

# River Archaeology

By Chris Begley

In 1811, the first steamboat on any river west of the Appalachian Mountains set off from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. They made it as far as Owensboro before the New Madrid earthquake hit. Over the next several days the crew would wake up to find the river entirely changed, with the boat in the middle of the river, still tied up to what had been the riverbank and was now the river bottom.

In 1844, the steamboat Lucy Walker exploded near Louisville. It was crewed by enslaved people and owned by a Cherokee man. Around one hundred people died.

In 1868, two steamboats collided near Warsaw, Kentucky and caught fire. They burned to the waterline and sank. These two boats were called the United States and the America. I know that sounds like a metaphor for something, but it's just what happened.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, river pirates hid out in a spectacular cave on the banks of the Ohio River down around Paducah, robbing flatboats floating downriver. This story provided the plot of a Davy Crockett movie from the 1950s.

These are just some of the events of the past that we still talk about. These are the ones we know about. Think how many more stories exist of which we know nothing. People have lived here for over 15,000 years. Imagine all the ways in which the waterways in Kentucky were used, and the ways they shaped our history. That's where archaeology comes in.



Chris Begley in the Kentucky River looking for the flat boat of iron ingots. Photo: Chris Begley

I'm a maritime archaeologist, and I work underwater. I study the ways in which people interact with waterways, and this can include looking at shipwrecks, infrastructure like docks or anchorages, or the construction of dams or canals. I work all over the world, in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific, and the Indian Oceans. Mostly I work in the sea, in salt water, looking at ships meant for trade or fishing. I also work here, in Kentucky, in the rivers mainly.

I have a few ongoing projects in the rivers of Kentucky. I think we've located a flatboat that sank loaded with iron from the Fitchburg furnace near Ravenna. Based on pervasive stories in the area, and with the help of local historians and river experts, I was able to identify a section of the river to search. Although nothing was visible on sonar (we use side-imaging fish finders), I did survey a section of the river bottom using a metal detector. Anything on the river bottom was buried in sediment in that area, but results suggest a possible location for the flatboat. Further work is needed to identify the buried anomaly, but was complicated by a large submerged tree that washed downriver and stopped right over the anomaly, making it too dangerous for divers to operate in that area. Recent floods may have dislodged the tree, and later in the summer I will return to that location and try to resume the project.



Kentucky River, Photo: Chris Begley

I have also been working to locate the resting place of the steamboat America, mentioned above, that ran into the steamboat United States, and whose position used to be well known to the community, but has now been lost. Locating the wreck would be the first step in a potentially more substantial investigation during which we could collect evidence on ship construction, the nature of the collision and fire that sank the boat, and possibly information on the cargo and on the material culture of the passengers and crew.

I am most interested in the questions about the passengers and crew on the steamboat. What did they bring with them? What did they bring back from somewhere else? I have even more questions about the crew. In many ways, we have much more documentation of the passengers. Think about the ways in which the crew on a cruise ship is largely hidden. The crew were often the kind of people about whom less is written, and whose lives are less well understood. How much do you think was ever written about the enslaved people that crewed the Lucy Walker? Archaeology can help us answer questions like that.



Kentucky River near Hazard. Photo: Chris Begley

## River Archaeology continued

Archaeologists like me conduct our research to answer specific questions, and we do that by looking at the things that people leave behind. Commerce, communication, even kinship is inextricably linked to the waterways running through the Commonwealth. Timber, coal, mail, and people came and went along these waterways. We use written and oral histories as well, but there are many questions not answered by the written history or the stories that are handed down to us. Entire parts of the population are not well represented in historical documents, including women, children, racial and ethnic minorities, and poor people. And sometimes those written texts don't tell the whole story. Sometimes, they are pure fiction. Archaeology helps us arrive nearer to the whole story. It can be painstaking and frustrating, or incomplete and inconclusive, but archaeology is the only way we currently have to access that part of the human past lost to the tides of time, and to bring the untold stories to light.

Sometimes the questions I ask are very basic. I may want to know what archaeological sites are present in a certain area, or where certain wrecks are located. In other cases, I might ask how people used imported goods to create an identity for themselves at the end of the colonial era. I might ask what was imported and exported, and with whom did this trade take place?

We associate shipwrecks with treasure, and treasure hunting. What is valuable to an archaeologist is often much different than what is valuable to a treasure hunter. First of all, we do not keep or sell anything we find, so finding a hundred gold coins is no different in that sense than finding a glass bottle or a dinner plate. For an archaeologist, information about the past is the treasure. We often say that it's not what you find, it's what you find out. Even something that is broken or has been discarded can contain a lot of information and can help us fill in gaps and understand the history of the Commonwealth a little better.

Scuba diving in the rivers in Kentucky is not always fun. If I can see anything beyond a few inches, I consider myself lucky. Sometimes I can't see anything at all, and I work by feel or using a sensor like a metal detector and listening for the sounds as I detect something. I understand why we do not have many recreational divers in the rivers. The lakes are different, and some of those are very good for scuba diving. Personally, I like the dark rivers. They hold many surprises, and treasure in the form of information about the past. Every dive is an adventure.

All archaeologists, including maritime archaeologists, depend on people in the community. We depend on their knowledge of the river and of the history of a particular area. They help us find questions to ask, help to locate archaeological sites, and help us interpret what we find. I invite any of you to let me know if you've heard something or seen something that you think may merit investigation.

*Chris Begley, Ph.D. is an anthropology professor at Transylvania University in Lexington. His most recent book is The Next Apocalypse: The Art and Science of Survival. You can reach him at cbegley@transy.edu.*

## A Wild Kingdom

By Susan Griffin Ward, KWA Director of Community Engagement



It was a peaceful Sunday afternoon, until it wasn't. Without warning, the creek valley was filled with terrible screams. When the bedlam began, we were sitting in our canoe, in a stream, straining our necks to spy on the heron rookery swaying 200 feet above us in ancient sycamore trees. Spring is nesting season and herons were sitting on eggs and feeding chicks. The peaceful scene abruptly ended when an eagle attacked. The herons' crazy shrieking and violent flapping of their powerful wings did not thwart the eagle's hunt for dinner. It was chaos.

Just as suddenly as it started, it was deathly quiet. No longer hungry, the raiding raptor ruled the rookery with a conqueror's ease; a heron nest served as her new throne. While the eagle surveyed her kingdom, the remaining herons were stock-still, effectively now prisoners of war. Under threat and unwilling to leave their babies, their instinct was an attempt at invisibility. That's what most mothers would do, me included. The reign of terror lasted a surprisingly long time. When the eagle finally flew off, a hawk chased her--perhaps to steer her away from and prevent a raid of its own nest.

Great Blue Herons are my favorite bird, my personal blue bird of happiness. It is true when I tease my children that I have taken more photographs of herons than them. I never tire of watching the resident river poets dressed in their blue-gray robes; they are lyrical in flight, and when fishing on a shoreline a study in stillness and silence that a monk would envy. But I am also amazed every time I see an eagle soaring over the Ohio River.

I considered that the eagle might also be nesting and have her own chicks to feed. All creatures are focused on survival. The eagle needs the heron, the heron needs the fish, the fish needs the mussel, the mussel filters the water to keep it clean, and all living things depend upon clean water to live. This includes humans, but often we forget what's important to the smallest of creatures is also in our own best interest.

Now it's almost commonplace to see eagles on the river, proving that wildlife and the environment can be restored when humans make the right choices. Witnessing this life and death scene unfold was a dramatic reminder that wildlife is indeed wild, not always easy, and protecting the ecosystem is critical to survival for all of us. A good start would be to stop pouring poison into our water.



Eagle in heron rookery



Kentucky River near Hazard. Photo: Chris Begley

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