

DEATH OF OLD CUMBERLAND RIVER CAPTAIN REMOVES ONE OF LAST OF COLORFUL FIGURES OF STEAMBOAT DAYS

By Samuel K. Neal

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN: Thursday, 7 June 1934.

Thomas Harvey Armstrong

b. January 1856, Celina, Clay Co., TN – d. 26 May 1934, Memphis, Shelby Co., TN, md **Mary A. (Fisher) Armstrong**, b. 23 August 1858, Carthage, Smith Co., TN – d. 23 October 1931, Nashville, Davidson Co., TN, d/o **Thomas Fisher** (1817-1880) & **Mary Jane Dedmon** (1822-1885). Thomas Harvey Armstrong, s/o **Maj. Luke Tierman Armstrong** (1827-1909) & **Lucetta Butler** (1828-1857). Thomas Harvey & Mary A. (Fisher) Armstrong both buried in the Mount Olivet Cemetery, Nashville, Davidson Co., TN. **Mary Jane Dedmon**, b. 25 June 1828 – d. 10 May 1857, d/o **Col. Bailey Butler** (1779-1842) & **Sally Scanlon** (1789-1828). **Mary J. (Dedmon) Fisher** is buried in the Bailey Butler Cemetery, Butlers Landing, Clay Co., TN. (Children of Thomas H. & Mary A. (Fisher) Armstrong: Martha Walker Armstrong md Charles Nelson Price; Mary Armstrong (1882-1936) md 1st William G. Sadler, md 2nd Gordon Elmer Outlaw; Sadie Armstrong (1884-1930) md Fred W. Underwood). **Maj. Luke Tierman Armstrong**, b. 22 April 1827, Butler's Landing, Jackson Co., TN – d. 22 May 1909, Nashville, Davidson Co., TN. **Lucetta (Butler) Armstrong**, b. 25 June 1828, Jackson Co., TN – d. 10 May 1857, Jackson Co., TN.

The Carthage Courier last week carried a story of the death of Capt. Thomas H. Armstrong at the home of a daughter in Memphis, and his passing removes one of the last of the living portions of the colorful steamboat days, remembered by many Putnam countians, Capt. Armstrong himself was known among the hundreds of Putnam countians who rode with him, and many a soul between Nashville and Burnside learned with regret of his death.



The Came, Saw, Dance:

Those who knew him tell many stories of his boating days-days that have forever passed-and he left a trail of good will and pleasantness that will live long after this story of his death is forgotten. He became a captain before the age of 21, beginning his steam boating career in 1878 (we learn from the Courier) after watching as a child the landing of big steamers from the banks of the river at Celina, where he was born, the son of Major Luke T. Armstrong, under whom he began his river work. He died at the age of 78.

Capt. Armstrong owned and commanded the Ewald, the L. T. Armstrong, named for his father, the Porter, the W. J. Cummins, and was part owner of the I. T. Rhea. These names are meaningless to the youth of the land, but they were deep-rooted in the warp and woof of the "early days" of Middle Tennessee growth along the upper Cumberland. They represented the outside world, and represented a glorious tradition even yet embedded in many sections.

One of the brightest memories of old Cumberland River days has to do with the coming of the first calliope on a steamboat. Capt. Armstrong piloted the Dora Cabler, the first steamboat to ply the upper Cumberland that boasted this "steam pianny," as it was known for hundreds of miles among the natives. Witnesses who were present when this extravagant and somewhat exciting spectacle bore itself along the water say that it attracted more attention than anything that ever came around the bend.

One reason why Capt. Armstrong was so popular was his love of company and his hospitality. He would telephone ahead and have the younger element prepare for a dance on whichever boat he was driving when he docked, and the "mud clerk," the checker who was always first off the boat with his pot of paint for marking merchandise, never had to bother with this temporary cargo, and it gave the roustabouts a welcomed rest.

Another popular steamboat captain and mate of those days was the late W. F. Cardwell, who was well known from one end of the Cumberland to the other.

The boat would tie-up and the captain's next command was, "On with the dance." These were occasions for the most cultured gatherings of the day, and the captain always had a bigger time than his guests.

The boat always carried a plentiful supply of refreshments at a bar near the entrance, but the fellow who imbibed too much was gently carried off the boat-and he didn't go back.

Associated with the Dora Cabler and her calliope was the Benton McMillin and her wildcat whistle. This boat when she first came up the river struck terror into many a heart with her unearthly scream; but some of the roustabouts lay on the deck asleep-some singing "me an' my wife an' six or seven chillum comin' 'roun' the bend on the Benton McMillin," to the tune of a lazy banjo.

This wildcat whistle on the Benton McMillin was a more terrible thing than one can imagine. We learn that when it blew, inhabitants for miles around unlimbered their guns and went after the "animal" that threatened their lives. They were chagrined to learn that it was only a steamboat whistle.

The Courier says: "He (Capt. Armstrong) was numbered among the most popular and efficient rivermen...Armstrong's name was a household word from point Burnside to Nashville on the Cumberland for a period of many years. He was most active in the days of the Lovells, the Rymans, and many other of the famous steamboatmen, and his like will never pass this way again."

Which is all too true. Those of us who never knew the glory of steamboat days will never know what real living is.

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Source: - Excerpt from A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLAY CO., TN. By Landon B. Anderson

Luke T. Armstrong Biography:

L.T. Armstrong was Major of a company in the Confederate Army for four years, and at the close of the war he married Miss Martha Walker, his second wife. (They had no children.) His first wife was Lucetta Butler, sister (*first cousin*) of Tuck Butler, and from their union were born two sons, Bailey and Thomas Harvey; two daughters, Sarah Ann and Kirk. After the close of the war he built a log house on the south side of Walnut Street, about 50 yards West of Dr. Davis' house, in which he lived for a short time before it was burned. He moved to Nashville where he was actively engaged in the wholesale dry goods business for many years. He was likewise interested in the steamboat business, owning the steamboat *L.T. Armstrong* which plied the Cumberland River from Nashville to Burnside, KY. Bailey, his oldest son, married a lady in Nashville and died a few years afterward. His widow, Mrs. Mary Armstrong, was a teacher in the public schools of the city for many years. (She died about two years ago.) Thomas Harvey married Miss Mollie Fisher of Carthage. Many people will remember him as Captain of many steamboats, being considered one of the best navigators on the Cumberland River. He was of a genial disposition and strong personality and loved by all who knew him. Kirk married Frank Flemming of Nashville, who was a prominent, popular and courteous wholesale dry goods salesman until his death.

Sarah Ann married Jack Walker when very young and was the mother of two boys, Sam Belle and Luke T. Walker. Soon after her husband's death, she moved, with her father, to Nashville, where she ran a boarding house for over one half a century. She was one of the organizers of the Ladies Hermitage Association and of the Daughters of 1812, and was honorary lifetime President of the W[oman's] C[hristian] T[emperance] U[nion]. She was also a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. She was married twice after she left Celina, the first time to a Mr. Bailey and the last time to Dr. J.W. McAllister, who died soon after their marriage. She lived an active life and died at the age of 89.

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