The History of the
GENERAL JACKSON SHOWBOAT

Announcement

In late December of 1983, Opryland announced plans for a $10 million showboat project - a 300-foot, four-decked paddle wheeler, which would begin a new era for Nashville’s tourism and entertainment industries. It would also become an important footnote to the history of the floating theaters.

We named our showboat the General Jackson in honor of the first steamboat to ply the Cumberland River. Unlike the showboats of the 19th and 20th centuries, the General Jackson offers year-round sightseeing, dining and entertainment cruises. Our showboat carries more than 1,000 passengers and is longer overall than the Delta Queen, the famous Mississippi River boat.

Nathan R. Cline, a 10-year veteran with Opryland was named director of the General Jackson. Jeffboat Inc. in Jeffersonville, Indiana, at one time the nation’s largest inland shipyard was assigned to build our showboat. Nickum & Spaulding Associates of Seattle, Washington, was the marine architecture and engineering firm on the project, and Nashvillian Charles Warterfield of Warterfield Goodwin and Associates in Nashville was the consulting architect.

Keel-Laying

On September 15, 1984, the General Jackson formally marked its construction with a traditional keel laying in the Jeffboat shipyard. Opryland officials, Minnie Pearl and government officials joined the shipbuilders and a gathering of townspeople near the banks of the Ohio River to “lay the keel” for the showboat.

The keel laying consisted of placing upright, in position to be joined together, eight huge sections of the hull and welding them together. It is one of the time-honored traditions of shipbuilding.

A highlight of the ceremony was a presentation of a section of wood taken from the historic Ryman Auditorium, which was given to Jeffboat President Bob Greene, by Grand Ole Opry performer Minnie Pearl and E.W. Wendell, then president and chief executive officer of Opryland. The wooden plaque is now displayed in the Heritage Hall Lounge on the General Jackson.

Construction

After months of plans and dreaming, our showboat finally started taking shape in the bustling Jeffboat shipyard. One hundred workers cut, riveted and welded on the 1,500-ton vessel that was to become the newest element of the Opryland entertainment complex.

Engines, brass railings and etched glass panels were installed. The Victorian Theater was decorated with ornate Victorian detail and rich colors of the period. The New Orleans Lounge and the Captain’s Pantry also were furnished for dining and entertainment.

What was once flat gray steel was transformed into a floating palace, measuring almost 300 feet from gangplank to paddle wheel and 63 feet across its beam.

While construction on the boat was progressing, Ingram Barge Co. was contracted to provide the seven-member navigational crew for the General Jackson. They commenced the search, which later turned up two veteran river pilots with more than 90 years of river experience between them – Captains Edgar Allen Poe and William Howell.

Showboat director Nathan Cline also announced that the award-winning culinary staff at the Opryland Hotel would handle food and beverage operations for the showboat.
Launch

Draped with red, white and blue bunting, the General Jackson rested atop five greased rails, which sloped down into the Ohio River. It was held in place by wooden pegs and five thick ropes. It was Saturday, April 20, and thousands of people were gathered at Jeffboat work site to watch the launch of the General Jackson.

Grand Ole Opry star Porter Wagoner blew a wooden boat whistle and called out “Let her go, boys.” George D. Hay, the founder of the Grand Ole Opry always started the Opry that way and it was especially fitting that the tradition continues with the General Jackson launching.

So, five men wielding brand new axes cut the coils of rope, the showboat slid down the rails, and the rest belonged “God and gravity.” As the massive vessel slid into the water amid applause and boat whistles, several of the boats that had gathered on the Ohio River to watch the launch had to scramble to get out of the way of the free-floating showboat.

The vessel’s two-story, 36-ton paddle wheel was installed the following day.

Delivery

Two months after its launch, the General Jackson cast off from Jeffboat and headed on a four-day journey to its homeport of Opryland USA. Approximately 80 people were on board the vessel as it traveled down the Ohio River to Kentucky Lake, taking a northern canal to the Cumberland River and on to Nashville.

Traveling at an average of 10 miles per hour, the showboat passed through as many as seven locks during its 500-mile trip from Jeffersonville, Indiana. For the most part, the cruise was a working trip for those aboard. Decks were painted, railings were installed and polished and other pre-operation chores were completed.

On Sunday, June 23, thousands greeted the General Jackson as it cruised up the Cumberland River, past Nashville’s Riverfront Park on its way to Opryland.

The following week captains Howell and Poe and the rest of our crew busied themselves with acceptance trials and training cruises.

Christening

A christening is a happy event, called for the purpose of “blessing a new vessel and wishing it many happy voyages.” And, the christening of the General Jackson was no exception.

Thousands of onlookers gathered at Riverfront Park and hundreds more lined Nashville’s Shelby Street and Memorial bridges for the christening of the showboat, Tuesday, July 2, 1985. Gov. Lamar Alexander, Mayor Richard Fulton and Opryland owner Edward L. Gaylord took part in the dockside ceremony. Mark Twain hosted the gala.

The highlight of the evening came when Thelma Gaylord smashed a bottle of champagne against the General Jackson to christen the vessel and ward off bad luck, in true nautical tradition.

The christening came to a climatic ending with William Warfield’s powerful rendition of Old Man River, the song his voice made famous in the 1951 musical Show Boat.

Others featured at the evening gala included the Grand Ole Opry’s The 4 Guys, who sang the national anthem, and Grand Ole Opry announcer Grant Turner, who blessed the boat.
Showboats never did have trouble drawing a crowd. They had everything: food, drink, glamour, the mystique of an elegant visitor from out of town, and most of all, the shows. With its’ impressive size and opulent décor, the General Jackson is certainly a colorful and magnificent showboat, carrying more than six million passengers since it’s christening in 1985. And, rest assured, the dedicated staff of the General Jackson strives to make every cruise an event its passengers will never forget.

From the signature service of the culinary and banquet staff to the excellent entertainment provided by some of the best singers and dancers Nashville has to offer to the safe passage provided by the captain and crew, the General Jackson has earned the right to be called...

“The Grandest Showboat of Them All”
A Few Facts About the General Jackson Showboat

NAME – “General Jackson”, after the first steamboat to operate on the Cumberland River in 1817 which was named after General Andrew Jackson

LAUNCH DATE – April 20, 1985

BUILT BY – Jeffboat, Inc, Jeffersonville, Indiana

CHRISTENING – July 2, 1985, by Mrs. Thelma Gaylord

CAPACITY – 1,000 passengers, 172 crew

LENGTH – 274 feet; 300 feet including gang plank

BEAM – 63 feet, 6 inches (width)

HEIGHT – 55 feet, fixed; 77 feet to the top of folding stacks

DRAFT – 7 feet

ENGINES – 2 Caterpillar 3512’s; 1050 hp per engine; 880 kw generators

MOTORS – Two 600 HP General Electric motors turn the paddlewheel – 1,200 hp total

SPEED – 13 mph top speed; 4-8 mph average speed

PADDLEWHEEL – 36 feet long, 24 feet in diameter; weighs 36 tons

FUEL - #2 diesel fuel with a 12,500 gallon tank; consumes 35 - 65 gallons per hour

WEIGHT – 1,489 tons dead weight

BOW THRUSTER – 200 hp prop

SEARCH LIGHT – Xenon bulb; 120 million candle power

DOCK – 195’ X 35’ barge

MOORING CELL – Large cylinders on each end of the dock filled with sand and rock, topped with concrete and used to support and secure the barge/dock. The long white line painted near the top of the cell at the north end of the dock marks the high water mark from the Nashville Flood of 2010.

CUMBERLAND RIVER – Navigable for 381 miles; the General Jackson dock is at mile 197.5; average depth is 15-25 feet; normal (pool) level is 385 feet elevation. A round trip to downtown Nashville and back is 14 miles. The head waters are in Harlin County, Kentucky, and the mouth is at Smithland, Kentucky, where it joins the Ohio River.
HISTORICAL POINTS OF INTEREST

NORTHERN ROUTE

Old Lock #2 - The second of nine locks constructed upstream from Nashville. It first went into operation in 1907 and was not phased out of service until Cheatham Lock was completed in 1952.

Abandoned Coffer Dam at Neely's Bend - About 1.5 miles upstream of Old Lock #2, you will see the remains of a timber coffer dam which was originally built for the construction of Lock #2 in 1891. It was abandoned and moved to its new site...Old Lock #2.

John Hartford’s Navigational Light - Named after the three-time Grammy Award winning singer/songwriter noted for his singing about America's rivers most of his career. The light is located at river mile 200.7, and the Hartford House is at mile 200.8. His DVD "Banjoes, Fiddles and Riverboats”, which is a rich history of riverboating and the General Jackson, is available for viewing and for purchase on board the boat in Delilah’s Gift Shop.

SOUTHERN ROUTE

Edgar Allen Poe Navigational Light and Dayboard - Named after the late Captain E.A. Poe who, along with Captain William Howell, served as the first captain of the General Jackson when it began service at Opryland in 1985. The light is located at river mile 196.5.

Demonbreun’s Cave - One of the first white settlers in this area, Timothy Demonbreun took refuge from Indians to this cave in the 1770's. He had navigated the river from south of St. Louis.

Waterworks Intake Tower - This imposing structure is often mistaken for a lighthouse or other aid to navigation; however, until 1986 it was the water intake tower for the Omohundro Waterworks.

Shelby Park - The park opened to the public July 4, 1912, and Major E. C. Lewis prepared the plans for park development, designing the Sycamore Lodge which opened on August 24, 1912, the Mission House, several log cabins, and various other park features. The park consists of 361.5 acres and features many other exciting landmarks.

Shelby Street Pedestrian Bridge - Built in 1909.

Nashville's Riverfront Park - First phase was dedicated July, 1983 and was completed in 1986. It is the focal point of many citywide events including a spectacular fireworks display every July 4th. The General Jackson was christened here July 2, 1985.

Nissan Stadium - Located on the east bank of the Cumberland River, this is the home stadium of the Tennessee Titans football team.

Fort Nashborough - This is the site where John Donelson brought a flotilla of keelboats carrying the wives and children of Nashville's first settlers, who had arrived in January 1780 and built log cabins inside a log fortress on the riverbank.
THE HURRICANE DECK

Towering 55 feet above the water line, this is the ideal spot for sightseeing. Come up for a panoramic view of the river. Enjoy the sounds of a band playing a variety of your favorite country and pop tunes during the reception prior to dinner or after lunch. The pilot house is located on this level and is available for special Pilot House tours before or after the cruise. There are also beverages available on the Hurricane Deck.

THE TEXAS DECK

This deck will provide access completely around the boat as you relax on a leisurely day cruise or stroll under a moonlit night on an evening cruise.

"Delilah's Gifts"

On the bow of the Texas Deck is Delilah's, where you may purchase General Jackson collectibles, souvenirs or view the DVD "Banjoes, Fiddles and Riverboats" featuring John Hartford and the General Jackson.

"Heritage Hall"

You're invited to enjoy the sights of the river from indoors during a day cruise or just sit back and relax during evening cruises. There are also beverages available for purchase here. This elegant room is also available for private receptions prior to dinner or may be reserved for private events for the duration of one of our cruises. The General Jackson catering staff can arrange this special event for your group.

"Texas Stern"

This covered area provides a great view of the Cumberland River during the Midday Cruise or a great view of the Nashville skyline at night as the General Jackson departs the downtown harbor during our Evening Cruise.

THE UPPER DECK

There's always a nice breeze on the Upper Deck Bow. This level also provides access to Victorian Theater balcony seating.

“Paddlewheel Deck”

Located on the stern of the Upper Deck, the Paddlewheel Deck offers the best view of the General Jackson’s magnificent red paddlewheel.

THE MAIN DECK

The Main Deck features the entrance for the Victorian Theater, a genuine replica of the finest accommodations the stern wheelers had to offer. When it's performance time in the Victorian Theater, you'll quickly discover why the General Jackson is known as "The Grandest Showboat of Them All". Also, our seated breakfast, lunch and evening dinners will be served here. Wheelchair accessible restrooms are located on either side of the bow.

NOTE: Public Chapter 410, known as the “Non-smoker Protection Act”, was signed into law by Governor Bredesen on June 11th, 2007 and became effective on October 1, 2007. Under this law, smoking is prohibited in all enclosed public places within the State of Tennessee. Non-enclosed areas of public places, such as the dockside gazebo, the boarding ramp and the outer deck areas of the General Jackson are exempt from the smoking ban.
Accommodations for Guests with Disabilities

The General Jackson provides accessibility for our guests with disabilities as follows:

**Boarding Ramp** – The ramp that leads to the General Jackson has an incline from the dock onto the Texas Deck of the General Jackson. There is also an inclined ramp on the dock that leads to the Main Deck of the boat.

**Texas Deck / Clerestory Deck** – There are two (2) inclined ramps (Port and Starboard) leading from the Texas Deck to the Clerestory Deck for guests to access the retail shop and the Heritage Hall lounge. Doors to both of these areas are 36” or more in width. This deck is also the uppermost deck with access for the onboard elevator. Guests wishing to utilize the elevator can do so with the assistance of a General Jackson crew member. The restrooms located on this deck are not wheelchair accessible.

**Upper Deck** – The balcony level of the Victorian Theater is located on this deck. The deck from the elevator to the balcony is flat for Tables 51 – 75. There is a step up to the second tier of the balcony where Tables 76 – 80 are located, however an aluminum ramp is available to over this step for guests sitting in this area. The next tier in this area is one step up and provides access to the covered Upper Deck Bow. The aluminum ramp would be required for this step also. A General Jackson crew member will assist with the ramp upon request. The paddlewheel observation deck is also located on this deck. The deck from the elevator to the back of the boat to view the paddlewheel is flat with an incline provided from the doorway onto the deck area. Windows have also been provided in the bulkhead for viewing of the paddlewheel. The restrooms on this deck are not wheelchair accessible.

**Main Deck** – The main floor of the Victorian Theater is located on this deck. The deck from the elevator to the main floor is flat for all tables. Crew members will assist in clearing a path for those in wheelchairs who need assistance. The only accessible restrooms on the General Jackson are located on this deck with the Women’s being on the Port Side and the Men’s being on the Starboard Side of the Main Deck Bow. The deck is inclined that leads from the door to the deck on the bow of the boat.

**Hurricane Deck** – This top deck of the General Jackson is not accessible by elevator, but only by two staircases. There are no restrooms located on this deck.
General Jackson

Hurricane Deck

Texas Deck

Upper Deck

Main Deck