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Sail and Steam Vessels Serving the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee Valley

By HARRY P. OWENS

Apalachicola, Florida, located at the mouth of a river system that drained parts of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia, became the third largest cotton port on the Gulf of Mexico before the Civil War. Three rivers, the Apalachicola, the Flint, and the Chattahoochee, offered transportation routes to the head of navigation at Columbus and Albany, Georgia. Cotton, timber, and tobacco were shipped downriver to the port city, and merchants in Apalachicola supplied planters along the river system with goods and services. Apalachicola was the major commercial center for the river valley until the railroads were built during the 1850's.

Sailing vessels, bringing goods from England, Havana, New York, and New Orleans, unloaded their cargoes at the port facilities at the mouth of the Apalachicola and secured a cargo of cotton for the outward passage. Steamboats played a major role by transporting cotton downriver to the port city merchants and by taking a large assortment of commercial goods to the upriver country.

By the time that Apalachicola became a significant port during the late 1830's, New York, taking the place once held by Boston, was the center of the cotton trade. Ships, loaded with manufactured goods in New York, sailed along the Atlantic coast, through the "hole in the wall," around Florida, and along the Gulf Coast until the captain disposed of the cargo and engaged a new one of cotton. In the "out and out" cotton triangle, Liverpool or a suitable European port such
as Le Havre was the next port of call. The third leg of the triangle returned to New York, the ship carrying a cargo of European goods or a load of immigrants. Then the trip south began again. Variations of this triangle occurred when ships returned to New York from a cotton port, rather than sailing directly to England or Europe. Cotton shipped from New York to England or Europe formed the middle passage, while the third leg was back to the cotton ports with a cargo of manufactured goods, or salt in ballast.\(^1\) Coasting vessels and large seagoing ships kept New York supplied with cargoes of cotton. Merchants from the cotton ports often went to New York or other eastern cities to purchase their goods for the approaching cotton season and returned on one leg of the cotton triangle. Many Apalachicola merchants, temporary residents whose homes were in New England or other eastern states, returned to Apalachicola in the fall with a supply of goods for the coming year.\(^2\)

Several types of sailing vessels brought goods and merchants to Apalachicola and carried away a cargo of cotton. Four types were common to Apalachicola harbor: ships, barks, brigs, and schooners. Ships were three-masted vessels, square rigged on each mast, with a spanker on the mizzenmast. It was a characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century that full square rigged vessels were considered the bluebloods of the seas. Even though many that reached Apalachicola were relatively small, the square rigged ship was favored over smaller barks and brigs. Vessels of this larger category, anchoring in Apalachi-


\(^2\) *Commercial Advertiser* (Apalachicola), Oct. 26, 1844, gives a list of passengers arriving from New York. Shipping lists for other dates also included a list of passengers, many of whom were Apalachicola merchants; Albion, *Rise of New York Port*, 117-118.

\(^3\) Fairburn, *Merchant Sail*, III, 1650-1657; Lists of vessels in port in *Commercial Advertiser*, 1844-1846. Some of the great clippers of the 1850's were two and three thousand tons. See Fairburn, *Merchant Sail*, III, 1675-1674.

\(^4\) National Archives, Record Group 217, General Accounting Office, Quarterly Reports, no. 15834 (1854); hereinafter cited as NA, RG 217, GAo, the number in parenthesis is the year; Fairburn, *Merchant Sail*, V, 2784, 2800, 2802, 2803.


\(^7\) Lists of vessels in port in *Commercial Advertiser*, 1844-1849. There were many more ships listed during this period, and some returned each season for a few years.

\(^8\) NA, RG 217, GAo, nos. 5628 (1845), 15308 (1852); *Commercial Advertiser*, Mar. 21, 1846.

\(^9\) NA, RG 217, GAo, nos. 5628 (1845), 28668 (1859), 31564 (1860); *Commercial Advertiser*, Feb. 19, 1844.

cola Bay, were in the four hundred-ton to seven hundred-ton class.\(^3\)

One of the largest ships to reach Apalachicola was the Black Ball Line's *Montezuma* of 924 tons. This vessel was engaged in the New York-Liverpool trade, and was apparently the ship by that name that anchored at Apalachicola after sailing from Liverpool in May, 1854.\(^4\) The *Liberty* (689 tons), the largest coastal packet built by Isaac Webb, one of the three largest shipbuilders of New York, also engaged in the Apalachicola trade.\(^5\) The shipbuilding firm of Pratt and Osgood of East Boston built the *Lady Franklin* (475 tons) in 1852, and two years later, that ship sailed into Apalachicola Bay with a cargo of machinery and salt for John Maclay.\(^6\) The *Ceylon* (421 tons), the *Charlemagne* (442 tons), the *Huron* (541 tons), and the *Alexander* (591 tons) were other American ships that visited Apalachicola.\(^7\)

Several English owned ships made repeated voyages to Apalachicola. The *Dauntless* (698 tons) visited the port with cargoes from Liverpool on several occasions between 1845 and 1852.\(^8\) The British owned ships *Courtney* and *Portland* also made several trips to Apalachicola.\(^9\)

Ships, in addition to serving in the cotton triangle, also served as packets, or regularly scheduled vessels. The packets along the Gulf Coast were irregular even though their owners...
professed a desire to sail on schedule. Elisha D. Hulbert owned and operated the Mobile Packet Line, which served Apalachicola to such an extent that Apalachicola was sometimes confused with Mobile. At one time he had fourteen ships sailing for his line; twelve of these were built in Connecticut and the other two in New York. They ranged in size from the 192-ton Henry Hill to the Cotton Planter of 501 tons. Advertisements for that firm listed five ships and two brigs as sailing regularly between New York and Apalachicola. The firm of Nourse, Stone & Company acted as agents for the packets in Apalachicola.10

Barks and brigs were also popular vessels in the cotton ports. Barks were three-masted vessels, square rigged on the fore and main masts, but schooner rigged on the mizzenmast. Brigs were slightly smaller with only two masts, both carrying square rigging. Vessels of these classes, reaching Apalachicola, generally ranged from two to four hundred tons. The bark Robert Watts (491 tons), dropping anchor in the bay in early 1844, was an exception. A packet line, advertised as the Brig Line of New York Packets, consisted of six brigs that averaged 379 tons. The largest was the Exact (431 tons) and the smallest was the Madison (314 tons).11 Captain Conforth, master of the British bark Fergus, anchored in Apalachicola Bay in 1837 and announced his intent to establish a direct trade between Apalachicola and Liverpool. The Apalachicola Gazette praised the captain and his ship, while civilians made him welcome on shore. He repaid their hospitality by entertaining some of the merchants on board the Fergus.12 Three years later, the same captain, now master of the brig Harbinger,

was again in Apalachicola and advertised the virtue of Apalachicola Harbor by reporting his easy passage over the bar even though he was drawing twelve and one-half feet of water.13 Barks and brigs were used in the coastal trade because they required less depth of water than the larger ships. They were also used in the trade with Havana. Schooners, smaller vessels with one or two masts, both fore and aft rigged and without yards, were the real workhorses of the coasting trade, but were little admired because of their size and rigging. They also served in the harbor as lighters and in the Cuban trade.14

Steamboats, serving as coasting vessels, packets, lighters, and river boats, were the real hustlers of Apalachicola. Between 1828 and 1861, sixty-four steamboats listed their home port as Apalachicola. More than 130 served on the river system at one time or another, and uncounted others visited Apalachicola Bay while engaged in the coasting trade. These boats generally listed their home port as New Orleans or some other town along the Mississippi or Ohio rivers.15

10 Commercial Advertiser, Aug. 15, 1840.
11 National Archives, Record Group 26, U. S. Coast Guard Treasury Department, Journal of Revenue Harbormaster, Journal of Revenue Cutter Washington, April, 1833; NA, RG 217, GAO, nos. 2592 (1841), 5623 (1845), 12887 (1860), 23582 (1858); Fairburn, Merchant Sail, IV, 2969-2989. The largest schooner built carried seven masts. Generally the smaller coasting vessels of the type found in Apalachicola carried one or two. Commercial Advertiser, Shipping lists, 1845-1846. The Margaret Ann was used by several of the merchants in the Havana trade.
12 William M. Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States, 1808-1868 (Mystic, Connecticut: The Steampship Historical Society of America, Publication No. 6, 1952), 1-294. This list was compiled by Lytle and is referred to as the "Lytle List." It was completed, after his death, by Forrest R. Holdcamper. Although the list does not include all steamboats found on the Apalachicola river systems, it is indispensable for anyone engaged in the study of river boats. This work will be cited frequently, and because the boats are listed in alphabetical order, this writer will not refer to page numbers. Henceforth cited as Lytle, Merchant Steam. Names of boats not listed in Lytle, Merchant Steam, were found in shipping lists in Apalachicola, Columbus, Georgia, and Eufaula, Alabama newspapers. Others were noticed in various customs reports in the National Archives. Specific citations will be given where it is deemed necessary. Another publication that was useful was Bert Neville, Directory of Steamboats with Illustrations and Lists of Landings on the Chattahoochee-Apalachicola-Flint-Chipola Rivers. Selma, Alabama: Coffee Printing Company, 1961. Henceforth cited as Neville, Directory of Steamboats... on the Chattahoochee.

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Almost all of the boats were built in shipyards along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Available information indicates that ninety-five of the river boats were built on the Mississippi River or its tributaries. Yards in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, constructed eighteen; fifteen were completed in Cincinnati, Ohio, and eleven were constructed at Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, Steubenville, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky each contributed six vessels that went into service on the Apalachicola River system. The remaining thirty-nine were built in various yards between New Orleans and Cincinnati. Forty-four of the sixty-four boats listing their home port as Apalachicola were constructed on the western rivers. Eight boats were built at Apalachicola, while twelve others were built along the Chattahoochee or Flint rivers. The first boat to reach Columbus, Georgia was the Fanny, and it was the only boat on the river to have been built along the eastern coast of the United States; the Fanny was constructed in New York, and it sank a few miles below Columbus in 1828. Since most of the boats on the Apalachicola system were built on the western rivers, they conformed to the general standards of boats on that river system which were designed for freight and passengers.

The great majority of steamboats on the Apalachicola system were side-wheelers. Only thirteen of one hundred and fifteen were stern-wheelers. The side-wheel was the most efficient arrangement for the propulsion unit until the serious problem of “hog backing” was overcome. This condition resulted when the heavy stern wheel and boilers added too much weight to the stern of the inadequately constructed hull. The stresses and strains of shallow water and strong currents caused the unevenly weighted vessel to break or bow in the middle. This problem was surmounted in the 1850’s when a series of trusses and chains, running from the bow to the stern, provided the necessary hull strength to support the heavy stern wheel.\(^\text{17}\)

The steamboats varied in size from the 31-ton Flint to the 372-ton America. Tonnage statistics exist for sixty-two of the sixty-four boats listing Apalachicola as home port. Only six of these were less than one hundred tons; thirty-one measured one hundred to one hundred and fifty tons, sixteen were between one hundred fifty and two hundred tons, while seven were more than two hundred, and only two measured more than three hundred tons. Tonnage rates for one hundred and thirteen boats (including the sixty-two of Apalachicola) reveal that about two-thirds of them were measured in the one hundred- to two hundred-ton class.\(^\text{18}\) Louis C. Hunter, who has studied western steamboats, found that steamboats of one to two hundred tons, built during the 1840’s, generally had a length slightly more than six times greater than the width, and a depth of one foot for every thirty-three feet of length. A one hundred and twenty-ton boat, built to the rule of thumb applied in shipyards along the Mississippi River, was about one hundred and forty feet long, twenty-three feet wide, and slightly over four feet deep. A boat of this size carried its own weight in cargo, and drew fourteen inches of water when empty, and thirty inches when loaded.\(^\text{19}\)

The cost of these vessels depended on their three major parts. The hull, constructed from locally grown timber, was the least expensive. Machinery was second in cost, while the cabin accommodations were the most expensive. A ship’s cabin accommodations depended on the service that the owners wanted to offer, and very few of the Apalachicola boats were known for luxurious cabin accommodations. There were exceptions like the Peytonia (183 tons), which one newspaper

\(^{17}\) Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 62, 94-100. Eastern boats were designed for speed and passengers.

\(^{18}\) Lytle, Merchant Steam; Neville, Directory of Steamboats . . . on the Chattahoochee.

\(^{19}\) Hunter, Steamboats on Western Rivers, Table 7, 85, and Table 8, 96.
called "emphatically a palace." The average cost for a small boat of one hundred tons was about $134 per ton in Cincinnati and Pittsburgh; a medium-sized boat of one hundred and fifty tons averaged about $121 per ton at the same ports. The cost of a typical boat of one hundred and twenty tons was around $15,000, depending upon the luxury of its cabin accommodations. Because most boats on the Apalachicola were built on western rivers, they conformed to these generalizations.²⁰

Twenty steamboats were built in Apalachicola and along the river system.²¹ Two of these locally-built boats were stern-wheelers: the Edwin Forrest and the Flint. A newspaper account said:

The Edwin Forrest, a new steamboat, built at the Old Agency, on the Flint River, by that enterprising citizen James Butts, Esq. arrived at ²⁰Commercial Advertiser, Jan. 30, 1847. This praise of the Peytonia may have been printed because the Commercial Advertiser had recently (January 9, 1847) accused the Peytonia of starting a fire on the wharves. See Hunter, Steamboats on Western Rivers, pp. 110-112, for cost estimates.
²¹A list of twenty was identified by the author from Lyle, Merchant Steam; Neville, Directory of Steamboats ... on the Chattahoochee; Apalachicola Gazette; and Commercial Advertiser. They were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tonnage</th>
<th>Where Built</th>
<th>When Built</th>
<th>Ended Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ALBANY</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. APALACHICOLA</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>Apalachicola</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. EDWIN FORREST</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Old Agency</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. EUFALIA</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>Eufaula</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>1854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. FLINT</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>Apalachicola</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. FLORENCE</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>Apalachicola</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>1845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. GEN. HARRISON</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. H. S. SMITH</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>1845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. GEN. SUMTER</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Apalachicola</td>
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<td>1848</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. LOTUS</td>
<td>202</td>
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<td>1844</td>
<td>1847</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. LOUISA</td>
<td>152</td>
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<td>1839</td>
<td>1847</td>
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<td>14. MARY A. MOORE</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. MAGNOLIA</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>Old Woman's Bluff</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. NATIVE GEORGIAN</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>Fort Gaines</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1850</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. NOTION</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1850</td>
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<td>18. RIVER BRIDE</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>1859</td>
<td>1851</td>
</tr>
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<td>19. SOUTHERNER</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>1847</td>
<td>1851</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. WAVE</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>1857</td>
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our wharves last Monday. She is one of a fleet of boats, of light draft and peculiar construction, intended for the towing of barges on the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers, at low stages of the water when other boats are compelled to lay by. The Peytonia of starting a fire on the wharves. See Hunter, Steamboats on Western Rivers, pp. 110-112, for cost estimates.
²²A list of twenty was identified by the author from Lyle, Merchant Steam; Neville, Directory of Steamboats ... on the Chattahoochee; Apalachicola Gazette; and Commercial Advertiser. They were:

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Launching a new boat was a festive occasion. When the Magnolia slid into the water at Old Woman's Bluff, seven miles above Apalachicola, everyone who could get a horse and buggy or a boat went upriver for the occasion. "Song and Wine" helped cheer the young men and ladies who went to the launching by water.²²

Many other boats, though not constructed in local shipyards, excited the imagination of Apalacholians. The Champion

²²Apalachicola Gazette, Nov. 2, 1866.
²³Commercial Advertiser, May 16, 1846.
²⁴Ibid., June 6, 1846.
²⁵Ibid., Feb. 24, 1848. As far as this writer was able to determine, the Peytonia set the record by transporting 1,005 bales, ibid., Apr. 18, 1846.
²⁶Ibid., Apr. 6, 1844.
(148 tons), built in 1843 at Pittsburgh, named Apalachicola as her first home port and became a favorite on the river. The Champion was noted for her excellent speed on her first trip to Columbus. She covered the distance of 378 miles in a running time of thirty-one hours and five minutes with an additional five hours for stops. She was reported as making the round trip in a little over four days. It was said that “if merchandise of every description don’t go up, and cotton, tobacco, and groundpeas, come down with a rush, it’s no fault of hers.” While making such a hurried trip in January, 1847, the Champion hit a snag, but after unloading part of her cargo she was soon refloated. This vessel, along with many others, spent the off-season months engaged in the coasting trade or sailing along the Mississippi. During her last voyage in April, 1849, the Champion exploded near New Orleans with the loss of three lives.

The Siren (110 tons), constructed at Cincinnati in 1838, also listed Apalachicola as her first home port. This boat was known for her ability to make the trip to Columbus against strong flood currents. The bridge at Eufaula was almost impassable during one flood in 1841, and the Florida Journal reported that “the steamer Siren on her way up thought it too tedious to undergo warping through the bridge, so went around it, gallantly plowing her way through fields.”

The Columbus Enquirer reported that the Siren reached that city by making the journey “…for the greater part over submerged plantations.” Some years later, the Siren met a tragic fate a few miles south of Chattahoochee, Florida. She was headed downstream in the middle of the night, having just taken on 200 bales of cotton, when her boilers exploded, killing nine people. Other boats were recognized for their shallow draft and ability to make a trip in the dry season. The Agnes (85 tons) drew only fifteen inches of water when empty, and the James Y. Smith had the distinction of being the first to reach Albany before the winter rains began.

The steamer Ben Franklin was famous on the upper reaches of the river for making the trip between Eufaula and Apalachicola “…so long as the bottom of the river remain[ed] moist….”

Several steamboats were involved in one of antebellum Florida’s more spectacular crimes, which occurred at Apalachicola in 1838. The story deserves the title of the “Great Steamboat Chase.” Hugh Stephenson, a financier and speculative, came to Apalachicola and secured control of the Bank of West Florida. On June 4, 1838, John C. Maclay, president of the Commercial Bank of Apalachicola, completed a transaction with Stephenson whereby the stockholders were paid off in risky paper money and Stephenson became the new president of the Commercial Bank. Maclay reported that at that time the bank had enough assets to meet its indebtedness of $160,000. Stephenson managed the bank for the next few days and all its affairs seemed normal. Late in the afternoon of June 20, certain businessmen began to have doubts about the safety of their deposits. The next morning they went to the Commercial Bank and asked for assurance that all was well, but upon examining the bank safe, they found that all specie and currency had been removed.

Sometime on June 20, Stephenson gathered the negotiable assets of the bank and went upriver on a steamboat. After proceeding north for a few hours, Stephenson got off the boat at a small landing place and waited. It was not long before

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27 Ibid., Nov. 8, 1845, his italics.
28 Ibid., Nov. 8, 1847; ibid., Nov. 8, 1845; ibid., May 9, 1846; Lytle, Merchant Steam, 225.
29 Florida Journal Mar. 17, 1841.
30 Mar. 17, 1841.
the steamboat *Ion* came downriver; he flagged it down, and, rather than acquiring passage to Apalachicola, he purchased the boat outright! The *Ion*, under the new ownership, tied up at an out-of-the-way wharf at Apalachicola.

In the meantime, the local merchants formed a posse, chartered the steamboat *Commerce*, and went upriver in hot pursuit of Stephenson, who had already returned and was docked, calmly watching the proceedings. As soon as the *Commerce* presented no danger, Stephenson got up a full head of steam and sailed out of Apalachicola Bay. The Apalachicola *Gazette* laconically stated “Shouldn’t be surprised if she was bound for Texas.”

The *Commerce* missed her quarry upriver. Returning to Apalachicola, the posse enlisted the aid of the U. S. steamer *Florence*, and steamed into the Gulf of Mexico in search of the *Ion*. For some unexplained reason the *Ion* doubled back south and met the pursuers near Cape St. Blas. Stephenson was arrested and $7,000 in specie and a “bundle of notes” were recovered. The capture occurred near St. Joseph and, since there was no jail there, the posse decided to transport Stephenson to Pensacola.

The story should end at this point, but the daring of Stephenson continued. Stephenson’s wife met him in Pensacola, where he convinced his captors that he would be secure if left under guard with his wife at the hotel. The law officers agreed to this argument and placed a guard outside the door to his room. During the night, Stephenson presented his jailor with a sufficient quantity of liquor and the guard dutifully went to sleep. Stephenson left the hotel, engaged a horse, and headed toward Alabama. He rode his horse to death, and at Hall’s landing, five miles north of Blakely, Alabama, he secured passage to Mobile. Rumors suggested that Stephenson reached Texas.

Maclay was, at first, thought to have worked in association with Stephenson, and an angry group of Apalachicolians in-vaded his house, but they were soon convinced that he had had no part in the affair. Even though many people believed Maclay innocent, he was brought to trial before the Superior Court of Franklin County. William P. Duval and James D. Westcott served as his defense attorneys. The jury returned a verdict of “Not Guilty.”

Most boats received notice in the news column of the Apalachicola papers only when they were involved in an accident. Snags, explosions, and fires were the causes of practically all the accidents on the river system. Snags and rocks caused a lot of damage, but ships, striking these underwater obstacles, sometimes could be refloated, or their engines salvaged. The *Champion* ran against snags in 1847 and in 1848, and in both instances was refloated and the damages repaired. Other boats were not so fortunate. The *Alabama*, *Tallahassee*, *Florence*, and *Retrieve* were a few of the boats that hit snags or rocks and sank on the river system. Cotton was generally the largest part of their cargo and most of it was salvaged. In the early summer months the rivers could be extremely dangerous. Such a situation existed in June, 1848, when three boats hit snags. The *Charleston* and the *Apalachicola* were wrecked on snags. The *Flint* came along and picked up as much of their cargoes as possible. Before the *Flint* reached Apalachicola, she also hit a snag, but managed to reach the wharves, where she was offered for sale immediately.

Boiler explosions caused some disasters on the river system, but they were relatively few. Mr. Allison, a passenger on

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34 Apalachicola *Gazette*, June 21, 1838; *ibid.*, June 28, 1838; Pensacola *Gazette*, July 7, 1838; *ibid.*, Aug. 4, 1838; *ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1838; *ibid.*, May 1, 1839; Tallahassee *Floridian*, July 28, 1838; St. Joseph Times, Apr. 27, 1839.
35 *Commercial Advertiser*, Jan. 9, 1847; *ibid.*, Feb. 24, 1848, for the *Champion*; Florida Journal, Dec. 25, 1840, for the *Alabama*; *Commercial Advertiser* May 25, 1844, for the *Tallahassee*; *ibid.*, Dec. 27, 1845, for the *Florence*; Columbus Enquirer, Feb. 22, 1853, for the *Retrieve*; *Commercial Advertiser*, June 1, 1848, for the *Flint*.
36 *Commercial Advertiser*, Feb. 6, 1847, supported state legislation that would help prevent explosions by demanding rigid inspections as well as safety devices.

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board the LeRoy when she exploded in November, 1840, gave this account:

The explosion was most terrific, blowing large fragments of the boat two hundred yards from the river. The pilot at the wheel was thrown nearly an hundred yards up the river with parts of the chimneys [sic] and wheel house; he swam out however, without sustaining any injuries. The berth occupied by Mr. Allison was torn to atoms and he was thrown out on his feet to the middle of the cabin. Captain Tupper, a passenger in the opposite berth was knocked out. . . . Mr. Rowlett, the passenger under the berth next to him has never been seen. The mail and one trunk was all that was saved, as the boat was immediately wrapped in flame and consumed in 10 or 15 minutes. The boilers of the boat were in an unsafe condition though the accident occurred through the carelessness of the engineer, who is said to have been drunk—there was no water in the boiler.37

Fires were more numerous than explosions. The Ohioan caught fire in 1836 a few miles above Apalachicola, and the crew was able to save very little because of the high winds. The Irwinton was somewhat luckier. When a fire broke out in the hole all her crew and passengers got to shore safely, and all but fifty bales of cotton were saved before the boat was scuttled. Captain L. A. Phelpis, aged and in ill health, lost his only means of support when his boat, the Fanny Ellsler, burned on the Flint River and lost an uninsured cargo of $3,000. When the Eagle burned in 1844, most of her thirteen hundred bales of cotton were saved, and Captain S. F. Osborne managed to save a quantity of money that was being transported to Columbus for Apalachicola merchants. The merchants, in gratitude to Captain Osborne, made up a purse of $500 and thanked him for his “extraordinary exertions.” Other boats were lost when they steamed through Lake Wimico for St. Joseph or were swamped while in the Gulf.38

37 Pensacola Gazette, Nov. 7, 1840. Six people lost their lives in the accident.
38 Ibid., May 7, 1836; ibid., May 26, 1838; Commercial Advertiser, Jan. 8, 1844; Columbus Enquirer, Feb. 7, 1854; ibid., Feb. 14, 1854. The Versailles was lost on Lake Wimico, see Pensacola Gazette, May 7, 1836; the Lamplighter was lost just outside the bay in 1841, see ibid., Mar. 15, 1841.

Insurance rates for steamboats and their cargoes on the Apalachicola River system were extremely high. The rate from Columbus to Apalachicola varied between two and one-half per cent to three per cent, and rates from Apalachicola to Boston or New York added another one and three-quarters per cent. Rates from Boston to Columbus reached as high as five per cent. A comparison of rates between other ports indicates that insurance companies considered the Chattahoochee and Apalachicola rivers among the most dangerous in the country. For example, rates between New Orleans and Huntsville on the Tennessee River, and between New Orleans and any port on the Wabash River, were two per cent. Rates between Boston and Tuscaloosa, Alabama were only two and three-quarters per cent, and charges from Apalachicola to any European port were only one and one-half per cent.39 Conditions on the river fluctuated with the seasons, and merchants wondered why insurance rates did not do the same. Shippers complained that rates were set in New York by people who had never seen the river or knew anything about the captains and pilots.40 Insurance premiums declined toward the end of the antebellum period, but rates for the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee rivers remained relatively high.41

The variable river conditions, either high or low water, not only created hazards that influenced insurance rates, but also made shipping uncertain. The Apalachicola River was almost always open to traffic. During the dry summer and early fall months the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers were navigable for shallow draft boats, and Eufaula on the Chattahoochee and Bainbridge on the Flint became the heads of navigation. When transportation was halted because of low water, prices dropped sharply in Apalachicola. At one time, bacon sold for twenty cents a pound in Columbus, while Apalachicola ware-

41 Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine, XXIV (December, 1851), 629.
houses bulged with it, but merchants could not sell their supply even at seven cents a pound. High water was almost as bad as low water. In low water, ships could not go upriver, but in high water ships caught above the Eufaula bridge could not come down. This happened in 1844, when floods kept most of the steamboats inactive between Columbus and Eufaula.\footnote{Apalachicola Gazette, June 24, 1887; Commercial Advertiser, Oct. 21, 1846; James Spencer to Robert Walker, Nov. 30, 1846, NA, RG 217, GAO, 481, reported that the river was so low that no duties would be paid in Apalachicola until after January; Pensacola Gazette, Dec. 21, 1839; Commercial Advertiser, Jan. 22, 1844. See pp. 234-37 of this volume for a list of steamboats on the Chattahoochee-Apalachicola river system compiled by Harry P. Owens.}

Regardless of the uncertainty and danger of river traffic, river boats steamed up and down the rivers in search of cargoes. They brought the great staple crop to Apalachicola where it was shipped aboard seagoing vessels, destined for the markets along the Gulf, the Atlantic Seaboard, or the English markets at Liverpool. Sail and steam vessels, as means of transportation, were a major factor in making Apalachicola the third largest cotton port along the Gulf of Mexico.