

Sinking of the *Montana*

Near the end of the steamboat era, it was almost symbolic when the *Montana* sank in 1884 after running into the Wabash railroad bridge. A huge sternwheeler, the *Montana* was built in Pittsburgh in 1878-79. On its longest trip it delivered a record 600-ton cargo to Fort Benton, Mont.

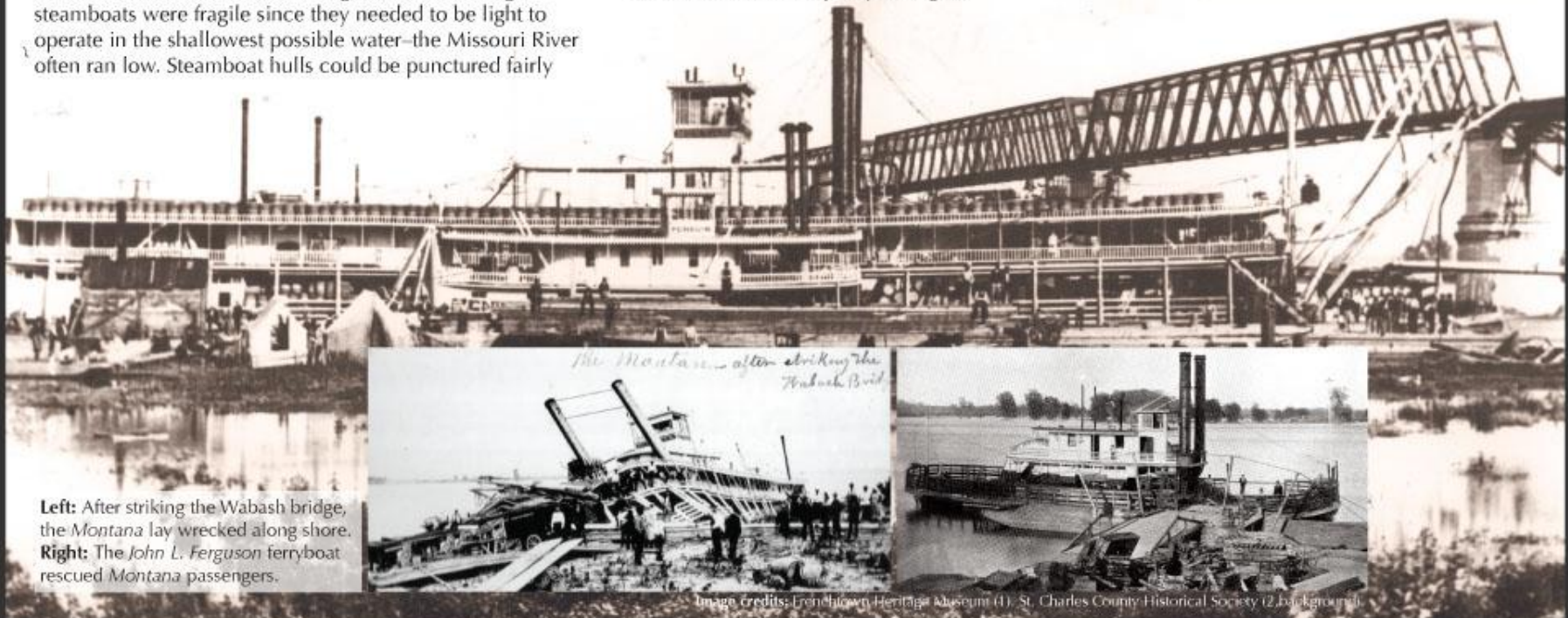
The *Montana's* enormous size made it difficult to navigate: it was 252 feet long, 48 feet wide, about 50 feet tall, and ran on four coal- or wood-burning boilers. Even large steamboats were fragile since they needed to be light to operate in the shallowest possible water—the Missouri River often ran low. Steamboat hulls could be punctured fairly

easily, and the *Montana* had no bulkheads to contain water entering the boat.

On June 22, 1884, the *Montana* started upstream. High water had forced it to wait at the Wabash bridge until the river fell and the great steamboat could pass underneath. Instead the *Montana* crashed into a bridge pier and started to sink. The captain probably steered to beach the *Montana* so it could be at least partly salvaged.

TODAY'S MONTANA

Today, a century and a quarter later, the wreck of the *Montana* still lies along the Missouri River shore opposite this overlook. About 40 percent of the hull remains, plus various other parts of the boat that help us imagine how it was constructed.



Left: After striking the Wabash bridge, the *Montana* lay wrecked along shore.
Right: The *John L. Ferguson* ferryboat rescued *Montana* passengers.

Image Credits: Frenchtown Heritage Museum (1), St. Charles County Historical Society (2 background)