



# **Tombigbee River Steamboats, The: Rollodores, Dead Heads and Side-Wheelers**

*Rufus Ward*

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The Tombigbee River flows through the history of Alabama and Mississippi, connecting the Black Prairie cotton belt of northeast Mississippi and west Alabama to Mobile and the Gulf of Mexico. In the early 1800s, it became the regional artery of commerce and trade, with steamboats carrying cotton to the port of Mobile and then returning upriver with farm supplies and consumer goods. Today, the "rollodores," who rolled cotton bales down slides to the decks of boats; the sunken logs, or "dead heads," that could sink a boat if struck; and the "side-wheeler" model steamboats have all but vanished. The Tombigbee River Steamboats brings this forgotten era back to life through accounts of the steamboats, their crews and their trials, such as the haunting story of the steamer Eliza Battle, which burned and sank on a freezing, flooded river.

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