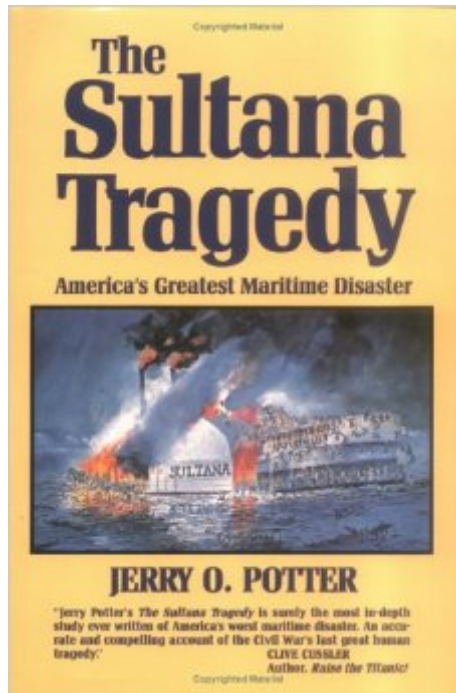


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# The Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster



## Synopsis

On April 27, 1865, the Sultana, a 260-foot, wooden-hulled steamboat, exploded on the Mississippi River near Memphis, Tennessee. More than 1,800 men died.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I finished reading The Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster on December 7 while on vacation in Aruba. The news of that day was that it was 58 years since that infamous day at Pearl Harbor. Yet it struck me odd that practically no one today was aware of the Sultana tragedy of April 27, 1865. The 2300 killed by the enemy at Pearl Harbor were only slightly higher than the estimated 1800 who lost their lives that forgotten night with the Sultana. As my fifth and seventh grade sons stepped into the overheated Jacuzzi to listen to Jerry Potter's story, the initial shock of the excessive hot water put them in an appropriate listening mood. Memphis Attorney Potter's study of the disaster is no doubt the most comprehensive examination of this 133-year-old incident. Why, I wondered, why did this disaster become lost in the memories of America? While I have vague memories of the Sultana from my Tennessee history professors and Memphis law school days, Potter's book easily captivated my attention as I roved through its 300 pages with 655 footnotes, pictures and a comprehensive list of the passengers. Perhaps, this history was lost because of timing. April 1865 had seen headlines of the end of the Civil War, the assassination of President Lincoln and the capture of John Wilkes Booth. And the Eastern newspapers were apparently not that interested in what happened on America's western front. My sons being very familiar with last year's top movie, "Titanic," gave their full attention as I explained what I had just read. As a 31 year

veteran of the Army and history buff, it puzzled me also why the Army has not covered this topic substantially. The Titanic's 1522 deaths are less than the 1800 who died with the Sultana. Of the approximately 765 individuals who immediately survived the disaster, nearly half would die within days of their recovery from the dark and cold Mississippi River. These U.S. prisoners of war had just endured the worst of all times at the infamous Andersonville and Cahaba prison camps. Over 20,000 US POWs had died during imprisonment while the South had over 23,000 of its prisoners to die in Northern prisons. Many recently released prisoners, weighing in at less than 100 pounds, believed that they were finally going home after the War. The worst was over they thought. The Sultana Steamship, one of the largest and best steamers supposedly every made, was only designed to carry 376 passengers. In the hurry to leave Vicksburg, an estimated 2500+ passengers crowded aboard, including crew and other non-military passengers. The Steamship Captain hurried a boiler repair that remains the primary suspect of the explosion, yet others believed that perhaps a revengeful Rebel might have placed explosives in the coal. Bribery, political influence, greed, indifference, criminal misconduct, and gross stupidity allowed the overloading of the ship at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Visions of being home in a few days perhaps were worth the crowding in the minds of these ex-prisoners who had seen much worst. Prior to departure, the steamer's first clerk remarked that this would be greatest trip ever made on western waters since there were more people on the Sultana's board than previously carried on any one boat in the Mississippi River. The Sultana also carried a large store of freight of sugar, wine, mules, hogs, and the crew's pet alligator. Due to the spring time floods of the Mississippi River, water was cold and swift; the river spread several miles as it flowed over fields and its banks. Even though other steamers were available, the ship's crew and passengers wanted to get the trip on. At approximately 2 a.m., April 28, 1865, the worst nightmare that could occur happened. The Sultana's boilers blew sending scalding steam over many passengers; decks crashed pinning hundreds of passengers in an inferno to burned alive, and it was miles to the shore in icy cold water- and there was only one lifeboat. For days following, bodies were found floating in the Mississippi - many unclothed. Animals were found lunching on human carcasses days later. My sons asked why no movies tell the story concerning the Sultana since it includes hundreds of touching stories. Assuming Potter's accurate description, perhaps it is really too tragic for viewers to envision. I wondered where could actors be found to portray the large group of frail men on the steamer? Absent Hitler's holocaust camps, perhaps there have been no collection of humans as frail as these released Confederate Prisoner of War Camp survivors. While citizens of Memphis, whose allegiance had been with the opposing force, opened their homes and care giving to the survivors with true Southern hospitality, the aftermath of seeking

fault and blame paints a sad story. Potter's research included the investigations that followed. Further, the lengthy court-martial of Captain Frederick Speed who was convicted but then set aside by the Army's Judge Advocate General. No doubt this explosion should not have rested on one lowly Captain when others were equally or more responsible. Although it is apparent that there were many faults in arriving at the disaster and even questions as to what caused the Sultana's boilers' to explode, the matter was swept under the rug. Most tragic is the manner in which this country treated these victims. This feeling is best summarized by a bitter survivor: "The men who endured the torments of a hell on earth, starved, famished from thirst, eaten with vermin, having endured all the indignities, insults and abuses possible for an armed bully to bestow upon them, to be so soon forgotten does not speak well for our government or for the American people."

For the serious Civil War researcher, *The Sultana Tragedy* is a very seriously well researched book. For an average reader, *The Sultana Tragedy* is gripping only in that the subject matter has barely been covered anywhere else, and the book lacks any gripping narrative. What it is a very unbiased account of a little known disaster, the explosion and sinking of the steamship Sultana. Over 1800 recently released Union soldiers, heading home from Southern POW camps perished, setting a body count that was higher than that of the Titanic, but almost completely overlooked

This is a little known event in the Civil War era. The Sultana was carrying released Union prisoners of war from Vicksburg to Camp Chase in Ohio. Due to an incomplete repair of one of the four boilers and the vast over crowding of the steamship, there was a huge explosion a few miles above Memphis on the Mississippi River. The explosion and sinking resulted in the loss of between one-two thousand people, mostly soldiers. Potter, who is a lawyer by trade, investigates why there were so many soldiers on board and why the boiler repair was incomplete. His theory is that the Captain-Mason bribed the Head Quartermaster Hatch so that all the released soldiers were placed on board the Sultana rather than two other steamships. The Captain also hastened the repairs of the boiler rather than take the ship out of service. This set the situation up for the accident. These two factors caused the ship to roll much and the boilers were affected. When the boilers blew, the resulting fire doomed a great majority of men. Potter also describes life in the Confederate prisoner of war camps and what it was like for those who had to live a life in one. These soldiers were indeed weakened to the point where they could not muster much energy to save themselves when the steamship was sinking. When they went into the water, most drowned. This is a great short read on a little known event of the Civil War. Potter did a great job writing a very informative history of a little

known tragedy.

We have a museum in our little river town , it is a sternwheeler from the early 20's , I used to go there with my friends and brothers and roam around and just soak up history...on one of the walls (that were filled with memorabilia and posters) was a poster of the Sultana with a drawing of it blowing up and telling of the great loss of life...so when my brother told me of a book he read of the event I had to get it too...this book covers the ship's last voyage from beginning to end and is very good...I learned a lot from this book..a lot of interesting photos too...

One of the returning Union POW's on the Sultana was my 3rd Great-Uncle Pvt. Wesley Lee of the Ohio 102nd Infantry. Uncle Wesley was one of the fortunate ones. He survived that awful disaster. Jerry Potter has done a great service to Uncle Wesley's comrades who perished in the Sultana explosion and aftermath. His excellent research, along with Gene Salecker's earlier work, goes a long way to bringing to light what has to rank as America's most "forgotten" tragedy. No Civil War library shelf is complete without this book.

Nonfiction. I have read almost every book on the Sultana on in preparation for my own novel. This is the mos beloved version of the story written with attentin to detail and a lot of heartfelt sincerity.

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