



S.S. Sultana Disaster

Topic Guide for Chronicling America (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>)

Introduction

At 2 a.m. on April 27, 1865, the worst maritime disaster in American history occurred when the S.S. Sultana exploded on the Mississippi River just north of Memphis, Tennessee. The wooden steamship's boilers had been in a state of disrepair, and rather than replace the faulty equipment, hasty fixes were made. Aboard the ship were some 2,000 passengers—including over 500 from Ohio—many of whom were Union soldiers traveling home after being released from the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville. It has been estimated that over 1,700 men perished—most dying either in the explosion or by drowning in the flooded, cold waters of the Mississippi. After living in the harsh prison camp conditions, few lacked the strength to swim to shore or await rescue forces from nearby Memphis. The disaster was overshadowed by other historical events of the time, including President Abraham Lincoln's funeral train and the death of his assassin, John Wilkes Booth, the day before the explosion.

Important Dates

- February 3, 1863: S.S. Sultana is launched from the John Litherbury Ship Yard in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- 1863-1865: The ship, intended for use in the lower Mississippi cotton trade, is used by the U.S. Government for the shipment of troops and cargo during the Civil War.
- April 21, 1865: The S.S. Sultana departs from New Orleans, Louisiana for its last journey. It makes several stops, including one in Vicksburg, Mississippi, for hurried boiler repairs and to take on more passengers.
- April 27, 1865: Three of the ship's four boilers explode at 2 a.m., destroying the ship and killing most of its passengers.
- April 27, 1865: General Washburn begins the official inquiry into the disaster.
- June 9, 1866: Captain Speed found guilty of neglect in the S.S. Sultana tragedy.

Suggested Search Strategies

- Use the following terms in combination (as a phrase or an "all" word search): Sultana, boat, disaster, Memphis, explosion, survivor, investigate, investigation, trial, Speed, reunion, Steamer Sultana, Mississippi.
- Because "Sultana" is the feminine version of Sultan, always use this term in conjunction with another.
- Limit your search by date to exclude irrelevant results.
- This incident was most widely reported in Ohio newspapers (due to the number of Ohio soldiers on board) and St. Louis, Missouri, papers (because that was the ship's home port).

Sample Articles from Chronicling America

- ["The Latest News by Telegraph"](#) *Cleveland Morning Leader* (Cleveland, OH), April 29, 1865, Image 1, col. 2.
- ["Shocking Steamboat Disaster"](#) *Tiffin Weekly Tribune* (Tiffin, OH), May 4, 1865, Image 3, col. 5.
- ["The Sultana Disaster"](#) *Highland Weekly News* (Hillsboro, OH), June 1, 1865, Image 1, col. 5.
- ["The Sultana Disaster"](#) *Howard Union* (Glasgow, MO), June 15, 1865, Image 1, col. 3.
- ["Annual Reunion"](#) *Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), May 1, 1900, Image 2, col. 6.
- ["A Sultana Survivor"](#) *National Tribune* (Washington, DC), March 13, 1902, Image 3, col. 4.