

Mississippi River

Be sure to look out your window in St. Louis as the train crosses America's greatest river, the storied Mississippi. You may be able to spot barges and casino boats on the banks of the river alongside this modern metropolitan area. Now try to picture a Native American village with canoes here long ago, or a settlement of French trappers in the 1600s. The mighty Mississippi has played key roles in human civilization for many centuries.

The mighty Mississippi provided support for all that inhabited its banks. The riverbank soil was enriched by yearly flooding to support crops and the lush vegetation along the banks supported a wide array of wildlife so were excellent areas for hunting and fishing. Of course, people also needed the river's water for drinking and cooking. Trade is important for human settlements as well, and this river has seen boats of all kinds. Among the many Native American tribes which relied on the river, the Ojibwe gave us the name we currently use. Misi-ziibi means Great River in the Ojibwe language.

As the largest river system in North America, the Great River has been a vital resource in the development and expansion of America. It stood in the path of explorers, challenging their ingenuity to cross it, and it stood in the minds of politicians as the key to westward expansion, an economic prize to be sought and held at all cost. As such, it has been fought over on the battlefield and used as a pawn in diplomatic exchanges. It was once the border for New France, New Spain, and the early United States, and it currently serves as the border for ten U.S. states.

While it has been important for travel and commerce throughout the ages, the river presented many challenges due to its slow current, varying depth, and shifting sand bars. At the start of the Mississippi in Minnesota, it is about the width of the coach in which we are riding, increasing to nearly a mile wide just north of St. Louis and in a few other places along its course. In its 2300 mile journey to sea level at the Gulf of Mexico, the river drops 1,474 feet in elevation – this is roughly equivalent to the length of 5 foot ball fields. To make travel safer and more convenient in both directions, dams and locks have been constructed in many places. To control flooding, levees have been built along the banks of the Mississippi for almost the entire course of the river. These efforts are not always successful, as we know from news reports. Even in these days of advanced engineering, communities from North Dakota to Louisiana experience periodic flooding disasters.

Thanks to the writings of Mark Twain, many of us can picture steamboat travel of the 1800s. However, riverboat commerce is not a thing of the past. Steamboats have been replaced by today's diesel towboats, pushing as many as twenty 1000-ton steel barges at a time. Waterborne commerce on the Mississippi has risen from 30 million tons in 1940 to approximately 300 million short tons in 2009. This heavy commercial traffic includes grains, coal and coke, petroleum products, sand, gravel, and chemicals.

Shipping continues to support communities large and small along the river, while people in riverside towns can enjoy the recreational advantages of wildlife watching, scenic hiking and boating. Seven National Park sites along the river protect historic and natural heritage, and numerous wildlife refuges, state and city parks also provide public access to the mighty Mississippi. We're privileged to get a glimpse of the river as the train crosses at St. Louis, but you might want to follow the lead of those early discoverers and explore more of this great river.

Source(s):

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Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott, Lecturer in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2010.