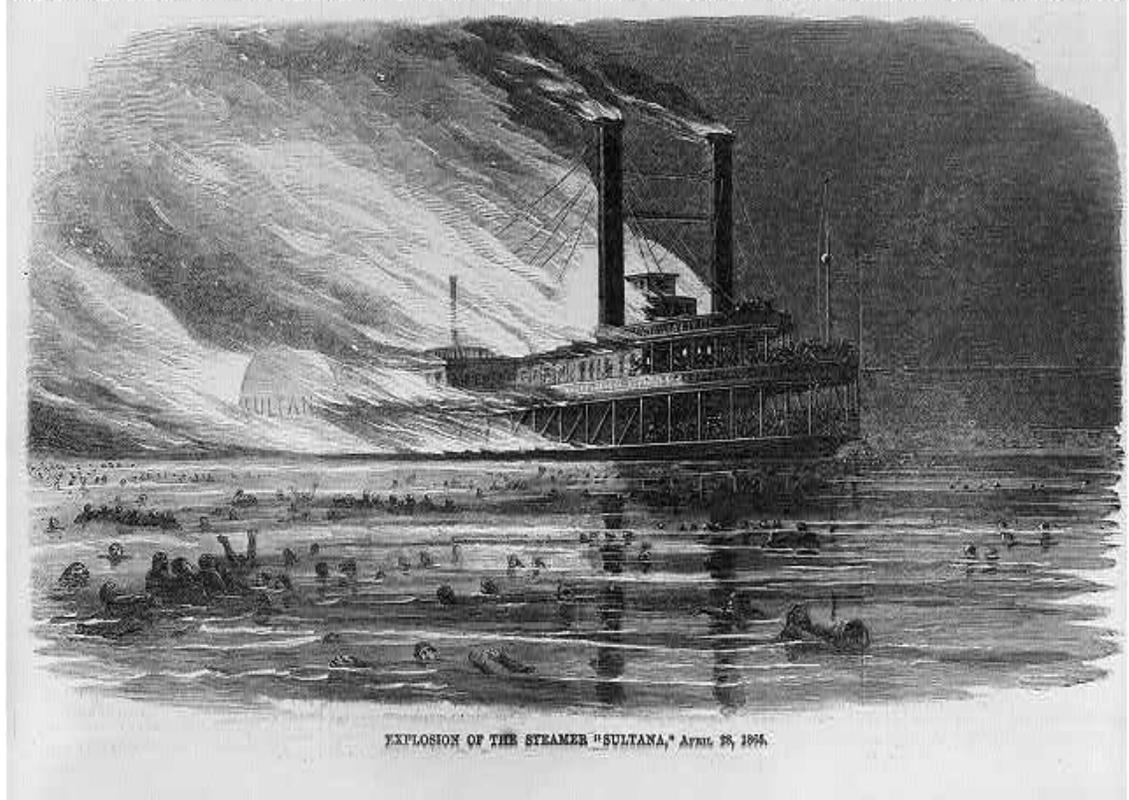


Rescue Comes to the Sultana survivors – But Too Late – Jacob Rush’s thrilling tale continues. “After swimming a short distance, I looked back. The boat was one flame and still many could be seen rushing to a watery grave, making that their choice. The fire made such a bright light that the shore could be seen on both sides of the Mississippi, but the current of the River soon carried one out of sight into the darkness to shift for himself as is generally the case in this life of ours.

A short time after the explosion, the steamer *Bostona* came in sight and immediately commenced throwing overboard planks, bales of hay, &c. for the strugglers to grasp, lowered her lifeboats and aided in every way possible. Many lives were saved by her and had it not been for this boat but few would have been left to tell the story. She gave the alarm at once and all the boats in the port of Memphis came to our rescue.”

The sinking of the *Sultana* was reported in Harpers Weekly.

about Lascoux took leave of his fellow-citizens of Springfield, among whom he had resided for a quarter of a century. As he stepped upon the platform which was to bear him away he said: "I must now turn again as I did to Mr. Lascoux. His insight into the great problem of the time did for him, though after a quarter of a century, what the attack on Sumner only could do for the nation. He did not, like you not attack you. You can have no counsel without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to them poster; and the very manner of his death disclosed to them the bitter malice of the treason over which they had gained the victory. They did not forget the anxiety with which they followed in



“I was swimming in company with one of the deckhands of the steamer...” “A yawl came near us when I called for help, and a rope was thrown to me, but as I reached with my right hand for the rope, my companion reached for me and got hold of my hair, which at the time was very long. He seized my hair with a grasp firm enough to pull me on my back and get me under water, but his hold soon relaxed, and as I came up the yawl passed out of sight.

“I was again left in darkness and drifted along with the current of the river. I was a good swimmer, but realized the fact that I could do nothing but keep above water, so I made no effort only to float, in hopes the current would carry me ashore. I drifted along for some time, when I ran into a stump that was floating in the water and struck it with so much force that there are now three small scars on my breast made by the sharp roots of that stump.

Those who have any knowledge of trying to handle a round piece of timber in the water can realize how difficult it is to support one’s self, especially in the current of the river, upon a piece of wood of such ill shape as a stump with roots protruding in all directions. Though having had years of experience, in fact from childhood, with such upon the lakes in sport, it was impossible for me to balance myself upon this stump, and after trying for some time until I was nearly exhausted, I had to give it up for fear it would wear me out, and I again struck out and let the current carry me along.”

“On my way down the River, I passed James Clary, formerly a member of the 49th Ohio I think, and a resident of Marblehead. He, with two or three others, was clinging to a bale of hay and seemed to be getting along well when he exclaimed ‘I am getting a cramp.’ At the same time he let go and went down. I saw him but a few minutes by the light of a torch on one of the *Bostona’s* yawl boats which was drifting with the current, picking up all who came in its way.”

“It was not long after that when day began to break [about 5 a.m.], and I could see a dark spot ahead of me that looked like shore, but before I fully realized the fact I struck against a lot of driftwood and threw myself out upon it, and in a very short time was on solid foundation. Here I met four or five of the boys, who had reached this point before me. I seemed strong, though I had been in the water nearly two hours [and swimming some 7½ miles with the current], but when the air struck me I wilted like a leaf, and though knowing perfectly well what was the matter with me, I was not able to help myself, and had it not been for those on the drift I would have chilled to death in a very short time..

As I was without any clothing, one of the boys who had wrung out his clothing until it had become partially dry, gave me a shirt, and in company with two or three others I went into the water several times to help others upon the drift. Persons not used to the water would invariably be carried under by the current, as they would grab the log, the log revolving and carrying them under; it was only those who were used to this who could throw themselves upon a log in the water, and we watched closely for the few that came within reach. By stretching out upon the logs, holding each other’s feet, one of us managed to keep close to the water’s edge, in fact, lay so the water could run over us all the time, and in that way we pulled out three or four who struck our drift.

It was then daylight, and as I was running from one log to another trying to strike another drift where we saw one of our number hanging to some brush to assist him on top of the logs, I heard my name called, and on looking around found it was my friend Steward, who had landed within 10 rods of the spot, though I had not seen him since we jumped from the steamer until that moment.”

“After getting warm by rubbing and exercise, we helped several others out onto the logs. There I remained about two hours when a steamer came along and took us to Memphis, which was just on the opposite side of the River from where I landed.”

“By the next day noon all the bodies that could be found were brought to Memphis. Out of 2,251 persons on board, but 550 were rescued, and of that number, 150 died within 24 hours afterwards from injuries and exposure.”

“Soon after a steamer came across from Memphis and we were taken aboard and cared for by the Sisters of Charity, who did all in their power for those who were picked up. I was taken to the Soldiers’ Home with my friend Steward, where we remained until we got a supply of clothing, when some of General Washburn’s staff [Washburn was then in command at Memphis] came and took the names of those who were not hurt and were able to give an account of the explosion. Myself, with about 15 others, reported at General Washburn’s headquarters, and there I was requested to answer such questions as were put to me by one of the staff officers as to my knowledge of the explosion of the steamer, what I saw, etc.”

It was thought that the boat was blown up by torpedoes put into the coal by the Rebels. “This I hardly think to have been the case, the boilers being old and nearly worn out having to be repaired before we left Vicksburg. He asked us some questions and sent us back to our quarters. But I and a particular friend, George Steward by name, only went part way when we slipped away from the guard who was not watching us very closely and went back to Gen. Washburn’s Head Quarters to see if he would give us transportation home, as we knew that if we waited for all the red tape to be unrolled, we would not get away for two or three weeks. He was very kind and pleasant, but told us that it was impossible for him to do so, and as the war would soon be [over] and we could go home. Finally, I said will it be all right if we get home? Yes, he replied. So we went to see if we could smuggle ourself on board an upward bound boat.

A steamer soon came in and luckily for us the Capt. was an old acquaintance of Steward’s father. This boat however was closely guarded and the Capt. told us that he could not dare to take us without a pass, but that if we could get aboard without his knowing it, we would be all right. We hung around the boat all day trying to get on, telling our story to each fresh relief of the guards, but none of them dared let us pass. Finally, just at night, the whistle blew for the last time – we sprang upon the plank pushing the guard to one side and were once more homeward

bound, without a cent of money or transportation and a thousand miles from home. It would take too long to tell how I begged my way home, telling my story as I went, and the many escapes that I had from being put off the trains.

On the 3rd of May 1865 I reached Louisville, Ky. and on the 5th day of the same month, I arrived in Sandusky O., there I got a sailboat and [having rowed across Lake Erie in a row-boat, a distance of 12 miles from Sandusky City] reached home about 1 o'clock at night, exciting a great commotion in my Father's house by my unexpected appearance." These accounts were written by Jacob Rush, Kelley's Island, on May 8, 1865 for the Sandusky Register and in 1888 for Jesse Hawes for his book about Cahaba prison. Rush was just 20 years old when he was released from Cahaba.

In closing Rush noted that "Out of eight of us belonging to the Third Ohio Cavalry, four were saved, namely - Marion Hawk, Co. D; Charles Green, Co. L; Charles McWorthy, Co. M, and myself. Lieutenant Lewis, Co. M, and three others whose names I cannot give, were among the lost. Also James Clary, formerly from Sandusky, is one of the lost. Nearly all the prisoners had been confined from one to two years, most of them at Andersonville."

The Official Report On The *Sultana*

News of the *Sultana's* destruction was buried by the turbulent events shaking the nation at the time, including the end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln which filled the newspapers with conspiracy theories and funeral details. The day the *Sultana* reached Memphis, John Wilkes Booth was killed. It is no wonder that the accident received so little coverage. The sinking of the *Sultana* killed 1,200 to 1,500 Union soldiers returning home from the Civil War and shattered the lives of those who survived. It was a tragedy on the scope of the *Titanic*, which sank in 1912 with a loss of over 1,500 lives.

Hawes lamented that this tragedy was relegated such a minor place in the war's history. "In the long list embracing every engagement of the Rebellion, the Union killed on the field have exceeded the loss of lives by this explosion in only four great battles: the Wilderness, Gettysburg, Spottsylvania and Antietam. There have been more lives lost by this explosion than were killed from the Union ranks in the combined battles of Fredericksburg, Franklin, and Five Forks; more than were killed from the Union ranks on the fields of battle at Pea Ridge, Perryville, and Pleasant Hill combined; more than the Union loss in killed at Chancellorsville, or Chickamauga, or Shiloh. Only the fact that it occurred just at the close of the great war, just when the country was bowed in grief at the murder of its beloved first citizen, gave it relatively a minor place in the history of that time."

In 1992, Jerry Potter, who spent 13 years researching the disaster, published *The Sultana Tragedy*. 'Nobody knew about it. That's what compelled me to write the book,' the Memphis lawyer said. 'These were young men who survived horrible situations during the war...then, to be killed on the way home and for the nation not to know about it, was appalling to me.' Potter obtained records at the National Archives of the two military inquiries that were convened to investigate the disaster. He reviewed newspaper accounts and Army correspondence. He obtained diaries of some of *Sultana's* victims and interviewed descendants of survivors. Another book on the *Sultana* disaster, *Transport to Disaster*, was written by James W. Elliott, grandson of a *Sultana* survivor.

Most of those who died were paroled Union prisoners going home to reclaim their lives after enduring the hardships, of the Confederacy's most brutal prison camps. Conditions in the camps claimed the lives of approximately 26,436 Confederate and 22,576 Union soldiers. Disease, malnutrition, and violence marked prison life. Andersonville may have been the most famous of all the camps but Cahaba rivaled Andersonville in appalling conditions. Malaria, smallpox, typhoid, diarrhea, dysentery, scurvy, and hospital gangrene killed thousands of the prisoners. One Confederate surgeon estimated that the deaths at Andersonville 'ranged from 90 to 130 each day.' He also provided the following grim statistics: 'Since the establishment of this prison on 24th of February, 1864, to the present time (October 1864) over 10,000 Federal prisoners have died, that is, nearly one third of the entire number have perished in less than seven months.' The men, mostly from Ohio, Tennessee, Indiana, Michigan and Kentucky, were bound for Camp Chase near Columbus, Ohio, to be discharged, and to reunite with families and resume their lives.

William Butler, a cotton merchant from Springfield Ill. described the scene. "I only noticed the *Sultana* from where I stood on the *Pauline Carroll*. On every part of her the men seemed to be packed as thick as they could well stand. They were on the hurricane deck, on her wheel-house, forward deck and guard, and a person could go from one part of the boat to another only with much difficulty." The prisoners boarding the *Sultana* were more than willing to suffer the crowded conditions on deck, believing that they were finally out of harm's way and going home.

During the investigation after the tragedy, Union Army officers accused colleagues of accepting bribes from steamboat captains to let them transport as many soldiers as possible upriver. But investigators ignored the charges and shifted the blame elsewhere. Potter claimed to have found evidence that Army officers allowed two other steamers to leave Vicksburg hours before *Sultana*, with no soldiers aboard. Only one officer, Capt. Frederic Speed, was court-martialed. The Army's top legal officer later reversed Speed's conviction.

Potter also found that Nathan Wintringer, the *Sultana's* chief engineer, said he knew a leak in one of the ship's boilers was not repaired properly but said nothing for fear it would keep the ship from sailing. Wintringer was never charged, even though he was required by law to ensure the steamboat's safe operation. The *Sultana's* captain, J. Cass Mason, pressured Army officers to give him as many passengers as possible and stood to be paid \$10,000 by the government for his standing-room-only haul, according to records found by Potter. Captain Mason died in the explosion. The Army never investigated the bribe allegations.

Brig. Gen. William Hoffman, the Army's chief investigator at the time, estimated the death toll at 1,238. The U. S. Customs office in Memphis put it at 1,547, a figure Potter said is generally accepted as the official estimate. Other estimates ran as high as 1,800. But Potter found records showing the *Sultana* carried about 2,300 soldiers, 100 civilian passengers and 85 crew members for a total of 2,485. Jacob Rush figured the total on board was 2,251.

Bodies of passengers rose to the Mississippi River's surface for weeks after the explosion. Because the Army kept poor records at Vicksburg, it will probably never be known for sure how many died. While several hundred survivors were pulled from the river by rescue boats, as many as 300 died within days from exposure.

Reports at the official inquisition indicated that the blast of the boiler drove boiler fragments, pipes, bricks, and machinery through the upper decks like shrapnel, killing and maiming scores of sleeping passengers. The upper decks, already sagging under the weight of the great load of passengers, crumbled when the blast ripped through the steamer's superstructure. The wreckage of these decks imprisoned hundreds, who, if they survived at all, suffered burns, lacerations, and broken limbs. Hot ash and flaming coals rained across the entire length of the vessel and the 'awful wail of hundreds of human beings burning alive in the cabin and under the fallen timbers' was heard. Survivors estimate that the entire boat was in flames within 20 minutes of the explosion.

Island soldier Jacob W. Rush testified at the April 27th Board of Inquiry and reported that he ran to the stern of the *Sultana* when the explosion occurred. When he reached the rear of the steamer, he saw the yawl being launched from the lower deck with four or five deck-hands. A woman, apparently the wife of one of the crewmen, was begging to be allowed into the yawl but could not convince the men to take her on as well. The boat made its way without her. The vessel was reported to have carried only 76 cork-filled life preservers, one yawl, and a single metal lifeboat. His story is part of the official record.