

General Negley's Fleet

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The Ohio River snakes from its source at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, twisting and turning through 981 miles until it flows into the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois. It marked the way west after the American Revolution. It formed the natural boundary between the expanding midwestern United States and the South.

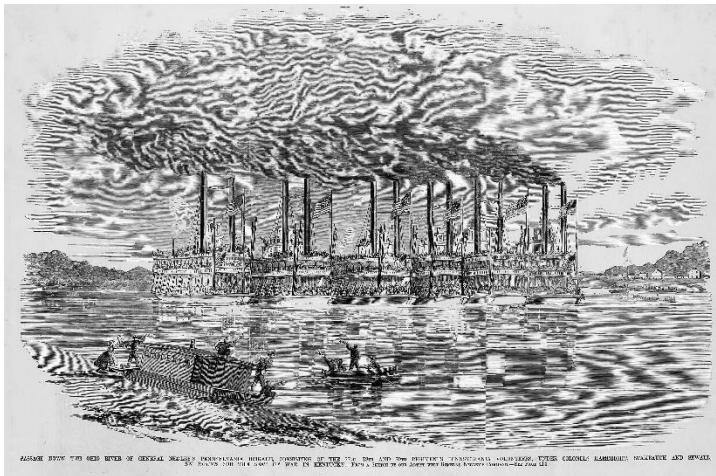
In 1861, this mighty river divided the North from the South, both geographically and culturally. To the south lay western Virginia, and Kentucky, once the territory of Virginia. Due to that legacy, Kentucky was the third highest slave owning state in the nation at the outbreak of war. To the river's north were the free states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. One could easily stand on the northern side of the river and see the other side, its hills, its people. The opposite was also true. One could imagine the enemy amassing just behind that ridge, behind those trees, just outside that river town.

Ohio and Indiana were particularly frightened of the prospect of Kentucky seceding from the Union. The nation must hold it at all costs. The Confederacy must be defeated there, and control of the river maintained for both trade and military transport. President Lincoln intimated that if Kentucky was lost, then the war would be lost.

War fever and patriotism were running rampant in Cincinnati in the fall of 1861. Since the Spring, and Mr. Lincoln's call to arms, the city was plastered with the Stars and Stripes—ever boastful of the 34 stars that represented the 34 states of the Union—and Cincinnati's place in it. The plethora of flags screamed the allegiance of the majority of the Queen City's citizenry. Rallies were held in the halls of government

and public squares. Recruitment for militia units, home guards, and Army regiments was ongoing. Violence toward dissenters periodically flared in near riots.

It was into this cauldron of pride and patriotism tempered with fear that Brigadier General James Scott Negley of Pittsburgh sailed his fleet. Negley was a man of note from Pennsylvania, having served with distinction in the Duquesne Greys, 1st Pennsylvania



Volunteers, during the Mexican American War. He would eventually be elected as a U.S. Representative from the Commonwealth and was a horticulturalist and railroader.

On October 18, 1861, Negley departed Pittsburgh in command of the 7th Brigade in the Department of the Ohio. Three regiments packed into six river steamers: the 77th Pennsylvania Infantry under Colonel Hambright; the 78th under Colonel Stambrough, and the 79th under Colonel Sewall. Their mission was to travel to Louisville, Kentucky, where they would reinforce the Federal army, as there was a great probability of the Confederate troops making that State a camping ground during the winter if not driven out by the Federals.

These were raw troops, having just been recruited in Pittsburgh and Lancaster the month before. They had yet to taste battle and were full of vim and vinegar when they boarded the flotilla in Pittsburgh. The immediate future would find them laboring on infrastructure projects in Kentucky, readying that state for what was to come. Eventually, the men of Negley's Brigade would face some of the most horrific fighting of the war: Shiloh, Perryville, Stones River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Kennesaw Mountain, the Siege of Atlanta, and Sherman's March to the Sea.

But on this day the men from Pennsylvania had a different role to fulfill—swelling the hearts of the people of the North until they nearly burst with patriotism and hope.

There is a bend in the Ohio River, upriver from Cincinnati and the Kentucky river towns opposite it. At this point the flotilla slowed or possibly anchored for the night. It would have been out of view of the city and towns, ready to approach at dawn. The six boats were under the command of W.J. Kounts, Commander of Fleet. His boat, the *Sir William Wallace*, captained by Hugh Campbell, was the flagship, housing General Negley and his senior staff. The other boats were the *Moderator*, *Clara Poe*, *J.W. Hailman*, the *Silver Wave*, and *Argonaut*.

It was probably Negley who wanted to put on a "demonstration" as they passed the Queen City of the West, as Cincinnati was called at the time. But it would have been Kounts who executed it.

The newspapers were aware that the flotilla was due to pass the city in the early morning hours in a "go-by", not docking at the landing. Even if they did not come ashore, it was worth noting the transport of an aggregate of over 3,000 Union soldiers headed for the South. So, reporters and sketch artists were dispatched to cover the event. And countless citizens ventured to the riverbanks to catch a glimpse of the fleet.

It happened about five o'clock in the morning on October 21, 1861. According to the *Gazette*, "the boats were within hailing distance of each other, and their decks were black with the warlike descendants of Quaker William Penn, anxious to catch a bird's eye view of the metropolis of the West."

The six identical triple-decker steamers were sailing side-by-side, bow to stern. The captains plied their craft in a synchronous feat of showmanship—nose to nose,

like racehorses at a starting line. A total of twelve tall smokestacks belched voluminous columns of inky smoke into the ever-lightening skies. Six massive United States flags flapped in the breeze, in seeming salute to the flag that flew over the Newport Barracks in Kentucky, from atop the hills in Cincinnati. On the bow of each boat, two menacing cannons trained their deadly barrels forward, the field artillery of the regiments onboard.

Soldiers whooped and waved. Their enthusiasm was returned by throngs on the riverbanks and some who launched small river craft to join their journey downriver, if only for a while. And through it all, the regimental bands, seated on the top deck forward, played on. There is no historical record of the songs they performed, but it is not hard to imagine the impact those rousing crescendos made to those listening from either side of the river.

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