



# **Sinking the Sultana: A Civil War Story of Imprisonment, Greed, and a Doomed Journey Home**

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**The worst maritime disaster in American history wasn't the *Titanic*. It was the steamboat *Sultana* on the Mississippi River -- and it could have been prevented.**

In 1865, the Civil War was winding down and the country was reeling from Lincoln's assassination. Thousands of Union soldiers, released from Confederate prisoner-of-war camps, were to be transported home on the steamboat *Sultana*. With a profit to be made, the captain rushed repairs to the boat so the soldiers wouldn't find transportation elsewhere. More than 2,000 passengers boarded in Vicksburg, Mississippi . . . on a boat with a capacity of 376. The journey was violently interrupted when the boat's boilers exploded, plunging the *Sultana* into mayhem; passengers were bombarded with red-hot iron fragments, burned by scalding steam, and flung overboard into the churning Mississippi. Although rescue efforts were launched, the survival rate was dismal -- more than 1,500 lives were lost. In a compelling, exhaustively researched account, renowned author Sally M. Walker joins the ranks of historians who have been asking the same question for 150 years: who (or what) was responsible for the *Sultana*'s disastrous fate?

## Sinking the Sultana: A Civil War Story of Imprisonment, Greed, and a Doomed Journey Home Details

Date : Published October 10th 2017 by Candlewick Press

ISBN : 9780763677558

Author : Sally M. Walker

Format : Hardcover 208 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, War, Military History, Civil War

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# **From Reader Review Sinking the Sultana: A Civil War Story of Imprisonment, Greed, and a Doomed Journey Home for online ebook**

## **Pamela says**

Like most disaster books, the author begins with the everyday lives of characters who will soon be thrown together in a live-or-die situation. However, in *SINKING THE SULTANA* the author adds an extra layer of pathos: most of the people we meet have already gone through unspeakable horror as Union soldiers recently released from Confederate prison camps. Walker neatly ties in information on the Civil War, how and why riverboats were designed, and the malfeasance of military bureaucrats as the book moves to its terrifying climax. In the midst of so much terror, the rescue efforts show humanity at its best. I won't soon forget the recently-discharged Confederate soldier wearing his uniform (the warmest clothing he has) as he pulls drowning Union soldiers out of the water. Engrossing on every level.

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## **Suzy says**

The worst U.S. maritime disaster, that in likelihood you've never heard of. (Or at least, I hadn't.) The *Sultana*, a Mississippi River steamboat designed to carry 376 passengers was packed, top to bottom, with over 2000 passengers. Many of them were Union soldiers who had been Confederate prisoners of war, survivors of the hell of Andersonville and other prison "camps", who were traveling north to be mustered out of the army to pick up the pieces of their civilian lives. Riverboat owners made a handsome profit transporting military personnel. Other passengers were private citizens who had bought passage on the *Sultana*. When one of the ship's boilers exploded, the ensuing fire and collapse of the vessel was catastrophic, resulting in the deaths of close to 1600 men, women, and children. Remarkably, not only was the disaster largely forgotten to history, but despite evidence of criminal negligence and rumors of bribery, not one person was ever held accountable.

In a strange sort of way, it is reassuring to see that the corruption, greed, and lack of humanity our country is experiencing now is nothing new (and thus can be overcome.) Although the survival rate on the *Sultana* was dismal, the stories of people on the shore -- both Union and Confederate sympathizers -- coming together to heroically rescue close to 500 victims was heartening.

This was a very well-written and researched book that makes me want to read some of the other books written about the *Sultana*.

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## **Rebecca Hill says**

Get ready for a read that will make you sit back and shake your head...

The *Sultana* was a ship that should have had a long and glorious career on the Mississippi river. During the Civil War, shipping along the river was slow, but it could be done. Danger, excitement, and money drove the

trade during the war years.

After the war, there was even more money to be made, and many boats made money by taking soldiers that had been POWs during the war home. They were to be mustered out of the Army and sent home. Many of them were sick, weakened during their time in camps such as Andersonville that housed thousands more than it was originally constructed for. But the needs outweighed the risks. Many, men like Colonel Hatch, found ways to make money during the war. It was these men that created more risks, and opened the door for later criticism from the public.

The Civil War was a defining time for the United States. The Sultana was something that should have never been relegated to the back pages of history, but time and circumstance conspired to bring this tragedy to an almost unknown portion of history. When the tragedy struck, President Lincoln had just been assassinated. The hunt for his killer was front page news. As the nation mourned the loss of its President, hundreds of families mourned their lost loved ones. Men, women, children were all victims of this explosion. Soldiers, families, lives and careers lost in the blinding explosion that ripped through the early morning hours. Families along the Arkansas shores woke to the screams and cries of the wounded. Many sprang into action, saving hundreds from a watery grave. Others slipped from their reach and were lost to the murky waters of the river. The explosion on the Sultana claimed more lives than the sinking of the Titanic, but due to its placing in history, has been lost to the annals of time.

While the public cried out for someone to pay for the loss of life, investigations continued, but no one would pay for the loss in full measure. Few were blamed, and those who should have carried the cost were lost to the military tribunal, simply by having resigned from the army before the investigation was concluded.

This tragedy is something that should not be lost entirely. The sinking was a tragic wake up call to those who sailed the river, and those who traveled along its banks. While the Sultana has been found and mostly reclaimed from the depths, the mystery still remains as to what could have caused the explosion. Sound theories have been put forth, but none have permanently answered the question satisfactorily so far. While the Sultana is once again reclaiming its history and time is allowing us the chance to find and know the names of those who were on board, we may never know its full answer. We might never get the entire list of names of those who were lost, and those who survived. To this day, there are families of those who were lost aboard the Sultana and those who survived who still meet yearly. They are determined to not allow history to swallow this tragedy. For as someone once said "as long as someone remembers my name, I am not entirely lost to time."

I enjoyed this book. It gave a rather interesting look into some of the lives of the men who survived the Civil War - living through the horrors of the prison camps, only to lose their lives while headed home. We get the before, the during and the after in this book. We see what could have caused the explosion, the overcrowding which brought the number of the dead to horrific highs. This is a pretty decent book, and one that allows for those who want to do more research a great jumping off point.

Happy Reading!

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## **American Mensa says**

Sinking the Sultana, by Sally M. Walker, was an intriguing nonfiction account of the Sultana, a prisoner-of-war transport ship that tragically sunk during the Civil War. The Sultana accident took as many lives as the Titanic, but has garnered far less attention. This book takes the reader on a journey from the end of the Civil War to the night of the tragedy, through personal accounts from real soldiers. It is incredibly detailed and packed with informative diagrams and descriptions. I could vividly imagine the physical and emotional

struggles of each soldier onboard, who only wanted to get home to their families after a long, bloody war.

The Sultana was not just a story of loss and tragedy, however. It also showed the power of human emotions in the face of tough decisions. Captain Speed and General Dana, the two people in charge of loading the ships from the prison camp, made some terrible decisions. They piled the Sultana with nearly 2,000 liberated soldiers, far over capacity, just to make a higher profit. Worse yet, they sent away two empty transport ships that were ready to help. Chasing money, they lost sight of the most important thing: transporting the soldiers safely.

Additionally, it was absolutely incredible to read about the soldiers' heroic acts on the night of the sinking. Many sacrificed themselves and spent their last hours throwing objects from the boat to the cold waters below, that others could use to get to land safely. Because of their actions, they had no time to escape and sunk with the ship. I found this simply unfathomable, and I was very moved upon reading about it.

I would recommend this book to girls and boys 12 and above, who enjoy history. This book was enthralling, but may not be appreciated if the reader does not have background knowledge regarding the Civil War.

This book received five stars because it was informative and captivating. I love it when nonfiction books tell a story and don't just state facts, and this book was the epitome of that. Sinking the Sultana gave me a clear view of one of our nation's most tragic events, and stayed with me long after I set it down.

Review by Anya A, age 13, Metropolitan Washington Mensa

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### **Alicia says**

Of great informational nonfiction, this one lies somewhere in the middle, not particularly engaging, but not without literary merit to captivate the audience and tell the sad story of the Sultana-- the largest maritime disaster with loss of human life in American history but because Lincoln had just been assassinated and the war was coming to an end, this did not make the headlines it should have even with the amount of lives lost including multiple soldiers.

It spent a little too much time detailing other pieces of history (not without merit because it does explain the "Civil War story" element in the subtitle, but some tangents were filler. The beauty in the book though includes the many images, documents, and illustrations included to give context to the Mississippi River, steamboats, water transportation, and the war itself with a nice reflection of the continued tragedies that occurred AFTER the sinking itself.

History is never dull and having books like this to share the hidden stories is useful and necessary.

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### **Cindy Vallar says**

On 27 April 1865, Frances Ackley joins her husband on deck of the USS Tyler in the wee hours of the morning. The Mississippi River, where the gunboat is docked, runs higher than normal because of the winter thaw. At 2:30 in the morning, the sky should be dark, but glows orange. All around them, voices plead for help. Two navy cutters quickly launch and, despite her husband's objections, Frances climbs aboard one. For the next hours, she helps rescue man after man. For each man saved, dozens more float past, too far to reach

with the boat hook. Sinking the Sultana recounts the nightmare of that night, as well as the days and months before, and the terrible tragedy that killed so many who had endured so much, but were finally going home.

Walker begins this story by first laying the groundwork so readers understand the river, the evolution of travel on the Mississippi, and time period. Then she introduces some of the men who joined the Union Army, were captured by Confederate forces, and ultimately found themselves aboard the Sultana. Michael Dougherty was a recent emigrant from Ireland. Robert Hamilton came from Tennessee, but fought for the North because he opposed secession. Too young to fight, Stephen Gaston became a bugler. A lawyer in civilian life, J. Walter Elliott had to lie about his identity to stay alive. John Clark Ely, a teacher, kept a record his life in the army and in prison.

The next four chapters examine what life was like inside the notorious prisoner of war camp known as Andersonville, as well as the less familiar, but equally horrendous, Cahaba in Alabama. It quickly becomes apparent why so many died, but readers also learn how the five men mentioned above managed to survive until the war ended and were transferred to Camp Fisk in Vicksburg, Mississippi until transportation home could be arranged. Also covered are the use of steamboats during the war; the building and fitting out of the Sultana (including her lifesaving equipment); a problem that developed with her boilers; and how more than 2,000 POWs ended up aboard a boat that was only supposed to carry 376 passengers.

The final five chapters cover the explosion and its aftermath, how individuals reacted, rescue efforts, and the investigations into what happened and who was found culpable. Walker also discusses the rumors of sabotage, as well as what scientists of today believe caused the accident. To reinforce the magnitude of how many lost their lives, she compares the sinking of Sultana with the sinking of Titanic. Equally revealing are the reasons why the former tragedy isn't as well known as the latter. In addition, she shares efforts by survivors, and later their descendants and interested parties, to make certain that no one forgets this tragedy. In her epilogue, Walker informs readers what happened to the five men she introduced early in the book, where the steamboat is now, and how the Mississippi has changed in the years since that fateful day.

Aside from Walker's chronicling of events, what makes this book come alive are the passages from primary documents, such as Ely's diary, and the many contemporary illustrations. Not only do these put faces to names, they vividly portray the realities of the prisons and the horror of that night. Two particularly poignant photographs show the effects of illness and starvation on an Andersonville prisoner, and the soldiers packed tighter than sardines on Sultana's decks, while an engraving from Harper's Weekly's illustrates the burning inferno and survivors floating in the river. Also included are several maps, a glossary, source notes, a bibliography, and an index. Interspersed throughout the book are several special sections (pages with gray borders) that cover key points that require greater explanation than can be revealed in the normal telling of the story. These are explained in clear language that middle grade readers will readily understand without feeling as if they are being talked down to.

Walker's depiction of this historical event is powerful, moving, and horrifying. After experiencing this book, readers come away with a better understanding that it's never a single event that leads up to the crisis and that when the worst happens, people with disparate beliefs and life experiences willingly set aside their differences to help others, regardless of whether the disaster occurs today or in the past. Sinking the Sultana is a compelling retelling that graphically and realistically portrays the consequences of decisions made and the price paid by innocent people because of "fraud, greed, and clout." (64)

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## Linda says

Thanks to Candlewick Press for my copy of this book. My first thought after finishing this book refers to the author's note. In it, Sally Walker writes: "History and research are all about making connections. Each time a person discovers the Sultana's story--even though it may be many years after the disaster--a connection is established between that person and the people who were on the boat." To learn about the victims and those who helped in the rescue (sometimes the same people) means here in the 21st Century we readers are offering a thought and sympathy to those who experienced this tragedy. We will remember!

Sally Walker clearly did extensive research into this disaster of 1865, nearly the end of the Civil War. I learned a lot about the prisons of that time, the terrible conditions (though in the past I have read Andersonville) and at this time the release, what was termed "paroling", of soldiers. She explained the way that steamboats were constructed to be faster and due to new ideas of boilers, but less understanding of how they worked, this steamboat Sultana was doomed. There also were those greedy men in charge who wanted to board as many soldiers as possible, overloading the boat, because they were paid by the government for the numbers carried. Although this did not cause the explosions, it did mean that many, many more were killed because of cramped conditions.

Numerous people were followed in the story, from prison to survival or death, in the journey--finally--home from the long years of war and imprisonment. And when Sally found more of the stories of these men, wives and children, she also shared that information. Yes, there were also passengers on board in cabins, families and couples heading north.

The book is extensive in the story, written in chapters with pictures and/or maps of the topic or the times. I suspect it would be best for 8th grade and up. It's written in chapters with extensive back matter: author's note, source notes, bibliography, and image credits. I enjoyed it thoroughly, and it made me wonder who will do the research and write the stories of this year's hurricanes or fires, this year's tragedies?

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## Jaina Rose says

This review is also available on my blog, Read Till Dawn.

Going into this book, I knew absolutely nothing about the *Sultana*. I had just finished studying AP US History, but our coverage of the Civil War remained focused on the big things--the politics, the generals, and the major battles. The sinking of the *Sultana* may have been terrible for the people who experienced it (as well as for the friends and families who lost loved ones on it), but it had no real lasting impression on the course of American history.

But still. I can't believe I'd literally never learned anything about the *Sultana* before. I used to be obsessed with the *Titanic*, yet I'd never heard of the largest American maritime disaster?

Anyway, on to the book itself. It's a good length, long enough to include lots of interesting details but not so long as to bore readers who are new to the subject. The first few chapters set the stage, introducing us to some of the prisoners of war and the squalid conditions they were subjected to, before moving on to the end of the war and the liquidation of the prison camps. There were some politics involved with the ships, some pressure placed on the men in authority to pack the *Sultana* as full as they possibly could as opposed to moving some of the men to other ships.

Then there's the description of the actual disaster, which is simply brutal. I had tears in my eyes reading

about all the gruesome scenes that confronted the survivors, all the people—including innocent children—who died horrible deaths that night. It was a terrible scene, a truly horrific one, and I still can't believe that I never knew anything about it before now. I'm sad to have read the book in a way, because it was so horrifying, but also glad that I did and learned about this little-known dark moment in my nation's history.

Disclaimer: I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Zach Koenig says**

Everyone knows the story of the Titanic...a nautical disaster tale that has practically taken on a life of its own. Much less known is the story of the Sultana, which author Sally M. Walker shines a light on in this title.

For a basic plot summary, “Sinking The Sultana” tells the story of the buildup, event, and aftermath of the sinking of the Sultana riverboat (due to a boiler explosion) that was transporting thousands of Union soldiers just released from Confederate prison camps.

Probably the hallmark of this book is the notion that such a momentous event (featuring large loss of life) is so scarcely known in the annals of history. A lot of things are to “blame” for this (the end of the Civil War & Lincoln’s assassination took over headlines before and after the sinking), so Walker does a great job of combing through history and piecing together the events and their times. This very much falls into the category of “narrative nonfiction”, with Walker telling the story in an engaging, almost first-person style. Pictures, sidebars, and different text types are also common occurrences, making the text more accessible to younger readers as well.

About the only potential negative about this reading experience is the amount of buildup that is given. Walker delves into the history of Civil War prison camps, the history of steamships, and even the history of the Mississippi river itself. The sections are well-done, and history buffs will find them fascinating. However, it takes nearly 60 pages to get past the preamble, so to speak, and for the text to really start focusing on the Sultana itself. I found myself becoming a bit impatient in the early goings and really wanting to get on with “the real story”. Not a huge detriment to the overall experience, but could perhaps be more of an issue with younger readers who will be more quick to want to get to the action portrayed on the book’s cover.

Overall, though, “Sinking the Sultana” is a fine, well-crafted book about an event that not many people likely are too familiar with. I found it to be an event well worth revisiting.

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## **Bjipson says**

When the boiler of the Sultana, a Mississippi steamboat, exploded in April of 1865, it killed more people than the Titanic did -- in fact, it was the worst maritime disaster in American history. However, Lincoln had just been assassinated, the war had made Americans numb to deaths and disasters, and many of us have never heard of this sinking. Walker's book is written for middle schoolers but shows careful research and



uses vivid prose that would engage high schoolers and adults as well as her intended younger audience. Illustrations and personal stories of survivors and rescuers help to make this an engaging read.

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### **Hasso von Moltke says**

I have long held a fascination with the Sultana disaster. When I was in elementary school every year the fifth graders did a project on the Mississippi River and its history. They would line the hallways of the school and younger students would go down the hall following a line of blue tape while being taught by the older students about the Mississippi from its start in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. I remember being enthralled by the stop for the Sultana, captured by the story of disaster and heroism. Finally, when I reached the fifth grade, I used our brand new first computer to scour the nascent internet for the stories of those individuals who made that fateful voyage in the spring of 1865. Therefore, the Sultana and its destruction hold a special place in my mind.

When I heard about the release of this book, I was very eager to dig back into the history of the Sultana. I did not initially realize that this was probably intended for a younger audience until I started reading after acquiring an electronic copy through Netgalley.

The first quarter of the book was a bit of a slog as I read through a very basic description of the Civil War, its prison camps, and steamboat. I would have preferred a bit more detailed account of each of these subjects. However, I am very pleased that I kept on reading.

The book shines when it actually gets to the ill-fated voyage itself. I became invested in the interactions between individuals involved on the trip from Vicksburg back to the north, and appreciated the authors ability to compliment the various eyewitness accounts. The explosion and subsequent chaos was the best section of the book, followed by a solid description of the aftermath, from rescue efforts, to the hospitals that cared for the victims, the resumption of the soldiers' journey home, legal proceedings, and the birth of a veteran's association.

One minor caveat, the author has a bit of difficulty making the individuals who are soldiers stand out from one another. All were captured at some point, other than guards placed on the vessel, and held in prison camps in the South. When the story started picking up it became a bit difficult to remember who was who.

All in all, I enjoyed the book. It's a good little narrative of an overlooked disaster that so often gets swallowed up in the larger American Civil War. In spite of some flaws, I gave the book some leeway because I would certainly have loved it had I come across it in fifth grade. It is a good book for younger readers and adults may find many positive qualities in it as well.

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

Reviewed for professional publication.

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## **Julia says**

I received this ARC via LibraryThing's Early Reviewers program.

In the wee hours of the morning of April 27, 1865, having just left Memphis, the steamboat Sultana was steadily making its way upstream on the Mississippi River when one of its boilers exploded. As the rest of the steamboat caught fire and sank, more than 1,100 people lost their lives, making it the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history. What caused the boiler to explode? Was there sabotage? Why was the Sultana carrying 2,155 people, when its legal capacity for passengers was 376?

Although the primary focus is on the disaster itself, learning more about the Civil War, the POW camps, steamboats, and the personal stories of a number of the Sultana's passengers made for a very readable, compelling, well-rounded tale. Recommended for kids fascinated by the Titanic and other types of disasters.

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## **Cat says**

Fascinating historical event. Ms. Walker's book is well worth a read if you are interested in U.S. history, the Civil War, or maritime history in the U.S. in general. Such a tragic story; so many senseless deaths due to greed. Sad tale and worth telling again. It's appalling that no one was ever held accountable for the many deaths and injuries caused by such blatant disregard of human life. Shameful. I'm glad to see a new book appear on the subject to keep the memory of it alive and to provide more food for thought.

I received a Kindle copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for a fair review.

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## **Anne says**

Approximately the same number of people lost their lives in the sinking of the Sultana as did on the sinking of the Titanic. However, one of these events is much better known than the other. This is a fascinating look at the circumstances that caused this terrible accident with such a devastating loss of life. It took place during the Civil War so ties in neatly to 8th grade curriculum.

Well-researched, thorough. The author used diaries and other primary source documents when available. She also met with relatives/descendants of those who were on the ship. Primary source photographs and charts are included whenever possible. There is also a lot of factual information about the Mississippi River itself. I enjoyed learning new things while reading this book. Complete source notes and bibliography at the end. A few suggestions for further learning are also included.

Grades 5-10

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