

**Lesson Plan 4**  
**Fort Leavenworth and Steamboats**  
**Grades 5-12**  
**2 class periods**

**Objectives:**

Students will understand the impact of the steamboat on western development.  
Students will be able to identify famous people of the American frontier.

**Materials Needed:** background information, maps of the United States, textbooks, encyclopedias, pencil, paper, colored pencils

**Background:**

Fort Leavenworth, the frontier army, and steam boating had a strong link in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even before Fort Leavenworth was established in 1827, the Congress had appropriated \$6500 for Major Stephen H. Long of the army topographical engineers to explore western rivers, including the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri, on the “United States Steam Boat *Western Engineer*” and to report on their navigation and potential problems with snags, sand bars, and rapids. Although the Lower Missouri – from St. Louis to Fort Leavenworth – had long been navigated by keelboats and Mackinaws, the first steamboat to enter the Missouri was the *Independence* in 1819. The *Western Engineer* under Long followed that same year, along with five other steamboats requisitioned by the government for transporting troops, but only the *Western Engineer* made it as far as the original Council Bluffs, just north of today’s Omaha. However, it wasn’t until 1829, two years after Colonel Henry H. Leavenworth established Cantonment Leavenworth on the Kansas side of the Missouri, that regular steamboat service between St. Louis and the post began.

Even the fur companies continued to rely on the keelboats and Mackinaws into the early 1830s. In 1830 Pierre Chouteau, Jr. wrote a letter to American Fur Company headquarters in New York City and suggested the use of steamboats to bring provisions to the upper reaches of the Missouri each spring, returning to St. Louis in the early spring with some of the peltries. The rest of the furs would still be sent downriver later in the year on the usual keelboats and Mackinaws. This practice, of sending provisions up in the spring on the steamboats and sending furs down in the fall on keelboats or mackinaws, continued throughout the next thirty years. The American Fur Company’s first steamboat, a small side-wheeler, the *Yellowstone*, made its first run up the Missouri leaving St. Louis on April 16, 1831. She reached Cantonment Leavenworth on May 1 and the company’s Fort Tecumseh on June 19. No previous steamboat had gone beyond Council Bluffs.

Through 1854, when Kansas achieved territorial status, Fort Leavenworth saw a steady stream of visitors brought by steamboat to the edge of the frontier. The 1830s saw the arrival of fur traders, merchants, Indian agents, dragoons, doctors, missionaries, explorers, naturalists, artists, hunters, and adventurers. The 1840s witnessed the arrival of thousands headed for the Gold Rush in California and for homes in Oregon. Mormons, many of them emigrants from Europe, joined others headed for Utah. During the Mexican War, 1846-1848, thousands of troops, horses, laundresses, and supplies

arrived at Fort Leavenworth by steamboat from Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis to begin their journey south along the Santa Fe Trail. Finally, when Kansas became a territory as part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, steam ferries brought many Missouri natives across the river to stake claims in an attempt to establish Kansas as a slave state.

Throughout these years, steamboat travel involved many perils. Snags and sand bars often grounded or sank boats. Although grounded boats could often be saved, much work was required to repair them and to dry their cargo. At times, if it did not appear the boat could be moved soon, the passengers and cargo might be transferred. In May 1851, 120 troops on the grounded *St. Paul* were transferred to the *Alton* to continue their trip to Fort Leavenworth. Ice in the river could also cause problems. The first steamboat of the year usually began travel on the Missouri sometime in February and travel could continue until November. However, sometimes the attempt was made too soon as with the *El Paso* in February 1852. The boat was crippled by ice and had to put its cargo ashore at Fort Leavenworth and then transfer its passengers to the *Kansas*. In addition to problems for the steamboats there were other problems for their passengers. Cholera was a constant concern. In July of 1833, only two out of a crew of ten survived a cholera outbreak on the *Yellowstone*. Residents along the river threatened to burn the boat. Another major cholera epidemic on the river occurred among Mormon emigrants from England. By the time the *Mary* reached St. Joseph from St. Louis, 47 out of 250 emigrants had died. Reports of cholera on steamboats during this time period were common and often resulted in desertion of the ship by its officers and citizens attempting to prevent landings.

**Sources:**

- Barry, Louise. The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West 1540-1854. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society. 1972.
- Drago, Harry Sinclair. The Steamboaters: From the Early Side-Wheelers to the Big Packets. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1967.
- Hill, Forest G. Roads, Rails & Waterways: The Army Engineers and Early Transportation. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1957.
- Hunt, Elvid. History of Fort Leavenworth 1827-1937. Fort Leavenworth: The Command and General Staff School Press. 1937.

**Activity: Journals of Famous Visitors by Steamboat to Fort Leavenworth**

**Procedure:** After introducing students to the background information, assign each student one of the “famous visitors” from the chart below. Have students research some additional facts about their assigned character in their textbook, encyclopedia, or the Internet. Have students write a fictional journal entry for their character based on their life. In their journal entry, they should include information about their occupation, what they hope to accomplish by traveling west, what their journey west on the steamboat might have been like, what other types of people they might have seen, what the weather was like, etc. In addition, they should draw a picture of something they have seen on their journey that would have been important to them or would have made a lasting impression. Have students take turns sharing their completed work.

**Famous Visitors by Steamboat to Fort Leavenworth\***

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Date arrived at Fort Leavenworth</b>	<b>Steamboat</b>
Pierre Chouteau, Jr.	Fur trade monopoly of the Missouri River Valley	May 1, 1831	<i>Yellowstone</i>
George Catlin	Artist famous for work on American Indians	September 1832	Upriver on <i>Yellowstone</i> , downriver by canoe
William Clark	Lewis & Clark expedition, 1804-06	September 30, 1836	<i>Boonville</i> , left for St. Louis on the <i>Diana</i>
Philip Kearny	Nephew of Stephen W. Kearny, later general in the Civil War	June 6, 1837	<i>Kansas</i>
Rev. Pierre Jean DeSmet	Jesuit missionary to the Indians, peace negotiator	May 21, 1838	<i>Howard</i>
John J. Audubon	Artist specializing in study of birds	May 3, 1843	<i>Omega</i>
Stephen W. Kearny	Commanding officer at Fort Leavenworth, 1843-1844, commanded Western Army of the United States during the Mexican War	May 15, 1846	<i>Amaranth</i> (leaving Fort Leavenworth to establish new post – the first Fort Kearny)
Philip St. George Cooke	Led the Mormon Battalion during the Mexican War	July 6, 1846	<i>Amaranth/Corinne</i>
Keokuk	Head chief of the “Mississippi” Sacs	mid-March 1847	<i>Amelia</i> (left to go to St. Louis with 10 other Indians to appear in the circus)
John C. Fremont	The “Pathfinder” – explorer of the Army Topographical Corps	August, 1847	<i>Martha</i> (on the way to Washington D.C. via St. Louis to be court-martialed for insubordination of Kearny.
Andrew H. Reeder	Appointed first territorial governor of Kansas	October 7, 1854	<i>Polar Star</i>

\*These are not necessarily the only times these visitors came to Fort Leavenworth by steamboat.

**Source:** Barry, Louise. The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West 1540-1854. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society. 1972.

In addition, consider including these women who surely traveled by steamboat at sometime with their famous husbands, but who are not specifically noted in the records:

**Jessie Benton** – wife of John C. Fremont, daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. She wrote about many of Fremont's adventures, including many magazine articles.

**Lucy Bakewell** – wife of John J. Audubon. She worked as a governess and teacher in Louisiana to help support her family.

**Mary Radford** – wife of Stephen W. Kearny. She accompanied him to Fort Leavenworth. Several of their nine children were born at the post.