

**A HISTORY OF THE MISSOURI RIVER:  
DISCOVERY OF THE RIVER BY THE JESUIT  
EXPLORERS; INDIAN  
TRIBES ALONG THE RIVER; EARLY  
NAVIGATION AND CRAFT USED; THE  
RISE AND FALL OF STEAMBOATING**

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A History of the Missouri River: Discovery of the River by the Jesuit Explorers; Indian Tribes Along the River; Early Navigation and Craft Used; The Rise and Fall of Steamboating by Phil E. Chappell

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**PHIL E. CHAPPELL**

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BY  
PHIL E. CHAPPELL



# A HISTORY OF THE MISSOURI RIVER.

## DISCOVERY OF THE RIVER BY THE JESUIT EXPLORERS—INDIAN TRIBES ALONG THE RIVER.

There is but little doubt that had the Missouri river been discovered before the Mississippi the name of the latter would have applied to both streams, and the Missouri would have been considered the main stream and the upper Mississippi the tributary. From the head of the Missouri, west of Yellowstone Park, to its mouth, as it meanders, is a distance of 2,546 miles; and to the Gulf of Mexico the Missouri-Mississippi has a length of 4,220 miles. The Missouri is longer than the entire Mississippi, and more than twice as long as that part of the latter stream above their confluence. It drains a watershed of 580,000 square miles, and its mean total annual discharge is estimated to be twenty cubic miles, or at a mean-rate of 94,000 cubic feet per second, which is more than twice the quantity of water discharged by the Upper Mississippi. It is by far the boldest, the most rapid and the most turbulent of the two streams, and its muddy water gives color to the Lower Mississippi river to the Gulf of Mexico. By every rule of nomenclature, the Missouri, being the main stream and the Upper Mississippi the tributary, the name of the former should have been given precedence, and the great river—the longest in the world—should have been called "Missouri" from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico.



The earliest Spanish explorers evidently considered the Lower Mississippi but a continuation of the Missouri, for when Coronado came into Kansas, in 1541, on his expedition from Mexico, he was told of the Missouri by the Indians. He says: "The great river of the Holy Spirit (*Esperita Santo*), which De Soto discovered in the country of Florida, flows through this country. The sources were not visited by us, because, according to what the Indians say, it comes from a distant country in the mountains, from that part that sheds its waters onto the plains and comes out where De Soto navigated it. This is more than 300 leagues from where it enters the sea."

#### MARQUETTE AND JOLIET—1673.\*

The Missouri river was the same ugly, muddy, tortuous, rapid stream when first seen by the early French explorers as it is today. When, in 1673, the Jesuit explorers, Marquette and Joliet—the first white men to come down the Mississippi—arrived at the mouth of the Missouri, they were astonished to see, flowing in from the west, a torrent of yellow, muddy water which rushed furiously athwart the clear blue current of the Mississippi, boiling and sweeping in its course logs, branches and uprooted trees. Marquette, in his journal, says: "I have seen nothing more frightful. A mass of large trees enter with branches—real floating islands. They come rushing from the mouth of the *Pek-i-tan-oni*, (the Indian name for Mis-

\*It was more than a century after the discovery of the Mississippi river by the Spaniards before the French made any effort to explore it. In 1634 Nicolet, a *courier-de-bois*, left Quebec, and, ascending the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers, passed through the Straits of Mackinaw. Then coasting along Lake Michigan he reached Green Bay. From the Indians in that vicinity he heard of a great river toward the west, which flowed toward the south. Other explorers and Jesuit missionaries followed. Fathers Raybault, and Jogues, in 1641, and Radisson 1654. All of these adventurers brought back to Quebec wonderful accounts of a great river flowing over west of Lakes Michigan and Superior, but, into what sea it flowed was unknown to the Indians.

souri, meaning, ('Muddy Water,') so impetuously that we could not without great danger expose ourselves to pass across. The Pek-i-tan-oni is a considerable stream, which, coming from the northwest, enters the Mississippi."

Marquette was informed by the Indians that "by ascending this river for five or six days, one reaches a fine prairie, twenty or thirty leagues long. This must be crossed in a northwesterly direction, and it terminates at another small river on which one may embark. This second river flows toward the southwest for ten or fifteen leagues, after which it enters a lake, which flows toward the west, when it falls into the sea. I have hardly any doubt it is the Vermillion Sea."

This was an age of adventure and exploration among the people of the New World, and in 1672 Comte de Frontinac, the Governor of New France, determined to send an expedition to discover the "Great River," in which great interest had now become awakened. Louis Joliet, a man of education, excellent judgment and tried courage, was selected to undertake this hazardous enterprise. He was besides a rover, and had previously visited the Lake Superior region and spent several years in the Far West.

Joliet set out from Quebec in August, 1672, and in December arrived at Mackinaw, where he spent the winter in preparing for his expedition. During his stay there, he met a young Jesuit missionary—Father Marquette—a religious zealot, who had devoted his life to the spiritual welfare of the Indians. The missionary, who was somewhat of an adventurer himself, was easily persuaded to join Joliet, and on May 17th, 1673, having laid in a supply of corn and dried buffalo meat, they set out with five Indians in two canoes

on their perilous voyage. Having reached Green Bay, they ascended the Fox river to its head, where they made a portage of two and a half miles to the head-waters of the Wisconsin river. They floated down the last named river until on the 17th of June, the little fleet floated out upon the placid waters of the Mississippi.

Without meeting with any adventure worthy of notice, they arrived at the mouth of the Missouri about the first of July, 1673. It was during the June rise, and the description which Marquette gives of the turbulence of that stream, the color of its waters, and the great quantity of drift-wood and logs, seen floating on its surface, is a correct one, and is familiar to every one acquainted with the Missouri when on its annual rampage.

After paddling their canoes down as far as the Arkansas, the *voyageurs* became convinced that the Mississippi emptied into the Gulf of Mexico, and not into either the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of California, as had been surmised. They also learned from the natives that they were approaching a country where they were likely to encounter the Spaniards. They, therefore, very prudently, turned the bows of their canoes up stream and after a tedious voyage arrived at Lake Michigan by way of the Illinois river. Here the two comrades parted company, Marquette to remain with a tribe of Indians, then seated where the city of Chicago is now located, and Joliet to return to Quebec by the route he had come. In descending the St. Lawrence river, Joliet's canoe was upset, and all of his papers, including his maps and journal, were lost. Fortunately, Marquette's papers were preserved, and it is from his journal—a priceless manuscript,—that the above extracts, referring to the Missouri river, have been obtained.