

The Sultana Disaster

The *Sultana* was a Mississippi River side-wheel steamboat that exploded on April 27, 1865 in the greatest maritime disaster in United States history. An estimated 1,567 of her 2,427 passengers died when three of the boat's four boilers exploded and she sank near Memphis, TN. This disaster did not receive much attention in the press and was overshadowed by other recent events – as John Wilkes Booth (President Lincoln's assassin) was located and killed just the day before; Lee had surrendered, and the President was dead. A country exposed to these many terrific losses took the *Sultana* disaster with seeming indifference.

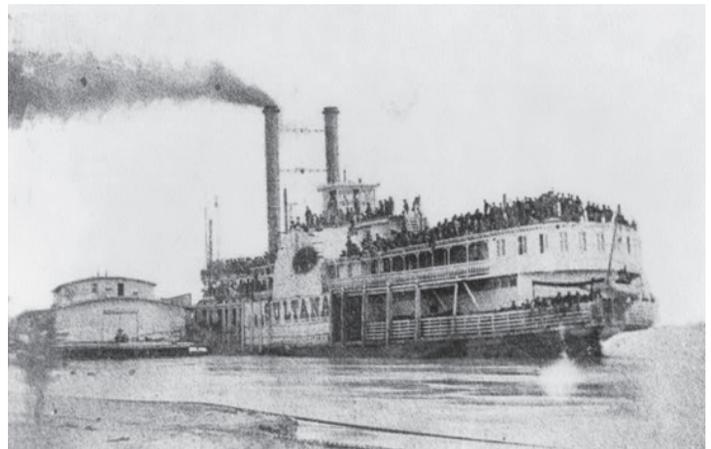
This large wooden steamboat was built in 1863 by the John Litherbury Boatyard in Cincinnati, OH and ran in the lower Mississippi cotton trade. Her hull measured 260' x 42' x 7' and was powered by high-pressure steam engines with 25" cylinders and an 8-foot stroke. Her engines were fed steam from four tubular boilers, each measuring 46" x 18-feet and containing 24 five-inch flues. She was propelled by two side-mounted paddlewheels, each 34-feet in diameter working 11-foot buckets. For two years, she ran a regular route between St. Louis, MO and New Orleans, LA and was often commissioned to carry troops during the Civil War.

Under the command of Captain J. Cass. Mason of St. Louis, the *Sultana* left New Orleans, LA on April 21, 1865, with about 100 cabin and deck passengers, and numerous live-stock bound for market in St. Louis, MO. At Vicksburg, MS she stopped for a quick repair to one of her boilers and to take on more passengers. Instead of having the bad boiler replaced, a small repair was made to reinforce a small leak. A section of bulged boilerplate was removed, and a patch of lesser thickness was riveted in its place. This repair took about one day, whereas a complete replacement of the boiler would have taken about three days. During the lay-up at Vicksburg, the U.S. Army ordered 1,886 troops aboard the *Sultana* until she was bursting at the seams with humanity. Most of these troops were Union soldiers from Ohio and just released from Confederate prison camps in Cahaba, AL and Andersonville, GA. The U.S. Government had contracted with the *Sultana* to transport these former prisoners of war back to their homes in the north. With a legal capacity of only 376 persons, she became severely overcrowded as passengers were put into every available space, and the overflow was so

severe that all of the decks were completely packed. The word around Vicksburg was that two other steamers (the *Pauline Carroll* and *Lady Gay*) had both bid for transporting portions of these 1,886 troops, but were turned down. All were placed aboard the *Sultana*.

After departing Vicksburg, landings were made at Helena, AR and Memphis, TN. About nine-miles above Memphis at 2:00 am, near the crossing at Paddy Hens and during a violent thunderstorm, the boilers gave way. The primary cause of the explosion was determined to be too much pressure and low water in the boilers. There was also reason to believe that the allowable working steam pressure was exceeded in an attempt to overcome the Mississippi's strong spring river current. The blast flung many of the deck passengers into the water and destroyed a large section of the vessel. The forward part of the upper decks collapsed into the exposed furnace boxes which soon caught fire and soon turned the remaining superstructure into a raging inferno; the glare of which was visible in the night sky as far away as Memphis, TN.

The "official" cause of the *Sultana* disaster was determined to be a mismanagement of water levels in the boiler, exacerbated by the fact that the vessel was severely overcrowded and top heavy. Because of this imbalance, as the steamboat made her way north following the twists and turns of the river, she listed severely to one side then the other. Her four boilers were interconnected and mounted side-by-side, so that when the boat listed sideways, water would tend to run out of the highest boiler. With the fires still engaging the empty boiler, hot spots were created. When the boat tipped the other way, water rushing back into the empty boiler would hit the hot



spots and flash instantly to steam, creating a sudden surge of pressure. This effect of careening could have been minimized by maintaining high water levels in all the boilers,

but this appears to not have been the case. So the official inquiry found that the boat's boilers exploded due to the combined effects of careening, low water level, and a faulty repair to the leaky boiler made a few days earlier.

Another explanation of the disaster came from William Stretor of St. Louis, MO: In 1888, Stretor claimed a former business partner, Robert Loudon, had made a death bed confession of having sabotaged *Sultana* by using a coal torpedo. Loudon, a former Confederate agent and saboteur who operated in and around St. Louis, had the opportunity and motive to do this and may have had access to the means. Thomas Edgeworth Courtenay, (the inventor of the coal torpedo) was a former resident of St. Louis and was involved in similar acts of sabotage against Union shipping interests during the war.) Supporting Loudon's claim were eyewitness reports that a piece of artillery shell was observed in the *Sultana*'s wreckage. Loudon's claim was controversial, however, and most scholars support the "official" explanation. The location of the explosion, from the top rear of the boilers and far away from the fireboxes, tends to indicate that Loudon's claim of sabotage was probably fabricated.

Another interesting aside to this disaster appeared on the television episode of History Detectives, which aired on July 2, 2014. This program reviewed the known evidence pertaining to the *Sultana* event and then focused on the question of why the steamboat was allowed to be crowded to several times its normal capacity before its departure. The program placed blame on a U.S. Quartermaster named Reuben Hatch, an individual with a long history of corruption and incompetence, who was able to keep his job due to his many political connections. It seems that Mr. Hatch had personally authorized this large crowd of soldiers on board the *Sultana*, garnering a ten-dollar fee for every soldier boarded. To make matters worse, President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and General of the Army Ulysses S. Grant were also implicated, as they wrote letters whitewashing Reuben Hatch's incredible and lengthy record of criminality and irresponsibility in his duties as an Army quartermaster. These letters currently reside in the National Archives in Washington DC. Hatch refused three separate subpoenas to appear before Congress and give testimony before dying in 1871, having escaped justice due to his numerous highly placed patrons – including two U.S. Presidents and a Secretary of War.

