

Arkansas Atlantis: The Lost Town of Napoleon

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MARK TWAIN'S SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CHARACTER in *Life on the Mississippi* had heard a tale of murder, revenge, and buried treasure. A dying man told him of an unscrupulous Union soldier who had stowed ten thousand dollars in gold in Napoleon, Arkansas, during the closing days of the war. Twain sought the treasure and was on his way to Napoleon with directions to the loot: "Brick livery stable, stone foundation, middle of town, corner of Orleans and Market. Corner toward Court-house. Third stone, fourth row." As the riverboat approached Napoleon, Twain told the captain to go ashore, but the captain explained: "Why, hang it, don't you know? There is n't any Napoleon any more. Has n't been for years and years. The Arkansas River burst through it, tore it all to rags, and emptied it into the Mississippi!" Any hope that the treasure might remain in the ruins was dashed as the captain described the destruction of the town: "Just a fifteen minute job, or such a matter. Did n't leave hide nor hair, shred nor shingle of it, except the fag-end of a shanty and one brick chimney,—all that's left of Napoleon." Twain fondly recalled that Napoleon had been a "good big self-complacent town twenty years ago. Town that was county-seat of a great and important county; town with a big United States marine hospital; town of innumerable fights—an inquest every day; town where I had used to know the prettiest girl . . . and the most accomplished in the whole Mississippi Valley."¹

Napoleon had been washed away by the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers in the years following the Civil War. Twain's 1883 account of its destruction—"swallowed up, vanished, gone to feed the fishes"—was

¹Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883; New York: Oxford, 1996), 355, 362-363.

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more dramatic than the actual process, but the town's ruin demonstrated the Mississippi's power and the futility of efforts to control it. Yet the river had also brought the town into being. The ambitious residents of Napoleon, who had made their town into a well-known stopover for those traveling the Mississippi between the 1840s and 1860s, had paid more attention to the commercial possibilities than to the dangers of the river, which often flooded the town.²

The town of Napoleon existed at the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas for fewer than fifty years. But many notable events took place at that site even before the town was founded. Some suggest that the Jesuit missionary Marquette may have celebrated Arkansas's first Catholic mass there. It might have been the burial site for Pierre Laclede, who founded St. Louis in 1764 and died on a return trip from New Orleans.³ Napoleon was founded in the 1820s or 1830s by the planter, land speculator, and former French soldier Frederick Notrebe, who named it for "his old commander," though he had been forced to flee Napoleonic France.⁴ Scholars have disagreed as to the exact year of Napoleon's establishment, some placing it as late as 1840. But Napoleon's first primary school was founded on December 10, 1838. Earlier that year, Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis sent Father Peter Donnelly to establish a Catholic church in Arkansas. He purchased land for the church in Napoleon and held the first mass there in May 1839.⁵

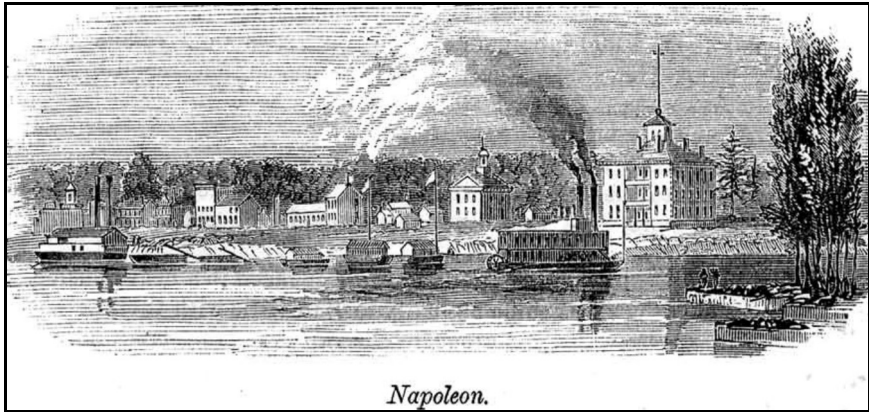
Many accounts bear out Mark Twain's description of a robust riverine community. Napoleon served as the county seat for Desha County and quickly became prominent as a shipping center where steamboats and sternwheelers transferred passengers and goods to shallow-draft

²Ibid., 363. There have been two towns in Arkansas named Napoleon. The first was the present town of Batesville. "This little settlement was on the old St. Genevieve road and when the town was first laid out in 1820, it was called Napoleon but when James Woodson Bates settled here, the high regard for him caused the name of the town to be changed to Batesville," Mrs. C. G. Hinkle, "Historic Homes in Batesville," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1946): 283.

³Dr. and Mrs. T. L. Hodges, "Possibilities for the Archaeologist and Historian in Eastern Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (June 1943): 156-159. Desha County officials have discovered the grave of Cecilia de Villemont Smith, daughter of one of the Arkansas's Spanish governors, Don Carlos de Villemont, at the site of Napoleon; Dorothy Jones Core, "The Saving of Cecilia," *Grand Prairie Historical Bulletin* 26 (no. 1 & 2, 1983): 33; George P. Kelley, "Markers Date Back More than 100 Years" *Programs of the Desha County Historical Society* 7 (Spring 1981): 73.

⁴William D. Hoyt, Jr., "Justice Daniel in Arkansas, 1851 and 1853," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (June 1942): 159; Boyd Johnson, "Frederick Notrebe," *ibid.* 21 (Autumn 1962): 269-283; Hodges, "Possibilities for the Archeologist," 159-160.

⁵Walter Moffatt, "Arkansas Schools, 1819-1840," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1953): 103; James M. Woods, "'To the Suburb of Hell': Catholic Missionaries in Arkansas, 1803-1843," *ibid.* 48 (Autumn 1989): 237-238.



An etching of Napoleon from John Warner Barber and Henry Howe's *Our Whole Country; or, the Past and Present of the United States, Historical and Descriptive* (Cincinnati: Henry Howe, 1861).

boats that traveled up the Arkansas River. An 1890 almanac suggested that before its demise, the town had "about 2,000 inhabitants" and was the "chief business point for miles up and down the river."⁶ "Lusty" Napoleon was known for hosting many river travelers.⁷ John Brown, who later attempted to spark a slave uprising at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, was even rumored to have been among the town's guests—though Brown's biographers fail to mention any such visit.⁸ This "Port Said" of the Mississippi offered travelers goods and services on wharf boats, as well as in the saloons, theaters, banks, inns, and cotton offices on shore.⁹ In 1850, a "large wharf boat" was built with storage for eight hundred tons of freight as well as groceries, liquor, and boat supplies for sale. It also could host up to fifty guests in its cabins.¹⁰ A federal marine hospital provided medical care. But Napoleon's leaders were not content with their town being simply a popular stop on the Arkansas and Mississippi Riv-

⁶*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing, 1890), 1000; C. C. Stuart, "Desha County to 1866," *Programs of the Desha County Historical Society* 8 (Spring 1982): 26-29; Sybil Hightower, "Settling the South End of Grand Prairie," *Grand Prairie Historical Bulletin* 24 (no. 3 & 4, 1981): 28; Elmo Howell, "Mark Twain's Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 29 (Autumn 1970): 198-202.

⁷*Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), February 11, 1940, p. 2.

⁸Hodges, "Possibilities for the Archeologist," 160.

⁹*Ibid.*, 159-160; Howell, "Mark Twain's Arkansas," 200.

¹⁰*Arkansas Gazette*, January 15, 1851, cited in Mattie Brown, "River Transportation in Arkansas, 1819-1890," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (December 1942): 350.

ers. They hoped that a planned railroad to the Pacific Ocean would make Napoleon the entry point to the West. As early as 1839, the Arkansas General Assembly had granted a charter for a railroad linking Napoleon to Little Rock.¹¹

For all of its antebellum prosperity, not all were impressed with Napoleon, though. United States Supreme Court justice Peter Daniel spent a few days in Napoleon on his way to Little Rock in 1851 and wrote his daughter that it was dilapidated and a “most wretched” place and complained of “filth in every shape & degree.” He continued:

This miserable place consists of a few slightly built wood houses, hastily erected no doubt under some scheme of speculation, and which are tumbling down without ever having been finished—and those which are standing, are some of them without doors or windows. To give an idea of the condition of things, I will state that the best hotel in the place, is an old dismantled Steam Boat In one of the staterooms of this old Boat I have my chamber about six feet by four; and in what is called the social hall, or more properly the thoroughfare, I am now writing serenaded by muschetos, who are not deterred from their attack [by] the motion of my fingers, on which they constantly fasten; whilst out of doors, they are joined by clouds of what in this region is called the Buffalo Gnat; an insect so fierce & so insatiate, that it kills the horses & mules bleeding them to death.¹²

Napoleon gained a reputation as a rough town in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. An anecdote from its heyday testified to this sordid reputation. Joe Hibbard, son of Napoleon shopkeeper James Hibbard, left Napoleon to attend Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He told the following story:

A lecturer arrived at the school one day; and the students gathered in the assembly hall to hear his account of his travels. In the course of his lecture he told the students, dramatically, “I’ve been within three hundred yards of hell!” Then he went on to describe a town which he had visited during his travels. It was a town called, Napoleon, Arkansas, with half a dozen business

¹¹Stephen E. Wood, “The Development of Arkansas Railroads,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1948): 103-140.

¹²Hoyt, “Justice Daniel in Arkansas,” 160-161.

houses and twenty three saloons and a murder committed every night.

Joe Hibbard soon changed his home address from Napoleon to Bolivar County, Mississippi.¹³ A journalist who visited in the early 1870s reported that “Napoleon did not have a good reputation in past days It was at Napoleon that the man showed a casual passer-by on a steamboat a pocket full of ears, and, with a grin, announced that he was among the boys while they were having a frolic last night. Murder, daily, was the rule, and not the exception. Brawls always ended in burials.”¹⁴

If Napoleon remained unkempt and rowdy, census statistics attest to its steady growth and cosmopolitan qualities. That its population ever actually reached the 2,000 figure given in the 1890 almanac seems questionable. Desha County formed in 1838, and the 1840 census counted 1,598 people in the entire county—662 white males, 493 white females, 15 free black males, 21 free black females, 211 male slaves, and 196 female slaves.¹⁵ The 1850 census provided more precise numbers for Napoleon itself. There were 239 free residents within the town limits, including Rachel Love, a forty-three-year-old mulatto woman who lived with her eight-year-old daughter, also named Rachel.¹⁶ The total free population for Wilkinson (sometimes rendered as Wilkerson in later censuses) Township, in which Napoleon was situated, was seventy-six families with a total of 354 people. Eighty-four slaves lived in Napoleon, and Wilkinson Township was home to sixty-five additional slaves, which brought the total free and slave population of the area to 503.¹⁷

Among this river town’s free population, the 1850 census counted five carpenters, five clerks, four steamboatmen, three doctors, three grocers, two merchants, and a hotel keeper, butcher, overseer, and gunsmith. Forty-nine of the eighty-four slaves in Napoleon were the legal property of Noah Hayden, a planter whose household also included his son Dudley, an attorney, and F. Mosby, a twenty-four-year-old overseer. Also living at the Hayden home were Isabella Norrells, a free twenty-

¹³Sybil Hightower, “Napoleon, Arkansas,” *Grand Prairie Historical Society Bulletin* 12 (July 1969): 15.

¹⁴Edward King, *The Great South* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing, 1875), 278.

¹⁵Manuscript Census Returns, Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm 704, roll 17.

¹⁶Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm 432, roll 26. The total free population in Desha County in 1850 was 1,746 in 350 households.

¹⁷Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm 432, roll 32.

five-year-old mulatto woman, and her daughters Elizabeth, age four, and Donna, two. Hayden kept livestock, including three horses, eight oxen, forty cows, twenty-two sheep, and thirty swine. He reported production in 1850 of 2,000 bushels of corn, 91 bales of ginned cotton, 200 pounds of wool, 13 pounds of honey, and 100 bushels of sweet potatoes.¹⁸ The next largest slaveholder in the town of Napoleon was forty-year-old Eliza C. Bays, whose household included William Dausey, a twenty-one-year-old overseer. Bays held seven slaves and real estate valued at \$2,000. Another slaveholder of interest was twelve-year-old Western Leavitt, who lived with three younger siblings and held four mulatto slaves and real estate worth \$2,000.¹⁹ Social statistics from the 1850 census were compiled only for the entire county and not for Napoleon specifically. They show that Desha County operated a public school with two teachers and forty pupils on an annual budget of \$350. No churches, libraries, or newspapers were listed. The average daily wage for a male day laborer was \$1.00, a male carpenter earned \$2.00 per day, and a female domestic worker earned \$3.00 per week plus board.²⁰

The town had nearly doubled in population by 1860, the peak of Napoleon's growth and success as a commercial city. The census of that year did not separate Napoleon out but recorded population by townships. Two townships, Wilkinson and Island, were listed as using the Napoleon post office. These two townships possessed a total population of 992 people—675 white residents, 310 slaves, and 7 free blacks.

The presence of these free people of color seems remarkable, given that the Arkansas legislature had in the preceding year passed a law looking toward the expulsion of free black people from the state. These seven included Rachel Love. She was now listed as fifty years old and working as a washwoman at the U.S. Marine Hospital. James Robinson, listed as a fifty-seven-year-old black man from Kentucky, was a butcher. In his household were Julia, a twenty-five-year-old female mulatto, Silas, a twelve-year-old black male, and Mary, a four-year-old mulatto. Robinson estimated the value of his real estate at \$2,000 and his personal estate at \$200. John Neighbors, a thirty-year-old mulatto laborer from Tennessee, lived at the home of Loretta Smith, a thirty-six-year-old farmer, also from Tennessee. Smith also housed nine white

¹⁸Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Agriculture Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

¹⁹Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm 432, roll 26.

²⁰Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Social Statistics, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

children, aged five through seventeen, and a fifty-six-year-old white school teacher, Alexander Graham. Genet McLin was a twenty-four-year-old female mulatto servant in the home of Andrew J. Choat, thirty-seven, a coffeehouse keeper from Tennessee. McLin listed real estate valued at \$300 and personal property valued at \$155.²¹

The area's white residents reported a much wider variety of occupations in 1860. These figures are consistent with Napoleon's status as a port that served river travelers. The most common occupations were laborers or tradesmen, including painters and carpenters. Sixty-three residents reported jobs that fit this category. Appropriately enough in this mercantile town, forty residents reported jobs in retail businesses, including grocers, merchants, and store clerks. The service industry, including coffeehouses, bars, hotels, and restaurants, employed twenty-nine residents. Eight of these were barkeepers, and seven were bakers or confectioners. Twenty-six residents held professional positions, including ten attorneys and seven physicians. The river accounted for sixteen jobs, including ten steamboat pilots and five levee workers. Farmers and fishermen numbered thirty. Domestic positions, such as seamstresses and servants, accounted for eighteen positions. Local government employed nine in positions such as sheriff, constable, and police officer. Unique occupations included that of John Hyde, a twenty-eight-year-old marble dealer from Cambridgeshire, England.²²

Napoleon's growth brought a small Jewish population to the town. During the 1850s, at least seventeen Jews moved there to open retail businesses. These included Henry Frank, a thirty-year-old dry goods merchant from Bavaria, Germany, who reported his worth at \$50,000. Merchants Abraham Cohn and David Thilman hailed from Prussia and France, respectively. Cohn reported his estate at \$25,000 and owned three slaves. Thilman reported his estate at \$15,000, and he owned six slaves. Frederick Heinz, a baker from Dormstadt, Germany, reported his worth at \$35,000. He held three slaves.²³

Two of the town's wealthiest residents held the most slaves. R. Montgomery, a forty-nine-year-old planter, owned the greatest number of slaves—fifty-six—and reported a worth of \$50,000. J. W. Rawlings, a thirty-year-old physician who had forty-two slaves, reported his real

²¹Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm 653, roll 41.

²²Ibid.

²³Carolyn LeMaster, *A Corner of the Tapestry: A History of the Jewish Experience in Arkansas, 1820s-1990s* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 31; Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas.

estate value at \$58,000 and his estate worth \$48,000.²⁴ Yet of eighteen farmers in Wilkinson Township only two, neither of whom were Montgomery or Rawlings, reported any cotton production. Most of the farms in the Napoleon area raised livestock and produced butter, corn, potatoes, and sweet potatoes. They clearly focused their production on the consumer appetites of river travelers.²⁵

The social statistics accumulated for the 1860 census divided the county's nine townships into three groups. In the group that included Napoleon, Wilkinson, Island, and Mississippi Townships, crops had been short in 1859 due to "the overflow," which left only one-fourth of the normal harvest. Three churches—Roman Catholic, Union, and Methodist Episcopal—operated, and the one public school taught fifteen pupils. The marshal reported that most students attended schools outside the district due to the death of the teacher. The *Weekly Planter*, a "Democratic" paper with a circulation of 2,600, must have been scanned by many travelers looking for news as they passed through the bustling port. Average wages for a male day laborer were \$1.50, a male carpenter earned \$2.50 a day, and a female domestic worker was paid \$3.00 weekly plus board. The townships supported five paupers at a cost of \$100 each. Given the wild reputation of Napoleon, it was perhaps surprising that local courts convicted only seven criminals in 1859.²⁶

Napoleon's town council and court records document local government's efforts in the antebellum decades to make their town prosperous and attractive. In February 1841, the town council repealed taxes on the commercial boats docked there, including wharf boats, grocery boats, and retail dry goods boats.²⁷ The economy in Napoleon must have generated considerable revenue, as an act of March 18, 1841 repealed a poll tax of fifty cents. In April, the council passed a 0.25 cent city tax, but that was also repealed.²⁸ With other port destinations on the Mississippi River, Napoleon sought to be a hospitable place for commerce.

²⁴Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas.

²⁵Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Agriculture Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

²⁶Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Social Statistics, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

²⁷"Feb. 20, 1841," Rules Ordinances, Etc. of the Town Council of Napoleon, Arkansas, 1841-1843, series MS, box N16, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

²⁸"April 13, 1841," *ibid.*

The next year, the council implemented a community-wide conscription to form a street department. The "Cleaning of Streets," authorized appointment of "an overseer by the Aldermen of said Town of the streets alleys & c. who shall be authorized to call out all able bodied men residing within this corporation between the age of 18 and 45 years to work on said streets alley & c." Men were given two days notice to report for work. The overseer was limited to calling them out no more than twelve days a year or once a month. Those who did not would be fined "one dollar and fifty cents for every day he shall so fail to work as offered aid to be recovered as an action of debt before the alderman."²⁹ This public service was intended to make the town appealing to visitors and clear the streets to facilitate trade.

Napoleon's town council concerned itself with the business of a growing community, such as providing relief to families injured by a March 1842 tornado and banning hog calling and animal pens.³⁰ The council also acted to prevent their town from becoming a refuge for undesirables. An ordinance passed on January 25, 1842, gave the town constable the authority to throw out at his discretion anyone staying in a "boat, house, camp or other dwelling." The evicted party would be required to leave the dwelling within five days and remove it within ten days. Those who did not comply were to be summoned before the aldermen and fined between five and fifty dollars. They could also expect their dwelling to be auctioned, with the proceeds going toward the assessed fine and the constable's fees.³¹

The same day, the council established a system of patrols to enforce this ordinance as well as to superintend the local slave population. The aldermen would appoint three local men each month to serve as the patrol. One would be designated captain, and the patrol would work at least two nights a week seeking out "slaves, or white men" who were "unlawfully assembled." The patrol's actions were "deemed as valid" as long as it had been assembled by these prescribed procedures.³²

This attempt to hunt down runaway slaves or other unwanted guests in Napoleon evidently met with some resistance. On May 7, 1842, the council passed an "Ordinance Concerning Patrols" that called for a fine of up to ten dollars for every person who refused patrol duty "without a good and sufficient excuse." The council specified that the January 25, 1842 law establishing patrols required free blacks to serve, indicating

²⁹"July 16, 1842," *ibid.*

³⁰"May 7, 1842," *ibid.*; "Feb. 4, 1843," *ibid.*

³¹"Jan. 25, 1842," *ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

even at this early date the presence in Napoleon of a free African-American population of the sort found in a number of river towns.³³

Another crucial matter town government had to concern itself with was flood control. Napoleon was situated on a peninsula with the Arkansas River along its eastern and northern borders and the Mississippi to the south. High river banks offered some protection. Nevertheless, the town flooded often. The first levee projects in Desha County were primitive, supplementing the natural banks with "dirt, logs and other debris."³⁴ Major floods and backwater flow soon overwhelmed these levees. It became apparent that something more substantial was necessary.

After a flood in 1840, Napoleon's town council commissioned levee projects. The "Report of the Levee Commissioners to the Honorable Alderman and Town Council of the town of Napoleon" detailed the work. The report deemed a levee built by Wilford Basket to be "well constructed." Designed to stop flooding up to "at least a foot above the water of 1840," it was "five hundred and eight rods" or about 8,400 feet.³⁵ An 1842 ordinance authorized the construction of levees to begin at "the weakest places first."³⁶ Such projects became more common along the Mississippi, but there was no formal plan to coordinate local work, as an 1861 army report made clear:

In 1828 the levees were continuous from New Orleans nearly to Red-river landing, excepting above Baton Rouge on the left bank, where the bluffs rendered them unnecessary. Above Red River they were in a very disconnected and unfinished state on the right bank as far as Napoleon. Elsewhere in the alluvial region their extent was so limited as to make it unnecessary to mention them. In 1844 the levees had been made nearly continuous from New Orleans to Napoleon on the right bank, and many isolated levees existed along the lower part of the Yazoo front. Above Napoleon, few or none had yet been attempted.³⁷

³³"May 7, 1842," *ibid.*

³⁴Jim Merritt and B. Gill Dishongh, Sr., "The Levee System of Desha County, Arkansas," *Programs of the Desha County Historical Society* 14 (Spring 1988): 8.

³⁵"Report of the Levee Commissioners to the Honorable Alderman and Town Council of the town of Napoleon," Rules Ordinances, Etc. of the Town Council of Napoleon, Arkansas.

³⁶"March 5, 1842," *ibid.*

³⁷A. A. Humphreys and Henry L. Abbot, *Report upon the Physics and Hydraulics of the Mississippi River; upon the Protection of the Alluvial Region against Overflow; and upon the Deepening of the Mouths Submitted to the Bureau of Topographical Engineers, War Department, 1861* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1861), 153-154.

Clearly, even after the town council acted, work remained to be done. The lack of levees near Napoleon would be a major problem when the flow of the river changed in the 1860s.

By the 1850s, levee projects along the Mississippi increased with the help of revenues from the sale of public swamp lands the federal government had granted to states. Arkansas, along with Louisiana, Mississippi, and Missouri, was authorized to drain and sell these swamp lands in order to fund levee construction. Despite this promising initiative, the 1861 report deemed the efforts “generally faulty.”³⁸ These early levees were haphazard and disconnected, and often they pushed floodwaters away from one river county toward another. Napoleon faced such a threat from a proposed levee in Chicot County in 1859. On October 3, Desha County appointed inspectors to petition Arkansas’s governor to stop Chicot County’s project. If constructed, the proposed levee would flood “natural outlets for the drainage of Desha County thus inundating, and to a great extent destroying immense [*sic*] quantities of Desha County land.” The county court resolved to fight the construction of the levee by “every legal means.”³⁹

In the end, levee projects were never organized in such a way as would prevent Napoleon from flooding. Nevertheless, the promise of a levee—along with powerful political pressure—brought Napoleon a government hospital that would be the pride of a town that aspired to become one of the major ports on the river—like St. Louis or Memphis.

Mark Twain would cite the hospital as a sign of Napoleon’s vitality. The U.S. Marine Hospital at Napoleon was an early example of the federal government assuming a role in public health and welfare. Such hospitals were a unique feature of life on the waterways, designed to provide care for boatmen, whose wages were garnished to fund them. Famed army engineer Stephen Harriman Long, known for his explorations of the Rocky Mountains, built four of these hospitals at points on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: Louisville and Paducah, Kentucky; Natchez, Mississippi; and Napoleon, Arkansas.⁴⁰ These were towns that were frequent stops for the men who piloted river boats. Being selected as a hospital site was a sign that Napoleon was recognized as an important place on the rivers, but, ultimately, the facility failed to transform the waterlogged town into a major city.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹“Desha County Transcript #81: Napoleon Ark Oct. 3, 1859,” WPA Arkansas Historical Records Survey, group A, title 21 (Desha), file D [hereinafter HRS], box 73, folder 6, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

⁴⁰Richard G. Wood, “The Marine Hospital at Napoleon,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1955): 38-39.

Construction of the hospital would be delayed by floods, funding shortages, and Colonel Long, who opposed the Napoleon site due to its unpredictable flooding. He anticipated that the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers might eventually form a new confluence inconvenient to Napoleon. On September 1, 1849, Long reported, "I cannot but regard the site selected for this hospital as objectionable."⁴¹ He proposed Helena, with its high bluffs, as an alternative. Long's recommendation prompted the suspension of work.

Arkansas senator Solon Borland intervened in the dispute in the fall of 1849. Colonel Long may have been a respected engineer, but Senator Borland argued that the location of the hospital was a matter for Congress to decide. Borland wrote a letter to the secretary of the treasury, arguing that construction should continue. Since Congress had authorized a hospital at Napoleon, it was not within the power of the executive branch to stop the work. Borland argued that "neither Col. Long, the Secretary, nor any one else, could rightfully obstruct or suspend" the progress of the Marine Hospital. As for Long's problems at the hospital site, Borland replied that these were "in a great degree unreal, and by no means insuperable." Borland assured the treasury secretary that Napoleon's residents had built a new levee that eliminated the threat of flooding. He also invoked the interests of the hard-working men who had funded the hospital, calling its construction an act of "simple justice, too long delayed, to the Western Boatmen." Boatmen had been taxed more than one hundred thousand dollars a year for forty-eight years, and the fund had not yet been used to construct a hospital.⁴²

Borland's political pressure succeeded. The *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat* published a response from Secretary of the Treasury W. M. Meredith. The February 5, 1850 letter conceded Borland's point that the Senate had considered the potential risk of the Napoleon site and still voted to authorize construction. Meredith also acknowledged that "the danger of overflow had since been obviated by a sufficient embankment, constructed at the expense of the citizens of the town of Napoleon." On February 6, 1850, Long received an order to begin construction immediately.⁴³

No evidence demonstrates that the levee referred to by Borland and Meredith had actually been built. If one had indeed been constructed to

⁴¹Ibid., 38

⁴²*Arkansas State Gazette & Democrat*, June 21, 1850, p. 2.

⁴³Ibid., February 22, 1850, p. 2



Stephen Harriman Long, the builder of the Marine Hospital in Napoleon. *Courtesy U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers.*

protect the hospital site, it failed its first test that spring. By April 1, 1850, construction had restarted on the foundation for the hospital. Colonel Long reported, "The entire site of the hospital at Napoleon was overflowed to the depth of about six inches, on the most elevated parts of the lot." On May 1, he described the work at Napoleon as "entirely impracticable" due to flooding. But he added that the work would be "prosecuted with the utmost dispatch as soon as these impediments cease to operate."⁴⁴ Work continued that summer, and, by July 12, 1850, crews had made "considerable progress" on the project. In addition, a surgeon had been appointed, and additional funds had been appropriated for the hospital.⁴⁵ It appeared that the project was moving along quickly, and the "delayed justice" Senator Borland had spoken of would soon be delivered. Yet more than a year later, the hospital was still eighteen

⁴⁴Ibid., June 21, 1850, p. 2.

⁴⁵Ibid., July 12, 1850 p. 2.

months from being completed, and it was being built on “oaken planks” driven into a foundation of sand.⁴⁶ The hospital, built at a cost of \$62,431.02, would not actually be finished until August 1854 and would not welcome its first patients until the following year.⁴⁷

The Marine Hospital’s existence testified more to the influence Borland exercised than to the suitability of the site. Colonel Long’s concerns about the river were well founded. Ultimately, the Mississippi would be the town’s undoing, but only after the river was reshaped by a man-made civil war.

On February 12, 1861, well before the state seceded from the Union in May, Gov. Henry Rector ordered state troops to seize the Marine Hospital and ammunition shipments in anticipation of conflict with the federal government. In April, secessionists set up two cannons at Napoleon, hoping to force riverboats to stop for inspection. A passenger aboard the *Westmoreland* died when the militia fired on the vessel. Not surprisingly, Union troops had occupied Napoleon by September 1862, and the Union Navy patrolled around the mouths of the Arkansas and White Rivers.⁴⁸ With river traffic disrupted and slavery collapsing in Union-occupied portions of Arkansas, Napoleon ceased to be a bustling port. A Union soldier wrote in 1863 that the town was “deserted, the houses—many in ruins, and all untenanted—make it a thing of the past.”⁴⁹ The few people who remained in the area harassed Union forces. They would hide along Beulah Bend, a peninsula in the Mississippi just across the Arkansas from Napoleon, and shoot at approaching Union ships, then sprint across to the other side of the peninsula and ambush the same ship again.⁵⁰

Union naval officers voiced their concerns about these “pests of the human race” and their tactics. Acting Rear Adm. David D. Porter described this peninsula as “one of the worst points for guerillas.”⁵¹ Lt. Com. T. O. Selfridge, who piloted the *Conestoga* on daily patrols past this trou-

⁴⁶*Arkansas State Gazette & Democrat*, December 26, 1851, p.2.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, March 25, 1853, p. 3; Lawrence Wodehouse, “Alfred B. Mullett and His French Style Government Buildings,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 31 (March 1972): 23; Wood, “Marine Hospital” 38-39.

⁴⁸Jim Merritt, “County Records Moved during Civil War,” *Programs of the Desha County Historical Society* 7 (Spring 1981): 31-36; Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 26.

⁴⁹*Johnstown (Pennsylvania) Democrat*, May 27, 1863, cited in Michael B. Dougan, “Life in Confederate Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1972): 26.

⁵⁰“Napoleon Cutoff in Desha County,” *Programs of the Desha County Historical Society* 12 (Spring 1986): 23.

⁵¹“Report of Acting Rear-Admiral [David D.] Porter, April 16, 1863,” *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), ser. 1, vol. 24, p. 549.

blesome location, reported engaging in battle with the guerrilla troops, often taking his ship ashore to track them down and burn out their hiding places. Eliminating the trip around the long peninsula would not only afford guerrillas fewer opportunities to attack but also shorten the route between two strategic points, the mouths of the Arkansas and White Rivers. Selfridge decided to dig a canal when he noticed floodwaters near Beulah Bend's most narrow point.⁵²

Selfridge put his men to work on the canal, which was to be only a few hundred yards long. The water cut through the canal quickly, and he recalled that "before many hours a raging torrent was rapidly enlarging the cut, carrying away even large trees."⁵³ Selfridge could not wait to try out the new, more efficient route. The next morning, he took the *Conestoga* through the cutoff, though he was not certain of the depth of the water or whether the route was clear of trees and debris. Estimating the current at twelve knots, he hit the canal at full speed and hoped for the best. The ship sailed through quickly and surprised those aboard transport boats that had traveled from the White River around the peninsula, a distance of eighteen miles, without knowing about the new shortcut.⁵⁴

In a report to Admiral Porter dated March 10, 1863, Selfridge attested to the cut-off's effectiveness: "I was up through the cut-off one day last week, returning by way of the Arkansas. Saw nothing but a party of some forty cavalry that I dispersed with a few shells. The river banks are now so overflowed that the guerrillas can give us but little trouble."⁵⁵ A dangerous guerrilla station was cut off from the mainland.

Admiral Porter was pleased. He told Gideon Welles, secretary of the Navy, that Selfridge deserved special credit for providing a better defense at the mouths of the White and Arkansas Rivers. On April 16, 1863, Porter wrote:

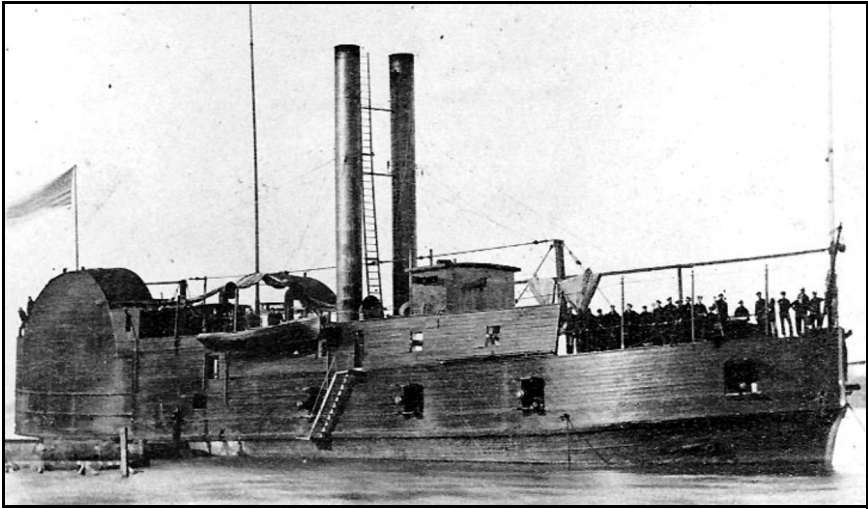
I have the honor to enclose a letter from Lieutenant-Commander Thomas O. Selfridge, which is interesting from the fact that it shows how easily cut-offs are made in the Mississippi when conducted with ordinary intelligence. I send a diagram which will explain the operation.

⁵²T. O. Selfridge, *The Memoirs of Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr., Rear Admiral, U. S. N.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), 76-77.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁵⁵"Report of Lieutenant-Commander Selfridge, U.S. Navy, Regarding General Matters, March 10, 1863," *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, ser. 1, vol. 24, p. 466.



Commanded by Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr., the *U.S.S. Conestoga* was the first craft through the cut-off at Napoleon. *Courtesy U.S. Naval Historical Center, NH-55321.*

We have been threatened for some time past with an attack from the Arkansas rebels in steamers. Every provision was made to meet it. Lieutenant-Commander Selfridge saw the difficulty in defending the mouths of White and Arkansas rivers while kept so far apart by a useless neck of land and proposed to me to cut it. I ordered him to do so, and he passed through with his vessel twenty-four hours after he cut the bend, this saving a distance of over 10 miles.

The mouths of Arkansas and White River are now brought close together, and a small force can defend both.

One of the worst points for guerrillas is also cut off, as these pests of the human race could, from the isthmus, attack a vessel on one side and be ready to meet her on the other as she came around; the distance being 10 miles around and half a mile across.⁵⁶

But Selfridge's ingenuity in cutting off this "useless neck of land," as he later acknowledged, may have hastened the destruction of Napoleon. By 1866, the river had fully established its new route through the cut-off.⁵⁷

⁵⁶"Report of Acting Rear-Admiral Porter, April 16, 1863," 548-549.

⁵⁷Robert Marshall Brown, "The Mississippi River from Cape Girardeau to the Head of the Passes," *Bulletin of the American Geographic Society* 34 (no. 5, 1902): 380.

In his 1924 memoir, Selfridge wrote that the town, which he described as a “notorious river gambling headquarters,” had washed away as a result of the new course of the river and that the townspeople had considered suing him for the destruction of their town.⁵⁸

What happened seems clear. Rivers flow through meanders or curves that slow their speed, as happens when a person running down a hill zigzags. But over time, the water gradually erodes the neck of the meander, eventually forming a cut-off. The cut-off establishes a straighter and swifter route for the river and leaves the former route as an oxbow lake.⁵⁹ Col. Stephen Harriman Long, in his 1849 objections to Napoleon as the site of the Marine Hospital, anticipated that the Arkansas and Mississippi would by such a process soon join at the site where Selfridge eventually dug the canal. He noted that the rivers were already eroding the shore line at the narrowest point of Beulah Bend.⁶⁰ The 1861 army report described the land as “only 1400 feet across in 1858 and caving above.”⁶¹ By creating his cut-off, Selfridge likely accelerated the destruction of Napoleon by increasing the flow and volume of water along its banks. Napoleon no longer stood at the far end of a long meander of the Mississippi, but along the direct and expanding flow of the river.

After the war, some residents returned to Napoleon and began to rebuild the town. They did not focus on the damage done by Selfridge but rather that of Union troops. During a particularly harsh blizzard in January 1863, Union soldiers had pulled apart the county courthouse to use for firewood. Since the courthouse was destroyed, the county government met at the Marine Hospital.⁶² Among the first items of business in 1865, the county court hired H. Clay Conde to “prosecute a claim against the Government of the United States for the sum of \$5,000 for damages sustained by the County in the destruction of the Courthouse thereof.”⁶³

Within the next few years, Napoleon experienced unprecedented floods. Stephen Harriman Long’s predictions about the Marine Hospital were borne out. The hospital was only fifty-two feet from the shore on March 11, 1868, and, several weeks later, on April 1, a corner of the building fell into the floodwaters, eighteen years to the day since Long protested that his Napoleon worksite was buried beneath six inches of water. By the

⁵⁸Selfridge, *Memoirs*, 79.

⁵⁹Brown, “The Mississippi River,” 372.

⁶⁰Gould, “Death Comes for Napoleon,” 52.

⁶¹Humphreys and Abbot, *Report upon the Physics and Hydraulics*, 104.

⁶²Merritt, “County Records,” 31-36; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs*, 997-1057.

⁶³“September 6, 1865. July Special Term 1865,” HRS, box 73, folder 6.

end of the month, the tower, east wall, and roof had collapsed. The *Weekly Arkansas Gazette* of May 19, 1868, reported: "We learn from Mr. Boyd, who has just returned from Napoleon, that the U. S. Marine Hospital at that place has about one half broken off and caved into the river." As the hospital gradually fell into the water, its custodian tried to sell what he could rescue from it.⁶⁴

Salvaging Napoleon would not be as easy. An entry in the Desha County Court record from the December term of 1868 expressed an urgent need for help in controlling floodwaters. The court petitioned the Arkansas General Assembly to "Memorialize the United States Congress in favor of such assistance by the General Government to build levees on the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers and upon such terms as they may deem appropriate."⁶⁵ During that same year, the county authorized renovation of the jailhouse in an attempt to resettle Napoleon and return the port to its former glory.⁶⁶ But this effort could not address the essential problem. The river's route had already been altered beyond correction. Not only was Napoleon subject to erosion from increased flooding, but the river was depositing silt and other matter in new places along the banks.

Still, many in Napoleon insisted that the town's future was bright. In 1870, the *Napoleon News* claimed that silver had been discovered near Napoleon and predicted that this would raise the town to new heights. The paper reported:

The Memphis and Helena papers are quarreling and wrangling about which shall be the leading business and commercial emporium between Cairo and New Orleans. It reminds us somewhat of the two dogs quarrelling over the bone. You needn't get mad at each other, gentlemen; it's all nonsense. In ten or fifteen years, Napoleon will be as far in advance of either of you, as St. Louis, Louisville or Cincinnati now is.⁶⁷

Napoleon would not become host to a silver boom. Instead, the next census brought unmistakable signs of decline. The population figures for 1870 revealed that the town's rapid growth had stopped. Napoleon's population had declined by almost half since 1860. A total of 575 people

⁶⁴Wood, "Marine Hospital," 42; "State News," *Weekly Arkansas Gazette*, May 19, 1868, p. 4. Sales of such items as doors, windows, and pipes netted \$815.53.

⁶⁵"Book County Court Record A-1865 p. 219. December term 1868," HRS, box 73, folder 2.

⁶⁶"March Term 1868," *ibid.*

⁶⁷"State News: Desha" *Daily Arkansas Gazette* April 12, 1870, p. 3.

lived in 156 households in Napoleon and surrounding Wilkinson Township: 144 white males; 124 white females; 153 black males; and 154 black females. This shift to a black majority seems to indicate a greater emphasis on agriculture as Napoleon's commercial life faded.⁶⁸

Napoleon still had seven merchants and eight store clerks, but the service industry all but disappeared. Only one saloonkeeper, one brewer, and one hotel worker remained. Three lawyers remained along with one doctor. Tradesmen, such as carpenters, numbered only four. Six steamboat workers represented a mere remnant of a once prosperous river port.⁶⁹ The agriculture statistics from the 1860 and 1870 censuses showed that although the population in Napoleon was dwindling, the number of farmers in the area was increasing. In 1860, Wilkinson Township registered eighteen farmers who valued the total worth of their farmland at \$188,760 and their livestock at \$15,994.⁷⁰ In 1870, the same township reported thirty-five farmers, with a total land value of \$121,178 and livestock value of \$27,380.⁷¹ Another 166 men identified their jobs as farming or "farm laborer." The fact that black men who as slaves had not had their occupations listed were now counted as farmers or farmworkers surely accounts for some of this increase. But at the same time, as in much of the South, freed women were leaving the fields. In the Napoleon area, 126 women reported their occupation as either "at home" or "keeping house." In earlier years, it had been rare for the census to record occupations of women. Clearly, as Napoleon was dying, its residents either left town or turned to agricultural pursuits for their livelihoods.

The social statistics from the 1870 census, again recorded for all of Desha County, indicated that a new town paper, the *Napoleon News*, had a circulation of only 400 as compared to the 2,600 circulation the *Weekly Planter* had reported ten years before. There was just one pauper supported at an annual cost of \$140 and only one criminal conviction reported. Two common schools were listed for the county, with an enrollment of seventy-one pupils. The wage for a male day laborer was \$1.50, \$3.00 per day for a male carpenter, and \$4.00 plus board for a week's work from a female domestic servant. The county had four Bap-

⁶⁸Manuscript Census Returns, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm 593, roll 5.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Agriculture Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas.

⁷¹Manuscript Census Returns, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Agriculture Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

tist churches, three Methodist churches, and two Catholic churches. These churches could seat a total of 5,500 attendees.⁷²

The next few years wrote the final chapters in the story of Napoleon. Another sign of the town's decline came in 1872 when the court ordered the bell from the Union Church auctioned off to raise money for the public school.⁷³ The flood of 1874 dealt the final blow. It breached levees up and down the Mississippi River. According to an 1875 report by the Corps of Engineers, "between Commerce, Mo., and New Madrid, there were 23.9 miles of crevasses and breaks; thence to Helena there were 68.2 miles; thence to Great Cypress Bayou, below Napoleon, there were 20.5 miles; and thence to the Louisiana line there were 23.9 miles."⁷⁴ The mayor of New Orleans sent a letter to mayors and government officials around the country on behalf of the 70,000 suffering in his state due to the flood. The flood covered Napoleon, the Mississippi River overflowing to a width of thirty miles in Desha County and the Arkansas and White Rivers to a width of twenty miles.⁷⁵ By that time almost all of Napoleon's residents had abandoned the sinking town. No longer could Napoleon be the gateway to the West or even to Arkansas. It had been deluged by the river that had brought it wealth and success.

A letter detailed the effects of the flood. Alex Harding wrote to his sister Mary:

I think all the seven vials of wrath have been poured onto this community. The water has been as high as ever known here and has fallen only a few inches. This morning the indications are that it will [not] fall soon The water is in more than half the houses in town. Some of the families have bunked with others. Some have gone to Arkansas Post or somewhere else.⁷⁶

The floodwaters afforded creative thieves a chance to rob the town in a unique manner. The waters were high enough for boats to float by the courthouse entrance, and that, the *Arkansas Gazette* claimed, "in-

⁷²Manuscript Census Returns, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Social Statistics, Desha County, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Library microfilm.

⁷³"County Court Record a-1865, page 426 June Term 1872," HRS, box 73, folder 2.

⁷⁴*Report of the Commission of Engineers Appointed to Investigate and Report a Permanent Plan for the Reclamation of the Alluvial Basin of the Mississippi River Subject to Inundation* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), 40.

⁷⁵Louis Alfred Wiltz, *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1874: Its Extent, Duration and Effects* (New Orleans: Picayune Steam Book and Job Print, 1874), 1, 4.

⁷⁶Amy Quattlebaum, "Letters from the Attic," *Jefferson County Historical Quarterly* 7 (no. 3, 1977): 21.

duced some bold buccaneers to run a flat boat up to the building on to which they drew the safe of the county clerk, with which they made a hasty retreat.”⁷⁷ The safe contained no money, however, only town records. Still, a journalist who visited Napoleon about this time was perhaps premature in writing “the river is yearly more and more closely embracing the doomed town, and the roughs, like the rats, will leave before the final engulfing comes.”⁷⁸

By March, the *Arkansas Gazette* was reporting from Arkansas Post:

We have lots of rain and now have a big river. Napoleon is entirely submerged—worse than in 1867, and many of the citizens are moving up here. Tom Wilcox’s boat the steamer *Tom Morgan*, is now running as a regular packet from here there, bringing out the people. She come up full last night and returned for more this morning. Many cattle and horses have drowned.⁷⁹

A letter to the editor from H. A. Pierce of Little Rock on April 29, 1874, appealed to residents of the state to help those displaced by the flood. A May 10 article reported that the Desha County sheriff had stayed for two months in a house that was surrounded by seven feet of water.⁸⁰

Despite the destruction and the fact that many of its residents remained at Arkansas Post or moved downriver to the new town of Arkansas City, the county seat remained at Napoleon through most of the year. In fact, records detail complaints over the rotted jailhouse where court proceedings were held. Calling the Napoleon jail the “black hole of Calcutta,” the grand jury presented a motion to the court to build a new jail in Watson, where, by an act of the Arkansas General Assembly, the county government was to be moved. On October 19, 1874, the court approved this motion.⁸¹

By the following year, the county conducted business in Watson. In 1876, the county court adopted a petition to remove the voting place from Napoleon because the town “is fast falling into the River, further that from high water it is extremely difficult and inconvenient to reach [and]

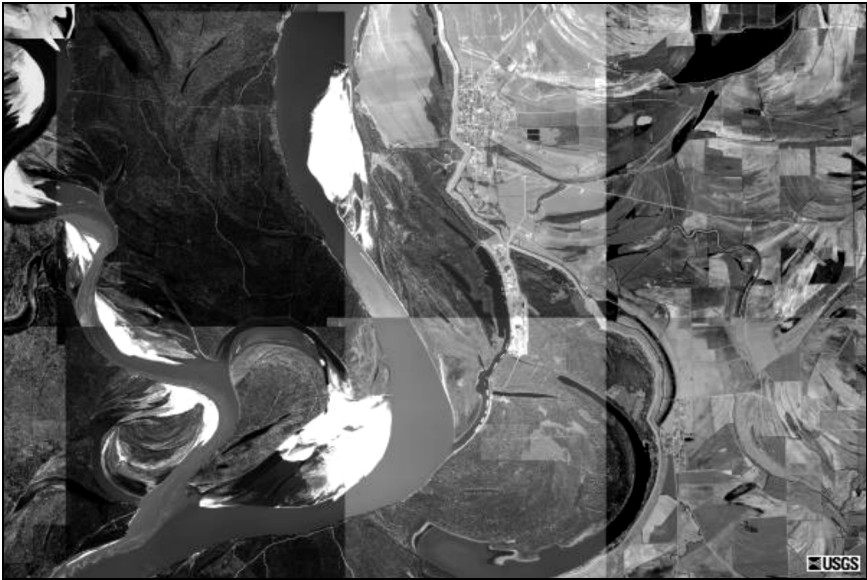
⁷⁷“Items in Brief,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 20, 1874, p. 4.

⁷⁸King, *Great South*, 278.

⁷⁹“Items in Brief,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 31, 1874, p. 4.

⁸⁰*Arkansas Gazette*, April 29, 1874, p. 4; May 10, 1874, p. 4.

⁸¹“Circuit Court Record “D” September Term 1874 p. 280,” HRS, box 73, folder 6; “Court Record 1873. Oct. 9, 1874,” *ibid.* On the relocation of the county seat, see “Act 12, Special Session General Assembly, 1874,” *ibid.*



A 2001 U.S. Geological Survey photo of the Napoleon area. Before Selfridge's cut-off, the Mississippi River's path followed the oxbow lake. The Arkansas River's course has also changed, flowing into the Mississippi southwest of the former site of Napoleon. *Courtesy U.S. Geological Survey.*

that there are but a few persons residing at said place.”⁸² With that, the town of Napoleon vanished from the county record.

By 1880, population figures for Wilkinson Township reflected the disappearance of the former county seat with its ambitions for fame and commercial success. In 1880, there were fifty white men, thirty-one white women, ninety black or mulatto men, and eighty-six black or mulatto women residing in Wilkinson Township. These 257 people represented less than half the population in 1870. The residents of Wilkinson Township by 1880 were even more likely to work by keeping house or laboring on farms. Only thirteen respondents did not fit into those categories. Among these were two store clerks, two lawyers, two cooks, and a plasterer, a shoemaker, a painter, and a baker.⁸³

⁸²“County Court Record 1873, p. 182, April Term 1876,” *ibid.*

⁸³Manuscript Census Returns, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Population Schedules, Desha County, Arkansas, NARA microfilm T9, rolls 57-58.

The flow of the Mississippi created a new path directly through Napoleon. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain vividly described the shifting course of the river in the area:

In regard to Island 74, which is situated not far from the former Napoleon, a freak of the river here has sorely perplexed the laws of men and made them a vanity and a jest. When the State of Arkansas was chartered, she controlled “to the centre of the river”—a most unstable line. The State of Mississippi claimed “to the channel”—another shifty and unstable line. No. 74 belonged to Arkansas. By and by a cut-off threw this big island out of Arkansas, and yet not within Mississippi. “Middle of the river” on one side of it, “channel” on the other.⁸⁴

Twain’s observation is a fitting end to the Napoleon saga. Ambitious residents of Napoleon thought they could exploit the river as a means to prosperity. But they lacked the foresight to anticipate what the river might do to their city. As Twain described, and recent disasters along the lower Mississippi have only emphasized, there are some times when nature makes its own course, to which the intentions and regulations of men have no answer.

⁸⁴Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 364.

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