

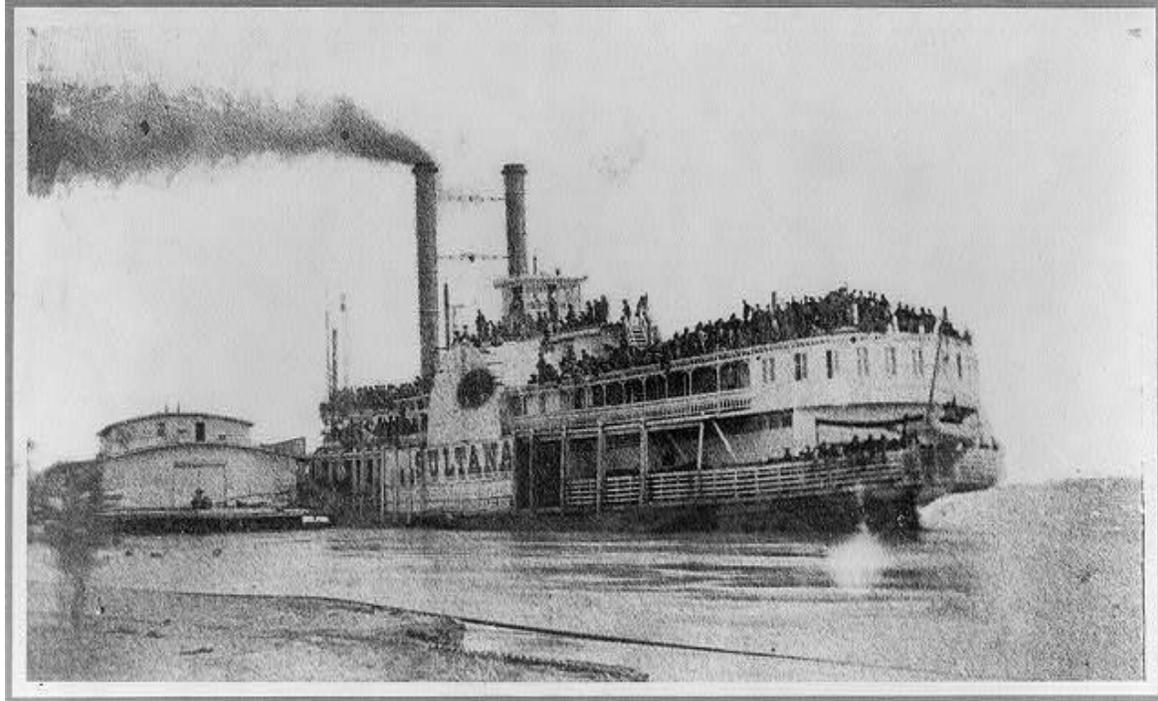
A first-hand account - The Tragedy Of The *Sultana*

Jacob Rush of the 3rd Ohio Cavalry, spent eight months imprisoned in Cahaba Prison. Like the other prisoners, his hopes were high that he would soon be going home. The prisoners were waiting final release and transport to the North and home, but that freedom would not be easily gained. Rush gave this first-hand account of an event that had surprisingly little press coverage, due to the assassination of Lincoln. He was one of the fortunate few who survived to tell the story. He wrote about his release from prison and the long, arduous and dangerous trip home in the pages of *The Islander* and he told his story in the pages of Jesse Hawes' book (*Cahaba-A Story of Captive Boys in Blue*). A blending of the two accounts forms an incredible picture of the fateful trip.

Rush wrote: "Having started last winter to write a history of my four years experience as a Soldier I gave my story up to the time we came to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

After spending some eight months in Cahawba, Ala. as a Prisoner of War, I was released and sent to Vicksburg where in company with other exchanged prisoners, I remained 20 days. We then, at 12 o'clock on the 24th of April 1865 took passage on the ill-fated Steamer *Sultana*, plying between New Orleans and Louisville. After a run of two days and nights, we arrived at Memphis on the 26th at 6 o'clock a.m. Unloading most of our cargo and taking on coal, we left for our destination which was Louisville, Ky., at half past one in the morning."

The *Sultana* was overloaded with men just released from prison before it exploded.



Hawes recalled the *Sultana* and the men who were sent aboard for transport home. "Wherever it was possible to stow away a human being within her capacious guards, men who had fought starvation and cold, hunger and heat; men who had fought vermin and filth, despondency and death, were crowded in. A large percent of her living freight were the former captives of Castle Morgan. With her decks, above and below, crowded to discomfort, with weak-bodied, pinched, and sallow-faced men, the *Sultana* steamed up the broad Mississippi. Every league of progress brought hope to her passengers: visions of a gray-haired mother whose heart has been bursting to know the fate of her boy, visions of a sister into whose eyes tears welled up at the mention of his name, came to the men and gave to them a new life." This was the hope held in the hearts of all these weary soldiers.

Rush continued his story. "About 3 o'clock I was suddenly awakened by a heavy jar and a shower of hot steam on my face. Springing to my feet I understood in a moment that the boilers of the steamer had exploded."

“At the time of the explosion of the steamer *Sultana* I was lying on what is known as the water-box, near the wheel-house on the upper deck, in company with George W. Steward, now a resident of Wellington, Kan. There seemed to be two distinct explosions. The first awakened us, and by the time we were on our feet, the hot steam was coming up through the deck, and immediately another explosion followed. Neither of us were hurt. Having been raised on Lake Erie, and being familiar with boats, I took in the situation at once...”

“Strange as it may seem there were men on board who were asleep and knew nothing of the explosion until awakened by comrades. I stopped for a moment to think what was best to do. Soon Capt. Mason, Master of the boat, appeared only partly dressed and very much excited, calling on the men to go forward and try to extinguish the fire. While trying to rally the men, the smokestacks of the steamer fell, killing many, as the men were thick as they could be on all three decks. The Capt. then begged the men to throw overboard planks, doors, tables &c., and try to save what few ladies there were on board. But out of 17 only one was saved. Her husband put a life preserver on her and fastened her little child into a life preserver chair. They floated down the river some five miles before they were picked up. The child died a few minutes after from the exposure. Her husband and several relatives who were on board were none of them heard from up to the 2nd day of the disaster.

To return to where the Captain was trying to rally the men. He soon found that his efforts were in vain as in a few minutes all was excitement and confusion. I will here state that we had on board 1,965 enlisted men and 36 commissioned officers, all of whom were paroled prisoners and had been imprisoned from six months to two years in Andersonville and Cahawba. The passengers and crew numbered some 250.

I was on the upper deck and started for the stern of the boat which I reached just as the lifeboats were thrown overboard. In 10 minutes after the explosion the boat was on fire, the flames bursting out in all directions. Another such terrible scene I never saw.”

“I started to the rear of the boat, expecting to make my escape by jumping overboard before the crowd realized the peril they were in, for I well knew that it would be a difficult matter to escape after the 2,200 people that were on board once got aroused to the situation, as I felt that nothing could be done to allay so great an excitement and confusion as would follow. As I reached the stern of the boat I saw a yawl launched from the lower deck with four or five persons in it, all of whom, I believe, were deck hands. I presume they were parties who were on watch at that time. There was a woman who begged piteously to be let into the boat, and from the conversation that took place, I think she was the wife of one of them, but they realized the situation and got away from the boat as quickly as possible and left her.

Not being able to get into the yawl, Steward and I then turned to and helped launch the life-boats from the upper deck, but as soon as a boat struck the water, crowds from each deck jumped into it, striking upon one another, and the boat was capsized. This was also true of the second boat that was launched. These boats were turned over and over, and many were drowned in trying to get into them, as every time they would turn bottom side up they would bury from 50 to 75, who were trying to climb in from the opposite side. This was kept up until the crowd had thinned out and the boats drifted off. I doubt whether any were saved in the life-boats, except possibly, a few who clung to their keels as they drifted down the river.

Steward and I kept ourselves occupied in throwing overboard such things as we could manage to tear loose from the staterooms; doors, blinds, etc, After working awhile we started for the passenger cabin to see if we could not obtain a life preserver, but found the steam had filled the cabin and fire was then breaking out near the centre of the boat, and had spread nearly to the upper deck. We then made our way to the lower deck again, and there, in company with several others, helped throw over one of the large state planks, but it had no more than struck the water before the crowd got on to it, and it was rolled over, and we concluded it was not safe to undertake to escape by that. We then got hold of a mule and tried to force it overboard, but did not succeed. The fire was then working well to the stern of the boat, and it was impossible to get the mule to go a step toward the fire.

We saw Captain Mason, master of the boat, in his shirt-sleeves and bare-headed, trying to restore order, and asking the crowd to quiet down and be patient, as he thought we would receive assistance very shortly; but to quiet the excitement under such circumstances was impossible.

Quite a number of ladies came out of the cabin, knelt upon the deck, and, resting their heads upon the rail of the stern of the boat, prayed for help. The captain tried to quiet them by saying that he thought that help would reach us soon. Of all the 17 lady passengers on board only one was saved, and several of the wives of the deck hands were also lost, which, I think, made a total of 22 ladies lost. I believe Captain Mason did all that any person could do under the circumstances. He and a majority of the officers of the boat were among the lost."

"While the battle for life was thus going on, some were praying, some swearing and others yelling 'Lie down! Fresh Fish!' &c., as done while in prison. Some were so panic stricken they made no effort to save themselves but lay down and covered their eyes with their hands [and] awaited the result as seemed to be certain, either by fire or water."

"Finding that nothing further could be done, and the flames were gradually working to the rear, and the entire boat now nearly in flames, I stepped on the after-guard and held that position until the flames drove me off. I stayed as long as I could in hopes that the crowd would be dispersed. It was almost sure death to jump while the crowd was around the boat, as hundreds were seizing anything that came within their reach and pulled others under in order to save their own lives.

Steward jumped overboard first with his clothes all on, while I undressed, being afraid that their weight would so encumber me that I might not be able to reach shore, not having entirely recovered from my wounds received nearly two years previous; then I made a leap, diving head foremost, and getting away without any one catching hold of me. Coming to the surface of the water a short distance from the boat, and getting my hair out of my face, I looked back and could see quite a number leaping from the boat at the time, and as I drifted out of sight I could still see by the light of the boat persons clinging to her.

I got hold of a small piece of board, on which I rested myself and drifted with the current, as the night was very dark and it was impossible to see which way to swim to shore. I drifted in this position for some 15 or 20 minutes, when I came upon a party who was resting upon one end of a door, the other end of which was raised out of the water. I ran against it before I saw it, and rested myself upon it, which gave me more support than the board. In this way I got along well for some distance. I tried to talk to my companion, but could not get any reply. He seemed to be hurt in some way.

All this time I could hear people calling and praying for help, while others, who were reasonably secure upon state planks, bales of hay, etc., were using their old prison slang and expressions, that one would hardly think it possible for men to use under such circumstances such as: 'Lie down and keep cool,' 'hot skillet,' 'fresh fish,' 'keep your hands on your pocketbook,' 'swim or die,' and such expressions as would only be used by men who had been for years accustomed to the hardships of severe campaigns and been inured to misfortunes of all kinds."