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## Rollin' on the river

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Looking upriver in Dubuque (from bottom): Julien Dubuque, East Dubuque (Ill.) Railroad and the Dubuque-Wisconsin bridges. DAVID FREESE • Contributed

**Photographer documents the Mighty Mississippi in new book**

BY MICHELLE LONDON  
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David Freese

When photographer David Freese's first book, "West Coast: Bering to Baja," was published in 2012, he had no intention of having a trilogy focusing on North American waterways.

"Most photographers are grateful to have one book published," said Freese, 73. "But people asked, 'What are you going to do next? The East Coast?'"

Although Freese is a New York native and has lived in Philadelphia since 1971, he wasn't sure what the hook would be for an East Coast book since his interest in documenting the West Coast had been from a geological perspective.

But then, 2012's Hurricane Sandy decimated much of the Eastern Seaboard, and Freese knew he had another geological goldmine on his hands. "East Coast: Arctic to Tropic" was the result.

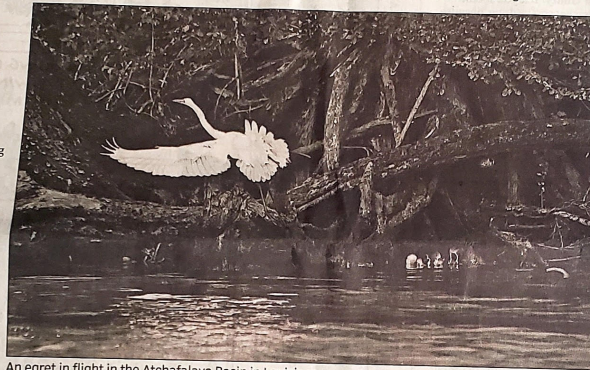
"Mississippi River: Headwaters and Heartland to Delta and Gulf," published in July, is the final book in the trilogy.

"I have a friend who works for TransAmerica Corporation, and they have an office in Cedar Rapids, Iowa," Freese said. "TransAmerica has a foundation, and the foundation said, 'If you're ever interested in doing the Mississippi River, let us know.'"

"I thought it would be great to do the middle of the country, the heart of the country. Some of the great cities and so much of small town America is along the Mississippi. There's the agriculture of the river and so much history. And most people, unless they live within 100 or 200 miles of the river, they have no idea of the scenery, especially along the Upper Mississippi."

So, Freese began researching the Mississippi River. He said he read half a dozen books and traveled the river via Google Earth before making his first trip, with his wife along as his assistant, to take photographs in March 2018.

Starting in Lake Itaska, Minn., at the headwaters of the river, he spent three weeks working his way down to St. Louis before heading



An egret in flight in the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana.

home to edit the photos and catch his breath. He and his wife returned to St. Louis two weeks later and made the trek south along the river to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico.

"I had full funding (for the book), so I could go full throttle," he said. In contrast, the West Coast book took Freese 15 years to complete.

"I'm of the age where I've lived through the transition from traditional analog photography to digital," Freese said. "It was quite disruptive. Over 90% of the West Coast book was shot on film. The East Coast and Mississippi books were all digital."

In addition, Freese learned and was licensed to fly a drone while shooting the East Coast book.

"Half of those images were from the air," he said. "You had to get in the air to see the relationship of the cities to the ocean. About 18 or 19 images in the Mississippi book are aerial images."

Freese found Simon Winchester, an Oxford-educated writer living in Massachusetts, through an Internet search when he was looking for someone to write text for the book. Winchester also proved to be a valuable resource when he put Freese in touch with the Army Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission.

Approximately two dozen of the almost 300 photos in Freese's book focus on southwest Wisconsin,

northeast Iowa and northwest Illinois, including several that were taken in East Dubuque and Galena, Ill., and Dubuque.

An unusual feature of Freese's book is that it's not in color. Freese chose different brown and sepia tones for the photos, which he feels evoke an emotional response.

"In the history of photography, I loved the photographers who explored the western frontier, those sepia-toned and brown-toned photos," he said. "There are incredible variations of different tones. I thought it maintained a visual interest, and I wanted to do that. I make a lot of emotional judgments when I tone these photos."

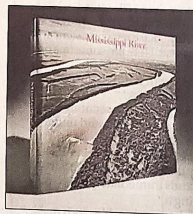
Freese said that digital toning was one thing he embraced in the digital age.

"Digital allowed me to be consistent in my toning, so it was a godsend for that," he said.

Freese said he now has a special place in his heart for the Mississippi River, the cities and everyone he met along the way.

"The people were so welcoming and friendly," he said. "I especially enjoyed getting on the tugboats. It's a special group of people who operate those things and push those barges."

"The river is a microcosm of American history. The good, the bad, all of it. It really is the breadth of our history. And what I'd really like people to appreciate, when



"Mississippi River: Headwaters and Heartland to Delta and Gulf" is photographer David Freese's third book on North American waterways.

they look at this book, at the beautiful scenery, is how it's all formed by powerful geological sources."

Next on the horizon for Freese is a book on Iceland.

"Just before lockdown, my wife and I went to Iceland for two weeks (on vacation)," he said. "Of course, I took cameras to document the trip. I never thought I'd end up with a body of work."

George F. Thompson Publishing, Freese's publisher, tentatively has scheduled the Iceland book for publication in fall 2021.

For more information, visit George F. Thompson Publishing at [www.gfbbooks.com](http://www.gfbbooks.com) or David Freese's website at [www.davidfreesephoto.net](http://www.davidfreesephoto.net).

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