

Visiting the Steamboats Arabia and Bertrand Museums

Gary Van Kauwenbergh

Visits to the museums for the sunken steamboats Arabia and Bertrand have long been on my bucket list, and I recently went to both. The steamboat Arabia sank in 1856, and the Bertrand in 1865. You can find the story of the Arabia at <http://1856.com/>, and the story of the Bertrand at http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/bertrand/bertrand.pdf I'm not going to recount their stories here, but thought I'd share a few notes on the items I thought were most interesting.

Notes on both wrecks: I was surprised to see most of the forks had two tines rather than three. Bottled ketchup, mustard, sauces of all kinds were abundant. There was a lot of jarred fruit, pickles and relishes and canned oysters, sardines, powdered yeast, fruits of all kinds. Boxes of loose matches were on both wrecks, the pre-war Arabia had wooden match safes, but the post-war Bertrand had elaborate metal match safes with roll-top doors. . No sewing machines were found on either wreck. Both wrecks had plenty of jackknives of various designs aboard. Silks and wools survived, but nothing that was made of cotton. Apparently, part of the cotton manufacturing process is bleaching, and there was a residue left over that the curators speculated led to their decomposing.



Arabia Notes: Over four thousand pairs of new shoes were found in the hold, and according to one of the salvagers/restorers we talked to every one of them had wooden peg construction. Oddly enough, one of the first items the found was a single, worn shoe caught in the paddle wheel that had a rubber sole marked 'Goodyear'.

They had both one-piece clothes pins, and two-piece 'pincher' clothes pins, but the pincher type had a simple coil spring between the undersides of the handles rather than the multi-bend spring at the axis that you see today.

About a third of the items recovered from the Arabia still need to be restored. All the items that have been preserved are displayed, and the ones that aren't are still frozen in water off site.

Bertrand Notes: The footwear found was a mix of pegged and sewn construction, and hob nailed soles and cleated heels were present. There were lots of cans of Lemonade and essence of coffee.

There were hundreds of both long handled and D-handled shovels on board, most made by the Ames manufacturing company that's still in business today. Unlike today's one-piece, stamped head construction, the heads were multiple pieces riveted together and the D-handles were made of wood. There were no rolled edges on the top of the heads where you would put the arch of your foot when digging.

Howitzer shot and shell, along with Maynard carbine bullets to resupply one of the forts along the way were in the hold. There were also wooden casks of black powder, along with lead bars and bullet molds. There was an interesting box of rubber raincoats made by the Goodyear Company.

Preservation of all the items from the Bertrand is complete, and while everything isn't displayed, example of every item is in the exhibit.

I'm not sure I'd recommend a trip just to see either museum to everyone, but I combined the trip with visits to the State Capitol buildings of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa, certainly enjoyed visiting them both.

