, which was so successful that it paid for itself the first year and gave the incorporators their first dividends. Then the company got the United States mail franchise and advertised two additional steamboats, the Bowling Green and the Evansville, as United States Mail Packets (meaning they carried mail, passengers, and freight). The 184-ton Bowling Green was the first sternwheeler in the trade, and its crew was extremely popular. A young Evansville girl wrote a poetic tribute to the quality of their service in 1886 which was published in the Bowling Green Democrat:
The morn was balmy, the breezes fair,  
Playing tricks with my curly hair,  
And all was bright and debonair,  
    On the boat.

That boat moved from the pebbly shore,  
We waved adieu to one or more  
Our hearts with gladness brimming o’er  
    To get afloat.

Who helped us up those tiny stairs,  
Where none can ever go in pairs,  
Like Noah’s doves or polar bears?  
    Capt. Robinson.

Who oft at times grew quite sedate,  
Discoursed sublimely of life and fate,  
And never thought the hour too late?  
    Capt. Robinson.

Who with fresh humor every day,  
Was ever the gayest of the gay,  
As we went gliding on our way?  
    Mr. Morris.

Who was ever at his post so neat,  
The pink of courtesy complete,  
Ne’er from his duty beat retreat?  
    Capt. Durrenberger.

Who kept the table all so neat,  
With such nice desserts, such tender meat,  
None could resist the wish to eat?  
    Mr. Berry.

Who held the fort with faith sublime,  
And steered us on through rain and shine,  
And talked of Christian love divine?  
    Pilot Dolly.

Who finally gave to me a river  
Gently down the stream to glide,  
With mamma and papa by my side?  
    Capt. Smallhouse.
And ever in my heart shall stay,
And many a time for them I'll pray,
In grateful memory of that day,
We went afloat.

To one and all good-bye, I say
Yet hoping to meet another day,
And many blessings on your way,
Is the wish of your little friend. 5

The other mail packet, the Evansville, was hardly in a class with the Bowling Green. Weighing only 160 tons, the Evansville was in a dilapidated condition and sank in 1880. Meanwhile, a passenger who took a deck passage on her summed up in one word his advice to others considering the trip—“Don’t!” Then, with sarcastic wit, he described the “romantic” trip’s filth, danger, and discomfort and concluded that the next time he considered taking it he would “have a certificate of lunacy filed for his detention.”6

The company’s packets carried large amounts of agricultural surpluses out of the valley, especially tobacco, cattle, and grain. Tobacco was the most valuable export, as local farmers shipped some 6,000 hogsheads a year valued at $1 million. In 1879 company boats also carried 100,000 bushels of corn, 30,000 bushels of wheat, 6,000 head of hogs, and 2,000 head of cattle.

About 1870 the company began using smaller steamers to tow barges of coal and timber to Evansville. They finally owned six of them, but the most successful was the sturdy, 112-foot Longfellow which plied the rivers for thirty-one years. Forest products formed the most important part of the Longfellow’s business, and isolated lumbermen stacked hoop-poles and staves along the rivers waiting for it to tow them to market.

Much local timber was sold as saw logs to Evansville furniture makers who preferred Green River oak and other local hardwoods for their factories. Some 500,000 logs a year, valued at five dollars each, floated out of the
valley, most of them going over the dams without paying tolls. This was particularly true in the lower Green between Calhoun and the Ohio River, where timber cutters made tremendous profits during this period.

While lumbermen successfully bypassed the locks, coal bargeing required extremely high water to pass over the dams safely. Most of the local coal deposits therefore remained undeveloped at this time. In fact, only four mines operated for any length of time—one at Spottsville, one near the Mud River, one in Muhlenberg County, and the Navigation Company’s mine at Mining City. A Civil War leader, General Don Carlos Buell, announced that he was forced to close his coal mines at Airdrie, in Muhlenberg County, because he could not compete with the company’s toll-free production. This was nonsense, countered Captain John A. Robinson, who claimed most of his company’s coal went to the L & N at Bowling Green, while the rest was retailed at nearby river landings, never touching Buell’s downriver markets.

Kentucky’s geological surveys of 1873 and 1880 publicized the Green River valley’s vast undeveloped coal resources. Many people blamed the Navigation Company for retarding development of these resources, for its tolls were some three times higher than those on the Ohio River. This cut sharply into the miner’s profits, costing him about 40 percent of his coal’s value at the mines. When the railroads began shipping valley coal, river interests charged that excessive Navigation Company tolls cost them this valuable carrying trade. The geological surveys also revealed valuable iron and asphalt deposits along the Green River. The eminent geologist Nathaniel S. Shaler tried to assure prospective miners that the earlier failure to produce iron at Airdrie was due to bad management, but still little iron was mined. In 1885, however, the state’s first rock asphalt quarry opened in Edmonson County, a bit above the Green River’s slackwater navigation.

While many valley residents resented the company’s
toll-free navigation, its efficient methods undoubtedly increased job opportunities along the rivers. By 1880 the company had invested more than $250,000 in steamboats, barges, dock equipment, and mining property. When their old Evansville sank in 1880, Captain Robinson went to Cincinnati to oversee the building of a luxury steamer, the new 194-ton Evansville, which cost the company $22,000. The company hired Bowling Green builders to construct smaller boats like the Houston Coombs and used Rumsey mechanics for dry-docking and repairing its fleet. The company also ran stores in isolated settlements and allowed valley residents to use its private telephone and telegraph lines.

One thing that inspired the company to improve its river services was competition from the railroads that were crisscrossing the valley. When it first leased the rivers the only railroad in the valley was the original L & N, but during the next two decades four additional lines began siphoning off company business. Towns without railroad connections, such as Morgantown and Calhoun, depended on water transportation as much as ever. The fastest-growing towns on the rivers, however, were those with both river and rail connections, such as Livermore, South Carrollton, Rockport, and Bowling Green. It was the railroads' competition, in part, that convinced the company it should sell its thirty-year lease before it expired.

The railroads had many advantages over the Navigation Company. The state legislature gave them tax exemptions until 1886, and several counties voted bond issues to help finance construction costs, hoping to be included on the line. When Muhlenberg County voters later tried to repudiate their bonded indebtedness to the railroads, the courts sided with the railroads. The courts also ruled in favor of the railroads when their bridges obstructed steamboat traffic, and the Navigation Company began to fear the railroads' growing political power.
Taking advantage of their tremendous popular support, the railroads built more miles of track during the twenty years the Navigation Company controlled the rivers than in any comparable period in the valley’s history. The L & N built a second line just west of the Green River, beginning at Evansville, to connect the Ohio River again with Nashville. Even closer to paralleling the Green River was the locally financed Owensboro & Russellville line, which the L & N took over in 1892.

The Navigation Company’s main competitor for east-west trade was the Elizabethtown & Paducah line, which crossed the Green River at Rockport and was part of the Chesapeake, Ohio, & Southwestern system until the Illinois Central purchased it in 1896. Another east-west line, and the last one built while the company controlled the rivers, was the Louisville, St. Louis, & Texas, which ran close to the Ohio River and crossed the Green at Lock Number 1. A Bowling Green editor correctly prophesied that “this will be an important outlet for both freight and passengers from the entire navigable distance of Green and Barren Rivers.”

In spite of competition there were often close connections between river and rail. In fact, the first locomotives to reach both Evansville and Bowling Green in the 1850s arrived by steamboat, and when the locomotives began using coal, the Navigation Company, along with a local boatman named L. H. Kincheloe, supplied them. In the early 1880s the Navigation Company exchanged goods with railroads at river crossings and advertised that freight rates would be the same by either river or rail to Louisville.

The railroads’ threat to Navigation Company business was apparent, however, when an independent packet began running a shuttle service between the two railroads which crossed the river above Lock Number 2. In order to stop this threatening diversion of river trade the Navigation Company got the 1876 legislature to amend its charter, authorizing it to collect tolls from boats
running only between the locks. Buell, who lived in that area, complained that the amendment practically ended connections between the railroads and the river except those made by the company itself.

Local shippers hoped that river-rail competition would lower freight rates, but this worked only on the rivers. For example, at the railroad towns of Rockport and South Carrollton, the Navigation Company charged $3.00 for carrying a hogshead of tobacco to Evansville, while at neighboring towns without railroads, it charged $5.00. An Owensboro editor warned the railroads that their "fountains of freight" would dry up unless they, too, lowered rates, because local shippers could always use the Green and Ohio rivers. The United States Corps of Engineers noticed, however, that the rivers' presence had little effect on railroad rates, even "at points which should be competitive,"8 indicating that railroads had little fear of river competition.

The Navigation Company, through the efforts of its attorney, Congressman Clarence U. McElroy, got the legislature to restrict the railroads' monopolistic practices in 1886. Because the Navigation Company used many of the same tactics, however, it was powerless to stop the railroads from taking over the rivers' traditional trade. As a result, the railroads shipped more and more of the valley's tobacco to Louisville, its grain to Alabama and Georgia, and its livestock to Evansville. Great amounts of local coal moved by rail to eastern markets after the Elizabethtown & Paducah Railroad sponsored a miners' excursion that resulted in over thirty new coal mines along that line. Coal barging was cut still further when the Henderson & Nashville line tapped the western Kentucky coal mines, and the Owensboro & Russellville line built a spur to the extensive Mud River deposits.

While the Navigation Company officials fought the railroads' encroachments, many valley residents complained about the company's monopoly of river trade. Local businessmen particularly resented its auxiliary
businesses, whose toll-free transportation allowed them to underprice local competition. In 1880 an Owensboro writer lashed out at the “monarchs of Green River” who, “without having made the great investment of private means which railroad companies must generally make, enjoy the domination over their lines.” He concluded that “the power exercised by this corporation over the people within its grasp is greater than that of any government save an unmixed despotism.”

The most outspoken critic of the company continued to be General Buell. Best known for “saving” General Grant at Shiloh, Buell became interested in western Kentucky’s mineral resources when he led Union troops through there in 1862. In 1866 he leased 17,000 acres near the abandoned iron furnace at Airdrie, but exchanged the tract the following year for outright ownership of 1,000 acres containing large coal deposits. He had just begun his mining operation when the Navigation Company leased the rivers, frustrating his plans to barge coal cheaply. Buell, only fifty years old in 1868, was unwilling to surrender without a fight. When he finally achieved his goal of a “free” river twenty years later, however, he was no longer interested in barging coal. He was never too old, however, to attack his archenemy, the Green and Barren River Navigation Company.

Buell’s home, overlooking the Green River some 100 miles from its mouth, was his headquarters, and he often set off on his favorite horse, “Shiloh,” to enlist valley support. His arguments against the company were so effective that they set off a pamphlet war that finally involved the press, the courts, the state legislature, and the United States Congress. For the first time valley residents questioned the sanctity of contracts and began to wonder if government interference might be necessary to end the Navigation Company’s monopoly. These new ideas entered the valley largely because of Buell’s rare ability to simplify a complex problem and to enlist widespread support for his solutions.
Buell’s declaration of war against the company came in 1878 when he presented a scholarly, legalistic petition to the legislature, published later as *Memorial of D. C. Buell and Others Concerning the Green and Barren River Navigation Company and Its Relation to the Green River Country*. He charged that company leaders pushed their charter through the legislature “at the closing hours of the session without due consideration,” giving political leaders stock in exchange for support. Bitterly, he described how the company controlled the valley’s business affairs: first, it drove out competing steamboats; second, its tolls “put down” all local businesses that required navigation; and third, it took over these ruined businesses. Using constitutional arguments, Buell begged the legislature to repeal the company’s charter, which he labeled a “grievous misuse” of democratic government.10

Buell infuriated company leaders when he described their tremendous profits. He revealed how the company had been free from debt since the first year of its operation and how it owned extensive property in barges, coal mines, and real estate, “besides having, individually, enjoyed the benefits of dividends and remunerative salaries.” Even if the legislature repealed its charter now, the company could continue to profit from the goodwill and experience which otherwise would have cost it “the expenditure of a large permanent capital, and years of persevering energy.”11

When Buell’s pamphlet was published in 1880, the superintendent of the Navigation Company, Captain Robinson, replied in a Bowling Green newspaper. With the confidence of a self-made man, he addressed his remarks to the Kentucky legislature: “We do not come before you like a lot of spanked schoolboys, whining for our rights, but we come as men who have performed their duty honestly, without fear or favor.” Buell had no right to criticize the company’s lease, asserted Robinson, because he had tried to lease the rivers himself. When the
Navigation Company succeeded where he had failed, Buell accepted free passes on the line and toll credits in exchange for steamboat coal. In fact, wrote the witty Robinson, “everything seemed lovely” between Buell and the company until it purchased a few thousand acres of coal lands just upriver from Buell’s Airdrie mines. Then, “every sound of the pick as the company’s workmen drove deeper and deeper into the hillside seemed to him the death knell of Airdrie.”

Robinson could not resist making personal attacks on Buell, who “spat at the Navigation Company” so regularly. Robinson, too, had a constitutional argument: the sanctity of contracts. He reminded state leaders that they had been unable to run the line effectively and had merely patched up the rivers’ Civil War damage. Robinson could not resist the temptation to stretch the truth when he claimed the company, in contrast, had spent $20,000 a year on repairs.

Buell, furious when he read Robinson’s response in Bowling Green’s *Kentucky Intelligencer*, replied in the paper the next day. While it was true that his business interests were “identical with the interests of the whole Green River valley,” he thought Robinson’s references to his personal life were “inappropriate.” He charged Robinson with grossly exaggerating the company’s repair bills; instead of spending $20,000, it was more like $5,000 a year.

Continuing his pamphlet war, Buell circulated a petition with nearly 500 local signatures in Washington and Frankfort, begging the United States to take over control of the rivers. He spoke of the national scope of Green River trade and the fact that it needed the same federal help as other major rivers. The company’s charter violated the interstate commerce clause because it provided “the machinery by which the corporation actually regulated commerce between Kentucky and other States by way of Green River.”

When Navigation Company officials saw that Buell’s
attacks had damaged their public image, they enlisted the aid of the press to repair it. In 1879 they invited the newly organized Kentucky Press Association on a complimentary excursion and gave free steamboat passes to influential members. They also supported small-town newspapers by buying space both to advertise and to answer Buell’s attacks. Judge Payne, the aging author of the company’s charter, published many articles on its constitutionality before his death in 1884. Finally, company officials publicized their community services, such as coming to the aid of flooded areas cut off from all other communications.

Navigation Company leaders, however, did not welcome publicity regarding their financial affairs. When United States officials asked to see the company’s records in order to assess the lease’s value, they balked at revealing Robinson’s exaggerated maintenance figure. They also felt trapped concerning profits, for if they were high, valley residents would conclude that toll fees should be reduced; yet if they presented their accounts to make profits appear low, they feared the United States would pay them less for their lease. Nevertheless, in 1886 company president Smallhouse finally became anxious enough to sell the lease that he allowed government officials to examine the books.

One thing that convinced the company to sell its lease was the plague of legal problems which beset it. Buell and others continued to test the constitutionality of its charter, even after the Court of Appeals maintained it in 1870. The company also fought expensive legislative and court battles to stop goods from floating over the dams toll-free, but stricter laws did not stop the practice. Legal battles over railroad bridges were equally frustrating. When the Chesapeake, Ohio, & Southwestern replaced its drawbridge in 1883, it obstructed Green River traffic for forty-seven days. The lower court awarded the Navigation Company $1,585 in damages, but when the railroad appealed the case, the state’s highest court ruled
that the railroad was entirely within its rights. This deci-
sion weakened the company’s position in future cases,
too, by declaring that its lease was limited to the improve-
ments and did not include jurisdiction over the rivers
themselves.

The most serious of the company’s court struggles came
in 1880 when the state finally repealed its charter. Com-
pany officials announced they would “test its validity in
the Courts” and refused to surrender the lease. The state
sued for recovery. When the Franklin Circuit Court ruled
in favor of the Navigation Company, the state took the
case to the Kentucky Court of Appeals. Meanwhile, the
Navigation Company was accused of packing this court
when it got its former attorney elected to it. This was
Thomas H. Hines from Woodbury, a widely known judge
and Civil War hero who planned General John Hunt
Morgan’s escape from the Ohio Penitentiary. If Hines
influenced the Court of Appeals, however, it was before
the final decision was handed down, for he was not sitting
on the bench October 29, 1880, when it ruled the state’s
repeal of the charter unconstitutional. The ruling de-
clared that because the company had complied with
every stipulation required in its charter, the state could
not force it to give up its lease “without any compensa-
tion.”

It was the phrase “without any compensation” that set
the stage for the next phase of the struggle. The Naviga-
tion Company refused to consider anything but a “just”
payment for the lease. Meanwhile, state leaders, who had
no intention of buying back control of the rivers, sup-
ported the idea of the company’s selling its lease to the
federal government. Thus, in 1886 the legislature gave
the United States permission to buy the unexpired lease,
and the Navigation Company was prepared to comply if
the price was right.

To determine the lease’s value, a board of three engi-
neers from the United States Corps of Engineers met in
Bowling Green with Navigation Company officers. From
there they embarked on a river trip to Evansville to determine the “present and prospective value” of the rivers. No doubt company leaders entertained the engineers lavishly and presented the rivers’ best features, for they reported, “The commercial importance of these rivers is sufficiently great to justify the General Government in extending aid to their improvement” and suggested paying up to $350,000 for the lease.17

Because the Corps of Engineers’ figure was suspiciously close to the Navigation Company’s asking price of $338,000, congressional leaders called for additional estimates. Again, Buell found a way to attack his old enemy. He warned federal officials that the company exaggerated its real profits in order to get a higher price for its unexpired lease. In his opinion, $100,000 was ample compensation. Buell’s influence was apparent when the final amount specified in the 1888 River and Harbor bill was only $135,000. This drastic cut in price was Buell’s final victory, and a local editor commended him, claiming the money was going to a “soulless corporation which has grown fat by sucking the life blood of the Green River region.” The Owensboro Messenger noted that the company’s “princely set of robbers” were to be paid off.18

While the valley rejoiced that the rivers were at last “free,” it could not deny that the Navigation Company had made some positive contributions to Green River history. It provided the most efficient transportation the valley had ever known and probably developed the valley’s resources more than competitors would have done under state ownership. Even the Owensboro editor who labeled the company’s leaders “monarchs” and “robbers” admitted that they excelled in skill and courtesy. Buell also unwittingly complimented them when he argued that they were so familiar with the valley’s resources and so experienced in river navigation that they could repair the line for much less than it cost the state. Perhaps the editor of the Park City Daily Times assessed them best when he called them “shrewd businessmen”
who realized that they were getting “a very large elephant” off their hands when they sold their unexpired lease to the federal government.\textsuperscript{19}

The last advertisement for the Navigation Company’s steamboats was on June 13, 1889, nearly a year after the company sold its lease, but it took the owners more than fifteen years to wind up all their affairs. Smallhouse, who by 1888 owned one-fifth of the company’s stock, believed it a mistake to continue operating while the company was being liquidated, but he was overruled. Apparently business deteriorated badly, for in 1904 he noted smugly that “had the company let us close the trade we had for all our property, we all would have fared better by ten or fifteen thousand dollars.”\textsuperscript{20}

The former members of the Navigation Company continued to enjoy the affluence that the company had brought them. Smallhouse became president of the Warren Deposit Bank and later established the Smallhouse Mineral and Timber Land Investments in New Orleans. The Van Meters invested in an extremely profitable tourist business at Grayson Springs, Kentucky, and Charles became a generous benefactor to local educational institutions. Van Meter Hall, on the Western Kentucky University campus at Bowling Green, was named in his honor.

When viewed historically, these “monarchs of Green River” and their twenty-year reign hold a unique position in the valley’s development. Their methods, so typical of the robber barons of their day, prepared valley residents for federal control of their rivers. In a real sense, it was these maligned company officials who initiated the valley into the modern, industrialized world.
The Final Steamboat Era
1888-1931

When the United States took over the Green and Barren rivers on December 11, 1888, many believed steamboating had little future. Railroads were cutting so deeply into river trade that Mark Twain, a former river pilot himself, had announced steamboating's funeral in 1872. In the Green River valley, however, his cut-off date was about fifty years too early, for toll-free navigation and government improvements initiated a flashy, second-wind era of steamboating interest.

In 1888 the Navigation Company had so badly neglected the rivers that through traffic between Bowling Green and Evansville was impossible. The river wall of Lock Number 3 had fallen into the river and the lock walls at Number 2 and at Barren River Number 1 were in danger of falling at any time. The remaining locks, as well as the dams, needed repairs, and the river was full of snags and silt.

Despite the deplorable condition of the slackwater system, the 1890 census showed that commerce on the Green and Barren rivers was nearly as heavy as that on either the Cumberland or the Tennessee rivers and exceeded that on the Kentucky River. Service was unreliable, however, and local residents were impatient for
through river transportation again. In June 1890 they circulated petitions along the river asking the government to establish packet mail service as the Navigation Company had done. Government officials had no authority to operate packet lines, but they did send engineers to examine the system and promised to make every effort to have it repaired and ready for navigation by the end of the year.

Rivermen cautiously entered the packet trade, though the collapsed lock wall at Number 3 limited their runs. The Navigation Company's *Bowling Green*, above the lock when it fell in, continued to run between Rochester and Bowling Green. The *Evansville* served the lower trade, exchanging cargoes with the *Bowling Green*. But in February 1889 the *Bowling Green* burned, and by September the *Evansville* had temporarily left the trade. The *Crown Point* and the *City of Clarksville* took over the lower business, and a small sidewheeler named *Ida* made frequent runs in the upper trade.

When the Navigation Company lost its right to toll-free navigation it began selling its boats, beginning with the successful towboat *Longfellow*. Often the buyers were T. J. Moss and B. F. Givens of Saint Louis, operators of the largest crosstie and timber business in the West. Then in May 1889 an agent for the L & N Railroad, Lee Howell, joined Moss and Givens to form a new packet company. The headline for the *Calhoun Constitution* announced: "Green and Barren Navigation Company No More—the Evansville and Bowling Green Steam Packet Company Takes Its Place." In addition to the *Evansville*, the new company promised to put a new packet named *Bowling Green* into the trade.¹

Rivermen watched anxiously while the Corps of Engineers began repairing the damaged system. In 1884 Congress had allocated funds for "operating and care of canals and other works of navigation," which required local officials to submit reports each fiscal year. The first report for the Green River system, approved January 4, 1889,
called for restoring the original structures “so far as practicable,” constructing new ones where needed, and dredging the rivers.²

It soon became apparent that the government was quite efficient in its efforts to improve the system. Through traffic resumed in November 1890, just as promised, and the Corps began repairing dams, building lockkeeper’s homes, and clearing the rivers of debris. Then the United States Congress appropriated funds for new locks and dams. The first of these was a new lock at Calhoun across from the original Lock Number 2 at Rumsey. Next, two entirely new locks and dams, Numbers 5 and 6, extended Green River navigation to Mammoth Cave. Finally, a lock and dam on the Rough River, a tributary of the Green, made a total of 257 miles of navigable water in the valley.

The Corps of Engineers began Lock Number 2 in June 1893. The engineers were disappointed that it was not completed until December 1895, blaming the delay on flooding, insufficient funds, and the failure of the Evansville, Ohio, and Green River Transportation Company to furnish stone according to its contract. The original estimate for the lock was $130,000, but its final cost was $170,000.

About the time that Lock Number 2 was completed, the Corps started the Rough River lock and dam, eight miles from its mouth, where a private company had earlier built one. The River and Harbor Act of 1890 provided the funds, and work began in 1891. While not completed until 1896, the Corps’ engineers were quite proud that they had built one of the first concrete locks in the world and that the entire project had cost only $105,000.

Meanwhile, the strong local desire for Green River navigation to Mammoth Cave led the Corps of Engineers to initiate two more locks and dams, Numbers 5 and 6. The original estimate for this extensive project was $361,346, and its final cost was $365,673. Congress appropriated funds for Number 5 in 1892, but it was 1894 before
the chief of engineers approved a location, just below the mouth of Bear Creek and eighteen miles above Lock Number 4. The river bottom at this point was sand and gravel, sometimes to a depth of twenty-eight feet, but the Corps chose the location in order to raise Bear Creek’s water level enough to encourage shipping of the rich mineral deposits nearby.

In addition to its weak foundation, the construction of Lock and Dam Number 5 was complicated by insufficient funds and difficulty in purchasing clear titles to the surrounding area. Finally, the first lockage occurred in December 1899, but there was so much debris in the pool above the dam that the official opening was delayed until January 1, 1900.

The last of the locks built during the final steamboat era was Number 6, twelve miles above Number 5 and 182 miles from the mouth of the Green River. The River and Harbor Act of 1902 provided generous funds to begin construction, and the Corps opened it to traffic on January 1, 1906. Now Brownsville rather than Bowling Green was the head of navigation, and there was renewed interest in extending it to Greensburg, seventy-seven miles farther upstream. A government survey discouraged the move, however, declaring the upper river was not “susceptible of being made a highway of commerce.”

In summarizing the Corps of Engineers’ initial improvements of the Green and Barren rivers, it is undeniable that by 1906 the system was in better condition than ever before. A comparison of commercial statistics in 1898 and 1906 shows that the improvements spurred commerce, for passengers increased from 10,128 to 13,585, coal shipping increased from 236 to 929 tons, and crosstie shipping increased from 57,378 to 82,481 tons. Total shipping almost doubled, from 193,475 to 342,495 tons.

As commerce expanded, so did the opportunities for employment. Men with mechanical ability, like J. Porter Hines, could get a variety of experiences on the rivers
about the turn of the century. Hines began his river career as a timekeeper at Lock Number 4 in 1897. Next he was a lockhouse keeper at Number 5 and the following year did construction work at Number 1, Green River. Late in 1899 he began operating the mail boat Kalista between Calhoun and Livermore and then in 1905 hired out as a pilot on the government boat Emerald. Finally, in 1906, he became a pilot and engineer on the Chaperon, which made excursions to Mammoth Cave.

The Corps of Engineers hired many workers to maintain the Green River system. An Owensboro editor reported in 1889 that at Calhoun the government was building a "combination dredge, pile driver, and snag boat in W. H. Shutt's lumber yards, and giving employment to quite a number of carpenters and other laborers." The Corps also hired college students during the summer to dive for submerged logs and railroad ties and many full-time laborers to work on government boats such as the William Preston Dixon, Emerald, Shawnee, Col. G. L. Gillespie, and Major MacKenzie.

Independent boat owners hired many laborers, especially in the towing business. While there were seldom more than eight packets on the Green and Barren rivers during the decade 1898 to 1908, local towboats increased from nine to forty-seven. Another change that affected the job market was the shift of business from the lower locks to the upper locks. Between 1819 and 1922, for example, the traffic in the first four locks in Green River showed no increase, while in Barren River Number 1 and Green River Numbers 5 and 6 tonnage was four times as great.

River work did not pay high wages. For example, the monthly wages on the Samuel about 1900 were $80 for pilot, $75 for chief engineer, $60 for second engineer, and $30 for cook and deckhands. Salaries increased during the period, for in 1916 pilots made about $125 a month, and in the 1920s some earned $200. The rivermen's salary, however, was nearly clear profit, with boat owners furnishing food, lodging, entertainment, and insurance.
Many remained on the rivers because they simply loved their work. James F. Woolcott found piloting so enjoyable that after he and his brothers sold their boat and retired, he volunteered to relieve Green River pilots who were sick. Woolcott rushed to the landing whenever he heard four long blasts from a steamboat’s whistle, the captain’s signal for help. Obviously, there was more than pay to lure some men to the rivers.

The steamboats’ deckhands, or roustabouts, were usually blacks. One of the commonest chores given these “rousters,” as they were called locally, was loading railroad crossties. As they crossed the gangplank they shuffled their feet in unison, in a “cross-legging sort of prancing step.” This rhythmic pattern helped keep their balance and inspired them to sing as they worked. The “coonjine,” the song they sang, dealt with conditions of river life. Some songs consisted of just a few words, born at a moment of despair, like the following one heard on the Green River:

![Music notation]

Oh, tell me how long! — Tell me how long!

Even after Brownsville became official head of navigation, Bowling Green continued to have more river-related jobs than any other valley town. The L & N Railroad, which had bought the Portage Railroad, converted it to a standard-gauge line, and the city built the only paved landing on the Green and Barren system. Private river interests maintained a wharf, warehouse, railroad incline, and derrick for transferring freight from water to rail or vice versa.

Evansville citizens, too, benefited from the Corps of Engineers’ improvements on the Green and Barren rivers and, under the leadership of W. P. Greene, worked hard to maintain good trade relations. Greene helped organize
the Green River Valley Improvement and Immigration Association. His enthusiasm inspired him to edit and publish a contemporary account of the valley in 1898 which included much of its history. Entitled *Green River Country from Bowling Green to Evansville*, the book is, despite its commercialism, the finest account of the valley in the steamboat era. Greene did not try to hide his promotion of Evansville when he wrote that “the manufacturers and merchants of Evansville make no idle boast when they assert their ability to supply all the wants of the vast trade that is now seeking her markets.” His desire for increasing trade made him eager to attract immigrants to the valley, and he wrote an article for the *Evansville Courier* aimed at selling farmland. His major selling point was the cheapness of Green River valley land, at “almost nominal prices” of less than five dollars an acre.7

Lumber was one of the most important products the Green River valley furnished Evansville, for it made her a leading hardwood center. A reporter for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* noted that in 1895 some 80 percent of the 100 million feet of lumber cut in Evansville came out of the Green River valley. The cutting, sawing, and rafting of logs kept large numbers of Green River laborers occupied. A writer for Bowling Green’s *Park City Daily News* concluded that “nobody on the upper end of Green River thinks of farming—all labor is directed toward the decimation of the forest.”8

The loggers began work early in the spring, loading their tents, saws, axes, cant-hooks, chains, provisions, and cooking outfits into enormous wagons. They made camp near the forest at the “boundary,” then divided into squads of from two to six men for cutting and sawing logs. This work continued until the November rains and the “fitting out” of logs began. Logging was such difficult work, noted one observer, that even the “red-shirted jeans-betrousered Green River sailor” sometimes fell under “malaria fevers, pneumonia, and consumption.”
Before breaking camp, however, he carefully stacked his logs along the riverbank to wait for the heavy spring floods that would float them to market.9

Logging began to decline during the later steamboat era as the most accessible forests were depleted. In the early 1890s about one thousand rafts a year passed Lock Number 1 on Green River, but after 1910 less than three hundred passed the same lock. The decline was caused in part by increased local interest in finishing the lumber, turning it into staves, shingles, chairs, hoop-poles, timber, and railroad ties. The town of Livermore, at the confluence of the Rough and Green rivers, was the leading center for this manufacturing.

Around 1900 several Green River boats were rigged up with a sawmill for local use. The Woolcott brothers—James, George, and Charles—built a floating sawmill of local poplar and named it the Three Brothers. Another, the Samuel, towed a cutting crew on a separate raft. This arrangement proved dangerous in 1906 when the Samuel accidentally ran into the raft, killing several workers.

Much local lumber left the valley as crossties for the ever-growing railroads. A captain on the steamer Indiana recalled that most of the ties he shipped were oak and walnut. Tie-hackers hauled them to the Green River’s bank by mules and wagons, where rousters loaded them on barges for one to one-and-a-half cents a tie. An owner of the towboat Racket reported that an Evansville dealer paid him eight cents a tie plus one cent each for unloading them.

When the government first took over the rivers, there was some coal mining, though the Corps of Engineers considered it insignificant. Among the privately owned coal tipples dotting the banks was one belonging to the Green River Coal Company, which supplied steamboat engines for four cents a bushel. The largest coal operation was probably the Aberdeen Mining Company in Butler County. Most valley coal was used locally, especially at Bowling Green, but Greene wrote prophetically that
larger locks would result in a dramatic increase of coal shipping to Ohio River markets.

From the beginning of Green River navigation, agricultural shipping had been important to the valley, and this continued to be so in the final steamboat era. A 1906 cargo on the Evansville included some 100 hogsheads of tobacco, 40 head of cattle, 400 hogs, sheep, and calves, 50 to 75 coops of poultry, and 300 cases of eggs. Grocery owners who used the packets both to import wholesale merchandise and to export local agricultural surplus were dependent on Evansville merchants to give them the best trade. One grocer rushed his geese to market on October 2, 1891, after his Evansville dealer sent word he could get twenty-five cents apiece for them at that time and warned that "the goose market always declines by November first."10

One of the best-known store boats was Woolcott’s Three Brothers, which had earlier been a floating sawmill. The owners, from South Carrollton, found the Evansville packet company cutthroat competitors. Relations became more cordial after the packet Evansville almost sank near Woodbury, and the Three Brothers’ pumps kept it afloat until repairs could be made.

Whether by store boat or packet, agricultural shipping decreased in volume from approximately 10,000 tons a year when the government took over the rivers to about 5,000 tons a year in the 1920s. The value of these products, however, nearly doubled, going from about $500,000 to $1 million. There was a noticeable change in items shipped, with tobacco, whiskey, beer, and grain decreasing while cattle, horses, and sugar increased.

Some smaller agricultural items such as chickens, eggs, and cream were often shipped on the fast little mail boats. There were several of these in the later steamboat era, and some were finally converted from steam to gasoline engines. Contemporaries recalled that the mail boats were so prompt that river people set their watches by
them. One that had this reputation was the Kalista, which J. Porter Hines ran as an express between Calhoun and the nearest railroad at Livermore. Leaving Calhoun at 8:00 A.M. he was back at noon; then he left again at 1:00 P.M. and returned at 5:00. A local poet commemorated the Kalista in verse:

The Kalista is a darling,
Of all Green River boats
A champion to her inches
And the fastest thing that floats
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
She’s a darling, she’s a daisy
She is Calhoun’s pride
If you don’t think she is swift,
Just get on her and take a ride.¹¹

Along with the traditional kinds of shipping on the Green River there was an increasing amount of asphalt in the final steamboat era. The Kentucky Rock Asphalt Company operated mines in Edmonson, Grayson, and Hart counties from its base on a peninsula between the Nolin and Green rivers. When the last packet burned in 1931, this company was shipping 1,500 tons a day by barges to Bowling Green and Rockport, where it went by rail to all parts of the country to be used as a paving material.

Before modern highways destroyed the valley’s isolation in the 1920s there were a number of special-service river crafts such as photography studios and tinshops. One of the most colorful characters on the river was a successful photographer named H. O. Schroeter. Greene, who used much of Schroeter’s work in his Green River Country, called him the “Artist of the Emerald Wave” and believed his work compared favorably with that of the “most distinguished professors of the art.” Schroeter and his family lived on his floating studio, which had a parlor, sitting room, dining room, bedrooms, kitchen, and artist’s studio. After his wife died, Schroeter told his
wide-eyed river customers that he still could communi-
cate with her by means of his special brand of spiritu-
alism.  

Schroeter claimed that the reason his prints did not fade was that he washed them in the mineral-rich Green River, placing them in a fish box he carried alongside the studio. He and his sons, Emory and Clifford, usually photographed individuals there on the boat, but they obligingly went ashore to cover nearby weddings or family reunions. According to local tradition the Schroeters’ photographic skill eventually got them into trouble when they began copying some United States money. Nevertheless, they left one of the finest historical records of the steamboat era.

Another specialty during the final steamboat era was George Ankerman's floating tinshop. At one time he hired six metal-workers and carried materials worth more than $10,000. His specialties were roofs and gutters, but he also claimed that he introduced iron corn-stick pans into the area. This occurred when boatmen tasted his wife’s delicious corn sticks and began ordering pans like hers for themselves. When the 1937 flood came to the Green River it carried Ankerman’s craft about one-half mile up into Calhoun. He decided to leave it there, adding a home and store for his family’s land-based operation.

The best-known river family during the later steamboat era was that of Richard T. Williams, which operated boats on the Green and Barren rivers for fifty years. Williams was born in 1833 on an Indiana farm, but he left home to learn the carpenter’s trade. After his marriage to Patience Suddarth he supported their family of five boys and five girls by sawmilling and steamboat-building. In 1880 he entered the Ohio River packet trade, but when the United States purchased the Green River system he recognized its potential for profitable packet service. He built one last steamboat, the Maggie Belle, and when it was completed in 1889 he put his entire family aboard and started for the Green River.
Later Mrs. Williams became an invalid and could not accompany her family on river trips, so she fixed her upstairs bedroom in their Evansville home as a sitting room where she could entertain family and friends. Her grandson recalled that she listened to people talk "until they'd completely run down" and then offered advice in the manner of Ann Landers of a later day. She expected her sons, even after they were river captains, to have lunch with her at least one day a week, whenever their boats were in Evansville. Perhaps her solicitude was one reason so many of her children remained unmarried. More likely, it was the unusual closeness that the family enjoyed, especially up to the time of the elder Captain Williams's death in 1912.

Richard Williams and his five sons could handle any job on a steamboat, as indicated on the caption on an 1897 photograph of their steamer J. C. Kerr: Richard was captain, Thomas and William were pilots, Jeff and J. Edgar were clerks, and Joseph was the chief engineer. Other rivermen called them "double-enders," meaning that they could cover any job on a boat, especially if it required mechanical ability.

The family experienced tragedy about 1898 when the oldest son, Joseph, drowned while serving as engineer on the steamer Park City. His father told reporters he had talked with his son a few minutes earlier and found him in especially good spirits that clear, warm evening. But when the pilot rang the bell at Burke City for the engineer to shut off the steam, the boat surged ahead. The crew rushed to see what had happened and discovered Joseph missing from his post. Immediately the pilot backtracked and threw searchlights along the banks, but it was not until some time later that Joseph's body was recovered from the river. His father explained to reporters that his son probably had slipped on some melted ice on the deck, but that did not stop talk that Joseph had recently taken out a new insurance policy on his life.

After the accident Captain Williams turned more re-
sponsibility over to his surviving sons. In 1900 J. Edgar took over his father's post as master of the Park City, and the elder Williams began to work wherever he was needed. In a letter written that year another son, Thomas, indicated a touching concern for his father's welfare when he warned him to get enough coal for his next trip, reminded him to pick up the machinery he had ordered, and suggested where he might find a good pilot.

The Williams family's continuing success on the Green River was no accident, for they worked hard to please their customers. Competition was keen when they entered the trade in 1889 and, according to his grandson, the elder Williams taught his sons the valuable art of accommodation on their first trip.

When they got above the locks, they stopped at a farm home to see if they could buy some produce—eggs, butter, milk, bacon, country ham, chickens, etc. In the meantime, it had rained and inundated so much of the land that this farm was marooned. . . . He said that if [the farmer] had grain he can rig up a mill here on the boat, so he ground out this farmer's corn and wheat and made flour, and meal and feed stuff for his livestock. . . . The farmer gave him in turn a portion as toll for grinding it.

He got on the river, and there was a little coal community, and they too were marooned. . . . My grandfather found out they were almost to the point of starvation, because they didn't have any supplies except what came by boat, and they hadn't anticipated the ice condition on the Ohio River. . . . So he let them have some of the meal and flour he had ground, and some of the farm produce. . . .

So he played between these two locks and kept those people from starving. As a result they got up a petition and asked him to come into Green River and navigate.¹⁴

The elder Captain Williams also taught his sons the importance of maintaining good press relations along the river. He purchased advertising space in small-town newspapers and furnished local editors with the latest
Evansville papers. He was usually repaid by favorable reporting of his activities. A *Calhoun Constitution* editor, for example, wrote that Williams and his crew handled a large excursion “with satisfaction to all,” adding that “the Captain is gaining friends and patronage as time rolls on.”

One riverman who worked with the Williams family called them “the best mixers that ever went on the rivers.” To illustrate, he told about a young boy flagging them from a remote landing, with the request they bring him a blue-back speller from Evansville on their return. They brought it, too, charging the boy only seventeen cents, which was far less than it cost to land the boat.

The reports of the Williamses’ accommodating ways are legion along the rivers. When business was light in July 1890, they took Sabbath schools to Livermore for a picnic without charge. If Calhoun residents contracted for two excursions, the family gave the proceeds of the first one to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the second to the Methodists for their respective building projects. In late summer they frequently brought a load of “Georgie Rattlesnake” watermelons up the river and sold them at the attractive price of “all you could carry for a quarter.”

The Williamses seemed to enjoy having people depend on them for personal services. They obliged willingly a request to return a “cubbard safe” to Evansville that was slightly damaged, and another from a solicitous father who asked them to “pass Miss Ollie Wilson in safety from Evansville to Calhoun.” They also served excellent food and kept the galleys open for coffee or a snack. A passenger on Jeff Williams’s *Hazel Rice* wrote that breakfast was a “good farmer’s meal—rice fixed with tomatoes and onions, and very tasty! bacon, sausage, hot biscuit, fried apples, coffee.” The noon meal consisted of “roast beef, mashed potatoes, lettuce, corn bread, white bread, pickles, quartered onions, wild mustard greens, coffee, and pumpkin pie.” Another passenger was im-
pressed that the evening meal on board a Williams boat included both country ham and chicken, and three deserts—watermelon, blackberry cobbler, and ice cream.18

Richard Williams tried to keep one member of his family on each boat, and he chose employees who could meet and serve the public in the Williams manner. The pilot of his second Green River steamboat, for example, was Mike Keplinger, well known as a former lockkeeper at Lock Number 2. Later Keplinger developed a drinking problem, and while Williams forbade the use of liquor on his boats, he tolerated his pilot’s frequent lapses because he was so popular with valley residents.

Price wars kept the Williams family hustling to get their share of the Green River business. Captain Williams was quite successful in that kind of struggle because his sons worked without pay until the price war was over. It was difficult, however, to pay the bills during these periods. In 1893 the Bowling Green Democrat reported that the deputy United States marshal at Evansville took over the J. C. Kerr until Williams paid notes amounting to $900. The government official released the boat when Williams convinced him that he would pay the indebtedness quickly if allowed to resume his packet service. The editor reporting the incident applauded the official’s decision, writing that “if her [the J. C. Kerr’s] business continues to increase Captain Williams can liquidate the indebtedness in a short time.”19

The J. C. Kerr made a comfortable living for the family, but after running her five years (1892–1897) the Williamses still owed nearly $1,000 for her, and she was worth only about $5,000. One reason they could never get out of debt was that they extended credit so liberally along the river. A letter the elder Williams wrote to the Quigg Brothers Department Store at Livermore was typical: “Please let Mrs. C. M. Freeman have her household goods, and return the freight bill to the boat.” This happened so frequently that Williams finally asked the Quigg
Brothers to collect such debts for him, and they agreed to do so for five dollars a month.\textsuperscript{20}

The Williams family lived well despite financial worries. The elder Captain Williams bought a well-built frame house in Evansville with nine rooms and a bath and paid cash for new furniture and carpets. Mrs. Williams had her own bank account and enjoyed plenty of paid household help, including a superb French cook.

Quite naturally the Williamses' most serious competition was the Evansville Packet Company, which owned the packets \textit{Evansville}, \textit{Crescent City}, and \textit{Gayoso}. When these boats and the Williamses' \textit{J. C. Kerr} were the only survivors of the deadly price wars in 1896 and 1897, it was perhaps inevitable that their owners should consider the advantages of a merger. The first to broach the subject was Lee Howell, who represented not only the Packet Company but also the \textit{L & N}. He and the Williamses attended the same Evansville Presbyterian Church, and after the services one Sunday in 1897 they discussed the advantages of working together rather than in competition. The next morning they met to complete plans for the merger, effective January 1, 1898. The \textit{Evansville Courier} reported that the two lines "that had driven so many boats out of the river" had formed a stock company with their boats as capital stock.\textsuperscript{21}

The new Evansville and Bowling Green Packet Company brought a mixed reaction from those involved in Green River trade. Evansville residents generally approved, for they believed it would bring their city more trade. An Evansville editor suggested that without amalgamation, price wars would force all Green River steamboats to "be sold under the hammer for charges." According to his view the company's rates were fair and its boats "thoroughly efficient."\textsuperscript{22}

But in the Green River valley there was historic distrust of river monopolies. Many shippers who enjoyed low freight rates during price wars feared that the Packet Company could safely set prices much higher with no
real competition. The rumor got out that the L & N owned the new company, a charge that was difficult to deny, because of Howell’s connections. When the Williamses’ J. C. Kerr came up the river with her stacks painted black to match those of the Packet Company, valley residents expected river rates to go as high as railroad rates, and in some areas, this was the case.

The merger between the Williamses and the Packet Company occurred just before Greene went to press with his Green River Country in 1898, but he appended his original draft to include his approval. “This is a most favorable movement for the Green River section,” he wrote, “as it will stop the ruinous cutting of transportation and passenger rates.” In his opinion, competition caused trade to go to cities other than Evansville.23

Much of the Packet Company’s success was a result of Howell’s leadership as president and treasurer. Howell, like Williams, left the farm as a penniless young man and in the best Horatio Alger tradition of his day became a successful businessman. Greene, concerned about the criticism of Howell’s L & N connections, claimed that “no breath of public prejudice is well founded, that associates Capt. Howell with any design or purpose of aggrandizement of himself or the corporation he represents at the expense of the city of Evansville.”24

Unlike Williams, Howell worked best behind the scenes rather than directly with river people, though he, too, was an experienced riverman. After the merger he let Williams and his sons take care of the steamboats while he managed the business and legal ends. To get cheap maintenance for the company’s steamboats he helped found the town of Howell near Evansville. The town, which was named for him, was a convenient place where mechanics could live and work. He also proposed a colony for Green River blacks to supply rousters and deckhands; he told a reporter in 1907 he believed he could interest a hundred families from Alabama and
Tennessee to move there as soon as he could get housing for them.\textsuperscript{25} To avoid expensive lawsuits, Howell took out insurance policies with a company in London, England, and urged Williams to report accidents immediately to assure full compensation.

Howell also drove a hard bargain in buying and selling produce, and his shrewd business techniques resulted in handsome profits. Records for the \textit{Gayoso} revealed a balance gain of over $600 in a single week in February 1900, when receipts were generally low. The details of the statement follow:\textsuperscript{26}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenditures</th>
<th>Receipts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wages $360.85</td>
<td>By freight $1,034.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel 31.73</td>
<td>By passage $181.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stores 102.12</td>
<td>$1,215.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenses 54.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$549.62</td>
<td>Balance gain $665.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above figures show that passenger fares were a minor item as far as profits were concerned, but river travel was nevertheless an important part of the later steamboat culture. W. P. Westerfield, who practiced medicine at Rochester near Lock Number 3 typified the frequent traveler on packets. His diaries reveal that nearly every month he took some sort of river trip, riding to fairs, conventions, weddings, medical meetings, and reunions.\textsuperscript{27} The number of passengers on Green River packets rose steadily during this period, from about 1,000 in 1890 to over 22,000 in 1925. Then, however, a decline set in until by 1932 there were again only about 1,000 passengers.

Steamboat travelers were a varied group. The passenger list on a Green River packet might include women going to Evansville to shop, businessmen on fishing trips, young people going to Massey Springs on the Barren River to dance, athletic teams meeting their rivals,
drummers bound for the Johnson House at Calhoun or the Commercial Hotel at Hartford to peddle their wares, or Sunday school groups going on picnics. One little girl regularly rode from Gemtown, where her father was a coal operator, to Livermore for her piano lessons.

One of the favorite passenger trips was to Mammoth Cave. The Chaperon, formerly the J. C. Kerr, first made the run in 1906; later the Evansville made regular trips, leaving Evansville every Friday for the cave. While the Packet Company did not make much profit on cave trips, it hoped these would build up the Green River territory. The four-day trip was indeed a bargain for tourists, costing eight to ten dollars, depending upon the number going, for boat trip, entertainment, meals, and cave tours. By 1921 the price for the trip had increased to fifteen dollars. For an additional eighty-three cents passengers could take the boat to Bowling Green and then catch the L & N for the cave, thus avoiding the half-mile wood-path separating the Green River and the cave entrance.

Another personal service performed by the packets was carrying some of the valley's dead to their burial place. Dr. Westerfield wrote as if it were a common occurrence when, on June 21, 1904, "Len Gibbs' wife's corpse shipped to Rochester this day on Crescent City." The packets had a "body-shipping case" equipped with a metal tray which was ice-filled and laid over the body. A hole at one end permitted an attendant to watch for signs of life. The Packet Company did not perform this service without pay, however, for when a penniless raftsman, William Ham, drowned in the Green River in 1889, the company refused to return the body to his Rockport home. It seemed that he and his fellow-raftsmen had tied up at Delaware "on account of high wind." He then proceeded to "imbibe too much corn juice," according to an Owensboro Weekly Messenger reporter, and when he returned to the raft Ham fell out of the skiff, too drunk to swim. Finally, his fellow-raftsmen took up a collection
until there was enough money to return the body “home to his people” on the steamer Evansville.28

While the packets were the leading actors in the later steamboat drama, they were sometimes outshone by another steam-operated river craft—the showboat. As Edna Ferber put it, those living in the backcountry discovered “a glorious world of unreality” on the showboat where “innocence wore golden curls” and “love triumphed, right conquered, virtue was rewarded, evil punished.”29

The Green River valley was a showboat favorite, probably because there was little competition from road shows in the isolated towns and landings. An old-timer claimed that “everybody in Butler County joined the showboat when it came to Morgantown.”30 One young woman who rarely saw any kind of show was so excited when a showboat tied up at Rockport that she remembered it vividly forty years later. She recalled:

We walked over there every night for about a week to see a different show. “East Lynne” was one of them and I remember the heart-rending scenes in the shows. . . . We really took it to heart. . . . When the curtain was finally pulled, the scenes were just beautiful. . . . Some would-be artists had painted sunsets in the background and different ones rolled up and down.

In between acts of the play itself . . . usually a curtain rolled down with a scene on it and two would come out and dance or they would crack jokes. . . . We would tell them after we got home for weeks. It was our amusement for the season. The songs were usually old tear-jerkers, ballads of some kind, and we would cry along with them.31

Tom Reynolds’s Majestic probably entertained more Green River country audiences than any other showboat, and he claimed the Green River was his favorite place to play. Anxious to maintain a reputation for giving a clean show so that whole families would attend, he reportedly
told his producer he “didn’t give a damn how rotten the show was just so it was clean.” He also boasted that he kept the Green River navigable. “People at Evansville begged my Dad to make a trip up the Green River to keep the government from closing off the locks,” recalled his son. Once Reynolds went all the way to Mammoth Cave to give a show, but when he saw people wading out in the middle of the river he left before showtime for fear that even the Majestic’s twelve-inch draft would require more depth than that.32

Because Green River audiences preferred melodrama, Reynolds usually presented “Ten Nights in a Bar Room” or “Saintly Hypocrites and Honest Sinners.” On good nights his gross receipts were about $150, until the depression left Green River audiences too destitute to buy tickets. A Morgantown man recalled that when he lacked forty cents for a ticket Reynolds let him deliver handbills as the price of admission.33

Another favorite showboat was Doc Bart’s Fun Boat, operated by a physician tired of medical practice. Sometimes he admitted Green River residents to his boat if they brought the cook blackberries or fresh fish. Once at Mill Landing, a poverty-stricken village of 600 people, Bart showed “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” to a capacity crowd of 300. Asked if he were not ashamed to take their money, Bart replied, “No, we gave them the only pleasure they have had for years, and that for fifty cents or a gallon or two of berries.”34

There were a number of other showboats on the Green River, such as French’s New Sensation, which appeared at Calhoun in August 1890, giving what a local newspaper reported as “the best show ever at this place.”35 Another, Price’s Columbia, specialized in plays emphasizing a female lead, like “Nellie the Sewing Machine Girl.” The showboats Cotton Blossom, New Era, Water Queen, Princess, Floating Theater, and Robertson’s Floating Palace also gave occasional shows in the valley.

Another colorful feature of the final steamboat era was a
river-pilot's guide at the confluence of the Gasper and Barren rivers called "Sally's Rock." It was named for Sally Beck, who first waved to passing steamboats from it in 1886. Actually, her "rock" was two huge pieces of sandstone jutting out from a bluff overlooking the Barren River.

As postmistress for Rockland, Kentucky, Sally regularly delivered mail to the steamboats. When a telephone was installed in her father's general store at the top of the hill, rivermen bought her a megaphone so that she could shout messages to them. A contemporary recalled that Sally gathered news "like a sheep gathering burrs," and boats slowed down or stopped to exchange news and questions. For example, a farmer once asked Sally to "tell Jett Hines to find out what feathers are bringing in Bowling Green." A river passenger shouted that "Aunt Trudy Jones is sick and wants somebody to tell her folks in Calhoun." 36

The steamboat pilots and crews made Sally a living legend. Reportedly, rivermen's wives were jealous of her, though she was described as a rather plain-looking woman. In 1918, when she was forty-six years of age and still unmarried, she answered a newspaper advertisement placed by a Canadian farmer seeking a wife. The resulting marriage ended Sally's unique river career, but her legend lives on in other "Sally's Rocks" along the rivers.

By the 1930s new technological advances replaced the showboats, the packets, and Sally Beck's megaphone, and the isolation that supported a steamboat culture disappeared. Radios, movies, automobiles, trucks, and modern highways joined the railroads in making the frontier-oriented steamboat unprofitable. There had been declines before, however, and old-timers recalled that peak years like 1908 were followed by the slow years just prior to World War I. Tonnage picked up again in the early 1920s, however, and perhaps it would do so again when the depression subsided.

Instead, a really serious decline began in 1930, with
commerce decreasing 18 percent in a single year. In 1931, with the decrease a disastrous 52 percent, the Corps of Engineers explained simply that the asphalt market was down and that the rivers' only packet had burned in July. As the depression deepened, the government spent little on the rivers, allowing the system to go from good condition to only fair, with the locks themselves in poor condition. The one redeeming development was that the completion of Lock Number 48 on the Ohio River finally provided sufficient water for Green River Lock Number 1 during dry seasons.

The trend toward barging goods on the rivers was also an important factor in ending the packet trade. By 1931 about 90 percent of the commerce on the Green and Barren rivers was either asphalt or coal, and these could be moved more profitably by barges and towboats than by packets. A comparison of shipping in 1889 and 1925 shows the shift in freight that terminated packet service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1889</th>
<th>1925</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General merchandise</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock asphalt</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railroad ties</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logs</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because asphalt became the leading item shipped on the Green River system in the 1920s, obviously replacing packet merchandise, Congress passed a River and Harbor Act in 1930 which provided for enlarged locks (56 by 360 feet) near the mines at Green River Lock Number 5 and Barren River Lock Number 1. The act also provided for Bear Creek's improvement for asphalt shipping if local interests contributed $10,000 to the initial costs. The economic situation in the valley was so depressed, however, that local river interests failed to raise the money.

One by one the packets left the rivers until only the
Evansville continued in the trade. The Chaperon gave up its Mammoth Cave run in 1917, and the third Bowling Green sank in 1920. The Williamses, in keeping with the times, began buying towboats instead of packets, such as the Hazel Rice. There was nostalgia for the vanishing packet, but it was apparent that no one was going to continue long in an unprofitable river business.

Jeff Williams, president of the Packet Company in 1930, continued to be optimistic, at least on the surface. "Not a weep, not a wail, nor even a hint of a gnash exists around Capt. Jeff," noted a Waterways Journal reporter, commending Williams's "refreshing absence of twiddling of thumbs and moaning over 'this' before 'that' killed the business." Two years later, however, the Williamses, too, had gone out of the packet business. The Evansville burned in 1931, ending Green River packet trade, and their Ohio River packet, the Southland, burned at the mouth of the Green River in 1932. The Williamses quietly collected their insurance and continued their towboat and barging operations until 1940, when one of their nephews in Bowling Green, James R. Hines, took charge of the business.

First the packets and then the steam-powered towboats left the rivers until the steamboat era was nothing but a vivid memory for those who experienced it. Courtney Ellis, who spent much of his retirement collecting steamboat photographs, wrote of standing on what was left of Sally's Rock with Sally herself when she returned for a visit in 1956. The two aging river buffs recalled the sounds as well as the sights of the "grand old steamer" Evansville and its "wildcat" whistle. They spoke of the talented Eugene "Genie" Lunn, a trombone player who played the wildcat whistle to the delight of valley residents. He and Captain William Williams had engineered the unique instrument, and Lunn used it to serenade his mother with "Old Folks at Home" as he approached her Morgantown home. Sally recalled that he often played a
tune for her, too, usually "Dixie," "Yankee Doodle," or "Old Black Joe." ³⁸

On July 25, 1931, the fifty-one year old Evansville was running late, and Lunn played "Old Black Joe," suggesting to impatient river folks that "I'm Comin', I'm Comin'." It seemed a prophetic message, for she was indeed "comin'" to join all the other Green River packets lying on the river's bottom. She burned soon after landing at Bowling Green, leaving only a charred engine jutting out from the water. This marked the end of the packet era, and those who mourned its passing believed there would never be anything quite so glamorous on the Green River again.
Coal, Flood Control, and the Environmentalists 1931-1975

The time is ripe for re-establishing a line of packets between our beautiful city [Bowling Green] and the city of Evansville, Indiana, and a revival of the old-time transportation and travel by water. Who can recall one of those trips without experiencing the keenest delight, living over again the happy experience, and longing for another? . . . It is time for us to wake up not only to the commercial opportunities offered by this waterway but to the recreational advantages.¹

This 1934 expression of nostalgia for the rivers' past glory had a prophetic ring, for it suggested the valley was entering an era of expanded river use. Unlike those who first brought steamboats to Bowling Green a century earlier, the river leaders who came of age in the Great Depression no longer believed they could bring about river improvements themselves; rather, they saw them as the responsibility of the United States government, through its Corps of Engineers of the United States Army. Finally they got huge government appropriations to build larger locks in the lower Green River and flood-control dams in the upper Green, Barren, Rough, and Nolin rivers.

The depression generation worried little about increased government intervention as long as it brought
financial relief. The government's first economic boost to the Green River valley in this period came in the 1930s when Congress financed new locks (56 by 360 feet) at Barren River Number 1 and Green River Number 5 to encourage asphalt mining. These were completed in 1934, with help from the National Industrial Recovery Act, at a total cost of nearly two million dollars. When valley residents asked for further improvements, however, the Corps advised they "be postponed indefinitely pending the completion of more important links in the system of waterways in the upper Mississippi Valley," which were more "national in scope."²

Government spending for rivers depended increasingly on volume of freight, and in the 1930s and 1940s the Green and Barren trade declined rapidly. Kentucky rock asphalt, which made up the bulk of the commerce in 1930, was disappearing from the rivers as concrete and petroleum-based asphalt from Trinidad superseded it for highway construction. Coal shippers stopped barging because they could no longer compete in Ohio River markets without larger locks. By 1940 even the valley's traditional log and timber trade was all but gone, and the Rough River lock, largely dependent on forest products to justify its operation, was closed that year. In 1951 Green River Locks Numbers 5 and 6 were also closed because of disuse. Meanwhile the steam-powered towboat, the last vestige of the steamboat era, left the declining trade to diesel-powered boats.

Many were predicting that local navigation might disappear completely until a new demand for coal about 1950 drastically altered the river's commercial prospects. The western Kentucky coal fields adjacent to the lower river inspired the government to build new locks at Numbers 1 and 2 and to clear the lower 103 miles for modern barging.

The need for river improvements was made clear when power and aluminum companies rejected the valley for
location because it lacked modern navigation facilities and flood control. Local citizens were bitterly disappointed in losing these industries, but they gained an unforgettable insight into the future. The valley appeared like a potential “little Ruhr of America,” as coal operator C. A. Reis (1888–1968) put it. “It is perfectly obvious that with modernized navigation and guaranty of a substantial and continuous water supply the Green River Valley would become intensely popular for the location of huge industrial plants,” he said at a United States Senate Hearing on Public Works.3

Reis and other valley coal promoters believed the greatest selling point for western Kentucky coal was its potentially low cost. To begin with, much of it was near enough the surface to be strip-mined. While this was of poorer quality than deep-mined coal, with a higher concentration of sulfur and other impurities, its cheaper mining method made it popular for certain industries. Furthermore, a great deal of it was sufficiently close to the Green River to allow barging, which required something like 30 percent less fuel than coal moved by rail, and 66 percent less than that moved by truck.

In 1950, when the outdated Green River system still prevented this efficient coal barging, valley residents put their historic use of river politics back to work. They recalled that it was largely through political effort that their forebears had persuaded the state to build the original locks and dams in the 1830s. It was also through political struggle that they had freed the rivers from monopoly in the 1880s and had extended navigation to Mammoth Cave in the first decade of the 1900s. Astute river leaders such as Reis and towboat-operator James R. Hines knew that these successes had resulted from nearly unanimous local support. Thus they set out to enlist the valley for Green River improvements in the 1950s.

The resulting organization of the Green River Valley Citizens League in 1951 had at least two precedents:
James Rumsey Skiles and his contemporaries had organized the first citizens' group in the 1830s, and in 1899 W. P. Greene, editor of *Green River Country*, had organized a valley improvement association. Reis and Hines first discussed a similar organization about 1940, but it was postponed because of World War II. Plans were revived when a federal survey of the Green River in 1947 suggested the need for a citizens' action group.

In 1949 more than a hundred persons met at Henderson to determine local desires concerning Green River navigation. The largest delegation was made up of coal interests, but there were also representatives from the Mammoth Cave National Park Service, the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the local division of the department of highways, the soil conservation districts, railroads, and utilities companies. This mixed group disagreed on the valley's needs and exhibited upriver-downriver differences, navigation versus conservation conflicts, and a struggle between private and government sponsored utilities.

Broad accord was not reached until September 28, 1951, when river leaders met at Central City to organize the Green River Valley Citizens League, with Hines as president and Reis as honorary president. League directors were to be chosen by the people of each area in order to "compose and coordinate plans effectively." At the first policy meeting the following April at Livermore the league invited the public to participate. It soon became clear that the one major point of agreement was the desire for four flood-control dams in the upper reaches of Green, Barren, Rough, and Nolin rivers. These had been approved in the 1930s by the federal government, along with a highly controversial dam at Mining City in Butler County. When the group voted unanimously to support the four upper dams, but not the Mining City project, it worked a small miracle in the strife-ridden valley.4

The league's formula for success was to get as many
people as possible involved in the program and to keep communication flowing between league leaders, members, and politicians. Much of the credit for initiating these methods must go to Reis, a World War I veteran from Indiana, who was a railroad economist before coming to Muhlenberg County to manage his Quaker friends’ coal property in the 1920s. Though hard-of-hearing and ineffective as a public speaker, Reis was a shrewd organizer who knew how to persuade through the power of his pen. Because he had been willing, but unable to organize the valley since 1920, he pushed tirelessly to keep league members working together.

As editor of the group’s weekly “News-Notes,” Reis became known as the “Father of the Green River Valley Citizens League.” His desire for valleywide support was apparent when he pushed the slogan “$15,000 from 15,000 dollar-a-year members rather than from one $15,000 contributor.” He kept up a voluminous correspondence with industries which might locate in the valley and informed the public about developments. His press releases were colorful and to the point, but he was careful to withhold controversial news. If he were confronted with controversial questions, however, he had evidence supporting his opinions at his fingertips. His file of valley statistics was indeed impressive, as his correspondence with Alcoa Aluminum in 1953 shows. Asking company leaders to take a fresh look at the valley for locating a new plant, he minutely outlined the ways the area could meet the aluminum industry’s complex needs.

Reis married a local woman who had inherited coal property, and the couple enjoyed a quiet life in their Muhlenberg County home on a bluff overlooking the Green River. While he shipped some coal by rail to a Chicago firm which required it be painted green as a trademark for Green River fireplace coal, Reis was anxious to find more profitable markets. He knew he must
have upper-valley support for river improvements before he could barge coal efficiently. In a 1953 letter to league president Hines, who was disappointed that the lower river got more federal funds than the upper river, Reis wrote that he had met with Senator John Sherman Cooper to get upper- as well as lower-river improvements. Then, blaming Cooper for delaying the project, Reis suggested that Hines write the senator. He also urged Hines to approach Senator Earle Clements through the Kentucky commissioner of conservation. He concluded his letter with the suggestion that all members push for the improvements, "attacking from any point of vantage—a-la-Foch."  

Reis and other river leaders agreed that the most effective point of attack was the United States Congress. In 1952 the league hosted a hearing of the Senate Committee on Public Works at Central City. A later president of the league, W. A. "Arch" Moore, said it was this meeting that "crystalized unified action" which led Congress to authorize over twelve million dollars for initiating the Green River improvements of the 1950s and 1960s.

League members worked closely with Kentucky's representatives in Washington, hoping to get both political parties to support their cause. They acknowledged the pioneer work of Senator Virgil M. Chapman, a Democrat who had spearheaded the survey of the Green and Barren rivers which recommended modern locks and a nine-foot channel. When Kentucky elected Democrat Clements in 1950 and Republican Cooper in 1952 to the United States Senate, the league worked closely with both men. After his election in 1953 Congressman William H. Natcher, a Democrat from Bowling Green, added his full support for league plans. When the league opened its own office in Central City and began publishing its "News-Notes" in 1952, Reis sent copies to representatives from both parties in Frankfort and Washington.
The third *Bowling Green*  
*Courtesy of Courtney Ellis Collection*
Roustabouts unloading merchandise from steamboat

Courtesy of Kentucky Library
The mail boat Kalista   Courtesy of Courtney Ellis Collection
Chaperone at the “Turnhole.” Until the new lock was finished, big boats could not go this far upstream without backing six miles to “Turnhole.”
Photo by George Dabbs in Courtney Ellis Collection
The *Crescent City* coming out of Lock Number 2, 1902, downbound for Evansville when this lock was on Rumsey side
*Courtesy of Courtney Ellis Collection*

The showboat *Majestic* and its tow, the *Attaboy*, taken at Rochester on the Green River
*Photo by Mrs. Bill Barr in 1930. Agnes Harralson Collection, Central City, Ky.*
Reis, with his gift for slogan-making, often spoke of the “lost twenty years” between 1931 and 1951 when there was federal approval for flood-control dams but no concerted effort to build them. Tongue-in-cheek, he compared those years to a “Lost Weekend,” but “without benefit of even a small jag.” His ideas provided the “true sparkplug of the movement,” according to Moore, but there is evidence he borrowed some ideas from fellow league members and local editors. He did give much credit to the “splendid twelve” newspapers which popularized league plans, however, and he kept them well informed concerning valley activities. Possessing journalistic talent himself for cutting through the mass of material passing through the league office, he successfully condensed and clarified it until it inspired action.\(^8\)

League leaders often used humor to draw national attention to the valley’s needs. Judge J. E. Wood of Muhlenberg County complained that by failing to provide jobs in the valley they had driven their children away from home “just as surely as if we had tied a shipping tag around every neck.” Another league member, Oren Coin, applied the light touch to local flooding when, at the 1952 hearing, he challenged the old adage about water seeking its own level. Coin claimed he could “show you a place where you can pour water in a pile and walk off, and any time you please find that water still piled there in the middle of the ridge where I live at Livermore, Kentucky.”\(^9\)

While Coin’s remarks brought much laughter from those attending the hearing, flood control was a serious problem for the valley in the 1950s. The Green River had been above flood stage every year between 1914 and 1956, for a total of 968 days. As a league representative, Moore often gave a speech to local groups entitled “Another Mark on the Old Beech Tree,” which described the valley’s increasingly high floods.\(^10\)

Because flooding was so complex a problem, the valley
was divided over its solutions. This had been particularly true of the proposed Mining City project just above Lock Number 3, which many feared would inundate valuable coal and farmlands and possibly damage part of Mammoth Cave. The ensuing controversy postponed federal action on all Green River flood control. Even at the 1952 hearing, when the league had gone on record as opposing the Mining City dam, a representative of the Mammoth Cave National Park spoke of the undesirable effect it would have on the park's underground Echo River trip. He concluded that "unnatural flooding is analogous with damage and cannot be construed in any other way."\textsuperscript{11}

In contrast to the Mining City project, there was comparatively little objection to the four flood-control projects in the upper valley. The Corps' surveys of the Rough, Nolin, Barren, and upper Green rivers justified the dams, for they showed there was heavy annual flooding and malarial conditions resulting from poor drainage. League members fully expected the first federal funds to be applied to the alleviation of these problems.

Thus many were surprised and disappointed to learn Congress had funded new locks in the lower Green River rather than the upper flood-control dams. But the increasing national demand for electricity and the growing trend to generate it from cheap coal reserves inspired the action. For example, in 1950 engineers for a generating plant that eventually went to Joppa, Illinois, inspected a site near Paradise. Company officials reported that "had regulated river flow been available, the Green River site would certainly have had distinct advantages over the Joppa site."\textsuperscript{12} Then the Reynolds and Kaiser Aluminum companies began looking at Green River sites, and A. P. Harding, the executive vice president of the league, claimed that the Atomic Energy Commission, too, would consider a Green River location if the river were improved for barges the size of those used on the Ohio River. When the commission did decide to use Green
River coal for its other nuclear power plants if the lower river was modernized, the result was funding for the lower-river locks before the upper flood-control dams.

There were mixed reactions in the valley when the Corps of Engineers recommended appropriations totaling $16,440,000 in 1953 for improving only the lower 103 miles of the Green River. Typically, Reis soft-pedaled his elation by explaining that the Corps had to consider "an economy-minded Congress" when it confined the improvements to the lower river. He explained in a Bowling Green newspaper that the lower locks received priority because they promised direct saving to the federal treasury. The Bowling Green editor nevertheless charged that the engineers had "dashed cold water on recent moves to improve Barren River." 13

Despite upriver disappointment with the Corps' report, Congress passed a River and Harbor Act in 1954 providing for improvement of the lower river if "local interests furnish, without cost to the United States, all lands, easements, and rights-of-ways necessary for construction." In less than a year the league acquired the necessary lands so that the Corps could begin construction. 14 The new locks, completed in 1956, were 600 by 84 feet, large enough to accommodate four Ohio River-type barges and a towboat at each lock operation. The project cost $9,320,000 for the new locks, plus $1,965,000 to provide a nine-foot depth and a 200-foot width in the river. When compared to previous government work on the Green and Barren rivers, which in nearly seventy years totaled less than $3 million, this was indeed an expensive project.

The 1956 lock-christening celebration at Calhoun was, in the words of the guest speaker, bridge expert Donald Wright, "the greatest day in the history of Green River." The center of attraction was the steamer Sternwheeler, which swarmed with beauty queens and dignitaries. While the league's directors met on the main deck, the
restaurant on the boiler deck served noon meals to the visitors. Members of the press and radio reporters were “all over the place,” and visitors thronged aboard to take a trip through the newly completed locks. At the formal ceremonies league president Moore was careful to stress that the celebration commemorated a task only half-accomplished, and he promised further effort to complete it.15

Despite such efforts by league members to mollify upriver forces, their dissatisfaction quietly “exploded” at the celebration aboard the Sternwheeler. After being left out in the initial improvements, Bowling Green leaders were upset to learn that Reis and other river leaders were giving priority to the Rough and Nolin flood-control dams, rather than the one on the Barren River. Reis claimed the reason was the local opposition to the Barren dam in Scottsville, but Bowling Green leaders charged Reis with stirring up the trouble to forward his own priorities. Hines recalled that he told Reis aboard the Sternwheeler, “You have all you want to get your coal to market. Now we ask for just a few crumbs from your table of plenty.”16

The four flood-control dams were all completed between 1955 and 1969, but the struggle for priority weakened the united effort which had always been so vital to valley development. League leaders had attempted to satisfy both upriver and downriver forces by adopting a five-year plan that would eventually give all members what they wanted. Developed in 1964 by a committee with Reis as chairman, the plan proposed asking Congress for an average of some twelve million dollars yearly for the next five years. Upriver forces disliked the plan because it promised little for the Barren River area until the two lower navigation locks were completed. Reis justified this in the “News-Notes” by claiming that until the work in the lower 103 miles was completed, the valley would “be doing exceedingly well
to obtain $200,000 for the Rough and Barren Reservoirs, divided $150,000 and $50,000 respectively.” Understandably, this did not satisfy impatient upriver members, and Hines sent Senator Cooper a telegram asking for $800,000 in a lump sum for all four reservoirs. Upriver interests were disappointed again, however, when Cooper indicated that no additional appropriations for the Green River would be available in 1954. 17

Soon after the Sternwheeler meeting Hines and other Bowling Green river leaders organized the Barren River Valley Development League. In contrast to the Green River Valley Citizens League, the Barren group agreed not to publicize its plans. They did hold open meetings, however, which were sometimes attended by 500 or more persons. Senator Cooper, Senator Thruston B. Morton, and Congressman Natcher frequently addressed these meetings and supported the group’s efforts to induce the Tennessee Valley Authority to build a generating plant in the area. League president E. O. Pearson, Jr., recalled that he and other local leaders made eight trips to Knoxville to negotiate with the TVA board before the Paradise Steam Plant was authorized in 1959. A board member told him that theirs was the first group which did not bring any elected officials to such meetings, but the league appreciated the fact that elected officials—especialy Morton, Cooper, and Natcher—had set up the meetings for them. Yet the group took pride in its own part in attracting the generating plant to Paradise and in getting final authorization for Barren River Reservoir. It also dramatized the need for upriver navigation by sponsoring the Belle of Louisville on a trip to Rochester, where the old Lock Number 3 blocked her upstream progress. Charles Stewart, president of the Barren league in 1960, told the group, “We now stand on the threshold of an area development program which can breathe new life into the economy of our valley.” 18

When the Barren league was assured of funds for all
four flood-control projects, which finally totaled some $94 million, it turned its full attention to getting improved navigation as far as Bowling Green. Local opposition remained a stumbling block, however, cooling the enthusiasm of politicians and the Corps of Engineers alike. Those owning valuable farmlands were supported in their opposition by some coal interests who feared that upriver improvements would overload the system. Lower-river bargeing alone was surpassing all expectations, exceeding a million tons the first year the new locks were completed and increasing by about a million tons in each subsequent year. A writer for the Park City Daily News in Bowling Green warned upriver readers that the decision to build new locks at Numbers 3 and 4 “won’t be prompted by any memories of past moonlight cruises on the Barren. . . . Instead it will be a hard dollars, cents and tons mathematical problem.”19

Both the Green and Barren leagues became discouraged in the 1970s when it became apparent the time was wrong for further valley improvements. A 120-foot break in the original dam at Woodbury, location of Lock Number 4, completely halted commercial navigation on the Barren River in 1965. The Corps refused to repair it on the grounds that “if we plug up this hole, the rest is in such bad shape that it would be useless.”20

The Barren league tried desperately to prove that upriver coal and asphalt reserves justified new locks, but the Corps reported a ratio of benefits to costs of 0.9 to 1, not quite the 1 to 1 necessary for a feasibility report. Also significant was the continued Butler County opposition to a higher dam, Number 3 at Rochester, which would inundate much of the county. As Moore put it, Butler Countians believed the new Green River Parkway between Bowling Green and Owensboro would provide “all the transportation we need.” The failure to reach local agreement on this project led the Corps to look elsewhere for more receptive areas.21
The debate over new locks and dams made Green River residents aware of a growing controversy between those concerned with environmental factors and those interested primarily in the rivers' economic possibilities. In addition to opposing new dams, the environmentalists attacked the Green River valley's increased strip-mining activity. Their campaign gained national support as a result of John Prine's song entitled "Paradise." Prine, whose relatives came from the tiny Green River town of Paradise, Kentucky, lamented that it no longer existed. Though other factors had contributed to its demise, he blamed the Peabody Coal Company, whose private rails carried local coal to Green River barges at that point, for destroying the little town. His song had the following lyrics:

When I was a child, my family would travel
Down to western Kentucky, where my parents were born.
There's a backwards old town, that's often remembered
So many times, that my memories are worn.

And daddy won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay,
Well I'm sorry my son, but you're too late in asking,
Mr. Peabody's coal train has hauled it away.

The coal company came with the world's largest shovel
They tortured the timber and stripped all the land.
They dug for their coal till the land was forsaken
And wrote it all down as the progress of man.

In the late 1960s the environmentalists attacked the Corps of Engineers, accusing it of exhibiting a "beaver complex" when it proposed dams in such areas as the upper Green River and the Red River gorge. The Corps, prodded by new federal regulations, began involving environmentalist groups in project planning. It published an "Environmental Impact Statement" of the Green River in draft form in 1975 which contained an
impressive amount of data. The statement was an effort to coordinate conflicting opinions regarding the future of the Green River.\textsuperscript{24}

The environmentalists succeeded in 1972 in getting the United States Congress to pass stringent water-pollution restrictions. In response to the requirement for local water-quality studies, Kentucky signed a contract with Ray F. Weston, Inc., of Chicago for over $100,000 to complete a recommendation for the Green River basin by June 1975. The report in its draft form, "Volume Three of the Kentucky Water Quality Management Plan," claimed to deal with "the problems created by discharge of wastes to surface water from industrial and public activities."\textsuperscript{25}

Generally referred to as the 303(e) report, it created a stir among those concerned with its economic implications. An outspoken critic, Jack Eversole of the Barren River Area Development District (BRADD) at Bowling Green, urged the state to reject the study, for it is "going to cost all of us a lot of money."\textsuperscript{26}

Under the 303(e) report the goal for "zero pollutants" in the Green River is 1985, with the best available technology in place by 1983. BRADD board members believed these standards and dates were too ambitious. To pay for the program, they warned, water rates would more than double in many areas, and employment would drop as industries closed down or moved elsewhere rather than install expensive antipollutant equipment. Worst of all, according to Eversole, the Environmental Protection Agency would be in a position to "tell us where people can live," which he called "land-use control without representation."\textsuperscript{27}

Unfortunately the struggle for control of the Green River retards effective handling of the valley's very real pollution problem. Meanwhile, acid water draining from western Kentucky coal mines continues to contaminate the stream, and reforestation is needed to stop soil erosion. The deteriorating upper locks and dams prevent healthy water movement, causing the rivers to become
sluggish. Finally, several towns empty sewage wastes into the system, along with "materials ranging from car bodies and washing machines to spoiled food and dead animals."28

"What are the alternatives?" was the question the Corps of Engineers' "Environmental Impact Statement" asked, and the one that responsible valley residents have always asked. The study offered fifteen alternatives to the present approach to the rivers, which included "restoration to the original conditions," "rehabilitation of inactive projects," and construction of a "canal system for commercial usage."29 If the history of the Green River valley has any continuing theme it is that economic factors play a leading role in determining the valley's future. When the energy crisis of the 1970s made western Kentucky coal increasingly valuable, Green River shipments became second only to those on the Monongahela River in amount of coal reaching the Ohio River. It is unlikely that these profitable coal shipments, so essential to national energy needs, will soon be interrupted for environmental concerns. Rather, there appears to be a good chance that the Green River locks will be extended and enlarged to accommodate further coal development in the upper rivers.

Because coal reserves are limited, however, river developers are looking elsewhere, too, for future economic opportunities. According to a comprehensive survey of the Ohio River basin, the Green River has one of the greatest potentials in recreational opportunities of any Ohio River tributary. With its inconsistent population gains and low average income the valley has traditionally viewed recreation as a secondary goal, something to be postponed until financial security was achieved. The parks adjacent to the four flood-control dams proved the area's recreational opportunities, however, and convinced local residents that one path to future financial security may be river recreation.

The history of the Green River is one of bitter struggle
and occasional agreement concerning the control of its resources. At the 1952 Central City hearing, Knox Hutchinson, assistant secretary of agriculture, wisely advised valley leaders that "no single Government agency—Federal, State or Local—possesses all the facilities to do the job in its entirety." Especially prophetic was his conclusion that "the missing link is an adequate facility to coordinate these skills, authorities, and interests in developing a single integrated plan."30

While the valley awaits the "single integrated plan," the Green River moves on as surely as time itself. Most human efforts to change it eventually fail, as the relentless power of rushing water erodes the soundest structures. The river changes people, too, sometimes eroding the best intentions and revealing an ugly greed. Yet it often develops strength of character, as exhibited by James Rumsey Skiles, Alonzo Livermore, General Don Carlos Buell, Richard T. Williams, Sally Beck, James R. Hines, and C. A. Reis. There will doubtless be others, as each generation looks afresh at the stream and decides how to live with its eternally useful and occasionally green-tinted waters.
Notes

Chapter 1

Arthur Rothert, The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock (Cleveland, 1924), p. 56.


14. See Rothert, Muhlenberg County, p. 58.


Chapter 2


4. Ibid., 1836, p. 51.

5. Kentucky Documents (Frankfort, 1838), pp. 73, 108–9.

6. Ibid., pp. 74–75.

7. Appendix to the Journal of the Kentucky House of Representa­tives (Frankfort, 1839), pp. 257–60.

8. The term Fultonized refers to the belief that Robert Fulton had used some of John Fitch’s ideas in developing the steamboat and failed to give him credit for them. Robert W. Lucas Journal, March 16, April 4, 1840 (Kentucky Library).

10. Later, Livermore figured that the cost up to 1842 was only $780,000.


12. The figures were taken from Kentucky Acts, 1843, pp. 62–64; Kentucky Documents, 1847, pp. 529–30; ibid., 1849, p. 520; ibid., 1867, p. 42.


Chapter 3


3. Legal documents, Clarence U. McElroy Collection (Kentucky Library).

4. See company charter.

5. In Bowling Green Democrat, June 29, 1886.


7. Quoted in the Calhoun Constitution, June 27, 1889.


11. Ibid., p. 7.

12. “Response of John A. Robinson,” published later in
United States Senate Documents, 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1880, no. 116, pp. 31-34.

13. Ibid.


16. Kentucky House of Representatives Journal (Frankfort, 1880), pp. 1177-78; Owensboro Semi-Weekly Messenger and Inquirer, April 2, 1880; Circuit Court case in McElroy Collection; History of Daviess County (Chicago, 1883), p. 188; Kentucky Reports (Frankfort, 1882), pp. 73-83.


18. Calhoun Democrat, September 27, 1888; Owensboro Messenger, quoted in ibid., July 26, 1888.


Chapter 4


3. Ibid., 1910, 2:2031.


5. Frank Thomas interview by Janice Holt Giles, in Janice Holt Giles Collection (Kentucky Library).


7. Greene, *Green River*, p. 160. The full title indicates the

8. Park City Daily Times, July 17, 1896.
9. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Calhoun Constitution, July 22, 1890.
17. Ibid.
20. R. T. Williams to Quigg Brothers, n.d., Joe Hines Collection; Quigg Brothers to R. T. Williams, March 2, 1900, ibid.
21. Evansville Courier, October 1, 1899.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 135.
25. Evansville Courier, September 4, 1907.
26. Statement for week ending February 13, 1900, Joe Hines Collection.
27. W. P. Westerfield Diaries, Jessie Westerfield Duer Collection, Auburn, Ky.
32. Thomas Reynolds, "Talk with Tommy Reynolds," typescript (Cincinnati Public Library).
35. Calhoun Constitution, August 26, 1890.

Chapter 5


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15. Donald Wright quoted W. A. Moore and described the July 14, 1956, celebration in Waterways Journal, clipping in Ellis Collection (Kentucky Library), n.d.


21. Leitchfield (Ky.) Gazette, quoted in Calhoun (Ky.) McLean County News, March 9, 1967; telephone interview with W. A. Moore, August 26, 1975.


24. The full title of the completed study will apparently be
“Continued Operation and Maintenance of the Navigation System, Green and Barren River, Kentucky.”


26. The name "303(e) report" refers to Section 303(e) of United States Public Law 92-500, under Title III, which required the study. Park City Daily News, July 24, August 31, 1975; Crocker interview with Jack Eversole, July 28, 1975.

27. Crocker interview with Jack Eversole, July 28, 1975; "Staff Report—Subject: 1972 Federal Water Pollution Control Act (PL-500),” typescript, BRADD Collection, Bowling Green, Ky.


A Note to Readers

While many Kentuckians have been enthusiastic collectors of Green River history, there have been few attempts to produce a comprehensive study of the valley. Despite the need for a definitive study, however, there is no lack of source material pertaining to the Green River. Only a small portion of it can be mentioned in this brief volume.

Perhaps the most valuable published work is a late nineteenth-century volume edited by W. P. Greene entitled The Green River Country from Evansville to Bowling Green (Evansville, 1898). While its actual purpose was to increase Evansville business, its essays on Green River towns and residents are excellent.

Several general histories of Kentucky and her rivers help put the Green River valley into the broader context of state and regional development. Useful state histories include Lewis Collins and Richard H. Collins, History of Kentucky, 2 vols. (Louisville, 1886), W. H. Perrin, J. H. Battle, and G. C. Kniffin, Kentucky: A History of the State (Louisville, 1886), and W. E. Connelly and E. Merton Coulter, History of Kentucky, 5 vols. (Chicago, 1922). Two river studies which deserve special mention are R. E. Banta, The Ohio (New York, 1949), and Leland Johnson's study of the Louisville District Corps of Engineers, Falls City Engineers (Louisville, 1974).

Travelers' accounts and early maps tell a great deal about the Green River valley during its various stages of development. In this category are John James Audubon, Delineations of American Scenery and Character (New York, 1926; originally published as essays 1831–1839),
and Clark B. Firestone, *Sycamore Shores* (New York, 1936). A number of travelers published their experiences at Mammoth Cave on the upper Green River, such as Robert Davidson, *An Excursion to the Mammoth Cave and the Barrens of Kentucky* (Philadelphia, 1840), and Ralph S. Thompson, *A Sucker's Visit to Mammoth Cave* (New York, 1970; originally published 1879). Early maps identify place names in the valley and show what successive generations of cartographers considered important enough to be included. For example, Elihu Barker's 1795 map (No. 19064, Kentucky Library) is helpful for locating natural landmarks such as the Barrens, and S. L. Gridley's 1814 map (No. 19005, Kentucky Library) pinpoints Harpshead and other early place names.

No serious researcher of Green River history can ignore the storehouse of materials in the government documents. To begin with, the United States Census provides statistics of population, transportation, and economics in the valley. Then geological surveys help the reader understand the influence of geology and geography on the valley's history. While there are many that are applicable to a Green River study, two of the best are Wilbur Greeley Burroughs, *The Geography of the Western Kentucky Coal Fields* (Frankfort, 1924), and Carl Ortwin Sauer, *Geography of the Pennyroyal* (Frankfort, 1927), both of which are part of the 43-volume *Kentucky Geological Survey*, Series IV. Laws relative to the Green River before Kentucky became a state in 1792 may be found in William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*, 13 vols. (Richmond, 1823). William Littell, in *The Statute Law of Kentucky*, 5 vols. (Frankfort, 1809-1819), published the earliest Kentucky laws pertaining to the Green River. When Kentucky built the first locks and dams between 1833 and 1842 the progress was reported in the annual *Acts of Kentucky, Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Journal of the Kentucky House of Representatives, Kentucky Documents*, and the *Ken-
tucky Reports. In 1888 the United States government through its Corps of Engineers took over the river, reporting its activities in the Annual Reports, War Department, Reports of the Chief of Engineers, the United States House of Representatives Documents and the United States Senate Documents.

Biographical studies, both primary and secondary in nature, help fill in many of the elusive links in the valley’s history. Joseph R. Underwood wrote an early account of the Harpes for the Bowling Green Democrat, October 21, 1891. Otto Arthur Rothert described the Harpes and many other Green River valley residents in The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock (Cleveland, 1924) and in his remarkably detailed A History of Muhlenberg County (Louisville, 1913). Pertinent details about James Rumsey Skiles may be found in S. S. Potter, “Biographical Sketch of the Life of Hon. James Rumsey Skiles,” Bowling Green Democrat, November 27, 1880, and in J. B. Rodes, “The Story of Bowling Green and the First Presbyterian Church,” typescript (Kentucky Library). Rena Crabtree relates the river experiences of the Woolcott brothers in the Central City Messenger, February 3, 1955. Green River showboating is colorfully described in “Talk with Tommy Reynolds,” typescript (Cincinnati Public Library). In an unpublished manuscript Courtney Ellis outlines the life of Sallie Beck (Ellis Collection, Kentucky Library).

Diaries, journals, and reminiscences of valley residents nearly always carry items relating to river history. Good examples are John Rowan’s “Unfinished Autobiography,” typescript (Kentucky Library), Robert W. Lucas’s Journal (Kentucky Library), and J. Porter Hines’s “Reminiscences of Green River,” typescript (Kentucky Library). The W. P. Westerfield diaries in the Jessie Westerfield Duer Collection in Auburn, Kentucky, provide a day-by-day account of life beside the Green River in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Manuscripts pertaining to the river may be found in libraries and private collections through the valley as
well as in the Evansville libraries, the Cincinnati Public Library, The Filson Club Library in Louisville, and the State Historical Society at Frankfort. Particularly useful are the Courtney Ellis Collection and the Clarence U. McElroy Collection at the Kentucky Library, the Agnes Harralson Collection in Central City, and the Joe Hines Collection in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. For the modern period, the Charles Stewart Collection at the Warren Rural Electric Cooperative Corporation in Bowling Green is extremely valuable.

Finally, newspapers, journals, and county histories are vital to a study of the Green River valley. Some useful journals are *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, *Waterways Journal*, *the S & D Reflector*, and *Steamboat Bill of Facts*. The newspapers and county histories reporting valley history are too numerous to list here, but they are an endless source of information concerning local response to the Green River.