

DEATH ON THE MISSISSIPPI

Few people know about the Sultana, despite the fact that it suffered the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history. For some reason, it is almost completely ignored by history books. Here's the tragic story.

HEADING HOME

The Civil War was finally over. It was April 1865, General Robert E. Lee had surrendered; Abraham Lincoln had been shot; and Confederate president Jefferson Davis had been captured. After four years of bloodshed, the war-torn nation was ready to start the process of healing and rebuilding. The first order of business was to get the weary troops home.

Captured Union soldiers were being released from Confederate prison camps. Thousands amassed along the Mississippi River seeking passage on one of the many steamships making their way upriver to the north.

One such riverboat was the *Sultana*, a state-of-the-art side-wheeler that had been built for transporting cotton. But now her cargo was people. By law, she was allowed to carry 376 passengers and a crew of 85, and the ship's captain and owner, J. C. Mason, had a reputation as a careful river pilot. But in the end, the money he stood to make from the Union government for transporting extra troops was too tempting to pass up: \$5 for each enlisted man and \$10 per officer.

A SETUP FOR DISASTER

The *Sultana* left New Orleans on April 21 carrying a small number of passengers, about 100, and headed north. Each time she stopped, though, the ship took on more troops. The men who boarded were weak, tired, and homesick. After spending months or even years in brutal prison camps, the only thing they wanted to do was get back to their families.

On April 24, the *Sultana* made her regular stop in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to take on more passengers. Captain Mason docked

the ship to find thousands of soldiers waiting there. Under normal circumstances, the ship would have made a brief stop, allowed the prescribed number of passengers to board, and then departed. But one of the ship's three main steam boilers had sprung a leak and needed to be repaired.

First of all, Captain Mason made the decision to have a piece of metal welded over the leak to reinforce it (which took less than a day) instead of having the boiler replaced (which would have taken three days). While the boiler was being repaired, the waiting soldiers did everything they could to muscle their way onto the ship. Bribes were paid, and more and more men packed on. When the repairs were completed, Mason was eager to get underway, so he broke another rule. He let all of the passengers get onboard before their names were logged in. Result: The ship was overloaded and no one on shore had a complete or accurate copy of the passenger list.

When an Army officer raised his concerns, Mason assured him that the *Sultana* was a competent vessel that could more than carry the load. "Take good care of those men," the officer told him. "They are deserving of it."

THE MIGHTY MISS

Four years of war had been hard on the series of levees and dikes that control the flow of the Mississippi River. The spring of 1865 saw heavy rains, which, combined with winter snowmelt, caused the river to rise to flood stage. By April it was several miles wide and the icy current was much stronger than usual.

But the *Sultana* was solid and Captain Mason an able river man. As the ship trudged slowly upriver, she made a few more scheduled stops, picking up even more men at each one. The huddled passengers filled every bit of space on the 260-foot-long vessel—the bottom hull, the lower decks, the cabins, the pilothouse, and the hurricane deck on top. Yet even though the soldiers were tired and packed in like sardines, their spirits were high. They sang songs, told war stories, and shared their plans for when they finally got home...unaware of the disaster to come.

On the cool night of April 26, 1865, the *Sultana* disembarked from Memphis around midnight, carrying an estimated 2,300 people—six times its capacity. There were only two lifeboats and 76 life preservers onboard.

HELL AND HIGH WATER

At around 2 a.m., the overloaded *Sultana* had made it nine miles north of Memphis when her weakened boiler could take no more. It exploded. The other two boilers went in quick succession.

The tremendous blast split the ship in two. Burning-hot coals shot out like bullets. The horrified passengers were jarred awake, some sent hurtling through the air into the icy water, others scalded by the tremendous blast of steam. Still others were trapped on the lower decks to either suffocate, burn, or drown. The men on the top decks had a choice—albeit a dismal one: stay and face the spreading flames or try to swim to shore, more than a mile away in either direction.

One survivor remembered, “The men who were afraid to take to the water could be seen clinging to the sides of the bow of the boat until they were singed off like flies.” Others who had waited too long on the hurricane deck were crushed when the two large smokestacks collapsed on them. Others slid down into the hottest part of the fire when the burning deck gave way.

Shrieks and screams pierced the night, as did the crackling of flames and the booms of small explosions. But loudest of all was the hissing sound as sections of the flaming steamboat sank into the water. Another survivor described it like this:

The whole heavens seemed to be lighted up by the conflagration. Hundreds of my comrades were fastened down by the timbers of the decks and had to burn while the water seemed to be one solid mass of human beings struggling with the waves.

What was left of the *Sultana* drifted downstream until finally banking on a small island in the middle of the Mississippi River. The ship’s broken, burning body then slowly disappeared into the dark water.

DAWN OF THE DEAD

As first light rose on the river, the devastation was overwhelming. Hundreds upon hundreds of bodies were floating down the Mississippi. Dotted between the corpses were dazed survivors floating on makeshift rafts of driftwood and ship parts. Some sang marching songs to keep their spirits up. Others just floated silently among the carnage.

All the way to Memphis, men—alive and dead—were washing

up onshore. Barges and other steamships were dispatched for search and rescue. At least 500 men were treated at Memphis hospitals; 200 of them died there. Because the passenger list went down with the ship, no one knows for sure how many lives were lost that night, but most estimates put the number around 1,700—including Captain Mason.

INTO THE DUSTBIN OF HISTORY

So why is the *Sultana* disaster such an unknown part of U.S. history? Mostly because of timing. After the bloodiest war in U.S. history, the nation was largely desensitized to death. What was another 1,700 in the wake of hundreds of thousands of casualties? The newspapers were full of articles about the end of the war, a new presidency, and a nation rebuilding. On the day before the disaster, the last Confederate army had surrendered and John Wilkes Booth had been captured. The story of the sinking of the *Sultana* was relegated to the back pages.

Another reason for the minimal coverage was that it was an embarrassing story. A lot of people—from the ship's captain to the army officers in charge of boarding—had failed miserably at their jobs. The Army was not anxious to publicize such a horrible dereliction of duty.

But the fact remains that the explosion and sinking of the *Sultana* was—and still is—the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history. Her bow is still lying on the muddy bottom of the Mississippi River as a sad memorial to the men who never made it home.

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REAL-LIFE COURT TRANSGUIPS

Q: So, you were unconscious, and they pulled you from the bucket. What happened then?

A: Mr. Stewart gave me artificial insemination, you know, mouth-to-mouth.

Plaintiff's Attorney: Why do you think your home developed cracks in the walls?

Defendant's Attorney: Objection! The witness has no expertise in this area, there is an obvious lack of foundation.