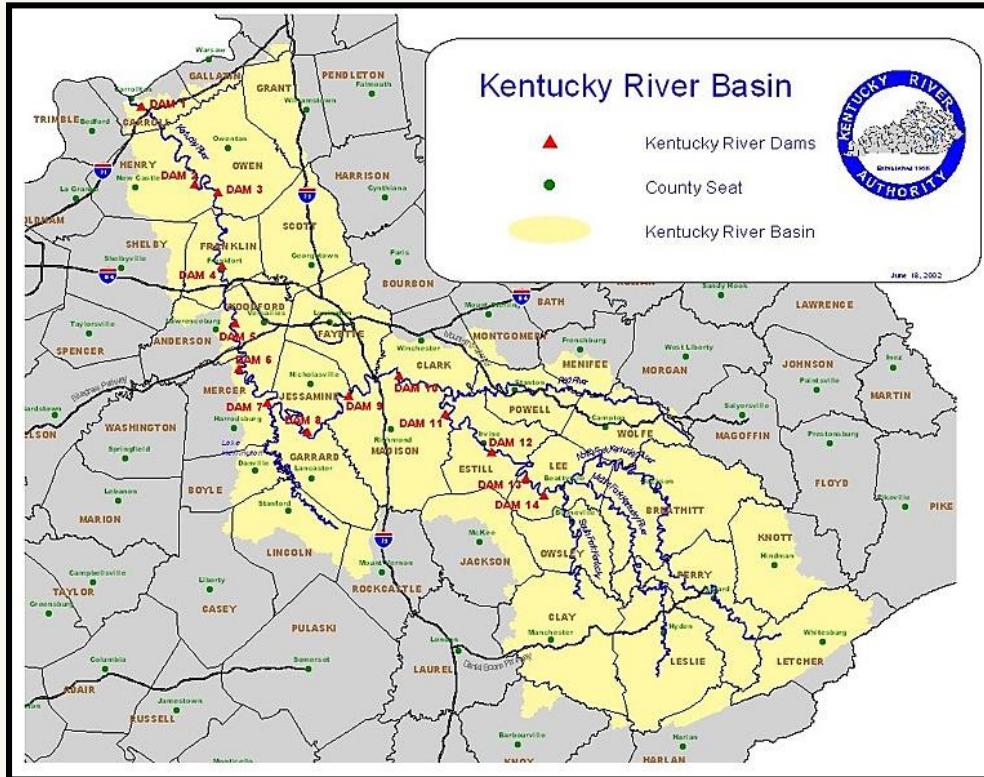


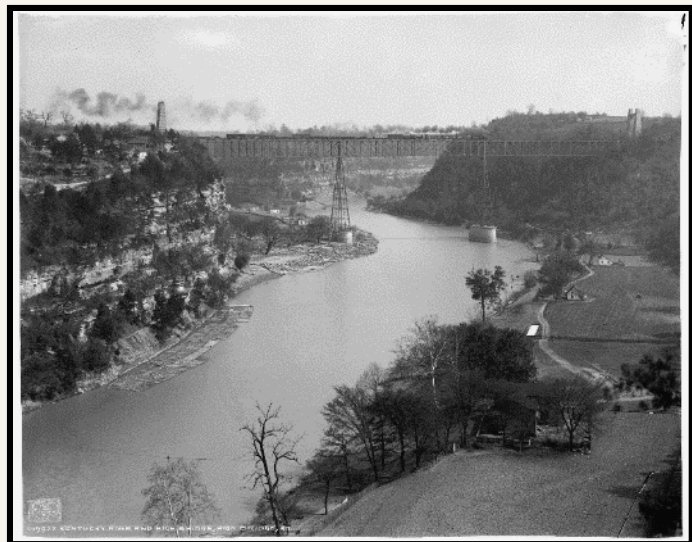
# An Introduction to the History of the Kentucky River as a Transportation Route



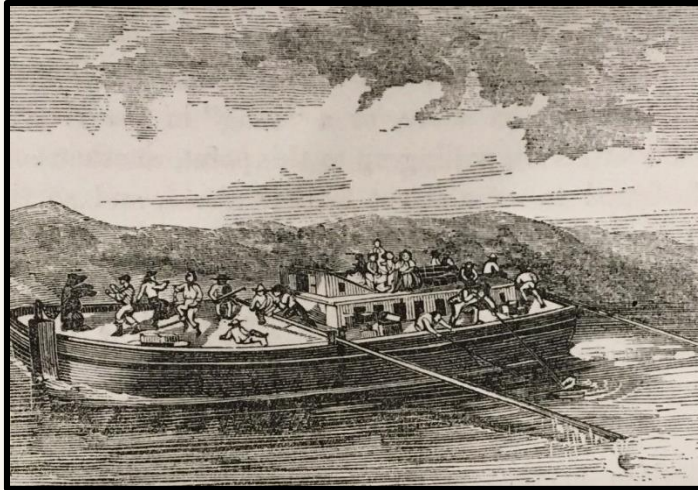
Map of the Kentucky River Basin. Courtesy of the Kentucky River Authority.

Following a northwesterly course, the Kentucky River begins in southeastern Kentucky and flows 255 miles through central Kentucky to the Ohio River. The river's North, Middle, and South Forks merge in Lee County near Beattyville, Kentucky. Combined, the Kentucky River Basin covers about 7,000 square miles, or about one-sixth of the state, and traverses the Cumberland Plateau, the Knobs, the Lexington Plain, and the Outer Bluegrass physiographic regions of Kentucky.

As it flows through the Bluegrass, the Kentucky River is lined by steep limestone cliffs known as the Palisades, which were formed over millions of years as the river eroded the surrounding rock.



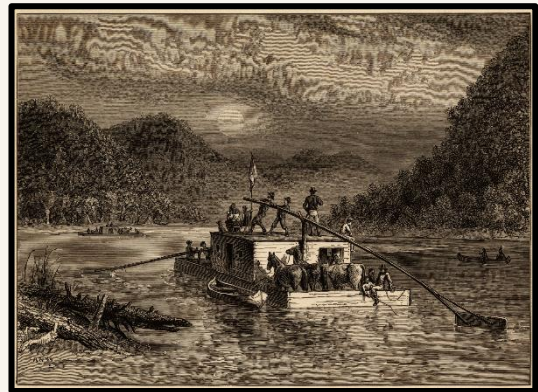
The Kentucky River at High Bridge near Shakertown, Kentucky, circa 1907. Courtesy of the Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.



Keelboat illustration from *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* (1856) from the Kentucky River Museum Collections.

Even before the arrival of Europeans, the Kentucky River served as a major transportation route for early Native Americans. They established communities near the river, navigated the waterway in dugout canoes carved from hardwood trees and relied on the river for food, water, and trade. The influx of white settlers during the late eighteenth century heralded the commercial development of the Kentucky River. Mills, saltworks, and ironworks sprang up along its banks. Flatboats and keelboats transported passengers and cargo, including tobacco, hemp, livestock, coal, ore, timber, whiskey, and iron, from eastern and central Kentucky to Louisville, Cincinnati, and New Orleans on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

Foodstuffs and manufactured items, such as sugar, tea, coffee, tools, furniture, and clothing, made their way upstream to communities in central and southeastern Kentucky. The first steamboat traversed the Kentucky River in 1815, introducing a faster and more reliable means of transport and revolutionizing commercial travel in the region. Steamboats quickly replaced other types of craft on the Kentucky River. They were used to transport passengers and cargo, to tow barges, and to dredge the river; they were even transformed into floating entertainment palaces known as showboats.



Engraving of a flatboat on the Ohio River. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

mi- are ap- s of on fert and h r not ned mi- t a go- rly n- ent ste- are hat as ave is our of low of ch ff- ere er erl- ds not	<p><b>SALT</b></p> <p>TO BE EXCHANGED FOR</p> <p><b>TOBACCO</b></p> <p>in Lexington, by <b>JAMES WILKINSON.</b></p> <p><b>JUST ARRIVED, AND NOW OPENING BY</b></p> <p><b>JOHN GOUDY,</b></p> <p>At his Store in Lexington, on Main Street, nearly opposite Mr. Collins's Tavern, and one door above McEl Alexander &amp; James Parker's Store. An assortment of</p> <p><b>GOODS</b></p> <p>VIZ.</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>LINE &amp; coarse Cloths,</td> <td>Shoe &amp; Knee Buckles,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Blankets, Corduroy,</td> <td>Table Spoons,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Velvet, Russian, Tents,</td> <td>Fine &amp; Coarse Combs,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Callimanco, Chintz,</td> <td>Hens Hairs, and Blades,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Callico, Irish Linnen,</td> <td>Black &amp; flower'd Ribbon</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Brown Linnen, Tickings,</td> <td>Powder and Lead,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Worsted &amp; Thread Stock,</td> <td>Pewter and Queens Ware</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Plates,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Check White and Black</td> <td>Tea Ware &amp; Tumblers,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Gauze,</td> <td>Looking Glasses,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Gauze Handkerchiefs,</td> <td>Tobacco Boxes,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pocket ditto,</td> <td>Cotton &amp; Wool Cards,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>English &amp; Dutch Telfa-</td> <td>Spelling Books &amp; Primers</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ments &amp; Plain Books,</td> <td>Sewing Silks, Needlehead,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fine and coarse Hats,</td> <td>Peppers &amp; Cinnamon,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Writing Paper &amp; Pins,</td> <td>Tea Coffin &amp; Chocolate,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sewing &amp; Linnen Need-</td> <td>Macgavado Sugar,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>les,</td> <td>Flooding Bricks,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Knives and Forks,</td> <td>Red lead &amp; red nail,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pen &amp; Canteau Knives,</td> <td>Bamboo &amp; Rofin,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Coat &amp; Veil Buttons,</td> <td>Black Smith's Files and</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Scripp Irons, Girth Buc-</td> <td>Raps,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>kles &amp; Bridle Bits,</td> <td>Chiffels &amp; Shoe Knives,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Wood Screws,</td> <td>Cuttings, Pipes, &amp;c.</td> </tr> </table>	LINE & coarse Cloths,	Shoe & Knee Buckles,	Blankets, Corduroy,	Table Spoons,	Velvet, Russian, Tents,	Fine & Coarse Combs,	Callimanco, Chintz,	Hens Hairs, and Blades,	Callico, Irish Linnen,	Black & flower'd Ribbon	Brown Linnen, Tickings,	Powder and Lead,	Worsted & Thread Stock,	Pewter and Queens Ware		Plates,	Check White and Black	Tea Ware & Tumblers,	Gauze,	Looking Glasses,	Gauze Handkerchiefs,	Tobacco Boxes,	Pocket ditto,	Cotton & Wool Cards,	English & Dutch Telfa-	Spelling Books & Primers	ments & Plain Books,	Sewing Silks, Needlehead,	Fine and coarse Hats,	Peppers & Cinnamon,	Writing Paper & Pins,	Tea Coffin & Chocolate,	Sewing & Linnen Need-	Macgavado Sugar,	les,	Flooding Bricks,	Knives and Forks,	Red lead & red nail,	Pen & Canteau Knives,	Bamboo & Rofin,	Coat & Veil Buttons,	Black Smith's Files and	Scripp Irons, Girth Buc-	Raps,	kles & Bridle Bits,	Chiffels & Shoe Knives,	Wood Screws,	Cuttings, Pipes, &c.
LINE & coarse Cloths,	Shoe & Knee Buckles,																																																
Blankets, Corduroy,	Table Spoons,																																																
Velvet, Russian, Tents,	Fine & Coarse Combs,																																																
Callimanco, Chintz,	Hens Hairs, and Blades,																																																
Callico, Irish Linnen,	Black & flower'd Ribbon																																																
Brown Linnen, Tickings,	Powder and Lead,																																																
Worsted & Thread Stock,	Pewter and Queens Ware																																																
	Plates,																																																
Check White and Black	Tea Ware & Tumblers,																																																
Gauze,	Looking Glasses,																																																
Gauze Handkerchiefs,	Tobacco Boxes,																																																
Pocket ditto,	Cotton & Wool Cards,																																																
English & Dutch Telfa-	Spelling Books & Primers																																																
ments & Plain Books,	Sewing Silks, Needlehead,																																																
Fine and coarse Hats,	Peppers & Cinnamon,																																																
Writing Paper & Pins,	Tea Coffin & Chocolate,																																																
Sewing & Linnen Need-	Macgavado Sugar,																																																
les,	Flooding Bricks,																																																
Knives and Forks,	Red lead & red nail,																																																
Pen & Canteau Knives,	Bamboo & Rofin,																																																
Coat & Veil Buttons,	Black Smith's Files and																																																
Scripp Irons, Girth Buc-	Raps,																																																
kles & Bridle Bits,	Chiffels & Shoe Knives,																																																
Wood Screws,	Cuttings, Pipes, &c.																																																

Narrow and meandering with frequent floods and periods of low water, the Kentucky River was

notoriously difficult to navigate. The river's rocky shoals and many sandbars and snags hindered river boat travel, which was becoming increasingly important to the Kentucky economy. A series of lock and dams was constructed along the river between 1836 and 1917 to improve navigability and to expand access southward along the river. The 14 lock and dams extend from Carrollton near the Ohio River to Beattyville in the southeastern part of the state. Locks No. 1–5 were built between 1836 and 1842 and Locks No. 6–14 were constructed during the second building campaign between 1891 and 1917. The lock and dams created a continuously navigable channel, which allowed vessels to travel during

Advertisement for James Wilkinson's store published in the *Kentucky Gazette* in 1788 from the University of Kentucky Archives. Wilkinson's trip from Frankfort to New Orleans in 1787 solidified the Kentucky-Mississippi River trade, establishing a new market for Kentucky products. Courtesy of the Kentucky Digital Newspaper Program.

periods of low water and to traverse sandbars and rapids along the river as they meandered through different elevations and topographies.





**Lock No. 5 under construction near Tyrone circa 1885.  
Courtesy of the National Archives.**



**The "John J. Kelly" passing through Lock No. 4 at  
Frankfort. Courtesy of the University of Kentucky  
Archives.**



**Towboat on the Kentucky River circa 1957. Towboats like  
this one gradually replaced steamboats on the river during  
the early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Kentucky  
River Museum Collections.**

Travel, both passenger and freight, flourished between Locks No. 1–4 during the Antebellum period, but the completion of the railroad between Frankfort and Louisville in 1851 and the outbreak of the Civil War disrupted river commerce. The river locks fell into disrepair during the 1860s and 1870s due to the war and a lack of funding for maintenance. In 1880, the lock and dam system was placed under federal management. Under direction of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, Locks 1–5 were restored, and the remaining lock and dams were constructed along the upper portion of the river. The repairs to the existing locks temporarily bolstered river trade during the late nineteenth century, but by the time the system was completed in 1917, the preeminence of the railroad and the rise of the automobile had diverted commercial and passenger traffic away from the Kentucky River.

Unable to compete with modern transportation alternatives, travel along the Kentucky River decreased during the early twentieth century. Barges associated with logging and industrial operations on the river continued to pass through the locks before World War II, but most of these industries diminished after the war. The river became a recreational destination, and pleasure crafts replaced the barges and towboats of the past. The upper river locks remained open for limited seasonal use during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1986, the Kentucky River Authority was established by the Kentucky General Assembly to manage the operation of Locks No. 5–14, which were decommissioned in 1990. Between 1996 and 2006, the upper river locks were transferred from federal management to the Kentucky River Authority. Some freight traffic continued to pass through Locks No. 1–4 until 2002. The United States Army Corps subsequently leased the lower river locks to the Kentucky River Authority, who continues to manage the Kentucky River locks today.

## **Bibliography**

Ellis, William E.

1992 Kentucky River. In *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, edited by John E. Kleber, p. 510–511. University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.

Grier, Bill

1996 *The Five Lives of the Kentucky River*. Kentucky River Authority, Louisville, Kentucky.

Johnson, Leland R. and Charles E. Parrish

1999 *Kentucky River Development: The Commonwealth's Waterway*. United States Army Corps, Louisville District, Louisville, Kentucky.

## **Photo Credits**

Photographs, maps, and figures courtesy of the following:

Kentucky River Authority: <https://finance.ky.gov/offices/kra/Pages/default.aspx>

Kentucky River Museum Collections:

[https://www.fortboonesboroughlivinghistory.org/html/river\\_museum.html](https://www.fortboonesboroughlivinghistory.org/html/river_museum.html)

Library of Congress Digital Collections: <https://www.loc.gov/>

National Archives Catalog from the United States National Archives and Records Administration:

<https://catalog.archives.gov/>.

University of Kentucky Archives at the Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky:

<https://exploreuk.uky.edu/>

Kentucky Digital Newspaper Program, Special Collection Research Center, University of Kentucky:

<https://kentuckynewspapers.org/kdnp/mcm.php>