

The Wreck of the America in Southern Illinois: A Flatboat on the Ohio River

By Mark J. Wagner

(Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. Pp. x, 119. Illustrations, glossary, notes, bibliography. Paperbound, \$19.50.)

You don't come across the remains of an Ohio or Mississippi River turn-of-the-nineteenth-century flatboat every day or even every year. In 2000, one was discovered not far from where the Ohio meets the Mississippi. At normal river levels, boaters might have sailed right atop this sunken treasure. It's located on the Indiana-Illinois side (the right-descending bank), about ten miles upriver from the Ohio's confluence with the Mississippi, and a few miles upstream from Mound City, Illinois. What a discovery! This flatboat may have sunk when Indiana and Illinois were still territories, or shortly after they became states.

In September 2000, during a period of very low water levels, a group of locals came across the remains of a very old boat wreck. One of them, John Schwegman, thought these remains might be historically significant. Before long, experts from the Center for Archaeological Investigation (CAI) at Southern Illinois University—Carbondale (SIUC) were on the scene. But they could examine the remains only when those always-fluctuating Ohio River levels were again low enough to allow access to this normally below-the-water site.

CAI director Mark Wagner and his team went to work dissecting every aspect of the wreck, which proved to be a two-century-old flatboat. The

team dispelled the popular idea that the wreck was a result of piracy; rather, the sinking was most likely due to the failure of a rotten wooden joint.

Wagner addresses the workmanship of period flatboats—much of it of low standards. The buyers of these one-way downstream vessels were highly unlikely to return upstream to the boat builders to lodge complaints or ask for refunds. The families, crew, and livestock—headed west and south on these one-way, downstream flatboats—were likely to find themselves many hundreds, or even thousands, of miles downriver, by the time poor workmanship revealed itself, with often fatal results.

Wagner goes into meticulous detail describing nineteenth-century flatboat construction methods, which included initially splashing vessels upside down, and then, once in the water, flipping the vessels upright to work on the topsides. He discusses how the wooden seams were made mostly watertight with oakum and tar, and what tools were needed to pound this material into those seams to slow down leakage. Wagner includes about a dozen helpful sketches of flatboat exteriors—including the positions of needed steering and sweeping oars—as well as illustrations of the boats' inside living quarters. The book also contains black-and-white

photographs of a handful of artifacts discovered near the wreck—pewter spoons, bone-plated buttons, and parts of jars and pans.

With limited research material from which to draw, Wagner does an interesting job addressing our inland river history, as it pertains to the construction, travel, and demise of so many flatboats. He presents in great detail this newfound wreck and describes the challenges that he

and his team faced in their efforts to record and preserve this unique piece of Ohio River history. The book offers an interesting and informative read for any “river rat” and even an armchair sailor.

CAPTAIN RICK RHODES of St. Petersburg, Florida, is the author of nine books, including *The Ohio River in American History and Voyaging on Today's River* (rev. ed., 2010).



The Photographer and the President: Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Gardner, and the Images that Made a Presidency

By Richard Lowry

(New York: Rizzoli Books, 2015. Pp. xiv, 241. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

After a big boom in “Lincoln and” books—full disclosure: my own *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* is among them—it comes as a breath of fresh air to see preeminence in yet another such title granted to a “secondary” character: in this case, Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner. Few artists associated with the development of the Lincoln image deserve such acknowledgment more, and Richard Lowry has risen to the challenge admirably.

The Scottish-born Gardner, a Mathew Brady protégé when the war began, ultimately tired of seeing his boss hog the limelight. After Brady won the praise for an 1862 New York exhibition of Gardner’s harrowing battlefield photos, Gardner decided to launch his own business, competing directly with his mentor. Billing himself as “Photog-

rapher to the Army of the Potomac,” he ultimately amassed a *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866), the masterpiece of the era. Gardner also opened a rival portrait gallery in Washington. Lincoln was his first sitter.

Until now, the standard Gardner biography was D. Mark Katz’s handsome 1991 *Witness to an Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner*. Lowry’s effort may be less satisfying pictorially, but it is the far superior literary achievement. Typical is Lowry’s captivating description of his two subjects’ initial meeting. President-elect Lincoln arrives in Washington weary from his journey and mortified at the way it ended: a secret passage through hostile Baltimore, allegedly in disguise. He hastens to Brady’s for some remedial image-making. There,