

The Effie Afton Bell



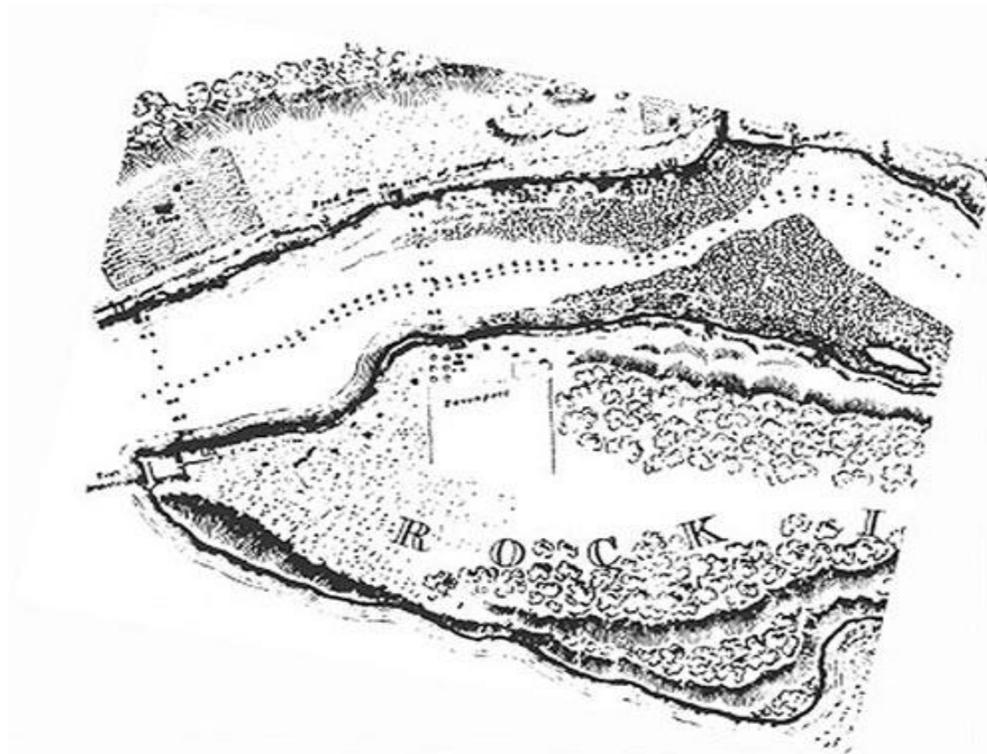
The Effie Afton bell was discovered in 1926 while the US Army Corps of Engineers was dredging the Mississippi River. Workers kept it a secret from their officers while systematically chopping it into little pieces for disposal. The officers did not know a treasure had been found.

In 1854 westward expansion by railway was proceeding at full tilt and the companies were determined to build a bridge that would connect the east across the Mississippi River. The key players in the location of this first bridge were Abraham Lincoln, who wanted a northern crossing, and Jefferson Davis, who wanted a southern crossing. The project engineer chose the Rock Island site based on a survey performed in 1837 by one Lieutenant Robert E. Lee. The

steamer companies vociferously argued against a railroad bridge and legislation had to be passed with the codicil that construction would not interfere with the free navigation of the Mississippi River.

Fifteen days after completion of the bridge, on the evening of May 6, 1856, the steamboat *Effie Afton* signaled she was moving to the draw. 200 feet after clearing it, she heeled over, caught fire, and burned to ash within five minutes. The fire spread up to the bridge and by the next day the span was completely destroyed. Captain John Hurd filed a lawsuit in Chicago claiming that his steamboat was destroyed by the eddies and currents caused by the placement of the bridge piers and demanded recompense. The Railroad Bridge Company accused the Captain of arson. The case ended in a hung jury and was tried for a second time by the Supreme Court who ruled in favor of the Railroad.

Rock Island Arsenal workers were able to piece together the remains of the *Effie Afton* bell on display in the Museum. The locations of the piers are commemorated by two historical plaques, one on the Arsenal Island near Colonel Davenport's house, the other at 706 East River Drive by the corner of 4th Street in Davenport. And on the Iowa side of the Arsenal bridge is a statue of Abraham Lincoln, the lawyer for the Railroad Bridge company. (by Nancy Neuhaus)



Drawn from Robert E. Lee's survey in 1837, this shows the steamer path through the Rock Island Rapids. The location of the first railroad bridge from Illinois to Iowa is on the far left.