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Week of March 20, 2023

History Minute

Sultana

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society kbridges@southark.edu<mailto:kbridges@southark.edu>

It was the end of the Civil War, and the men in uniform hoped the danger was over and they could finally resume their lives. But in an instant, a cruel twist of fate forever ended those hopes for hundreds of people. The explosion of the steamship Sultana in 1865 was the worst maritime disaster in American History, a disaster that took the souls of hundreds on the Mississippi River between Arkansas and Tennessee. It is a story still remembered with sadness and dread to this day

Up until the railroad spread across the country, the rivers of America were the interstate highways of the time, offering relatively quick and easy access (for the time) to cities across the nation. Countless steamships would drift up and down the rivers, carrying passengers and cargo for a growing country on the move. The Mississippi River was by far the most important, with its tributaries allowing access to an expanse from the Appalachians to the Great Plains and to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Sultana was commissioned in 1863 in Ohio as a private wooden steamship and had sailed many river miles safely, mostly between St. Louis and New Orleans. It typically had a crew of 85 and was intended to carry 376 passengers. It often carried cotton and sugar but also shipped Union soldiers to positions along

It was under the command of Captain James C. Mason of St. Louis, who was also part owner. On April 21, 1865, just days after the Civil War ended, the Sultana limped into port at Vicksburg to repair a leaking boiler. The repairs were intended to only be temporary, with a small patch of thin metal over the leak. In the meantime, thousands of newly released prisoners were crowded into camps, anxious to go home. Mason made arrangements with army officers to take on board as many of the men as the ship could carry, charging the army \$5 for each enlisted man and \$10 for each officer.

The men were mostly Union soldiers, coming from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia. Desperate to return home, they flooded aboard the ship, determined to leave the horrors of the war far behind. For these Union veterans, the voyage was to be a celebration, knowing they would be home within days. On April 24, the ship left Vicksburg, headed for Cairo, Illinois. But the ship struggled to leave port, weighed down by anywhere between 2,100 and 2,400 men, with the exact numbers lost.

Many of the men had just been released from the notorious Andersonville prison camp in Georgia, and despite the cramped conditions on the ship, were relieved to be able to breathe in the fresh air as free men. The ship was under strain against the current and the weight of the passengers, but its captain was certain the Sultana would make her way to port without incident. On April 26, the ship stopped at the bustling port of Helena. Afterward, the Sultana

went on to Memphis, where it dropped off 200 passengers and a load of sugar. At midnight on April 27, the Sultana pushed forward again.

At 2 AM, just ten miles northwest of Memphis, disaster struck. The damaged boiler exploded. In an instant, a chain reaction caused two others to erupt. The explosions tore the ship apart, setting it aflame. The force of the blasts threw men into the water. Others followed, leaving the burning mass in a terrifying bid for safety. Some tried to rescue injured men from the murky depths. Some of the remains of the flaming ship continued to drift, running aground and sinking not far from Marion. The confusion and the screams echoed through the night.

As the ship sank, the waters extinguished the flames. Suddenly, the men were enveloped in blackness, struggling against the cold, inky waters around them. The screams of injured and desperate men were everywhere, until the waters claimed the screams as well. Some survivors were able to swim to shore. Less than thirty minutes after the blast, the Bostona, another steamship, saw the flames and the men in the river, and the crew worked to pull dozens of men out. Many burn victims recovered would die in the coming days from their injuries. Bodies floated along the river, some washing ashore. Frantic searches continued for days, with many ships joining in. In the end, the disaster claimed nearly 1,800 lives.

The Sultana was not the first steamboat disaster, but it was by far the worst. In 1828, the Car of Commerce sank when a boiler exploded near Osceola, killing 28. In 1832, the Brandywine caught fire while sailing along the Mississippi River, leaving at least 69 dead. The St. Joseph exploded in 1850 near the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers, leaving twenty dead. More than 200 people would die on the Miami in 1866 when a boiler explosion caused a fire on the ship near Desha County. However, few regulations regarding fire safety, quality controls on boilers, ship capacity, or life preservers existed at the time. Even the most cautious captain took a considerable risk with equipment

quality he could not guarantee with each voyage. Memorials of the victims were placed in their various hometowns in the years afterward. A handful of the remains of the Sultana were found buried in the mud of a soybean field on the Arkansas side in 1982. In 1987, the Sultana Association of Descendants and Friends was organized to educate the public about the tragedy. The association organized a temporary museum in Marion in 2015, but it is currently working with a team of community organizers and benefactors to organize a new, expansive museum about the disaster. Located in the converted 1938 Marion School Auditorium-Gymnasium building, the new museum is expected to open in 2023. The state legislature has marked April 27 as Sultana Remembrance Day.

