

LAST WORD SOCIETY

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The Ill-Fated Passenger Steamer *Sultana*: An Inland Maritime Mass Disaster of Unparalleled Magnitude

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ABSTRACT: On the night of 27 April 1865, the *Sultana* left Memphis for points north on the flood-swollen Mississippi River. An estimated 2347 individuals were on board this luxury passenger steamer—a boat designed to accommodate only 76 cabin passengers and 300 deck passengers.

At a point seven miles (11 km) north of Memphis near a group of islands known as Paddy's Hen and Chickens, 3 of the boat's 4 boilers exploded. The explosion, fire, and river claimed approximately 1547 lives, exceeding the death toll of the *Titanic*.

Why were so many passengers on board the *Sultana*? Why did the boilers explode? What were the stories of the survivors? And how does this tragedy compare with the *Titanic* disaster?

These questions are addressed along with other aspects of the tragedy. In addition, recent attempts by the authors to discover the exact location of the wreck are discussed.

KEYWORDS: The Last Word Society, *Sultana*, historical background, mass disasters

On 26 April 1865, the luxury passenger steamer *Sultana* unloaded cargo at Memphis, Tennessee, and later that evening crossed the river to the coaling station at Hopefield, Arkansas [1]. The *Sultana* was known to be one of the largest and best luxury steamers ever constructed; however, that night found it deplorably overcrowded. It was near midnight when the coal supply was loaded and the boat continued its journey, laboriously steaming north up the flood-swollen Mississippi River. At two o'clock on the morning of 27 April 1865, at a point approximately 7 miles (11 km) north of Memphis, 3 of the *Sultana*'s 4 massive boilers exploded. The explosion, fire, and river claimed 1547 lives [2,3], a death toll exceeding that of the *Titanic*. Unfortunately, the magnitude of this disaster was soon lost to history.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate various aspects of the *Sultana* disaster including the reasons for the overcrowded conditions aboard, the cause of the explosion, factors leading to the excessive loss of life, statements of the survivors, and the reasons for its obscurity.

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