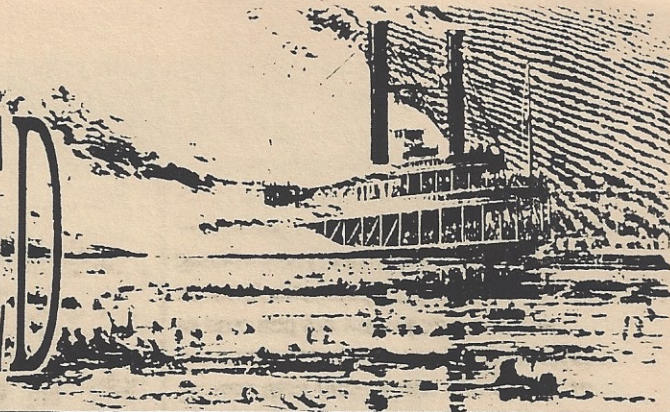


# the SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

FALL 1997

## "The Survivor": The Story of Lt. John H. King, 9th Indiana Cavalry

By Robert R. Smith

*The following manuscript was sent to me by Mr. Smith of Fishers, Indiana, great great grandson of Lt. King. It is well written, complete with endnotes, photos, and an attractive binding. Due to space constraints I regretfully had to shorten this poignant account somewhat while striving to retain spirit of the work. -Ed.*

John Henry King: born June 28, 1831, Cincinnati, Ohio. The steamship "Sultana": built in Cincinnati, Ohio, launched February 4, 1863. Fate would stage a rendezvous for this pair. They would meet on the Mississippi River, participants in a major but little known event in world history.

John King grew up in Cincinnati and met and married Katherine King (nee King). John and Katherine had five children, Forrest, George, Wesley, Daisy and Nettie. Shortly after Nettie was born in September of 1860 the King family moved to Indianapolis, where John plied his trade as a blacksmith. These were difficult times. The conflict between the northern states and the seceding southern states had nearly reached its peak.

When Civil War broke out, John King began to think about enlisting in the Union Army. He made the decision to do so and on December 14, 1863, enlisted at Indianapolis for a three year hitch in the newly formed 9th Indiana Cavalry. He was assigned to Co. F.

In December of 1864 he and eleven others were captured by Texas Cavalry after a sharp engagement at Sugar Creek, Tennessee. John King was sent to

Andersonville Prison.

Andersonville had come into being as Southern prison camps in the Southeast became more vulnerable to Yankee troops. Therefore, the need to build a camp in the deep South away from the risk of attack became crucial. Andersonville, deep in the state of Georgia, filled this bill. The original stockade enclosed about sixteen and a half acres and was fenced by pine trees which had been cut down, trimmed and topped by local Negroes to a length of about twenty feet. Then they hewed the logs

# LECTURE

## SLEDGEHAMMER KING!

THE WONDERFULLY GIFTED DRATOR

Will be In Town and Speak

At

On

**SUBJECT:**

The **GREATEST EVIL** of the Age.

As the Lecture is Free, Mr. King hopes that the entire population will be present to

**"LISTEN TO HIS TALE OF WOE."**

Poster circulated proclaiming John King's post-war lectures

to a thickness of eight to twelve inches and placed them five feet into the ground, making a wall approximately fifteen feet high. Beyond this, Quartermaster Captain Richard B. Winder's ability to obtain building materials was almost nonexistent. The local mill operators would not sell him wood because it was more lucrative to sell to the southern government for use on desperately needed railroads. Winder then submitted a request for tents for the prisoners, but was informed that the tents could not be supplied for the simple reason there weren't any. He was instructed to buy beef in Florida and southern Georgia but he had no men to drive the stock and no means of getting any. His orders also said he should call upon the nearest Commissary for supplies but this was in Columbus, Georgia, which was fifty miles away. In the midst of this dilemma, with the stockade only about half completed, the first batch of five hundred prisoners arrived on Thursday, February 25, 1864. Unable to provide even the basic necessities of food, shelter and clothing, the prison began an immediate downhill slide to unbelievable conditions.

By the time John King arrived in early January of 1865, the prison had become a cesspool. There was no discipline of any kind. The men had constructed "shanties" from any available material and followed their own personal whims as to where they located their huts. Consequently, there were no direct aisles or streets in which to pass and the natural air flow was severely restricted. A branch of Sweetwater Creek flowed through the prison and was originally to be the fresh water source for the prisoners. However, the ill-equipped hospital and cookhouse were located upstream from

the prisoners and the refuse from both facilities were thrown into the stream. In addition, the prisoners themselves contaminated the stream with their own wastes and garbage. What had once been a small flowing stream was now a sluggish semi liquid mass of filth. Near the cooking area was a mound of cornbread, bones and trash of all kinds. It was thirty feet in diameter, several feet high and swarming with flies. The flies crawled over the faces and bodies of the men and many prisoners were so covered with mosquito bites that they appeared to be suffering from measles.

Typhoid and smallpox were rampant and food supplies were nearly nonexistent. At one point, the Adjutant General received a message from Andersonville that "there are 29,400 prisoners, 2,650 troops, 500 Negroes and other laborers and not a ration at the post." When food was available, it was poor in quality and improperly cooked. Salt meat and coarse unbolted cornbread were the mainstay of the prisoners' diet and the resulting cause of dysentery and diarrhea among the troops.

By February 23, 1865, John King was in such a weakened condition he was admitted to the camp hospital suffering from debilis, a condition of the body in which the vital functions are feebly discharged. James H. Kimberlin, who had been King's friend prior to the war and was also in charge of his company at Andersonville stated, "King contracted diarrhea after which he was also attacked with scurvy, from which he suffered severely. In fact, for a time his life was almost entirely disposed of. I took special care of John and often went in person with him to the physicians in charge."

By March 5 the doctors determined that John had improved and returned him to the prison area.

By the time Federal troops closed the prison (April, 1865), 41,000 men had been imprisoned here and suffered greatly. Of those, 13,000 had died. One of the survivors was John H. King. Weak and weary but alive, he and the other surviving Union prisoners had been released and began their trek toward Camp Fisk, the exchange point at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Even in his misery, John's spirits were high. He was on his way home, with no way of knowing that more tragedy lay ahead.

John would later state ..."that owing to my broken down physical and starved condition at the time, I do not remember many things that may have occurred at that time." This would prove to be a blessing.

After spending some time at Camp Fisk where the soldiers again had to scramble to provide their own shelter, they eventually were loaded on steamboats headed northward from Vicksburg. The Sultana was one such boat. There was, however, a problem with one of the boilers, and a local boiler mechanic had made a temporary patch for it. The Sultana's Captain Mason had decided permanent repairs would have to wait until they reached St. Louis.

U.S. Army Captain George Williams was assigned the unenviable task of systematically checking off the passengers as they boarded the Sultana. He was working from a list provided by the Confederates which was grossly inaccurate. Some troops began arriving on the wharf by train and others by foot and all became hopelessly mixed as they waited their turn to board the ship. Williams found it impossible to keep up with the names and eventually lost track of even the number of men going on board. By the time John King and the rest of this group were loaded, there was hardly a foot of unoccupied space on any of the Sultana's decks. The boat was built to carry three hundred and seventy six passengers; it is estimated that when she left Memphis she was carrying twenty four hundred soldiers, one hundred regular passengers, and eighty crew.

Around 2 AM on April 27, 1865, in the middle of the Mississippi just above Memphis, tragedy struck. Pilot George Kayton was at the helm of the Sultana, all the while fighting the oncoming current and the top heavy boat with the dangerously overburdened boilers.

All of a sudden there was a tremendous explosion that was heard in Memphis, seven miles away. At least two boilers had exploded and the force of it had nearly split the boat in two. Broken boards, pieces of iron and bodies flew into the air and dropped back on the deck of the boat with a thundering crash. Many people were blown off the boat and into the river. Fire broke out and the mass of humanity broke for the river, trampling each other as they ran and jumped in by the hundreds. The ill and injured soldiers were begging to be thrown overboard, preferring to drown

rather than roast.

By the time the ordeal was over, the death toll was staggering. There were less than a thousand survivors, some of which would die later. John King woke up on the wharf at Memphis with an injured back and no recollection of how he got there. He later said, "The authorities wanted to take me to a hospital at Memphis, but I refused to go to a hospital and I was taken to the soldiers home at Memphis where I was treated about three days by the surgeons...After three days, I was put on a steamer, I think the Belle of the West (actually, it was the "Belle of St. Louis"), and landed at Cairo, Illinois and took the cars (train) for home."

When he arrived home his family was overjoyed to see him and appalled at his physical condition and appearance. During the exchange of greetings - handshakes and hugs - someone came up with the idea to take John down the street to the same photographer and have his picture taken as a record of how he looked on his arrival home. So, with an aching, injured, suffering the effects of scurvy, malnutrition and dysentery, the bedraggled, shoeless John King posed for the camera to complete the classic before and after photo.



LT. JOHN H. KING,  
UPON ENTERING THE SERVICE.



LT. JOHN H. KING,  
UPON ARRIVING HOME.

John King was officially discharged from the army on August 4, 1865. He then began many months of trying to regain his strength and health. Eventually he was able to return to his trade of blacksmithing. But as the years went by, the debilitation effect of his prison days and the injury to his back began to take its toll. The scurvy, from which he had suffered greatly, had resulted in the loss of many of his teeth and generally impaired his health and the pain in his back increased with each passing year. John tried his best to lead a normal life, but by 1882, at age 51, was no longer able to perform any sort of manual labor. At this point, he began corresponding with the U. S. Pension Agency in order to claim a disability pension. John was now in another war.....a paper war. It would be eight years before the battle ended.

Since no accurate records had been kept from either Andersonville or the Sultana, John had no real proof of how he had suffered while at the prison camp or that he was even aboard the Sultana when it exploded. The government had to be convinced. So, he went about methodically gathering affidavit after affidavit and even acquired the services of a lawyer for a brief period of time.

*(Editor's note: The request from the government for these affidavits were never-ending. I have seen as many as fifty such documents in a pension file of a soldier trying to convince the Board that his disability had come from army service. Many times the end of the struggle came with a notice from Washington: "Denied.")* He first requested pension money only for the disability due to the scurvy and was eventually granted a pension of \$4.00 a month. In 1886 he petitioned to upgrade his pension to \$16.00 a month stating that he "is now greatly disabled on account of said results of scurvy and asks pension commensurate with my degree of disability."

In December of 1886 John was living at the Turkish Bath of the Grand Hotel in Indianapolis and was now asking for additional pension money for his back injury. The Pension Agency, as a result, required John to have an examination by the Board of Pension Surgeons at Danville, Indiana. John went for the exam, but was highly displeased with the results, The board had turned him down. He then wrote another sworn affidavit to the Pension Agency, claiming "Great injustice was done me in their report of my alleged examination on April 20, 1887 and for the purpose of receiving exact justice now respectfully appeal to the decision of some other board of surgeons. At the time of the alleged examination, only one of the surgeons said anything or examined me and he did not make a thorough examination. He blindfolded me, laid me a on a lounge and looked in my mouth. Also, I ask allowance of pension on account of spinal injury alleged in my original declaration. I am unable to follow my occupation as that of blacksmith and having no other occupation, I am unable to earn my subsistence."

The battle was still going on in the spring of 1890 when John received a request for additional documentation of his presence on the Sultana. In response, he sent another affidavit stating that he could not find any more witnesses than he had already provided and asked that they be accepted. He also stated "With reference to the testimony of Seth Green of file, I will state that I know he was on said boat as stated in his affidavit. I am unable to understand why he now refuses to testify. He has told me that he draws a pension for a scald he received at the time of the explosion. Anderson Pinion and I are the only members of my company now living

who were on said steamer. His affidavit was recently filed in my claim."

During the early period of correspondence with the Pension Agency, John sought medical help from a Dr. Moore of Indianapolis. But John was nearly out of funds and was unable to pay for his services. The good Doctor was kind enough to continue to treat him and in appreciation, John performed light chores and sawed wood for him. Dr. Moore recommended Allcock's Plasters, Balsam Copaiba (a stimulant and diuretic) and Sweet Spirits of Utine to relive his suffering. An ad that appeared in the April 24, 1892 issue of the Indianapolis News for Allcock's Plasters stated, "If you suffer from lame back, especially in the morning, Allcock's Plasters are a sure relief. Try this before you resort to opiates. If any of your muscles are lame, joints stiff, feel as if they need oiling, or if you suffer with any local pains or aches, these plasters will cure you." Dr. Moore died in 1886 and John continued to use these herbal medicines in search of relief. There was, however, one other source which John sought out and that was the numbing effect of alcohol. When the plasters, diuretics and spirits failed, alcohol became his constant source of relief. Being unable to work or to rid himself of the physical pain and the memories of his days at Andersonville, John continued to drink until he became an alcoholic.

In order to provide himself with some sort of income, John began to give public lectures. His topics were his experiences at Andersonville and temperance. The lectures were free, but John always passed the hat for donations at the end of the program. He would then take the proceeds from his lecture and promptly head for the nearest saloon. His lectures were apparently rather successful since he adopted the name of "Sledgehammer King" and had a series of posters printed proclaiming him to be "A wonderfully gifted orator."

He began traveling outside of the Indianapolis area to give his lectures and even ventured into adjoining states when he could find an audience. But his illness continued to plague him. While he was in Paxton, Illinois giving one of his lectures, John became ill, was bedfast nearly three days, and was treated by the local doctor. He also stated in the same affidavit that

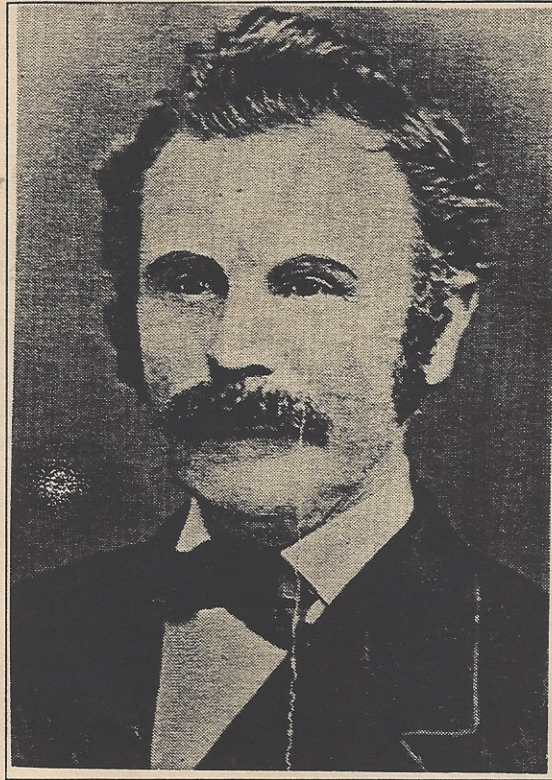
"Mostly I have used the remedies of Dr. Moore and having but little means, I could not pay for skilled medical services. I rely mostly on the plasters but usually am without hope and do not believe anyone can do me much good except to partially deaden the pains."

John continued to travel and lecture whenever and wherever he could. He enlisted the aid of friends and acquaintances to locate a church, revival or temperance meetings where he could speak. Samuel Sawyer, a minister from Indianapolis, became friends with John and agreed to aid him in acquiring speaking engagements.

John continued his pattern of suffering, lecturing, and drinking until he reached a point where his health and his income would no longer allow him to sustain a normal life. He remained married, but his traveling and drinking put a strain on all involved. On September 5, 1892, John was admitted to the Marion Branch of the National Home for Disabled Veterans in Marion, Indiana. He continued to travel and lecture even from the Veterans Home when the opportunity arose. He kept in touch with his family by writing letters and occasionally making business and pleasure trips to Indianapolis. John lived at the Veterans Home until March 10, 1893. He then moved back to Indianapolis with his wife at 51 Peru Avenue. His health was failing badly and his drinking had gotten worse. It was spring in Indiana and new life was beginning for Mother Nature, but John King's life was drawing to a close. On May 22, 1893, John Henry King died of acute alcohol poisoning at the age of 62. He was buried at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis in a pauper's grave without a tombstone.

Some forty years later, Raymond James Smith, John's great grandson, would write from his sick bed in Sunnyside Tuberculosis Sanitarium, "Fate is a sculptor who shapes the lives of men, and destiny is the finished work of fate. At times fate works with beautiful grace, but again He molds like a demon of hate."

Fate may have made John's destiny far more difficult than most, but it can never take away the fact that he was a survivor.



JOHN H. KING IN HIS LATER YEARS.



As a result of the author Robert R. Smith sharing this story with the Historian at Crown Hill Cemetery, John King received a military headstone for his grave in May of 1993, one hundred years after his death.



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**FROM THE EDITOR**


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## Lobby the State of Indiana for a Sultana Monument!

The following is from William and Marsha Stewart, Jr., William is the great great grandfather of Pvt. William Thornburgh of the 9th Indiana Cavalry, Co. G. :

### Calling all Descendants from the State of Indiana:

We, the family of Nathan Thornburgh are trying to get the state to erect a monument for all the men from the State of Indiana who were on the Sultana. We have sent letters to our congressmen and senators asking them for help and guidance on where to go for funding for this very important project.

The Director of the Historic Preservation Office thinks we have a very good chance of getting this monument, but he suggested that as many Indiana citizens as possible contact their congressmen and senators and ask them for letter of support.

We need help and support from all Indiana Sultana descendants and friends. Please write letters to the following officials and ask for their help and expertise in this matter. It is only fitting that Indiana raise a monument to these brave Union soldiers who went to war and prison to assure freedom for all.

#### PEOPLE TO CONTACT:

• Senator Richard G. Lugar  
306 Hart Senate Office Bldg.  
Washington, D.C. 20510  
(202) 224-4814  
Indianapolis phone: (317) 226-5555

• Senator Dan Coats  
404 Russell Senate Office Bldg.  
Washington, D.C. 20510  
(202) 224-5623  
Indianapolis phone: (317) 226-5555

• Representative David McIntosh, 2nd District  
1208 Longworth Office Bldg  
Washington, D.C. 20510  
e-mail: mcintosh@hr.house.gov  
Muncie office 747-5566  
Muncie address: 2900 W. Jackson St.,  
47304

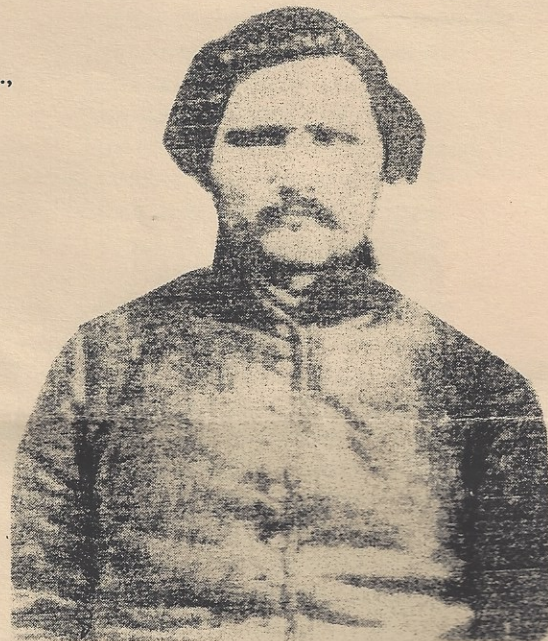
• Sue Ann Gilroy  
Secretary of State  
State House, Rm. 201  
Indianapolis, IN 47204  
Phone (317) 233-6536  
FAX: (317) 233-3283

• John Goss, Director  
Tourism Dev., Dept of Commerce  
1 N. Capitol  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
Phone: (317) 232-8870

• James A. Glass, Director  
Historic Preservation Div.,  
Dept. of Natural Resources  
402 W. Washington St., Rm. 274  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
Phone: (317) 232-1646

For further information regarding this project contact:

William and Marsha Stewart, Sr.  
P.O. Box 2027  
Muncie, IN 47307



**PVT. NATHAN THORNBURGH**  
(Died on the Sultana)

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## Date Change for 1998 Annual Sultana Reunion

We have always held our annual Knoxville, Tennessee reunion on the Saturday closest to the anniversary of the Sultana disaster, April 27. However, this year, due to conflict of schedules, we will be holding it a weekend earlier, Saturday, April 18. We hope this date will be clear for most of you. And do plan to come and join us! We are keeping the memory of the Sultana soldiers alive as well as making new friends (as well as greeting old ones) who share this common bond.

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#### NEW SUBSCRIBERS

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- Billie Jo Richter, 10420 Don Rico Rd., Spring Valley, CA 91978-1020
- Steven L Wright, 984 Kings Way, Elizabethtown, KY 42701 (Desc. of James Morris, 6th KY Cav., Co. H)
- Don and Ann Miller, 3652 West CR 100 South, New Castle, IN 47362
- Maureen Lemek, 737 W. 48 St., Davenport, IA 52806
- Jerry Elick, 503 Fort St., Bremen, OH 43107 (Desc. of Pvt. John Elick, 58th OH Inf, Co. A)
- William and Marsha Stewart, Sr., P.O. Box 2027, Muncie, IN 47307 (Desc. of Pvt. Nathan Thornburgh, 9th IN Cav. Co. G)
- MSG Paul Stokes (Ret., U.S. Army), 220 Parliament Dr., Columbia, SC 29223
- Sarah J. Hughes, 145 Wade Ln., Oak Ridge, TN 37830
- Don Beattie, 12243 Ladue Woods Drive, St. Louis, MO 63141
- Patricia Sharp Johnson, 760 E. Three Fountains Dr., Murray, UT 84107-5257 (Desc. of Pvt. Thomas Sharp, 2nd W VA Cav., Co. F)
- Wm. Ray "Bill" Sheldon, 586 Yurok court, San Jose, CA 95123 (Desc. of Pvt George A. King II, 2nd TN Cav.)
- Wayne F. Sheldon, 890 South G. Street, Livermore, CA 94550 (Desc. of Pvt George A. King II, 2nd TN Cav.)