

Sultana Disaster Anniversary

Sultana was a Mississippi River side-wheel steamboat. On April 27, 1865, the boat exploded in the worst maritime disaster in United States history. She was designed with a capacity of only 376 passengers, but she was carrying 2,155 when three of the boat's four boilers exploded and she burned to the waterline and sank near Memphis, Tennessee, killing 1,192 passengers. This disaster was overshadowed in the press by other events, most particularly the killing on the previous day of President Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth.

The wooden steamboat was constructed in 1863 by the John Litherbury Boatyard in Cincinnati, intended for the lower Mississippi cotton trade. The steamer registered 1,719 tons and normally carried a crew of 85. For two years, she ran a regular route between St. Louis and New Orleans, frequently commissioned to carry troops.

Near 2:00 A.M. on April 27, 1865, when Sultana was just seven miles north of Memphis, her boilers suddenly exploded. First one boiler exploded, followed a split second later by two more. The cause of the explosion was too much pressure and low water in the boilers. There was reason to believe allowable working steam pressure was exceeded in an attempt to overcome the spring river current. The enormous explosion of steam came from the top, rear of the boilers and went upward at a 45-degree angle, tearing through the crowded decks above, and completely demolishing the pilothouse. Without a pilot to steer the boat, Sultana became a drifting, floating hulk. The terrific explosion flung some of the passengers on deck into the water and destroyed a large section of the boat. The twin smokestacks toppled over, one backwards into the blasted hole, and one forward onto the crowded forward section of the upper deck. The forward part of the upper decks collapsed into the exposed furnace boxes, shoving kindling into the open fire boxes which soon caught fire and turned the remaining

superstructure into an inferno. Survivors of the explosion panicked and raced for the safety of the water—but in their weakened condition soon ran out of strength—and began to cling to each other. Whole groups went down together. (Source: Wikipedia)