

# Lessons from the Steamboat *Arabia*

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The steamboat *Arabia* lay forty-five feet beneath a Missouri cornfield for over 150 years. In 1856 the fully loaded vessel, bound for frontier general stores, had impaled itself on a sunken log and sunk in a matter of minutes. When the course of the Missouri River was later altered by the Army Corps of Engineers, the ship was entombed in mud. Excavation, which began in 1989, unearthed tons of cargo largely intact. Now on display in Kansas City, the goods provide a snapshot of American life in the mid-nineteenth century. Some observations from a visit to the *Arabia* museum:

1) *The definition of “treasure” differs.* Onboard the *Arabia* were 400 barrels of Kentucky bourbon. An earlier salvage operation was undertaken to retrieve the bourbon, but to no avail. The hole was covered up as the rest of the *Arabia*’s cargo was deemed worthless. But over time, everyday items such as tools, china, perfume, decorative beads, lamps, clothing, etc. became priceless. Jesus spoke of different treasures: in heaven/on earth (Mt 6:19-21); buried in the ground (Mt 13:44); a pearl (Mt 13:45). Some will reject heavenly treasure without a second thought because it has no perceived value to them – like the bourbon hunters’ assessment of historical artifacts.

2) *Treasure hunters will sacrifice.* The project to unearth the *Arabia* was not undertaken by a corporation or historical society but by ordinary citizens in search of adventure. The Hawley and Mackey families invested their own money in what became a gargantuan salvage project. But they kept forging ahead because they believed there was something valuable beneath that Missouri mud. And they were right. Likewise, we must be willing to invest everything we have in our pursuit of heavenly treasure. Unlike the Hawleys and Mackeys who weren’t quite sure what they would find, Christians already have glimpses of the glory of God and the blessings of eternal fellowship that should inspire us to keep digging.

3) *Our goals may change mid-stream.* The Hawleys and Mackeys began their quest for the *Arabia*’s treasures with the thought of selling the ancient cargo. But as they began to realize both the magnitude and historical significance of their discovery, they decided to restore and display the artifacts so that the public could enjoy them. Likewise, our maturity as Christians should cause us to make adjustments in our life goals. Things that we think are *sooo* important early on are moderated by deeper realities. For example, we may anticipate retirement less for its leisure and more for its freedom to concentrate on the Lord’s work. Aren’t we glad for Paul’s career change?

4) *Jobs should be merely tools to greater ends.* Again, the salvage families were able to fund the *Arabia* project because they had successful businesses. The businesses also provided storage room, freezer space and other facilities to preserve the wreck’s more delicate items. They looked at their jobs and income as a way to support their *real passion*: treasure hunting. What is your *real passion*? Your job? Or is the job merely an asset to enable you to focus on what’s *really important*: serving the Lord in various capacities? Surely Paul didn’t make tents in the hope of being featured in *Mediterranean Living* magazine.

5) *Our sins will find us out.* One of the passengers on the *Arabia* was transporting his mule, which was tied at the stern when the ship hit the snag. Newspapers told glowing reports of how the man valiantly risked life and limb to untie his mule, but alas the mule was never seen again. When the *Arabia* was found, there – *still tied securely to the railing* – was the skeleton of the poor old mule. Fooling men is often easy, but judgment will reveal all (Heb 4:13; 1 Cor 4:5).

6) *Every day is like Christmas.* This became the slogan of the salvagers as they eagerly pried open each new crate. Children of God can have this same kind of enthusiasm each new day as we anticipate the unfolding of God’s providence.