

# Fast Boats on the Mississippi.

## *A Brief History of Fast Trips Between New Orleans, Louisiana and St. Louis, Missouri.*

### King of the Mississippi.

The quest for steamboats to establish fast running times between the cities of New Orleans, Louisiana and St. Louis, Missouri began with serious intent on April 29, 1844, when the *J.M. White II* completed the 1,278 mile <sup>(1)</sup> downstream trek from St. Louis to New Orleans in 3 days and 16 hours.<sup>(2)</sup> On May 4, 1844, she made the return upstream trip back to St. Louis in 3 days, 23 hours and 9 minutes; setting a record that would stand for 26 years until it would be (arguably) broken by the *Rob't. E. Lee* in 1870.<sup>(3)</sup>

As a comparison, in 1849, the big 886 ton side-wheeler *Missouri* ran the same course in 4 days and 19 hours. In 1865, the Atlantic & Mississippi Steamship Company's big sidewheeler *Ruth* with Capt. Ben Taber in command, covered the distance in 4 days, 9 hours and 54 minutes. In 1869, the *Dexter*, commanded by Capt. Sam Montgomery, went from New Orleans to the wharf at St. Louis in 4 days and 10 hours flat. All of these vessels were considered "steppers," in their time, however, none of them came close to challenging the record time of the *J.M. White II*.

### The Lee, the Natchez, and Immortality.

The *Rob't. E. Lee* was built in 1866 at New Albany, Indiana and from the very beginning, because of her great speed, she began rewriting the record books. She was owned by Capt. John W. Cannon; a serious competitor to Capt. Thomas P. Leathers in the lower Mississippi River passenger and freight trade. Capt.

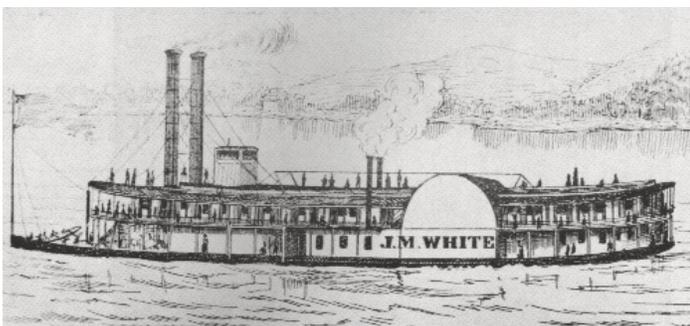
Leathers had always had the reputation of owning fast boats and the very thought of his arch-rival, Capt. Cannon, owning a faster boat did not set well with him. In 1869, he built a vessel to change all of that. He named his new boat the *Natchez* <sup>(4)</sup> and she was built specifically to beat the *Rob't. E. Lee*.



*The Rob't. E. Lee* was built for Capt. John W. Cannon in 1866 at New Albany, Indiana. She beat the *Natchez* in the "Great Race" – 1218 miles from New Orleans to St. Louis in 1870. She was dismantled at Portland in April, 1876 and the hull was later used as a wharf boat at Memphis.

Shortly after the *Natchez* was built, Capt. Leathers was eager to show the performance capabilities of his new vessel. He went right after the 26-year-old New Orleans to St. Louis speed record held by the *J.M. White II*. So, in early June of 1870, he and the new *Natchez* set out to do just that. When he arrived at St. Louis, 3 Days, 21 hours and 58 minutes later, he had beaten the *White's* time by 71 minutes and added a handsome set of antlers to his collection. Leathers had thrown down the gauntlet to Capt. Cannon and the *Lee*. It was only a matter of time before the two boats would race.

On June 30, 1870, the *Rob't. E. Lee* and the *Natchez* squared-off on that same course in a much-celebrated race. The *Lee* completed the distance in 3 days, 18 hours and 14 minutes<sup>(5)</sup> - bettering the time of both the *J.M. White II* and the *Natchez*. There was much controversy with the *Lee's* win. Many thought the *Lee* used unfair tactics,<sup>(6)</sup> but the general opinion was that the *Lee's* captain just had a better race plan. Although the *Lee's* time in the race was quicker than that of the *Natchez*, some still argue that the *Natchez* was actually the faster boat.<sup>(7)</sup>



*The J.M. White II* was built at Elizabeth, PA for Capt. J.W. Converse in 1844. She held the record time of 3 days, 23 hours and 9 minutes between New Orleans and St. Louis. Was dismantled in 1847 and burned at Memphis in 1850.

## The Rest of the Story...

With the speed argument not completely settled, Capt. Leathers decided to go after the *Lee's* new record (and claim of speed supremacy). It didn't make sense to have another 1,200-mile race, when an abbreviated race against time and at a shorter distance could determine a winner. What better place to accomplish this than a publicized run from New Orleans to Natchez, Mississippi – Leather's home town. On October 16, 1870, Leathers set out on this 268 mile speed run to better the time set by the *Lee* during the "Great Race." During that leg of the 1870 race, the *Lee* covered that distance in 17 hours and 11 minutes. By the time the *Natchez* completed the attempt, she had lowered the time for that distance to 16 hours, 51 minutes and 30 seconds, bettering the *Lee's* time by 20 minutes and 30 seconds. The horns then went from the *Lee* to the *Natchez*.



*The Natchez VI was built at Cincinnati in 1869 for Capt. Thomas P. Leathers. She broke the 26-year-old record of the J. M. White II between New Orleans and St. Louis when she made the distance in 3 days, 21 hours and 58 minutes. She lost the "Great Race" later that year to the Rob't. E. Lee. She was dismantled at Cincinnati in 1879.*

The sight of those horns on the *Natchez* was unbearable to Capt. Cannon and he immediately set out to retrieve them. The following week he prepared the *Lee* to do just that. On October 18, 1870, with the *Lee* in racing trim, he set out to win back the horns. On the first leg of the trip, from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, the *Lee* performed flawlessly and was well ahead of the *Natchez's* new record time. Above Baton Rouge she encountered a severe storm causing a delay. A fueling problem at Bayou Sara caused the *Lee* to lose even more time, resulting in her arriving in *Natchez* eight minutes behind the time of Capt. Leathers vessel. His attempt had failed. The horns would remain with the *Natchez*. This was very embarrassing to Capt. Cannon – so he tried again. On October 27, 1870, the *Lee* again left New Orleans

headed for Natchez – and this time he encountered no problems and he succeeded at beating the *Natchez's* time; setting the pegs at 16 hours, 36 minutes and 47 seconds. He had bettered the *Natchez's* time by 14 minutes and 43 seconds. The horns were returned to the *Lee*.

This seems to have ended the competition between the two captains and their respective vessels for a speed title. Perhaps the two aging captains had begun to lose their competitive spirits or, more likely, they just concluded that it just wasn't very practical or profitable to sacrifice business and money just to own speed records.

As the steamboat era began to draw to a close, it became less and less practical to own and operate large steamboats on the lower Mississippi river. Competition between the steamboat owners was diminished by the success of the railroads, with passenger and freight business on the rivers suffering greatly. The *Lee's* record time of 3 days, 18 hours and 14 minutes between New Orleans and St. Louis remained and would never be beaten by another steamboat. However, it would not remain unchallenged.

## Chasing the Ghost of the Rob't. E. Lee.

In 1929, Edwin C. Koenig, a St. Louis businessman and President of the St. Louis Yacht Club, established a challenge open to all motorized river vessels to better the time set by the steamer Rob't. E. Lee in 1870 between the cities of New Orleans and St. Louis. A prize was created to be awarded to anyone who could accomplish this challenge. The prize was called "The Koenig Trophy" and carried with it a significant monetary award. Since that time, a number of vessels were awarded that prize. A partial list follows, starting with the motor vessel *Bogie* in 1929 and ending with the turbine-powered catamaran *Skater 32* in 1990.



*The Skater 32 was powered by a GE T-58 turbine engine generating 1,325 hp. On Sept. 22, 1990, she ran New Orleans to St. Louis in 12 hours, 40 minutes and 40 seconds at an average speed of over 82 mph. She attained a maximum speed of 118 mph at times during the trip.*

1929	<i>Bogie</i>	Dr. Louis LeRoy	87 hours, 31 minutes <sup>(8)</sup>
1930	<i>And, How III</i>	Claude M. Mickler	78 hours, 51 minutes <sup>(9)</sup>
1948	<i>m/v Harry S. Truman</i>	Capt. Willis Smith	91 hours, 31 minutes <sup>(10)</sup>
1953	<i>Mark Twain</i>	Roy F. Smith	79 hours, 12 minutes <sup>(11)</sup>
1953	<i>37' Cabin Cruiser</i>	Frank G. Burkheath	61 hours, 22 minutes <sup>(12)</sup>
1955	<i>26' Home-made Craft</i>	Raymond and Thomas Loetscher	52 hours, 53 minutes <sup>(13)</sup>
1984	<i>20' Charger</i>	Bob Cox	20 hours, 14 minutes <sup>(14)</sup>
1987	<i>Scarab 43</i>	Don Johnson (Miami-Vice TV star)	19 hours, 51 minutes <sup>(15)</sup>
1988	<i>22' Starcraft</i>	Roy Fulton	14 hours, 55 minutes <sup>(16)</sup>
1990	<i>Skater 32</i>	Howard Arneson	12 hours, 40 minutes <sup>(17)</sup> and 50 seconds.

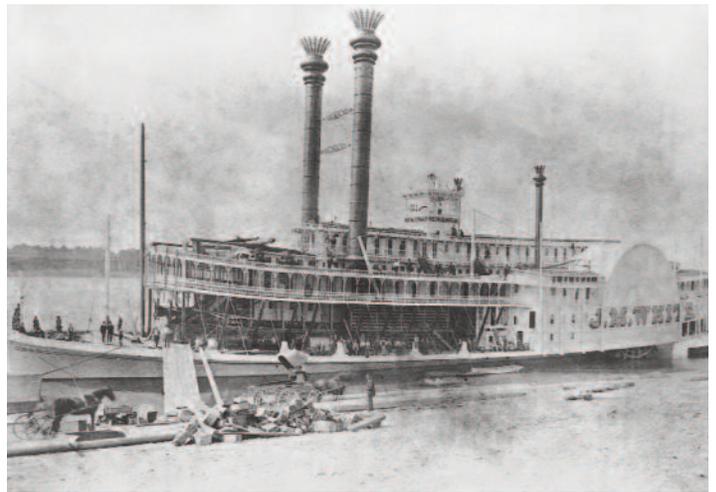
Until the summer of 1953, no one had had really beaten the *Lee's* time by much. You could argue that the *Lee* was still the king of the river as, although the *Lee's* time had been beaten, the distance traveled by the other boats had been reduced from 1218 miles (the distance run by the *Lee* in 1870) to 1,154 miles (run by the more current challengers after 1929), to 1,039 miles in 1990.

## So Which Boat Was the Fastest?

If you're talking power boats on the Mississippi River between New Orleans and St. Louis, Arneson's *Skater 32* seems to get the nod. If you're talking river steamboats operating in that venue, you might assume that the *Rob't. E. Lee* would get most of the votes...but, you'd be wrong. Most historians would assign that honor to another large sidewheeler owned by Capt. John W. Tobin, ironically named the *J.M. White III*; a name familiar because it had a moniker very similar to the vessel mentioned in the very beginning of this story.

The *J.M. White III* was a large cotton packet built at the Howard Shipyard in Jeffersonville, Indiana in 1878. She was bigger than either the *Rob't. E. Lee* or the *Natchez*. She had 10 boilers and gigantic high-

pressure engines (even bigger than the *Lee's*) with 43-inch cylinders and an 11-foot stroke generating 3,400 hp. She was considered by most to be the pinnacle of steamboat architecture on the Western Rivers of the United States. She was also very fast. Unfortunately she left very few accounts of her splendid performances. This was because her owner simply wasn't interested in setting speed records. One of the reasons for this was that her owner, Capt. John W. Tobin, was a good friend of Capt. John W. Cannon (the owner of the *Rob't. E. Lee*) and vowed to never challenge any of the *Lee's* records while Capt. Cannon was still alive. For eight years the *J.M. White III* ran without officially challenging them.



*The J.M. White III was one of the largest and most luxurious cotton packets to ever operate on the Lower Mississippi River. She was rated 2,027 tons and her massive steam engines, with 43-inch cylinders, were rated at 3,400 hp.<sup>(18)</sup> Her paddlewheels were 44-feet in diameter. She burned on December 13, 1886 at the St. Maurice Plantation in Louisiana. Between 25 and 30 lives were lost.*

However, there are a couple of examples of her extraordinary speed that still survive. One occurred on October 3, 1881—while on a regular business run with a load of freight and passengers, the *White* went from New Orleans to Baton Rouge in a time, including all stops and a delay en route, of 7 hours and 40 minutes. (This was 42 seconds faster than the *Rob't. E. Lee's* record run to that city on October 27, 1870, when the *Lee* ran 16-36-47 to Natchez with special preparation and no stops. (The *Lee's* time to Baton Rouge during this speed run was 7 hours, 40 minutes and 42 seconds). The distance was 133.2 miles – at an average speed for the *White* (against the current) of 17.34 mph.

There is also an unverified account of the *White* racing with Capt. Leather's *Natchez VII* (the "Big Injun"). Sometime in the early 1880's,

the story goes, Captain Leathers liked to allow boats docked at New Orleans to pull out in front of the *Natchez* when departing and he would catch and then pass the boat while under a full head of steam. The show was well known to the people on the New Orleans wharf and never failed to impress the passengers of the *Natchez*. Once Leathers did this to Capt. Tobin while he was aboard another of his boats, the *Ed. Richardson*. Capt. Tobin found this embarrassing and vowed to get even for this and waited to use the *J.M. White III* to do it.

The opportunity arrived once when both vessels were leaving New Orleans at about the same time, and the race was on. The *Natchez* gained the lead and the duel appeared over, however, the *J.M. White* had suffered a minor accident and had only slowed to make repairs. After the repairs were made, Capt. Tobin put her under full steam and quickly caught and passed the *Natchez*, beating her handily into Baton Rouge. It is interesting to note that Capt. Leathers, seeing he was about to be passed by the hard charging *White*, pretended to answer a “hail” from shore to pick up an “empty” barrel of freight. The *White* reportedly arrived in Baton Rouge in 7 hours flat. This put her average speed (against the current) at slightly over 19 mph.

### Looking Back...

In 1844, the *J.M. White II* went 1,278 miles from New Orleans to St. Louis in 95 hours and 9 minutes, averaging a little over 14 mph. 146 years later, Howard Arneson piloted the turbine-powered catamaran *Skater 32*, 1,039 miles from New Orleans to St. Louis in 12 hours, 40 minutes and 50 seconds, averaging a little over 82 mph. In 1870, the *Rob't. E. Lee* and the *Natchez* were both capable of averaging 15 to 16 mph against the current and averaged about 13 1/2 mph and 12 1/2 mph respectively for the “Great Race.” The *White* was just a little faster than either of the aforementioned.

Now, it would be interesting to see how the *J.M. White III* could do if “let loose” on a run from New Orleans to St. Louis, but, I guess we can only speculate. Now if I were betting man...

## Notes

- (1) Estimated mileage between New Orleans and St. Louis in 1844.
- (2) The *J.M. White II* left St. Louis on April 29, 1833 at 3:00 pm with 600 tons of freight and arrived at New Orleans on May 4, 1844 at 5:40pm.
- (3) The Mississippi River, between 1844 and 1870 had decreased in length by approximately 60 miles, making the total distance run by the *White*, longer than that run by the *Lee*. Some argue that the *White's* transit between the two cities (for miles run) was arguably faster than the *Lee's*.
- (4) The estimated mileage between New Orleans and St. Louis in 1870 was 1,218 miles.
- (5) The actual elapsed time of 3-18-14 for the *Lee* varies. Most reputable historians agree with these numbers, however, such noted historians as Fred Irving Dayton (*Steamboat Days*), E.W. Gould (*Fifty Years on the Mississippi*) report the time as 3 days, 18 hours and 30 minutes. Ray Samuel, Leonard B. Huber and Warren C. Ogden (*Tales of the Mississippi*), give the time as 3 days, 18 hours and 13 minutes.
- (6) The *Lee* made special preparation for the race; stripping it down to cut wind resistance, making arrangement for fuel delivery while underway, starting the race early to gain position on the *Natchez*, and refusing freight and carrying fewer paying passengers. The *Natchez* reportedly made very little race preparation, took on passengers and freight and made scheduled stops at Grand Gulf, Natchez, Vicksburg, Greenville and Memphis, suffered a breakdown near Helens, AR, and a major delay in the fog above Cairo. *Natchez* supporters claimed that, with deducting time lost by delays and making landings, the *Natchez* actually had a faster running time.
- (7) Built in 1869, this was the sixth of eight vessels named *Natchez* owned by Capt. Leathers.
- (8) On July 29, 1929, Dr. Louis LeRoy of Memphis, TN set out to accomplish this task. With a small motorboat named *Bogie* (powered by a Scripps 6-cylinder motor) he left New Orleans at 3:04 PM and headed for St. Louis in an attempt to break the record of the *Rob't. E. Lee*. In spite of breaking six propellers and a propeller shaft, the *Bogie* arrived at the St. Louis Municipal Dock at 6:35 PM on August 1, 1929. The time for the trip was 87 hours, 31 minutes. (3 days, 15 hours and 31 minutes). The *Lee's* record had finally been beaten. Distance (1154 miles.)
- (9) Piloted by Claude M. Mickler. Broke the record of the *Bogie* in 1930 making the run from New Orleans to St. Louis in the *And, How III*. Time: 78 hours, 51 minutes.
- (10) On March 8, 1949, the m/v *Harry S. Truman* left New Orleans at 4:59 PM and arrived at St. Louis on March 12, 1949 at 1:30 PM. Her time was 91 hours and 31 minutes. (3 days, 19 hours, 31 minutes). Lost 2 hours 13 minutes at Profit's Island with mechanical breakdown. Went aground at Memphis, TN. Lost 3-4 minutes. Operated by Federal Barge Lines. Capt. Willis Smith. Hull measurements: 135' x 54'. The *Truman* was a powered unit pushing nine (9) integrated barges. Rated 3,200 hp.
- (11) The *Mark Twain* was driven by Roy F. Smith. A small motorboat powered by two (2) outboard motors, it covered the distance from New Orleans to St. Louis in 79 hours and 12 minutes.
- (12) Owned by Frank G. Burkheat, a St. Louis businessman. A 37' cabin cruiser, powered by (2) two 125 hp gasoline engines. New Orleans to St. Louis in 61 hours, 22 minutes. (3 days, 13 hours, 22 minutes)
- (13) A 26' home-made boat built by Raymond and Thomas Loetscher. Powered by (3) three V8 automobile engines. In 1955, went from New Orleans to St. Louis in 52 hours and 53 minutes.
- (14) A 26' *Charger Bass Boat*. Piloted by Bob Cox. Powered by a 300 hp Johnson V8 outboard motor. In 1984, ran New Orleans to St. Louis in 20 hours and 14 minutes.

- (15) The Wellcraft *Scarab 43* was piloted by “Miami Vice” television star Don Johnson. The Lamborghini-powered racing boat made the 1987 New Orleans to St. Louis run in 20 hours, 14 minutes.
- (16) Roy Fulton piloted the 22’ *Starcraft* from New Orleans to St. Louis in 1988. It was powered by a 225 hp Yamaha outboard motor. His time was 14 hours, 55 minutes.
- (17) On Sept. 22, 1990, Howard Arneson and the *Skater 32* left New Orleans and 12 hours, 40 minutes and 50 seconds later, he arrived in St. Louis. His average speed was more than 82 mph; including down time for four fuel stops and slowing for barge traffic. Most of the way, when conditions allowed, he rocketed up the twisting river at 100 to 110 mph, with occasional bursts to 118 mph. He kept to the river channel all the way, taking no shortcuts. The *Skater 32* was powered by a GE T-58 turbine engine with a Rolla 4-blade prop, generating 1,325 hp.
- (18) The horsepower rating on the engines of the J.M. White III is also stated as being 2,800.

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