

Sultana: Greatest Maritime Tragedy in United States History;
A Nation's Best Kept Secret

May, 2015

Lindsay S. Scott
529 Gascony Avenue
Springdale, AR 72764

Originally prepared for the online exhibit "As Much as the Water: How Steamboats Shaped
Arkansas"

University of Arkansas at Little Rock: Center for Arkansas History and Culture
May, 2015

Abstract.

The disaster of *Sultana* has been recognized as the greatest maritime tragedy in United States history. The wreck has little notoriety, despite its significance, due to historical overshadowing and a terminal resting place in the landlocked state of Arkansas. Efforts for salvage were immediate, but archaeological undertakings have been cautious and sporadic. An unwelcoming landscape and lack of interest and funding have consorted so that after 150 years have passed, little has yet to be done in the way of recognizing the event. A team of historians, lawyers, city officials, celebrities, and academics have taken it upon themselves to combat the Mighty, muddy Mississippi, a possibly taboo excavation, and a crippling anonymity in hopes to finally

afford this disaster the prestigious recognition it deserves, both in a historical and maritime setting.

The steamboat *Sultana* met a tragic end on 27 April 1865. It solidified its place in maritime history when the boilers exploded, sending the grossly overloaded steamer into chaos and killing hundreds of recently released Union prisoners of war. Although historically significant, the wreck has little notoriety due to overshadowing by President Lincoln's and John Wilkes Booth's deaths and a terminal resting place in the landlocked state of Arkansas. Salvage efforts were made in 1865 only to provide evidence for the subsequent court hearings, but the wreckage has since been left mainly untouched.

Survivors of the *Sultana* disaster were left forever changed. Bonded by tragedy and a need for recognition, remembrance groups began forming in 1885. The current leading group, the Association of *Sultana* Descendants and Friends, successfully petitioned U.S. Congress to pass a resolution acknowledging the *Sultana* tragedy as the "Greatest Maritime Disaster in United States History." Their efforts also spurred a documentary about *Sultana* called "Remember the *Sultana*," funded and sponsored by actor Sean Astin (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Rudy*) and producer Mark Marshall. Members of this group have created a legal non-profit organization: *Sultana* Historic Preservation Society. The Society (funded by the city and open to donations) is responsible for the current temporary exhibit of *Sultana* artifacts as well as the plans for the permanent *Sultana* Museum set to open by 2020 in Marion, Arkansas.

It was Jerry Potter, (attorney, association member, and author of *The Sultana Tragedy*), who proposed the first modern location of the wreckage in May 1982. After extensive historical research, he teamed with author Clive Cussler to use a water probe that came up with samples of glass and charred wood, which they took as location verification. Several entities

have conducted studies since then, including Panamerican Consultants, Inc. and PBS while doing research for the “Civil War Sabotage?” episode of their TV show, *History Detectives*. All of them agree on a general location for a metal anomaly, in the middle of a soybean field on private property on a stretch of riverbank that would most likely harbor many wreck sites. There has yet to be any definitive proof that the site of the anomaly is *Sultana*.

Because there is no proven exact location of the wreckage, and the location in question is very near the Arkansas/Tennessee border, there is some debate as to who has legal archaeological jurisdiction over the site. However, The Arkansas Archaeology Survey has mapped and surveyed it several times since the 1980s, though not much more has been done archaeologically on the location. From a legal standpoint, due to the number of soldiers who went down with the boat or were buried nearby after its sinking, any excavation would have to be conducted by professional excavators who have received permits in accordance with Act 753 of 1991 of the Arkansas Burial Law. Beyond that, excavation would require the approval of the land owner, U.S. Army, and conservators for the artifacts, etc. As for the families and descendants, they firmly believe the location of the wreck is “hallowed ground,” and should never be excavated, and that the location should never be made public.

With these varied beliefs and motives, it is difficult to predict what will become of the wreckage of *Sultana* in the future. Regardless, various groups have taken it upon themselves to raise awareness for *Sultana*, and to celebrate the lives of those men and women who spent their last day with her. With their efforts, they hope to finally afford this disaster the prestigious recognition it deserves.

Sources

Berry, Chester

1892 *Loss of The Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors*. Darius Dr. Thorp, MI.

“Civil War Sabotage?”

2014 History Detectives. PBS. Season 11, Episode 1. Online at <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/investigation/civil-war-sabotage/>
Accessed 17 October 2014.

Elliott, Joseph Taylor

1913 “The Sultana Disaster,” *Indiana Historical Society Publication*, 3.

Levstick, Frank

1974 “The Sinking of the Sultana,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, XII January.

Potter, Jerry

1992 *The Sultana Tragedy*. Pelican Publishing Company, Inc. LA.

Samuel, Ray, Leonard Huber, and Warren Odgen

1955 *Tales of the Mississippi*. Hastings House, NY.

Lindsay Scott is an Arkansas native. Born and raised in Fort Smith, she graduated from Northside High School and went on to earn a Bachelor’s in Marketing and Management from the Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas. Her postgraduate work was conducted in the Program for Maritime Studies at East Carolina University in North Carolina. She has worked on various projects, but her passion is for Civil War ships, and especially for the steamboat *Sultana*. Lindsay’s studies in nautical archaeology and maritime history have led her to a life of adventure, though she always comes back home to Arkansas.