

The Filson

A Publication of The Filson Historical Society, Kentucky's Oldest and Largest Independent Historical Society



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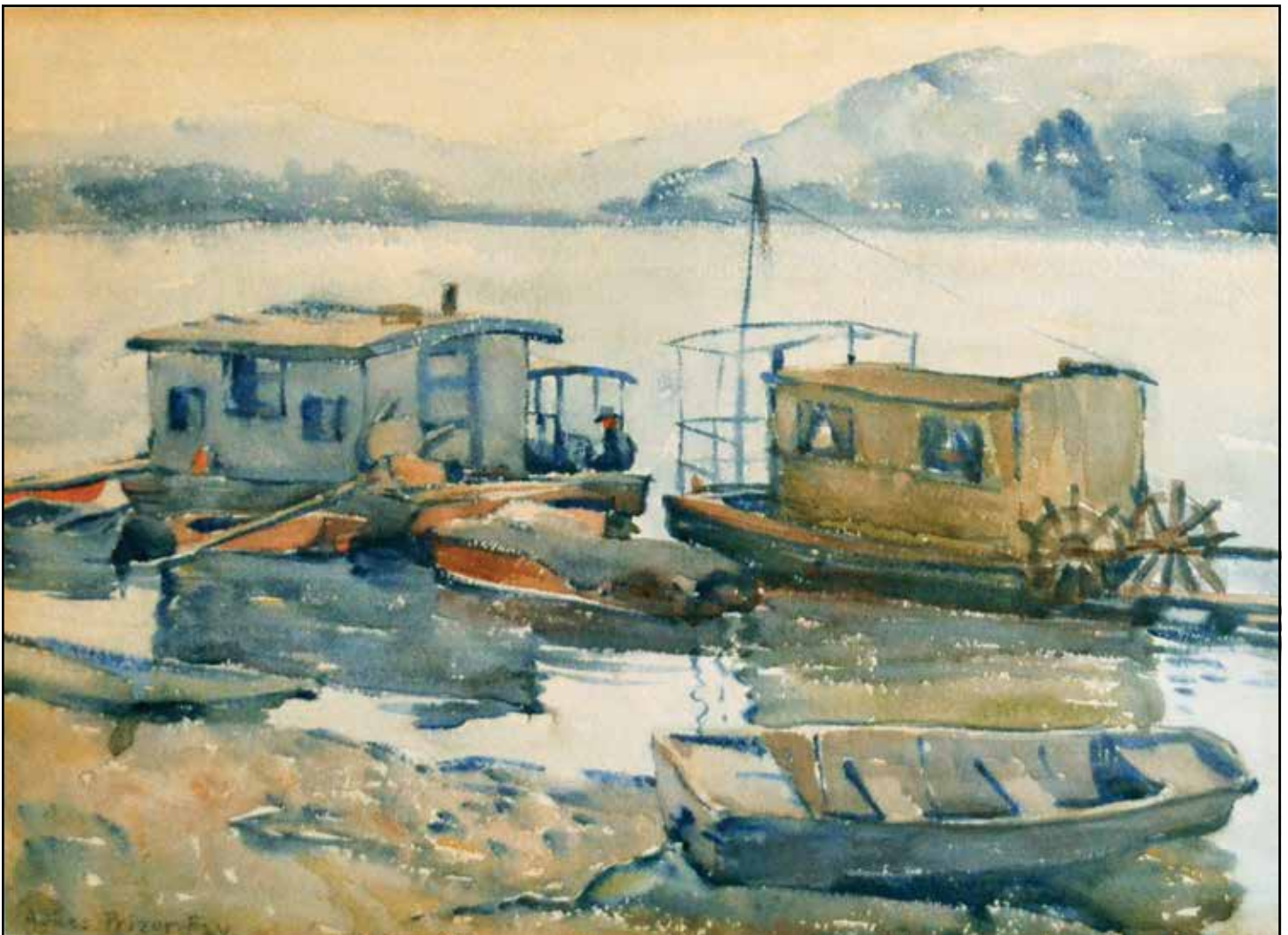
Documenting a Lost Neighborhood by Mark V. Wetherington

One of the joys of working at The Filson is discovering stories large and small that help us understand the social history of people and places. Over the years I've had the opportunity, along with the rest of the staff, to research and present a number of "Filson Fridays" programs. In this popular series we explore with our members and the public topics of research interest. For me as a historian, one of the values of the series—beyond supporting our educational

mission—is testing our collection's ability to document and tell significant stories that at first glance might seem difficult to recover.

"Shanty Boat Louisville" was one of those stories. While the neighborhood disappeared around 1960 after a life of about 100 years, the stories of how its people survived on the edge of an urban landscape increasingly characterized by environmental damage—deforestation, air pollution, foul river water, and

industrial waste—suggest that the issues the shanty boaters faced are relevant today. Almost two centuries before the tiny house movement gained popularity, shanty boat owners were living with less on the rivers of America. Traveler Timothy Flint sighted house boaters on the Ohio River during the 1830s. During the Civil War, artists captured the boats in images held by The Filson and originally printed in *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*.



Watercolor of shanty boats by artist Alice Prizer Fay. A skiff (or john boat) is in the foreground.



A drawing by Alexander Van Leshout of the Jeffersonville ferry boat wharf with a beached shanty boat behind the wharf boat and an industrial neighborhood in the background. The text reads, "A Landmark at the levee Jeffersonville ferry-wharf that saw the supremacy of river traffic and its overthrow by steel and steam."

Autumn was shanty boat time in Louisville. According to shanty boat custom, it was time to cast off and drift south whenever five leaves floated by touching each other. Louisville's waterfront was a major gathering place for the Upper Ohio's shanty boats, especially in October when the migratory shanty boaters gathered

to make last minute preparations, take on supplies, and renew old acquaintances before drifting south for the winter. At times during October there were more than 200 homemade house boats along the river banks. It was hard to find a parking place! Others tied up below the falls at Portland and across the river at New



"Repairing the Net." Glen Tracy, 1940.

Albany, Clarksville, and Jeffersonville, Indiana. Louisville's more permanent boaters tied up east (or upriver) of the Big Four bridge behind Towhead Island in the "chute." There they were safer from the wakes of steamboats and tows.

Flint called these craft "family boats," but they were also known as flat boats and were the quickest way to move a family or freight to the frontier during the early 1800s. Many flat boats were built on the Upper Ohio River, drifted downriver with passengers and cargo, and were then broken up and sold as lumber. Well before the Civil War, the frontier "family boats" evolved into house or shanty boats. Most likely a marriage of a downsized flat boat hull and the small and narrow shotgun house, shanty boats were homemade, constructed almost entirely of wood, and followed a vernacular design using nearby resources.

Given such a large field of play along the region's waterways, it is interesting that shanty boats had no means self-propulsion. They drifted downstream or hitched a ride upriver with steamboats or tows. A rare photograph in our collection shows a single small mast and sail atop one shanty. If the current was slow, a shanty boater could maneuver



“Life on the Ohio.” Henry Dutchin’s shanty boat on upper end of The Point. Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston, Oct. 6, 1922.

and row his home over short distances. Skiffs (or john boats) often appeared in shanty boat images. They were used by fishermen to row out to tend their lines and nets and to return home with the catch. They had other uses as well: partially filled with water, boaters kept fish alive in skiffs until selling them. Skiffs were also a handy place to do the laundry.

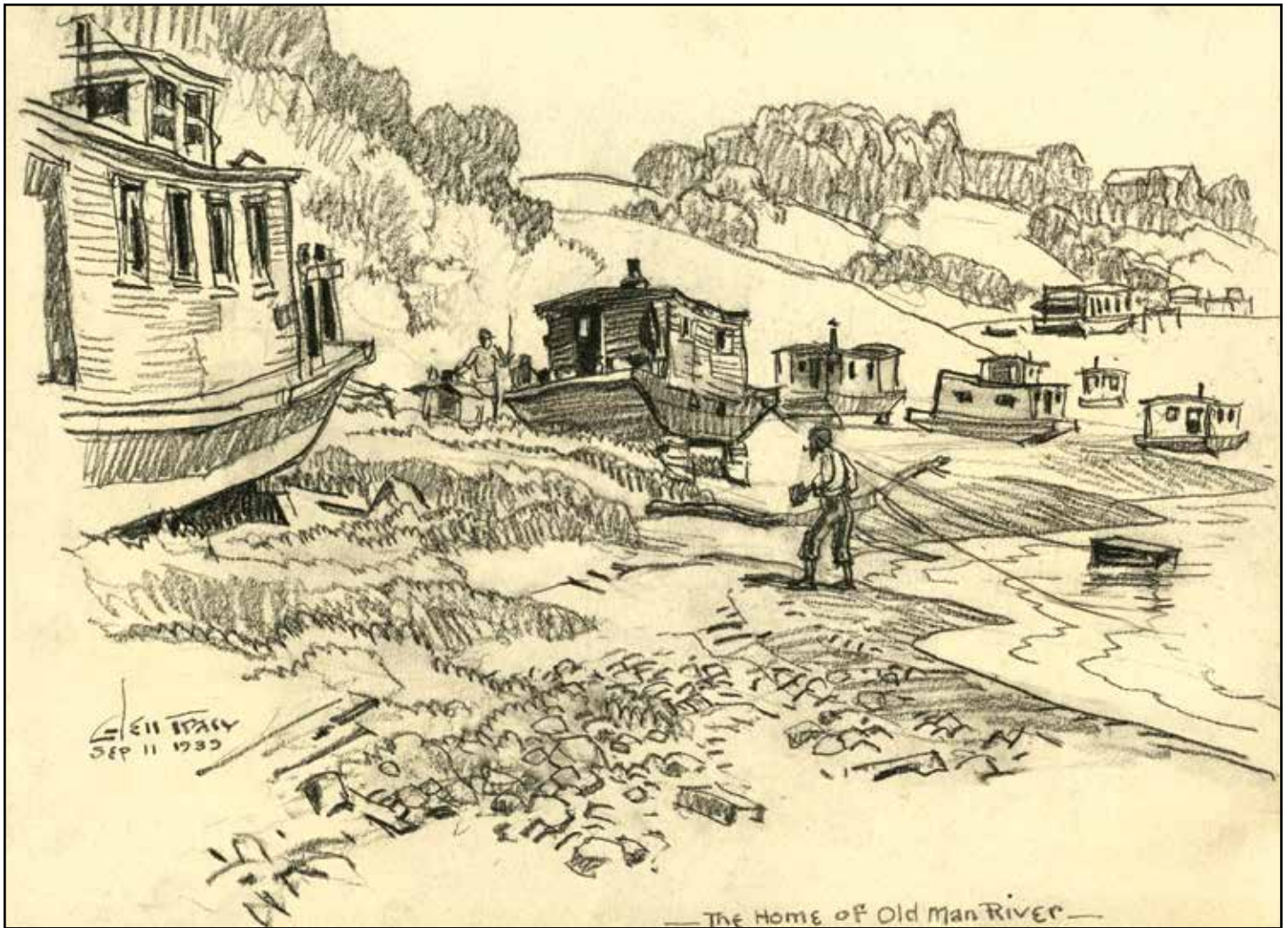
Permanent boaters stayed in one place for months at a time and planted gardens on the river banks. They traded fish to farmers in exchange for meat, milk, and eggs. Most boaters avoided cities and towns. They gathered in places such as Louisville only at winter migration or because family members worked as laborers in riverbank mills and factories or as the help in hotels and private homes. About one half of the shanty boaters

at Louisville made a living fishing, so the presence of fish and a fish market determined where families tied up their homes.

Life was hard. Shanty boats were crowded, cold in winter, and hot during the summer. A couple could make do with a single room, but most families with children had two rooms (a kitchen-dining room and a bedroom). Three rooms was considered a large boat. A good shanty boat could be built for a few hundred dollars or much less since most of the building material was found along river banks or floating on rising river waters. Seven people lived on one shanty boat at Louisville’s “Point” in 1900. A door at each end and side windows gave some cross ventilation during the hot humid summers. A single stove was used for cooking and heating on one room boats. Firewood gathered

from drift piles and coal pilfered from barges and railroad yards fed winter stoves. On wash day clothes were hung from porches, doors, and the branches of nearby trees.

As a neighborhood, Shanty Boat Louisville stretched from around First Street to the Beargrass Creek “cut off” at the eastern end of Towhead Island. The area of present-day Thruston Park was called the “point” after the 1850s when the natural course of Beargrass Creek was filled in where the *Belle of Louisville* ties up today. Rerouting the creek moved the point about a mile and a half upriver and made the steamboat wharf’s expansion possible. The old natural creek bed was haphazardly filled in over the years leaving isolated ponds filled with debris, garbage, and aquatic life still visible on maps in our collection a half century later.



"The Home of Old Man River." Glen Tracy, Sept. 11, 1939.

This line of low standing water (called "Water Street" in places) was shanty boat Louisville's southern boundary. The river was unpredictable and could rise or fall five or six feet overnight. The Floods of 1883, 1884, 1913, and 1945 left shanty boats on dry land at the Point, sometimes for years. Industrious stranded boaters became squatters and staked out homesteads with fences, gardens, pig pens, and outhouses. As a result the shanty boat neighborhood extended a block or two inland where schools, churches, bakeries, and saloons provided goods and services to house boat families.

By 1900 shanty boat Louisville's population was made up of about half adult males and half adult women and children (under the age of fifteen). These numbers (based on

the United States Federal Census) defied the stereotypical view of shanty boaters as mostly single idle men with unsavory habits and reputations. About half of the men were fishermen, but their fishing season was usually three or four months long. They rented their skiffs to day trippers and found part time jobs on tows and steamboats. Others fished for mussels and sold their shells to pearl button factories. All had settled in Louisville's shanty boat neighborhood to make a living and provide for their families. Downstream below today's Big Four Bridge, shanty boaters worked in industrial settings—sawmills, iron foundries, and box factories—rather than in the fishing fleet. Their environment was as noisy and gritty as any industrial town. Stranded shanty boats in this area became

small churches, the home of a spiritualist and fortune teller, women basket makers, and the scene of late night revivals.

Today the "chute" behind Towhead Island is lined with upscale weekend boats, but a century ago this place was the heart of shanty boat Louisville and a part of a larger shanty boat nation. One field worker estimated that as many as 50,000 people—out of work farmers, factory workers, and their families—lived on shanty boats during the Great Depression, and an estimate in 1938 suggests as many as 30,000 houseboats in the Ohio and Mississippi River basins. Despite the highly transient nature of the shanty boat community, the working class nature of their lives and stories are captured here at The Filson through images, vital statistics, and first hand accounts.

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