

DISASTER ON THE MISSISSIPPI
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In April of 1865, the American Civil War was rapidly drawing to its conclusion. Soon, four years of bloodshed, of brother fighting against brother, would come to an end.

Many significant events occurred in the month of April that would draw the attention of the whole country.

Chief among these were the April 9th signing of the surrender terms by Gen. Robert E. Lee, in the Appomattox Court House home of Wilbur McLean. Three days later, the Army of Northern Virginia officially surrendered its weapons to the Federal forces of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, and the Southerners began to return to their homes.

Two days after the formal surrender, on April 14, President Abraham Lincoln was mortally wounded at Ford's Theater by a bullet from the gun of John Wilkes Booth. Although Booth escaped the scene of this horrendous crime, he was finally trapped in a barn south of the Rappahannock River, in Virginia, by Federal troops, and there lost his life.

The following day, an event was to take place on the Mississippi River that was to be overshadowed by the events of the day, and also covered up by the Federal Government. It was to become the worst maritime disaster in American history.

The 260-foot wooden-hulled steamboat, Sultana, which was built at the Lithoberry Shipyard in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1863, was plying the flooded Mississippi, just north of Memphis, Tennessee, with its crew of 85, and a bulging load of over 2,400 passengers, most of whom had boarded the ship at Vicksburg. This was more than six times its official capacity of 376.

Suddenly, at 2:00 a.m., the boilers on the ship blew, and the ensuing fire and subsequent drownings claimed some 1,547 persons, mostly paroled Federal prisoners from Confederate prisons. This number was the official estimate by the Customs Department at Memphis, although other estimates were as high as 1800, due to the improper manner in which the boarding records were handled. These prisoners were heading back to their homes in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, after suffering through the war, and some of the most horrible prison conditions, in places such as Andersonville Prison in Georgia and Cahaba Prison in Alabama.

The Sultana had arrived in Vicksburg on her return trip from New Orleans on the evening of April 23rd. While in Vicksburg, the ship's engineer had hastily patched a small crack in one of the boilers.

Her captain, J. Cass Mason, had been promised a load of paroled prisoners to transport back north. At Vicksburg, he pressured Army officials to give him as many passengers as possible, and stood to be paid almost \$10,000 by the government.

As the boat pulled out of Vicksburg, heading for Cairo, Illinois, the men rejoiced at the prospect of soon being home with their families and loved ones. Little did they know what fate awaited them several hours later.

Following the tragedy, several investigations into the root cause of the disaster were conducted by the government. They came to various conclusions, but most agreed that the explosion was probably caused by insufficient water in the boilers, although the root cause could not be determined.

Charges of bribery concerning the loading of prisoners on the Sultana were considered against several key persons said to be involved in the overloading of the ship. However, the only person indicted in the incident was Capt. Frederic Speed, who, in the absence of Capt. George A. Williams, his immediate superior, was in charge of the shipping of the prisoners. On November 9, 1865, he was arraigned on charges of neglect of duty to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, with two specifications, to which he pled not guilty.

On June 5, 1866, Gen. Charles A. Gilchrist, president of the court, announced that Capt. Speed had been found guilty on all charges. The court then sentenced him to dismissal from the army, and the verdict was forwarded to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for final action.

Stanton referred the verdict to Brig. Gen. Joseph Holt, the Judge Advocate General of the Army, who reversed the court's decision, and found Speed innocent of all charges against him. Holt stated that it was Capt. Williams, not Capt. Speed, who had refused to release any of the soldiers to other ships.

The Secretary of War accepted Gen. Holt's recommendation, and refused to sentence Speed. With the exoneration of Capt. Speed, the government closed its files on the Sultana incident.

Frederic Speed was born in Ithaca, New York on September 22, 1841, the son of Col. John James Speed.

After receiving his public education at Detroit, the family removed to Portland, Maine in 1860. Speed raised the first company from that state to serve in the Union Army. Being too young to hold an official office, he enlisted as a private. He

received promotions to Sergeant-Major, and finally received his first commission as a lieutenant with the Fifth Maine Volunteers.

Speed was eventually appointed as adjutant to Col. Dow for the New Orleans expedition under Gen. Butler. He served in this capacity, with the rank of Captain, under successive commands.

He participated in the Battle of Bull Run, the siege of Port Hudson and in nearly all of the battles of the Department of the Gulf, and was stationed at Mobile, Alabama at war's end. Capt. Speed was honorably discharged from the army on September 1, 1866.

Back again in civilian life, he returned to Vicksburg, Mississippi and entered into the lumber business. He served as the circuit and chancery court clerk for Warren County, Mississippi.

During these years, he also studied law, and was admitted into the practice in 1868. In 1869 he was appointed as the criminal court judge for Warren County.

He later became editor of the Vicksburg "Weekly Times and Republican" newspaper, and was a powerful voice in Mississippi politics.

Speed was married in 1871 to Miss Esther Adele Hillyer.

Speed's Masonic career began in 1866, when he was raised in Harmony Lodge No. 36, in Gorham, Maine, on February 14th.

In 1866, he affiliated with W.H. Stevens Lodge No. 121 in Vicksburg. He was exalted in Vicksburg Royal Arch Chapter No. 3, greeted in Vicksburg Council Royal and Select Masters No. 2 and knighted in Magnolia Commandery No. 2, all in 1873. He received the Scottish Rite Degrees in 1870. In 1878, he received the Honorary 33rd Degree of the Scottish Rite. He was, for a number of years, Inspector General for the State of Mississippi.

Speed rose through the ranks of these various organizations and eventually served as Grand Master of Masons in Mississippi in 1882, Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter in 1881-82, Grand Master of the Grand Council from 1891 to 1901 and Grand Commander of the Grand Commandery from 1880 to 1890. He also served as Chairman of the Law Committee, at the state level, in all four organizations. From September 26, 1901 until his death, he served as Grand Secretary and Recorder of the Grand Lodge and the three Grand York Rite Bodies. He was Grand Representative of the Grand Lodges of England, Illinois and Maine to the Grand Lodge of Mississippi, President of the Order of High Priesthood and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Masonic Home.

M.W.B. Speed attended 41 consecutive meetings of the Grand Lodge of

Mississippi.

He passed away in Vicksburg on March 10, 1911. His funeral, which was conducted by the Grand Lodge of Mississippi, was one of the largest funeral processions ever seen in Vicksburg.

Speed was succeeded in the office of Grand Secretary by his son, Frederic Gordon Speed, who held the office for 8 years before his untimely death in 1919.

Frederic Speed died as a well-respected man, and was much loved by the citizens of Vicksburg.

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