



October 2022

License Plate Travels to the Sultana Disaster Site



These battlefield supporters traveled to Marion, Arkansas to the site of the Sultana Disaster. The Sultana was a Civil War era, paddlewheel steamboat whose destruction in an explosion on April 27, 1865 occurred when three of the boat's boilers exploded and the Sultana sank just north of Marion, Arkansas.



Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association Board and members were joined by Judge John Fogleman, historian and President of the Sultana Historical Preservation Society, and Jerry Potter, author of *Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster*, for a tour of the site where the Sultana, a Civil War-era paddle-wheel steamboat, exploded and burned on the Mississippi River. The West Tennessee Three Star Preservation tour was well attended. The tour began at the actual site where the Sultana exploded and burned on the Mississippi River, (*photo on the right*), then ended with a tour of the Sultana Disaster Museum, (*photo on the left*).



As part of the West Tennessee Three Star Preservation tour, President Anthony Hodges was pleased to present a preservation grant for \$750.00 to Judge John Fogleman, President of the Sultana Historical Preservation Society on behalf of the Board and members of the Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association. This grant will assist with preservation and interpretation of the new Sultana Disaster Museum.

The Sultana Disaster

At 2:00 a.m. on April 27, 1865, the magnificent side-wheeler riverboat Sultana was struggling against the surging current of the Mississippi River eight miles north of Memphis. The weather was rainy and chilly, and the boat was grossly overloaded. Suddenly one of the boilers exploded, triggering the worst inland marine disaster in U.S. history.

The initial impact ripped the vessel in half, igniting flames, releasing scalding steam, and instantly killing or mortally wounding hundreds of sleeping passengers as well as a number of stock animals. Within seconds, bodies and body parts along with metal fragments from the boilers, splintered wood, and other debris rained down on the boat and into the water. As the flames spread, those who survived the initial explosion began jumping overboard in the false belief that they were near the shore. Unfortunately, the river was at flood and the Sultana near mid-channel at a distance of more than four miles to either bank. With no lifeboats and little in the way of safety equipment, panicky passengers resorted to ripping wooden planks and other buoyant objects from the boat before jumping into the dark and fast-moving water. Meanwhile, the flames cast an eerie glow into the night and onto the mass of live and dead humanity thrashing or bobbing about the sinking boat. Chaos and panic ensued as those in the water either tried to help one another or competed for handholds on every available piece of floating debris.

The first rescue craft, the *Bostonia No. 2*, was ninety minutes away when her crew spotted the glow of the Sultana pyre in the night sky. As they approached the scene, the crew of the *Bostonia* threw bales of hay and anything else that would float to the struggling survivors. With the approach of dawn, other craft arrived and survivors were transported to shelters and hospitals in Memphis. The dead were retrieved from the water, and many were later buried in mass graves in Memphis.

The Sultana was licensed to carry 356 passengers and crew, but on this occasion the boat may have been carrying as many as 2,485. Exact figures were never established and are still controversial. Most of those on board were Union prisoners of war from Andersonville, Georgia, and Cahaba, Alabama, homeward bound after the end of the Civil War. Among them were a number of East Tennesseans from Blount, Claiborne, Hancock, Knox, Sevier, and Union Counties. Estimates of the number of dead range from a low of 1,450 to as high as 1,900. In terms of maritime disasters, the estimated death toll exceeded that of the ocean liner Titanic, which sank in the North Atlantic in 1912.

Stories about the disaster quickly faded from contemporary newspapers, leading some to suspect a cover-up by the War Department. However, it is more likely that the end of the war, economic problems, and the recent assassination of Abraham Lincoln account for the public's brief interest in the disaster.

A monument erected by the survivors to the memory of the East Tennessee victims of the Sultana disaster stands in the Mount Olive Cemetery in Knoxville. Inscribed on the monument is a modest tribute to the brave Tennesseans who suffered the toils of war and almost made it home.



The Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association preserves and interprets Tennessee's Civil War Battlefields and their contributing landscapes for present and future generations.

Become a member: tcwpa.org/join Make a donation: tcwpa.org/donate [Purchase a license plate](#)



Copyright © 2022 Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association, All rights reserved.