

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT

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AT SEA

Perhaps the earliest English-built ships on this side of the Atlantic were those created by the Jamestown-bound passengers of the *Sea Venture*, whose shipwreck in Bermuda inspired Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The hurricane wedged the ship between two rocks, and the passengers salvaged many of the timbers, carrying them to shore. The ship's carpenters built two smaller vessels from the salvage, and in May 1610 the newly-constructed *Deliverance* and *Patience* arrived at Jamestown.

Shipbuilding quickly became an important industry for the colonies because England no longer had sufficient good timber. We supplied shipyards in England with oak for planking and tall pine for masts, but we also built many vessels here, for export to England and for our own use.

Most ship and boat builders learned their trade by apprenticeship or membership in a family in the trade. America has few records mentioning early apprenticeships. As with other early ancestors involved in trades, we learn of their occupations through the items in their probate inventories and through their appearances in court. Since those with skilled trades were really small businessmen, there were often disagreements about payment and quality of work.

For example, siblings of my Marshall ancestor appeared frequently as defendant, plaintiff, and expert witness in the Essex County, Massachusetts, court records on such matters. They argued about accounting, they argued about ownership, they argued about size. In reading the cases, I was astounded at how far people sailed in what were really rather small (what I would call boat-sized) ships—all the way from the Piscataqua River (the border between Massachusetts and New Hampshire) to Barbados with a cargo of mackerel and oil and then back with a cargo of Muscovadoe sugar.

Many of the boats and ships built in America were for domestic use for fishing and trade on the rivers and shallow harbors that made up our entire eastern seaboard. Fishing was a primary industry of Maine, Massachusetts, and the Chesapeake. Over time, American shipbuilders invented several styles of boats, varying number and placement of masts, size and shape of sails, and profile of the hull, based on the purpose, sailing conditions, and size of the crew. "Chebacco boats" were developed in the town where my ancestors lived, but I am disappointed to say that they were not personally involved in the development.

The British controlled, regulated, and taxed all trade and shipping to and from the colonies—or at least they tried to. This was easier to do in the major deep-harbor seaports such as Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston, where there were customs offices, than in such areas as the banks off the Carolinas, the inlets of the Chesapeake, or the islands of Maine. With shipbuilding and small harbors thriving up and down the coast, it was easy for boats to sail directly to the West Indies. This isn't

to say that smuggling and avoiding tariffs was the major business model, but because it was not necessary to use the major ports, this contributed to the attitude of independence that would lead to the American Revolution.

ON RIVERS

As mentioned in JINGLE BELLS, travel and transport in the colonies was more likely to be by water than by road. The type of boat used by our ancestors depended on time, place, purpose, and nature of waterway.

The Indians helpfully introduced early settlers to canoes, but canoes never caught on. If you were one of those who never quite mastered the j-stroke at Scout camp, you may empathize. The English preferred boats that could be rowed, poled, or sailed. Massachusetts records report several drownings in capsized canoes.

In regions that did not have town-oriented development, homes often turned their faces to the river. If you've visited Mount Vernon or the James River plantations in Virginia, you will recall that they expected their guests to arrive by river, and their houses and landscaping are designed accordingly. Even in areas with towns, practicality was important. Provincetown on Cape Cod wasn't accessible by a major road until the nineteenth century. Boats were a more efficient way to reach the other towns on Massachusetts Bay.

When a river required regular or frequent crossing, it usually wasn't long before a ferry was established. The local ferry was almost always an officially sanctioned franchise. You will find mention of it—often annually—in town meeting or county court records. Because a ferry often connected two different political jurisdictions, you may find control at the higher colony or state level. Sometimes this oversight included the setting of fees. Early ferries were often just boats that were rowed or poled across. Sometimes a rope or guy wire was strung from one side to the other to keep the ferry from drifting downstream.

When there was need to carry goods or even entire wagons across a river, a flatbed craft was needed. Animals could sometimes be transported, but often they were tied to the boat and swam across. Pulley systems may have been added to move the ferry across. Eventually most ferries were replaced by bridges, but in Kentucky I have, in a rental car, crossed a river on a pulley-operated ferry in the same place in which such a ferry operated when my ancestors lived there.

It is important to identify ferry sites on maps, as the residents on both sides of the river are closer to each other there than at other points, which explains how my third-great-grandparents met, even though their residences were separated by the wide Monongahela River in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Except for major barges and riverboats cruising up and down rivers such as the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi, much river transport was one-way only. Although many

settlers came into Kentucky through the Cumberland Gap from the Great Wagon Road, many others avoided the mountain crossing by beginning their journey down the Ohio River before continuing on a trail into the interior.

Members of one of my ancestral families were renowned for having safely taken a ferry of goods from the wild Green River in the Mammoth Cave region of Kentucky all the way to New Orleans (which would have involved going north to the Ohio and then down the Ohio to the Mississippi before heading south to New Orleans). It is my understanding that they used the profits to buy horses and rode back.

In much of America, rivers were navigable only during the warmer months. Once ice locked in, towns were effectively shut off from many of their visitors, supplies, and communication. This was a matter of no small interest, even as late as 1870, as shown by the newspaper article that announced the departure of the last steamer before the freeze from Hartford, Connecticut, and listed the historical opening and closing dates since 1852.

Whether a particular ancestral family traveled by water or by land depended on very practical considerations. Careful examinations of the records left by the family and their neighbors will help you determine which.