

**HISTORIC  
NAMES  
AND PLACES  
ON THE LOWER  
MISSISSIPPI  
RIVER**



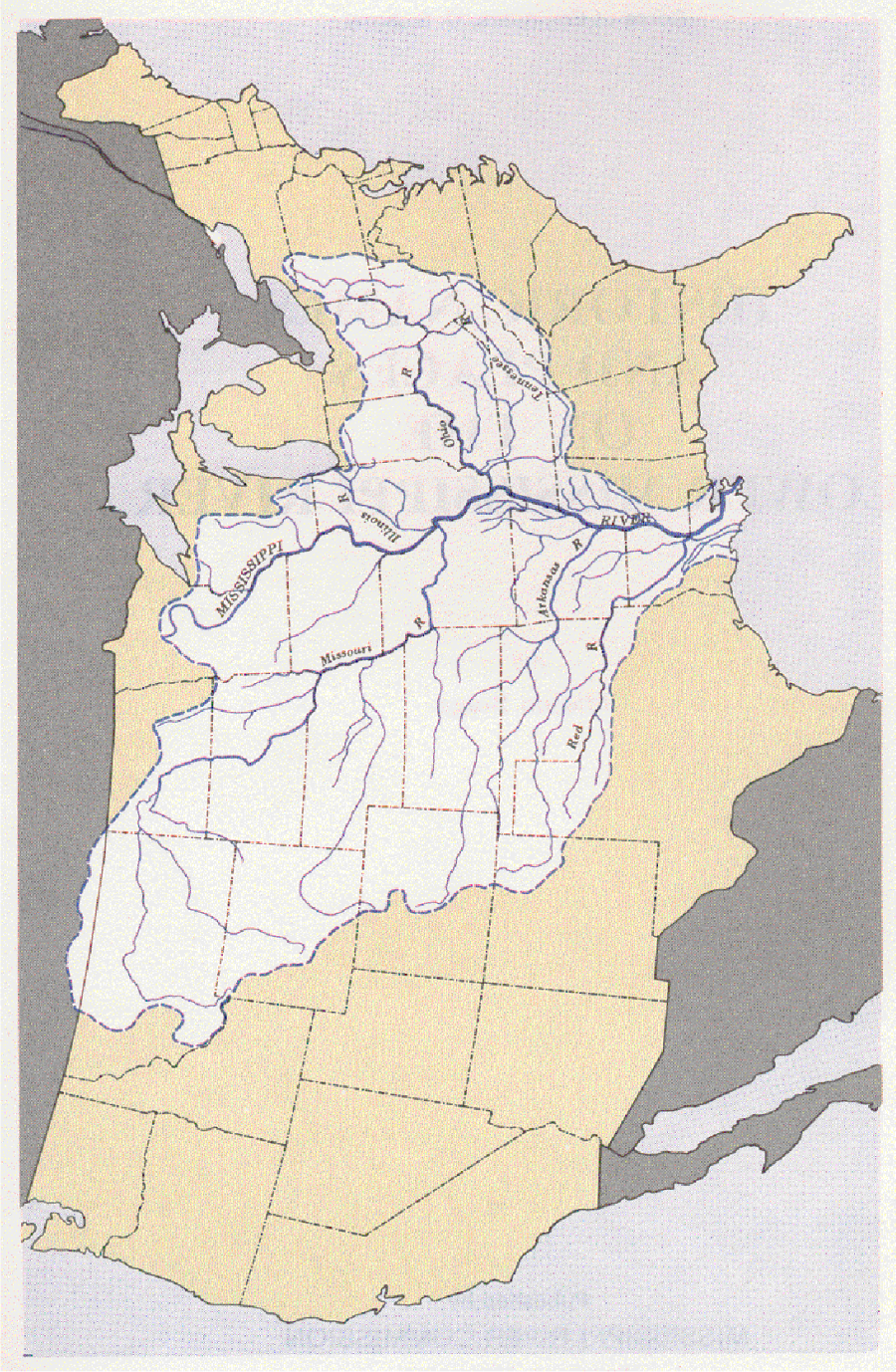
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army

**HISTORIC NAMES  
AND PLACES  
ON THE  
LOWER MISSISSIPPI RIVER**

by  
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Published by  
**MISSISSIPPI RIVER COMMISSION**  
Vicksburg, Mississippi  
1977





**MISSISSIPPI RIVER DRAINAGE BASIN.** The Mississippi River drains an area of 1.25 million square miles in 31 states and two Canadian provinces. All of the water collected in this vast drainage basin, the fourth largest in the world, flows through the narrow outlet known as the Lower Mississippi, which begins at the confluence of the Ohio and Middle Mississippi and ends at the Gulf of Mexico.

## FOREWORD

*The text of this publication is keyed to navigation maps published annually by the Mississippi River Commission, Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army. All of the physical features, historical incidents, and flood control and navigation works discussed herein are identified by "river mile" numbers, and the book is designed to serve as a historical supplement to the map book.*

*The navigation map book, entitled "FLOOD CONTROL AND NAVIGATION MAPS OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, CAIRO, ILLINOIS, TO THE GULF OF MEXICO," is revised annually to include the latest information from surveys made by the Corps of Engineers and other Federal and State agencies. The maps show the location of navigation lights, channel lines, shorelines, islands, bars, towheads, revetments, dikes, docks, towns, and harbor installations. They are essential for safe navigation on the Lower Mississippi, and pleasure boaters will find them invaluable for planning a trip down the great river.*

*Copies of the navigation map book may be purchased from the Mississippi River Commission at Vicksburg, Mississippi, or from the District Offices of the Army Corps of Engineers in St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg, and New Orleans.*

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Note: River mile figures are based on a 1962 survey of the Lower Mississippi. A more recent survey confirmed the accuracy of the 1962 measurements, and the figures used above are those that appear on current navigation maps published by the Corps of Engineers.



## **LOWER MISSISSIPPI BEGINS**

*Mile 953.8 AHP, Map 1*

The Lower Mississippi River begins just below Cairo Point, Illinois. Here the Middle Mississippi and the Ohio River join each other, take a new name, and begin a long journey to the Gulf of Mexico. By air the distance from Cairo Point to the Gulf is only 600 miles, but the river's winding, twisting course is more than 950 miles long.

Distances on the Lower Mississippi are measured from the Head of Passes. The Passes consist of several short, narrow channels through which the river discharges its waters into the Gulf. The point where the river divides into Passes is located about 95 miles below New Orleans, Louisiana. It is designated on river maps as Mile 0.0, and is called the Head of Passes.

Since the confluence of the Middle Mississippi and Ohio occurs 953.8 river miles above Mile 0.0, or above the Head of Passes, the Lower Mississippi is said to begin at "Mile 953.8 Above Head of Passes," or at "Mile 953.8 AHP."

No one knows how long men have been pitting their wits and their frail vessels against the mighty Mississippi. There is archaeological evidence that human life and culture existed in the Lower Mississippi region at least 10,000 years before the birth of Christ. Prehistoric man and the Indians who later inhabited the Lower Mississippi Valley had no impact on the natural environment in which they lived. The European explorers, missionaries, and early colonists who were in the Valley at brief intervals over a period of almost three centuries also left the virgin wilderness and the great river virtually untouched.

When the vigorous young American nation acquired undisputed possession of the Lower Mississippi in 1803, American settlers were eager to develop the rich agricultural lands and vast forests that bordered the river. They soon discovered that the Mississippi was both a blessing and a curse. The river enriched their lands, provided transportation for their products, and gave them easy access to their own and other nations. On the other hand, it periodically destroyed their homes, washed away their crops, and on occasion gobbled up their villages and towns. For more than a century individual landowners and local governments fought a losing battle against the river's ravages.

In 1927 the greatest flood of record devastated the Lower Mississippi Valley. Hundreds of lives were lost, millions of dollars worth of property was destroyed, and there was widespread suffering and hardship. The spectacular superflood captured the shocked attention of the whole nation. Congress responded by acknowledging that the Mississippi River was a national problem, not a local one, and the Federal government joined the unequal contest between man and the river. For the first time a comprehensive flood-control plan was made for the protection of the whole Lower Mississippi Valley. Known as the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, or the MR&T Project, the flood-control plan includes levees, floodways, tributary basin improvements, and channel improvements.

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers was given the responsibility for constructing and maintaining the flood-control works. As funds became available, various phases of the

plan were pushed to completion. Still unfinished after half a century of work, the MR&T Project has nevertheless served to protect the six million inhabitants of the Lower Mississippi Valley from several major floods since its adoption.

The Corps of Engineers was also given the task of maintaining a navigation channel in the Lower Mississippi River. Before the Corps began this work, river traffic was often halted for months during low water periods. At low water, the Mississippi in its natural state consists of deep pools, shallow crossings, and divided channels. With corrective dredging, dikes and other works, the Corps has eliminated many of the low water navigation problems. The goal of a low water channel 300 feet wide and 9 feet deep is not always attained, but traffic is rarely halted for more than a few hours at a time.

Commercial traffic on the Lower Mississippi is heavier today than it has ever been in the past. Steamboats carried a limited amount of cargo, but the powerful modern diesel towboat can push 30 or more large barges with relative ease and efficiency. Petroleum products, coal, grain, iron, steel, sand and gravel, and paper are among the products that can be moved in bulk by barge. River towboats handled more than 300 million tons of cargo in 1974 and tonnage figures continue to increase. New concepts of containerization and intermodal transportation are being developed, and industrialization is increasing rapidly along the banks of the river.



**HEAD OF THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI.** In the above photograph, the Middle Mississippi River is on the left; the Ohio is on the right; and Cairo Point, the southernmost tip of Illinois, lies between the two rivers. Just below the Point, the Lower Mississippi begins its long journey to the Gulf of Mexico. The head of the Lower Mississippi lies 953.8 river miles above its foot, at the Head of Passes, where it divides into several short channels before emptying into the Gulf.

In recent years, there has also been a great increase in the number of pleasure craft to be found on the Mississippi. They vary from luxurious yachts and expensive houseboats to crude rafts and small canoes. Boats made of ferro-cement are not uncommon, and one party made the voyage in a genuine Chinese junk. Back in 1828 an observer commented that "no craft is so whimsical or outlandish in shape that it cannot be seen lying on shore or floating somewhere on the Lower Mississippi." The observation is still valid. People will tackle the mighty Mississippi in anything that will float.

Pleasure boaters who make the voyage from Cairo Point to New Orleans are often surprised to find it a unique experience that differs drastically from other pleasure cruises. Up-to-date navigation charts, navigation aids, and the observance of basic boating safety rules reduce the hazards, but few voyages on the Lower Mississippi are without some moments of real excitement or high drama.

One youngster who made the river voyage on a raft once summed up the experience briefly but eloquently. "Well, we made it," he said, "and I guess there's more to me than I thought there was."

The boy's remark highlighted one of the chief attractions of river voyages. The river is real, and its problems are real. The pleasure boater who makes the voyage safely can enjoy a sense of achievement rarely experienced in connection with other kinds of recreational activities.

## **BIRDS POINT, MISSOURI**

*Mile 953.0, Map 1  
Right bank, descending*

In 1798, Abram Bird of Virginia cleared a patch of forest on the west bank of the Lower Mississippi and built a warehouse where flatboatmen could obtain supplies needed for their long trip to the New Orleans markets.

The Bird family still owned the property when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Officially, Missouri was a Union state but many of its citizens were southern sympathizers. When General U. S. Grant was assembling his Union army at Cairo Point to begin a campaign to gain control of the Lower Mississippi River, the head of the Bird family was arrested on the suspicion of harboring "secessionist" views. The ferryboat he owned was confiscated, and his land became a camping ground for thousands of Union soldiers.

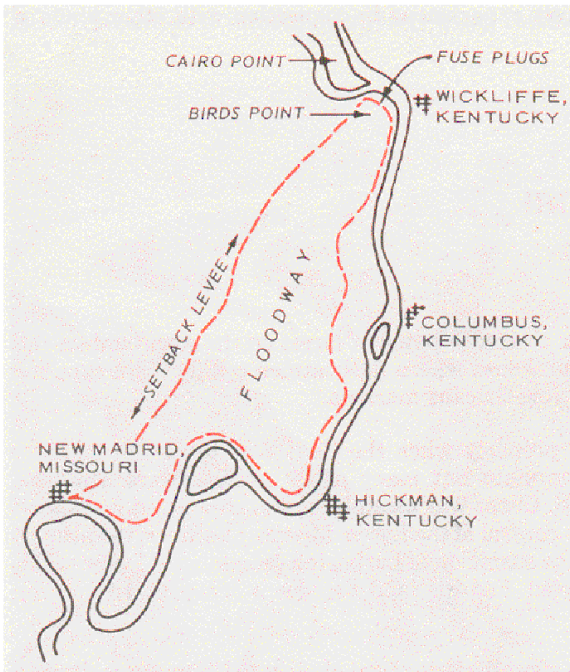
The strategic importance of the Lower Mississippi was obvious to Union authorities, if not to the Confederacy. While General Grant was patiently assembling his large army to begin the river campaign, the attention of the Confederate government authorities was turned to other areas. Fortunately for the untrained and inexperienced Federal soldiers, they had to contend only with hit-and-run raids by small groups of rebel cavalry as they waited for the campaign to begin in earnest.

Birds Point was the scene of a few of these early, hot little skirmishes. In one of the brief engagements, a Union army officer reported that he and his squad of 25 cavalymen had wandered too far from camp and had been attacked by "more than 100 rebels." After killing eight or ten of the enemy, he and his men retreated, the Union officer said. A Confederate officer, reporting the same engagement, said that he had attacked a large body of Union cavalry with only 34 men. He was happy to report that his little group had suffered only one minor casualty. One of his men, a poor rider, had fallen off a horse and broken his arm.

The reports of this engagement were typical of much of the reporting that was done during the war. Each side usually overestimated the enemy forces, underestimated his own casualties, or claimed a "glorious victory" from an inconclusive skirmish.

**Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway:**

Floodways are one of the essential elements of the comprehensive flood-control plan for the Lower Mississippi Valley. The Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway was completed in 1933, and is designed to provide safe passage for excessive flood flows in the Cairo area during major floods.



The head of the Floodway is at Birds Point, and it ends near New Madrid, Missouri. When put in operation, "fuse plug" sections of the levee at Birds Point are artificially breached, and the water flows down between the riverfront levee on the Missouri shore and a setback levee located about 5 miles to the west. The water returns to the Lower Mississippi just above New Madrid, where the volume of the flow does not pose a threat to the integrity of the mainline levee system.

The Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway was used during a major flood in 1937, but has not been put in operation since that time.

*BIRDS POINT-NEW MADRID FLOODWAY. The Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway is located on the Missouri side of the Lower Mississippi, below Cairo Point, Illinois. Through the floodway, water can be diverted from the main channel of the river at a maximum rate of about 550,000 cubic feet per second. During a major flood in 1937 use of the floodway prevented levees and floodwalls in and around Cairo, Illinois, from being overtopped.*

**Mainline levee system:**

The massive mainline levee system on the Lower Mississippi is the most visible



and perhaps the most impressive of all the flood-control works included in the MR&T Project.

On the west bank of the river, the levee line extends from a point some miles above Birds Point to the mouth of the St. Francis River. Another line begins at Helena, Arkansas, and protects the front of the White River Basin. From Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the west bank levee extends more than 650 miles downriver ending at the little town of Venice, Louisiana, less than 11 miles above the Head of Passes. This is probably the longest continuous levee line in the world.

On the east bank of the river, bluffs alternate with mainline levees to provide protection from major floods.

A total of about 3,772 miles of levees, floodwalls, and control structures are included in the MR&T Project. After they are constructed by the Federal government, they are turned over to local interests for ordinary maintenance. The Corps of Engineers offers assistance as needed during major flood fights.

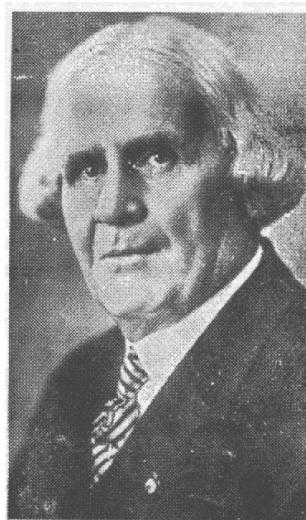
River voyagers will find that the mainline levees are often beyond their range of vision from the navigation channel. Levees are seldom built directly on the river bank, for it is the river's flood plain and not the stream itself which is leveed.

## QUAKER OATS LIGHT

*Mile 952.6 AHP, Map 1  
Left bank, descending*

On the Lower Mississippi, navigation lights are placed and maintained by the U. S. Coast Guard. Each light has a Mile Board on the frame that supports it, which enables boatmen to check their location by referring to the river mile locations shown on the navigation charts.

In 1882, Mark Twain returned to the river after a long absence, and remarked jokingly that the government had turned the Mississippi into "a sort of two thousand mile torchlight procession." The government, he said, had taken all the romance out of piloting. The navigation lights had also taken a lot of the danger out of piloting, Twain admitted, and had made the pilot's life a great deal easier and safer than when he had been a cub pilot on the Lower Mississippi in 1858.



*CAPTAIN CALVIN L. BLAZIER. Quaker Oats Light was named for Calvin L. Blazier, a popular steamboat captain who wore his hair in the old Quaker style. His friends said he resembled the famous trade mark of the Quaker Oats Company. (Photo Courtesy of the WATERWAYS JOURNAL.)*

Lights are usually named for geographical locations but sometimes for persons or for incidents in the river's history. Quaker Oats Light was named for one of the most popular pilots on the river. The steamboat captain's real name was Calvin L. Blazier, but he wore his hair in the old Quaker style and his colleagues called him "Cap'n Quaker Oats," because he so closely resembled the famous trademark of the Quaker Oats Company.

The location of all navigation lights appears on current navigation charts. Since the positions of the lights change from time to time, pleasure boaters should be sure they have up-to-date navigation charts when they plan their voyages down the Lower Mississippi.

## **WICKLIFFE, KENTUCKY**

*Mile 951.7 AHP, Map 1  
Left bank, descending*

The small town of Wickliffe is named for a Kentucky family that produced three State governors. Charles A. Wickliffe, one of Kentucky's own early governors, was a haughty, sharp-tongued gentleman whose undeniable administrative talent was greatly admired by his faithful constituents. His high-handed ways failed to impress Kentuckians, however, and they usually referred to him ironically as "the Duke."

There are some interesting prehistoric mounds in the Wickliffe area. They have been partially excavated and are open to the public, for a fee. In spite of the commercialized atmosphere, the excavation is fascinating and is well worth seeing. The owners call it the Ancient Buried City and it is located on the edge of the town of Wickliffe.

There is a launching ramp for small boats at Wickliffe, but no marina for pleasure boats. Fuel and supplies can be obtained on an emergency basis.

### **Wickliffe Revetment:**

Revetments are protective works designed to retard or halt the attack of currents against the banks of the river. They help preserve waterfronts, levee systems, and other flood control and navigation works. The Wickliffe Revetment was constructed in 1951 and was extended in 1968.

There are more than 600 miles of revetment work along the Lower Mississippi River. They consist of articulated concrete mattresses, laid under the water, with stone or riprap paving above the waterline. A bank-grading unit prepares the river's banks for the protective work, and a mat-sinking unit assembles the mattress on the spot and lays it in the water.

On the Lower Mississippi, where almost everything is on a grand scale, erosion problems naturally assume gigantic proportions. It took more than half a century of experimentation for the Army Corps of Engineers to develop the methods and the

machinery used today to produce the articulated concrete mats that stabilize the river's caving banks.

It has been estimated that when the river attacks an unprotected bank it can erode as much as 600 feet of good earth in a year's time. Even a moderate attack by river currents can eat up 30 to 70 feet of river bank annually. The soil that disappears as the banks cave away soon reappears as sand and silt temporarily suspended in the water. When the load becomes too heavy, the river drops it, and it forms sandbars, towheads, or islands. In the past, small towns have been totally destroyed by the river.



*MAT-SINKING UNIT AT WORK. The mat-sinking unit shown in the above photo is in the process of laying an articulated concrete mattress designed to stabilize the river bank at the work site. The mattress, which consists of huge concrete blocks, is assembled at the site and lowered into place from a barge designed especially for this work. The fleet maintained and operated by the Army Corps of Engineers contains several of these mat-sinking barges.*

#### **Wickliffe Gage and Bulletin Board:**

The establishment of permanent gages to measure the water stages on the Lower Mississippi was authorized by Congress in 1871. Today the Corps of Engineers maintains 32 gages on the river. From gage readings that have now been recorded for more than a century, useful data are obtained for flood control and navigation improvement work on the river.



*RIVER BULLETIN BOARD. Bulletin boards along the river banks keep navigators informed about stages of the water. They are maintained by the Corps of Engineers, and may seem to be an anachronism in the electronic age, when most boats are equipped with fathometers, radar, and radio communications systems, but river pilots still find them useful. When the Corps proposed tentatively that the bulletin boards be abolished, pilots protested vigorously, so the Corps continues to maintain them for the convenience of the towboat operators. In the photograph, a bulletin board located above Lake Providence, Louisiana, shows a river stage of "13 feet, and falling" at the time the photograph was taken.*

For the convenience of navigators, daily river stages are posted on large bulletin boards near some of the gages. Visible from the river, the bulletin boards tell the pilot what the water stage is, and whether the river is rising or falling.

The Wickliffe gage was established in 1932, but many of the other gages are much older.

## **FORT JEFFERSON, KENTUCKY**

*Mile 950.0 AHP, Map 2  
Left bank, descending*

Fort Jefferson was an American outpost during the Revolutionary War. It failed to accomplish the purpose for which it was established and was abandoned little more than a year after it was completed.

When the fort was built in 1780, the area in which it was located was Chickasaw territory. The Chickasaws had always favored the British over all the other contenders for control of the Lower Mississippi Valley. Thomas Jefferson, then the governor of Virginia, thought that the Chickasaws were aiding the British in their efforts to quell the American rebellion, and he suggested to General George Rogers Clark that a fortification just below the mouth of the Ohio would be useful as a base from which Indian allies could be recruited to help annihilate the troublesome Chickasaws.



General Clark, who had just won a victory over the British at Vincennes, was glad to cooperate in Jefferson's plan to drive the Chickasaws out of what is now western Kentucky. With the Revolution drawing to a close, Clark was planning a real estate speculation of his own that he hoped would make him a rich man. A fort on the river below the mouth of the Ohio might help attract settlers to a site where he expected to establish a city he would call Clarksville.

The little fort, named for Jefferson, was completed in April, 1780. Leaving a garrison of about 100 soliders at the post, General Clark departed with the remainder of his army to pursue his operations against the British and the Indians.

As Clark had expected, settlers moved in around the fort almost immediately. Word of the American activities had already reached the Chickasaw villages, however, and in the summer of 1780 the Chickasaw warriors launched a vigorous attack against the post. All of the settlers were quickly driven inside the stockade, where they were trapped, along with the soliders, as the Indians besieged Fort Jefferson for almost a year.

Supplies were giving out and total disaster threatened, but General Clark came to the rescue with reinforcements and the Chickasaws prudently withdrew. The post, having failed in its purpose, was abandoned and Fort Jefferson fell into ruins and disappeared. The settlers left with the soldiers, and moved to more thickly populated areas where life was not so hazardous.

The Chickasaw nation retained possession of the western part of what is now Kentucky until after the end of the Revolution. Eventually treaties and land purchases gave the United States undisputed possession of the territory. The Chickasaws finally yielded to the constant pressure and moved west of the Mississippi in 1837.

## **NORFOLK LANDING, MISSOURI**

*Mile 949.0 AHP, Map 2*  
*Right bank, descending*

General U. S. Grant established his headquarters at Cairo, Illinois, on September 4, 1861. Early in November, he received a report that Confederate troops were marching toward the old steamboat landing of Norfolk, Missouri, and planned to take possession of the place. The Federal general requested the U. S. Naval forces to send a gunboat down to Norfolk to investigate.

Two of the Navy's makeshift wooden war vessels, the *Comestoga* and the *Lexington*, departed from Cairo and eased cautiously down the river toward Norfolk. Both of the boats were old river steamers that had been hastily converted for service as gunboats on the Mississippi.

As the gunboats passed Norfolk Landing, the Navy commanders saw no signs of