



The River Crossing



The city of Decatur began as a simple Cherokee river crossing. Over time, more people learned of the beauty of the Tennessee Valley, and the river crossing became a ferry crossing. Known first as McDaniel's Ferry and then Rhodes Ferry, Decatur was named after Commodore Stephen Decatur in 1820 and officially incorporated in 1826.

Decatur became the eastern terminus of the first railroad west of the Appalachians, the Decatur to Tuscumbia line. The rail line carried goods around the infamous Muscle Shoals. The presence of the railway lead to a dark time in the town's history as both north and south fought for control of the line. At the end of the Civil War, all but three of the town's buildings had been destroyed.

The town was rebuilt and prospered after the Civil War, making the Tennessee River a major artery for trade in the area. The taming of Muscle Shoals and the development of the TVA network of dams laid the way for even more trade. Decatur is now linked to over 650 miles of navigable waterways stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

Steamboats of Decatur

The Steamer R.C. GUNTER was one of the major packet boats that operated between Chattanooga and Decatur in the 1880s. Packet boats were steamboats used for cargo and passengers. This steamboat, owned by

Bridgeport's prominent R.C. Gunter, carried both cotton and passengers along the Tennessee River. Built by the Chattanooga and Decatur Packet Company in 1886, this wooden hull packet stretched 153 feet in length and 28 feet in width.



Morgan County Archives



Captain William "Steamboat Bill" Hudson/Keith Hudson

Steamboat Bill

When crossing the Tennessee River, most steamboats were stopped at Muscle Shoals where the river was too difficult to navigate. During times of high water, a few brave steamboat captains ran the shoals all the way to Chattanooga. The river at Decatur has raised generations of captains and rivermen who left a legacy throughout the entire Mississippi Basin. The bridge that now spans the river crossing was named for one of the many great steamboat captains to pass this way, Captain William "Steamboat Bill" Hudson.

