

THE FORGOTTEN WRECK OF THE STEAMSHIP *SULTANA*

How America Forgot the Deadliest Shipwreck in National History

The wreck in April, 1865, of the steamship Sultana remains the deadliest maritime disaster in American history, yet it has largely faded from public memory. Using a selection of newspapers from around the country in the immediate aftermath of the wreck, I argue that the American public's attention was not captivated by the Sultana because the Civil War had desensitized newspaper readers to death.

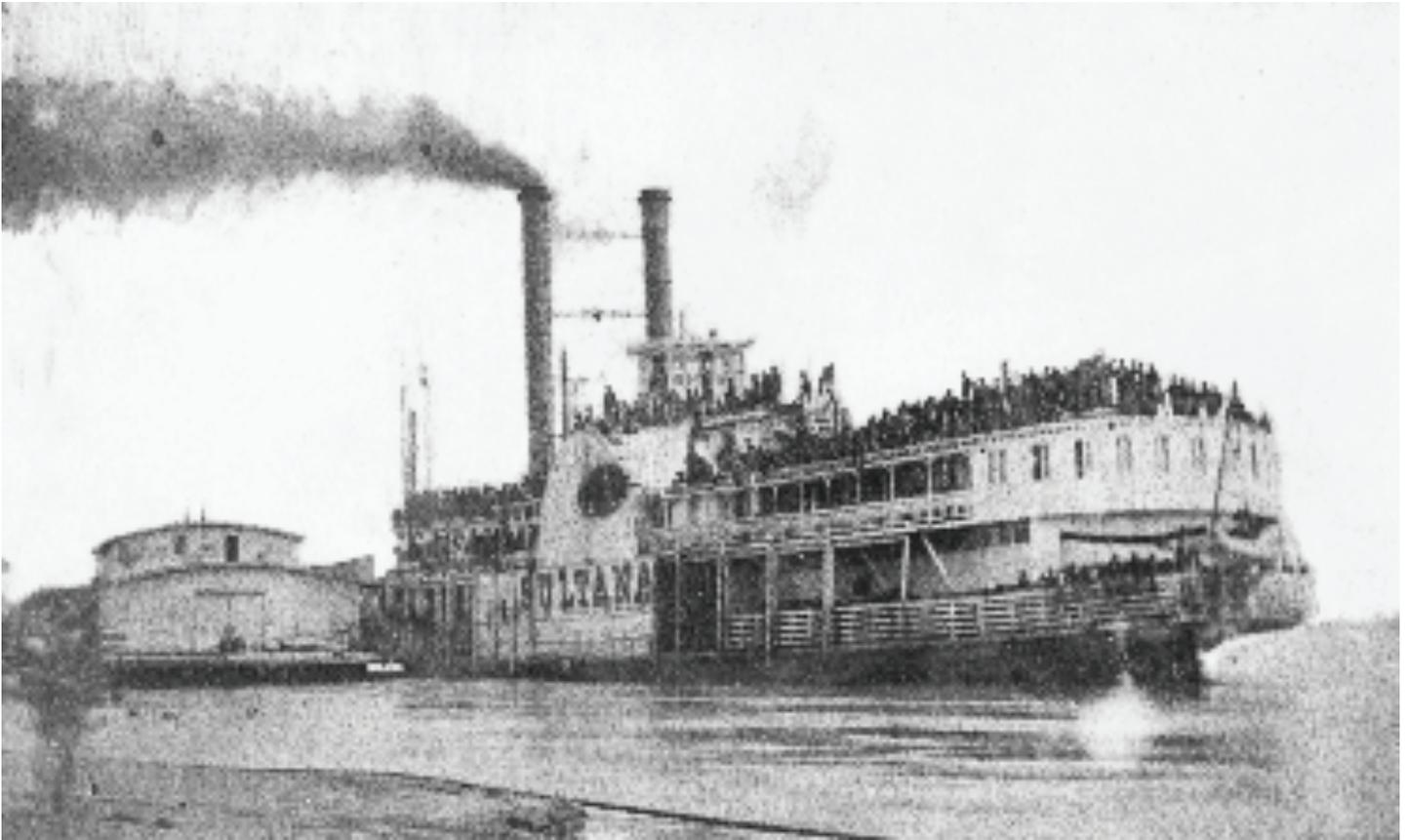
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On April 27, 1865, the early morning darkness in Memphis, Tennessee, was rent apart by a massive explosion. A ship by the name of *Sultana*, overflowing with Union soldiers, went up in flames in the middle of the mighty Mississippi River and sunk into the watery depths below. The steamer had set sail from Vicksburg, Mississippi, the previous evening, after stopping for a small repair to one of the boilers.¹ Although the ship was in a state of disrepair and had a maximum capacity of 400, she was overcrowded with an estimated 2,400 passengers.² The Civil War had ended just weeks earlier, and, the government offered payment to ship captains for each former prisoner of war transported back to their respective home states, providing motivation for ships to be filled far beyond capacity. In the case of the overcrowded *Sultana*, the poorly repaired boiler exploded between 2:00 – 3:00 a.m., spelling disaster for the released prisoners of war aboard the ship. In a matter of hours, more than 1,800 men lost their lives, making the *Sultana* the deadliest maritime disaster in American history. Yet the story of their tragic demise did not captivate national attention and has largely faded from public memory.³ Why was the *Sultana* shipwreck not a major news story that dominated American media outlets? What about the circumstances of this shipwreck caused the *Sultana*'s story to disappear into obscurity, much like the ship itself?

Using a selection of news articles from around the country in the weeks following the *Sultana* disaster, I have attempted to expose the sociopolitical context which enabled the deaths of 1,800 people to go relatively unnoticed. In examining the newspapers, I noted where articles about the *Sultana* appeared in relation to other news, what was included and left out of the newspaper's account, which other stories were present in the newspaper, and how much text was allotted to the *Sultana*. Although the tragedy was mentioned in newspapers across the country, it was preceded by articles about President Lincoln's upcoming funeral, the whereabouts of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, and other major events in the aftermath of the Civil War. Therefore, I argue that the

nation was much more focused on the end of the war than on the *Sultana*. If the ship had wrecked at a different time - when it did not have to compete for public attention against the assassination of the President and the reunification of the country - perhaps it would have been covered more thoroughly in the newspapers. Those same papers had featured the deaths of thousands of soldiers throughout the war, and readers were therefore desensitized to death. After 23,000 deaths at Gettysburg, the 1,800 souls lost aboard the *Sultana* paled in comparison. Whereas the Chicago Tribune devoted nearly the entire front page of its issue on July 4, 1863, to the Battles of Vicksburg and Gettysburg, the same newspaper had only 50 lines on page 2 for the wreck of the *Sultana*, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Relatively few historians have conducted in-depth studies of the *Sultana* disaster, despite the appalling loss of human life. In fact, when Memphis-based lawyer Jerry Potter began his research to write *The Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster* in the early 1990s, only three books on the subject had been written.⁴ When historians have written about the *Sultana*, most hypothesized that the timing of the wreck caused it to fade from the collective memory. The end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln eclipsed the *Sultana* in the public eye almost entirely.⁵ My research elaborates on this theory; however, I contribute a new aspect to the discussion, that at the end of the Civil War, the public was desensitized to death after constant media coverage of soldiers' deaths throughout the war. Over the course of four long years, the public had grown accustomed to lists of fatalities and death tolls in the thousands, so when the *Sultana* sank, the media did not devote as much attention to the disaster as one might expect. Though no American shipwreck since has resulted in a greater loss of life, including the Titanic, the story of the *Sultana* did not capture public attention in the same way because the four preceding years had seen incredible death and destruction. In the following pages, I will show this trend using both northern and southern newspapers from before and after the *Sultana* sank, ex-



“To all observers it was obvious the *Sultana* was being overcrowded.”⁸

The *Sultana* in Helena, Arkansas (April 27, 1865)

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs

aming the placement, length, and content of articles about the *Sultana* and other incidents of mass casualties.

THE SINKING OF THE SULTANA

To begin, let us examine the exact circumstances of the wreck of the *Sultana*. After the Civil War, thousands of prisoners of war were released all over the newly reunified country and needed transportation back to their home states. In order to encourage ships to take on this task, the United States government offered the considerable sum of \$5.00 per soldier and \$10.00 per officer carried.⁶ Ship captains, like the captain of the *Sultana*, therefore had motivation to transport as many P.O.W.s as possible to maximize their profit margins, and for this reason the *Sultana* was loaded to six times her legal and safe capacity. William Floyd, himself a crewmember of a ship in the Memphis area in April 1865, saw the *Sultana* pass in the Mississippi, and aboard his ship “there was considerable talk as to whether she [the *Sultana*] had as many men on board her as another steamer that passed a few days before, or whether she was more crowded than that one.”⁷ Evidently, ships as packed as the *Sultana* were a common sight at this time, as enterprising captains wanted to transport as many prisoners as possible and thereby capitalize on the reward of-

fered by the government. This photo was taken of the *Sultana* as she left Vicksburg for what would be her final journey, burdened with the huddled masses who must surely have had difficulty moving about on the congested ship.

In addition to being full to the brim with released P.O.W.s, the *Sultana* was also disadvantaged by a poorly repaired boiler. While stopped in Vicksburg, the captain called for a boiler maker by the name of R.G. Taylor to come and examine the ship. Taylor “discovered two sheets of the boiler ‘were badly bulged out’” and in dire need of repair.⁹ Taylor suggested forcing back the bulges, but Captain Mason did not permit him to do this repair. Instead, “Mason directed Taylor to cut out a twenty-six inch by eleven-inch section and place a patch over it... The patch was thinner than the boiler’s thickness.”¹⁰ Perhaps Captain Mason was in a hurry to get the *Sultana* loaded and on its way to ensure he would be paid the promised sum. Whatever the motivation, we can be sure that the boiler was not repaired to full functionality and posed an imminent threat to all aboard. Within days, the decision not to invest the necessary time and funds into the boiler repair would have dire consequences, not only for Captain Mason, but for the 2,400 passengers on the *Sultana*.

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On April 27, the *Sultana*'s boilers erupted in a massive explosion that sent steam, flames, and shrapnel flying in all directions. Bodies were thrown through the air by the tremendous force of the explosion, ripping men apart and scalding those who were exposed to the steam and hot water. Within twenty minutes, the ship was engulfed in flames.¹¹ One of the men aboard William Floyd's ship spotted the wreck in the distance, and the crew sprung to action to rescue as many men as they could. One of the men Floyd rescued said "he was sleeping above the boiler and that the first thing he knew he was flying up in the air and when he came down he was in the water."¹² Floyd spotted men floating unconscious in the freezing cold water, clinging to pieces of the wreckage as they drifted toward death. For the week and a half that Floyd and his men stayed in Memphis to help, they continued to pick bodies out of the water. Floyd wrote that "the government would send up every morning a boat and barge to pick them up, and the deck would be covered with bodies" even a week after the wreck.¹³ In fact, Floyd said, he and his crewmates became accustomed to the incredible tragedy of the *Sultana* that as they left Memphis nearly two weeks after the wreck, "no attention was paid to floating bodies except to avoid running over them."¹⁴ Even those who saw the wreckage first-hand eventually became desensitized to the death and destruction of this horrific event.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

In the course of my research, I examined three American newspapers' coverage of the *Sultana* to expose how the American public was informed about the shipwreck. Those three newspapers are: *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, *The Hartford Daily Courant*, and *The Daily Picayune*. In examining each newspaper, I posed the following questions:

1. How many lines were devoted to the *Sultana* wreck?
2. Where in the newspaper does the article about the *Sultana* appear?
3. What other stories took precedence and were featured earlier in the paper?
4. What details were included and excluded about the wreck?
5. How were previous mass casualties portrayed in the newspaper?

For each paper, I found a shipwreck which resulted in loss of human life earlier in the war to judge whether the amount of public attention given to deaths of soldiers decreased during the course of the war. This research led me to believe that in addition to being overshadowed by President Lincoln's assassination and the end of the Civil War, the *Sultana* was largely ignored in American media because the general public was desensitized to death by April 1865. The attention given to maritime deaths at the beginning of the war was substan-

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In total, an estimated 1,800 people died as a result of the explosion of the *Sultana*, whether from the force of the explosion, burns from the flames, scalding hot water, or exposure to the cold water. They were buried in a mass grave near Memphis, as the resources to transport 1,800 corpses back to their families would have been immense.¹⁵ The harrowing story of their tragic demise did appear in newspapers in the North and the South, but the nation was not gripped by the tale, and it faded into obscurity. I contend that the sinking of the *Sultana* did not dominate American media outlets because the public was no longer shocked by death tolls in the thousands after the devastation of the Civil War, with thousands of soldiers dying on a daily basis. For that reason, newspapers covered the *Sultana* minimally, rather than setting aside space on the front page for news of the wreck. In the following section, I will analyze a selection of newspapers from this period and explore the public response to the disaster to expose how the sociopolitical realities of April 1865 allowed these 1,800 deaths to go relatively unnoticed in American media.

tially greater than that at the end of the war when the *Sultana* exploded in the Mississippi, a trend visible in both northern and southern newspapers. In the following section, I will examine each newspaper individually, posing the questions above and comparing the coverage of an earlier shipwreck to the *Sultana* disaster.

The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, featured a short article about the *Sultana* a week after the wreckage.¹⁶ As the P.O.W.s aboard the *Sultana* had fought for the Union, many of the readers of the Daily Enquirer could very well have known one or more men who perished in the explosion, and yet the paper devoted a mere thirty-four lines on page three of four to the shipwreck. Rather than being given a headline of its own, the *Sultana* is featured in a section entitled "Latest by Telegraph" which describes events outside of the Cincinnati area. Of the great many articles which precede the *Sultana* in this edition of the *Daily Enquirer*, there is one about the funeral arrangements for President Lincoln, an article about changes in the stock market, and the gruesome tale of a man in Baltimore who committed suicide. The placement of this third article is intriguing, since one might

logically assume that 1,800 deaths would be given more media attention than one death. Regardless, the article about the *Sultana* includes some specific details, including the approximate number of passengers and the fact that “a great number of lives were lost; all soldiers.” While the author does mention the number of men aboard the *Sultana*, he does not compare that figure with the safe capacity of the ship, therefore leaving out an important detail of the disaster. Additionally, the journalist who wrote about the *Sultana* mentioned that the boiler had been recently repaired, although there was no reference to the hurried and insufficient nature of the repairs done just before the deadly explosion. As the article was written mere days after the wreck, we cannot be sure if the author purposefully excluded these details or was simply unaware of them; however, the length and placement of the article about the *Sultana* does reveal a certain lack of attention paid to the explosion.

Published in a local newspaper, this source was likely written in an attempt to keep the public abreast of national and local news. Additionally, newspapers by their very nature indicate the priorities of their readers; newspaper editors seek to maximize their distribution by including articles they believe the public will find informative and important. Since the *Sultana* was featured after an article about the President’s funeral arrangements, the public was seemingly more interested in the upcoming funeral than in the deaths of the soldiers aboard the *Sultana*.

By comparison, the *Daily Enquirer* featured an article about the *U.S.S. Hatteras* shipwreck in 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, a much smaller wreck which was given much larger media attention. The headline, “A Terrible Spot – Latest from *Hatteras*” on October 31, 1861, appears on the front page and covers over fifty lines of text.¹⁷ The *Daily Enquirer* gave far greater attention to the *U.S.S. Hatteras*, and yet there were only two deaths and five injuries as a result of that wreck. Despite the enormous scale of the *Sultana* in contrast with the *U.S.S. Hatteras*, the seven casualties of the earlier wreck were featured far more prominently by this Ohio newspaper. This suggests that the readers of the *Daily Enquirer* were less interested in the *Sultana*, because the deaths of 1,800 soldiers no longer shocked readers after the devastating violence of the American Civil War. Additionally, the same paper featured a full seventy-two lines on the front page about a Scottish vessel caught in a gale in February, 1861.¹⁸ The *Elliott of Arbrath*, Scotland, was on her way to Bristol when the temperature suddenly dropped more than twenty degrees and the wind picked up dramatically. One crew member fell overboard and could not be saved; two more died from cold and exposure during the night. The particular attention paid to this wreck by the *Daily Enquirer* is curious, as only three men were lost and the wreck occurred across the Atlantic Ocean. It is unlikely that the readers of the *Daily Enquirer* knew anyone involved, yet it was given greater coverage than the *Sultana* in which thousands of American soldiers per-

SAD ACCIDENT ON THE MISSISSIPPI. THE SULTANA BLOWN UP. 1400 LIVES LOST

NEW YORK, April 28.—A private dispatch from St. Louis reports a terrible accident down the Mississippi river. The steamer *Sultana* exploded and sunk, and a great number of lives were lost—all soldiers.

ST. LOUIS, April 28.—A telegram received by the military authorities from New Madrid says the steamer *Sultana*, with two thousand paroled prisoners, exploded. Fourteen hundred lives were lost.

CAIRO, April 28.—The steamer *Sultana* from New Orleans, the evening of the 21st, arrived at Vicksburg with boilers leaking badly. She remained thirty hours repairing, and taking on 1,000 federal soldiers and 35 officers, lately released from Cahawba and Andersonville prisons. She arrived at Memphis last evening, and after coaling proceeded on. About 2 a. m., when seven miles up she blew up, and immediately took fire and burned to the waters edge. Of 2,100 souls aboard, not more than 700 will be recovered. Five hundred were rescued and are now in hospital. Two or three hundred, uninjured, are at the Soldier’s House.

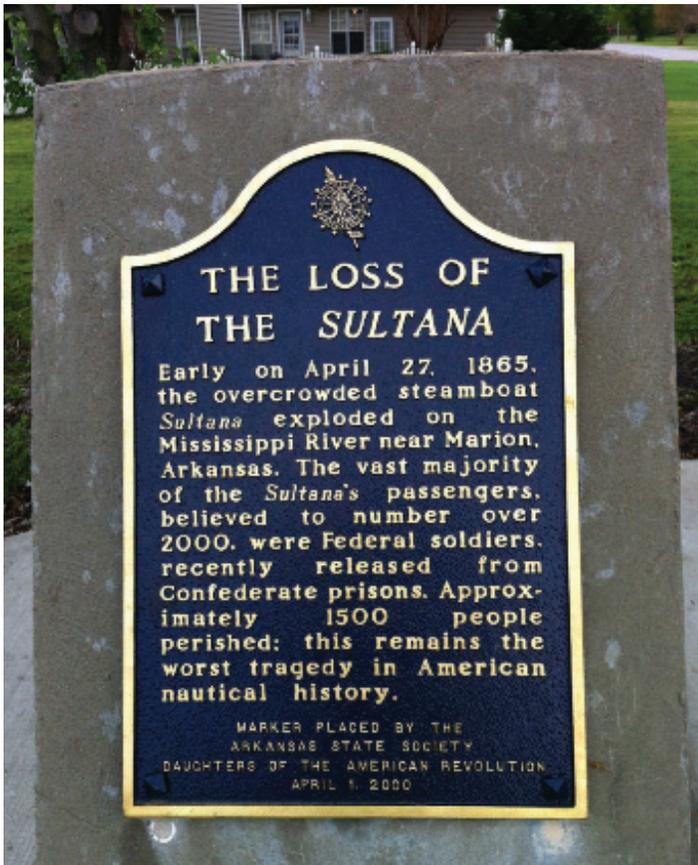
Capt. Mason, of the *Sultana*, is supposed to be lost. At 4 this morning the river in front of Memphis was covered with soldiers struggling for life, many badly scalded. Boats immediately went to the rescue and are still engaged in picking them up. Gen. Washburne immediately organized a board of officers to investigate the affairs. No further particulars received.

Excerpt from the Hartford Daily Courant (April 29, 1865)
Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers

ished. Evidently, the *Daily Enquirer*’s editor believed readers would be more interested in the *U.S.S. Hatteras* and the *Scottish Elliott* than they would be in the wreck of the *Sultana*.

Although the *Sultana* disaster was not the first priority for readers in Cincinnati, it was nevertheless mentioned in newspapers across the country. Based in the Union city of Hartford, Connecticut, the *Hartford Daily Courant* gave its readers thirty-two lines on page three of six about the *Sultana* disaster on April 29, 1865.¹⁹ The newspaper evidently received a number of telegraphs on the subject, from New York, St. Louis, and Cairo, and featured the details of the telegraphs in an article entitled, “Sad Accident on the Mississippi: The *Sultana* Blown Up, 1400 Lives Lost.” Like the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, the *Daily Courant* specifies that “a great number of lives were lost – all soldiers.” The article goes

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Historic marker of the *Sultana* disaster in Marion, Arkansas (2012)

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* (DavGreg)

on to describe the *Sultana*'s arrival in Vicksburg with "boilers leaking badly," where she stayed over a day to have the boilers repaired and to take on released P.O.W.s for transport. This newspaper also neglects to mention the subpar nature of the repairs, perhaps because this information was not publicly available at this point. Nestled among advertisements for clothing and food, the article about the *Sultana* does not appear to be one the newspaper editor believed would capture the public attention. It is preceded by an article detailing the whereabouts of Jefferson Davis, an account of the recent shooting of Senator Sumner, and a description of the weather forecast in Connecticut.

The article about the *Sultana* lacks several major details, including the extreme overcrowding on the ship which far surpassed its legal capacity and the emergency repairs done to the boiler of the *Sultana* just before the explosion. In fact, the article states that "All seemed well up to the time of the accident" and reassures readers that "all eastern men were saved." Given that the readers of this newspaper lived in the east, it would appear that the readership would have been particularly concerned with the fate of eastern men on board. The journalist assuages any fears by telling readers that the men they would have known have survived the wreckage. Fur-

thermore, the journalist lists the number of survivors first, adding the number of casualties almost as an afterthought. This fact is underscored by the light tone of the article and sheds light on the author's purpose for writing. However, the author does address the universal nature of the tragedy, stating, "The troops on board represented every state in the Union." Although the *Sultana* could have become a national tragedy of great magnitude because of the enormous loss of life of men from every state, this newspaper chose not to draw attention to the story by placing it inconspicuously on page three.

This article provides evidence that the media gave little attention to the *Sultana* in the days following its shipwreck, favoring other news stories instead. The weather, the shooting of a senator, and the whereabouts of the president of the former Confederate States took precedent over the *Sultana*, as did a number of local advertisements. In contrast, the same paper devoted an entire column, over 100 lines of text, on page two to the explosion of the U.S.S. *Merrimac*.²⁰ The wreck was described in vivid and meticulous detail, with phrases such as "an explosion took place that made the earth and water tremble for miles" and "a most beautiful sight [which] attracted thousands of spectators." There were no casualties of this explosion, as it was planned to avoid capture of the ship. We must therefore ask why the *Daily Courant* chose to devote such an enormous amount of text to this wreck in which not a single person was injured, while the *Sultana*, the deadliest maritime disaster in American history, was given much less attention just a few years later. Both wrecks provided opportunity for rich description of shocking images to entertain readers, but the paper opted to describe only the earlier wreck in such detail. One wreck resulted in an appalling number of casualties, while the other caused none at all; so why would the paper choose to give them such uneven attention? I argue that the readers of the *Daily Courant* were much less interested in the *Sultana* because it occurred in the midst of sociopolitical upheaval after years of deadly conflict. While 1,800 deaths might have shocked the readers of the *Daily Courant* in 1861, by 1865 they had grown accustomed to much greater numbers of casualties. For this reason, the editors tucked the story of the *Sultana*'s tragic demise among advertisements and details about the weather, rather than on the front page as they might have done before the horrors of Civil War shook the nation.

The third and final newspaper which I will examine is *The Daily Picayune*, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, a former Confederate state. Founded in 1840, *The Daily Picayune* was one of two major newspapers in the city of New Orleans in the antebellum period, and the papers later merged after the war. A full month after the *Sultana* disaster, *The Daily Picayune* devoted seventy-three lines on page three to the court martial findings regarding the wreck.²¹ The article details the final journey of the *Sultana*, beginning in New Orleans, then arriving in Vicksburg with a badly leaking boiler. The author

claims that the boiler repair work “was well done, so far as it went, but sufficient repairs were not made;” however, the court martials evidently found that this neglect “did not materially endanger the safety of the boat.” The article continues by describing the overcrowded nature of the boat, saying that while this was not terribly dangerous, there was “no military necessity for placing them all upon one boat.” The article fails to explain why Captain Mason chose to cram his ship so far past capacity; there is no mention of the bounty offered by the government per P.O.W. transported in the months following the war. While the article does say that the *Sultana* exploded due to a boiler malfunction, there is no graphic description of the scene of the wreckage, nor is the number of casualties given. We can reasonably assume that a month after the wreck, this information was available, and thus the newspaper made a decision not to include those details in the article.

By contrast, this same newspaper devoted a considerable amount of space to several earlier shipwrecks with far fewer casualties. On November 11, 1860, *The Daily Picayune* featured 120 lines about the death of a gentleman by the name of Sheridan Knowles in the wreck of the steamer Arctic.²² Mr. Knowles was a banker native to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and had traveled to Russia to make arrangements for the fulfillment of a recent business contract with the Russian government. While en route to St. Petersburg, the Arctic experienced heavy winds from the northwest, as described in vivid detail in *The Daily Picayune*. Mr. Knowles was one of several passengers to perish in the wreck, including three women and a child who were washed overboard by a fierce wave. The survivors were stranded with no food for two days before being found and rescued, with most of those onboard the Arctic living to tell the tale. This lengthy article appears toward the end of the issue of *The Daily Picayune*, but it takes up significantly more space than the article about the *Sultana* just a few years later. In March of the next year, the same newspaper covered another shipwreck extensively: the wreck of the *Mary Kingsland* of New York.²³ The ship was run aground by strong winds on the coast of Florida, and the nearby lighthouse keeper refused to give the survivors provisions or relief. They waited for several days until rescue arrived, with no casualties of the wreck. This story was covered by *The Daily Picayune* on March 22, 1861, in an article of nearly 100 lines, despite the fact that nothing was lost in the wreck except the boat itself (a yacht valued at nearly \$1000). Both the Arctic and the *Mary Kingsland* shipwrecks resulted in far fewer casualties than the *Sultana*, yet the *Sultana* was given much less space in *The Daily Picayune* and was discussed in much less detail. By the end of the Civil War, the readers of *The Daily Picayune* were not as interested in tales of death and destruction as they had been in the early 1860s when the Arctic and the *Mary Kingsland* wrecked.

All three of the above newspapers, *The Daily Enquirer*, *The Daily Courant*, and *The Daily Picayune*, had an established

behavior of lengthy articles covering shipwrecks in great detail before the Civil War, especially if those disasters resulted in death or injury. However, by the time the *Sultana* tragedy occurred, each of these papers had reduced the amount of space devoted to deaths, covering the 1,800 lives lost in the tragic explosion of the *Sultana* in the most minimal of terms. The placement and length of articles, decisions made by the newspaper editors, indicate what the editor believed readers would find most compelling. Therefore, the movement and reduction of the space allotted to deadly shipwrecks indicates a decrease in public interest in maritime deaths during the Civil War. These are just a sample of newspapers, and in fact this trend can be observed in newspapers around the country from this time period. Not only was the *Sultana* overshadowed by the shocking death of the President and the long-awaited end of the Civil War, but it was also largely neglected by the American public because the public simply was not interested. By April 1865, the readers of these papers and others were no longer gripped by harrowing tales of death at sea, as the newspapers had been filled with nothing but death for the past four years of brutal civil war.

DISCUSSION

No historian works in a bubble, and thus insight into historical events is always built upon the work of other historians. The challenge in this particular case, however, is that hardly any historians have written about the *Sultana* disaster, despite its shocking scale. Fewer than five books exist on the subject, one of which was not written by a historian but by a policeman by the name of Jerry Potter who researches history in his free time. He spent years compiling eyewitness and survivor accounts, photographs, newspaper articles, and government documents into a book entirely about the *Sultana* disaster, and since its publication, Potter has also appeared in a documentary on the subject.²⁴ Potter contends that the reason the *Sultana* was forgotten was the individuals who perished onboard; these were poor men, valued less by American society than the rich and famous.²⁵ Substitute laws enabled wealthy men to pay poor men to take their place and avoid the draft, which meant that the majority of soldiers in the Civil War came from poor families; it was, in essence, ‘a rich man’s war but a poor man’s fight.’ In addition to the national attention being focused on President Lincoln’s assassination and the end of the war in April 1865, Potter believes that the *Sultana* disaster has been forgotten because history does not remember the common man. His contention is supported by the memoir of William Floyd, who wrote that the nation forgot those lost in the *Sultana* disaster because they “were merely soldiers,” among other reasons to be discussed later in this section.²⁶ Indeed, the circumstances of the wreck support the notion that soldiers’ lives were undervalued. Captain Mason was offered twice the reward for transporting an officer as he was an ordinary soldier, and the uncomfortably full decks of the *Sultana* would surely have been unimaginable with wealthier passengers. Several of the articles I studied used phrases such as “mere soldiers” to describe the victims of the

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disaster; however, nothing in my research indicates that the socioeconomic status of those who perished in better-covered shipwrecks was better or worse than those onboard the *Sultana*. Further research could explore the media coverage of soldiers' deaths throughout the war and analyze whether the amount of space dedicated per death decreased over the course of the war. One could make a claim the nation was particularly desensitized to the deaths of soldiers at this particular moment in American history.

Mississippi-based journalist Alan Huffman published the most recent account of the sinking of the *Sultana* in 2009.²⁷ His account is perhaps more embellished than a historian would have written, focusing on three soldiers in particular and describing their experiences before and during the disaster. Huffman describes their service in the western theater, their incarceration in brutal P.O.W. camps, and their battle for survival in the cold waters of the Mississippi. In the course of this account, however, Huffman does not offer an explanation as to why journalists at the time and historians since have written so little about the *Sultana*. His work focuses primarily on breathing life into this forgotten chapter of American history, with little insight other than to blame corruption for the ship's overcrowded and poorly repaired state at the time of the explosion.

In his article for the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* in 1976, Wilson Yager wrote that the *Sultana* "captured public attention only briefly before fading into relative obscurity in the general interest and excitement attending the end of the war and events surrounding Abraham Lincoln's assassination."²⁸ In his subsequent description of the wreck, he offers no further explanation of the disaster's relatively small amount of coverage other than it being overshadowed by the grand events of April 1865. While I agree that President Lincoln's assassination and the dissolution of the Confederacy surely captivated the nation's attention at this time, my research also led me to believe that there is more to the story than this. Further research could include a historiographical approach to the event, asking not only why newspapers at the time did not cover the *Sultana* in great detail but also why historians of the Civil War period have neglected to write about the wreck.

Eyewitness William Floyd offered several explanations on this account in his memoir of the disaster.²⁹ Blaming the wreck itself on government corruption and greed on the part of Captain Mason, Floyd suspected the federal government might have intervened to minimize media coverage at the

time of the shipwreck. My research did not address this question, but further study could seek to find evidence of such a cover-up, including internal government communications and communications with newspapers at the time. Floyd also believed that the disaster was forgotten because "those lost in the *Sultana* were merely soldiers, and it occurred at a time when loss of life was taken for granted."³⁰ Like Potter, Floyd saw a connection between the social status of those who perished in the accident and their disappearance into obscurity. His experience of American culture at that period also supports my thesis, that the American public was desensitized to death after years of bloody warfare.

The paltry amount of historical writing on this subject means that there are ample research opportunities to be had surrounding the *Sultana* disaster. Further study of the *Sultana* can give us greater insight into the maritime experience of the Civil War, the lives and relative social standing of soldiers, the role of corruption in the American government at the time, public sympathy to the deaths of soldiers, and much more. In closing, I invite historians of the American Civil War to seek out answers to the research questions posed above and the many other facets of this shipwreck which remain, as of yet, unexplored.

CONCLUSION

The *Sultana* disaster of April 27, 1865, remains unmatched in total casualties among American maritime disasters, yet the tragic story of this shipwreck has been largely neglected by historians. A clue to this neglect lies in the media coverage afforded to the wreck at the time, which was minimal and often lacking key details. Whereas shipwrecks with few or no deaths were often featured in lengthy articles on the front page of American newspapers before the Civil War, by April 1865 the vast majority of newspapers devoted far less space to the *Sultana*. The deaths of nearly 1,800 soldiers therefore faded into obscurity, neglected by their contemporaries and forgotten by historians. The decreasing coverage of maritime deaths from 1861-1865 indicates that national interest in deaths waned during this period, according to the perceptions of newspaper editors who chose how much space to devote to the *Sultana* and other shipwrecks at the time. Whether this trend was a result of bias against soldiers of poor backgrounds, a purposeful government cover-up, or as I contend, desensitization to death after the Civil War, is a question which demands further research. We can be certain, however, that the particular timing of this shipwreck had an enormous impact on its place in American national attention and historical consciousness. 🏛️

Endnotes

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