

*The Wreck of the America
in Southern Illinois: A Flatboat
on the Ohio River*

MARK J. WAGNER

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In *The Wreck of the America in Southern Illinois: A Flatboat on the Ohio River*, Mark J. Wagner presents the results of the investigation of an early 19th-century flatboat shipwreck north of Mound City, Illinois. This short book is written for the general public but includes valuable information for anyone interested in vernacular shipbuilding and European American immigration along North America's inland waterways. Wagner describes the only archaeologically recorded example of a flatboat, one of the possibly 100,000 or more of this type of vessel to descend the Ohio River. Local boat builders constructed flatboats—boxy, flat-bottomed vessels that primarily relied on river current for propulsion—in most river ports. These vessels carried settlers, supplies, and cargoes along the Ohio, Mississippi, and other rivers before being broken up for their wood at their final destination. Wagner refers to this specific wreck as the *America*, taking the name from a nearby town; the historic name of the boat, if it had one, is unknown.

The Wreck of the America in Southern Illinois describes the history, construction, and archaeology of flatboats through eight chapters, including an introduction that summarizes the book's findings. Following the introduction, "Arks, Broadhorns, and Other

Flat-Bottomed Boats" contextualizes flatboats within the variety of vernacular craft floating on North America's inland rivers between the American Revolution and the American Civil War, as well as within the larger European tradition of edge-joined, shell-built boats. Importantly, this chapter, which is nicely illustrated with a variety of historical images, also uses primary documents to describe the characteristics of flatboats and how they were constructed. Flatboats were an example of bottom-based construction, where the flat bottom of the hull was built inverted, allowing the bottom planking to be easily fastened to the framing timbers, and then flipped over as part of the launching process, before the vertical portions of the hull were added. All of the attachment points for the vertical hull framing were precut into the large timbers that described the shape of the bottom so that the entire vessel was defined by the bottom of the hull. The third chapter provides further context for the wreck of the *America*, describing the various ways that a flatboat could be wrecked. Flatboats were lost due to attacks by pirates and Native Americans, both of which tended to be exaggerated in the period literature, as well as more mundane causes such as faulty construction and collisions with other vessels, sandbars, and logs.

Chapters 4 and 5 summarize the archaeological findings. Both chapters are well illustrated with photographs and drawings of the wreck and artifacts. Chapter 4, "Stuck in the Mud: Documenting the *America*," focuses on the wreck itself. Initially discovered and investigated by nonprofessionals in 2000,

the wreck was investigated again in 2002 by archaeologists from Southern Illinois University Carbondale during a week-long period of low water. The remains included approximately one-third of the bottom of an approximately 45-ft.-long flatboat. The stern girder and nearly entire starboard chine log were intact, as were the bottom planks from the stern forward approximately 16 ft. Forward of the intact floor planks the hull was broken up and then missing except for the starboard chine log. Because the flatboat was bottom-based and symmetrical, the surviving remains were sufficient to understand the primary artifact of the site: the hull of the flatboat. The other artifacts, collected in 2000 and 2002, are discussed in the chapter 5. Relatively few artifacts were recovered from the wreck, but they were useful in dating the site to the early 1800s.

The next two chapters interpret these findings. Chapter 6 describes how the flatboat was built, and chapter 7 hypothesizes how it was lost. Drawing on the archaeological findings as well as period documents that described flatboat construction, Wagner provides a step-by-step description of how the *America* was constructed. This chapter includes some repetition of information from chapter 2, but it is interesting to note how the historical descriptions deviated from the archaeological remains. Chapter 7 also draws on both historical and archaeological

information to argue that the *America* was one of many flatboats to suffer from faulty construction. In the instance of the *America*, Wagner suggests that a poorly built joint between the chine log and stern girder failed and caused the vessel to leak. The location of the wreck suggests that the pilot was able to bring the boat into shore before it sank. The book ends with a discussion of what happened after the site was recorded. The hull was reburied, but continues to erode, offering a poignant example of the difficulty of preserving archaeological sites in rivers.

The Wreck of the America in Southern Illinois provides a good introduction to a poorly understood type of inland vessel. Wagner avoids much of the jargon that can accompany technical pursuits, such as boat construction and archaeology, so that the book is accessible to the general public. This lack of precise language and the absence of construction drawings to illustrate the process make portions of the text hard to follow. In these instances Wagner's lack of expertise in nautical archaeology becomes apparent. However, his archaeological training and solid historical research make up for this deficit and make this book an asset to archaeologists interested in vernacular North American watercraft.

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