

THE WORST MARITIME DISASTER FEW REMEMBER

Remembering your American History you no doubt recall the key dates in April 1865, especially those surrounding the Civil War.

April 9, 1865. Gen. Lee surrendered The Army of the Potomac to Gen. Grant.

April 14, 1865. President Lincoln was shot at Fords Theater and later died.

April 26, 1865. The assassin John Wilkes Booth was killed in a Virginia barn.

April 26, 1865. Gen. Joseph Johnston surrendered his Confederate troops to Gen. William T. Sherman.

And April 27, 1865: an important date, yet very few people would ever know what happened that day in April. The steamer SULTANA blew up just north of Memphis with a loss of life of Union soldiers, with numbers exceeded only by the four great battles at Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, and Antietam.

Why would a disaster such as the SULTANA explosion not be given great attention by the press? Shouldn't it be widely remembered and mentioned in the history of the Civil War? The most prevalent opinion seems to be that a war weary public, still grieving the death of President Lincoln, was not interested in yet another mass casualty event. The Eastern press was busy with the major stories of the preceding weeks; the SULTANA explosion happened in the West (the Midwest to us today), and those who died were largely returning home to Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Mention was relegated to the back pages of the newspapers if at all. Regardless, this was, and remains the worst Maritime disaster in US history. The loss of life exceeded the 1517 lost on the Titanic, and that from a vessel 30% of the size of the great liner.

The paper that I bring to you tonight will perhaps shed some light on the story of the SULTANA, and the mismanagement, greed, corruption, and willful neglect on the part of the steamer's owners and the Union Army that brought about her tragic end. It expands on the very short

description of the explosion found on a somewhat obscure commemorative plaque at Sawyer Point. I just happened to see the plaque one day, and my curiosity was piqued. I wanted to know more. So I did a little research.

On a bright late Spring morning in 1862, Captain Preston Lodwick walked into the office of the John Litherbury Boatyard in Cincinnati to discuss a contract to build a new steamer for service on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Ownership of a boat during this period was very lucrative because the Union Army paid well to transport troops and war materiel on the rivers. Captain Lodwick ordered a boat that was to be 260 feet in length, 42 feet at its beam, four decks including the pilot house, and powered by two 34 foot side paddle wheels. She was to have four state of the art boilers and the latest safety equipment. She was built entirely of wood and drew only 3 feet of water. In all, she weighed 1,719 tons. Accommodations for 376 passengers and a crew of 85 were also designed into the new boat. She was launched in January, 1863 and christened the SULTANA. There had been two other earlier Sultanas that met with mishaps that sank them, but this did not deter Captain Lodwick in naming his new vessel. Lodwick and his investors operated the SULTANA until March 1864. Then, having recouped their investment and a nice profit, they sold it to another investment group which included the Master of the steamer, Captain J. Cass Mason.

Captain Mason began operating on the Mississippi from Cairo, St Louis, to New Orleans transporting cotton, sugar, and more importantly, Union soldiers. The payment for an enlisted man was \$5 and \$10 for officers. However, Mason was not the manager that Captain Lodwick was, so by April, 1865 he had sold most of his interest in the SULTANA to his First Clerk and others to offset his financial problems. Mason also realized that the war was near its end, and he needed a big payday before the lucrative Union payments for troop transport dried up.

The SULTANA left St Louis on April 13, 1865 heading for New Orleans. On April 15, she was tied up at Cairo, IL when word of the assassination of President Lincoln reached the city.

Immediately, Captain Mason grabbed up as many newspapers as he could and headed south

spreading the news as he went. Telegraph lines had largely been destroyed between north and south, so news travelled slowly.

Upon reaching Vicksburg, MS, Mason approached two army officers, Brig. Gen Morgan L. Smith and Lt Col. Reuben Hatch, the chief quartermaster at Vicksburg. Smith promised Mason a full load of paroled prisoners for his north bound journey. Hatch made a similar promise and also had a proposition for Mason. Thousands of recently released Union prisoners of war from the prison camps at Cahaba, near Selma AL, and the notorious Andersonville, in southwest GA had been brought to a small parole camp outside Vicksburg to await release to the North. Hatch would pay the usual charge for passage to any captain who would take a group north. Knowing Mason needed money, Hatch suggested that if he could guarantee to give Mason a full load of about 1400 prisoners, Mason would guarantee a kickback. Hoping this was the big payday he needed, Capt. Mason readily agreed to the bribe. Mason then continued his trip to New Orleans.

Now, just a word about Reuben Hatch. Early in the war, while serving as an assistant quartermaster at Cairo, Hatch had been arrested for taking bribes in the purchase of military supplies. The evidence was overwhelming, but Hatch never appeared before a court-martial tribunal. His brother was the Secretary of State for Illinois and a friend and supporter of President Lincoln. Secretary Hatch, the Illinois Governor, and the Illinois Auditor wrote a letter to President Lincoln supporting Reuben Hatch's innocence and seeking the president's help. Lincoln endorsed the letter and sent it to the judge advocate in Cairo who was handling the prosecution, asking that he give him his opinion of the case. Lincoln also appointed a civilian commission to investigate the charges. The majority of the men on the commission were from Illinois, so it was not so surprising that Reuben Hatch was cleared of the charges.

Following this episode, Hatch continued his military career rising to the rank of Lt Colonel. In early 1865 he was found "totally unfit" to perform the duties of an assistant quartermaster, a post he had held for four years. Soon after this report was filed, Hatch was made the chief quartermaster for the Department of the Mississippi, stationed at Vicksburg. So, this blatant

dereliction of duty and corruption was allowed to continue setting the stage for what was to come.

Having discharged her cargo in New Orleans, the SULTANA started her north bound voyage on April 21 with about 70 cabin passengers, 180 deck passengers, and a small number of livestock. A crew of 85 was also on board.

Nine days earlier, while the SULTANA was in St. Louis, government inspectors concluded that the vessel "could be employed as a steamer without peril to life from imperfection of form, materials, etc." However, crew members soon became concerned about the condition of the massive boilers. One crewman, who left the steamer only two hours before the SULTANA departed New Orleans, later reported that the boilers had been patched or repaired at Natchez and Vicksburg on the two previous trips.

About 10 hours south of Vicksburg, one of the four boilers sprang a leak and the steamer, under reduced pressure, finally wheezed into Vicksburg.

The scene was chaotic as you might expect. Several boats were tied off at the wharf and some of the paroled prisoners were being put aboard some of those vessels. Seeing this, Captain Mason dashed off to find Lt. Col. Hatch and arrange to get his promised prisoner load. Chief Engineer Nathan Wintringer went off to engage a boiler mechanic to repair the boiler leak.

Capt. Mason went to the Quartermaster office and found Captain Fredrick Speed in charge. Speed told Mason that only about 300 prisoners had been enrolled and ready for shipment. And, that he had reported to higher command that no prisoners would be shipped on the SULTANA as he could not prepare the rolls for more prisoners in time for her scheduled departure. As we know, Mason was already having a bad day and he was having none of what Captain Speed was telling him. Furious, he set off to find Col. Hatch, with Speed in tow, to get this matter settled. Mason found Col. Hatch, Gen. Smith, and Captain Williams together in their office and complained bitterly about Captain Speed's decision to give him no prisoners. Speed held firm stating the rolls could not be prepared in time for the SULTANA's scheduled

departure. Captain Williams , though, offered a solution by suggesting the prisoners could be checked off as they boarded, and the rolls made up afterward.

We have no record of further discussion of the matter, but the outcome was clear. Later that evening Speed reported to Major Gen. Dana , the brigade commander that all remaining prisoners at Camp Fisk, estimated at 1,300 to 1,400, plus those in the hospital in Vicksburg, would be transported on the SULTANA. An unconfirmed story goes that Col. Hatch cut a government check to Mason for \$10,000, cashed it immediately, and gave Mason \$6,000, keeping the balance. At the going rate, that would have paid for 1200 enlisted men.

This decision was expedient, but careless at best and criminal at worst. Speed had severely underestimated the number of prisoners at Camp Fisk at 1300-1400 when in fact there were over 2000!

Mason, having been reassured that he would have a full load, returned to the steamer to deal with the boiler repair problem. The boilermaker, R.G. Taylor, took stock of the situation and advised Mason and Chief Engineer Wintringer that the ruptured seam should be cut out and replaced; this was a process that would take about 3 days. He also pointed out other parts of the boiler that needed attention as well. Mason finally prevailed promising to have proper repairs made in St. Louis, if Taylor, the boilermaker, would put a patch over the seam so they might get on their way. Taylor finally gave in and agreed to patch the seam, estimating about one days work for the job.

The next morning, Captain Speed and Captain Williams were on the first train to Camp Fisk to organize the first load of parolees to be put aboard the SULTANA. They agreed that Speed would supervise the loading of the men onto the trains and Williams would ride the first train back to Vicksburg to keep count as they boarded the steamer.

One of those paroled prisoners was Sgt. John Clark Ely of the 115th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Ely had been captured in December, 1864 and spent Christmas as a POW. The former school teacher wrote in his diary, "Christmas Day and such a day for us prisoners. Hungry, dirty,

sleepy, and lousy. Will another Christmas find us again among friends and loved ones?" Now that he was released, the prospect of home seemed very real. He wrote, "Oh, this day is the brightest day of my life, long to be remembered".

The quartermaster in charge of river transportation, Captain William Kearns, did not share the view that all of the prisoners could be placed on one vessel. The SULTANA was too small. Kearns tried in vain to have some placed on the LADY GAY that was larger and had space available, but he lost the argument. The LADY GAY sailed without a single prisoner on board.

A few minutes later the first train from Camp Fisk arrived with an estimated 570 prisoners who went aboard joining 398 soldiers, probably from the military hospital in Vicksburg. Now, the SULTANA had exceeded its designed carrying capacity by more than 600. Among the group was Sgt. Ely who noted in his diary that "SULTANA was a large but not a very fine boat".

The second trainload of men arrived and went aboard, but Captain Williams was not on the wharf to check them off. This group was estimated to be about 400. Again Captain Kearns, afraid the SULTANA could not accommodate so many passengers, pleaded with Col. Hatch to place some of the men on the recently arrived PAULINE CARROLL. Hatch telegraphed Speed at Camp Fisk asking if there were more men who could be put on The SULTANA. Speed was still convinced that no more than 1400 prisoners were to be shipped that day. But he replied that all could go on the SULTANA. Based on this, Hatch refused Kearns' request to put some of the men on the PAULINE CARROLL. Kearns fearful of the heavy load then went to Gen. Smith. But again Kearns was refused.

The third and final train from Camp Fisk arrived in the late afternoon carrying approximately 800 more parolees. When Captain Kearns saw this number walking toward the wharf, he again implored Speed and Williams to put some of these men on the PAULINE CARROLL. Again he was refused. By this time Williams was angry, and he told Kearns that "they could all go very well on the SULTANA. That the PAULINE CARROLL had offered a bribe of 20 cents per man to get those men and for that reason she could not have a single one of them". Kearns watched in dismay as the PAULINE CARROLL steamed away with only 17 passengers.

Dr. George Kemble , the medical director of the Department of the Mississippi , who visited the SULTANA after the second trainload was put aboard, shared Kearns' view. Citing overcrowding, he requested and received permission from Maj. Gen. Dana to remove the 23 men who were confined to cots, and he redirected a column of 278 soldiers who came from the hospital.

Even Captain Mason was becoming alarmed at the number of troops that were on board and was concerned about the stability of his boat. Although he thought he could manage, he still protested further loading. Even he was ignored!

While the exact number of people loaded on the SULTANA on April 24 is not known, it was obvious that it was dangerously overcrowded. It was necessary for the crew to install extra supports for the upper decks for fear that they might collapse. Passengers were warned to not make sudden moves to one side or the other as it might cause the boat to capsize. Captain Speed was shocked to learn that Captain Williams had counted 1,996 men who boarded, several hundred more than his estimate; and this did not include the men from the second train that were not counted at all. Everything added in, the boat was carrying as many as 2400 when paying passengers and crew were added. The First Clerk, William Gambrel, told one of the soldiers that "If we arrive safe in Cairo it would be the greatest trip ever made on western waters, as there were more people on board than were ever carried on one boat on the Mississippi River."

Lt. Harvey Annis, his wife and baby were among those passengers who had purchased cabin passage for the trip home at war's end. Annis had resigned his commission in order to return home where his presence was required. Ann Annis was very concerned about the overcrowding, and the boat feeling top heavy. Remember, the vessel drew just three feet of water.

At 9:00 PM on April 24, the SULTANA slowly backed away from the wharf at Vicksburg and headed north on the fast running, flood swollen, Mississippi River.

The SULTANA stopped briefly at Helena, Arkansas. Word spread quickly that a photographer was setting up his camera on the west bank. The excited soldiers, hoping to have their pictures taken, rushed to the port side causing the SULTANA to list dangerously. The picture taken that day was the last one of the SULTANA and many of those on board.

The voyage continued on to Memphis. There on the evening of the 26th, the steamer stopped for about 4 hours before heading across the river to Hopefield, Arkansas. There she took on a thousand bushels of coal. At this stop Captain Mason was reported to have said to one of the soldiers "that he would give all his interest in the boat if it was safely landed in Cairo."

At this point the flood swollen Mississippi was almost 4 miles wide, with a fast current. The overloaded boat was giving everything it had to make headway going North. One could imagine the stokers furiously firing the boilers to keep steam up with the throttles wide open.

At about 2:00am on the morning of the 27th, at a point 7 miles north of Memphis, three of the four boilers exploded like an enormous bomb. A witness on shore described the explosion like the thundering noise of 'a hundred earthquakes.' The blast instantly destroyed the upper decks above the boilers. THE forward part of the boat was engulfed in flames, clouds of steam, flying coals, scalding water and bits of metal, from the destroyed boilers. Most of the passengers were sleeping on the crowded decks made of wood and coated with highly combustible paint. When the decks collapsed this became a funeral pyre for many not blown overboard. The smokestacks toppled over. One fell forward onto the foredeck packed with survivors; the other fell aft onto the roof of the passenger cabins. Within 20 minutes, the entire superstructure was ablaze. With only 76 life preservers and two small life boats, most who survived the blast were forced into the water to grab anything that floated for survival.

Lt. Harvey Annis and his wife were shaken awake by the sound of rattling iron. Shocked to find his cabin filling with steam, he quickly fastened a life preserver onto his wife and himself. He took up his child and led his wife to the stern lowering himself and the child by rope to the lower deck. His wife then followed. The soldier with his child jumped into the water. Mrs. Annis then jumped and was able to hold onto the rudder. Soon after, she watched her husband lose

strength and disappear with their child beneath the water. She finally was able to seize a small board which eventually carried her to safety.

The water around the boat for a distance of twenty to forty feet was a solid, seething mass of humanity, clinging to each other. There were hundreds of men struggling for their very existence before finally surrendering to the embrace of the muddy river.

The SULTANA began to drift with the current while the fires raged. The starboard paddle wheel broke off and fell into the water. Soon after, the port side wheel followed suit. Hundreds of soldiers and civilians struggled in the water for what seemed an eternity before help arrived. The BOSTONIA II sailing down river was the first on the scene at about 3:00 am, and began hauling in survivors from the water around the wreckage. In Memphis, sailors stood on the decks of U S Navy gunboats, watching the red glow in the sky from the disaster. Finally about 3:20am, hearing cries from the river calling for help, these crews started rescue operations. These survivors had been in the cold April water for over an hour and had drifted seven miles back to Memphis. Those on watch on the gunboats assumed that whatever was burning up river was close to shore allowing the crew to beach the vessel. The drifting survivors shocked them into action. Cutters from the gunboats USS GROSSBEAK and the USS ESSEX set out immediately to collect as many as they could in the 4:00 am darkness.

Across the river, at Mound City, AR, stood L.P. Berry. He watched the flames shooting skyward from the SULTANA as she drifted past and heard the cries for help. Just a little farther down river at Marion, AR, John Fogleman saw what had happened and, with his sons, and other townspeople went into action. They wanted to save as many as they could, as they drifted close to the western shore. The Foglemans had no boat so they cobbled together a raft and went out collecting about twenty five survivors, bringing them to the safety of their home. This act was remarkable in itself, because Arkansas was still Confederate territory. and the rescued and the rescuers only weeks before had been at war!

The Chief Engineer, Nathan Wintringer, was floating down river on a wooden plank with three other men, when the plank lodged into a snag near the Tennessee shore. Having been in the

cold water for over two hours, one of the men lost his grip and slid beneath the water. Soon after, a cutter came upon the scene and rescued the three remaining men. It is ironic that the Chief Engineer, who had insisted that the boiler leak just be patched, had survived the explosion, going off watch and retiring to his quarters at the stern of the boat.

Just before dawn, The SULTANA was caught in an eddy current on the north end of Chicken Island just north of Mound City, AR. It burned to the waterline becoming a crematory for the remains of hundreds of passengers and crew trapped between the collapsed decks. The steamer then sank in 26 feet of water, with only her jackstaff still visible above the water. A marker to her final resting place.

At approximately 5:00am a messenger rushed into the quarters of the medical director and superintendent of government hospitals in Memphis to inform him of the explosion. He was told that survivors were washing ashore along the riverfront. Medical teams raced into action at the wharf to attend to the treatment of the victims pulled from the river.

Dawn brought an end to a horrible night. With daylight, the true magnitude of the disaster became clear. More than 1,700 were dead or dying! The dead littered the long stretch of river both above and below Memphis. Survivors now could be seen clinging to trees and snags and were rescued and brought to safety. Every survivor had a story, the elements of which had the same thread. Surprise, immediate action taken to survive, constant prayer, helping others if able, despair, and finally the joy of rescue and living through the terrible ordeal.

Lt. Col. B.T.D. Irwin, the medical director and superintendent of the government hospitals in Memphis, estimated that 530 survivors were placed in hospitals, and 260 at the Soldiers Home. Other accounts estimated that of the 757 people rescued, nearly 300 died once they reached the hospitals.

Ann Annis, having been plucked from a tree, lay in a bed at Gayoso Hospital suffering from exhaustion. But no doctor could relieve the pain of her witnessing the loss of her husband and

child. Others who were able went about the riverfront and hospitals looking for family members and comrades. Among the fatalities were Captain Cass Mason; First Clerk, William Gambrel; Second Engineer Samuel Clemens, who died in the hospital; and Sergeant John Ely, who would not see another Christmas.

Bodies continued to be collected for several weeks after the explosion, some as far south as Vicksburg. Townspeople in Memphis went to work: They found clothing for the survivors; women washed the female victims and clothed them for burial; and an opera troupe from Chicago, who had travelled to Memphis on the SULTANA gave benefit performances to aid the survivors. Many of the military victims were laid to rest in mass graves; or they were pulled from the water, wrapped in canvas and dropped back into the river. Witnesses were just overwhelmed by these sights on both sides of the river.

A week after the explosion, P.D.Parker, the engineer on the USS VINDICATOR wrote of witnessing the gruesome aftermath. As he reported, "I wish to say that the most horrible sight I saw during my whole service was immediately after the calamity. When clearing the wheels of debris after the SULTANA disaster, we would find them clogged with dead bodies from the SULTANA. The crew of the VINDICATOR were mostly old soldiers, and there came very near a revolt because we were not allowed to bury the bodies which were lodged in our wheels."

The actual death toll will never be known, but the Customs Department at Memphis estimated the toll at 1547. This did not include those who died in the hospitals which would bring the total to almost 1800. Ohio lost the most of any state with 791 dead. Of these, over 50 were Cincinnatians.

On April 30, 1865, Secretary of War Stanton telegraphed Major General Cadwallader Washburn, the commander of the District of West Tennessee, ordering him to convene a board of inquiry to investigate the loss of the SULTANA. Washburn had anticipated such an order; and he had already commissioned a board within hours of receiving news of the disaster. This was the first of three commissions convened to probe the causes of the explosion, and to ascertain if charges or censure were in order. Much back and forth occurred during the hearings,

including the inevitable conspiracy theories of sabotage. After weeks of testimony, this panel concluded that “the evidence fully shows that the government has transferred as many or more troops on boats of no greater capacity than the SULTANA frequently and with safety”. The crowded conditions were completely discounted.

Major General Dana and Brigadier General William Hoffman, the U.S. Army Commissary General of Prisoners, conducted additional investigations. General Hoffman’s report was the most critical of the military’s involvement in the tragedy. He concluded that the shipment of so large a number of troops, which he put at 1,866, on one boat was, under the circumstances unnecessary, unjustifiable, and a great outrage to the troops. Hoffman expressed the opinion that Hatch, Kerns, Speed, and Williams were together responsible for the inordinate number of troops loaded on the SULTANA, with Col. Hatch and Captain Speed being most censurable. He also faulted Brigadier General Morgan Smith, who after being informed by Captain Kearns that the SULTANA was being overloaded, did not take it upon himself to investigate the situation and intervene if he saw fit to do so. Hoffman felt that had he done so, many lives would have been saved.

Another key witness in the Hoffman investigation was Chief Engineer Nathan Wintringer. He testified that the boilers were working perfectly until a small leak was discovered about 10 hours below Vicksburg. Repairs were made at Vicksburg; Wintringer was confident that the repair job was done properly and the boilers were safe. He claimed that he knew nothing of recommended further repairs to be done in St Louis. He theorized that because the boat was top heavy it was inclined to careen from side to side causing the water in the boilers to be thrown from side to side, exposing some parts to become overheated. The overheated parts gave way when the water was suddenly returned to its proper level.

Isaac West, an engineer and boilermaker from Cincinnati, testified that in his opinion, the cause of the explosion was low water levels in the boilers. He also stated that if the patch had failed, it would not have caused an explosion.

Wintringer had his Engineers license suspended as a result of the explosion, but appealed the decision. Upon further review, two other inspectors decided that Wintringer was a well respected engineer and that he was off watch when the explosion happened. The two were mindful that the dead can mount no defense, and laid the blame on Samuel Clemens, the Second Engineer, which cleared Wintringer.

At the end of the inquiries, Col. Hatch and Captain Speed were the only officers ordered before court-martial tribunals. True to form, Hatch never appeared. Speed was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to be dismissed from the army. The verdict was later reversed by the judge advocate general, and Speed was honorably mustered out of service. With Speed's exoneration, the military closed the book on the SULTANA tragedy.

Hatch was relieved of his duties as chief quartermaster of the Department of the Mississippi. A few weeks later he boarded the northbound steamer ATLANTIC, carrying \$14,490 in government money. During the voyage, the safe of the vessel was robbed. The thief was caught before the boat reached St. Louis, and all of the money from other passengers was recovered, except for more than \$8,500 in government money that Hatch claimed he had put in the safe. He was found to have violated military regulations by removing funds from the Department, and was held personally liable for the loss of the money. Finally, he was taken to account for at least one of his misdeeds.

The horror of the SULTANA was multiplied by its futility. There was no military reason justifying the placement of so many soldiers on one boat. "IT WAS MURDER" screamed the Memphis Daily Appeal headline. The real cause was not the failure of a boiler patch, or low water in the boilers. It was the conspiracy of greed at Vicksburg that put the quest for profit and easy money above the safety of the weary soldiers, who thought the horrors of war were behind them. And, in the final analysis, none of the surviving conspirators was charged with any offense.

I will leave the last word on this sad story to James H. Kimberlin, a survivor, who expressed resentment toward his country. Shortly before he died he wrote, "The men who had endured the torments of a hell on Earth, starved, famished from thirst, eaten with vermin, having endured all of the indignities, insults and abuses possible for an armed bully to bestow upon them. And, to be so soon forgotten does not speak well for our government or for the American people."

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