



George Caleb Bingham's Missouri

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George Caleb Bingham witnessed the transition of Missouri from a rough “backwoods” state into a leading agricultural and industrial producer of the nation. Much of this transition and the people who shaped it are chronicled in his artwork. This presentation is a “broad brush” view of what Missouri was like during his lifetime.

Following the War of 1812, America turned its eyes towards its western territories, particularly the Missouri Territory. The region known as the “Boonslick Country” drew more settlers than all other regions of the territory combined. The core of the Boonslick settlements was in the Missouri valley in what are now Howard, Saline, Chariton and Cooper counties.

Land was abundant and very cheap at first, affording new economic opportunities for settlers who faced economic problems or whose farms were “played out” back east. John Mason Peck, a Baptist Missionary in St. Charles, made this observation of the migration: “Some families came in the spring of 1815; but in the winter, spring, summer and autumn of 1816, they came like an avalanche. It seemed as though Kentucky and Tennessee were breaking up and moving to the Far West. Caravan after caravan passed over the prairies of Illinois all bound to the Boone’s Lick. The stream of immigration had not lessened in 1817.”

This volume of immigration was previously unknown in America, and the frenzied pace continued for several more years. Henry Vest Bingham suffered financial setbacks in his native Virginia, and in 1819 he joined the throng of immigrants and brought his family including 8 year old George to the Boonslick boomtown of Franklin, about 12 miles across the river from Arrow Rock. Franklin did not even exist until 1816, but by 1819 it had a population of 2,000 and was second in size only to St. Louis. Henry established a tavern called the “Square and Compass” which indicated his membership in the Freemasons. Henry also became a partner with William Lamme in a tobacco factory and he purchased 160 acres of land two miles southwest of Arrow Rock to raise tobacco for the factory.

There were two ways to reach the Boonslick Country. Most traveled overland from St. Charles on the Boonslick Trail on foot, by horseback or by ox-drawn wagon. On the Missouri River people traveled in keelboats which were pushed, pulled, rowed or sailed, sometimes all at the same time, up the turbulent and rapid river. However, this was a time of rapid technological change. The May 28, 1819 edition of the Franklin Missouri Intelligencer reported an astounding development:
With no ordinary sensations of pride and pleasure, we announce the arrival, this morning, at this place, of the elegant STEAM BOAT INDEPENDENCE, Captain NELSON, in several sailing days (but thirteen from her time of departure) from St. Louis,

with passengers, and a cargo of flour, whisky, sugar, iron castings &c being the first Steam Boat that ever attempted ascending the Missouri. She was joyfully met by the inhabitants of Franklin, and saluted by the firing of cannon, which was returned by the Independence...boats may ascend the turbulent waters of the Missouri to bring to this part of the country the articles requisite to its supply and return laden with the various products of this fertile region. At no distant period may we see the industrious cultivator making his way as high as the Yellow Stone, and offering to the enterprising merchant and trader a surplus worthy of the fertile banks of the Missouri, yielding wealth to industry and enterprise.

The newspaper's prophecy of the impact of steamboats on Missouri's future was correct although it took a few more years to come to fruition. By 1831, there were five packets regularly operating on the Missouri. These light, fast steamboats were specifically designed for navigation on the Missouri River. Boats designed for the Ohio and Mississippi had deeper drafts and would be more likely to hang up on the Missouri's sandbars or rip their bellies out on the many snags. By 1849, the number of steamboats had increased to 58. Within 10 years, the number of boats had doubled again. The average boat cost around \$50,000 to build, but that money could be made back in one good season, which demonstrates how important river commerce was. For Arrow Rock and other communities along the Missouri, the river was like the Interstate Highway. You were going to benefit economically from all that commercial and passenger traffic passing your locale. Flatboats and keelboats continued to be used on the river but these steadily declined as the number of steamboats increased. Bingham knew the era of the flatboat and keelboat was passing, and he recorded the life of the boatmen in an almost nostalgic, romantic fashion. He only painted a couple of images of steamboats seen in the distance, perhaps showing a bit of disdain for advancing technology.

Land speculation was rampant in Missouri and other western territories. People were buying and reselling land at a profit without making any payments on the tracts they purchased. This economic bubble finally burst in 1819. It took almost two years for the full effects to impact Missouri, but the result was the collapse of the banking system. The "Panic of 1819" was a true depression, perhaps far worse than the 1930's Great Depression. Stores in Franklin and other Boonslick towns had no buyers for their merchandise and farmers had little outlet for their produce. Paper currency, printed by individual states and even private banks was worthless. Gold or silver coin of Spanish mint known as "specie" was the only accepted legal tender in Missouri. Bartering for goods and services was commonplace and debtors faced prosecution in courts. There were no bankruptcy laws, so conviction for debts meant jail time. One of those facing prosecution was William Becknell of Franklin. He owed Henry Bingham \$495.70, and Bingham formally filed suit against Becknell in November of 1821.

However, Becknell could not keep his court date. At that time, he was about 800 miles to the southwest in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which was then a foreign country. Becknell and his companions made about 1,000% profit on the meager supply of trade goods they carried with them. When Becknell returned to Franklin, he reportedly cut the

thongs of his saddlebags and coins spilled into the gutter. Henry Bingham collected on his debt, and Becknell became known as “the father of the Santa Fe Trail.” Trade with Santa Fe broke the depression, and for the next 30 years it was one of the most important industries in building Missouri’s economic foundation. Governor John Miller stated in 1830, “Our trade to the northern parts of New Mexico continues to be prosecuted by our citizens and is an essential and important branch of the commerce of Missouri.” Even at later dates, profits of the traders still ranged from 20 to 100%. Governor Miller said the trade “...is believed to yield a greater gain than any other branch of industry employing the same amount of capital.

The actual amount of money brought into the state from the Santa Fe trade is unknown. Traders jealously guarded their capital, records are sparse and officials like Governor Miller could only make estimates. However a demonstration of the importance of the trade occurred when there was a run on the Bank of Missouri in 1839. The run was stayed when Santa Fe traders pumped \$45,000 of specie into the bank. Interestingly, Missouri newspapers routinely decried the “ruinous condition” of the trade and the lack of its profitability. The newspapers were deliberately printing false information in an effort to keep the benefits of the trade solely in Missouri. They didn’t want Illinois or Arkansas citizens horning in on our action.

Another aspect of the trade that had a lasting impact on Missouri was the livestock brought back from Santa Fe, primarily mules, jacks and jennets. These animals formed the basis of Missouri’s world renowned mule industry. The first animals were brought back in 1822 and each year the size of returning herds grew. By the 1850s, these animals were no longer imported from New Mexico. However, they formed the basis of a Missouri industry that lasted through the First World War and produced and shipped more mules worldwide than any other state in the Union.

George’s childhood activities came to an abrupt end on December 26, 1823, when his father died. With six children to support, his mother briefly opened a girl’s school in Franklin. However, due to unfortunate mismanagement, the properties of the Bingham family dwindled until they had only the 160 acre farm near Arrow Rock. Early in 1827, the Franklin Masonic Lodge secured the farm property and helped the family to relocate there. There were no such things as life insurance policies or government aid programs so fraternal organizations such as the lodges provided an important safety net to the families of their members. George later became a member of the International Order of Odd Fellows Lodge in Arrow Rock as opposed to the Freemasons.

Young George had to lay aside his artistic ambitions and help support the family. He was apprenticed to cabinetmaker Jesse Green who was also a Methodist minister. Green was transferred to the Shawnee District in Indian Territory. From 1828 to 1832, George was apprenticed to Justinian Williams, another cabinetmaker and Methodist minister in Boonville. George expressed interest in becoming either a lawyer or minister during this time and is known to have preached sermons at several camp meetings. This situation demonstrates another aspect of 19th century Missouri life. People often held multiple occupations and sometimes these varied by season. For example,

between planting and harvest time, a farmer might be engaged in the Santa Fe trade or, in addition to farming, someone may have done black smithing or wagon building.

By 1834, George was in a studio in Columbia, Missouri. The March 14, 1835 edition of the Missouri Intelligencer reported: "We cannot refrain from expressing our delight, occasioned by a visit a few mornings since to the portrait-room of Mr. Bingham upon Guitar street...A collection of well-finished portraits – each affording full evidence of a cultivated mimetic skill and of an undoubted high creative genius-is a circumstance that deserves a place as an important era, in the history of Trans-Mississippian progress towards a state of intellectual and social refinement." It is important to note that although Missouri was still defined as a "frontier state" at this time, it had truly changed from the stereotypical image of the buckskin-clad hunter living in a crude log cabin and fending off Indian attacks. This was the point of the Intelligencer article – Missouri was well on the road to becoming civilized, sophisticated and appreciative of the arts and culture. To be sure, you could still find rough, illiterate "frontiersmen" living in cabins in remote areas like in Bingham's The Squatters. However, they were considered "ne'er do wells" who did not contribute to society and would move on when the refinements of civilization reached their neighborhood.

In 1836 Bingham married Sarah Elizabeth Hutchinson of Boonville and in July of 1837 he purchased Lot 14 of Block 3 in Arrow Rock from future governor Claiborne Fox Jackson. Bingham built his Federal-style brick house which remains on this site today and is a National Historic Landmark. Jackson and other upper class merchants and plantation owners frequently purchased town lots and then sub-divided them for resale at a profit. Elisha Ansell owned a lumberyard in Arrow Rock and built homes on his lots that he would live in while building another. Then he would move into the finished house and sell the old one. Consequently, there were and are several Ansell houses in Arrow Rock. We can see in many respects, real estate development has not changed much in the intervening 175 years. Probably the major difference is the homes built on the lots were not perfect clones of each other.

As Bingham expanded his artistic endeavors, he left the state and traveled to Philadelphia in 1838 where he lived for four months. He also traveled to New York and exhibited one of his first genre paintings, Western Boatmen Ashore. Bingham returned to Arrow Rock later in the year and continued painting portraits and began sketching scenes of life in the country and on the Missouri River. But Bingham had interests besides the law, preaching or even his artwork. He showed an interest in politics that grew over time and many of his famous genre pieces such as Canvassing for a Vote, Stump Speaking, The County Election and Verdict of the People documented the political atmosphere of 19th century Missouri. It is important to note the absence of women and people of color in these paintings: the law did simply not allow them to participate in the political process.

When Bingham was a young man, the Democratic Party dominated Missouri politics. Party headquarters was centered in Fayette in Howard County and most of the party leaders were from the Boonslick Country, many of them friends, neighbors or portrait

subjects of Bingham. These party men were known as the “Central Clique” and held their power nearly 40 years. Newspaper editorials commented on how the “long and shrewd fingers” of the Clique extended into state government. Democrats supported the expansion of slavery into western territories, and the policies of President Andrew Jackson. They also supported a Jeffersonian ideal of an egalitarian agricultural society, advising that traditional farm life bred republican simplicity. Today we would probably label their views as ultra-conservative.

However Bingham was drawn to the Whig Party formed in 1836. The Whigs formed in opposition to what they viewed as the tyrannical actions of President Jackson, namely his defiance of Supreme Court rulings, the dissolution of the Bank of the United States and his issuance of executive orders bypassing Congress. And you probably thought that the controversy over “executive orders” was a relatively recent event in our history. The Whigs opposed the expansion of slavery and sought more internal improvements such as roads, canals and railroads. Whigs also sought government support of a more industrialized society and promoted public education, private colleges and cultural institutions. The Whigs supported government by the people and for the people, but also believed that only educated people should have a say in the process. In a word, we would probably call them progressives today.

Missouri was a slave state and although in 1860 less than 10% of the population was enslaved, in the Boonslick that number averaged as high as 35 – 50%. Slavery was vital to agricultural production of the region primarily the labor-intensive crops of hemp and tobacco. Missouri was the third largest producer of tobacco in the nation during the 19th century. Much of the physical labor in town building and civic improvements was done with slave labor. Almost every structure you see in Arrow Rock today is at least partially the result of African-American labor, initially slave and then free. The Democrats, of course, favored and even depended on the institution of slavery. Even the Whigs did not actively promote dismantling the institution where it already existed. Bingham even owned slaves although by the time of the Civil War he had freed them.

Missouri’s economy became increasingly tied to the cotton culture of the Deep South. Hemp became the crop of choice because the plant fiber, which was made into rope, was needed to tie and pack cotton bales. Hemp plantations, which were comparable to the cotton plantations of the Deep South, flourished in Missouri. The south had invested almost all of its agricultural production in cotton and was thus incapable of feeding itself. Despite the proliferation of hemp and tobacco, Missouri farms were still producing great quantities of corn, wheat, beef and pork and this produce was shipped to the Delta Region. Claiborne Fox Jackson and O.B. Pearson of Arrow Rock are prime examples of this economic tie. They formed a company that regularly shipped flour, pork, mules and horses to the cotton district of Natchez, Mississippi. This economic connection explains why Jackson as governor and many Missourians supported the South when the Civil War erupted in 1861. The South was their bread and butter.

In the spring of 1840, Bingham became active in the Whig Party presidential convention held in Rocheport. On April 1, 1840, fourteen men voted in Arrow Rock’s first town

election. Bingham served as an election judge and certified the results. Bingham was elected as the Saline County representative to the Missouri State Legislature in 1846. His Democratic opponent, Erasmus Darwin Sappington, contested the election and won the recount. I am uncertain how this recount was achieved as voting was done by voice and everyone at the polling place already knew how you voted. A clerk recorded each oral vote and there was no "paper trail" beyond that. Bingham was elected to the Arrow Rock Board of Trustees on April 24, 1847, and board members voted him in as chairman. In May of 1848 Bingham was again nominated as the Whig candidate to the State House of Representatives for Saline County, but he declined the nomination. In June, he accepted the nomination and this time defeated Erasmus Darwin Sappington for the office. Following the Civil War Bingham went on to serve in various other state and local governmental offices. One thing can be said with certainty of Bingham's political paintings, they are based on his personal experiences in the streets of Arrow Rock, Boonville, Rocheport and Columbia.

We tend to think we live in a hurried and highly mobile society, and we do. But I would submit to you that the phenomenon existed in the 19th century. Look at how Bingham moved around in his life:

- 1835 – In St. Louis
- 1838 – In Philadelphia and New York
- 1840 to 1844 – Living in Washington, D.C.
- 1850 to 1851 – Moves to New York
- 1851 – Returns to Columbia, Missouri
- 1852 – Attends national Whig convention in Baltimore.
- 1853 – Travels to New Orleans, Natchez Mississippi, Lexington Kentucky, New York and Philadelphia.
- 1854 – In New York, Philadelphia and St. Louis.
- 1856 to 1859 – In Paris, France and Düsseldorf, Germany, travels around Europe.
- 1860 – Residing in Independence, Missouri.
- 1870 – Moves to Kansas City
- 1871 to 1873 – Travels to Philadelphia, Colorado, Texas, and Kentucky.
- 1877 – Travels to Virginia.

Bingham's mobility reflected the improvements in transportation systems. Besides a proliferation of steamboats on the Missouri, Mississippi, Ohio and their major tributaries, stage coach routes networked across the country. Stage lines could be affected by deep snow, ice or muddy and rutted roads. Steamboats could only travel on certain rivers, and ice or too high or too low water levels could limit navigation. However, the application of steam greatly enhanced and improved transatlantic shipping, although a large number of sailing ships still remained in service. East of the Mississippi, railroads spread rapidly during the 1850s. Following the Civil War, railroad lines exploded across Missouri and further west. Railroads had the advantage of speed and were not affected by weather conditions, and, of course, rail lines penetrated territory that was inaccessible by water routes. Consequently, both the steamboat and stage lines were squeezed out of existence by the railroads. However, it is clear that even at an early

date in the 19th century the means of personal mobility existed and increased with each passing decade.

This mobility represented by changing technology impacted the Boonslick. At first the impact was positive, as we've seen. However, following the Civil War it became a negative as it changed demographics statewide. In 1865 the population of Kansas City was 3,500, but by 1870 it had increased to 30,000. Manufactured products in St. Louis rose from \$27 million in value in 1870 to \$114 million in 1880. The Boonslick could not compete with such phenomenal population and industrial growth, and, in fact, it steadily lost population to those burgeoning cities. In addition the Central Clique had supported the wrong side in the war. Their power was rooted in the slave-based agrarian society which was destroyed by the war. In addition the post-war Republican reconstruction government made sure the power of the Boonslick Democrats remained broken.

Personal tragedies, typical of 19th century Missouri, visited the Bingham family. Today news stories generate concerns and fears about West Nile virus, mad cow disease, avian flu or other potential pandemics. However, on a per capita basis, our society has experienced scarcely a fraction of the illness or death toll that afflicted a much smaller population in the 19th century. We know that nearly everyone, everyone in Missouri lived with malaria and without Dr. Sappington's quinine pills the death toll from that disease probably would have been higher. A cholera epidemic in the summer of 1849 killed over 4,000 people in St. Louis. In Arrow Rock at least 50 died, which was one in six of the population at that time, and that number doesn't include the people who got sick but recovered. Doctors in neighboring communities urged that Arrow Rock be completely abandoned. I just heard a news report where the narrator grimly announced, "the beginning of West Nile virus season." He then emphatically stated that "1,000 people have died from the disease since 2001." Now I am not minimizing the death of those 1,000 people, but can you imagine if we experienced a plague on the same scale as the 1849 cholera epidemic?

With medical knowledge being extremely primitive by our standards, the death of children and of women in childbirth was especially commonplace. Bingham's first son, Newton, was born in March of 1837, but he died in March of 1841. Horace, his second son, was born that same month. A daughter, Clara, was born in 1845, but his wife Elizabeth died on November 24, 1848, after giving birth to another son, Joseph. Joseph died the following month. In 1849, Bingham married Eliza Thomas of Columbia. Her parents were instrumental in founding William Jewell College in Liberty. Eliza suffered from a mental disorder and died in 1876 while institutionalized in Fulton State Hospital. The grief that Bingham experienced over and over again is incompressible to me. Yet it is clear that the man got through it and went on with his life. George married his third wife Mattie Lykins in 1878, but he himself became ill with pneumonia in 1879 and finally passed away from cholera morbus on July 7 at the age of 68.

Bingham saw remarkable change in Missouri during his lifetime. In his youth the northern and western portions of the state were still roamed by Indians. He witnessed the transition in commerce and transportation from keelboat to steamboat to railroads.

In his heyday as an artist, the Boonslick was the economic and political center of Missouri. Following the Civil War he saw that power shift to St. Louis and Kansas City. He witnessed Missouri's economy transform from a dependency on slavery, the Santa Fe trade and hemp production into a free state with a highly diversified agricultural and manufacturing base. Fortunately for us, in an age before photography existed, George Caleb Bingham recorded for us the images of his Missouri.