The Frederic Speed Story

-by Pam Newhouse

Only one person was ever officially tried for the Sultana disaster of April 27, 1865. That man was Captain Frederic Speed. The detailed reasons why are ably laid out in Jerry O. Potter's book, The Sultana Tragedy, and Gene Eric Salecker's work, Disaster on the Mississippi. The purpose then, of this article is to explore who Frederic Speed was, where he came from, and what he did after the war.

The Speeds were educated and resourceful people. The family traces its ancestry back to one John Speed, born in the Cheshire area of England in 1552, one year before the birth of William Shakespeare. John was six when Queen Elizabeth came to the throne, and she reigned for most of his lifetime. He greatly admired her and wrote much about her.

John was a respected scholar, his life's work culminating in a history of England, entitled "The Theater of the Empire of Great Britaine," which included maps of England, Scotland and Ireland. He also wrote "The Tables of Scripture Genealogy" which were published in the first edition of King James' translation of the Bible.

John had numerous children who were all educated at Oxford. A son and grandson both were doctors of medicine as well as writers. A grandson, James, emigrated to America in 1695 at age sixteen. He married in Virginia and he and his wife had four sons. His son John (great great great grandfather of Frederic Speed) was one of the wealthiest and influential men in Virginia during his lifetime (1714-1785) and was a pillar of the Episcopal Church. John had 11 children, and upon his death, the surviving nine each received a considerable inheritance.

One of John's sons, Henry (1742-1818) was also a Virginian until he moved his family to the state of New York (Tompkins County) to a place in the wilderness which he named Speedville. He had inherited land and slaves from his father, and he took the slaves with the family to New York in 1805.

The third son of Henry was John James Speed (Frederic Speed's grandfather), who was born in Virginia but moved to Speedville, New York with father, mother, and siblings in 1803. He was a postmaster there for many years before he first moved to Detroit, and then to Maine, where he died at age 82.

Frederic Speed's father, Colonel John James Speed was, by all accounts, a remarkable man. He was born in 1803 about the time his father and grandfather moved to New York. He was a land speculator, an entrepreneur and businessman, connected with one of the largest woolen mills then in America at Ithaca, New York.

In 1832 he was elected member of the legislature of New York. However, he also was fascinated with chemistry and mechanics and in 1846 he and an associate, Ezra Cornell (founder of Cornell University), established the telegraph system in New York. At this time he became president of the Western Telegraph Company and moved his family to Detroit, where he was manager of the telegraph line between Buffalo, New York and Chicago.

In 1860 he moved his family to Portland, Maine where he established an independent telegraph line from Portland to Washington City. At the time of his death in 1867 he was President of a railway company that manufactured railway iron. A newspaper article noted that he had been "a man of remarkable mental powers, intense enthusiasm, genial affections, and incorruptible integrity."

His son Frederic Speed was born in 1841 in New York, but at age five had moved with this family to Detroit, where his father oversaw the Buffalo-Chicago telegraph line. (Frederic must have appreciated his Detroit upbringing as evidenced in a portion of a letter he wrote to his father in 1865 saying that he didn't think living in Mobile, Alabama would be as pleasant as living in Detroit.)

In 1860 he moved to Portland with his parents in 1861 enlisted in the army as a private soldier, after raising the first company from Maine for the Union army. He served with the 5th Maine Infantry at First Bull Run and the siege of Port Hudson. He later advanced to the adjutancy of the 13th Maine Infantry and by late 1862 was promoted to Captain and assistant adjutant general of volunteers. In 1865 he became an
assistant adjutant general for the Department of Mississippi and joined the staff of General Dana in Vicksburg. This set the stage for his involvement in one of the greatest tragedies of our country.

Frederic Speed was a prolific and eloquent letter writer and wrote many letters home to his family in Maine during the days before, during, and after the Sultana disaster, while awaiting his Court Martial for his part in this affair.

On March 29, 1865 he wrote his sister Anna that his duties "are not very arduous here, indeed, all I have to complain of is that there is not enough to keep one occupied". He mentioned that "Vicksburg is a very entertaining place, I board in a rebel family with three daughters, one married to a rebel officer.....the 'old hen' is a reb too- I sleep in a reb house and my office is in a most beautiful reb place."

On April 4 he wrote to his father, telling him of his intention to go into the ice business after the war, saying that "there is no doubt that $21 a ton can be realized for ice in New Orleans." He then stated that 11,000 Union newly released prisoners from Andersonville and Cahaba will be sent to Vicksburg and thence northward, and that "3,000 have arrived so far - those from Cahaba are hale and hearty - those from Andersonville are more dead than alive. Four hundred were sent to St. Louis on Sunday who were little better than dead and indeed some did die before the boat got away." He finishes the letter by saying that he "dislikes to have to fight the ten thousand cotton speculators and other thieves who are calling General Dana all sorts of bad names."

Speed was feeling exhilarated as the end of the war was celebrated in Vicksburg by Union troops on April 14. He wrote, "A few of us must go to Mexico and drive the French out and if John Bull don't keep civil we must annex Canada so as to keep him at a safe distance."

On April 28, one day after the Sultana disaster, Speed wrote a very long letter home to his sister Lotty. Somehow, he must not have yet heard about the explosion of the Sultana the night before, because he makes no mention of it. Instead, he wrote at great length about the tragedy of the Lincoln assassination and of the "tasteful" mourning decorations he put up at army Headquarters: "I trimmed the entrance to Headquarters as handsomely as I could - many say that it is the most beautiful and appropriate of any in the city." He ends by saying that the slanderers still continue to spread lies about Gen. Dana but "...I feel that he is right and am determined to stick by him come what will." He added prophetically, "The next thing I expect to hear will be my own name coupled with some great lie, but thank God my record is clear - Do you wonder I am tired and anxious for the war to end, if for no other than personal motives."

On June 27 he said he "cannot refer to the Sultana affair without feelings of sadness and I fear anger sometimes." But "the delay (in winding up the investigations) has done no harm as I should have not had nearly as good business chances open to me as I now have." He chides his family for not writing more often, because he needs "good comforting letters since the terrible accident to the Sultana."

On September 17 Speed's letters to his father are now full of thoughts about his upcoming Court Martial: "I arrived here last evening and have ascertained that I am to be tried by a General Court Martial on account of the part I played in the Sultana disaster - I do not fear the result...The charges are serious and much time must be consumed in the trial, a and I fear not a little money. I am glad to observe that all who have any acquaintance with the case are on my side. General Slocomb who left last night spoke very confidently as to the result as indeed everyone does - I have not yet been served with a copy of the charges but have seen a memorandum to them and therefore know that they will be very strongly drawn and, altho easily disapproved, yet of a nature too serious to tolerate any mistake on the part of the defence...Please be good enough to prepare for and anticipate some drafts which I must draw on you shortly." And: "...everyone (who has read all the evidence of the impending Court Martial) told me I would be acquitted - everyone says this, but the order from Mr. Stanton is to try everyone implicated in the matter and the Judge Advocate thinks that he can make a great thing for himself...and to take advantage of the ample order of Mr. S. to make it a Wirt* trial, if possible."

On September 22 Speed wrote a very flowery letter to his mother: "I had

* Some of these letters are collected in the Clements Library at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, MI

* CSA Commandant of Andersonville Prison
hoped to spend this day with you but the Great Captain above has been pleased to bring a great trial upon me and alas I fear upon mine, which has separated us at least, for a season. ... God only knows how gladly would I have this cup turned from my lips, if it could be done with honor, but as the issue stands we must abide by it, as best we may. I only ask that the charges shall be fairly put and a competent court appointed, which I have no good reason to doubt will be the case, altho' the charges, so far as determined upon, are unjust and not according to good sense, and perhaps, malice has its share in their composition. However, we will not complain, but look to God for the victory, praying that as we do not fear to stand before earthly courts so shall we not fear the arraignment before that Most High and Mighty Judge Eternal, when each poor mortal soul shall stand forth to enter his account of the deeds done in the field.

On the same day he also wrote his father: "No progress has yet been made in my trial, indeed the charges have not been determined upon as yet but it is certain that they will be as strong as the Judge Advocate dares to make them. It only makes my defence the more elaborate and seems to cater to the public feeling which is making the Wertz (sic) trial so attractive to the class of men who delight in murder trials. And you know that it is easier to charge than to disapprove. (The defense lawyer) thinks there is no possibility of a conviction and that all the fear I need have is the newspaper comments which will be made before the trial, upon the charges."

On January 9, 1866 Frederic Speed's Court Martial began in Vicksburg.* On May 29th, the defense rested its case without ever putting Speed on the witness stand. The verdict was announced June 5: Guilty on all charges. The court sentenced Speed to dismissal from the service and the verdict was forwarded for review to Brig. Gen. Joseph Holt, Judge Advocate General of the Army. Judge Holt, in a surprising reversal of the court's decision, cleared Speed of all charges made against him, writing: "Terrible as was the disaster to the Sultana, there is no evidence that it was caused by the overcrowding of her decks, and it is therefore difficult to say upon whom the responsibility for the loss of 1,100 lives should rest. The engineer testifies that he considered the boilers well and sufficiently repaired, but his criminality in risking the lives of so many men, knowing, as he did, the condition of his boat, was great and without palliation. Whoever should be regarded as meriting punishment for his connection with this event, it is believed that is not Captain Speed."

* see the Potter and Salecker books for details of this trial.


Holt recommended that Speed "be publicly exonerated from the charges which have been made against his character as an officer." Speed was therefore honorably discharged from the army on September 1, 1866.

True to his plans, he remained in Vicksburg and pursued business projects until 1868 as well as studying law. He was admitted to the bar in 1868, and by 1869 he was a Judge. He pursued his legal career until 1880 when he purchased 69 acres on the southern edge of Vicksburg, which he opened as a suburb known as "Speed's Addition" which became known as "one of the most handsome residential sections of the city". From that time forward Speed concentrated on real estate and real estate law.

In 1871 he married Esther Adele Hillyer, the daughter of a distinguished Mississippi citizen and editor prior to the war. They had five children, and some of their descendants still live in Mississippi today.

Frederic Speed was said to have been "fortunately endowed with the gift of oratory and a facile pen" and at the time of his death was "one of the most well-known and beloved citizens in Vicksburg."

He was very active in the Episcopalian Church and Masonry. Hundreds attended his funeral which "started at the Speed residence on Bowmar Avenue, headed by a brass band, and proceeded to Christ Church" with uniformed Masons "following in automobiles and carriages."

No mention of the role he played in the Sultana drama was made in two lengthy newspaper articles written about his passing. But, ironically, it seems he was unintentionally linked to the Sultana disaster by the title of the article on the front page of the Vicksburg Evening Post. It read: "Judge Speed Crosses the Dark River."
"Thinking Back," by Mary McAlister

When my husband Bob and I moved into our home my Mother, Martha Leslie Simmons, gave us a fireplace set that included a poker, shovel and dog-irons that my Great Grandfather John Leslie (Sultana survivor; 3rd TN Cav.) had made. They are simple but effective tools. When I heard someone trying to break into my home through the sliding glass door, I got the poker to use as a weapon and I felt very brave. The ends of the dog-irons were worn off when I received them and Mother gave me two hand made bricks to use to hold them up. Bob found a blacksmith a few months ago and surprised me with the repair of the dog-irons. It is a miracle they are still in the family and were not melted down during World War II. During that war the community would use the relics come from the large personal collection of one of the other men, which he collected after the war. He got word that a man would be by to collect scrap iron for the war effort. Dad would gather up whatever we had and put it out by the road. After he left for work, Mother would retrieve the pieces made by her grandfather and hide them. Because of her efforts the set has survived.

The fireplace set originally included a popcorn popper. It had a long iron handle and had a flop-down top and was made of thick wire and had a solid iron bottom. I think it went for the war effort but I remember it well. On winter evenings when neighbors gathered to tell ghost stories or play Rook, Mother would pop the corn at the fireplace for us.

Grandpa John (Leslie) lived on a beautiful farm. He did all of the blacksmith work for the farm. His son, Ray Leslie, also had a blacksmith shop. It was located in one side of his garage and he used his Dad's supplies. He would let me pump the bellows while he was making horseshoes.

- MARY SIMMONS McALISTER, Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Three Friends; Three Neighbors

If you're ever going out for a weekend drive in the southeast part of Michigan you may want to wander over to the little town of Waldron, right down on the Ohio line, just west of US-127, in Hillsdale County Michigan. As you come into the town from the east on Broom Road you will come to the Waldron Cemetery, final resting place of three Sultana survivors. All three were from the Wright Township (Waldron) area. All three enlisted in the 18th MI Inf. All three were on the Sultana. All three survived and returned to South Wright (Waldron's name before it was changed.) All three lived the rest of their lives there and raised families. All three died and were buried there. If my memory is right, Nathaniel Fogelsong and Samuel Stubberfield's graves are along the east fence in the southeast corner of the cemetery. Christian Abbaduska's grave is in the next part over and a little ways more toward the center; it's a bigger stone and easier to find. (Both Stubberfield and Abbaduska were in Company F; Fogelsong was in Co. A. - Ed.)

-BILL NEWCOMER, Gr Gr Grandnephew of Pvt. Wesley Lee, 102nd OH Inf., Co. A, Sultana survivor.

Civil War Exhibit on Display in Knoxville

Those coming to the Annual Reunion might want to take the time to visit the East Tennessee Historical Museum (600 Market St., Knoxville) to see an important exhibit, "Four Horsemen" War Within a War, Tennessee 1861-1865." Fred Brown, Knoxville News-Sentinel staff writer and Sultana Reunion attendee writes: "The exhibit, with wonderful new era artifacts and newly commissioned wall panels, will give viewers a glimpse of the Civil War through the eyes of four East Tennessee Union Cavalrymen, three officers and one sergeant." (from the 1st, 3rd 4th and 8th TN Cavalries. All but the 1st were represented by men on the Sultana). "What makes the show so unusual is that it has artifacts that were carried into battle by the calvalrymen....One of the more striking parts of the exhibit is the photo album kept by one of the officers, which he updated where ever he went." Many of the relics come from the large personal collection of one of the other men, which he collected after the war.

-MARY McALISTER

Three Neighbors

Waldron Cemetery, final resting place of three Sultana survivors. All three were from the Wright Township (Waldron) area. All three enlisted in the 18th MI Inf. All three were on the Sultana. All three survived and returned to South Wright (Waldron's name before it was changed.) All three lived the rest of their lives there and raised families. All three died and were buried there. If my memory is right, Nathaniel Fogelsong and Samuel Stubberfield's graves are along the east fence in the southeast corner of the cemetery. Christian Abbaduska's grave is in the next part over and a little ways more toward the center; it's a bigger stone and easier to find. (Both Stubberfield and Abbaduska were in Company F; Fogelsong was in Co. A. - Ed.)

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Information Wanted: Can you help?

Does anyone know who the parents of JOHN H. CAMPBELL, (3rd TN Cav, Co. A) were? John was the blacksmith of Captain Goddard's company and lived in Maryville, TN at the time he enlisted. According to his pension papers, he was born in Knoxville. Descendants have done all they know to do but have had no luck in tracing his parents. Thanks! Please contact me if you can help.

-Joan Gibson, 7518 La Barrington Blvd., Powell, TN 73849

All Back Issues of The Sultana Remembered Now Available

I get many request for back issues of this newsletter, and until now have not had reprints of all issues. However, they are now all available and are listed on the following two pages. Ordering information is at the top of the first page. Please remember to make your checks or money orders payable to me, Pam Newhouse, and not "The Sultana Remembered" or "The Sultana Association."

For those of you coming to the reunion in Knoxville, I will have all the newsletters there for sale. Of course, when you buy them there, you pay no postage and handling charges.

When ordering by mail be sure to tell me how many of which issue you want and enclose your payment.

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Our annual reunion is almost here! As we have for the last few years, we will first meet at 11 AM at the 1916 Sultana monument in the cemetery next to Mt. Olive Baptist Church and have a short ceremony there. At least one more name of a Tennessee Sultana soldier will have been added to the monument. Please contact Norman Shaw immediately (423) 558-0331, work number) if the name of your Tennessee Sultana ancestor is NOT on the monument. The charge to have a name added is reasonable.

At noon we will go into the church sanctuary and have a short memorial service, much like the Sultana Survivors had when they met in this very church. Afterwards, we will go to the fellowship hall in the basement for a potluck lunch. We are asking everyone to bring some sort finger foods or snack-type food and we will provide beverages. At some point in the afternoon we will "pass the hat" and ask you to put in a few dollars to cover the costs of the beverages and the church cleanup. At 1 PM we will ask for introductions of all present. If you know of a short anecdote about your Sultana ancestor, this will be the time to share it. Next, the documentary, "Sultana: The Mississippi's Titanic" that was made last year for the History Channel, will be shown.

Finally, Sultana descendant Ron Farmer (California resident and a producer with NBC Evening News with Tom Brokow), will update us on a Sultana documentary he has been working on for the past few years with Jerry Potter and Gene Salecker. He would like to interview descendants for possible inclusion in the documentary and encourages all attending to bring family artifacts, relics, and documents relating to the Sultana, as well as any Sultana stories that have been passed down in your family.

We are excited about this project. There can never be too much publicity (albeit 134 years late) about the Sultana! This project is a labor of love for Ron, and we know that he is going to present a finished product that will make us all proud. Please come prepared to share what you have with him and the rest of us. As always, tables will be set up for this purpose.

See you soon!

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12th Annual Sultana Reunion
Mt. Olive Baptist Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
SATURDAY, APRIL 10, 1999
11 AM to 6 PM

From the city: Take I-40 (near downtown Knoxville) to the Alcoa Highway (US 129), the "Airport" exit, 386B); go south on this (crossing over the Tennessee River and passing the University of Tennessee Hospital complex on the left) - about 2 to 3 miles. Turn left on Maloney Rd. (1 1/2 miles after passing the Southgate Shopping Center) and go to Maryville Pike. Straight in front of you, across the Pike, is Mt. Olive Baptist Church. (To go to the cemetery, turn left here onto Maryville Pike and Mt. Olive Cemetery will be about 50 yds. down the Pike on your right. The Sultana monument is not hard to find-the cemetery is small. Look for the people gathered there.)

From the airport: Take the Alcoa Highway from the airport- go north approximately 6 1/2 miles. Turn right on Maloney Road, a little less than a mile and a half after passing the Gov. John Sevier Highway (State Road 168). Follow directions above, (starting with Maloney Rd.) to church.