

I

Susan Bary

notes

Up Salt River

MAR. 25, 2012 *By Susan Bary in* POLITICAL DEFEAT *Tags:* ARTIFACTS, CARTOONS, JAMES POLK, LORE, MARTIN VAN BUREN, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, SALT RIVER, US PRESIDENCY, US PRESIDENTS 2 COMMENTS

In the nineteenth century, it was a dreaded destination, a fabled place where presidential candidates found themselves fighting for their lives. It was Salt River, a tantalizing, semi-mythical waterway whose treacherous shoals were known to be the ruination of great leaders and their parties.

As the election season advances, do we not owe it to history to contemplate the legions who have met with disaster on this journey?



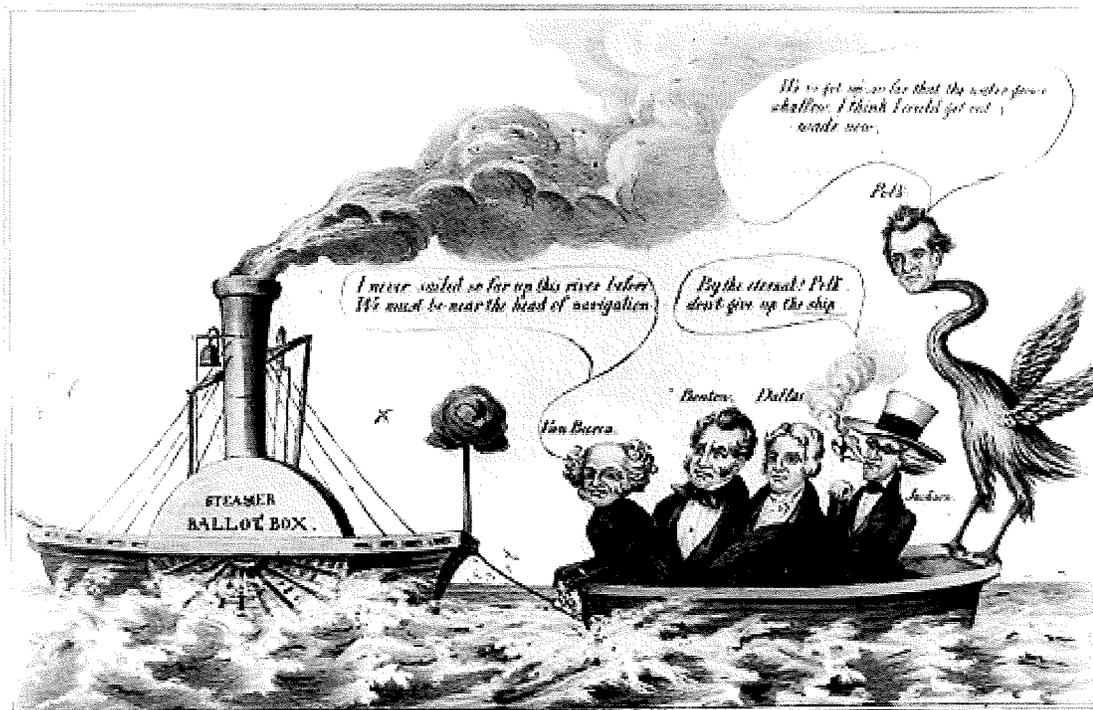
ROWING HIM UP SALT RIVER.

Salt River was, to begin with, a real place: a small, winding tributary of the Ohio River originating in the wilds of Kentucky. Before railroads, the Ohio was the main cross-country route for reaching the eastern cities. To go up Salt River was to leave a broad waterway, which steamboats plied daily carrying hundreds of passengers, and end up in the middle of nowhere on a dead-end stream.

Add in the fact that the state of Ohio was even then known as a “king-maker,” and you can understand how the Salt River became synonymous with political oblivion. Judging from these old prints preserved at the Library of Congress, political cartoonists had a field day with this theme. Salt River became the setting for betrayal and folly of all kinds. Above, we see Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor rowing his Democratic opponent Lewis Cass up Salt River. The expression on Cass’s face shows that he knows what fate awaits him. He is resigned.



Here, presidential candidates of 1848 attempt to cross Salt River to reach the White House. Martin Van Buren (who often figures in these Salt River fantasies) is shown piggybacking on the shoulders of his son, John, a popular figure whom many expected to equal his father in fame one day. And the other men, submerged and in danger of drowning? These are Van Buren’s rivals, including Horace Greeley. On the bank sits a Greeley ally, who declines to save him.



POLK & CO GOING UP SALT RIVER.

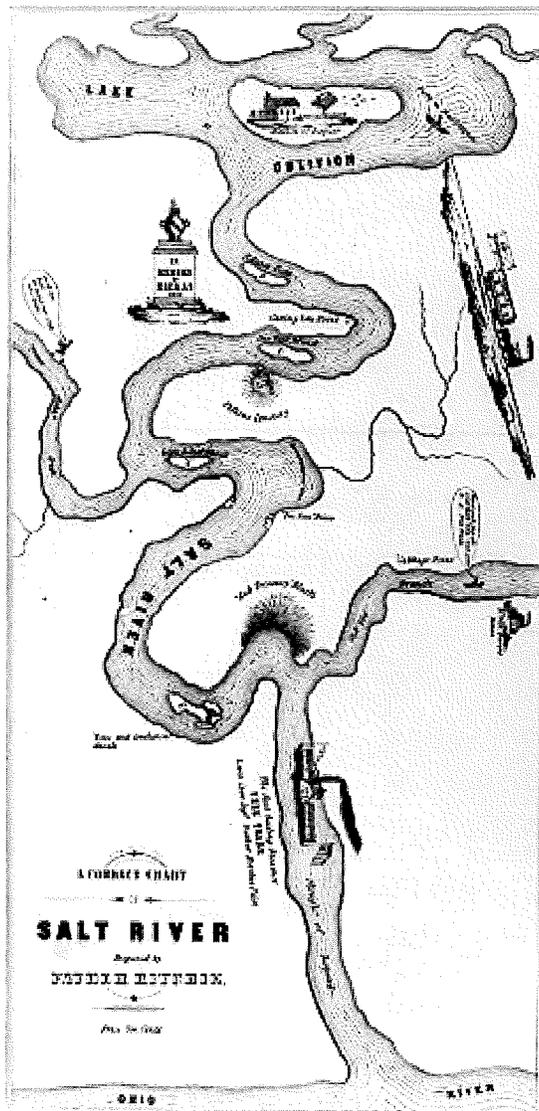
This 1844 cartoon shows candidate James Polk (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_K._Polk) and his Democratic Party allies. Polk was a dark-horse candidate who many sensed would cause trouble for his party. (They were right.) Perched on the edge of a dingy that a steamboat is towing, he towers over his party's elders, who are oblivious to the disaster looming. They believe that they are still on the Ohio. Polk, knowing the truth, isn't worried. Equipped with the body of a long-legged wading bird, he's perfectly capable of reaching safety. Alone. While Van Buren blithely expresses delight at being near "the headwaters of navigation," Polk, noting the water growing shallow, prepares to take off.



TERRIBLE ROUT & TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE WHIG PARTY.
IN SALT RIVER.

At times, Salt River could become positively crowded with victims, as in 1854, when the Democrats routed the Whig Party, a defeat that spelled an end to the party for good. Here, the Democrats drive their Whig opponents into the briny river with malicious glee.

Looks like fun, doesn't it? Salt River, anyone?



All images courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division
of the Library of Congress

(top to bottom):

Rowing Him Up Salt River (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661489/>) (1848)

Fording Salt River (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661491/>) (1848)

Polk & Co. Going Up Salt River (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661435/>) (1844)

Terrible Rout & Total Destruction of the Whig Party in Salt River

(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661556/>) (1852)

A Correct Chart of Salt River (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661488/>) (1848)

Click on any title for more information.

2 responses

SAM DUNE says:

Mar. 28, 2012 at 8:28 pm

So much fun to read! Light-hearted and funny—plus I sure did learn something. By the by, do you know what newspapers those cartoons came from?

© Like

Like

SUSAN BARSY says:

Mar. 29, 2012 at 6:48 am

Sam—Good question about the newspapers. Sadly, those of the time didn't have the capacity to print illustrations like these. All the pictures shown here are lithographic prints (The top one by Nathaniel Currier, as in Currier & Ives) and all were made in, and sold out of, print shops in NYC. Some of the lithographs were hand-painted after they were printed, so that they appeared in glorious color. People bought them to hang on their walls—to remember the glory and agony and the FUN of the political campaign. Though much like the political posters of today, these old prints are more elaborate and individualized. It's great that they contain good likenesses of by-gone politicians. Many political posters of today do not—and VERY few contain images of a candidate AND his opponents. SB

© Like

Like

Susan Barsy

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) | [The Elemin Theme.](#) Design by [Themify.](#)



© Follow

Follow “Susan Barsy”

Build a website with WordPress.com