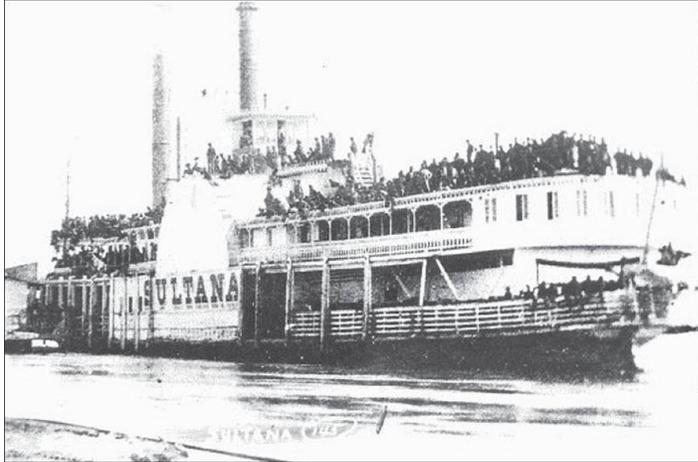


The *Sultana* disaster

Several Erie County men died in the sinking of paddle wheeler
on April 27, 1865

BY DANIEL KOCH



T.W. Barnes took this photograph of the Sultana on April 26, the day before it sank. The image shows how overcrowded the boat was.

In the early morning hours of April 27, 1865, the worst maritime disaster in American history occurred. Few people in Erie County have probably ever heard of a Mississippi River paddle wheeler named the *Sultana*, even though the

disaster would cost seven Erie County men their lives. If you haven't heard of the disaster, you are not alone. Even at the time it was dwarfed by other news.

On April 9, Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. Just a few days later, on April 14, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. The manhunt for the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, stole most major headlines. On April 26 two more events would further sentence the *Sultana* to obscurity. That morning, Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the largest remaining Confederate field army to Gen. William T. Sherman in North Carolina. In the evening, John Wilkes Booth was shot by Sgt. Boston Corbett in the Garrett family tobacco barn after a 12-day manhunt.

The cruel shame of the *Sultana* disaster is who the victims were. The men aboard the boat had not only survived the carnage of Civil War battlefields, they had also been the lucky ones to survive the hell of Southern prison camps. If you were a captured Union soldier, you had a 15 percent chance of dying while in confinement. If you survived the camps, your body would likely never be the same for the rest of your life due to disease and malnutrition. Photographs taken of some of the survivors could easily be mistaken for concentration camp survivors from the World War II.

The men aboard the *Sultana* had been released from Andersonville, near Americus, Ga., and Cahaba, near Selma, Ala. Andersonville was built to hold 10,000 prisoners, yet at its height held 45,613. Some 13,000 Union soldiers died in captivity there, making the death rate close to 30 percent. Cahaba was built to hold 500 men but held 3,000 by March 1865. An attentive commander helped those in Cahaba suffer a relatively low 2 percent death rate, which was the lowest of all Civil War prison camps of the North and South.

The *Sultana* left St. Louis for New Orleans on April 13. When the boat tied up at Vicksburg, Miss., on the journey south, Capt. Mason, the vessel's skipper, was approached by Lt. Colonel Reuben Hatch, who was responsible for arranging transportation of the recently released prisoners. The government was offering \$5 per enlisted man and \$10 per officer for every officer taken back. Hatch guaranteed Mason a load of 1,400 men in exchange for a kickback. Mason agreed, despite the fact the *Sultana* was only built to hold 376 passengers and cargo.

On the return journey north from St. Louis, one of the boat's four boilers began to leak, forcing the boat to limp into Vicksburg. Rather than wait for a proper repair that might cost him his prisoner money, Mason ordered a quick patch. To make matters worse, instead of just loading the 1,400 men promised, an error resulted in all 2,100 men in the parole camp being loaded aboard, in addition to the 50 – 100 civilian passengers and 85 crewmen. The men, many in a severely weakened state, were crammed into every available space. In some places the sagging deck had to be supported.

The *Sultana* took two days traveling north, battling against a spring flood with the river 3 miles wide in certain locations. At about 2 a.m. April 27, one of the vessel's boilers exploded, with two more blowing in quick succession. The force of the explosions threw some passengers into the water while the boat itself became a raging inferno. Rather than burning alive, men began to jump into the swollen river, drowning due to their weakened condition. It took more than an hour for rescuers to arrive, and for many, it was too late. Bodies were discovered in the river for the next few months, some as far south as Vicksburg. Some 1,800 of the 2,427 passengers and crewmen aboard the *Sultana* died in the disaster, 300 more than the death toll on the more famous *Titanic*. No one was ever held accountable for the tragedy.

Of the Erie County men aboard, Myrum Gregory, Albert Niles and Sebastian Whyler of the 55th Ohio Infantry all survived. Amos Fairchild, David Geeseman and David Grubaugh, all of Company G of the 65th Ohio Infantry, perished. Morris Aubrey and Jacob Brandt of the 72nd Ohio perished, while Andrew German of the same regiment survived. William Gustin and Asa Pouch died while Ira Perkins survived; all three men were members of Company K of the 3rd Ohio Cavalry.