

# American river pirates and their influence on pioneer life essay



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“ When I think of pirates, I think of the Caribbean Sea or the Gulf of Aden. I don't think of the Ohio River. ” (Lepper) Mark Twain lived during a time when hearing someone's relation of a river pirate in America was typical, and stores along the rivers were frequently being pillaged. He had much experience on the rivers due to his early profession, and witnessed first-hand the crimes that they committed. Twain expressed his thoughts toward piracy through his literature, written around the time that these greedy bandits took place.

In the late 18th century, river pirates roamed the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, hunting for pioneers traveling down the river with their cargo. A common location for them to reside was a large tavern referred to as Cave-In-Rock, and since this was so easily disguised the pirates used their cunning and intelligence to scam the pioneers into their trap. River pirates were an essential element to America's history, and they provided for many of the hardships the pioneers had to face when living in early America. River piracy began in the late 18th century as the river traffic increased due to trading in New Orleans.

People would sail down the river with all of their possessions they intended to trade, and because of this many found it extremely economically profitable to steal from these boats. The pirates remained mainly on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, since these were the two most frequent routes to use when traveling to New Orleans. The most common location for the pirates to reside was a huge cavern that is referred to today as, Cave-In-Rock. (Davis) \* Cave-In-Rock was a vast cavern about 55 feet by 160 feet, situated in the limestone bluffs right off of the Ohio River in Southern Illinois (Davis).

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This was a wonderful haven for criminals engrossed in river piracy since it provided expansive views of the Ohio River due to its lofty elevation of about 50 feet up (Ailinani). Also, since there were countless trees and brush surrounding it, the entrance was partially concealed, making the opening difficult to find unless you knew what you were looking for (Valois). The dense river traffic and immensity of the cave lured many travelers to come and explore. This gave the pirates the ability to come out, steal the boat, and murder the voyagers. (Ailinani)

The first river pirate to use the advantages of Cave-In-Rock was Captain Samuel Mason, a former officer in George Washington's army. According to Harry Ailinani, he came from an excellent family and was recognized as an intellectual man, but before long he began to thief, rob, and kill in eastern Tennessee. Mason developed a gang who eventually spread to present-day Henderson, Kentucky on the banks of the Ohio River, and it was there that he discovered Cave-In-Rock. Mason used his intelligence to generate "accidents" that intentionally grounded passing flatboats.

For example, he used the men in his gang to pose as pilots that would help guide ships of pioneers through an intricate eight mile channel leading up to Cave-In-Rock. Then, they would deliberately ground the boats and raid them. Mason also used women to wait at a nearby island called Diamond Island, and they would ask passerby to pick them up and take them to the tavern where the gang was waiting. These techniques were just a few of the many that Mason used to create terror on the rivers for 20 years. When simply trying to bring their cargo down to New Orleans pioneers would have to risk their lives and possessions.

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Finally, after many years, Mason was found by law officials. He moved to the Spanish territory in lower Mississippi and attempted to pass as an ordinary citizen, but his plan was ruined when he was discovered with 20 scalps and \$7, 000 bankroll. The Spanish turned him over to the Americans, but when he was on his way to jail he was able to find a way to escape. However, soon after two of his own men killed him in order to receive the reward money. Samuel Mason's adventures and escapades have inspired many stories and film, allowing his legend to still live on today. (Davis)

Another gang of pirates that took up temporary residence in Cave-In-Rock and spread terror throughout the surrounding region was the Jim Wilson family. At the turn of the century he brought his family here when he discovered it while looking for shelter during a heavy storm. Soon after, he began a tavern named, " Wilson's Liquor Vault and House of Entertainment". This pub attracted many gamblers and thieves, who eventually became his gang of robbers and murderers. They used the tavern to draw passerby, and then they would kill the travelers and Wilson's gang would sail the boats to New Orleans and trade the cargo for money.

After a while, suspicion began to rise in the town since many valuable cargoes that had the left upper Ohio port were never heard from or seen again. Much of the gang fled, and the others that were found were arrested. Ultimately, Wilson was killed by one of his own men in exchange for reward money, just like what happened to Mason, the previous Cave-In-Rock river pirate. (Ailinani) The third and final of the most powerful river pirates to occupy Cave-In-Rock were the Harpe brothers.

Even though they were referred to as brothers, they were essentially just cousins. Weiser) Micajah, named Big Harpe, was the oldest and Wiley was the youngest, called Little Harpe. Renee Valois refers to these two as America's earliest serial killers. They took extreme pleasure in torturing and slaughtering people. For example, together they once pushed travelers off of a cliff just for the sheer amusement of it. (Ailinani) The Harpes originally grew up in Tennessee, Kentucky, and in Illinois. They fought in the American Revolution on the side of the British, but it was said that the only reason why they joined was because of all the violence involved.

While fighting they participated in burning farms, raping women, and pillaging. After the war they were falsely accused of murder by a man named Moses Stegall and placed in jail, however they escaped and discovered Cave-In-Rock when they were on the run (Weiser). Here they captured many travelers coming down the river and killed many of them. One time they even took a few ashore, blindfolded and tied one to a horse, and scared the horse off a bluff of over a hundred feet high. Eventually they were driven out of a cave by other outlaws just because they committed so many unpleasant acts.

Today, around the area of Cave-In-Rock, many legends of the pirates are still told. Nearby locations were also named after the pirates that once resided there. For example, a road was named " Harpe's Head Road" because this was where Micajah was decapitated and his head was stuck on a pole by John Lieper and Moses Stegal. There are also locations that are named " Harpe's Hill" and " Harpe's House. These are all popular tourist attractions,

and Cave-In-Rock and the park around it was named a state park in 1929 in southern Illinois, as seen in the picture to the right.

Many books have also been written describing the cave's history, such as *The Outlaws of Cave-In-Rock* by Otto A. Rothert and *It Happened in Southern Illinois* by John W. Allen. (Ailinani) Even today it is extremely difficult to find evidence of river pirates. For example, it is hard to prove that a boat sank from pirates rather than just natural causes. Most of today's known information has come from accounts in travel diaries, court transcripts, and other government papers. Archaeologists still have never found a single definite pirate-related archaeological site.

However, in order to find more evidence they could dig in store rooms rather than in dirt. There are also many documents in the American, Spanish, and French archives relating to American river piracy that have not yet been examined. (Davis) The river piracy that occurred in the late 18th century had much influence on the literature written at the time. For example, Mark Twain lived much of his life on the Mississippi River when his family moved there when he was four years old. When he was 17 Twain became a river pilot's apprentice and then became a licensed river pilot.

Because of his life experience on the river when Twain wrote his books they typically were very centered around river life. In his book, *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain discusses how if people were good, then God would allow them to become pirates along the river. This quotation, " Now and then we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates," (Clemens) describes the desire that people had to live the

adventurous lives of river pirates. They envisioned these notorious bandits as having adventurous and daring lives and that they were draped in fine cloths and gold.

This aspiration is also portrayed in Mark Twain's, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Referring to pirates, the character Joe states, " And don't they wear the bulliest clothes! Oh no! All gold and silver and di'monds," (Twain) said Joe, with enthusiasm. At one point in the book, Tom and his friends had all run away to a nearby island to pursue their interest in piracy. Young boys always dreamed of having a life just like the pirates they visualized. Piracy was a tremendously common career at the time, and Mark Twain even knew of some of his own ancestors that became a part of this trade.

River pirates were an essential element to America's history, and they provided for many of the hardships the pioneers had to face when living in early America. Even though they were the most efficient means of travel to use at the time, rivers were widely feared by the early pioneers. The slaughter that took place threatened the lives of pioneers and affected river travel, and it made settlers eager to have law enforcement in close proximity to the rivers. These pirates made the pioneers' lives much more precarious, and without them the history of America would not be the equivalent to what it is today.