

## Steamboats on the Colorado River

Steamboats on the Colorado River operated from the river mouth at the Colorado River Delta on the Gulf of California in Mexico, up to the Virgin River on the Lower Colorado River Valley in the Southwestern United States from 1852 until 1916.

The shallow draft paddle steamers were found to be the most economical way to ship goods between the Pacific Ocean ports and the settlements, military forts, and mines along the river, putting in at landings in Sonora State, Mexico, Baja California Territory, California, Arizona Territory, New Mexico Territory, and Nevada. They remained the primary means of transportation of freight until the advent of the more economical railroads that began cutting away at their business in 1878 when the first line entered the Arizona Territory.

The first steamboat on the Colorado River was the Uncle Sam, launched in 1852 by James Turnbull, who had been awarded a contract to supply goods to Fort Yuma. But the Uncle Sam sank, and the contract was given to George Alonzo Johnson. In 1854, Johnson purchased the General Jesup. The General Jesup was also a side wheeler and at 104 feet and with a much more powerful engine, it survived until 1859 when it was dismantled. It was also more successful than the Uncle Sam not only because of its larger engine but the fact that Johnson established wood-yards along the river and hire Cocopah Indians to supply him with cut wood for the engine.

In 1856 Captain Johnson was responsible for getting the approval of Congress to explore the upper Colorado River for the military. Thinking his company would be used to supply the boat, he was angry to find that Lt. Joseph Christmas Ives would be building his own steamboat, the iron hulled Explorer.

Johnson did lend one of his steamboat captains to Ives, Captain David C. Robinson. In the meantime, Johnson made plans to do his own exploring using his General Jesup.

21 days later Johnson had made it upriver to a place approximately 8 miles north of the present day Davis Dam. He turned back because he was low on supplies.

Meanwhile the heavy hulled Explorer went from one sand bar to another, and it was only under the expertise of Captain Robinson that Ives ever made it to a point 40 miles north of where Johnson had turned back. The Explorer hit a rock and repairs had to be made before the return trip. Ives named the rock Explorers Rock.

Johnson later purchased the Explorer, removed the engine and used it as a barge until it was swept away and lost in 1864.

Robinsons Landing was established in 1852 approximately 10 miles above the Pacific Ocean on the Colorado River delta. A hotel called the Colorado Hotel, a shack on stilts, was built there. Port Isabel replaced Robinson's Landing. In part because a tidal surge of over 6 feet was not unusual where the Pacific Ocean and the Colorado River met in the Gulf of California.

Captain David Robinson was in put in charge of Port Isabel, a little known shipyard built in 1865 by Johnson & Company. In 1869 Captain Robinson returned to Maryland for a visit and took a bride named Ellen. He brought her to the desolate mudflats area of Port Isabel to live. In 1871 trying to reach Fort Yuma Ellen gave birth to their daughter on the steamboat Mohave. Captain Robinson, suffering for many years with poor health died in 1874 leaving Ellen a widow with 3 small children. Copies of her memoirs are available to read.

Due to problems with rapids and sandbars on the river, Johnson turned to stern-wheelers, bringing the Colorado I into service in 1855.

The Colorado I was captained by Isaac Polhamus Jr., who went on to pilot several other steamers in Johnson's fleet, including the Cocopah II in 1867, and the Mohave II in 1876, the only two-stack on the river. By that time, Johnson's business, the Colorado Steam Navigation Company, had grown to 10 steamers and a half-dozen barges, all under the charge of Captain Polhamus. Second in command was Capt. John Alexander Mellon.

Steamboat travel on the Colorado was always an adventure. Even boats drawing very little water— some as little as two feet—were frequently victimized by the ever-shifting sandbars. Sometimes the only way to negotiate the sandbars was by turning the boat around and digging through with the paddle wheel on the stern, a technique devised by Captain Mellon.

At low tide, hands on deck often had to go overboard and pull the boats out. At high tide, it was difficult to steer the boats through the rough waters in the narrow canyons.

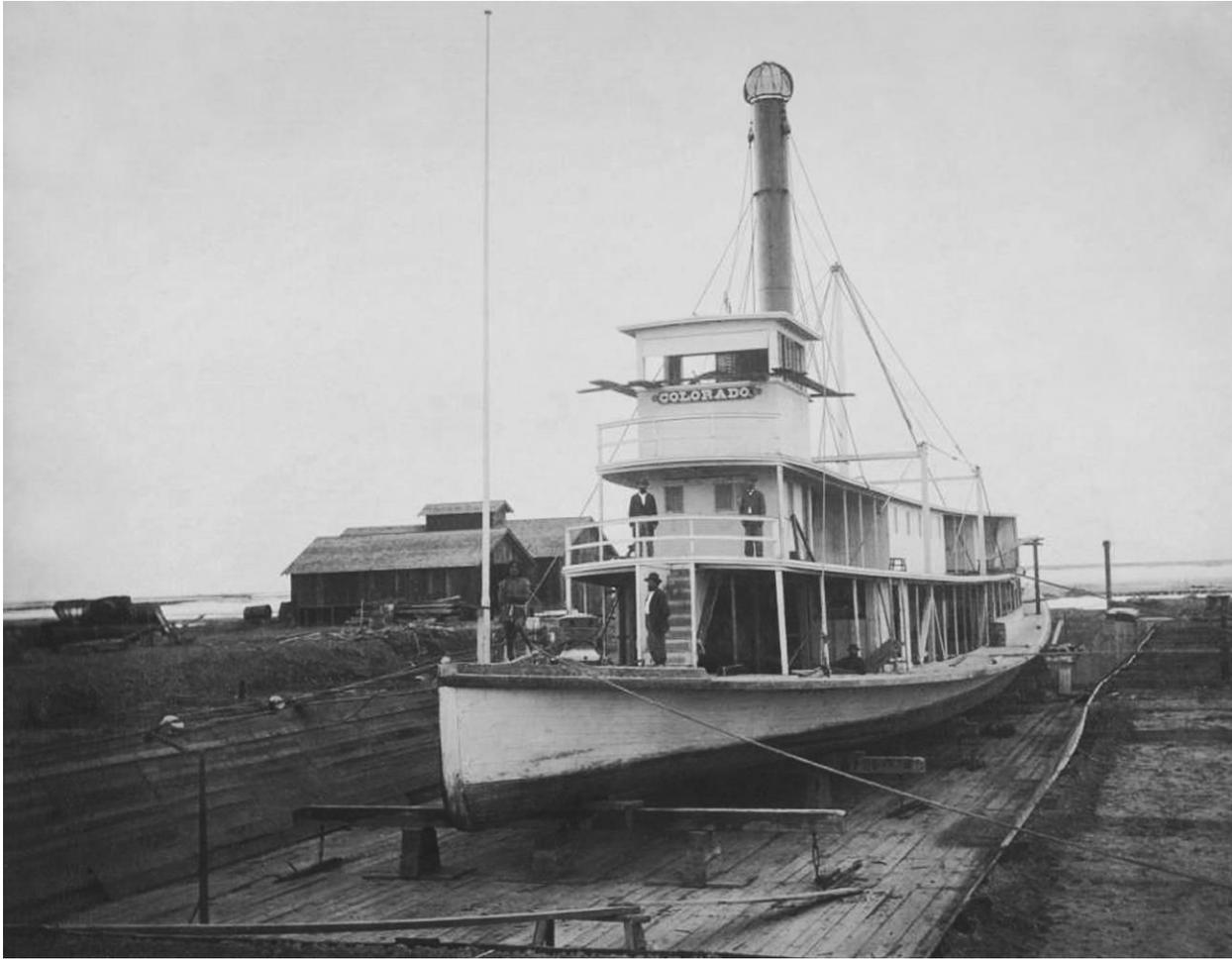
Life on board was an adventure as well. In *Vanished Arizona*, Martha Summerhayes remarked that her trip upriver on the Gila, piloted by Melon in 1874, was hot. "We had staterooms," she writes, "but could not remain in them long at a time, on account of the intense heat." At night, passengers were forced to take their straw bedding out on the deck. Even the dining room was hot. "The metal handles on the knives were uncomfortably warm to the touch and...the wooden arms of the chairs felt as if they were slowly igniting." The fare itself was meager: "fresh biscuits without butter, very salty boiled beef, and some canned vegetables." Drinking water was kept in canteens "covered in flannel and dipped in water" and hung from the rails in the shade, making the water "a trifle cooler than the air".

At Fort Yuma newcomers were often related this story about the high temperatures in the desert, "We had a comrade that died and went to hell. He came back the next day for his blankets."

Silver was first discovered in El Dorado Canyon by former trapper Johnny Moss in 1861. Moss' discovered of precious minerals was instrumental in opening up the Colorado River to the need of steamboats.

Backed by Johnson & Company, William Harrison Hardy laid out the town of Hardyville as a supply point for the upriver mines in 1864. Hardyville was considered the "practical head of navigation" on the Colorado at low water.

By the time of his retirement in 1904, Captain Polhamus had spent nearly 50 years on the river, servicing ports from Fort Yuma to Fort Mohave on a regular basis. Although much of the commerce had to do with transporting troops and supplies between the forts, stops were made for scattered ranches and mining settlements all along the way. One of the stops frequented by Polhamus was Liverpool Landing, near the present site of Lake Havasu City. Polhamus and others had small ranches in the nearby Chemehuevi Valley. Liverpool Landing and Chemehuevi Landing were the closest stops to Fort Mohave.



Colorado II

The Colorado, launched in 1855, was the first stern-wheeler put into service. It was 120 feet long and could carry 60 tons on less than two feet of water. The Colorado was the first steamboat on the river captained by Isaac Polhamus, who had just come west. Learning his trade on the relatively peaceful Hudson and Sacramento Rivers, Polhamus refused to run the Colorado north through the rough waters of the Mohave Canyon (Topock Gorge), 60 miles below Fort Mohave, until ordered to do so by the post commander, Major Armistead. After its retirement in 1862, the engine works of the Colorado were fitted onto the Colorado II. The Colorado II—145 feet long, 29 feet wide, and with a capacity for 179 tons of freight—ran until 1882. Launched in 1867, the Cocopah II was 147.5 feet Long 29 feet wide, and could carry 120 tons of freight on less than 20 inches of water. Isaac Polhamus also captained this boat. In 1881, the Cocopah II was dismantled.

Isaac Polhamus Jr. ultimately became known as the "Dean of the Colorado River". In 1859, George A. Johnson turned over the Colorado Steam Navigation Company to Polhamus. Polhamus continued as superintendent—even after 1877 when the business was sold to the

Southern Pacific Railroad—until 1886, when he and Jack Mellon bought the company. Polhamus and Mellon owned the company until 1904, when finally, at the age of 76 and after nearly 50 years on the river, Polhamus retired. Polhamus was closely associated with the area around Lake Havasu City, as his ranch in the Chemehuevi Valley was located only three miles north of Liverpool Landing.

Capt. John Alexander "Jack" Mellon was another famous steamboat captain on the Colorado River. Mellon came from New Brunswick to the river in 1864 to work for Thomas E. Trueworthy's Union Line, in chief competition with George Johnson's Colorado Steam Navigation line. Shortly after arriving, Mellon joined Johnson's line, becoming second in command, and worked the river for over 40 years. The railroad station where the cantilevered bridge was built across the Colorado River by Atlantic & Pacific in 1890 (at present-day Topock, Arizona) was first named after Capt. Jack Mellon, though it was misspelled as "Mellen."

Launched in 1873 and first piloted by Jack Mellon, the Gila—149 feet long, 31 feet wide at the beam, displacing 236 tons, and drawing 16.5 inches of water—was the most durable boat on the river, hauling freight and passengers for more than 25 years. Rebuilt as the Cochran, she ran for another 10 years, until the river was finally closed to navigation. From 1879 to 1887, the Gila saw service under charter for gold mines in Eldorado Canyon in Nevada and salt mines at the mouth the Virgin River in Utah.

Launched in 1876, the Mohave II was the largest steamboat to ever run the river. Displacing 188 tons and drawing only a foot of water, the steamboat was 149.5 feet long and 31.5 feet at the beam. Because of her shallow draft, the captain was able to take her all the way up to the Virgin River. Advertised as "palatial" and "magnificent" the Mohave II was also a pleasure boat that made trips into the Gulf of California. The Mohave II was retired in 1900.

Steam boating on the Colorado River essentially ended in 1909 with the completion of the Laguna Dam, some 14 miles above Yuma. However, steamboats continue to be used on the river for pleasure, serving as equipment hurlers for the railroad, and ferrying passengers when the river would flood out the railroad. The last paddle wheeled boat to operate was the Searchlight who finished her service in 1916.

Isaac Polhamus, the river's most famous captain, survived until 1922, passing away at the age of 94. Jack Mellon survived until 1924, passing away at the age of 83.