

The Sultana

By John D. Wilson, Rush County Historian

On Wednesday, November 11, 2020, we observed Veterans Day. It is a tradition in Rush County to observe the day with special ceremonies. This year our veterans had their annual ceremony at the Veterans Memorial Bridge near the intersection of Veterans Street and Park Boulevard. The bridge was dedicated in honor of Tom Barnes for his service and dedication. Fifteenth Street was renamed Veterans Street by the Rushville City Council on November 2nd. Also, at Arlington's East Hill Cemetery a new memorial was dedicated on October 17th to all men and women that served in the military and also to all first responders.

When we look back in our military history there was a group of Rush County soldiers that didn't get full recognition for their service because of a great catastrophe.

The year was 1865. The Civil War was winding down. Robert E. Lee had surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox on April 9th. The war would drag on west of the Mississippi and to some degree on the high seas, but for all intent and purposes the South was defeated. On April 14th President Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre, and he died on April 15th.

The armies on both sides were anxious to return home, and those that had been in prison camps were most anxious after months of terrible treatment. Such was the case for a group of Rush County soldiers imprisoned at Cahaba Prison Camp in Alabama.

Cahaba (Cahawba) was a Confederate prison camp located on the Alabama River just south of Selma, Alabama. It was named after the first Alabama State Capital located there. Cahawba was the state capital from 1820-1825. In the middle of the Civil War there were approximately 500 prisoners at Cahaba. The Rush County prisoners had been captured at the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle on September 25, 1864. When the war ended the Cahaba prisoners were released, and they began their long journey to the Mississippi River at Vicksburg to catch a ride home. They were billeted at Camp Fisk.

While at Camp Fisk their paperwork was processed to be exchanged for captured Confederates. Captain George Williams was in charge of this process, but it's doubtful that all the paperwork was completed.

The easiest and fastest way to Indiana was by steamboat. Steamboat owners were more than eager to transport troops since they were paid \$5 per soldier (\$10 for an officer) by the Federal Government. Obviously greed was a major problem. The more men you could load on your boat, the more money you made.

One such vessel was the SS Sultana. The Sultana was built in Cincinnati and was a typical side-wheeler. It legally could transport 375 people, plus cargo. The boat weighed 1,719 tons and carried a crew of 85 men. Its captain was Captain J.C. Mason of St. Louis.

On April 24, 1865, the Sultana loaded for its trip north. Captain Mason allowed 1,866 discharged troops, 75 cabin passengers, 85 crew, 60 horses and mules, and 100 hogs to board! Remember the legal passenger limit was 375. Little did the passengers know that the Sultana had boiler problems, and repairs were made on April 23rd. Overloaded, the Sultana left port on April 24th headed north. The river was high and the current was fast. The weakened boilers had to work harder to go up river.



Picture courtesy of the Indiana State Historical Society

Two days later on April 26th, the Sultana made a routine stop in Memphis. Another leaking boiler was discovered and quickly repaired. The trip continued.

Seven miles up river from Memphis, sometime between 2am and 3am on April 27th, the Sultana exploded. Some were killed instantly, and others burned to death on the boat before it sank. Many struggled to swim in the cold Mississippi River. Lucky ones were able to get away hanging on to floating debris or to horses and mules that had escaped. People clung to the trees along the bank of the river, and some sang songs until help arrived. Numerous boats assisted in the rescue, and survivors were taken to hospitals in Memphis. Citizens from the town of Marion, Arkansas, made valiant attempts to try and save as many passengers as possible. Some of the rescuers were former Confederate soldiers. It's amazing that the Sultana traveled half the length of the State of Mississippi (from Vicksburg, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee) before it exploded.

The U.S. Customs Service later reported that there were 1,547 victims, but the count was probably closer to 1,800. It was the worst maritime disaster in U.S. History. More people died in this tragedy than in the 1912 sinking of the Titanic (1,512). Some accounts have reported that there may have been as many as 2,400 people on board. (That's about the total number of fans that Memorial Gym in Rushville holds today.)

So greed helped cause the accident. Captain Frederick Speed, the officer in charge of transportation at Camp Fisk, was court-martialed and eventually dismissed from the service. The boat's captain and owner, J.C. Morgan, died in the explosion.

The explosion of the Sultana didn't get the overall press coverage and attention that it normally would have. The surrender at Appomattox, the assassination of President Lincoln, the death of John Wilkes Booth, and Lincoln's funeral train dominated the headlines. In fact the morning the Sultana exploded, Lincoln's body was lying in state at St. James Hall in Buffalo, New York.

Passengers on the Sultana included Rush County men from the Ninth Cavalry (One Hundred and Twenty-First) Regiment. Twenty-two of the men in Company E were from the vicinity of Carthage. This group had been in the battles at Sulphur Creek Trestle and at Franklin. On the way home when the Sultana exploded, this regiment lost 55 men. Ten Rush County soldiers died in the explosion. They were:

Pvt. John M. Armstrong; Cpl. Joe Alexander; Pvt. George W. Blake; Cpl. William Brigg; Cpl. Nathan E. Gruell; Pvt. Enos Holloway; Pvt. William H. Huffman; Pvt. James M. Isentrager; Pvt. Samuel King; Pvt. Franklin Ridley.

Many of the Sultana's dead were buried at the Mississippi River National Cemetery (Memphis National Cemetery.) Four other Rush County soldiers were known to have survived the explosion (probably because they could swim). They were: John P. Guffin, Robert Hutchison, Oscar Spacy, and Jonathan Wright. (Guffin is buried at Rushville's East Hill Cemetery, and Spacy near Little Flatrock Cemetery.)

The effect of the disaster on the citizens of Rush County was devastating. Rush County soldiers had endured battle(s), POW camps, and a long march to Vicksburg only to have their dreams dashed. The county was once again grief stricken. We had already suffered tremendous losses on the field of battle, we had lost our President, and then came the terrible news of the SS Sultana.

As we celebrate Veterans Day in the future, please take a moment to remember those that were on the SS Sultana.

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