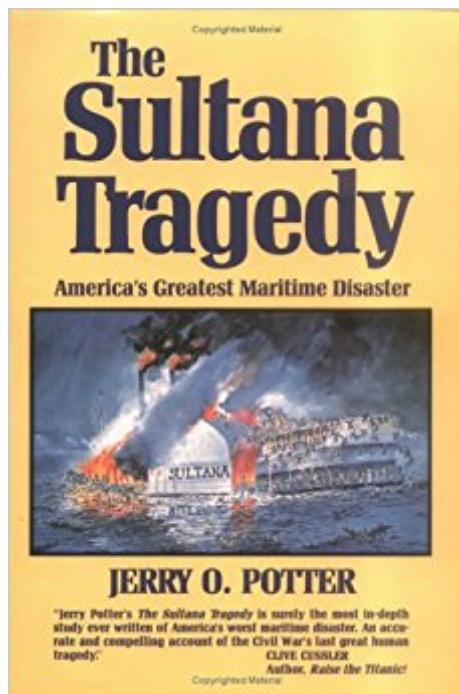


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# The Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster



## 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

On the night of April 27, 1865, a wooden-hulled steamer overloaded with war-weary Union soldiers exploded and sank on the Mississippi River near Memphis, Tennessee. More than 1,800 soldiers, veterans of some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War and survivors of the Andersonville and Cahaba prison camps, died en route to their homes and families in the North. The magnitude of the catastrophe was overshadowed by the turbulent events that shook our nation and filled the newspaper headlines in April of 1865—namely the end of the Civil War, the assassination of President Lincoln, and the capture of John Wilkes Booth. As a result, the explosion of the Sultana has been all but passed over in the pages of history. In this first ever comprehensive study of the disaster, author Jerry O. Potter brings to light the cause of the explosion, and the investigation and cover-up which followed. Emphasizing the needlessness of the tragedy, Potter reveals the greed, indifference, criminal misconduct, and gross stupidity which led to the loading at Vicksburg of 2,300 men onto a boat designed for 376. This authoritative work contains abundant photographs and illustrations, as well as the most complete list of the ship's passengers available. Potter, a Memphis lawyer, first became interested in the Sultana over a decade ago when he saw a painting of the burning ship. Determined that the Sultana should not be forgotten, Potter researched newspaper accounts, the three existing books on the subject, and previously unused original military and

government documents. Through these sources, he has created the truly definitive study of this great tragedy which even today stands as the worst maritime disaster in American history.

"Lee Surrenders!" "President Murdered!" "Booth Killed!" screamed the headlines of American newspapers in April 1865, leaving little room for mention of a maritime disaster that to this day stands as America's worst. On April 27, 1865, the Sultana, a 260-foot, wooden-hulled steamboat-smaller than the Titanic but carrying more passengers-exploded on the Mississippi River near Memphis, Tennessee. More than 1,800 men, mostly Union soldiers on their way home from Confederate prison camps, died. On board were over 2,400 passengers-six times the ship's legal capacity. Although jubilant about the war's end, most of the men were weakened by malnutrition and disease from their imprisonment at Andersonville and Cahaba. Hundreds who were not killed in the explosion drowned in the cold, swift waters of the muddy Mississippi River. Because of the timing of the sinking, coverage of the Sultana's demise was scant, and the tragedy has passed almost unnoticed in the pages of American history. A bitter survivor would write: "The men who had 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 the American people." In this highly documented book, author Jerry O. Potter focuses on how greed, indifference, gross stupidity, and criminal misconduct reaching as far as the White House led to the overloading of the Sultana at Vicksburg. Such irresponsible conduct characterized the actions of an entire chain of army command, President Lincoln, and several profit-hungry civilians. This authoritative work contains abundant photographs and illustrations, as well as the most complete list of the ship's passengers available.

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 Camps 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."

I thought that I knew all there was to know about the subject of this well documented book. However, author Potter presents a much more complete insight to the "Tragedy" and the reasons for its demise than any other source I have seen. For those who remember Paul Harvey and his trademark telling of an event, stopping at what seemed to be the end, then after a break would say, "Now for the rest of the story" Jerry Potter does exactly that by providing missing pieces of the Sultana Tragedy. Includes numerous period photos and an extensive list of the names of the crew; civilian passengers; soldier's names, rank, co., regiment, and state. In addition, those who died are identified as are those who were buried in Memphis National Cemetery. Potter's book was first published in 1992. In 2009, Alan Huffman wrote a book on the Sultana disaster. He cites Potter, among other works that only mention the Sultana. Potter is a lawyer, Huffman is a freelance journalist. Both write "good reads."

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.

With four men from Marion County Ohio surviving the sinking it is of great interest to me. There is a possibility there may be more Marion County men who were there.

Took us back in time. Someone should adapt this and make it a movie. Paints a very vivid picture of the Civil War Era disaster which is pretty much unknown to most Americans.

Forget the Titanic, the Sultana killed over 2000 prisoners of war when she blew up towards the end of the civil war. This detailed account of the tragedy and aftermath is very well done.

A great description of the vessel and a fascinating run-down of the terrible consequences of ignored responsibility and pathetic corruption by those in charge.

I bought this book for myself. It was interesting to read about this tragedy. The book was shipped promptly and was reasonable. I would recommend it.

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