The Riverboat Captain Who Was Said to Curse the Ohio River

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The Ohio River has always carried more than cargo and passengers. Along its banks grew stories of rivalries, disasters, ghost tales, and legends that blended fact with folklore. One of the strangest stories tied to the river is that of Captain Francis McHarry, an Irish immigrant and steamboat captain whose burial became part of Ohio River legend.

Francis McHarry was born on April 25, 1805, in Ballywalter, County Down, Ireland. Like many immigrants of the nineteenth century, he came to America seeking opportunity. He eventually found his place on the Ohio River during the height of the steamboat era, a time when river traffic transformed towns across Kentucky and Indiana into bustling commercial centers.

McHarry became a well known riverboat captain and ferry operator along the Ohio River, especially in the area between Louisville, Kentucky, and southern Indiana. The steamboat business was fiercely competitive. Captains fought for passengers, freight contracts, and profitable routes. Tempers on the river could run as hot as the boilers powering the boats themselves, and Francis McHarry developed a reputation as a fiery and stubborn man.

According to legend, his rivalries became so intense that he made unusual plans for his burial.

Before his death, McHarry reportedly constructed a massive stone burial vault overlooking the Ohio River near Beeler's Landing in southern Indiana. The tomb faced the water and included a small opening directed toward the river. Stories quickly spread that the captain wanted to remain near the river forever, even after death.

An 1872 article published in the Princeton Clarion-Leader described the tomb as "a massive stone vault at the top of the bluff in full view of the river." The article stated that McHarry had the vault erected before his death and ordered "that his body should be placed in an upright position facing the river so that he might see and curse every steamboat that passed."

The same article included another layer to the growing legend. According to the story, McHarry allegedly secured a promise from his wife that she would never remarry "as long as he was above ground." The article claimed that after some years, his widow supposedly had the body removed to Louisville for burial, freeing her to marry again. Interestingly, the newspaper writer

admitted doubts about this version of events, noting that the McHarry vault and burial chamber could still be seen at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville.

As the years passed, the story only grew larger. Some believed McHarry's anger toward rival river captains followed him into death. Riverboat crews were said to sound their whistles when passing the tomb. Some claimed it was done out of respect for a fellow riverman. Others insisted the whistles were meant to keep Captain McHarry's spirit at peace and prevent bad luck on the river.

Francis McHarry died on February 15, 1857, in Harrison County, Indiana, at the age of fifty one. Though the stories surrounding his burial continued to spread, later records reveal that the legend was not entirely accurate. While he had originally been buried in the riverside tomb, his remains were eventually removed and reinterred at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky.

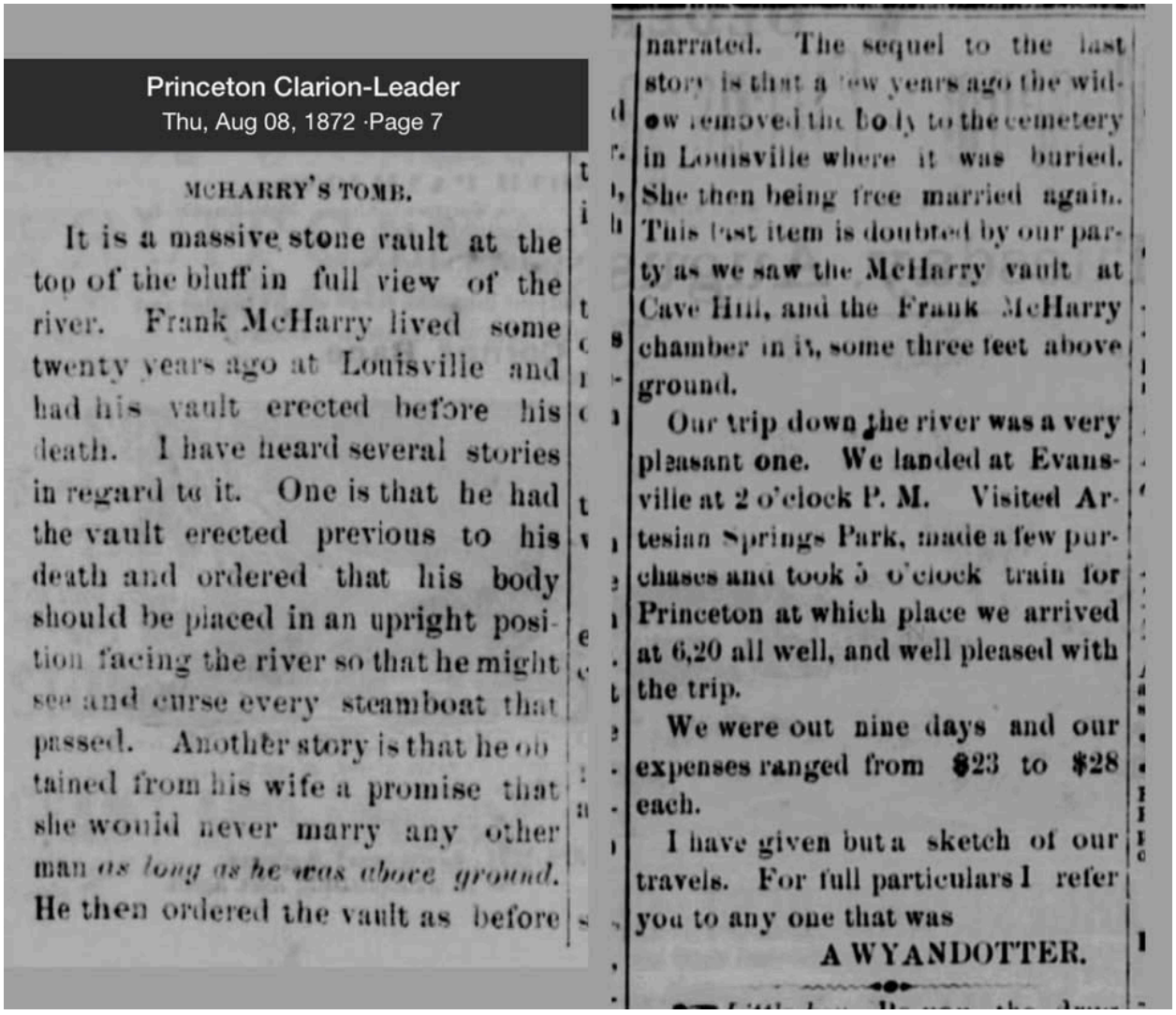
Today, Francis McHarry rests in the Irvin Mausoleum alongside his wife, Emily Irvin McHarry. Despite the enduring legend that he was buried upright overlooking the river, he now lies horizontally within the mausoleum at Cave Hill.

Even so, the old riverside tomb and the stories surrounding it never fully disappeared. The abandoned vault overlooking the Ohio River became part of the region's folklore, passed down through generations fascinated by the strange traditions and personalities of the steamboat era.

The story also reflects the larger culture of the nineteenth century river world. Steamboat captains were often viewed almost like celebrities along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Their reputations, rivalries, and larger than life personalities became woven into local history. In a time before highways and airplanes, the river was the lifeline of countless communities, and the men who commanded the boats became legendary figures in their own right.

Today, the legend of Captain Francis McHarry survives as one of the Ohio River's most unusual tales. Somewhere between documented history and river folklore lies the image of a stubborn river captain who supposedly wanted to watch the boats forever, long after his own final voyage had ended.The Riverboat Captain Who Was Said to Curse the Ohio River

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MCHARRY'S TOMB.

It is a massive stone vault at the top of the bluff in full view of the river. Frank McHarry lived some twenty years ago at Louisville and had his vault erected before his death. I have heard several stories in regard to it. One is that he had the vault erected previous to his death and ordered that his body should be placed in an upright position facing the river so that he might see and curse every steamboat that passed. Another story is that he obtained from his wife a promise that she would never marry any other man *as long as he was above ground.* He then ordered the vault as before narrated. The sequel to the last story is that a few years ago the widow removed the body to the cemetery in Louisville where it was buried. She then being free married again. This last item is doubted by our party as we saw the McHarry vault at Cave Hill, and the Frank McHarry chamber in it, some three feet above ground.

Our trip down the river was a very pleasant one. We landed at Evansville at 2 o'clock P. M. Visited Artesian Springs Park, made a few purchases and took 5 o'clock train for Princeton at which place we arrived at 6,20 all well, and well pleased with the trip.

We were out nine days and our expenses ranged from $23 to $28 each.

I have given but a sketch of our travels. For full particulars I refer you to any one that was

A WYANDOTTER.

An 1872 article from the Princeton Clarion-Leader described McHarry's riverside vault as "a massive stone vault at the top of the bluff in full view of the river." The article repeated the growing legend that the riverboat captain ordered his body placed upright facing the Ohio River "so that he might see and curse every steamboat that passed."

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This photograph shows the original McHarry tomb overlooking the Ohio River in southern Indiana. The massive stone vault became the center of one of the Ohio River's most enduring legends. According to folklore, steamboat captain Francis McHarry ordered that he be buried upright facing the river so he could watch and "curse" passing steamboats forever.

Though his remains were later reinterred at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, the abandoned riverside vault continued to fuel ghost stories and river lore for generations. Riverboat crews were said to sound their whistles as they passed below the bluff, either out of respect for the old captain or from fear of the supposed curse tied to the tomb.

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Today, Francis McHarry and his wife Emily Irvin McHarry rest in the Irvin Mausoleum at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. Though legend claimed the captain remained buried upright overlooking the river, his remains were eventually reinterred here after being removed from the original riverside tomb.