

## **lesson 5 Transportation**

### **STEAMBOATS ON THE SACRAMENTO RIVER**

#### **OVERVIEW**

This lesson introduces students to the history of steamboat travel and shipping on the Sacramento River. You can view or print most single images directly as a JPEG file. However, some documents are in Adobe Acrobat PDF format and must be viewed or printed with Acrobat Reader. *In Lesson 5, students use the Sacramento History Online database at <http://www.sacramentohistory.org>.*

#### **STUDENT OBJECTIVES**

1. Explain why steam travel on the river grew rapidly and later declined.
2. Identify three challenges or dangers of steamboat travel.
3. Use the SHO database to find specific historical information.

#### **CALIFORNIA HISTORY STANDARDS**

**4.1.3 - 4.1.5 Physical and human geographic features that define places and regions in California**

**4.4.1 - 4.4.4 California's rise as an agricultural and industrial power**

#### **BACKGROUND ARTICLE 5**

**Steamboats on the Sacramento River** (pages 5-5 and 5-6)

#### **STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET 5 AND KEY**

**Steamboats on the Sacramento River** (pages 5-7 and 5-8)

#### **DOCUMENTS TO DISCUSS**

The documents below relate to steam travel on the Sacramento River.



#### **1. View of Sacramento City, from the River**

[ca. 1850]  
Engraved illustration of Sacramento ca. early 1850's shows buildings in place of earlier tents.

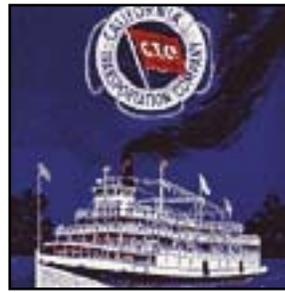


#### **2. Riverboat - (Central) Pacific Railroad depot**

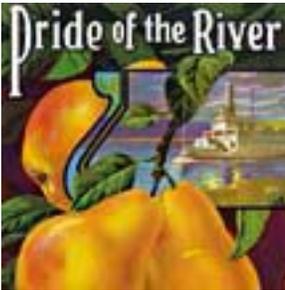
[1868]  
At the dock of the California Steam Navigation Company in Sacramento, with the steamer *Chrysoopolis*. Also shows the Central Pacific Railroad depot.



**3. John Laggas and crew of the steamer *Varuna* [1876]**  
View of John Laggas and crew members of the *Varuna* sternwheeler in front of warehouse at Sacramento waterfront, near M Street.



**4. Travel by Water through the Heart of California**  
[ca. 1915]  
Brochure of the California Transportation Company, with descriptions and timetables.



**5. Riverboat - Fruit label - Sacramento River - Locke**  
[192-?]  
Colorful fruit crate label advertising pears grown in the Sacramento Valley and shipped via steamer on the Sacramento River.



**6. Barges and steamboats on the Sacramento River**  
[191-]  
View of the barge *Alabama* loaded with steel and iron for the Thomson-Diggs Co., at the dock.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Print the images and PDF files shown above that you will use in your discussion, as well as **Student Activity Sheet and Key 5**. (Label the documents by their number to identify them in the instructions).

2. Read **Background Article 5**. Read it to your students or print it and have them read it themselves. Discuss any questions that they may have.

3. Show and discuss **Document 1, View of Sacramento City, from the River**. Tell them that the picture shows Sacramento. Ask them what kind of document it is. (*print*) How old do they think the picture is? (*1850*) Why? What transportation is shown?

4. **Document 2, Riverboat - (Central) Pacific Railroad depot** (with the *Chrysopolis* at the dock). Ask students how the *Chrysopolis* is powered. (*steam*) Tell them that the *Chrysopolis* was called a sidewheeler. Later boats with paddles at the stern were called sternwheelers. Do they know any other terms for steamboats? (*riverboats, paddlewheelers*)

5. **Document 3, John Laggas and crew of the steamer *Varuna***. The *Varuna* and the *Chin du Wan* were opposition steamers. Ask the students if they know the meaning of the word *opposition*. Why do they think a boat would be in opposition to something? Explain that competition was fierce in the early years. Some steamboat owners joined together to form a company to control the steamboat industry. However, other owners continued to operate independently, running what were called opposition boats.

6. **Document 4, Travel by Water through the Heart of California.** Tell students that this document is an advertisement and timetable for the California Transportation Company, which introduced two new steamers, the *Capital City* and *Fort Sutter*. Read the description of the boats. How does this advertisement compare to a modern cruise ship ad? Show students how to read a timetable. Discuss the fare price and the prices of accommodations and meals. How do these prices compare to those for modern ships?

7. **Document 5, Riverboat - Fruit label - Sacramento River - Locke River.** This image also depicts the steamer *Pride of the River*. Ask students why they think someone would advertise fruit using an image of a steamboat. Notice the description of the *Pride of the River* in **Document 4**, which indicates that this boat stopped to pick up and leave freight, while the others only left or picked up passengers at river stops. Where did the steamboats stop? Discuss what types of freight might be shipped in this manner. (*fruits and vegetables*)

8. **Document 6, Barges and steamboats on the Sacramento River.** Several of the images in the SHO collection show barges being pulled by steamboats. What kind of freight might be shipped on barges? Have students seen modern barges? If so, where?

9. Give students **Activity Sheet 5: Steamboats on the Sacramento** (*page 5-7*). After they have completed the activity, discuss their answers as a group.

## FOLLOW-UP

1. **Find out more about the individual steamboats** mentioned in this lesson. Make a report about your favorite steamer.

2. **Make a broadside** that a dock agent might have used to convince potential passengers in San Francisco to travel on your favorite steamboat.

3. **Write a journal entry** describing a trip that you took on a steamboat in 1850 from San Francisco to Sacramento. How did it feel to travel on the river? Where did you stop? Whom did you meet and where were they going?

4. **Solve a historical mystery**



**Opposition to Sacramento Landing at Benicia** [1860]  
Broadside advertising the departure of the *Chrysopolis*

Although all sources consulted for preparation of this lesson indicate that the *Chrysopolis* was operated by the California Steamship Navigation Company, this broadside presents it as an opposition steamer. Could the CSNC have been trying to fool passengers? At deadline time, no one had solved this mystery. Perhaps you can help by conducting further research.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- Cook, F. S. *Steamboats in the valley*. Volcano, CA: California Traveler, Inc. 1971. (includes information about all boats listed in this lesson)
- Dana, J. *The Sacramento: River of gold*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939.
- Holden, W. *Sacramento: Excursions into its history and natural world*. Fair Oaks, CA: 2 Rivers Publishing Co., 1988.
- Hunt, R. D. and Arent, W.S. *Oxcart to airplane*. Los Angeles, CA: Powell Publishing Co., 1929
- MacMullen, J. *Paddle-wheel days in California*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1944.
- Wilkinson, P. and Pollard, M. *Ideas that changed the world: Transportation*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1994. (juvenile)

## RELATED LINKS

### **Steamboats.com**

features many photos of the *Delta King*  
(<http://www.steamboats.com/>)

### **Towns and Cities of the California Delta**

(<http://www.californiadelta.org/cities.htm>)

### **When Paddlewheeler Steamboats Pushed through Delta Waterways**

(<http://www.californiadelta.org/steambts.htm>)

## background 5

## STEAMBOATS ON THE SACRAMENTO RIVER



The first known steamboat to make the journey from San Francisco up the Sacramento River was the *Sitka*. In 1847, this 37-foot long vessel was brought to the Bay from Fort Ross on a larger Russian boat. It reached Sacramento (known then as New Helvetia) in November 1847, after a six-day and seven-hour journey. In September 1849, the steamer *Sacramento* made its first run from Sacramento to San Francisco, soon followed by the *Senator* and the *New World*, to begin passenger and freight service connecting Sacramento and San Francisco.

Steamboats burned wood or coal to fuel their boilers, which heated water to create steam. Some are called paddlewheelers because of the paddle that propels them. The early boats were usually sidewheelers, with paddles on the side of the boat. Later boats were sternwheelers, with paddles at the rear. Some steamers were used to tow barges, as many as five at once.

At the peak of the Gold Rush, steamers left San Francisco for Sacramento and other ports north, carrying fortune-seekers, supplies, and equipment headed towards the Gold Country of the Sierra Nevada foothills. In 1850, within a year after the *Sacramento* made its first run, many steamboats began to crowd the waters of the Sacramento River.

Early days on the river were rough and dangerous. The inland waterway of the Sacramento River and Delta is a maze of marshes and islands, and no charts for ships were made until the 1860s. In some places it is hard to find the main river channel. In the winter, fog makes navigation difficult. Echo boards were set up along the river so that captains could use their ship's whistle to find their way.

Unlike today, there were few regulations on river traffic. In San Francisco, arguments often erupted over space at the wharf. On the wharves, dock agents begged passengers to travel on their particular boat, promising good food and a quick trip. Ship captains were often the ship's owner, to whom more speed could mean more money. As competition grew, many steamer captains began to race.

The desire for speed meant that too much fuel was added to heat the ship boilers, sometimes causing catastrophic explosions, of which there were many in the 1850s. Fire was another danger for the wooden ships. The Sacramento River was full of dead trees or snags. It also became shallower and harder to navigate as hydraulic mining upstream began to fill the river downstream with silt, until such mining was outlawed. To avoid the debris, many owners made the shift to sternwheelers, which could travel in shallower water.

As competition increased rapidly, passenger fares fell from as high as \$30 to as low as 10 cents. In 1854, some owner-captains organized to form the California Steam Navigation Company (CSNC), setting the San Francisco to Sacramento fare at \$8. Their most famous boats were the *Chrysopolis* and the *Yosemite*. Sometimes, the CSNC bought out opposition groups to keep prices high. However, eventually opposition steamers such as the *Chin du Wan*, caused the fares to drop again. In 1869, the California Steam Navigation Company became part of the Central Pacific Railroad, which lowered prices so much that even the opposition boats could not compete.

To indicate waiting freight or passengers, lanterns were used at night and flags during the day, with the lantern or flag color signaling which steamer should stop. Sometimes, instead of mooring lines, only the captain's skill was used to make brush landings, where freight was thrown on board, or planks were set down across the brush for passengers to reach the bank. The *Isleton* once made a record number of stops, with 46 stops up to Sacramento and 76 back to San Francisco. Many farmers depended on steamers for moving their crops to market. However, when some companies started charging a minimum price per pickup, it became easier to use trucks to haul produce.

Although hydraulic mining was outlawed and a tax was imposed to pay for river dredging, the increase in agriculture and irrigation also began to drain the river and interfere with steamboat travel. As passengers turned to the railroad and the automobile, and freight was transported by train and truck, the old steamers were eventually doomed. The Sacramento Transportation Company and the Southern Pacific operated steamers in the early part of the 20th century. The last great Sacramento riverboats, the *Delta Queen* and *Delta King*, were built in 1926, primarily for tourist travel, which lasted until World War II. Although the channel was later dredged to allow deep-hulled, ocean-going ships to travel up the river from San Francisco, by the 1950s, steam paddlewheelers on the Sacramento were only a memory.

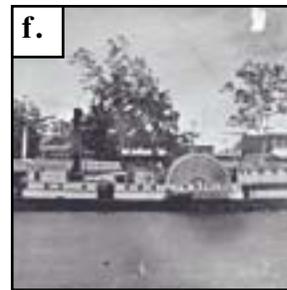
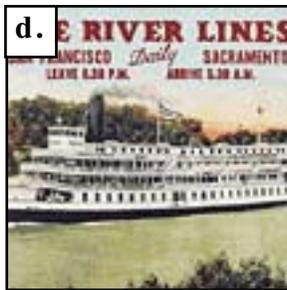
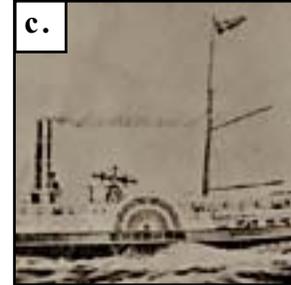
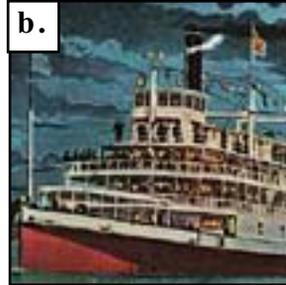
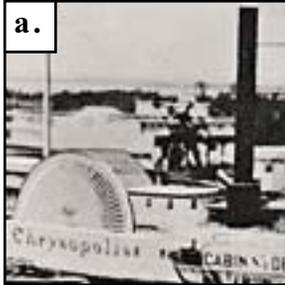
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**activity sheet 5**  
**STEAMBOATS ON THE SACRAMENTO RIVER**

<http://www.sacramentohistory.org>

**I. Photo Match: Find the Steamer**

**Find the image of each steam ship in the database, using the keyword search. Match the correct picture to the steamer name and description.**



\_\_\_\_\_ 1. **Senator**

This ocean-going steamer left New York in March 1849 and arrived in October that year to begin regular San Francisco/Sacramento runs, carrying supplies and people headed for the mines.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. **New World**

Built in 1850, this sidewheeler set a record for the fastest time between Sacramento and San Francisco, 5 hours and 35 minutes. It was wrecked in 1879.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. **Chrysoopolis**

Built in 1860 for the California Steam Navigation Company, she could carry 1,000 passengers and 700 tons of freight. She beat the *New World's* speed record by 16 minutes, a record that was never broken. Her sister ship was the *Yosemite*.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. **Apache**

Built in 1880, this sternwheeler was one of several passenger and freight boats run by Southern Pacific on its Netherlands route. Its sister ships were the *Modoc* and the *Navajo*.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. **Seizer**

This ship was built by the government to clear the river of snags that might endanger ships. Called a snag boat, it was built in 1881. Its captain sometimes hired Hawaiian divers to help bring up debris.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. **Capital City**

This ship was one of two built by the California Transportation Company that were the first to have private bathrooms. It was built in 1910. Its sister ship was the *Fort Sutter*, built in 1912.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. **Delta King**

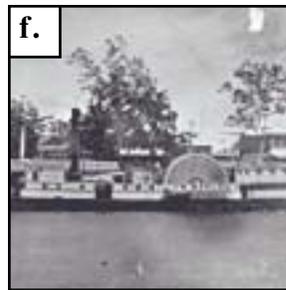
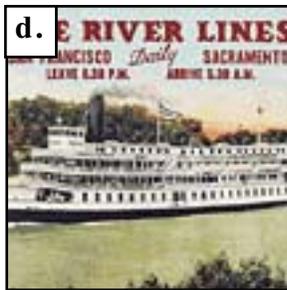
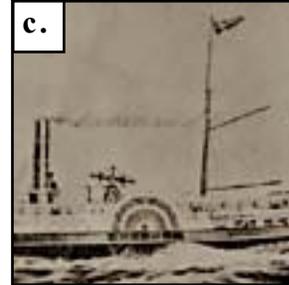
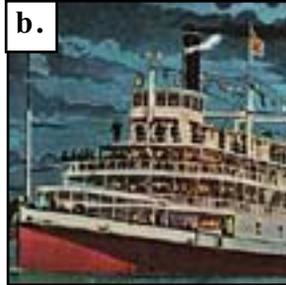
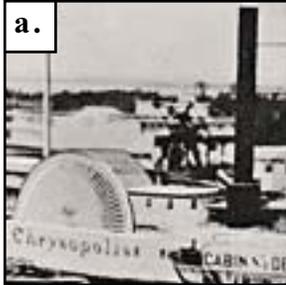
Sister ship to the *Delta Queen*, both boats were part of the River Line and built in 1926. They were sold to the government in the 1940s. Although they stopped running on the Sacramento, the *Delta Queen* became a Mississippi tour boat, and the *Delta King* is a restaurant in Sacramento.

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