



The Explosion of the SS Sultana: The Deadliest Maritime Disaster in American History

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures

*Includes accounts of the explosion and sinking of the Sultana

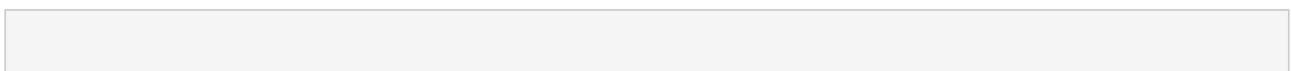
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There is a popular saying that declares “timing is everything,” and in no other field of study is that truer than in history. For instance, under normal conditions, a ship that sank with more than 2,000 passengers aboard – most of whom died – would be big news, yet today the sinking of the SS Sultana is often overlooked if not entirely forgotten. While it might have generated the type of publicity and reaction of the Johnstown Flood of 1889 or the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 under normal circumstances, the explosion and sinking of the Sultana on April 27, 1865 has become something of a historical footnote.


The irony is that the Sultana is a historical footnote because of the Civil War, but it was also intimately tied to the war. Although Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox was not technically the end of the Civil War, it took one of the last remaining Confederate armies out of the field. Furthermore, on the night of April 14, many of the Union’s hopes for the future were dashed when President Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D. C. The people of the nation quickly became a volatile mix of grief and outrage, uninterested in anything that did not relate to the death of their beloved president. In fact, just the day before the disaster, as the Sultana was sailing up the Mississippi River to her rendezvous with destiny, Union Army soldiers cornered and killed Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth. The Sultana’s chief engineer, N. Wintringer, tried to give his readers a sense of the context in which the accident took place when he wrote, “As I was chief engineer of that ill-fated steamer at the time of her explosion I thought that my recollections of that terrible calamity would be of some interest. I believe that George Oayton, one of the pilots and myself were the only officers of the boat that escaped with our lives. ... The ‘Sultana’ left Cairo on that fatal trip the 15th of April, 1865, the day after the death of President Lincoln, and as all wire communications with the south were cut off at that time, the ‘Sultana’ carried the news of his assassination and death to all points and military posts on the Mississippi river as far as New Orleans.” In short, the entire nation was in a state of chaos and too exhausted from four years of war that culminated in the death of the president to give the disaster the attention and grief it deserved.

Perhaps the cruelest irony of the disaster is that the Sultana was packed full of men who had survived every conceivable trial and tribulation of the war, from wounds and sicknesses to being prisoners. Having lost hundreds of thousands, America was almost numb to the loss of a couple of thousand more, especially when many of the dead were soldiers themselves, and in a sense, it was left for future generations to try to unravel what went wrong and to pay tribute to the men who died on that dark night.

The Explosion of the SS Sultana chronicles the story of America’s deadliest maritime disaster. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the explosion and sinking of the Sultana like never before, in no time at all.



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