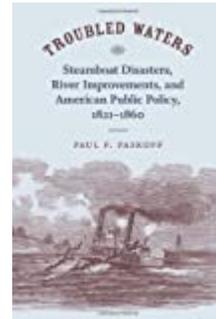




Paul F. Paskoff. *Troubled Waters: Steamboat Disasters, River Improvements, and American Public Policy, 1821-1860.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. xvii + 324 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3268-5.



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Paddlewheels and Politics

Steamboats captured the American imagination in the early nineteenth century as many citizens considered riverboats to be a civilizing agent that conquered nature and demonstrated the young nation's ingenuity and power. Public fascination also stemmed from the macabre, as lurid stories of steamboat disasters filled the columns of antebellum newspapers. While fires, explosions, and mangled bodies garnered the most publicity, snags—logs or tree trunks that had washed into the river and waited like chevaux-de-frise to impale unsuspecting riverboats—were both more prosaic and more dangerous. Snags produced more damage, whether measured in numbers of steamboats or their tonnage, than all other calamities combined. When states proved slow to tackle the issue of riverboat loss, the federal government responded with a river improvements program. While the western waters became safer, political debate did not. The efforts of western states to secure funding for internal improvements touched off disputes over the nature of government, warmed the fires of sectionalism, and led to arguments over political economy. The intersection of

these two issues, the efficacy of river improvements and the scope of federal activism in the economy, form the core of Paul Paskoff's interesting new book.

In a book that bristles with quantitative analysis, Paskoff first argues for the importance of steamboats to the antebellum economy. His claim that by mid-century steamers had more economic and social influence than the railroad is most probably accurate, but not well supported in the text. Nevertheless, it is clear that riverboats revolutionized society, economy, and culture in the Mississippi River valley and became foundational not just to the region, but the nation. As steamers proliferated and penetrated shallower water, losses and deaths mounted to such a degree that the federal government felt compelled to act. Improvements to the Mississippi River and its tributaries were lumped in with debates about road bills, lighthouses, and canals, all of which accelerated sectional and partisan bickering over pieces of the ever-changing budget pie. Political reversals, log-rolling, and strange bedfellows became the rule of the day as alliances shifted and politicians jockeyed for position. Paskoff

carefully charts internal improvement appropriations by region and presidential administration, with the results being somewhat surprising. In a conclusion that must have Henry Clay spinning in his grave with such force as to solve the current energy crisis, Andrew Jackson spent far more money, \$13.5 million, on internal improvements than any other president before 1860.

Expenditures on internal improvements fluctuated wildly during the antebellum years. Paskoff argues persuasively that spending was less a product of political philosophy and more a result of available federal revenue. In flush years, like Jackson's two terms, money flowed freely but during lean years appropriations dried up. Paskoff rightly acknowledges that constitutional interpretation and geography also played a role in determining the amount and location of funds. South Carolina, like many southern states along the Atlantic, opposed internal improvements not just for constitutional scruples but also because the state received almost no direct benefit from such expenditures. Southern states along the Mississippi River, by contrast, craved funding and were therefore more flexible when it came to arguments over the federal government's role in promoting economic development. That fact was not lost on South Carolina's most famous son, John Calhoun, when he wooed the Memphis Convention in 1845 with his call for more federal supervision of the Father of Waters. As depicted by Paskoff, the political scene in the middle of the nineteenth century is a halting and limited effort to direct American commerce.

Readers familiar with scholarship on the antebellum American economy will realize that Paskoff's conclusions do not always square with John Larson's recent work.^[1] While both authors elevate political bickering and log-rolling to the center of their arguments, Larson concluded that the federal government retreated from its opportunity to shape the political economy. When it did so, railroads were able to set the terms of the debate and privatization rather than public direction became the rule of the day. Perhaps the differences between Paskoff and Larson are more a product of scale and focus. It is indisputable that the federal government spent money on internal improvements during the antebellum years, but whether that figure was adequate is a matter of judgment. Paskoff, for instance, notes that federal improvements to the Mississippi River paid for themselves in loss prevention, and so the federal government did make a difference in the political economy. Also, Paskoff examined efforts to improve natural resources (the rivers) while Larson focused on attempts to create new projects (canals and

roads) that linked natural resources. Perhaps it comes down to asking whether the glass is half empty or half full.

Paskoff's analysis, though, ultimately rests on determining whether or not the internal improvements program succeeded in reducing steamboat loss and, by extension, promoted economic development. At first glance, the answer appears to be no. Paskoff admits that riverboat losses remained consistent in both shipping tonnage and number of boats. In other words, as river traffic increased, steamboat wrecks rose proportionally. But riverboat technology also improved, so shallower draft boats penetrated further upriver and were at greater risk to snag. More river traffic also meant that boats competed for the better river channels, and so more boats were forced into dangerous water. River improvements, Paskoff concludes, offset the deleterious consequences of technological change and thus positively influenced western commerce. Also, steamboat longevity, which averaged a meager three to five years, also improved slightly over time. Paskoff's conclusions here are debatable and a more thorough discussion would have been welcome. Perhaps technology, experience, and licensed pilots also prevented accidents, so the effectiveness of river improvements is still arguable.

There is much to like about this impressive book. The sprightly writing style offsets a topic that can challenge a reader's attention span. Paskoff created a steamboat database that rests on a bedrock of 1,200 documented shipwrecks as well as construction and engine data for more than 600 steamboats. He also analyzed and cataloged more than 2,300 spending projects, breaking the expenditures into every conceivable subcategory. This research and the figures it produced, make the book an admirable achievement. Omissions are few, although Paskoff could have devoted more attention to snag boat designer Henry Shreve's quest for reimbursement from the federal government. Shreve built the first few snag boats for free and then sought compensation. The resulting testimony and evidence would have buttressed Paskoff's contentions about the importance of snag removal to the economy along the Mississippi River. More material about specific removal projects like the Red River Raft or Plum Point would have added depth and flavor to the book. Despite these minor quibbles, *Troubled Waters* is essential reading to anyone interested in internal improvements, political economy, or the political discourse of antebellum America.

Note

[1]. John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

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