A SINGLE STEAMBOAT, reputed to be as slow as "anything on the upper river," was all that Captain William F. Davidson owned when he entered the upper Mississippi River trade in 1856. Four years later he was a director and large stockholder of an important steam packet company and well on his way to becoming the "commodore" of the upper Mississippi. Although several men in other businesses improved their positions spectacularly in this time and place of great opportunity, few if any of the hundreds of steamboatmen on the upper river during the 1850s achieved the prominence that was to be Davidson's. A study of this early period of his career suggests some of the reasons for his unusual success.

Minnesota Territory was growing rapidly when Davidson entered the steamboat business on the upper Mississippi. St. Paul, the capital, had only about a thousand inhabitants in 1850, while the entire territory had a population a little over six times that number. During the next five years the Indians' title to a large part of the region was extinguished by treaties, and a rush to the new land followed. The booming lumber business accounted for the remarkable growth of some river towns, while others became prosperous points of entry for settlers from the East. St. Paul, at the head

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of navigation on the Mississippi, became the commercial as well as the political center of the territory. By 1857 the city's population had grown to over eight thousand, and by the opening of the new decade it had more than ten thousand inhabitants. In the same period the population of Minnesota increased to over a hundred and fifty thousand in 1857, the year before it achieved statehood, and three years later it had 172,923 people.

Steamboat operation to the head of navigation on the Mississippi began in 1823, a third of a century before Davidson entered the trade. For many years the business was limited primarily to transporting supplies for Indian traders and troops and necessities for Fort Snelling, at the mouth of the Minnesota River above St. Paul. After increasing gradually for a quarter of a century, the steamboat trade expanded rapidly between 1848 and 1857. In the latter year, despite a great financial panic, ninety-eight different boats made 1,026 trips to St. Paul, and the number of arrivals there reached a peak of 1,066 in 1858. During the next two seasons the business dropped off sharply, so that in 1860 there were only forty-six boats in the trade and they made 776 trips to Minnesota's capital city.

An important element in the rapid development of the steamboat trade in Minnesota during the 1850s, as well as in Davidson's success, was the expansion of steamboating on the Minnesota River after 1850. By 1857 there were thirteen different boats on the Minnesota, and they made a total of 292 trips to St. Paul. Even the panic of 1857 did not stop the growth of this business immediately, and the steamers made 383 trips to the capital in the following year. By the beginning of the new decade, however, just eight boats, which made 250 trips to St. Paul, remained.

Although Davidson was only thirty-one years old when he entered the upper Mississippi trade, he was already an experienced river boatman. His paternal grandparents had been among the first settlers in Lawrence County, Ohio, on the Ohio River; and his father, a Baptist minister, made his living as a flatboatman. His son followed him on the river rather than in the pulpit. Lacking opportunity for a formal education, the boy early became a proficient riverman, helping his father on his trips to near-by Ironton, Ohio, to Cincinnati, and to other ports. In 1845, at the age of twenty, he became captain and part owner of the steamer "Gondola," and later of the "Relief" and the "United States Aid." His younger brother, Peyton S. Davidson, joined him in the steamboat business in 1852. William visited the upper Mississippi and St. Paul in 1855, and he apparently was impressed by the opportunities in this growing region, for in the following spring he decided to enter the St. Louis and St. Paul steamboat trade.

Between 1856 and 1860 Davidson purchased six steamboats, all of them well suited for the upper Mississippi trade. Before shifting to that area, he replaced the "Aid" with the "Jacob Traber," a new...
stern-wheeler constructed at Cincinnati. The latter boat was described some sixty years later by a veteran steamboatman as one of the few on the river with double stern wheels, and he also recalled that “If there was anything on the upper river slower than the ‘Jacob Traber’ I never heard of it.” It made a much better impression than that, however, when it arrived at St. Louis in 1856 on its first trip to St. Paul. A St. Louis journalist then reported that it was a “fine new steamer ... of the largest size, and has great capacity for freight, and is of very light draft.” Actually, the “Traber” had a capacity of 238 tons, only a little above the average for the time.6

After one season on the upper Mississippi, Davidson determined to expand his operations by entering the booming Minnesota River trade. Although the “Traber” was too large for that stream, it had earned sufficient money during the preceding season to enable its owner to buy a second boat. Accordingly, Davidson ordered a short, light-draft side-wheeler, the “Frank Steele,” which could readily navigate the many bends in the Minnesota, and he personally supervised its construction at Cincinnati during the winter of 1856–57.7 The “Steele” soon became known as “one of the finest boats on the Minnesota.” One traveler enthusiastically expressed his belief that “A passenger had better remain in St. Paul three days than to take any other boat.” Early in the “Steele’s” first season, the press reported that it was “the special favorite on the Minnesota.” It made one trip down from Mankato, about 105 miles above St. Paul, in sixteen hours, including all way or intermediate stops. This average speed of over six and a half miles per hour was then considered remarkably fast on the Minnesota. One journalist described the “Steele” as “a perfect palace when compared with the old style boats that used to trade on the river,” adding that “passengers receive as good accommodation as they would in a hotel.” A group of passengers who traveled on it in 1858 to Fort Ridgely, 177 miles above St. Paul, “unanimously” resolved that “we cordially recommend to the travelling public generally the ‘Frank Steele’ as being a boat unsurpassed on the Minnesota River, for safety, convenience and good living.”

In spite of the panic of 1857, Davidson’s two boats made profits by the end of the season of 1858 sufficient to enable him to plan a considerable expansion of his business on the Minnesota. Before the end of the year he arranged for the construction at Cincinnati of another short side-wheeler, the “Favorite.” According to a newspaper report published in the fall of its first year, “no boat on the ... river is so popular as the little Favorite.” Purchased by Davidson during the winter of 1858–59 were two small stern-wheelers built in 1855—the “Eolian” at Brownsville, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, and the “Freighter” at Zanesville, Ohio. According to one writer, the “Eolian,” a fast, light-draft boat, had been in the “regular” trade on the St. Croix River earlier. It operated on the upper Mississippi to St. Paul in 1858. The “Freighter,” a “Scow-bow” boat calculated to run on a “heavy dew,” arrived on the Minnesota River in the same year.8 Finally, in the summer of 1860, Davidson purchased another small new, light-draft side-wheeler, the “Wenona,” to operate as a “low water boat” on the upper Mississippi. It was built at Hokah, across the Mississippi from La Crosse, using the engines from the “Ben Coursin,” which had sunk near by three years earlier. Davidson bought the “We-

6 William H. C. Folsom, Fifty Years in the Northwest, 691 (St. Paul, 1888); Merrick, in Post, July 29, 1916; Pioneer and Democrat, May 27, 1856; Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels, 95, 190.
7 Pioneer and Democrat, April 2, 1857; Post, May 1, 1857.
8 Mildred L. Hartsough, From Canoe to Steel Barge on the Upper Mississippi, 168 (Minneapolis, 1934); Minnesotian (St. Paul), May 23, July 1, 1857; Pioneer and Democrat, May 12, June 13, 1857, April 30, August 14, 1858.
nona" at St. Louis soon after it was completed.10

With the exception of the “Traber,” purchased for the St. Louis and St. Paul trade, all the steamers acquired by Davidson were small, light-draft vessels. With one exception, they were built on the Ohio or its tributaries—three of them at Cincinnati. The average capacity of the five smaller boats was 124 tons, a little more than half the average of 218 tons for all forty-six boats that arrived at St. Paul in 1860. The “Steele” and the “Favorite,” both built expressly for the Minnesota River, each had a beam, or width, of only twenty-eight feet, less than the distance between the ten-yard markers on a football field. The “Steele,” built in 1857, was 175 feet long, while the “Favorite,” built two years later, after Davidson had some experience on the Minnesota, measured only 147 feet. The “Eolian,” 106 tons, drew only fifteen inches of water.11

LIKE ALL steamboats, those owned by Davidson met with a variety of accidents. During the “Traber’s” first season, it lost a wheel on a trip down the river from St. Paul. During the “Steele’s” first summer on the Minnesota, the water level dropped so low that the boat ran aground several times. The resulting damage made necessary a trip to St. Louis for repairs which kept it there for a month. The season of 1859 was particularly destructive to Davidson’s steamers. In the spring, soon after he purchased the “Eolian,” it was wrecked and sunk in Lake Pepin on its first trip of the season to St. Paul, with the loss of four passengers. A shift in the wind drove ice against the boat’s sides, crushing it between floes and knocking over its upper works. Less than three weeks later the “Traber,” after only three seasons of operation, sank at Cincinnati while moving down the Ohio, and was virtually a total loss. In the following spring the “Steele” lost its smokestacks and pilothouse when it ran “into a tree” and was damaged so seriously that it had to lay up for repairs.12

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10 Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels, 64, 68, 95, 200; George B. Merrick, Old Times on the Upper Mississippi, 269 (Cleveland, 1909); Frederick Way, Directory of Western Rivers Packets, 111 (1950); Post, April 3, May 1, 1915; Pioneer and Democrat, March 14, November 25, 1860.
11 Minnesotian, September 6, 1856; Pioneer and Democrat, July 11, 1857, May 10, 1859, April 13, 1860; Red Wing Sentinel, April 23, 1859.

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FORT RIDGELY AND THE MINNESOTA VALLEY ABOUT 1860

"Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels, 200; Pioneer and Democrat, August 10, 1860; Post, November 8, 1919.

"Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels, 64, 68, 95, 200; George B. Merrick, Old Times on the Upper Mississipi, 269 (Cleveland, 1909); Frederick Way, Directory of Western Rivers Packets, 111 (1950); Post, April 3, May 1, 1915; Pioneer and Democrat, March 14, November 25, 1860.

"Minnesotian, September 6, 1856; Pioneer and Democrat, July 11, 1857, May 10, 1859, April 13, 1860; Red Wing Sentinel, April 23, 1859."
Whenever possible, Davidson had his boats repaired promptly after such major accidents, and, in addition, he had them overhauled regularly each winter in preparation for the coming season. After the “Eolian” sank in Lake Pepin in the spring of 1859, however, he had to wait until later in the year to raise and repair it. When low water in the Minnesota forced the “Favorite” out of service on the depleted stream, he sent it to Lake Pepin, expecting that it would be back with the wreck of the “Eolian” in a few days. Three weeks passed, however, before it could tow the damaged vessel to St. Paul; the water where the “Eolian” had sunk was so deep that the work of raising it was “very difficult indeed,” requiring a large gang of men. Davidson then found that the wreck and the freight were hardly worth the expense involved in recovering them, and not until the following season was the “Eolian” again ready for active service. To help offset the expense of these repairs and the loss of the “Traber,” Davidson sold the “Freighter” after owning it for only a few months. The boat soon became stranded and was abandoned by its new owner.13

AMONG THE capable officers serving on Davidson’s boats, perhaps the ablest was his younger brother, Peyton, who accompanied him to the upper Mississippi in 1856. Peyton was described as “a model mate in everything, including language.” When Captain Davidson took command of the new “Frank Steele” in 1857, Peyton became master of the “Traber,” and he later was part owner and captain of other Davidson boats.14 Two of his key officers started as clerks, or business managers. James R. Hatcher went to the upper Mississippi as clerk of the “Traber” in 1856, and when Davidson took command of the new “Favorite” three years later, Hatcher was promoted to captain of the “Steele.” He became part owner of the “Eolian,” and master and part owner of other Davidson boats in later years. William Rhodes, the clerk of the “Steele,” was described as “a gentleman well known and highly es-

13 Lytle, Merchant Steam Vessels, 68; Pioneer and Democrat, May 11, June 24, August 30, September 20, 1859, March 14, 1860. 
teemed”; he, too, became one of Davidson’s right-hand men.13

Davidson and his officers, as well as their boats, were highly regarded during the early period of their careers. When the “Traber” stopped at St. Louis in the spring of 1856, a local newspaper reported that its officers were “well known as excellent steamboater men.” A St. Paul journalist described Davidson in the following year as “a first rate captain.” Upon his return to the Minnesota in 1858, a local paper announced that “Capt. Davidson, and his fine boat, the Frank Steele, were received with great demonstrations all along the river from St. Paul to Mankato. The Captain is very popular, and deservedly so, because he is just of that gentlemanly and accommodating disposition, which is so necessary for success.” About seventy-five passengers who traveled on the “Favorite” to St. Louis late in 1859 signed a letter to a St. Paul editor speaking “in high terms of the boat, and of the officers and crew, for their courteous and gentlemanly treatment.” A Red Wing newspaper reported “golden opinions” of Davidson’s boats running on the Mississippi during low water on the Minnesota.16

After Davidson’s entrance into the growing trade on the upper Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, it soon became apparent that he was quick to take advantage of opportunities. During the winter of 1855-56, while still in Cincinnati, he wrote his father: “I think this icy time will make freights better when the river opens and we can make money, and if we can get two or three good trips at first it will help us out of a dead lift and make all things right.” During the three seasons that the “Traber” operated on the upper Mississippi, it went to St. Paul only when the freights were heavy, spending most of its time farther down the river.17

Each spring, as soon as the upper Mississippi was free of ice, most of Davidson’s boats, having wintered on the Ohio, arrived at St. Paul with full loads of freight from Pittsburgh, Wheeling, or Cincinnati. For the first trip upstream in 1856 he loaded the “Traber” at Wheeling with a heavy cargo for St. Paul and other points on the upper Mississippi. When the “Steele” arrived in Minnesota for the first time a year later, its passengers included seventy-five members of the Cincinnati Turnverein who planned to join the new German colony at New Ulm. The “Traber” arrived a short time later with a load of machinery and other freight, also from Cincinnati. In the spring of 1858 the “Steele” stopped at St. Louis with about a hundred and fifty tons of freight for the upper Mississippi and two hundred and fifty passengers, many of them bound for the same locality.18

Although three of Davidson’s boats took on cargoes for St. Paul on the Ohio or at St. Louis in the spring of 1859, only one arrived under its own steam. The “Eolian” was carrying freight from St. Louis when it sank in Lake Pepin, while the “Traber” had loaded at Pittsburgh for St. Louis and the upper river, but sank at Cincinnati. The “Favorite” left St. Louis after its first trip from the Ohio with a hundred passengers for the upper Mississippi. In the following spring it again loaded at Cincinnati for St. Paul.19

DAVIDSON made every effort to get maximum use out of his boats. During a single month in 1857, when the average number of trips by other boats was fewer than four, the “Steele” made a total of seven to St. Paul from the Minnesota, principally from

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Mankato. A journalist explained that Davidson did not tie up his steamer for a week waiting for freight, but kept it moving, thus making two trips to the average boat's one. The local press reported approvingly that, when low water forced most boats to leave the Minnesota, Davidson kept the "Steele" there as long as it could operate—"more than can be said of some other boats" in the trade. By 1858 the "Steele" was occasionally running up the Minnesota as far as Fort Ridgely. In the following year it went to the fort and back, a total of 354 miles, in three days and sixteen hours, the quickest round trip made up to that time. On another occasion it ran all the way up to the Upper Sioux or Yellow Medicine Agency, 238 miles above St. Paul. Only one boat had gone farther up the Minnesota previously.

During periods of low water on the Minnesota, Davidson worked out new schedules for his boats. In 1857, for example, the "Steele" ran between St. Paul and Fulton, Illinois, where it made connections with the Chicago, Fulton and Iowa Railroad. In the early fall of 1859 Davidson put the "Steele" into the St. Paul and St. Louis trade and operated the "Favorite" between St. Paul and La Crosse, where it met the trains of the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad. That road, which reached the Mississippi in the fall of 1858, provided a new route which was shorter than that of any of its competitors between Minnesota and the East. The "Steele" joined the "Favorite" in the La Crosse trade near the end of the season. In the spring of 1860 Davidson scheduled the "Eolian," then his smallest boat, to operate on the upper Minnesota, connecting on the lower stream with his larger boats from St. Paul. The "Steele," which had wintered above Lake Pepin in 1859–60, ran between the lake head and St. Paul until the ice broke up and made it possible for boats from below to reach the upper river. Late in the summer of 1860 Davidson put three boats into the La Crosse trade.

By the summer of 1858 Davidson was running the "Steele" on a regular semi-weekly schedule between St. Paul and Mankato. Before the opening of the 1859 season, when he expected to have four boats on the Minnesota, his line proudly announced that its boats, which were "elegantly fitted up with the latest improvements" and staffed by "skillful, gentlemanly officers," would run daily between St. Paul and "all points" on that river. After the loss of the "Eolian" and the sale of the "Freighter," Davidson could not operate a daily line, but he scheduled the "Favorite" to leave St. Paul regularly three times a week for Mankato and the "Steele" to depart every Thursday for the Lower Sioux Agency, about ten miles east of the mouth of the Redwood River. In the following spring, after the "Steele" was wrecked, he again put the "Favorite" on a regular tri-weekly schedule along the Minnesota River.

Such schedules suggest that passengers were an important source of revenue to Davidson. In 1858 the "Steele" carried about seventy passengers on its first trip up the Minnesota. Later that season a St. Paul newspaper noted that the boat was "crowded to overflowing" with passengers moving to the Minnesota Valley, "mostly farmers of the best class." It took seventy-seven cabin and twenty-five deck passengers downstream to St. Paul from Mankato in the same year. The fare for the round trip between the Minnesota capital and Fort Ridgely in 1857 was about eleven dollars, or three and one-tenth cents per mile. In the La Crosse trade, during the
season of 1859, the “Favorite” frequently made trips with large numbers of passengers on board.23

As freight carriers, Davidson’s boats transported a considerable array of commodities. On one trip in the fall of 1857 the “Traber” steamed up from St. Louis with a cargo which included, among other necessities, nails, hardware, sleighs, beds, furniture, tin plate, carboys, dry goods, pork, eggs, apples, pears, barley, corn, oats, flour, and liquor. Two weeks later the “Steele” arrived at St. Paul with another load of freight from St. Louis, equally varied, and including also zinc, sheet iron, and feathers. Just a year later the “Steele” was carrying oats, substantial quantities of flour, potatoes, hides, and other items to the St. Paul market from Mankato. Flour was already beginning to be an important Minnesota product. According to one historian, Davidson secured a large share of the freight business on the Minnesota by charging considerably lower rates than other captains.24

Further illustrations of the variety and quantity of freight carried by the Davidson line are to be found in the cargoes of 1859 and 1860. Clothes, blankets, flannels, prints, and sheeting were among the items carried up the Minnesota by the “Favorite” in the fall of 1859 as part of the annuity payment for the Winnebagoes, then living on a reservation in Blue Earth County near Mankato. Toward the end of this season the “Favorite” transported a hundred and twenty barrels of cranberries, destined for the Boston market, down the Mississippi to the railhead at La Crosse; this led to optimistic predictions in the local press concerning the future of Minnesota’s cranberry crop. During the fall of 1859 Davidson’s boats sometimes moved such heavy freights that they were forced to tow barges to carry part of their cargo. The “Eolian,” which steamed down the Minnesota with two thousand bushels of wheat and oats in the spring of 1860, was soon followed by the “Favorite” with twenty-five hundred bushels of grain, plus butter, eggs, pork, ham, vegetables, and other commodities.25

Excursions and contracts for hauling military personnel, mail, and express also resulted in profits for Davidson. In 1857 the “Steele” took a hundred and fifty soldiers down the Minnesota from Traverse des Sioux to Fort Snelling, about ninety miles. Later in the season it was chartered for an excursion from St. Paul to Belle Plaine, forty-nine miles up the Minnesota, for a Fourth of July celebration. On a similar occasion a year later it took aboard nearly three hundred passengers, which no doubt

23 Pioneer and Democrat, April 14, 25, August 20, September 17, 1858, October 4, 7, 21, 1859.
24 Lester B. Shippee, “Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi after the Civil War,” in Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 6:471 (March, 1920); Pioneer and Democrat, September 10, 24, 1857.
25 Mankato Weekly Record, August 9, 1859; Pioneer and Democrat, October 26, November 4, 1859, June 12, 16, 1860.

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helped explain the report that Davidson had a “glorious time.” The “Steele” made several pleasure trips all the way up to Fort Ridgely later in the same summer, and in 1859 it contracted to transport a company of soldiers to that post from Fort Snelling. It also made excursion trips, complete with band music, to the Indian agencies beyond Fort Ridgely later in the season, when the festivities which marked annuity payments were in progress. The “Favorite” had contracts to carry mail and express during this and following seasons. One reason why Davidson entered the St. Paul and La Crosse trade in the summer of 1860 was to get the mail contract.\(^{20}\)

THE FACT that Davidson, after arriving on the upper Mississippi with just one boat, was able to buy five more during the next four years, indicates that he was financially successful. The setback encountered in the panic of 1857 notwithstanding, he purchased three steamers about a year later. Within a year and a half after the “Traber” was lost and the “Eolian” and the “Steele” wrecked, he bought still another boat. The press reported in the fall of 1859 that Davidson’s line had made “a pile of money” during the year and that the “Favorite” had paid for itself during its first season. These small and medium-sized steamers were not, of course, very costly. The “Eolian,” 106 tons, was valued at $8,000 after four seasons of operation, and the “Traber,” 238 tons, at $12,000 after three seasons, although the latter was insured for only $6,000.\(^{25}\)

Davidson’s growing success on the upper Mississippi and the Minnesota is to some extent reflected in the annual statistics of steamboat arrivals at Minnesota’s commercial center. Although the “Traber” reached St. Paul only six times during the season of 1856, by 1860 Davidson’s four boats accounted for 145 of the 776 arrivals at St. Paul—a significant although far from dominating portion of the total from both the Mississippi and the Minnesota. A large percentage of the trips to St. Paul by Davidson’s steamers were from the Minnesota River between 1857 and the summer of 1860. The “Steele” made twenty trips on that stream in 1857, while in 1859 it combined with the “Favorite” to make sixty-three of the total of 102 trips up the Minnesota to Mankato. After the “Eolian” was returned to service in the following spring, three of the eight boats on that river belonged to the Davidson line.\(^{28}\)

By the summer of 1860 Davidson was prepared to expand his operations through becoming a director and large stockholder of the already incorporated La Crosse and Minnesota Steam Packet Company.\(^{20}\) His small, light-draft boats were especially well suited for operation in the unusually low water that hampered navigation on the upper Mississippi during the next few years. He and his officers were experienced, capable, widely known, and popular, and they had developed and tested policies relating to construction, repairs, scheduling, and other matters. They also had made many important contacts in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and farther down the river which helped assure capital, passengers and freight, as well as mail, express, and military contracts for Davidson’s line. Among the many steamboatmen on the upper Mississippi in the late 1850s, Davidson certainly was not the only one of outstanding ability, but he was able to consolidate his advantages and to become, within a few years, one of the dominant figures on the river.

\(^{a}\) Pioneer and Democrat, June 3, 1857, July 8, August 14, 20, 26, 1858, May 3, June 7, 15, 24, September 9, 1859, April 17, July 29, 1860.

\(^{b}\) Pioneer and Democrat, April 23, May 10, November 18, 1859.

\(^{c}\) See the company’s Minute Book, August 28, 1860, Davidson Papers.