



Disaster on the Mississippi: The Sultana Explosion, April 27, 1865

Gene Eric Salecker

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At two o'clock in the morning on 27 April 1865, seven miles north of Memphis on the Mississippi, the sidewheel steamboat *Sultana's* boilers suddenly exploded. Legally registered to carry 376 people, the boat was packed with 2,100 recently released Union prisoners-of-war. Over 1,700 people died, making it the worst marine disaster in U.S. history. This book looks at the disaster through the eyes of the victims themselves. It offers a concise, minute-by-minute account on the cause of the explosion and its effect on different parts of the boat.

To focus on the personal stories of the victims, both civilian and soldier, Gene Eric Salecker patiently collected material from hundreds of letters, period newspaper stories, and other sources. Readers are first introduced to victims while they are languishing in Confederate prisons and follow their release to an exchange camp outside of Vicksburg to their eventual crowding onto the *Sultana*. His knowledgeable narrative is interwoven with individual reminiscences, including those of the heroic rescuers. He offers unprecedented details about the captain's handling of the steamboat and corrects some long-held myths about the placement of the soldiers on the *Sultana* and newspaper coverage of the disaster.

A large portion of the book covers rescue attempts, both successful and failed, and the aftermath of the disaster as it affected those involved. With its emphasis on the human-interest aspect of the *Sultana*, this book brings to the literature a critical point of view and much new information.

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