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Contact the editorial offices at lwhites@filsonhistorical.org or matthew.norman@uc.edu.

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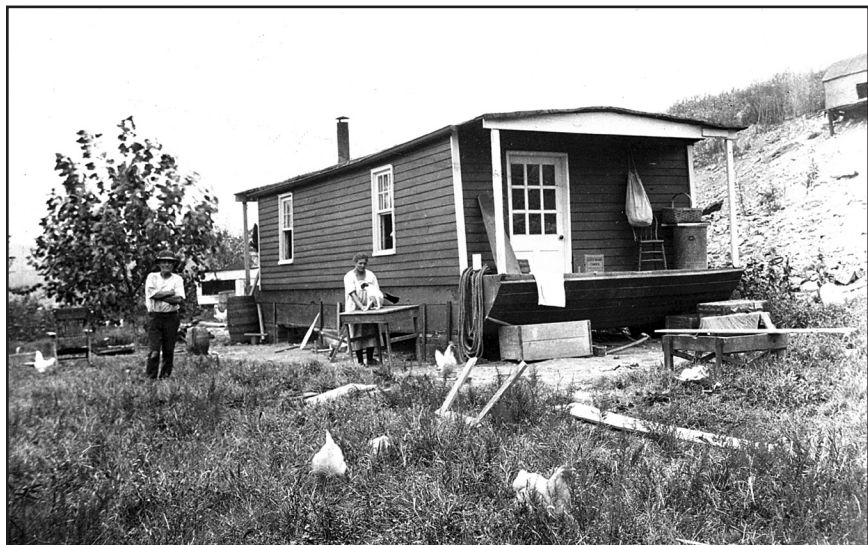
ON THE COVER: Henry Dutchin’s shantyboat on the upper end of the point between the canal and the Ohio river, Louisville, Kentucky, October 6, 1922. Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Photograph Collection.

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Collection Essay

Shantyboat Life

When the shantyboat waterfront disappeared around 1960, after a life of more than one hundred years, the stories of how its people survived on the edge of an urban and industrial landscape also faded. However, an environment increasingly characterized by deforestation, air pollution, foul water, and industrial waste suggests that the issues the shantyboaters faced are relevant today. Although the community and its stories became almost invisible after the city bulldozed many of its buildings and turned the site into a municipal garbage dump, the Filson's holdings can help us imagine what life was like in this lost neighborhood.



Henry Dutchin's shantyboat on the upper end of the point between the canal and the Ohio river, Louisville, Kentucky, October 6, 1922. Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Photograph Collection.

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As a neighborhood, Shantyboat Louisville originally stretched from around First Street east to the northern end of Towhead Island. Rerouting the Beargrass Creek in the 1850s moved the point at which the Beargrass entered the Ohio upriver, and reduced the size of the shantyboat neighborhood by about one third. The eastern portion of this area was a neighborhood known as "The Point," which existed until about 1945.

The Filson's excellent map collection reveals the changes in the waterfront that shantyboaters called home and helps establish its boundaries and sense of place. That waterfront was dynamic not only because the river altered itself due to erosion but also because the citizens of the Falls of the Ohio knew the

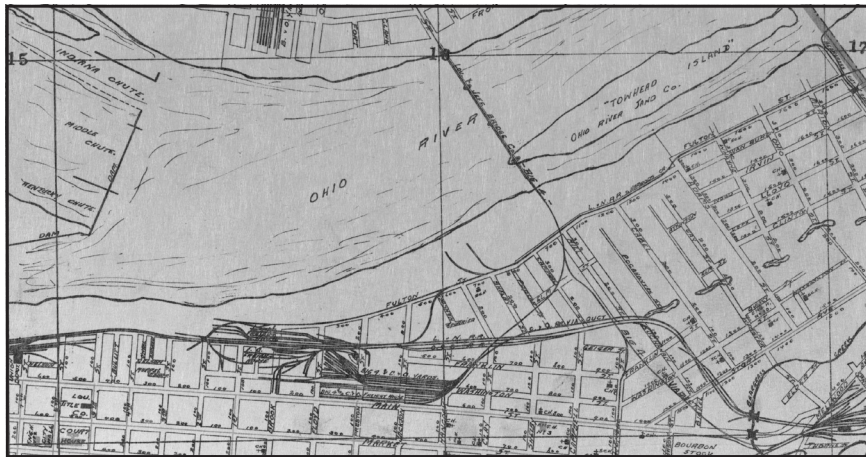
falls were the key to Louisville's settlement and growth. One of the city's largest civic improvements and engineering feats was the construction of the Louisville and Portland canal. The rise of steamboat transportation and the creation of a steamboat industrial complex led to the canal's construction and completion in the early 1830s.



"Locks of Louisville" by John T. Bauscher, 1930.

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There was a problem with the south bank of the Ohio River downtown. Beargrass Creek emptied into the river only a few blocks north of the canal's downriver entrance, bringing silting and small boat traffic, including shantyboats, into the mix of larger steamboats and barges. During the 1850s, city leaders decided that the expansion of Louisville's wharf was so important to freight and passenger traffic that they decreed the mouth of Beargrass Creek be moved upriver about a mile and a half. The lower Beargrass, long used as a harbor for small watercraft, was abandoned and its natural mouth closed, filled, and made part of the levee. A new creek entrance into the river was created by digging a canal, the Beargrass cut-off, to the river near the north end of what was commonly called Towhead Island, owned by the Ohio River Sand Company according to the 1913 *New Map of Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky, Compiled from Actual Surveys, and Official Records*.¹



Towhead Island and The Point.

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The early efforts to change the waterfront were intended to support industry, so it is not surprising that the maps in the Filson's collection reveal that the city's early shantyboaters lived in the center of Louisville's first industrial center, not on the banks of a bucolic stream surrounded by farmland.

During the late nineteenth century, another transportation technology—railroads—made the southern bank of the Ohio an even more chaotic place to live and work. The main tracks and extensive railyards effectively cut off entire city blocks of shoreline from downtown. This was particularly true after the completion of the Big Four Bridge to the river bank just downriver of Towhead Island. The 1913 city map shows the extent of this barrier and the marginalization of people living along the shoreline. In addition to railroad mainlines and yards, which partially filled in Beargrass Creek's natural bed, in some places, unfilled pools of stagnant water, garbage, and debris from the Big Four viaduct to the city limits completely cut off streets.



The Point, Louisville, Kentucky, April 1913.

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With high water and major floods that reached the second floors of shoreline homes and stores in 1883 and 1884, the river added to the chaotic landscape. Once the waters receded, shantyboats were stranded on dry land. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Company's 1905 map details the waterfront along old Fulton Street, including the outline of shantyboats dropped onto streets, where they could remain for years. This map is also useful for identifying resources used by shantyboaters within a few blocks of the waterfront, including churches, schools, and favorite stores mentioned in newspaper accounts.²

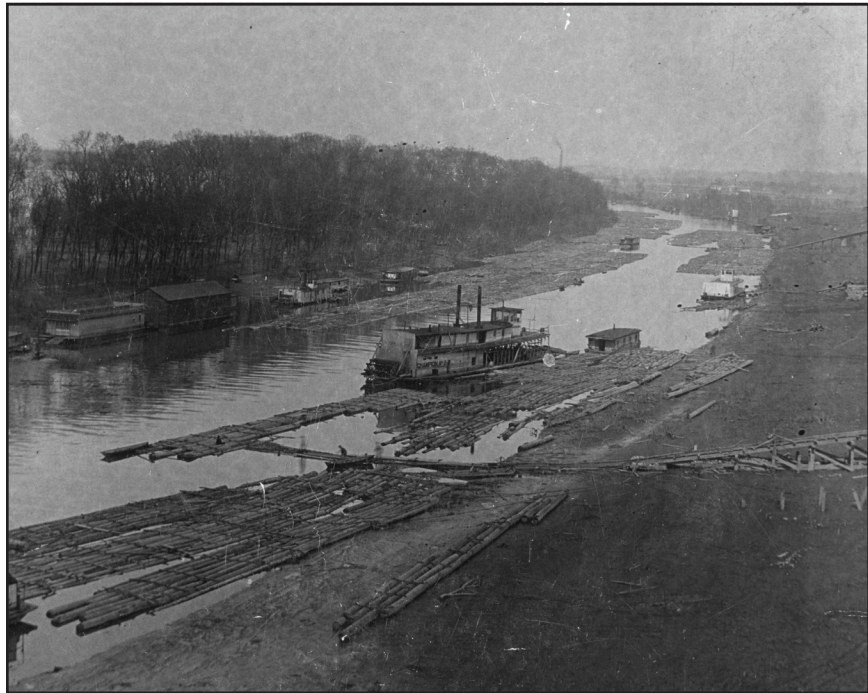


After the flood of January 27, 1937, looking up Water Street in Portland near 35th. Rogers Clark Ballard Thurston Photograph Collection, February 14, 1937.

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These resources identified on the Sandborn Map included places of employment beyond the waterfront. The fishing season might only last three or four months, so fishermen needed additional income. Some worked in nearby Butchertown's meat-processing companies and at riverbank sawmills east of Kentucky Street, and as day laborers on steamboats or truck farms in Crescent Hill and St. Matthews. Their favorite haunts, such as Charlie Gay's grocery and saloon at the corner of Fulton and Campbell Streets, were situated between the riverbank and railroad tracks, at the same time both isolating shantyboaters and unifying them into a relatively small walking community.

Fortunately, the 1900 census of Louisville's First Ward at Towhead Island, accessible on microfilm at the Filson's library and online, provides some valuable information that helps us understand more about the daily lives of shantyboaters. In about twenty-five cases, the census taker wrote *boat* instead of *H* for house, as the instructions directed. While shantyboater stereotypes leave us

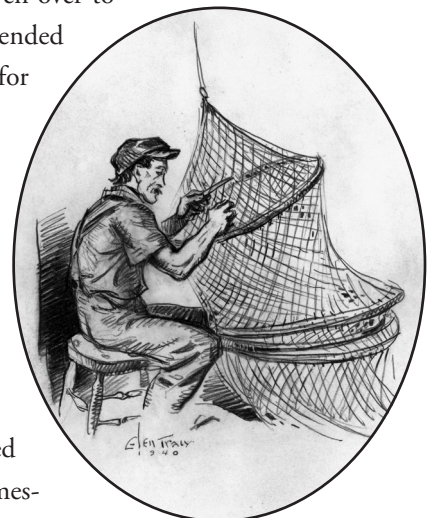


Towhead Island, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1900.

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an image of mostly men who were loners and lazy, women and children fifteen years of age or younger made up half of their population. The shantyboats truly were family boats, as antebellum traveler Timothy Flint described the flatboats and broadhorns of the early nineteenth century. William Day and his wife, Tillie, lived on one boat with five sons and one daughter. Although the census lists Day's occupation as "street labor," the family owned its shantyboat, supplying some security in an industrial downtown given over to tenements. Their eleven-year-old son, Charles, attended school, and Kentucky was listed as place of birth for everyone in the household.³

The census also provides the occupations of most adults. About half of the men were fishermen, while another 13 percent worked on the water as tow- and steamboat hands. Others were employed as cabinetmakers, house painters, ship carpenters, iron workers, and tinner. Some women worked alongside men in fishing boats, made and mended nets and lines, cleaned fish, made baskets and clothes, worked as domestic servants, and tended small family gardens during the summer when boats were tied up.

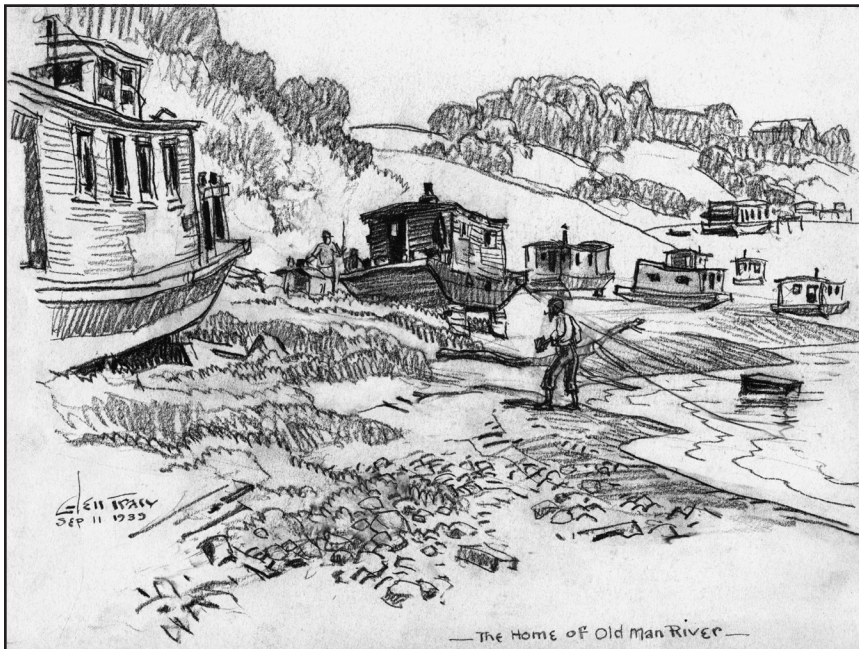


"Repairing the Net," by Glen Tracy, 1940.

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Older children also helped out by renting out skiffs to sightseers when the fishing season ended. Almost all shantyboaters were “junkers,” collectors of anything floating along the river they could trade and firewood from the river and sawmills and coal from nearby coal yards. Floating markets, which fishermen followed from town to town, purchased their market fish, and they sold their lower quality fish on nearby streets on The Point and tenements.

The census also tells of much about the origins of shantyboat families. About 75 percent of those living at The Point in 1900 were born in Kentucky or the Ohio River valley, while another 14 percent were foreign born, approximately the same percentage as for the city as a whole. Shantyboat Louisville was almost exclusively white. In 1900, only one African American was listed as a shantyboat resident.



“The Home of Old Man River,” by Glen Tracy, September 11, 1939.

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Other sources, especially newspapers, reveal the presence of a small African American community called “Happy Hollow” near the south end of the present-day Kennedy Bridge. It included Brady Church; the Littrell House, one of the most “noted hovels”; and an assortment of shanties linked by footpaths isolated between railroad track and the riverbank.⁴

Newspapers, especially the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, are useful for documenting the lives of those living at the Point, but they are pejorative in some ways and do not give a full or accurate voice to shantyboaters. The Point, much like Frankfort’s Crawfish Bottom, possessed a reputation for being both quaint and unsavory. Newspaper reporters frequented the neighborhood for human

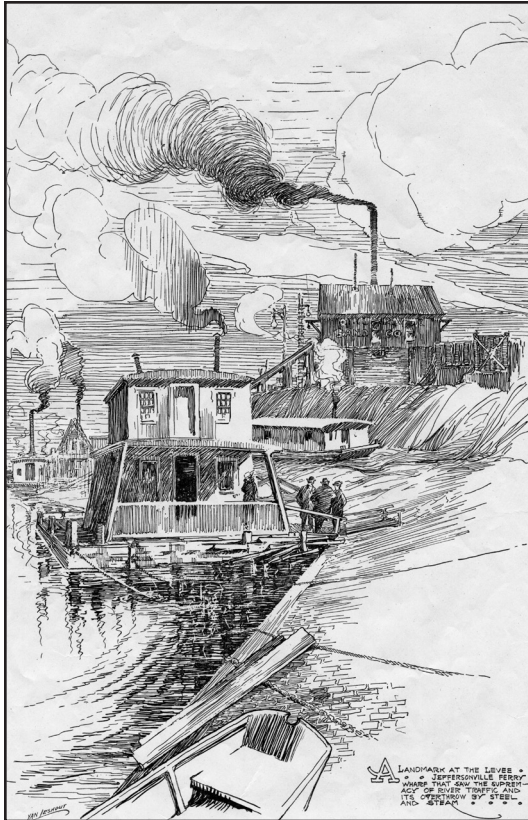
interest stories, especially in October, when the boats gathered before heading south to escape the winter's cold and ice. "Beached High and Dry," a story from the *Courier-Journal's* January 9, 1888, edition, told of boats and their owners left on dry land by receding waters following the floods of 1883 and 1884. Over the years, the "settlers" planted gardens and put up fences and small outbuildings around their boats. Six sketches by a newspaper artist accompany the story, many of them featuring the family of a man named Hiram Jenkins. Jenkins was described as half fisherman and riverman and half merchant. He floated down the Ohio with a shantyboat loaded with store stock, selling for double the price he had paid, which earned him the nickname "pirate." If accompanying sketches can be believed, Jenkins and his wife lived with five children and a dog in a small beached shantyboat. The family's practice was to trade on the river between Cincinnati and Cairo and then, once its store was empty, sell the boat and return upriver to Cincinnati and start over again.⁵



"Shantyboats on the River," by Agnes Prizer Fay, 1930.

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The Filson's photograph, drawing, and painting collections hold the most important visual sources of understanding shantyboat life at the Falls of the Ohio. Taken together, these artistic works can put the viewer close to the center of waterfront life. Alexander Van Leshout's sketch of the waterfront's Jeffersonville ferryboat wharf, for example, puts the viewer on a narrow strip of the levee facing upriver with the ferry wharf in the foreground and beached shantyboats and other buildings in the background, including an industrial site that was most likely a sawmill. A photograph taken from a higher perspective, perhaps from the Big



Landmark at the Levee – Jeffersonville Ferry.
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Four Bridge, takes the viewer another step upriver and looks over the chute behind Towhead Island. There, shantyboats are wedged between log rafts, waiting their turn to reach the sawmills below. Fulton Street is hinted at only by a streetlight, board fences, and a railroad embankment.

In 1938, Ben Lucien Burman, a Kentucky native, estimated there were as many as thirty thousand houseboats in the region. Although the number had increased during the Great Depression as unemployed factory workers and farmhands sought housing for their families, the home-made houseboat, or shantyboat, had been around since the settling of the region and would continue to be a conspicuous part of riverfronts until the mid-twentieth century. Today there are few visible reminders of the lost neighborhoods.⁶

Mark V. Wetherington

Independent Scholar and former
Director of the Filson Historical Society

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- 1 Louisville Title Company, *New Map of Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky, Compiled from Actual Surveys and Official Records* (Louisville: Louisville Title Company, 1913).
 - 2 *Louisville, Kentucky Insurance Maps* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1905).
 - 3 Twelfth Census of the United States, Population, Kentucky, Jefferson County, Louisville, First Precinct, 1–4.
 - 4 “Life in Happy Hollow,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 23, 1889, 9.
 - 5 “Beached High and Dry,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 9, 1888, 5.
 - 6 Carl R. Bogardus, *Shantyboat* (Austin, IN: Muscatatuck Press, 1959), cites Burman’s estimate (1).