

## Rampaging rivers, rampant speculation, and the failure of Cairo, Illinois, to become a great railway center.

By FRED W. ASH

### PROLOGUE

Settlement of the American West created the need for a mode of transportation capable of spanning great distances. Not surprisingly, the relentless push of westward commerce overlapped with technological advances that would make such transportation possible. Road travel in the early 19th century was backbreaking and expensive, so most goods were floated downstream to markets. Western waterways, however, possessed strong currents that allowed only one-way traffic. Keelboats could be poled against the current in shallow water, but they did not function well on larger rivers or during periods of high water. Their country cousins, the flatboats, could not even do that.

The first steamboat on western waters, the *New Orleans*, was launched by Robert Fulton at Pittsburgh in 1811. Fulton and his partner, Robert Livingston, established a legal monopoly on steamship service on the Ohio River, but the war with Britain that broke out the next year dampened their ability to drum up capital. Andrew Jackson's 1815 victory over the British at New Orleans, which ended the hostilities, was a great spur to development of the Mississippi Valley through steamboat transportation.

Keelboats and flatboats rarely stopped on their downstream journeys, but steamboats required frequent landings for wood. These wood yards quickly developed into bustling transfer stations for commerce going up navigable streams and tributaries. At least on a map, the perfect site on which to bundle these activities together was at the tip of a narrow peninsula where the Ohio River poured its gray waters into the muddy Mississippi River before the latter pressed down the nation's center to the Gulf of Mexico. Even better, junctions with the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Wabash Rivers were close at hand.

The promise of controlling a portal through which the commerce of the West would pass inflamed the imagination of many men, and hastened another phenomenon that would characterize the settlement of the West – the array of seers and speculators who used advances in transportation to conjure up metropolises in the wilderness.

# Submerged Ambitions

Mounds Ill. Apr. 5, 1912.

The great flood of 1912 inundated the Illinois Central Railroad's yard at Mounds and isolated Cairo to the south. The milepost at the far left reads: "NO [New Orleans] 556."

Illinois Central Railroad Historical Society