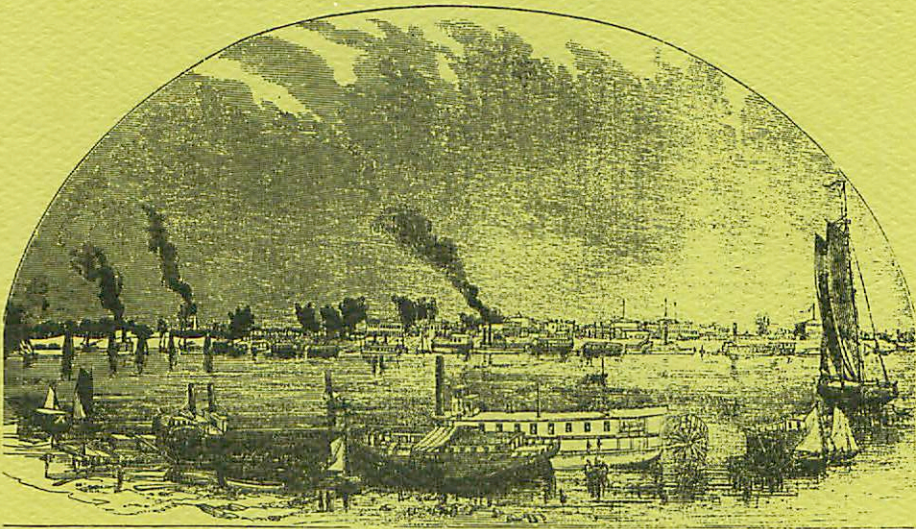


GOLDER ☆ NOTES

Vol. 26. No. 1

Spring, 1980



THE LEVEE AT SACRAMENTO, FROM WASHINGTON, YOLO COUNTY.

Racing On The River

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Racing On The River

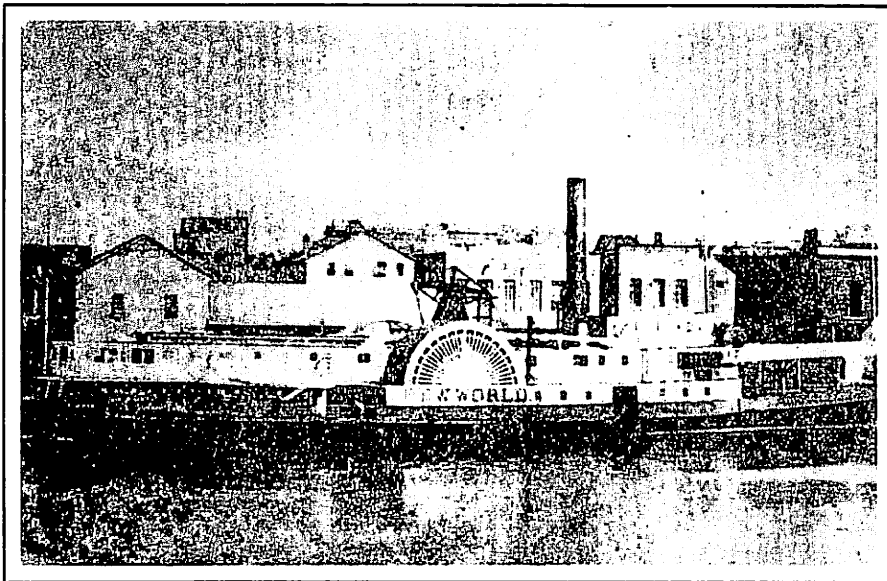
by Joe McGowan

Today one can drive from Sacramento to San Francisco in less than two hours, or fly there in about a half hour. But in John Sutter's time it took at least five to ten days to sail down the Sacramento River, and sometimes it required three or four weeks to sail up the river to Sutter's Embarcadero. Even after the first steamboats arrived in 1849, one had to assume that such a trip would take one or two days. And so it is somewhat remarkable that within two years steamboats regularly made the trip in less than seven hours, which was the usual time required to travel between these two cities until the railroad was completed in 1869.

The driving motive in lowering travel time was competition between steamboats owners to obtain freight and passengers. This struggle involved the use of "runners", agents on the wharf who tried to direct passengers to their boat (sometimes with physical force), cheaper rates and speed of passage.

The first steamboats in 1849 were little more than barges with a small steam engine on deck and a paddle wheel attached to the stern, but few if any of them could navigate on both the river and the bays. The first big boat, the *McKim*, to steam up to Sacramento required two days for the trip on October 26 and 27, 1849, although the total running time was 17½ hours. Narrow channels, unchartered shoals and deep draft made the trip a torturous one, and required a night stop at Benicia.

The first of the "river palaces", the *Senator*, to inaugurate regularly scheduled trips between the two cities, arrived in San Francisco on October 27, 1849, after a three month trip from New York around Cape Horn. It departed for Sacramento on November 5, arriving late that night. Two days later it completed the first one day, sunrise to sunset, run between the two cities. Thereafter it made three roundtrips a week, usually carrying about 300 passengers at \$20 to \$30 each and about 300 tons of freight at \$30 a ton. Until July of 1850, the *Senator* had no significant competition. In that month the steamer *New World*, built in New York, arrived at San Francisco. Within sixty days competition had been dulled by compromise or sale, for the *New World* was advertised as the sister ship of the *Senator*, running on alternate days to and from Sacramento in approximately 12 hours. So was established the first regular daily communication between these two cities.



The New World

Although several other steamboats entered the Golden Gate or were assembled at San Francisco in late 1850, they did little to challenge the monopoly and fixed rates of the *Senator* and the *New World*. But a new and competitive line was developing. It consisted of the 370 ton *Confidence* which had arrived from the Hudson River on December 21, 1850, and the 400 ton *Wilson G. Hunt*, which had steamed into San

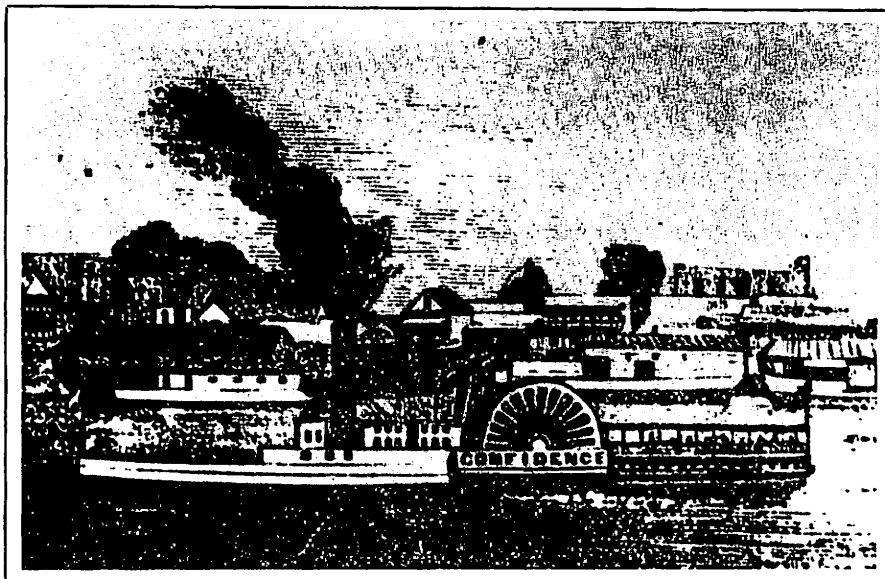
Francisco Bay on January 21, 1851. The two formed the Union Line as distinct from the People's Line which owned the *Senator* and the *New World*. By the end of March these four steamboats not only provided two boats a day to and from Sacramento but also lowered prices, reduced the time of travel and created a more pleasant atmosphere for passengers. An editorial in the *San Francisco Courier* of February 28, 1851, seems to have summed up public sentiment.

The new and beautiful steamer *Confidence* has created a good deal of fluttering among the old line monopoly, and the opposition on the river becomes fiercer than ever. The monopoly had its own way so long that the people got used to submission and became habituated to the idea that it was alright to pay from \$15 to \$30 for a steamboat trip of 100 miles. They became accustomed also to the want of punctuality exhibited by their monopolizing masters, and could go on board the steamer that was advertized to start for Sacramento at 4 o'clock and wait patiently until 6 for the shrill whistle which told of a prospective departure. Nor did they murmur in later days against the oppression and insolence of every kind which could put the almighty dollar in the pocket of the steamboat lords. A new era has dawned upon us, and the monopoly has little hope for in the future, except the contempt which their past avarice has inspired.



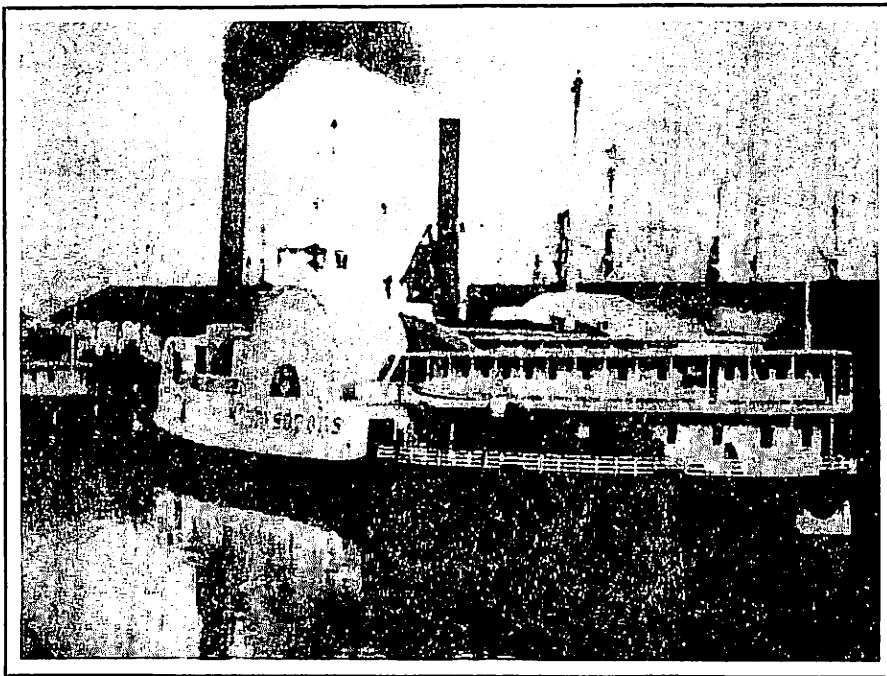
Arrival of the *Wilson G. Hunt* and its threatened entrance to the Sacramento run inaugurated an era of competition that was to reduce travel time by half. The *New World* on January 22, 1851, raced down the river in the then incredible time of seven hours. Since its owners publicized the feat, equating speed with quality, other boat owners felt compelled to challenge the speed record. Gamblers joined in the action, gathering on the wharves of San Francisco to place their bets. Even the

passengers were caught up in the thrill of racing, gathering on the decks to cheer their captain on and taking paid space in the newspapers to crow over victory or declare the opposing captain in violation of fair play, sportsmanship or safety.



The Confidence

The main contestants seemed to be the *Senator* and the *Confidence* which engaged in spirited rivalry whenever possible. The ocean-going *Senator* was bigger so that it could usually lead the race from San Francisco to Benicia or make up lost time on the return trip when it reached the bays. But the *Confidence* was more maneuverable in the narrow channels above Rio Vista, and could hold its own over that stretch. Within the next two years each of these steamers set speed records. The *New World* achieved the fastest time, 6 hours and 3 minutes, followed by the *Confidence* with a 6 hour 10 minute clocking, the *Senator* with 6 hours 19 minutes and the *Hunt* with 6 hours 21 minutes. Such speed meant that these steamboats were averaging about 19 miles an hour over 120 miles of narrow, twisting and sometimes shallow river and a bay sometimes roughened by tides and winds. Even today diesel vessels during the river seldom exceed 12 miles an hour. Some 10 years later the magnificent *Chrysopolis* set the record which has never been surpassed, 5 hours 19 minutes for the run from Sacramento to San Francisco.



The fastest steamboat on the river – the Chrysopolis.

It must have been a real thrill to be a passenger on steamboats racing on the river. Apparently no holds were barred if the opportunity to gain an edge on the rival boat presented itself. Steamboat owners, agents and captains resorted to all sorts of tricks to get an advantage.

Agents tried to establish a monopoly on the wood cutting business along the river so that they could deprive the opposition of fuel. Some captains considered wood a second rate fuel and used resin "to make the wood burn", pitch, tar and oil to give them a little more speed. These tactics led to the explosion of the *R.K. Page* near the town of Nicolaus on the Feather River on March 23, 1853, killing 5 passengers and crew, and the *Pearl* on the Sacramento near the mouth of the American River on January 29, 1855, killing 67 and injuring many others.

Other techniques were of a harassing nature. A favorite trick was to serve legal papers on the captain of the opposition steamer just as he was about to depart, in the hope of gaining a few minutes advantage. Or an agent could move barges and small boats to the landing so that the opposition steamer had no place at which to land its passengers.

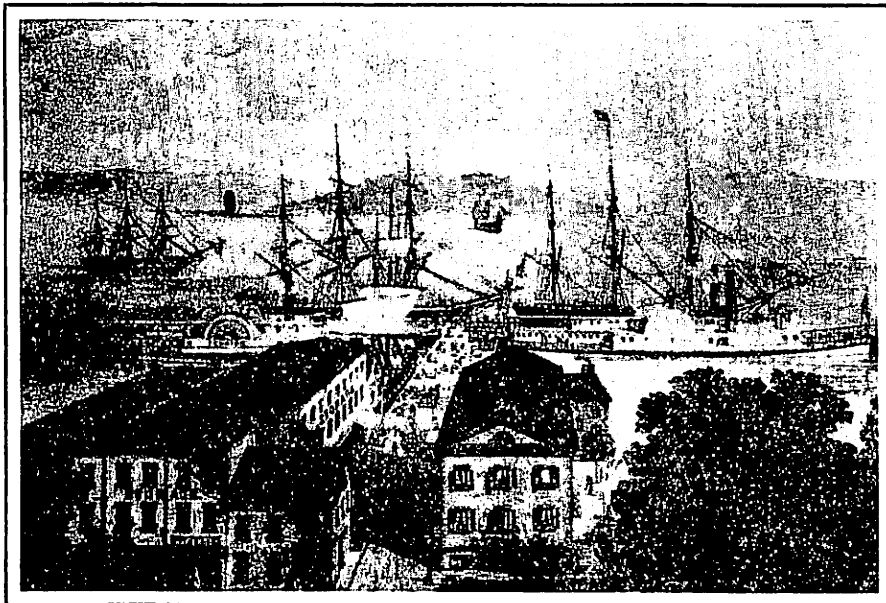
Sometimes agents hired other boats to steam up and down Sacramento's waterfront so that the opposition boat would be delayed in its departure. In those days several of the boats had their own brass bands. On one occasion they attempted to "blow each other out of the water" at departure time, creating a most unpleasant scene for the boarding passengers. Newspapers reported that the noise was so loud that the District Court had to suspend its business.

Even "tailgating" was common during a race. When the *Senator* entered Steamboat Slough in July, 1851, the *Wilson G. Hunt* was close behind. Closing the gap, the *Hunt* got too close to the *Senator* whose huge stern paddle wheel smashed the bow of the *Hunt*, breaking the railing and opening the seams so that it leaked badly. Between 1850 and 1853 at least seven steamboats collided with other steamboats, sinking three of them but with no loss of life or injuries.

Such tricks were harassment but carried little or no threat to the physical security of the passengers. Other tactics while the boats were underway created a different situation. Frequently the captain of the slower boat left his wharf a few minutes ahead of his faster opposition, and then zigzagged down the river whenever the latter tried to pass. Usually the faster ship waited until they reached Suisun Bay before passing. But not always. On April 9, 1851, the *Senator* and the *Confidence* left Sacramento about 2:00 p.m. but the former, the slower boat, took the lead because it departed from the lower landing. Four times the *Confidence* tried to pass, and its bow had reached the wheel house of the leading boat when the latter cut across its bow. Four times the captain of the *Confidence* rang his bells to warn of an imminent collision and four times had to reduce speed to avoid disaster. On the fifth attempt the captain of the *Confidence* did not back off and the two ships did collide. Both boats went dead in the water but no one was hurt. The passengers of the *Confidence* published a formal statement in San Francisco newspapers, accusing the captain of the *Senator* of unsportsmanlike conduct.

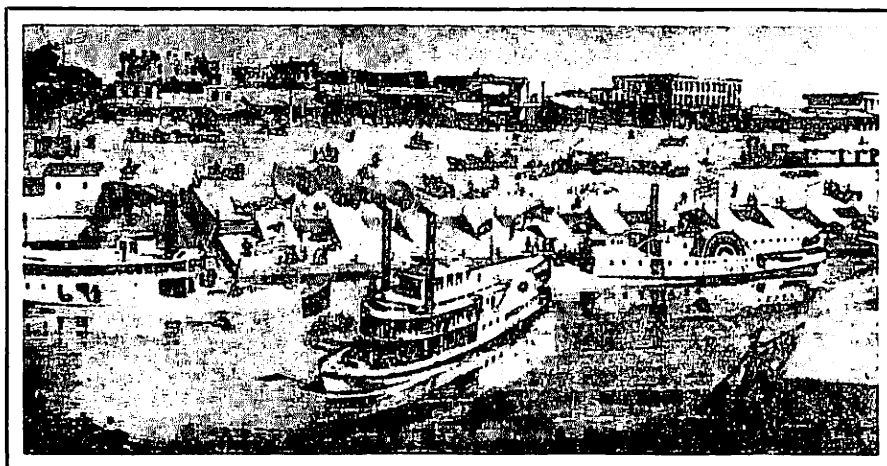


Benicia was a landing scheduled for all Sacramento-San Francisco boats, and so it became the scene for many shenanigans. Coming down river it was the last obstacle before the open run across the bays; going up stream it controlled the approach to the narrow channel of the Upper Sacramento. Apparently Benicia had only one wharf for the use of these steamboats, a situation which led to many conflicts. On one occasion when the *Confidence* had a significant lead over the *Senator* in a race from Sacramento, it was delayed 17 minutes at Benicia because the *Senator's* sister ship, the *New World*, was occupying the wharf and was reluctant to leave until the *Senator* appeared. On another occasion the *New World* and the *Hunt* approached Benicia about a half-length apart but with the *Hunt* leading. As they neared the wharf and reduced speed in preparation for landing, the *New World*, behind but on an inside track, with a burst of speed forced its way into the dock first. The *Hunt*, unable to land, had to circle and await the departure of the *New World* before it could dock, thereby losing 30 minutes and the race. The *New World* later repeated this tactic on the *Confidence* which had already tied up to the wharf by both bow and stern lines. As the *New World* poked its nose alongside the dock behind the *Confidence*, crewmen cut the stern lines of the latter, causing it to swing wide while the former took on its passengers and was off, winning the race by 4 minutes. The



The Senator and the New World at San Francisco.

New World was involved in another incident at Benicia, which raised suspicions. When the *Confidence* was leading in the race down the river, it stopped at Benicia and the single passenger fell overboard while boarding the steamer. While the ship waited to recover the lost passenger, the *New World* failed to stop at Benicia, passed the *Confidence* still at the wharf, and reached San Francisco first.



The Queen City at Sacramento.

Not every encounter on the river was so devious. When the *New World* collided with the *Defender* in 1855, while the latter was zigzagging to prevent being passed, someone on the *Defender* shot at the pilot of the *New World* and a passenger on the latter shot back. Fortunately, the incident stopped there. The captain of the *Defender* was arrested and charged with an attempt to kill but was released and filed similar charges against the captain of the rival boat who was also released.

There was at least one other shooting incident. Although the steamboats were different from those involved in earlier incidents, at least one of the captains, Galloway by name, was notorious on the river. Captain Swan was navigating his steamer, the *Princess*, down the Sacramento on a clear night in May, 1859, when he saw the *Martin White*,

captained by Galloway, towing the barge, *Sacramento*, upstream. Remembering Galloway's reputation and his previous threat to ram the *Princess*, Swan put his boat into the bank and waited ten minutes for the *White* to pass. However, Galloway took the *White* to within six feet of the *Princess* so that the barge swung into the motionless *Princess*. Galloway then fired his pistol at Swan, wounding him in the thigh. Galloway was later arrested but the criminal action was dismissed when the participants agreed to a settlement by civil action. Interestingly enough, Galloway was captain of the *Princess* in November 1859, when he was involved in another altercation, this time with the *Dashaway*.



Over 50 steamboats had steamed the inland waters of California by 1852, including big, competing boats and smaller, shallow draft up-river boats. The result had been not only racing and accidents on the Sacramento but also rates reduced from \$30 to \$5 for passage and from \$30 to \$10 a ton for freight. Cheaper rates were justified not only by competition but also by the large amount of freight moved from San Francisco to Sacramento. The *Alta California* of San Francisco, the state's leading newspaper, estimated that in 1852 sailing ships and steamboats transported 167,000 tons up the Sacramento at \$8 a ton by steamboat, \$5 a ton by sailing ship for a total bill of \$1,506,250. About 16,500 tons was destined for use in Sacramento, about 11,000 tons was to be reshipped on shallow draft boats to Marysville and Red Bluff. The balance, or 137,500 tons, was to be teamed to the mines at a cost of 3¢ a pound.

The economic instability brought by rate cutting led to organization of the California Steam Navigation Company in 1854. The owners of the bigger steamboats formed a joint stock company, with each owner receiving stock to the value of his boat. Owners of smaller boats were

also included. Then all steamboats not necessary to maintain the traffic of passengers and freight were tied up across the river from Sacramento, to be used only to replace regular boats out of service for repairs or to aid in the heavy spring and fall trade. Known as the "Yolo Fleet", its number varied from 13 to 20. The new company fixed rates and attempted to eliminate racing on the river but "opposition boats" soon appeared and sporadically offered reduced rates and renewed racing. The ability of steamboat owners to monopolize the traffic flow into northern California was eliminated by completion of the railroad from Sacramento to the San Francisco Bay area in 1869. Two years later the Central Pacific Railroad acquired control of river traffic by buying the California Pacific Railroad, which had built a line from Vallejo to Sacramento and had itself bought the California Steam Navigation Company. There were no further instances of "notorious" racing on the river.



The Yolo Fleet



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Your editor did all the research and writing for this article. James Henley of the Sacramento City and County museum provided the pictures.



SACRAMENTO COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 1175
SACRAMENTO, CA 95805