

Riverboats on the wide Missouri

Not by chance did Missouri towns like St. Charles grow up along major rivers. The Missouri River was a travel route for every craft from bullboats to flatboats to keelboats. Before steamboats, getting a boat up the Missouri took great physical labor, with the crew having to cordelle, tow, "warp," or pole a boat against the current.

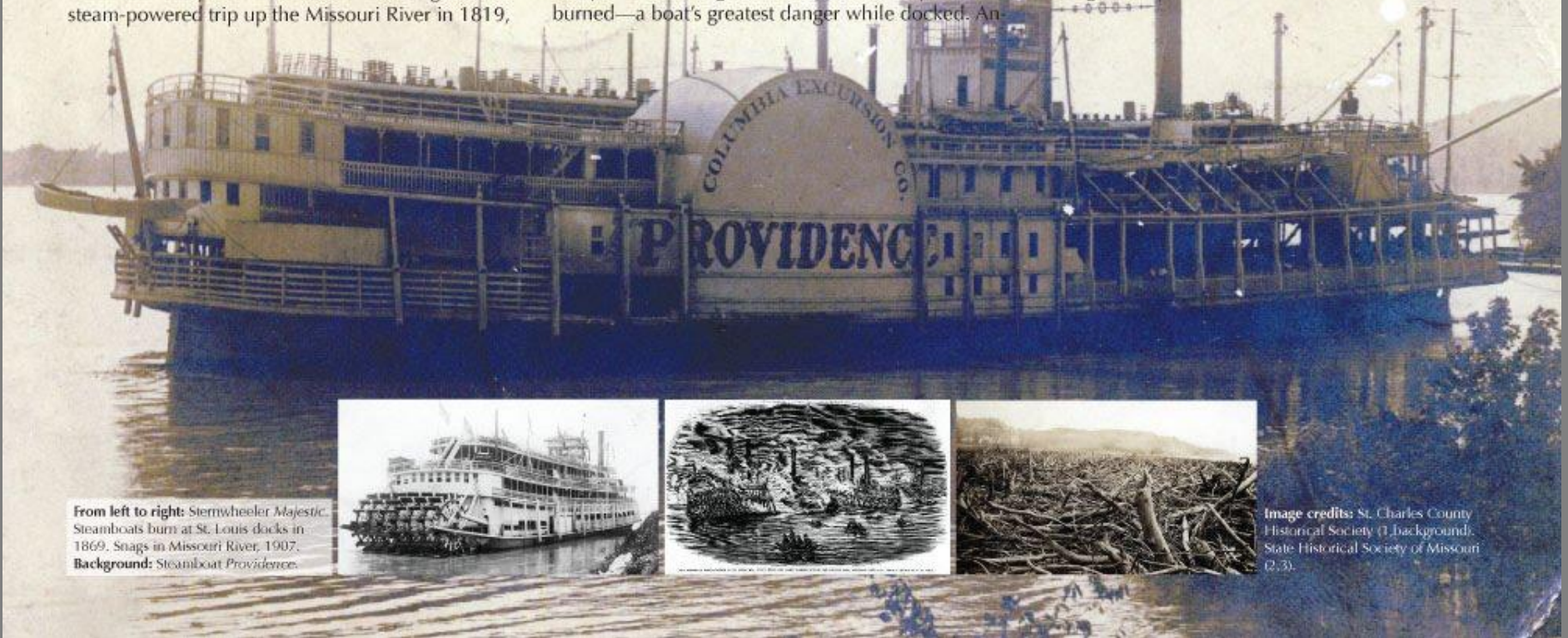
When the *Independence* made the first significant steam-powered trip up the Missouri River in 1819,

the steamboat era was underway. Steamboats easily carried large numbers of people and goods. They also towed barges. From St. Louis and St. Charles, a vast river trade stretched from Pittsburgh to Fort Union, St. Paul to New Orleans.

Though it has a romantic image, steamboating was costly and inefficient. Steamboats lasted only about five years on average. Half of those destroyed were burned—a boat's greatest danger while docked. An

other quarter snagged on tree trunks, many invisible in the muddy river. The rest were stranded on sandbars, crushed by ice, exploded, or collided with other boats.

Railroads proved cheaper, faster, safer, and more reliable for both passengers and freight. Rivers—which had defined boundaries and led the way into the West—gave way to rails.



From left to right: Sternwheeler *Majestic*. Steamboats burn at St. Louis docks in 1869. Snags in Missouri River, 1907. Background: Steamboat *Providence*.



Image credits: St. Charles County Historical Society (1, background); State Historical Society of Missouri (2, 3).