

## **400 years ago, Hudson sparked our long river voyage**

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by Lewis E. Lehrman

Two centuries before Abraham Lincoln was born, Henry Hudson sailed up the river that would come to bear his name. After tentatively exploring the mouth of the Delaware River and the Chesapeake Bay to the south during the summer of 1609, Hudson spent three weeks sailing up and down the Hudson. Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, got as far as present-day Albany before turning back because of impediments to further travel upriver.

The Englishman's actions on behalf of the Dutch East India Co. would open up America to European commerce even though Hudson failed to find the Northwest Passage to the Orient for which he had been searching. On Oct. 4, Hudson and his 20-member crew began their return across the Atlantic.

Thus began America's preoccupation with river travel. America's Founders -- notably George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison -- were fascinated with the potential of the Potomac River to act as a commercial artery across the Appalachian Mountains. Indeed, many early American leaders were worried that unless such a commercial connection were made, new immigrants into the interior, especially Kentucky, would see their future tied to the Mississippi River and perhaps to whatever country -- France, Spain or Britain -- controlled the river's outlet and port at New Orleans.

It was this preoccupation -- and the action of the Spanish government in closing New Orleans to American commerce in 1802 -- that led the government of President Jefferson feverishly to pursue purchase of New Orleans and the coastal territory along the Gulf of Mexico to the east. Spain controlled the port but she had already been forced to cede ownership to France's Napoleon, who was preparing for war with England.

Napoleon concluded that the territory would be a worthless burden in that war and easily retrieved after the conflict, so he decided to sell it to the Americans in return for the cash he needed for his army and navy. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the nation's size, preserved its control of the Mississippi River, and opened up future conflicts over the spread of slavery, which would lead to the Civil War.

Born in 1809, Abraham Lincoln grew up in Kentucky and Indiana, states preoccupied with the use of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to market their products. His first dollar was earned when he rowed two men out to a steamer in the Ohio River. He later said: "I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day -- that by honest work I had earned a dollar. The world seemed wider and fairer before me. I was a more hopeful and confident being from that time."

Lincoln saw the river as his path to economic opportunity. At age 19 and 22, Lincoln himself piloted rafts down the Mississippi carrying agricultural goods to New Orleans, where he got an education in the evils of slavery.

While Lincoln was growing up in the frontier West, Gov. Dewitt Clinton spearheaded the construction of the Erie Canal across New York State -- effectively beginning where Hudson

had stopped his explorations in 1609, and greatly extending the reach of inland navigation. Although initially derided as "Clinton's Big Ditch," the canal ignited the commercial development of the Empire State.

Abraham Lincoln came to maturity in the early 1830s with one clear goal -- he wanted to be the "Dewitt Clinton of Illinois" -- establishing a network of canals and railroads that would help the state to blossom economically. In the first statement of his political career in 1832, Lincoln stated: "That the poorest and most thinly populated countries would be greatly benefitted by the opening of good roads, and in the clearing of navigable streams within their limits, is what no person will deny."

Lincoln's vision was dashed by the Panic of 1837, which devastated the American economy for six years and bankrupted the Illinois state government. Lincoln never lost his fascination with transportation, however. He would become one of the foremost railroad attorneys in Illinois. In one of his most famous cases, he defended railroad interests after an errant steamboat had rammed the first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River in May 1856 -- burning both the steamboat and the bridge. River interests had cheered the conflagration -- hoping that it would put an end to competition from railroads.

That would not be the case. As president, Lincoln would sign the 1862 legislation that initiated the transcontinental railroad. He took a personal interest in the siting of the eastern terminus of the railroad in Iowa. In effect, the transcontinental railroad would become the Northwest Passage that Henry Hudson and scores of other explorers had failed to find. As Lincoln stated in his final message to Congress in December 1864: "The great enterprise of connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific states by railways and telegraph lines has been entered upon with a vigor that gives assurance of success."

**Lewis E. Lehrman, a Greenwich resident, is co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008).**