

38. Down on the Farm, July 20, 2009

Here come the Batteaux!



A couple watch a batteau, the shallow draft boat of early James River commerce, as it comes in to dock for the night at Scottsville, Va. The French word *batteau*, for boat, is sometimes spelled batteaux (plural), bateau, bateaux (plural), or batoe. This batteau was a part of a “fleet” of nineteen which were retracing and reenacting the 146 mile trip down the James from Lynchburg to Richmond.

Arms point upstream, a cannon is fired from one of the craft in celebration, there is excitement in the crowd along the shore, and a youngster yells, “Here come the batteaux!”

June is “Batteaux Month” along the James River. Two hundred years ago, from 1775 until the 1840s, these long, slender, flat-bottomed craft were the workhorses, the freight carriers of goods, along the James. The batteaux used on the James were used extensively to carry tobacco downriver to the tidewater at Richmond. They were about 6 feet wide, up to about 60 feet long and 18-24 inches deep. They played a vital role in the life of Central Virginia until the horse-drawn, tow-rope canal boats replaced them in the 1840s.

In both the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War, batteaux were used to transport military supplies and troops, as well as to carry mail and passengers. The small version of the batteaux required only one crewman, while larger ones required up to five.



A batteau tied to the shoreline with its crew already ashore. Note the quality of carpentering in this modern-day version by local craftsmen recreating a part of Virginia's past. Also note how easy it would be for hogsheads of tobacco to be loaded onto the craft.

Anthony Rucker is credited with building the first "James River style" batteau about 1775. Rucker was a tobacco inspector for Amherst County which included all of Nelson before it became a county in 1807. There were five Rucker brothers who were tobacco planters and they, along with growers all up and down the James, were in need of a way to transport tobacco hogsheads to the markets in Richmond.

First the French explorers used batteaux in addition to canoes in their fur trade. These shallow draft boats were well suited for the rivers and had the ability to carry a very heavy load. They were built in a wide variety of sizes. The boat was pointed at both ends, and two long steering oars called *sweeps* were used to maneuver it at each end as it floated downriver. The larger batteaux were manned by at least three men, two on the sweeps, one in the front (headsman) and one in the rear (steersman), and there were one or more additional crewmen equipped with oars to use in the slower flowing parts of the river. The crewmen also had sturdy iron-tipped poles to push the batteau off the shoals, rocks and snags, and to push along the river bottom to speed up the boat when needed. The flow of the river dictated the jobs of the batteauxmen; in slower water more help was needed to pole or paddle. In swift water, their responsibilities changed, here it was to "keep her straight" through the sluices and over the rapids. The batteau could be maneuvered in close to shore so the giant hogsheads (barrels), packed tight with about 1000

pounds of tobacco, could be rolled onto the craft. The larger batteau could carry 10 hogsheads of tobacco, each about 48" long and 30" in diameter.

Susan and Roger Huffman, with friend Dewey Wood and others, have floated the James many times in recent years in their batteau, "The Maple Run." Susan told of their experiences on the river, "Your rear 'sweep' person and two good polers on the front of the boat can get you through most every situation. We have had the pleasure of learning the river and the rhythm of batteau life when Dewey was with us for many years. Roger and Dewey were a great team and did not have to tell the other what needed to be done as we made our way down the James; they just knew each other and the river that well. I imagine that many of the crews in the 1700's and early 1800's were much like them."

The trip downriver from Lynchburg usually took about 7 days, and the return upriver trip took longer, both voyages dependent on the river's flow. Once down river, then came the arduous upriver journey using the sweep in the stern as a rudder; the other batteauxmen poled. Sometimes they had to jump overboard to push and pull the slim craft against the river current. Records note that at one time between Lynchburg and Richmond, there were about 500 batteaux and 1500 men involved in this early means of river commerce.

There are heart warming stories of the fun of the batteauxmen at nighttime as they traveled the river. They often secured their craft close to each other; then came supper and out came their banjos and fiddles and whatever else they may have been hidden for the occasion...and we can only imagine the merriment of these hardworking river men.

Henry Howe's book, *Historical Collections of Virginia*, notes that about 1835, at the little river village of Norwood [known then as New Market] where the Tye River flows into the James, there was a "tobacco inspection" where several hundred hogsheads of tobacco were inspected. It is highly probable that most of this traveled by batteaux to market. At this time the James River and Kanawha Canal was under construction and it was not completed to Lynchburg until 1840. Since Norwood was but one of the little villages along the James, one can only imagine how many hogsheads traveled downriver by batteaux. There were no railroads then, and the precious flow of the James River, with its batteaux, and canal boats later, connected Central Virginia counties to the world beyond.

A crowd of folks were at Scottsville on that day last month for the annual celebration of the batteaux. Some of the boat crews had boarded their craft in Lynchburg for the entire voyage, others joined in the fun for only a part of the trip. Following along with the batteaux was a group of canoes, rafts, and other boats which were part of an escorting and celebrating flotilla. The crews on the batteaux had friends and family meet them daily at campsites along the way. Those of us who watched from the banks could only shake our heads and marvel at this lesson in history that was being portrayed.

So long for now,

Paul Saunders

