# THE RIVER MURRAY - HIGHWAY TO ALBURY

The Murray River was first sighted by Europeans on November 16, 1824 on the expedition of explorers Hamilton Hume and William Hovell:

> Tuesday, 16th Nov., 1824 …. we suddenly arrived at the bank of a fifth and very fine river, at least two hundred feet wide, apparently deep, with the bank about eight or nine feet above the level which is overflowed at the time of a flood, and the stream running about three knots per hour. On both sides the land is low and level, and consists of a fine alluvial soil, with grass up to our middle. This I named Hume's River, he being the first that saw it.
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> *From the Journal of Captain William Hovell*

In 1829 Charles Sturt in his historic navigation of the Murrumbidgee River downstream from Yass, entered a "broad and noble river," near Boundary Bend which he named after his friend Sir George Murray of the British Colonial Office. He found that the Murray actually emptied into Lake Alexandrina near Goolwa in South Australia and did not enter an inland sea as had been previously supposed. Later, when overlanding a mob of Huon's cattle from Wodonga to Adelaide, Sturt proved that this was the same stream as the Hume. Yet a third name was given to the river by Thomas Livingstone Mitchell when returning to Sydney from Portland in November 1836. He crossed the stream near Oolong (Howlong) and, rather than recognise the discoveries of his predecessors, gave it the Aboriginal name Millewa (Milawa). Subsequently the name Murray was used, though the river above Albury was called Hume for some time.[1]

The *Lady Augusta* was one of the first paddlesteamers on the Murray and in October 1853 Captain Francis Cadell reached as far as Goonamadda Station, 20 miles from Albury. An Albury correspondent writing to *The Argus* (Melbourne) on October 7, 1854, observed:

> The navigation of the Murray from Lake Alexandrina to Albury may at length be regarded as a fail accompli. Captain Cadell has brought the Lady Augusta to within a few miles of the place. He has, however, been induced to return without blowing off the steam in front of this town, not on account of any great difficulties in the way of doing so, but on account of the apprehended expenditure or what is to him exceedingly valuable—time. Some or our townsfolk feel annoyed at him not having accomplished the last twenty miles at any cost; but there is no doubt among the reflecting part of our neighbours that Captain Cadell has acted judiciously ….
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> http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/4798742

To much rejoicing, Albury was finally reached by the paddlesteamer *Albury* on October 2, 1855. The bank was crowded with people waiting to acclaim Captain George Johnson who had at last linked Albury with the 'outside.' On October 10, *The Argus* reported:

> The head of the navigation of this noble river, which forms the northern boundary of Victoria, has at last been successfully reached by a steamer of Captain Cadell's line. It has thus been demonstrated that the Murray is navigable for 1400 miles and its tributaries are believed to be navigable to an equal extent. We received last night from Captain Cadell the following communication, to which we give, as it deserves, the utmost possible prominence:—
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> "The Murray River Navigation Company's steamer *Albury*, Captain Johnston (Cadell's line), arrived at Albury on the 2nd inst., to the great delight of the inhabitants of that thriving district. The *Albury* left Maiden's Punt on 20th ult., but lay three days at Wahgunyah, besides calling at all stations on the way up. Great credit is due to Capt. Johnson, who has an excellent knowledge of the river, for bringing his steamer up in safety. The *Albury* towed up the barge, *Wakool*, which will remain at Albury. Numbers of the inhabitants flocked on board the steamer, so appropriately named after their township, before she took her departure on her downward voyage on the 6th inst."
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> http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/4820471

The Sydney Morning Herald proclaimed:

> ALBURY STEAM AND CUSTOMS. HURRAH! hurrah!! for the steamer *Albury*. Free trade for ever! The long-looked-for come at last!! Such were the congratulations that greeted the steamer and her

adventurous crew, as they neared our township, and were safely moored at about 4 p.m., on the 2nd instant, to the banks of our noble and navigable Murray.

PS Albury, c1870

The delighted townsfolk of Albury presented Captain Johnson with a purse of one hundred sovereigns and his officers with thirty.[2] According to the *Empire* the *Albury* "brings up a general cargo, suitable to the wants of the settlers for sale or barter. All this year's clip will be taken to Adelaide, and thence shipped to England."[3] It was obvious from Captain Johnson's welcome that Albury's settlers realised that increased prosperity could follow with the efficient transport of their staple products, wool, wheat and wine.

Albury was as high up the Murray as the steamers ever traded. Albury is a classic example of how the Murray-Darling river paddlesteamers made possible civilised settlement through cheap transmission of the comforts and conveniences of life. The *Geelong Advertiser* reported in January 1868 that "Last week a number of immigrants from South Australia passed through Mulwala for Albury. They are of the desirable class, apparently hardworking people with families, farming instruments, etc., and a fair share of money."[4]



PS Cumberoona in Dock c1877

The river quickly became a highway for the produce of Albury to market and for the import of goods into the district. In a letter in the *Ovens & Murray Advertiser* Mr G H Mott wrote "Large fortunes were made by some steamer proprietors who freighted their own vessels, and realised double and treble the cost price in Adelaide of the goods they brought up."[5] However the river was only navigable for about seven months of the year. In 1866, the steamer *Cumberoona*, was built at Echuca to the order of the Albury Steam Navigation Company - shareholders included four one-time Mayors of Albury, William M N Edmondson, James T Fallon, George Day and Kenneth McLennan. For some time the vessel was said to be the pride of the Murray fleet. "It established some speed records in 1868, travelling the

68 km downstream from Albury to Howlong in three hours. The *Lady Darling* once steamed upstream from Corowa to Albury in 11 hours."[6] An advertisement in the Melbourne *Argus* claimed "The passenger accommodation is considerably superior to any boat on the river. Her saloons are elegantly and comfortably fitted, and her other accommodations will be found equal to any." The trip from Echuca to Albury cost £4.

**PORT OF ALBURY**

Recognition of Albury as a port came in 1856 and the *Border Post* ran a regular column of "Shipping Intelligence," listing the comings and goings of steamers. Thirty different paddlesteamers used the port, including the *Albury*, *Lady Augusta*, *Gundagai*, *Corowa* and the *Cumberoona*, moving thousands of tons of goods and produce - wheat, wool and wine.

The steamers carried large cargoes. In 1856 the value of merchandise from Adelaide to Albury by steamer exceeded £1,000,000.[7] Until the Albury wharf was built in 1871, cargoes were transferred by swinging them by crane between the boat and the bank. The following year when the river trade had reached its peak, *The Australasian* reported "ALBURY, Friday. On Tuesday the *Cumberoona* and *Lady Daly* left with very large cargoes, consisting of about 1,000 bales of wool and 600 bags of wheat"[8] - the *Lady Daly*'s cargo was said to the biggest cargo ever from Albury. Even in summer when the Murray was too low to be navigable, consignors of freights were not deterred as their goods were rarely perishable.

In November 1856, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that "a sum of £2000 shall be placed on the Estimates for the construction of a wharf at Albury."[9] However tenders were not called for until June 1870 and in July 1870 the colonial government granted £1000 for construction of a wharf on the Murray River at Albury. Contractors Messrs Hamlin & Simpson drove the first pile in January 1871. It was completed in May with a 160 ft frontage to the river. A five ton crane was completed by November 1871. However, in May 1878, the *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* reported that "Since the opening of the railway few steamers come above Howlong and the Albury wharf, useless and deserted, is quietly rotting away."[10] The wharf remained a sad relic of the 'Port of Albury' until it was finally demolished in 1896.



The Hovell Tree with the
Albury wharf in the background

River snags were always a treat to navigation of the river. 'Snagging' of the river was an expensive operation, the *Border Post* recording in January 1857 that the Victorian Government "intended to expend £23,000 in the removal of snags and other obstructions."[11] The South Australian Government voted £10,000 for a steam snag boat[12] while the New South Wales

Government allocated £8,000.[13] Snags continued to be a hazard, the *Border Post* reporting on August 5, 1866 that "Six wrecks on the Murray have taken place in about the same number of weeks. The *Endeavour* was sunk once, the *Lady Darling* thrice, the *Cumberoona* once, and the *Beechworth* once."[14]

The river trade peaked in the early 1870s, but rail links to Echuca (1864), Wodonga (1873) and Albury (from Sydney in 1881) saw a rapid decline in the river trade. The *Albury Banner* of November 21, 1874 reported that "The railway has driven steamers from the Murray." By the 1890s, river trade as far as Albury had all but ceased. In July 1893, the *Lancashire Lass* with the barge *Victory* in tow, encountered great difficulties to reach Albury carrying salt from Swan Hill - it was the first cargo steamer for almost ten years to reach Albury. Beyond Corowa the river was badly silted and to get under the bridge at Howlong, her wheel house, funnel and deck houses had to be dismantled and cargo from the barge added to settle the steamer deeper in the water.[15]

For twenty hectic years the river provided a 'highway' for the transport of the produce of the Albury district to markets at home and abroad and brought great prosperity to the region. However, by the 1890s the 'Port of Albury' was just a memory.

[1] A&DHS Albury History Sheet - *The River Murray* (1986)
[2] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/49295936
[3] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/60167152
[4] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/147776798
[5] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/199702232
[6] Jones, Howard C, *Albury Heritage* (1991)
[7] Bayley, William, *Border City, History of Albury* (1976)
[8] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/137575780
[9] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28636091
[10] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/162691664
[11] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/207172534
[12] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/60265715
[13] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28633401/1495143
[14] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5772728
[15] http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/200479543