
Two Rivers – The Mississippi and Missouri

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“...A heap more goes down the Mississippi than ever comes up it again and that sets you a-thinkin’,” says Charles Steward in his book, *Partners of Providence*.

The first Europeans to see the Mississippi were probably De Soto and his men in 1541. History began to turn into legend by the time Lewis and Clark ascended both rivers to record the savage and luxuriant charm of the surrounding countryside. A poignant contribution to the legend of the Mississippi was made when Jolliet and Marquette were led to the mouth of the “world’s greatest tributary,” the Missouri River, by two Miami Indians. The Missouri River from St. Louis to far northwest into the Dakotas became the thread which bound the *Epic of America* (by John G. Neihardt) into one great story of fur traders, explorers, miners and mountain men.

Hundreds of men joined Ren Ashley and Stempy Henry in St. Louis in 1822 when St. Louis was becoming the *grande dame* of the Midwest and the cry to youth was, “Go West, young man. Go West!” (*Treasury of Mississippi Folklore*, B.A. Botkin).

The two rivers share many similarities:

- Both have a lot of silt in them that is supported by the swirling currents.
- Both rivers constantly change or modify their crooked paths, and sand and gravel bars appear and disappear.
- Both rivers are navigable and serve the entire Midwest with a water route for shipping large quantities of raw materials and products.
- The two rivers have become keys to the leisure time habits of thousands of people for fishing, sailing, water skiing, swimming and motorboat racing and cruising.



Photo by Susan Dunn

Tower Rock on the Mississippi River near Wittenberg.

Endless theories have been set forth and a continuous scientific discussion threads its way through modern literature about the geology and geography of the two river systems. Unusual geologic features are common-place on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. Oxbow lakes, which are large, crescent-shaped bodies of water that were left in low lying areas when the river changed course across meander loops, decorate the flat flood plains along either side of both

ivers. There are also scenic spots where the rivers left tall pinnacles of rock standing like towers. Castle Rock, on the Mississippi is an example of this unique occurrence. Tavern Rock, on the Missouri, is a typical bluff. It is often noted in the history and folklore of the rivers and was visited by Lewis and Clark.

The flood plains of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers cover hundreds of square miles in this state and provide citizens with rich, tillable acreage for producing Missouri's excellent agricultural products. A second feature of the flood plains is the tremendous amount of good quality groundwater which can be drawn from shallow wells in the alluvial deposits along the rivers. The river water seeps deep into the gravel and sediment beds and is pumped for use after this very efficient filtering process removes most of the river's impurities. Some of these shallow wells produce as much as 2,000 gallons of water per minute.



High loess bluffs (yellowish gray loam; silt), deep limestone gorges, "lost" hills and cutoff meanders, and millions of tons of sand and gravel, which are deposited along the almost shoreless banks, entice the scientist to a more thorough study of the origin and development of these majestic waterways. Industry and the rivers are comparable to the chicken and egg story in that for nearly 300 years, one has gradually become dependent upon the other. Fur trade gave St. Louis its start in 1700. Today, barges laden with coal, sand and gravel, ore, cement, agriculture commodities, marble, clay products, fertilizer, heavy machinery, equipment, ammunition, cars, trucks, food and household items float three abreast and sometimes four deep up and down the Missouri and Mississippi. To help maintain this veritable six-lane liquid highway system, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers works diligently to regulate and stabilize the channels. For example, a nine-foot channel is controlled by dredging, leveeing, and use of piers on the Missouri River from St. Louis to Kansas City. "Traffic lights," signs, buoys and markers outline the safely navigable "lanes" up and down the river.

Both rivers also share their majesty in destructiveness as they jam with ice in the winter and swell to flood stage in the spring and fall. However, some of the danger of flooding is eliminated by the levees or lock and dam systems that are strategically located along the rivers.

The Missouri and Mississippi rivers are the two features in the state which have given rise to thousands of volumes of lore and literature about "life along the river" in the United States. In 1844, a New York reporter wrote, "There ain't nobody but Uncle Sam as could afford such a river as that! Where in airth so much water comes from I can't think!"

Changes in the details regarding life and work along the river system since Mark Twain's day is keenly exemplified in the very town where Mark Twain himself lived -- Hannibal. With both rail and river traffic to boost its economy, the quaint little town has become a busy, growing industrial center of mills, factories, plants and stockyards, like those that characterize contemporary river towns such as St. Joseph, Boonville, Cape Girardeau and Jefferson City.