

1907-1917

The first decade of the Kansas City District

This is the first in a series of articles commemorating the centennial of the Kansas City District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The articles will attempt to address topics from each decade of the district's history.

World Events:

1907

- ~The Chicago Cubs are the World Series Champions
- ~Our president was Theodore Roosevelt, (R-New York)
- ~The Ziegfeld's Follies has its first year on Broadway
- ~Federal spending is \$0.58 billion

1908

- ~Henry Ford produces the first Model T

1912

- ~The Republic of China is established
- ~New Mexico and Arizona are admitted as states
- ~The Royal Mail Steamer Titanic sinks

1913

- ~Woodrow Wilson creates the Federal Reserve System.

1914

- ~World War I begins

1915

- ~Einstein publishes his theory general relativity.

1916

- ~Britain initiates daylight saving time

1917

- ~The U.S. declared war on Germany (World War I)
- ~Federal spending is \$1.95 billion

By Eric Cramer

The Kansas City District began its first 100 years in 1907, with the appointment of Capt. Edward H. Schultz as its first district engineer.

The then-new district headquarters were in the Postal Telegraph Office at 8th and Main streets in Kansas City, Mo.

Although the Kansas City District came into existence in 1907, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was present along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers throughout much of the 19th century.

The initial call was to improve navigation on the rivers, the waterways that were the nation's highways and the freightways for the heartland's agricultural products to reach the rest of the world.

In 1907, the work of the Kansas City District was a matter of political debate even as it is today.

Kansas City businessmen organized a "Missouri River Valley Improvement Association," or MRVIA, with the stated goal of having a six-foot navigational channel from Kansas City to St. Louis.

Ultimately, the first district commander presented a report to Congress asking for authority to spend \$20 million in channel improvements from Kansas City to St. Louis. Corps histories indicate much of his data came directly from the MRVIA.

In 1908, Schultz told Congress the farm economy throughout the area would benefit by channel improvements, as the threat of competition from river traffic would lower railroad freight prices for grain.

Congress authorized \$1 million to be used for a six-foot channel from Kansas City to St. Louis, plus an additional \$300,000 for channel improvements between Kansas City and Fort Benton, Mont.

Missouri Rep. James “Champ” Clark, speaker of the U.S. House, praised the measure for returning the river to what he called the “granary.”

By 1912, Congress adopted the “Ten Year Plan” for developing the river. It called for spending \$2 million each year over a 10 year period for a series of systematic river improvements. Although Congress never provided the plan with full funding, local interests in Missouri acted in response to the plan’s authorization.

The Kansas City Missouri River Navigation Co. pledged \$1.2 million for the creation of steam boats to run between Kansas City and St. Louis. Kansas City issued \$75,000 in bonds to build port facilities on its river front.

The Kansas City firm also constructed port facilities in St. Louis.

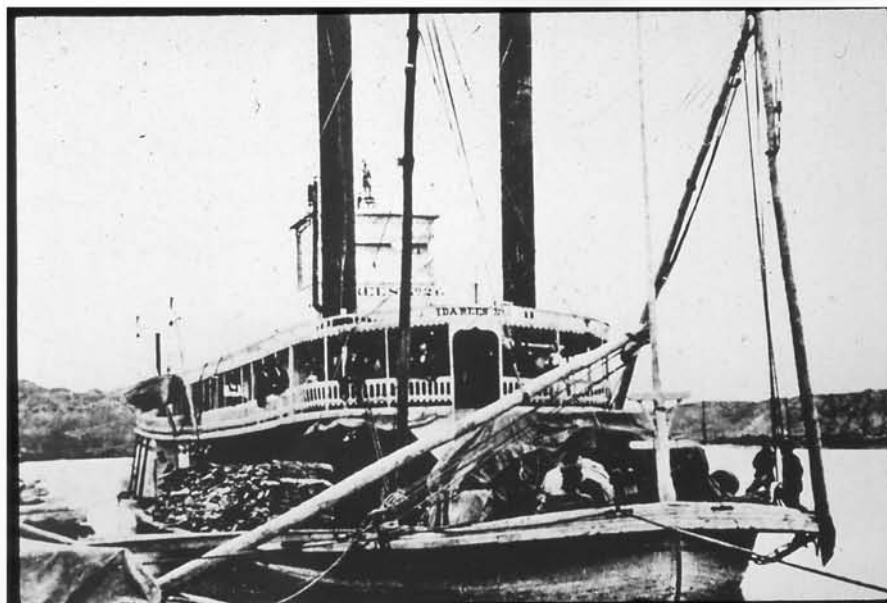
By 1914, the company reported 221 shippers and 13,677 tons of freight hauled.

Despite this seeming success, the new Kansas City District Commander, Lt. Col. Herbert Dekyne, felt navigational improvements on the Missouri River should be abandoned. In 1915, he reported the channel improvements between Kansas City and St. Louis were only 14 percent complete. Although Congress had not fully funded the Ten Year Plan, Dekyne said it was spending \$1.1 million a year to save freight shippers \$10,000 a year in shipping fees. He told the Congressional Rivers and Harbors committee that the project should be abandoned on the grounds that its costs would exceed any possible national gains.

Although the Dekyne report energized navigational interests, the advent of World War I changed priorities. By 1918, the Kansas City Navigation Co. sold its boats and barges to a congressionally created federal barge line, authorized to operate between St. Louis and New Orleans.



A steamboat sinks in the middle of the Missouri River. Removing hazards to navigation and improving the movement of freight on the Missouri River was the primary mission for the Kansas City District when it came into existence in 1907. *Photo provided*



The steamboat *Ida Reese* takes on cargo at a Missouri River port. Navigation was the driving force behind the creation of the Kansas City District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. *Photo provided*

Editor’s note: Figures used in this article are taken from the book “Soundings – 100 years of the Missouri River Navigation Project” by John Ferrell.

(Next Month: the Roaring ’20s)