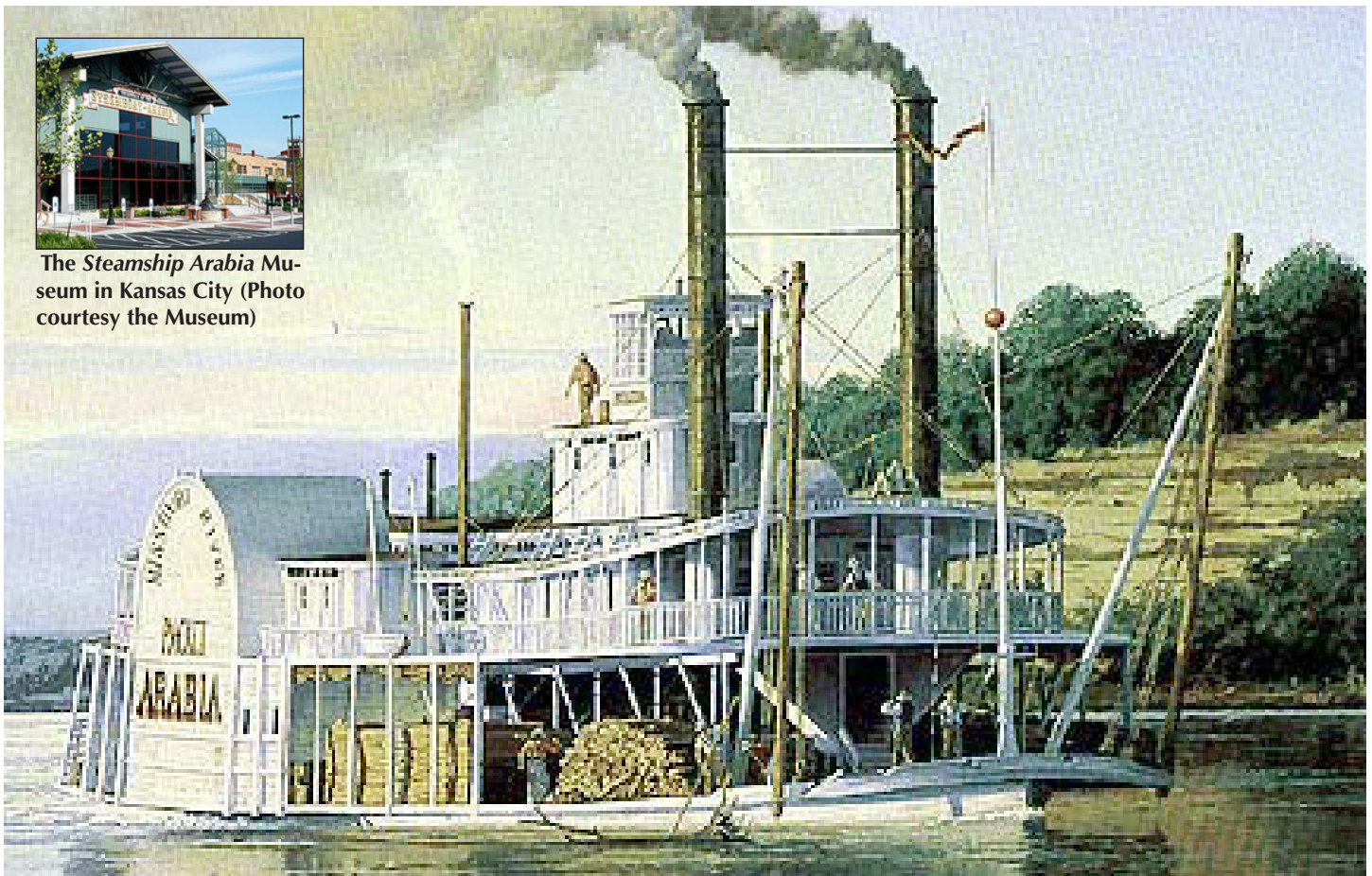




The Steamship Arabia Museum in Kansas City (Photo courtesy the Museum)



Rendition of the Steamship *The Great White Arabia* as it navigated the Missouri River (Photo courtesy the Museum)

The Missouri Yields a Ceramic Treasure Trove: The Cargo of *The Great White Arabia*

By Suzanne Nolan

I suppose that just about everyone has a certain something they just find fascinating; for me, it has been clay. Yes, rare earth, something that has been around forever and that has provided civilizations with a means for everyday living. No, I am not a potter, but I do enjoy the things that come from clay. About 30 years ago, I started to collect old Illinois stoneware and other pieces of Mid-western crockery. This interest spread to other areas of antiques, to history and, eventually, to museums displaying such items. Preserving history is very important because it shows where we have been. For that reason, I joined several national organizations whose goals are to keep history intact and share it with others. A year ago, I

received a brochure from one of these clubs; it was planning a trip to a museum during its annual convention in Kansas City. This museum held a cache of items from a sunken steamboat laden with 200 tons of cargo – a real buried treasure! How exciting, I thought, and I didn't have to drive to any coastal destination to see it.

America expanded westward in the 19th century by foot, in wagons, by horseback and sometimes, by the river routes. Here is a story that took place on the Missouri River 150+ years ago.

The Great White Arabia was a 171-foot steamer built in 1853 in Pennsylvania. It eventually wound up doing business on the treacherous Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. In St. Louis in 1856, she was headed upstream for the new frontier, stopping to load

cargo in what is now Kansas City. Just a few miles after leaving the docks in Kansas City, she hit a submerged 'snag' or tree in the river; her hull was gashed and the ship sank quickly. The cargo in the hold was considered a total loss. As the Missouri River currents eroded away the upper decks, the vessel sank even deeper into the muddy silt. Over the decades, the river's course changed and people forgot about the wreck. That was until a salvage operation began in 1897. The operation was a partial success: the salvagers found the hull of the *Arabia*, and its cargo, but it was not the premium whiskey they had hoped to find; rather, it was foot apparel and household items. Interest quickly waned and the salvage operation was abandoned. The *Arabia* then sat for another 91 years, before it would be

disturbed again.

During the 1980's, archeologists endured hardships and setbacks in their attempts to locate and recover the lost steamship. The course of the Missouri had changed and the wreck turned out to be a half mile from the present River, buried 45 feet under a cornfield! After locating this ship's remains, the archeologists salvaged the cargo, the stern and rudder, 3 boilers and other machinery and one of the paddle wheels. The fluctuating water table was then allowed to reclaim what was left of the *Arabia's* hull.

The artifacts salvaged from the cornfield served as the centerpiece of *The Great White Arabia* Steamboat Museum in Kansas City. From the moment you enter and hear the whistle and the loud "All Aboard", you are transported to a floating, 19th Century Wal-Mart of sorts. Shelves and displays are filled with goods typically found in general stores in the mid-19th Century: English pottery, household essentials, clothing and bolts of fabric, hardware and tools, and even exotic items such as French perfume (to help get the residents between those Saturday night baths).

I had hoped to see many pieces of stoneware, but found something more beautiful: 2000 pieces of unused English Ironstone. Numerous patterns were represented: Wedgwood's *Cypress*, Davenport's *Friburg*, Blue Feather (Shell) edged wares and simple white ironstone. All of this cargo from the *Arabia* had been headed for Council Bluffs, Iowa, a frontier outpost if there ever was one! What a fascinating barometer of everyday life on the Prairie in the years immediately preceding the Civil War!

My visit to the Museum and my adoration of "Clay" led me on a search for Davenport's *Friburg* ironstone, as seen in the Museum's collection. The *Friburg* pattern found buried with the *Arabia* was made and marked by Davenport in 1856. Some of the pieces in my personal collection are marked "G. Phillips, Longport", which dates them prior to 1847. I sometimes wonder if there were cabins or sod huts on the prairie with pieces of this pattern displayed on cupboards: how proud our pioneer women would have been

to have these – or any – transferware dishes in their modest homes.

When you are in Kansas City, I strongly recommend a visit to the *Steamship Arabia* Museum (www.1856.org), located in the City Market in the downtown area, not far from the spot where the paddle wheeler made its last docking. Detailed accounts of the *Arabia* are included in 2 books: *Treasure of the Steamboat Arabia*, by David Hawley and *Treasure in a Cornfield*, by Greg Hawley.



Transferware, mostly *Friburg* Pattern, found in the wreckage of the Steamship Arabia (Author's Photo).



English Pottery Salvaged from the wreck of the *Arabia* (Author's Photo).



Friburg Platter from the Author's Collection (Author's Photo)



Excavating the *Arabia* in a Cornfield (Image courtesy the Museum).



Transferware Collectors Club Bulletin

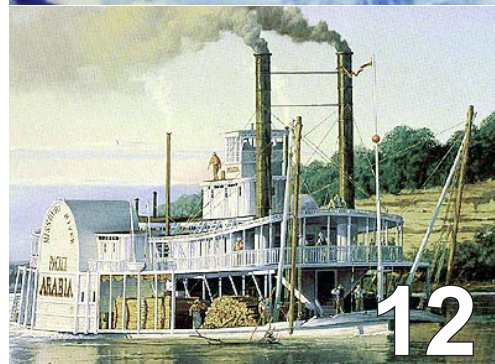
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TCC Launches Source Print Database

TCC President Loren Zeller announced at the end of June that the Club has launched its new Source Print Database, to be part of the pattern database which will now be known as *The British Transferware Pattern and Source Print Database*. The Database was developed with a grant from the Wallis Foundation and is currently available for use by Pattern Database Editors; the general membership will have access in the near future.

The idea for a Source Print Database evolved as the understanding of the importance and in-

fluence of these prints grew. Editors for the Pattern Database have been sent detailed guidelines for incorporation of the details of each source print into the listings, and it should not be long before this additional information will complement the Pattern Database listings.

A full Report will appear in a future *Bulletin*. If members have questions or source prints to share, they should contact Loren Zeller, Michael Sack or Connie Rogers (all members of the TCC Board; contact information available in the Board Listing).