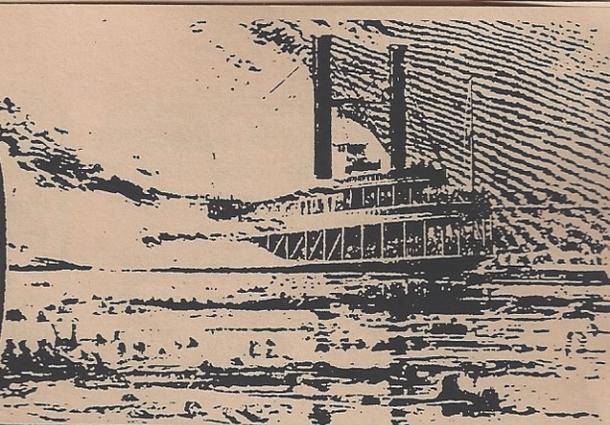


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# SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

SUMMER 1996

## To the Rescue: Rescue Vessels and the Sultana Disaster

By Gene Eric Salecker

The first rescue vessel to come to the aid of the *Sultana* did so completely by accident. The *Bostona II*, a sidewheel steamboat, happened upon the *Sultana* at approximately 3:00 a.m. Coming down river from Cincinnati on her maiden voyage on the Mississippi River, the *Bostona II* was still a few miles up river from the *Sultana* when the crew of the steamboat noticed a bright light up ahead. At first thinking that it was a fire at Memphis, the crew soon learned that they were mistaken. Seeing the water filled with human beings and still more people jumping from the burning decks of the *Sultana*, Captain John. T. Watson of the *Bostona* quickly gave orders for all floatable objects to be thrown overboard. In an instant all deck chairs, tables, planks and any other floatable items were thrown out to the *Sultana* victims.

Reaching the *Sultana*, the *Bostona II* slowed her engines and drifted with the current while her crew shoved bales of hay into the water and tossed out ropes for the sufferers to catch on to. Among those that deserve special mention for their efforts in helping the victims of the *Sultana* was a civilian passenger, a Mr. Deson, from Lake Providence, Louisiana. Using one of the *Bostona's* footplanks as a float, Mr. Deson single-handedly saved the lives of eight people.

While the *Bostona II* floated along beside the burning *Sultana*, the crew of the *Bostona* went out nine times in the sounding yawl, a small rowboat, and brought in between four to nine persons each time.

Finally, after rescuing 100 and 150 people, Captain Watson made the hard

decision to leave the *Sultana* and race ahead to Memphis. Although leaving the scene of the disaster while so many men were still in the river may seem like a cruel thing to do, it was the correct decision at the time. All of the survivors that the crew of the *Bostona* had managed to bring aboard were in need of immediate medical attention. It was, therefore, in the best interest of everyone for the *Bostona II* to hurry ahead to Memphis and report the disaster so that other steamboats might come to the aid of the victims. So, with her decks full of sufferers, the *Bostona II* turned her bow down river and rushed off towards Memphis.

Although Captain Watson had no way of knowing it, Memphis already knew of the disaster. Alerted by survivors that had floated down the river, all of the privately owned steamboats at Memphis sent out their sounding yawls and small boats while the engineers quickly built up steam in the boilers. Hampered by the early morning darkness and a slight fog that clung to the river surface, the rescuers did all in their power to save the *Sultana* victims.

Among those steamboats that sent out

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their small boats was the *Marble City*. Within minutes, the crew of the *Marble City* had rescued 17 people while another two soldiers were washed up against the *Marble City* and found clinging to one of her huge paddlewheels.

Equally as helpful in the rescue were the small boats from the government vessels, *Pocohontas*, *Grossbeak*, *Essex* and *Tyler*.

The crew of the United States picket boat *Pocohontas* had seen the faint glow of the burning *Sultana* about an hour before but had done nothing. When finally hearing the cries of help from the victims as they floated past Memphis, the crew rushed to action, sending out her small boats and throwing lines to the swimmers, while her engineers built up steam.

Likewise, the crew of the tinclad *Grossbeak* had also seen the fire of the *Sultana*. While her crew wanted to investigate, her acting master refused to move the vessel. Only after hearing the cries from the sufferers did the master allow the crew of the *Grossbeak* to go out in tow cutters or longboats.

The sailors aboard the ironclad U.S.S. *Essex* did not know of the disaster until the survivors were opposite Memphis. Then, in an instant the officers and men of the *Essex* sprang into action. In an ironic footnote, the *Essex* had been one of four ironclads to attack Confederate held Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River in February, 1862. The boilers of the *Essex* had been pierced by one of the cannon shots from the fort and twenty-eight officers and men had been scalded. Now, three years later, the crew of the *Essex* were seeing the same injuries but on a scale that was more than tenfold!

The gunboat U.S.S. *Tyler* was undergoing repairs at the Navy yard,

located up river from Memphis, and was manned by a skeleton crew. Although the *Tyler* could not go to the rescue of the victims, she immediately sent out two of their cutters, Lacking sailors, Mrs. Frances Ackley, the wife of the *Tyler's* executive officer, took command of cutter Number 2 and was credited with saving about twenty people. In 1902 the United States congress passed a special pension of \$20 per month for Mrs. Ackley to honor her for her heroic work on April 27, 1865.

While the small boats from the many privately owned steamboats and military vessels tried desperately to save the victims that had floated down to Memphis, the engineers on the boats hurried to build up enough pressure in their boilers to set the mother vessels in motion.

Then, amidst this beehive of activity, the *Bostona II* suddenly arrived at Memphis. Finding that Memphis was already hard at work aiding in the rescue of the *Sultana* victims, the crew of the *Bostona II* carried ashore the 100 to 150 survivors that had been pulled from the waters around the *Sultana* and immediately went back into the river. Working without rest, Captain Watson and the crew of the *Bostona II* pulled another 100 victims from the flood-swollen Mississippi, thus being credited with rescuing a total of between 200 and 250 people. In 1875, congress passed an act giving Captain Watson the sum of \$3,962 for property that he had thrown overboard in his efforts to aid the *Sultana* victims.

The first privately owned steamboat that had been docked at Memphis that had built up enough steam to go to the rescue of the *Sultana* victims was the *Jenny Lind*. Taking with her a supply of medicine and blankets, the *Jenny Lind* started up river towards the *Sultana*, fishing people out the water and moving from side to side, plucking survivors out the top branches of flood enshrouded trees.

The *Silver Spray* was the second steamboat to build up enough pressure and head up river toward the *Sultana*. Like the *Jenny Lind*, the *Silver Spray* concentrated on picking people out of the river and rescuing others from the semi-submerged tree tops.

Leap frogging past the private steamboats, the U.S. picket boat *Pocohontas* was the next boat to leave Memphis. Picking a few survivors out of the tree tops, the *Pocohontas* was the first boat to reach the hard working citizens of Mound

City and Fogelman's Landing, Arkansas. The citizens of both communities had spent the early morning hours pulling people from the river and tree tops and had literally taken the last few survivors from the burning decks of the *Sultana*, just seconds before she sank. The *Pocohontas* then started back down river towards Memphis carrying more than 150 rescue victims.

Among the other government vessels that finally moved out to help the *Sultana* victims was the ironclad *Essex* and the tinclad *Grossbeak*. Since the small boats of both warships had been carried down stream by the current, both vessels went down river past Memphis.

As told in our last newsletter, it was the small boats from the ironclad *Essex* that were fired on by the U.S. Colored Troops from Fort Pickering. By the time all of the firing and arguing was over, the *Essex* had floated opposite Fort Pickering and a number of survivors were transferred from her small boats to her decks.

Getting a late start, the *Grossbeak* also went down river in search of her small boats. Using lines to pull swimmers from the water and after catching up to her cutters, the *Grossbeak* went beyond Fort Pickering and circled President's Island.

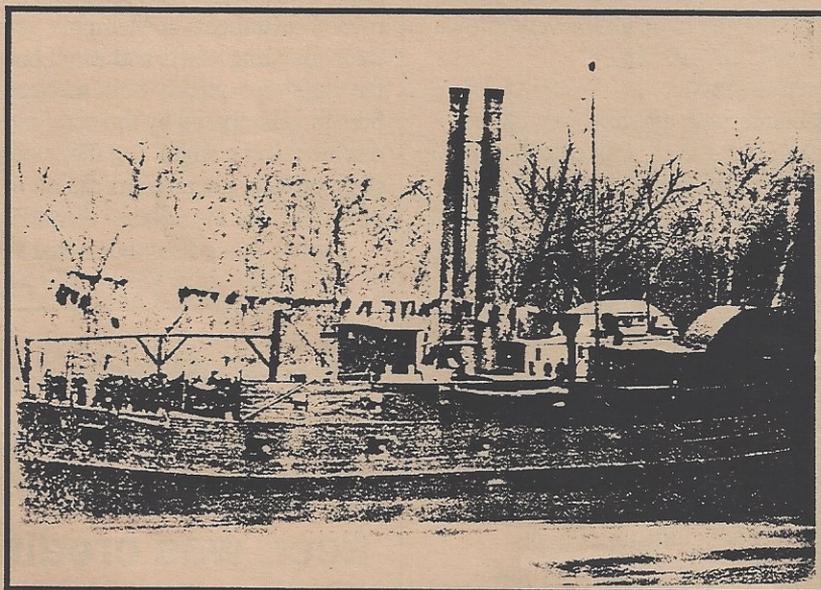
By the time the *Grossbeak* started back to Memphis, at about 11:00 in the morning, the crew of the tinclad had rescued about 90 victims.

At least two other vessels went to the rescue of the *Sultana* victims. The small steam ferry *Rosedella* went up river and arrived after most of the victims had already been rescued. With no one left to save, the *Rosedella* began the gruesome task of reclaiming the bodies of the dead.

Perhaps the last boat to try and help the *Sultana* victims was the steamboat *Rose Hamilton*. Like the *Rosedella* she also arrived too late to help the living and instead turned to the reclamation of the dead.

In summary it must be said that the crews from every vessel at Memphis went beyond the ordinary in helping the sufferers from the *Sultana*. If not for the heroic and unselfish efforts of so many sailors, crewmen and ordinary citizens, the death toll of the *Sultana* would undoubtedly have been much, much higher. It is well that when we remember the *Sultana*, we should also remember those that risked their lives to help those in need. ■

## The U.S.S. Tyler



The gunboat USS *Tyler*. Although she was tied up at the U.S. navy yard above Memphis for repairs, her longboats rescued a number of *Sultana* survivors. (Courtesy of Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio)

## 1996 Sultana Reunion a Big Success

WOW! That is the only word to describe the 1996 reunion of the Association of *Sultana* Descendants and Friends. This was the most successful reunion to date. The reunion, held at Mount Olive Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee on Saturday, April 27, 1996 (131 years to the day of the burning and sinking of the *Sultana*) was attended by about 150 people! Thanks to Fred Brown, staff writer for the Knoxville News-Sentinel, who did an excellent job on three fine articles about the *Sultana* on the Sunday before the reunion, Norman Shaw, our founder and organizer, and Pam Newhouse, our newsletter editor, were unable to attend the event, both sent their regrets and left beautiful messages to be read before the group.

Descendants and friends of the *Sultana* victims were in attendance from Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, all parts of Tennessee and from as far away as California and New York City! Among the notable guests were Glenna Green and Elsie Huffaker, whose fathers were on the *Sultana*, and Ron Farmer, from California, who took the opportunity to videotape the event and interview many of the participants in anticipation of a documentary on the disaster.

All in all this was a great turnout and a great event. Although both Jerry Potter and I were slightly overwhelmed by the turnout, we tried to run the reunion as well as possible. Of course, we are both looking forward to the return of both Norman Shaw and Pam Newhouse at next year's reunion, our 10th annual reunion since restarting the gathering of *Sultana* Descendants and Friends. We are all looking forward to another great turnout. Thank you to everybody that attended the 1996 reunion and we hope to see you again in 1997. Until then, always "Remember the *Sultana*!"

-GENE SALECKER

### NOTES FROM NORMAN

I was delighted to learn that our 1996 annual reunion was a huge success! Even though I was unable to attend (the first time ever!) I want to thank Virgil Davis for videotaping the meeting and making a copy for me so that I could share the excitement by modern technology.

You have read in Gene Salecker's report of the meeting about how he and Jerry Potter were almost overwhelmed by the great number of people who came. Gene sold over half of the 100 copies of this his book, Disaster on the Mississippi, that he had on hand, while Jerry also did well by selling the entire boxload of this book, The Sultana Tragedy, that he brought with him.

Much appreciation also goes to Fred Brown, feature writer for the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, who did an exceptional piece on our organization, including information about Elsie Huffaker and Glenna Green, real children of *Sultana* soldiers, and Gene's new book. The artwork of the burning *Sultana* that accompanied the article far exceeded my best expectations. This excellent publicity obviously contributed to the record-breaking attendance.

I want to emphasize to everyone that next year will be our tenth annual reunion since our group was revitalized in 1987! Since this is a significant milestone for our group, we hope to come up with a program that will be consistent with the occasion and hopefully produce another record-breaking event. Let me know of any ideas that we might explore to celebrate this momentous accomplishment. Reserve Saturday, April 26, 1997 on your calendars!

Start spreading the word - tell your friends, write letters, contribute to the newsletter, use e-mail - to achieve another successful reunion in 1997. As my friend Art Arseneault yearly reminds me, it's never too early to start making plans.

-NORMAN SHAW, originator of  
our group

### FROM THE EDITOR

Like Norman and Gene, I am also delighted that the reunion was such a huge success, and regret that life's circumstances prevented me from attending. Now, however, our daughter's wedding is but a fond memory and my health has returned. I thank God for both, and for all you dear ones who sent wishes for recovery my way. Special thanks to Virgil Davis who also sent me a videotape of the reunion less within a week of the event. Upward and onward to next year! We will have the biggest and best reunion yet. Do please let Norman, Gene, Jerry or myself know of any ideas you have for next year.

I continue to receive information and inquires about the *Sultana* and the newsletter from subscriber Dale Talkington's website on the World Wide Web. For those of you who have recently come online, this Internet address is: <http://www.ionet/~cousin>

Another *Sultana*-related site is descendant Joanne Todd Rabun at <http://www.innerlight.com/genepool/sultana.html>

and don't forget to e-mail me at [CW1865@aol.com](mailto:CW1865@aol.com)

Please keep those letters coming with items I can use for upcoming newsletters. And remember to go out and water your *sultanas*!

PAM NEWHOUSE, EDITOR

