

Figure 1. MONROE [LA] postmark to Campton, Arkansas, with manuscript "10" cents due; advertising cover, "Regular New Orleans & Arkansas River Packet, STEAMER JUDGE FLETCHER."

## Steamer Judge Fletcher, a Confederate Steamboat

James W. Milgram, MD

Situated on the Monongahela River, the town of Brownsville, Pennsylvania, developed a steamboat-building industry early in the nineteenth century, producing about 3,000 steamboats between 1811 and 1888. The side wheel packet *Judge Fletcher* was built there in 1860.<sup>1</sup> The measurements of the wooden-hull vessel are unknown, but, according to registry records, it weighed 260 tons.

First registered at Little Rock, Arkansas, the *Judge Fletcher* plied the Arkansas River, a major tributary of the Mississippi, during the Civil War. On March 13, 1861, *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana) ran an advertisement announcing that "the superior, light draught and swift running passenger steamer JUDGE FLETCHER, J. W. Smith, master" would leave on the 16th for the Arkansas River and all points along the way, including plantation landings. Figure 1 illustrates a cover with the printed message "Regular New Orleans & Arkansas River Packet, STEAMER JUDGE FLETCHER"; "J. W. SMITH, Master"; and "THEO. JUDGE, CLERK." Used to carry a soldier's letter, the cover was postmarked Monroe, Louisiana, and sent ten cents due to Hampton, Arkansas. It was endorsed "3rd Ark" for the soldier's regiment. (There is no enclosed letter.)

There is little published history about the steamer during the war. On June 20,



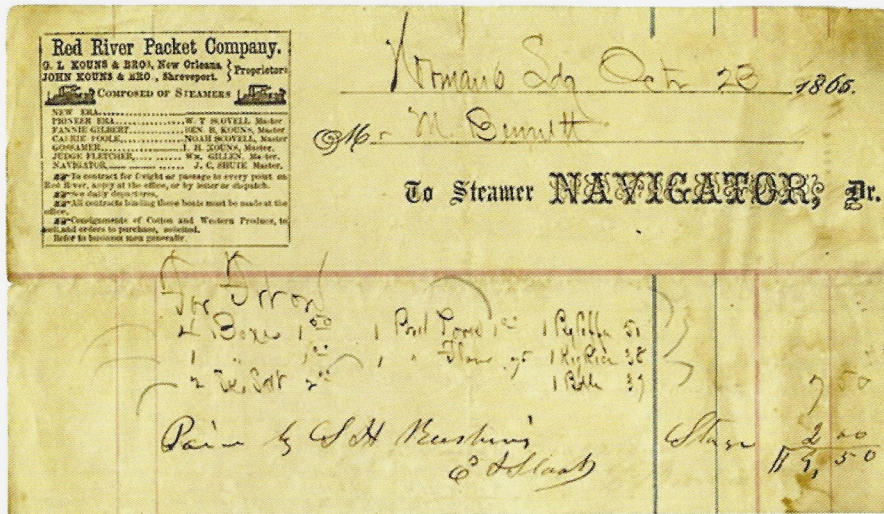


Figure 2. Freight bill dated October 28, 1865, to the Steamer *Navigator*, with an advertisement for the Red River Packet Company listing for the *Judge Fletcher*.

1862, the *New York Times* reported that on June 15th, the *Judge Fletcher* had joined other steamers at India Bay, “also, the gunboat *Arkansas*, which run down from Memphis in an unfinished state,” to offer battle to the Union stern wheel gunboat *St. Louis*.<sup>2</sup>

On at least one occasion the vessel transported Confederate soldiers. In early April of 1865, the 8th Missouri Infantry Regiment, camped out post-battle near Pleasant Hill, Louisiana, was ordered to attack Major General Frederick Steele’s Union force at Camden, Arkansas. Before the Confederate forces arrived, however, Steele’s troops abandoned Camden. The regiment was one of several infantry divisions that continued to pursue Steele’s forces until the general made a stand at Jenkin’s Ferry, on the Saline River. After about an hour of fighting, Steele again retreated. The 8th Infantry experienced no further combat. Paroled in Alexandria, Louisiana, on June 7, 1865, its soldiers then boarded the *Judge Fletcher* for the lengthy trip back to Missouri.<sup>3</sup>

In 1865 the *Judge Fletcher* was readmeasured—the vessel’s dimensions, capacity, weight, and other details were again documented—in New Orleans.<sup>4</sup> Early in the fall of that year, the *Judge Fletcher* was chartered by the Kouns Line, New Orleans-Red River, whose boats traveled from Shreveport to New Orleans by way of Alexandria and other small settlements along the Red River.<sup>5</sup> The *Times-Picayune* reported on September 17th that the Kouns had chartered the steamer to take the place of the *New Era* to make weekly trips to Alexandria, Louisiana. Figure 2 illustrates a receipt dated October 28, 1865, with an advertisement for the Kouns’ operated Red River Packet Company. The *Judge Fletcher* is listed, with William Gillen, master. Figure 3 details a freight bill dated at Monroe, Louisiana, “April 10, 186[5],” which shows the same boxed advertisement for the Kouns’ Packet Company.

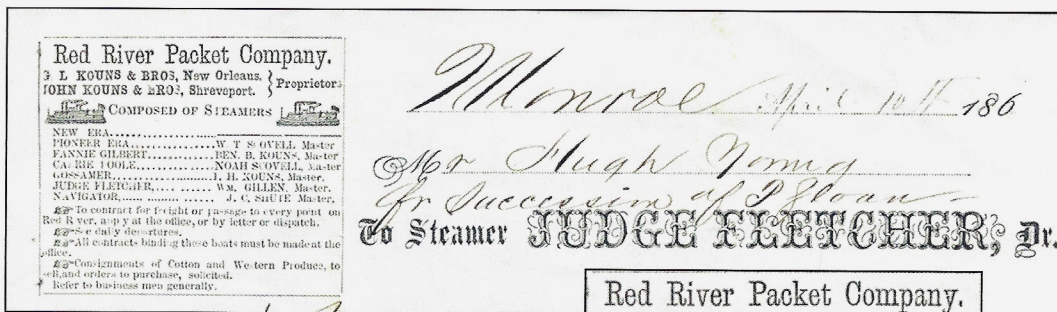


Figure 3. Detail of a freight bill dated April 10th to the *Judge Fletcher*, with advertisement at right listing the steamer (highlighted) as one of the Red River Packet Company's vessels.



In the summer of 1866, the *Judge Fletcher* replaced the *Vicksburg* to run a New Orleans-Ouachita River route under Capt. John W. Tobin, with G. Pres. Work as clerk.<sup>6</sup> Figure 4 illustrates a cover with a blue oval reading "OUACHITA & NEW ORLEANS/ Packet/ JUDGE FLETCHER."<sup>7</sup> Figure 5 details a freight bill dated February 24, 1867, the advertisement noting that the *Judge Fletcher* was running New Orleans and Arkansas River under Captain John W. Smith. This is the same information as shown on the cover in figure 1.

The cover shown in figure 6 was carried by the steamboat from New Orleans to Camden, Arkansas, in March of 1868. It contains a bill for grocery items sent on the same trip. This is an example of steamboat mail having to pay the US postage, so the letter was carried in an uncanceled three-cent entire.

On May 16, 1868, the boat's registry was transferred from Little Rock and enrolled as No. 196 at New Orleans by Captain Harrison L. Watts, who was both owner and master. The boat was quickly sold again, however, this time to Edgar Nott of New Orleans with Captain James E. Phelps and enrolled as No. 59 on October 29, 1868.<sup>8</sup> Figure 7 depicts a freight bill dated January 10, 1869, identifying the steamer as a New Orleans and Red River packet and listing Phelps as master.

On or about March 16, 1869, while on the Pascagoula River, the vessel struck a rock and was badly damaged, "with both cylinder timbers broken and wheel down."<sup>9</sup> The boat was raised and towed to New Orleans, where it was auctioned off on June 5, 1869.<sup>10</sup> The registry document was surrendered that same day.



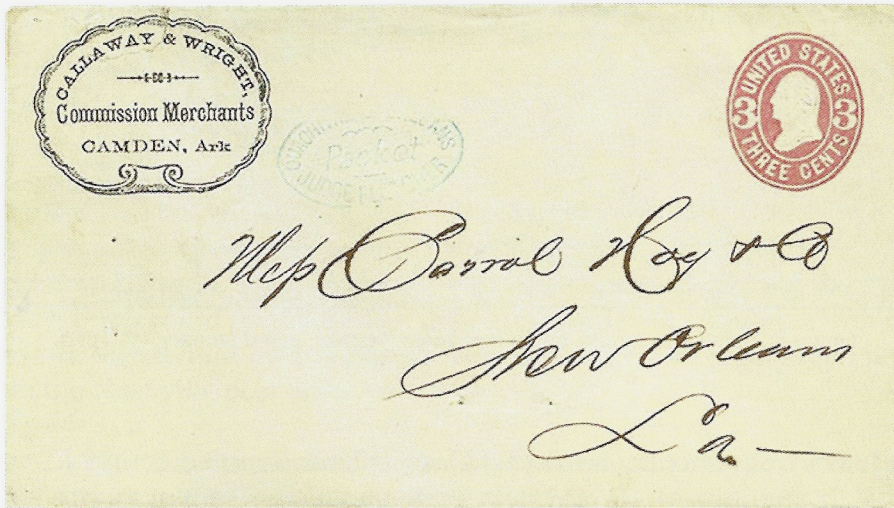


Figure 4. Cover to commission merchant and cotton agency Carroll, Hoy and Company, New Orleans, with blue oval packet stamp "OUACHITA & NEW ORLEANS Packet JUDGE FLETCHER."

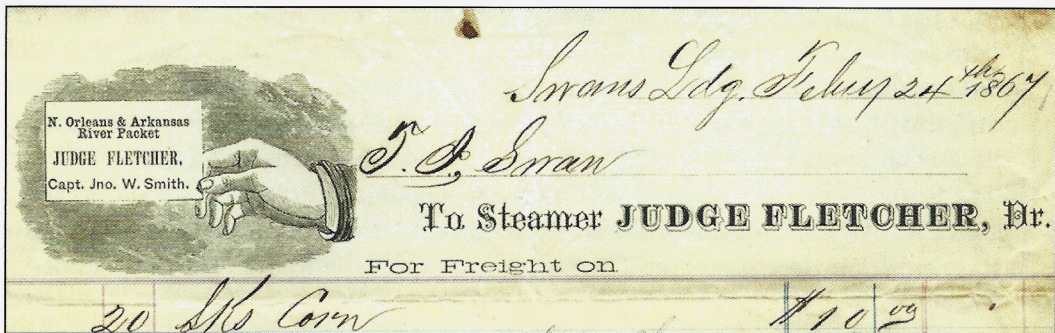


Figure 5. Detail of a freight bill to the steamer *Judge Fletcher*, dated February 24th, 1867. Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries



Figure 6. Advertising cover for G. M. Bayly and Company, commission merchants, New Orleans, addressed to Camden, Arkansas, via "Steamer Judge Fletcher."



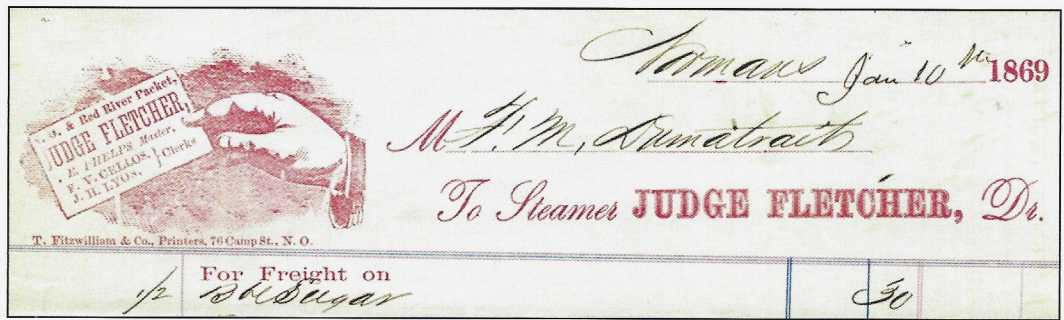


Figure 7, Detail of a freight bill to the *Judge Fletcher*, dated January 10, 1869.

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## NOTES

1. Frederick Way, Jr., *Way's Packet Directory, 1848-1883: Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System Since the Advent of Photography in Mid-Continent America* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, 1983).
2. India Bay may refer to Indian Bayou, on the Atchafalaya River. For a detailed discussion of Louisiana's bayou steamboat history, see Carl A. Brasseaux and Keith P. Fontenot, *Steamboats on Louisiana's Bayous: A History and Directory* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2004).
3. James E. McGhee, *Guide to Missouri Confederate Units, 1861-1865: A Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective on the Central High Crisis* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas, 2008), 212–13.
4. Survey Federal Archives (US). *Ship Registers and Enrollments of New Orleans, Louisiana*, vol. 6, 1861–1870, typescript (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University, 1942), 155.
5. The Kouns New Orleans-Red River Packet Line was founded in 1860. It was operated in New Orleans by G. L. Kouns and Bros. and in Shreveport by John Kouns and Bros.
6. Way, *Packet Directory*.
7. Robert A. Siegel Auctions Galleries, Inc., Sale 906, United States Postal History, Lot 1400; <https://siegelauctions.com>. The cover is recorded in James W. Milgram, *Vessel-Named Markings on United States Inland and Ocean Waterways 1810–1890* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, 1984), M-735.
8. Way, *Packet Directory*.
9. *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 16, 1869.
10. *Ibid.*, June 2, 1869.