

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The following overview of the history of the Memphis Landing is drawn from a much more extensive summary in the first volume of this report (Weaver et al. 1995). The reader should consult that report for further information and bibliographic citations.

The present Memphis Landing is the surviving portion of a series of four river landings developed along Memphis' frontages with the Mississippi and Wolf rivers between 1819 and ca. 1881. Today's Landing includes portions of the South Memphis Landing, developed between Union Avenue and Beale Street beginning in 1838, and the southern portion of the great Memphis Landing, first developed in the 1840s between Jefferson and Union avenues.

Before 1859, the appearance of the great Memphis Landing and the South Memphis Landing were quite different from the existing vast but well-defined stone pavement. Printed images from the 1840s and 1850s show the Landing as an expanse of rough, exposed, eroded bluff terraces, divided by east-west road cuts through the terraces to reach a narrow strip of land at the water's edge. The river's edge, a much smoother plane of clay and silt, was subject to erosion by the currents of the Mississippi River and proved to be an unreliable place for river traffic to land. Falling water levels often revealed impassable sheer drops in the slope of the embankment, caused by erosion of the bank by river currents during high water levels. The vertical movement of the Mississippi River is astonishing, sometimes exceeding 50 feet between periods of high and low water and 30 feet between average annual high and low water. During periods of low water, river passengers and laborers were forced to traverse two hundred to three hundred feet of the unstable bank before reaching compacted ground. Newspaper descriptions from this period suggest that crossing this embankment of mud was usually difficult, and virtually impossible during rainy periods.

The City of Memphis recognized that the surface of the Landing should be improved. Center Landing, between Adams and Poplar avenues, was paved before 1859. However, paving the portion of the Landing that remains today was not considered until 1859, when the opening of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad fueled a boom in activity at the Landing to connect river with rail transport. At that time, the City hired paving contractor John Loudon to initiate "paving the wharf with limestone or granite" between Adams and Union avenues to cover a width of 100 feet and length of 3,300 feet. Amendments to Loudon's contract set the thickness of the paving at 12 inches and extended its length to Beale Street. The stone used in the project was quarried in Illinois; contrary to popular and longstanding myth, it did not originate as ballast stones in sailing ships.

Loudon began the work in 1859; by August 1860 the City Engineer reported that Loudon had completed 19,558.27 square yards of paved surface. The project was halted soon after the outbreak of the Civil War. Loudon resumed the project in July 1866. Subsequent contracts with Loudon's sons and other contractors brought the Landing to completion in 1881. Analysis of the remaining pavement fabric on the Landing strongly suggests that at least portions of each of these paving projects remains in place today.

By the early 1880s, the original Memphis Landing at the mouth of Bayou Gayoso near Auction Avenue had been rendered obsolete by accretions of the river bank to the west. Center Landing was in the process of eroding away and was landlocked by the late 1880s. The focal point of commerce on the Memphis waterfront permanently shifted to the great Memphis Landing and the South Memphis Landing, then recognized as a single place.

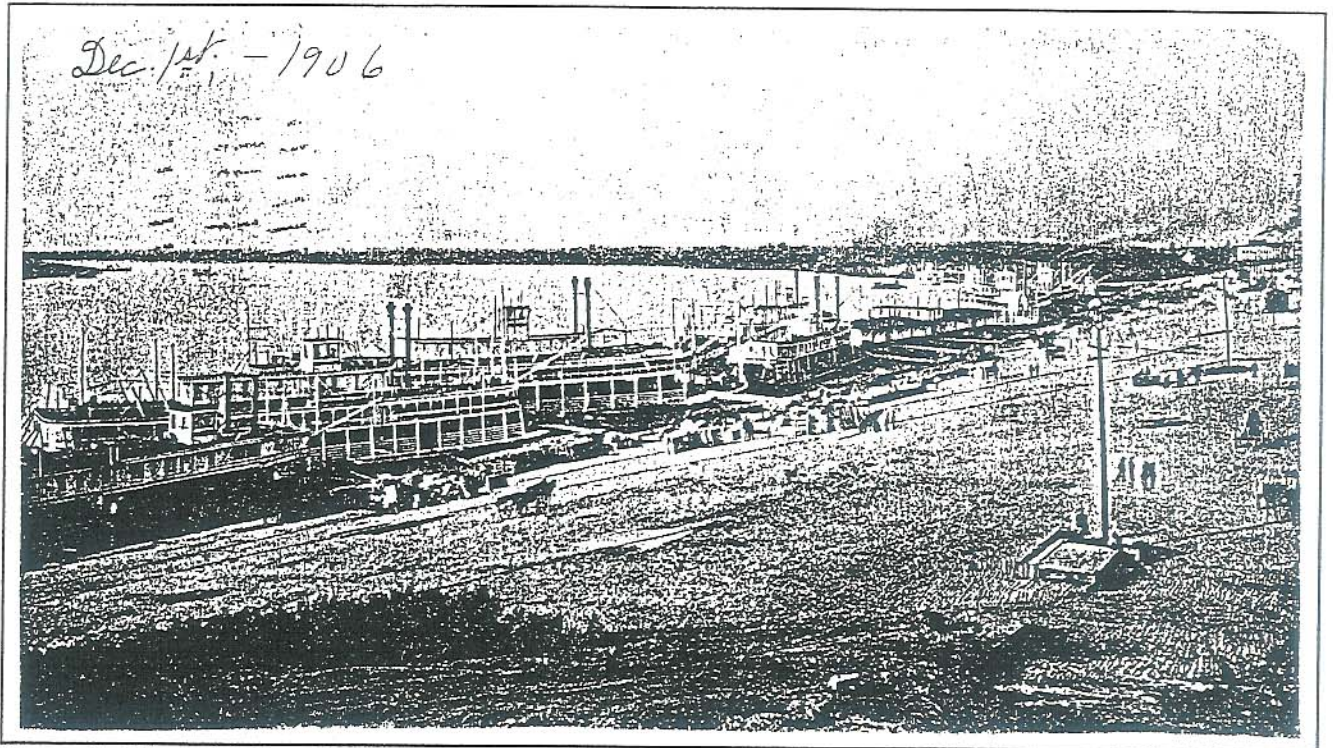


Figure 2. Memphis Landing ca. 1906 (View to the North from Beale Street).

The paving of the Memphis Landing between 1859 and 1881 was arguably the largest and most complex public works project undertaken by the City of Memphis in the nineteenth century, perhaps rivaled only by the construction of George Waring's revolutionary sanitary sewer system, which began in 1879. The completion of the Mississippi and Tennessee Railroad line across the brow of the Landing in 1882 established a direct connection between the river and rail terminal.

For the next fifty years, the Landing bustled with activity. The growth of the nation's railroads slowly diminished the importance of the Landing for passenger traffic, especially after the completion of the Frisco Railroad Bridge in 1892. Still, the river remained a necessary connection between the rich cotton plantations of the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas and the industrialized North. The poor quality of the road systems in the Mid-South region guaranteed that the river would remain an important transportation route for agricultural crops well into the twentieth century. Local steamship lines like the Lee Line and national carriers like the Anchor Line originated service from the Memphis Landing and continued to make Memphis a port of call on their routes, with daily trips until the 1930s. Individual steamships such as the Lee Line's *Kate Adams* attained such status in the city's collective consciousness that their names are still familiar to most Memphians.

It is difficult to pinpoint when the Memphis Landing began to slip in commercial importance and prestige. Some argue that the completion of the Frisco Bridge started the decline of the Landing's commercial role; others point to the region's escalating agricultural depression that began in the 1910s. An important factor was the isolation of the Landing from the main channel of the Mississippi River by the growth of Mud Island beginning in the 1910s. In all likelihood, a combination of these and other factors changed the role of the Landing in city life.

Harland Bartholomew proposed altering the Landing for a new purpose in the city's first comprehensive city plan, completed in 1924. Since then, urban planners, architects, and city leaders have occasionally proposed a solution to the question, "What shall we do with the Memphis Landing?" To date, the complex terrain of the river bluffs and the Landing itself have combined with the formidable and fickle Mississippi River to render many proposals impractical or impossible. Riverside Drive was constructed across the brow of the Landing in the 1930s; apart from that road project, the other proposals, including the massive parking lots proposed by Bartholomew, the 17-lane interstate highway, the heliport, and the megalithic apartment building included in other plans have all been considered briefly but discarded.

One probable reason for the survival of the Memphis Landing into the 1990s is its special place in the collective memory of Memphians. At its peak, the Memphis Landing played a role as important to the commercial and civic life of the city as the FedEx "Hub" and Memphis International Airport are in our own times. Perhaps its preservation has been accomplished in recognition of its valued service to the Memphis community, not just for its place in the City's economic development over a century and a quarter, but also in memory of the thousands of unknown people who built it and moved the commerce of the city across its surface.

For a much larger group, those who might be in Memphis for only a few days or even a few hours, the Memphis Landing provides a rare opportunity to approach the edge of the waters of the Mississippi, to touch the water if they wish to. Though this may seem insignificant to Memphis residents, the powerful place held by the Mississippi River in our national heritage, our literature, and our music is a magnet for visitors who feel attracted to this mighty waterway. Along its entire route, there are few places where the topography allows one actually to reach the river easily. Keeping the Memphis Landing as one of a very few urban places to experience the Mississippi River may be enough to justify its preservation.

LEVEL OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Memphis Landing was recognized as a significant historic resource by its inclusion in the boundaries of the Cotton Row Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in August 1979. Although this form of recognition is adequate to afford it protection under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the listing does not provide a comparative context to evaluate the Landing on a larger scale.

In conjunction with this study, an effort was made to contact each of the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) in the 13 states that border the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to gather comparative information concerning the survival of historic landings in their states. Based on this informal survey, the Memphis Landing is likely the best preserved of all of the nineteenth century landings in the Mississippi River drainage basin. Unlike landings in other major cities (Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, New Orleans), the Memphis Landing remains largely intact in its historic dimensions and physical composition. Moreover, the construction of flood control measures, interstate highways, and other obstructions has not severed its contact with the city it served. On a national level, then, the Memphis Landing may best represent the significant national themes of river commerce in the nineteenth century, in addition to its significant role in westward migration. There are no resources listed as National Historic Landmarks that represent these themes. It is recommended that nomination of the Landing as a National Historic Landmark be pursued.