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Navigation on the Kaw River

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Kaw River Sunset
Steve Snell

NAVIGATION ON THE KAW RIVER

The Kaw (Kansas) River courses about 173 miles through the heart of Kansas.

Named for the mighty Kaw (Kanza) Nation, the river served as a transportation corridor for the canoes of Indigenous people and the pirogues of French fur traders for many years, and occasionally for the shallow keelboats of other Euro-Americans.

The Kaw River was considered commercially navigable for only a brief period during the early to mid-1800s. As with the new Kansas Territory, the Kaw River represented great promise to early Euro-American settlers. Many of them located their towns and homesteads along its banks to take advantage of its potential.

There was no lack of effort to make the river a profitable avenue for commerce. The Excel was one of the first steamboats to make the attempt. The boat wasn't a glamorous vessel but rather one of the small stern-wheeled "mountain boats" commonly working on the upper Missouri River. The Excel was but 79 tons and 180 feet long. Most importantly, its draft — the minimum depth of water in which the Excel could float — was only 2 feet.

Commanded by the able Capt. C.K. Baker, the Excel had a better chance of success than most other boats. In April 1854, the crew loaded the boat with 1,100 barrels of flour destined for Fort Riley and set out. The paddlewheel turned sure and steady, but the Excel reportedly returned to Westport, Missouri, within 24 hours. Perhaps the fickle Kaw River was not cooperative.

Steamboats faced many hazards on the Kaw besides low water. The shallow river was beset with snags, sandbars and tight turns that filled the most seasoned steamboat crews with trepidation.

The course of the river changed often, and the bed was like quicksand. Wood was the only fuel, but the cottonwood trees along the banks didn't burn well. Winter ice halted all traffic; dry periods caused serious delays.

This was all on top of the common tribulations that befell steamboats, such as boiler explosions and fires.

Ferries constituted another impediment to steamboat traffic, springing up at towns (including Lawrence, Lecompton, Topeka, St. Mary's, Manhattan and Wamego) and popular crossing places. Anyone who thought they could make a profit could apply for a ferry license, and they did. These ferries were usually primitive affairs, but they allowed travelers and wagons to cross the Kaw safely where there were no fords. Ferry cables stretching across the river had to be dismantled each time a steamboat passed, but most ferry owners were not inclined to do so without financial persuasion.

The next year, 1855, brought little more success and one calamity, with eight boats giving it a try. These were the Bee, Emma Harmon, Financier No. 2, Hartford, Lizzie, New Lucy, Perry and Saranak. None reached the intended destination due to low water. The Hartford had the misfortune of running hard aground, stranding her for a month. The boat was eventually able to reach Manhattan to unload her cargo. The Hartford later grounded again at St. Mary's, caught fire and was destroyed. Her bell may have been installed in the Methodist church in Manhattan.

The year 1856 found some of those steamboats returning, as well as the Brazil, Lewis Burns, Far West and Pioneer. They must have been moderately successful, as they were joined in the late spring by the Lacon, Lightfoot of Quindaro, Otis Webb and Violet.

The Lightfoot of Quindaro is often credited with being the first steamboat built in Kansas. The boat was about 90

DID YOU KNOW?

The Kaw River is the largest prairie-based river system in the world, with a watershed draining more than 61,000 square miles. The headwaters (the beginning) of the river's tributaries form in the grassland regions of Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska; none of the waters come from the mountains.



Kaw at Wamego
Lisa Grossman

feet long, had a 16-foot beam, and was commanded by Capt. Mott Morrison. She made but one trip up to Lawrence, the greater part of the time spent upon sandbars near Eureka Ferry. The Lightfoot transferred to the Missouri River and found more success. This was quite common for the Kansas boats.

These first few years set the tone for future river traffic on the Kaw. Steamboats could carry heavy loads, but customers could not count on the boats arriving when scheduled or arriving at all. Delay or loss of cargo could spell financial ruin. Waiting for adequate water flow cut deep into profits. In addition, many of the people along the river couldn't afford the steep fares. During the Civil War years, few, if any, steamboat owners would risk their vessels on a river under

constant threat of Confederate raiders. These factors caused river traffic to drop each year.

Neither the state nor the national government was in any mood to spend the amount of funds needed to dredge and straighten the Kaw River for steamboat navigation. Towns and private entrepreneurs shared the sentiment. Railroads were eager to push westward once the war was over, and on the Kansas plains, railroads would be ideal for transporting people and goods. In 1864, to entice railroads, Kansas declared the Kaw unnavigable. With no steamboat traffic, the railroads would be free to build bridges without restriction and would face little or no competition. Thus, Kansas was destined to become a railroad state.

The Kansas Legislature restored the Kansas River to navigable status in 1913, but those hoping for business opportunities on the river were disappointed when nothing came to pass besides the proclamation. The era of river traffic was on the wane across the country, and river traffic could never hope to compete with the railroads in Kansas. Instead, even more bridges and dams were built. Today, the Kaw is harnessed by dams and crossed by dozens of bridges, rendering commercial

river traffic a distant memory. These structures, though, make a sportsman's dream come true: Boating and fishing remain quite popular along the river's entire length.

The Kaw River never became a commercial transportation success, but it still provides power generation, recreation and life-giving water to more than 800,000 people living along its length. Its untamed nature remains and serves as a reminder of our rich Kansas history.

Kendall D. Gott is a retired U.S. Army officer and retired senior historian at the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is the author of several historical publications. He currently resides in Kickapoo, Kansas, with his wife, Julia, and their dachshund, Carly.

The author wishes to express appreciation for the help provided by the Kansas Historical Society's website as he searched for supporting primary and secondary source material.

PROTECTING THE KAW RIVER

The Friends of the Kaw is the only grassroots organization dedicated to protecting the Kaw River. When the nonprofit group formed in 1991, the river was almost completely inaccessible to the public, with only six boat ramps. Now, the Kaw has 19 boat ramps.

Friends of the Kaw's mission is to advocate the rehabilitation of the Kaw's environs, including water quality and wildlife habitat; to promote compatible public recreational uses of the river; and to encourage development of adequate public access.

Friends of the Kaw guides student and public educational paddle trips for paddlers of all ages and experience levels. It provides canoes and kayaks, paddles, personal floatation devices, basic instruction, safety information and an educational sandbar seminar. More information on educational paddle trips is available at kansasriver.org.