

## *The Truth About the Tragedy of the Steamship*

# SULTANA

## *and the Trail of Death & Corruption That Leads Back to Abraham Lincoln*

WHAT NON-MILITARY MARITIME DISASTER CAUSED the most deaths of Americans in U.S. history? If you said the sinking of the *Titanic*, you'd be wrong. It was the destruction of the Mississippi paddlewheel steamship *Sultana*. In the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, 119 American lives were lost, but the count for the *Sultana* on April 27, 1865, is estimated at 1,800-2,400—though the true total may never be known. And, in the end, President Abraham Lincoln's cronyism and nepotism may have ultimately been responsible. But by the time the truth came out, Lincoln had been assassinated and could not be impeached for his corruption in the ensuing *Sultana* investigation and scandal.

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**By John Tiffany**

**T**he *Sultana* was 260 feet long, one of the biggest paddlewheelers of its time, 42 feet wide, weighing 1,719 tons. It was rated as able to carry 376 people. Drastically overcrowded at the time of its demise—she held about six times that number—men were literally packed like sardines on the decks. The ship carried 80-85 crewmen and an estimated 2,427 passengers, as well as some freight, including about 100 head of assorted livestock and a nine-and-a-half foot “pet” alligator in a wooden crate.

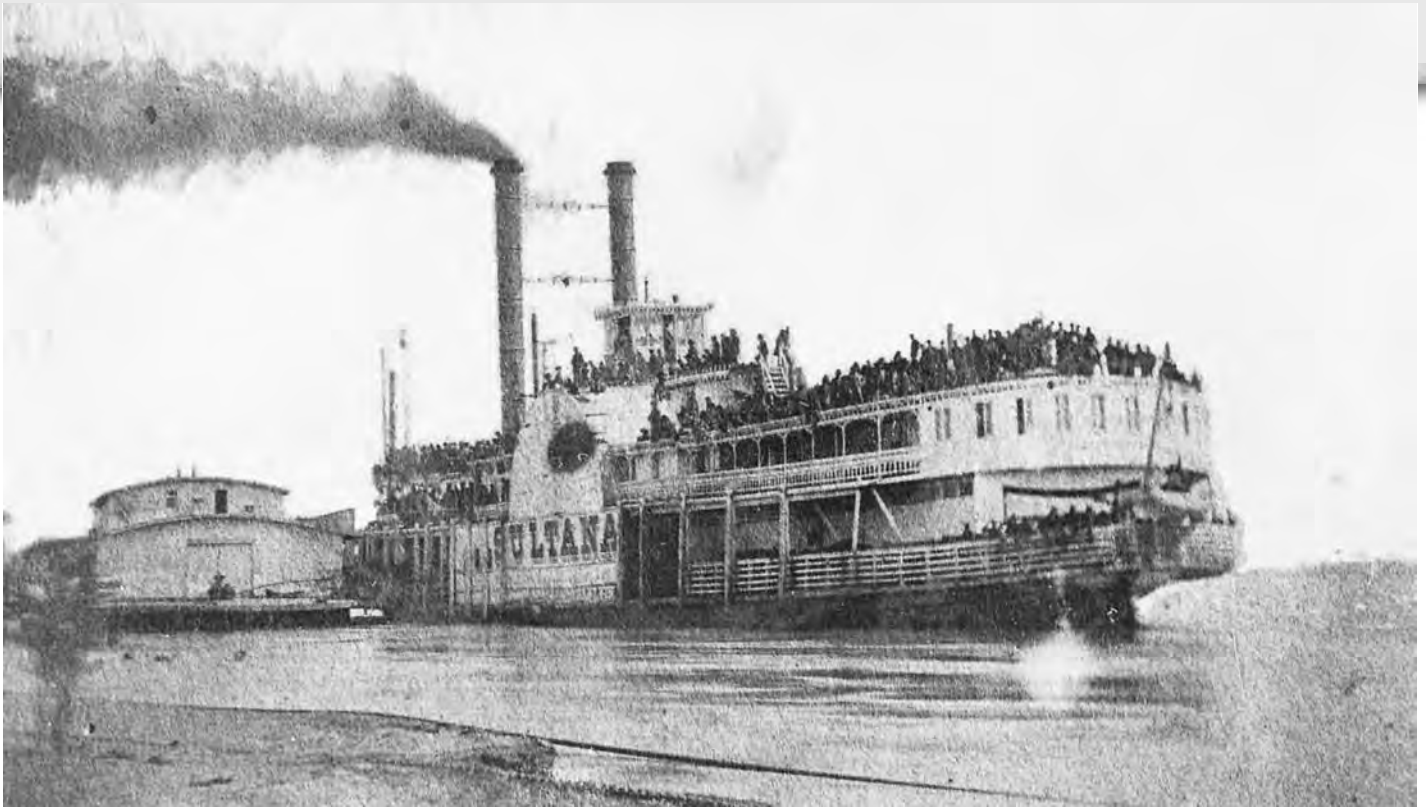
By this time, the War for Southern Independence was nearly lost, and the ship had taken in a slew of mostly

just released Yankee POWs at Vicksburg, Miss., some from the prison camp of Andersonville, but mostly from the smaller camp known as Cahaba. Many were like walking dead men—sick and with loose teeth in their jaws from malnutrition.

In addition, there were cabin passengers, including some women and children. Some regular soldiers, with rifles or muskets and bayonets, were also on board.

Initially, with the war still on, the Yankee men being released were moved to a holding camp. The idea at this point was to make an even exchange of prisoners between the North and South. However, the North did not have enough Southern prisoners for that to work out, so some other arrangement was arrived at.

By early April there were rumors that Gen. Robert E. Lee was about to surrender; the Confederate command



**This Library of Congress archive photo** shows the ill-fated steamship *Sultana* at Helena, Arkansas, just two days prior to its explosion on April 27, 1865. One can see the decks packed with people, most of them recently released Union POWs who were on their way home after enduring, in many cases, years of privation during their incarceration in Confederate prisoner of war camps.

was increasingly in disarray. The negotiations for POW release dragged on, confused and desultory.

The Yanks got new uniforms in the holding camp, tents to sleep in and the first decent rations many had seen in months or years. But since they were still technically prisoners, the Yankee command had agreed to keep them under armed guard, strange as it seems.

The first guards assigned were newly freed negro slaves, now soldiers. This nearly led to a riot, as the Yankee POWs did not cotton to being guarded by blacks. Many prisoners were just now learning about the emancipation, and many disapproved. White guards were hastily substituted, and things calmed down. Soon the men were released from the holding camp and on their way to Vicksburg. The war in the East was more or less over, and Lincoln was dead.

(President Jefferson Davis was captured on May 10. The last battle of the war would take place on June 23, the Battle of Palmito Ranch in Texas—a Confederate victory—but the last Confederate surrender would not be until Nov. 6, when the warship CSS *Shenandoah*—the

only Dixie ship to circumnavigate the globe—surrendered in Liverpool, England. U.S. President Andrew Johnson had declared the war over on August 20.)

### **SULTANA HAS BOILER TROUBLE**

About April 25, a crack was discovered in one of *Sultana*'s four boilers. To fix it properly would take three or four days—but with good money to be made from trans-

**Had it not been for the senseless intervention of President Lincoln, at least 1,800 former U.S. POWs might have made it home to see their families.**

porting POWs back to the North, and other ships competing for the business, the mechanic was told to put a temporary patch on, which would only take a day.

The U.S. taxpayers were paying \$5 apiece for every enlisted man transported, and \$10 for each officer. This was big money then. The military officers were paid a kickback of \$1.15 per person to look the other way and ignore

the severe overcrowding.

It is not known if the boiler explosion resulted from the poor patch job or from a bomb. According to a PBS television program on the subject, the patch was done properly and passed inspection. Nevertheless, some 60 ships had been destroyed by saboteurs already. Rebel saboteurs could sneak a bomb disguised as a large lump of coal aboard a ship and slip away. Eventually it would be shoveled out of the coal bin into the furnace and then explode from the heat. These bombs were known as Courtenay coal torpedoes. (Most bombs were called torpedoes at this time.)

In either case, the overloading of the ship was certainly a factor. The river at the time the *Sultana* left was swollen from recent rains and the ship was fighting up-river against the increased currents. The top-heavy loading cause the ship to lean and lurch to the left and right, sloshing the water in the boilers from side to side. When the water moved to one side of the boiler from the swaying of the ship, one side of the boiler would not be in contact with any water and thus superheat. When the ship swayed the other way, the water would then hit the overheated side of the boiler, causing some of the water to quickly turn to steam from the excessive heat of the uncooled boiler plate. If one boiler exploded it would set

off a chain reaction causing other boilers to also explode. This is one theory of how the *Sultana* exploded.

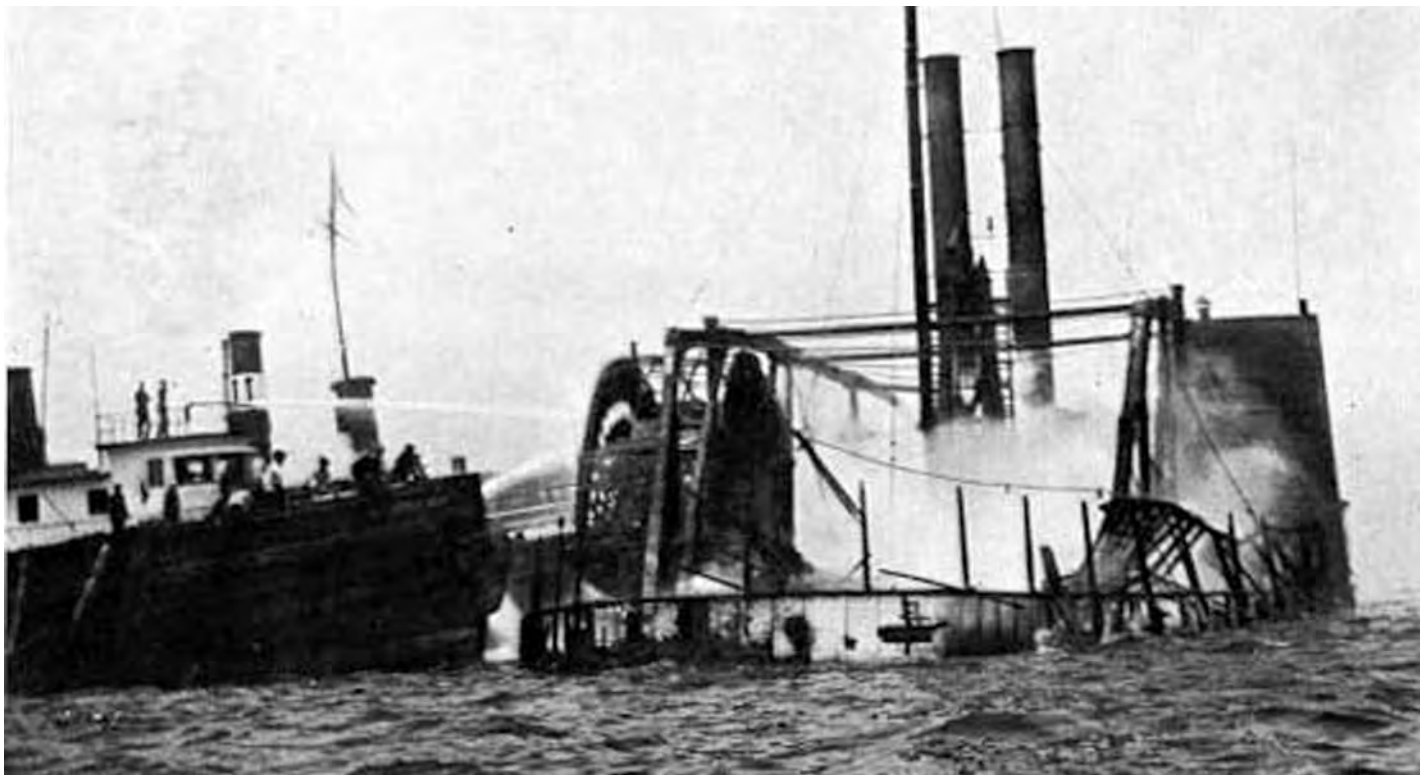
As it happened, there were two other ships that came into Vicksburg, looking to transport POWs. But after the *Sultana* was greatly overloaded, there were no prisoners for the rival ships to transport.

## THE GREED & CORRUPTION OF REUBEN HATCH

Why weren't the POWs divvied up equally among the ships as safe practice would have dictated? This is where a sleazy character named Reuben Hatch enters the scene. Hatch, a political appointee, was the chief quartermaster for the U.S. government at Vicksburg. His assistant tried to tell him the *Sultana* was dangerously overloaded and the POWs should be redistributed among the three ships, but Hatch would not listen to him.

It is not known how big a kickback Reuben was getting per POW from the captain, J. Cass Mason, but he was definitely more interested in money than safety.

Hatch had a shady past. In 1861, long before the *Sultana* disaster, he was court-martialed for overcharging the central government while keeping two sets of books. Getting wind of the impending court-martial, he threw the incriminating set of books into the river—but unfor-



Fireboats spray water on the smoldering wreck of the *Sultana*. The appalling loss of life was the result of unbridled greed.

fortunately for him the books washed up on the shore, still largely legible. Fortunately for him, his elder brother was Ozias Hatch, Illinois secretary of state—a crony and major campaign contributor to another Illinois politician named Abraham Lincoln.

Before the court-martial of Reuben could get started, Ozias wrote Lincoln a letter saying the charges were frivolous—without merit—and asking Abe to do something about it. Lincoln wrote an endorsement to the letter saying he knew Reuben, and there was nothing against his character; then Lincoln forwarded both documents to Henry Halleck, his general-in-chief and the head of the court-martial. The trial was dropped due to Lincoln's recommendation.

Then in 1863, Reuben Hatch went AWOL from the Army for three months. It is unknown what he was doing for this quarter-year, but the Army was well rid of him. All of a sudden, he showed up and not only wanted his job back but a promotion as well. Chief Quartermaster-General of the U.S. Army Montgomery Meigs refused to consider his request, considering him a traitor who had abandoned his post. Then Ozias Hatch again wrote to Abe Lincoln. Lincoln, not wanting to lose the support of this powerful Illinois campaign contributor and supporter, wrote a letter to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Thanks to the Lincoln's letter and Stanton's insistence, Reuben Hatch got his promotion.

Possibly unaware of the scandalous past of Reuben Hatch, Maj. Gen. Ulysses Grant later promoted him to lieutenant colonel in the Quartermaster Corps. Coincidentally or not, at the beginning of the war, Ozias Hatch had recommended that Grant, out of the Army at that time, be appointed by the governor of Illinois as a colonel in the state militia, which he was. Was Grant rewarding his old supporter—just as Lincoln had done—by promoting his incompetent brother?

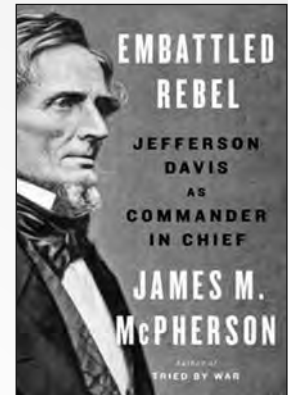
But Reuben Hatch's poor performance was glaring. In February 1865, he was brought before a military board for deficiency in his duties. Again brother Ozias interceded with Lincoln, and not only was Reuben not charged, Lincoln even recommended Reuben be promoted to full colonel. Lincoln once again interceded on behalf of a corrupt and greedy man who obviously had no business serving in the U.S. military.

## REACTION TO THE ASSASSINATION

In a quirk of fate, it was the *Sultana*, draped in black, that brought word of the death of Lincoln to the Mississippi River cities. She was making regular runs between Cairo, Illinois and New Orleans. The reaction of Southern

# Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief

History has not been kind to Jefferson Davis. His cause went down in disastrous defeat and left the South impoverished for generations. If that cause had succeeded, it would have torn the United States in two. Many Americans in Davis's own time—and in later generations—considered him an incompetent leader, if not a traitor. Not so, argues James M. McPherson. In *Embattled Rebel*, McPherson shows us that Davis might have been on the wrong side of history, but it is too easy to diminish him because of his cause's failure. In order to understand the Civil War and its outcome, it is essential to give Davis his due as a military leader and as the president of an aspiring young nation.



As president of the Confederacy, Davis devoted most of his waking hours to military strategy and operations, along with Gen. Robert E. Lee, and delegated the economic and diplomatic strategy to his subordinates. Davis was present on several battlefields with Lee and even took part in some tactical planning. Indeed, their close relationship stands as one of the great military-civilian partnerships in history.

Incidentally, Davis was gravely ill throughout much of the war, often working from home and even from his sickbed. Nonetheless, Davis shaped and articulated the principal policy of the Confederacy with clarity and force.

Most critical appraisals of Davis emphasize his choices in and management of generals rather than his strategies, but no other chief executive in American history exercised such tenacious hands-on influence in the shaping of military strategy. And while he was imprisoned for two years after the Confederacy's surrender awaiting a trial for treason that never came, and lived for another 24 years, he never once recanted the cause for which he had fought.

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Whites to the news of Lincoln's 1865 assassination was one of official condolences, public silence and private celebration. To Southerners, Honest Abe had seemed the craziest of the abolitionist madmen, a devilish persecutor who slaughtered their men and destroyed their country for no other reason than sheer spite.

One Southern lady wrote in her diary that Lincoln must have been motivated by extreme class envy. In his early years, she wrote, "Lincoln's chief occupation was thinking what death thousands—who ruled like lords when he was cutting logs—should die." But now it had all changed: "A moment more, and the man who was progressing to murder countless human beings is interrupted in his work by the shot of an assassin." (Diary, Sarah Morgan of New Orleans.)

Another diarist wrote, "All honor to J. Wilkes Booth, who has rid the world of a tyrant and made himself famous for generations." (Kate Stone of Vicksburg)

## THE DISASTER

On April 23, the *Sultana*, returning from New Orleans, heading up the flooded river, stopped at Vicksburg, carrying a full complement of cargo and passengers. She lay over for a day while one of those testy boilers was patched again—"a routine procedure for steamboats on the river." (Sandlin, Lee, *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 2010) *Sultana's* boilers had already been patched twice that spring. Meanwhile, arrangements were made for her to carry a huge number of Union POWs upriver to Cairo.

They were in pitiful, skeletal shape. Some couldn't walk and had to be dragged on pallets by their mates. The Cahaba Camp, where most had been held, was designed to hold 500 prisoners and at the end held more than 3,000; the only water was from a stream that doubled as a cesspool.

The men began to board the *Sultana*—"driven on like so many hogs," a survivor recalled. And more and more and more, till it was standing room only, and the ship carried six times its capacity. Some of the crew were heard to say it would be a miracle if the ship ever made it to Cairo. The boat made sluggish progress against the debris-choked strong currents; in places the river was flooding five miles on either side of its banks, and land was out of sight. Bushes seemed to poke out of the river beyond the flooded levies—in reality the tops of sunken trees. The water was nearly as cold as ice. It was overcast with scattered rain; the Moon was new and the river dark. Everything was pitch black as the ship struggled

upstream about seven or eight miles above Memphis at 2 a.m. God only knows how the pilots knew which way to steer, with the river proper buried under another 20 feet or so of water.

Suddenly a boiler blew up; then two more. Hundreds of men sleeping near the boilers were killed instantly, scalded and torn limb from limb and body from head. Men outside the blast hole were buried alive in body parts.

Hot coals were flung everywhere, starting fires all over the wooden ship. Soon they were raging out of control, and the crowd surged to and fro, trying to escape the flames, and in the process those near the edge of the boat were forced into the water, whether they could swim or not. The railings and anything else that could float were torn off and cast overboard. At least people could cling to something that could give them hope of survival in the frigid water.

The ship carried only two lifeboats and 76 flotation belts, and the struggle for possession of these was murderous, both on board and in the water. Drowning men grabbed whatever they could, dragging others down with them.

One woman fought savagely with two soldiers over a life belt she was trying to put on her child. She succeeded in fending them off, but in her panic put it on incorrectly, and when she dropped the boy in the water, he helplessly rolled over head down and drowned.

Another lady could be called the saint of the *Sultana*. The woman, still on board, amid all the pandemonium, began calling to those struggling in the water to remain calm. They were destroying one another and themselves by their wild actions. Pennsylvanian soldier Chester Berry, looking up from the water, saw and heard her talking to them:

... urging them to be men and finally succeeded in getting them quieted down, clinging to the ropes and chains that hung over the bow of the boat. The flames now began to lap around her with their fiery flames. The men pleaded and urged her to jump into the water and thus save herself, but she refused, saying, "I might lose my presence of mind and be the means of the death of some of you." And so, rather than run the risk of becoming the cause of the death of a single person, she folded her arms quietly over her bosom and burned, a voluntary martyr to the men she had so lately quieted.

The ship was drifting out of the channel and into the shallows of the Arkansas side. The fires had burned nearly to the waterline, and the ship had to be abandoned by those still aboard. Michigan man Commodore Smith, who had been a POW at Libby Prison, recalled that day



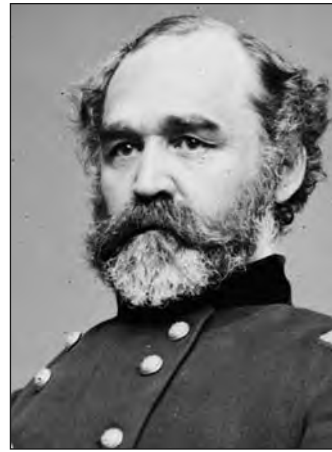
**OZIAS HATCH**

Intervened for greedy brother.



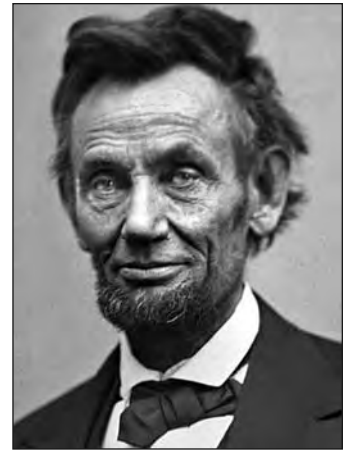
**J. CASS MASON**

Money-hungry captain.



**MONTGOMERY MEIGS**

Tried to do what was right.



**ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

Ultimately responsible.

as the hardest day of his life. [See page 11.—Ed.]

Finally the ship began to sink, the fires sputtering out, and this added to the terror of the swimmers. The fire had been their only source of light, and hope vanished along with the light. Plunged into complete darkness, those able to swim could not tell which way to go to seek the shore or some semi-submerged treetop or roof. Some did at last reach dry land—only to be shot at by patrolling soldiers who thought they were Confederate infiltrators. Most of those still alive, however, were carried down the river along with the corpses and debris. Among them a new terror was spreading: fear of the pet alligator that had been carried on board the *Sultana* in a crate. Some soldiers became somehow convinced they had glimpsed the creature and were driven into a suicidal panic. A swimming horse rested his snout on a log some men were clinging to; mistaking it for the reptile, they all dove away into the swirling water.

Little did they know the alligator was not a threat. A soldier named William Lugenbeal had earlier been searching for some flotsam to throw overboard that he could cling to, but nearly everything was gone already. He came across the alligator crate, opened it and bayoneted the alligator three times. He lugged the crate to the bow, threw it overboard and jumped in beside it and clung to it for dear life. He recalled: “When a man would get close enough I would kick him off, then turn and kick someone else to keep them from getting hold of me. They would call out, ‘Don’t kick me . . . I am drowning!’ But if they had got hold of me we would both have drowned.”

Over the next several hours, rescuers took some 700 people alive out of the river. About 200 of them would die over the next few days.

Aside from those rescued, only a few of the wreck’s dead were ever recovered. The rest ended up buried in

the river mud or consumed by carrion eaters such as the alligators of the lower valley.

The *Sultana* herself—or what was left of her—was buried in a channel about four miles north of Memphis. The river changed course over the years and the wreck wound up beneath an Arkansas soybean field, some 32 feet down, two miles from the present location of the river.

The burnt wreck, if indeed it is the *Sultana*, was found in 1982 by a local archeological expedition led by Memphis attorney Jerry Potter.

### **HATCH GETS OFF SCOT-FREE**

The loss of the *Sultana* got little attention from the press, especially in the East, which cared little about the West. People were still preoccupied with the death of Lincoln.

There were three commissions that looked into the disaster, the main one being headed by Illinois Republican Rep. Elihu Washbourne. Reuben Hatch, who by now must have felt he was above the law, ignored three subpoenas, and never testified before Congress and was never prosecuted. He died in 1871, age 53. Evidently corruption pays. In the end, much of the blame for the disaster can be laid at the feet of Abraham Lincoln. Had he not insisted on coming to the defense of a man many of his subordinates had wanted to court-martial on various occasions, Hatch would not have been in a position to use his authority to line his pockets by endangering the lives of thousands due to his insatiable greed. But politician Oziath Hatch bears a burden of blame as well. His brother was a corrupt and slothful man, and he should have realized that Reuben was a dangerous character and not worth saving from court martial.

## WAS IT A BOMB?

We may never know whether the explosion on the *Sultana* was just due to a badly patched boiler and overloading, or if there was actually a bomb planted on board. However, there were a number of professional saboteurs on the river, who were known as the Confederate boat burners. Most of the official papers of the Confederate Secret Service (CSS) were burned by Secretary of State Judah Benjamin just before the government evacuated Richmond, Virginia, so it is impossible to know how many, or which, ships were attacked using coal torpedoes.

Robert Loudon, a former agent of the CSS and a known boat burner, claimed years later that he had used a coal torpedo to sink the *Sultana*. In addition to Loudon's confession, there is considerable concrete evidence indicating he had the motive, means and opportunity to commit the act of planting the bomb in the *Sultana's* coal bin. There was no legal action that could be taken against Loudon when he made his confession—he had a pardon! He was not, as one prominent

online encyclopedia states, on his deathbed, but he was drunk in a bar, which loosened his tongue. It is interesting that very shortly after making his statement of confession to another bar patron, Loudon left St. Louis and never returned. It may be that he feared he would be lynched.

It is highly credible Loudon was telling the truth.

Blowing up riverboats and other ships was old hat to rebel saboteurs. On the Mississippi alone, 60 steamboats had been destroyed by dedicated Confederate agents. Loudon had sneaked on and off numberless boats during the war, despite being a wanted man with a price on his head. He was good at what he did, a master of disguises. Getting aboard the *Sultana* and planting a coal bomb would not have been the most difficult thing he achieved in his career.

There were plenty of Confederate agents working with Loudon in the Memphis area. One, a Mr. Keatona, owned a boat supply store near the wharf. So any help Loudon might have needed to do the job was at his disposal. It is known Loudon destroyed the *Ruth*, another steamship, which was carrying \$2.6 million at the time and had con-

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siderably tighter security than the *Sultana*.

Gen. Grant was nearly killed on Aug. 9, 1864 at City Point, Virginia by a Confederate bombing. The agents planted their bombs, slipped out and got away—this at Grant’s headquarters, guarded by the entire Army of the Potomac. That’s how good the CSS saboteurs were. [See sidebar.—Ed.]

There is also the testimony of *Sultana* first mate William Rowberry, quoted in *The Missouri Republican*, April 29, 1865. The reporter says: “I conversed with the first mate of the ill-fated steamer, Wm. Rowberry—who in company with six others clung to a plank, from which five fell off before they were drowned; and he thinks there must have been some infernal machine put in the coal, as the boat, at the time, was running very steady, and so little steam on that an explosion was impossible.”

All in all, with the statements of Louden and Rowberry and other evidence, it appears more than likely that a bomb, rather than negligence in a repair job, caused the fatal explosion on the *Sultana*. We will never know 100% for certain. But in any case, an equally heinous crime was the gross overloading of the ship, which can be laid at the feet of corrupt politicians, with the man in the Oval Office ultimately responsible. ♦

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# Union Soldiers Forced to Throw Mates Overboard

The following account of the aftermath of the explosion of the *Sultana* was written by Commodore Smith, a Union soldier from Michigan who had been interned at Libby Prison:

“The wounded begged us to throw them overboard, choosing to drown instead of being roasted to death. While our hearts went out in sympathy for our suffering and dying comrades, we performed our sad but solemn duty. I say “we,” because there were others besides myself who were fortunate enough not to be hurt or blown overboard by the explosion, and they too were doing all they could to alleviate the sufferings of their unfortunate comrades. We waited hoping, but in vain, to be rescued from the burning wreck.



Commodore Smith

“When at length the last shadow of hope had expired, and we were forced to leave the burning boat and try our luck in the seething, foaming, cold and turbulent waters of the mighty Mississippi, and this too at about two o’clock in the morning and almost total darkness prevailing, except the light from the burning wreck, we proceeded to perform carefully, but hurriedly, the most heartrending task that human beings could be called upon to perform—that of throwing overboard into the jaws of certain death by drowning those comrades who were unable on account of broken bones and limbs to help themselves. Some were so badly scalded by the hot water and steam from the exploded boiler that the flesh was falling from their bones.

“Those comrades who were doubly endeared to us through mutual suffering and starvation while we were penned up in the rebel hellholes, or so-called Confederate prisons, and who instead of throwing them thus overboard, we were wanting to render every kindness to, dress their wounds and soothe their sufferings. But, alas! This was impossible, the only alternative was to toss them overboard.” ♦