

# The Sultana Disaster – the Worst Maritime Loss in American History



Civil War philately contributes to the knowledge of a monumental disaster  
By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Ask the average person what is the worst U.S. maritime disaster, and likely the reply would be the sinking of the Titanic. Certainly the RMS Titanic is the most well-known, but it is not really a U.S. disaster and it is not the worst in terms of the loss of life in U.S. history. That dismal distinction goes to the SS Sultana, a Mississippi River paddlewheel steamer which exploded and sank on April 27, 1865 at the close of the Civil War. (Figure 1)

The prisoner of war cover pictured in Figure 2 is franked with a U.S. 3¢ rose (Scott #65) used with a grid and matching Vicksburg, Mississippi February 2, 1865 double circle cancel. It is addressed to Capt. O. C. Harvey, Provost Marshal 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, 4th Corps, Nashville, Tenn. with docketing “From Capt. Coleman” up the left side and the examiner’s manuscript “Approved H.A.M. Henderson Capt & As[sistan]t Com[missione]r of Exchange C.S.A.” on the top back flap (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Prisoner of war cover from Captain William L. Coleman while at Castle Morgan, Cahaba, Alabama – a victim of the *Sultana*.

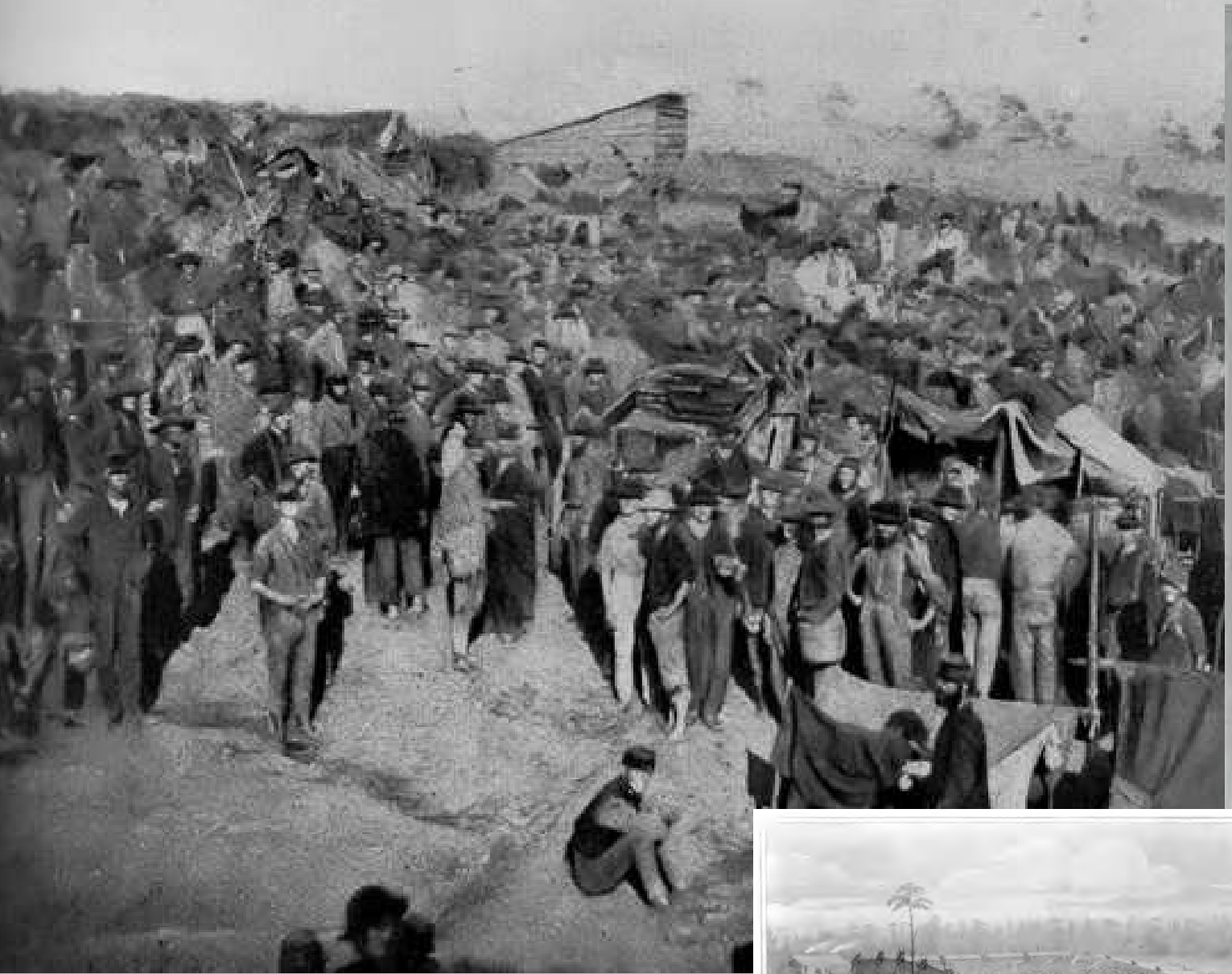
*“They were impatient to get home and once again relish family, friends and peace with no more fighting and no more destruction. Most of them would be traveling north on the ill-fated Sultana.”*

Artistic rendering of the massive conflagration that destroyed the *Sultana* on April 27, 1865. Note the hundreds of victims struggling in the river.

The enclosed letter was probably a request for clothing, as in February 1865 clothing was sent to the prison under Flag of Truce. This is a scarce and very collectable prison use; only ten covers are recorded from Castle Morgan in Cahaba, Alabama by Galen D. Harrison in his book *Prisoner’s Mail in the American Civil War*. This one has the added bonus of being directly associated with America’s worst maritime disaster - the sinking of the paddle wheeler *Sultana*.

#### **Captain William L. Coleman**

In military records, Captain Coleman’s residence is listed as Lafayette, Indiana. He enlisted as a Private in Company A of the 40th Indiana Infantry on 31 October 1861 and served as Adjutant’s Clerk. He was subsequently promoted to 2nd Lieutenant in Company D on 10 May 1862, to 1st Lieutenant on 26 November 1862 and to Captain on 1 June 1864. He is buried in Columbia Park, Lafayette, Tippecanoe County, Indiana. (Figure 4)



**Before the *Sultana*: Issuing Rations in Andersonville Prison—August, 1864.** Rations actually were issued in Andersonville Prison, as attested by this photograph, in spite of a popular impression to the contrary. The distribution of rations was practically the only event in the prisoner's life save for the temporary excitement of attempted escapes. Even death itself was often regarded with indifference. Many of the *Sultana* victims had been prisoners of war at Andersonville.

**A black and white lithograph print** of a Civil War-era artist's rendering of Andersonville prison.



Coleman was wounded at Stones River (Murfreesboro), again at Marietta and a third time at Kennesaw Mountain. He was taken prisoner at the Battle of Franklin and briefly incarcerated at Andersonville, Georgia before being transferred to Castle Morgan at Cahaba, Alabama, which was even more crowded for its size than Andersonville. Coleman perished on the *Sultana*. He is mentioned in records as have been one of two soldiers who helped an injured soldier get overboard at the cost of his own life. Parts of his military records are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

#### ***S. S. Sultana***

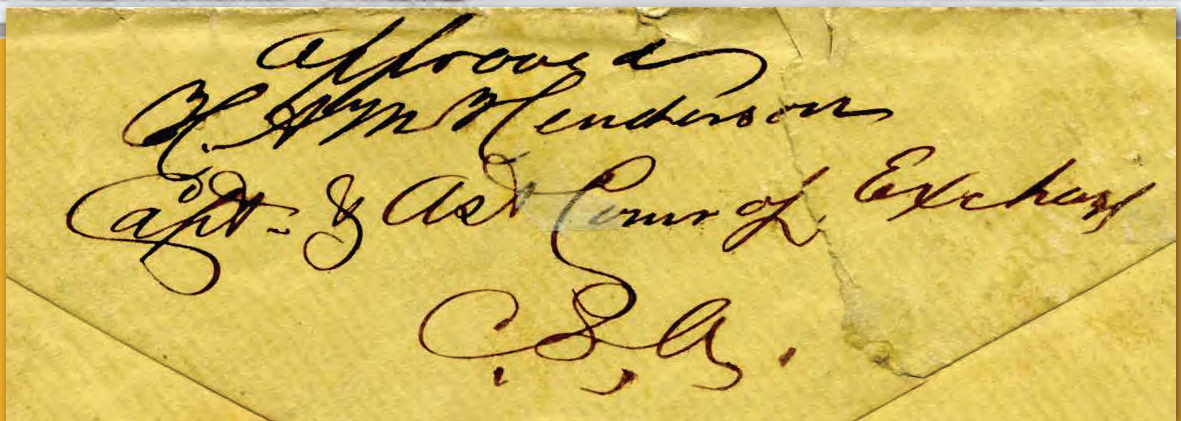
The *Sultana* was a 260 ft., 1,719 side-wheel steamboat built at

the John Lithoberry Shipyard in Cincinnati in 1863. She sailed the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, mainly from St. Louis to New Orleans. *Sultana* was frequently commissioned by the War Department to carry troops. She was state of the art, including the most modern safety equipment -safety gauges that fused open when the internal boiler pressure reached 150 pounds per square inch, three fire-fighting pumps, a metallic lifeboat and a wooden yawl, 300 feet of fire hose, thirty buckets, five fire-fighting axes and 76 life belts.

Camp Fisk, outside Vicksburg, Mississippi, was a major repatriation center for Union prisoners just released from nearby prison



**Figure 1.** Grainy photo of the heavily overloaded SS *Sultana* taken on April 26, 1865 at Helena, Arkansas less than 24 hours before three of her boilers exploded and she burned and sank. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-48778.



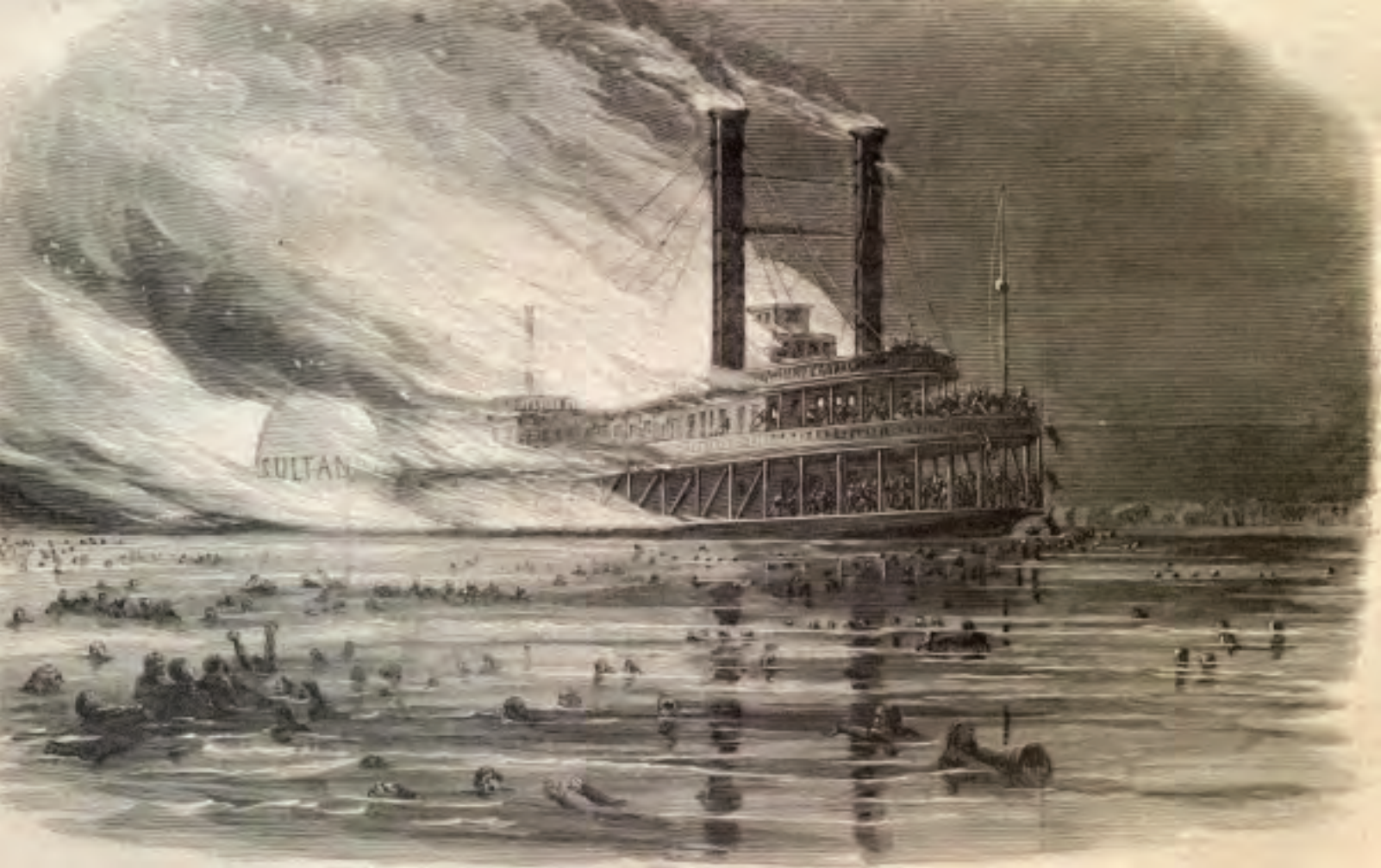
**Figure 3.** Manuscript examined markings on the back flaps of the Coleman POW cover on page 21.

camp. More than 2,000 former prisoners in faded uniforms arrived in Vicksburg seeking river transportation back to their homes in the north. Most of these war-weary men were gaunt and sickly from their prison experience. They were impatient to get home and once again relish family, friends and peace with no more fighting and no more destruction. Most of them would be traveling north on the ill-fated *Sultana*.

The *Sultana* blew up on April 27, 1865 some seven miles north of Memphis, Tennessee carrying between 2,200 and 2,400 of these just-released Union prisoners of war – mostly from Cahaba and Andersonville prisons – as well as crew and civilian passengers.

So many people were crammed on board that they decided not to make out a passenger list. Upwards of 1,800 people died. It was more costly than the April 14, 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*, when 1,517 people were tragically lost on that 882 ft. long vessel. *Sultana* was only thirty percent as long as *Titanic*. (Figure 7)

The accident happened at 2 a.m., when three of the steamer's four boilers exploded. The death toll was almost exactly equal to the number of Union troops killed at the battle of Shiloh (1,758). The *Sultana* was legally registered to carry 376 people. But the government was paying a lucrative \$5 per soldier to get them home, so the ship's captain, J. C. Mason of St. Louis, put as many



passengers on board as possible. According to some, the military officers were also being paid a kickback of \$1.15 per person to look the other way and ignore the overcrowding. Sultana had more than six times her registry on board due to the bribery of army officers and the extreme desire of the former POWs to get home. The true reason for the disaster was simply greed and government incompetence.

Extra stanchions were installed to support the top deck, which was sagging from the weight of the passengers. At Vicksburg, the engineers discovered leaks and a bulge in one of the boilers. Not wanting to lose time and take a chance on another steamboat getting the opportunity to carry the passengers, the captain decided to patch the boiler rather than replace it, which would have taken three days. The patch could be done in just one day. The Sultana was the last to leave the docks from Memphis at 7 p.m.

After stopping in Memphis, Sultana started upriver, headed for the next stop at Cairo, Illinois where most of the passengers were scheduled to disembark. The spring runoff was underway, so the river was high and the current strong, which meant that the Sultana needed a greater than normal head of steam to make her way upstream. The steamboat, top-heavy from too many passengers, was careening from one side to the other. About seven miles upriver from Memphis, at 2:00 a.m. on the 27th, three of the four boilers exploded. The explosions tore a gaping hole in the Sultana and sent burning pieces of coal flying everywhere, which quickly caught the wooden ship on fire. Men were blown off the ship or jumped into the icy spring water to escape the flames. Soldiers drowned, burned, died from hypothermia, or were crushed when

the smokestacks collapsed onto the stricken ship. About 500 men were rescued from the water, of which some 200 to 300 died later from burns, hypothermia, or general poor health resulting from extended captivity. The water was icy-cold, many of them could not swim, and there was little wreckage to cling to. Men died by the hundreds in the water near the wreck. They had been half-starved for months and were in no physical shape to swim even if they had known how. Between 1,700 and 1,800 people died, which made it the worst maritime disaster in American history.

One man recalled afterward,

*“When I got about three hundred yards away from the boat clinging to a heavy plank, the whole heavens seemed to be lighted up by the conflagration. Hundreds of my comrades were fastened down by the timbers of the decks and had to burn while the water seemed to be one solid mass of human beings struggling with the waves. Shrieks and cries for mercy were all that could be heard; and that awful morning reminded me of the stories of doomsday of my childhood.”*

An excerpt from the *Memphis Argus* of April 28, 1865:

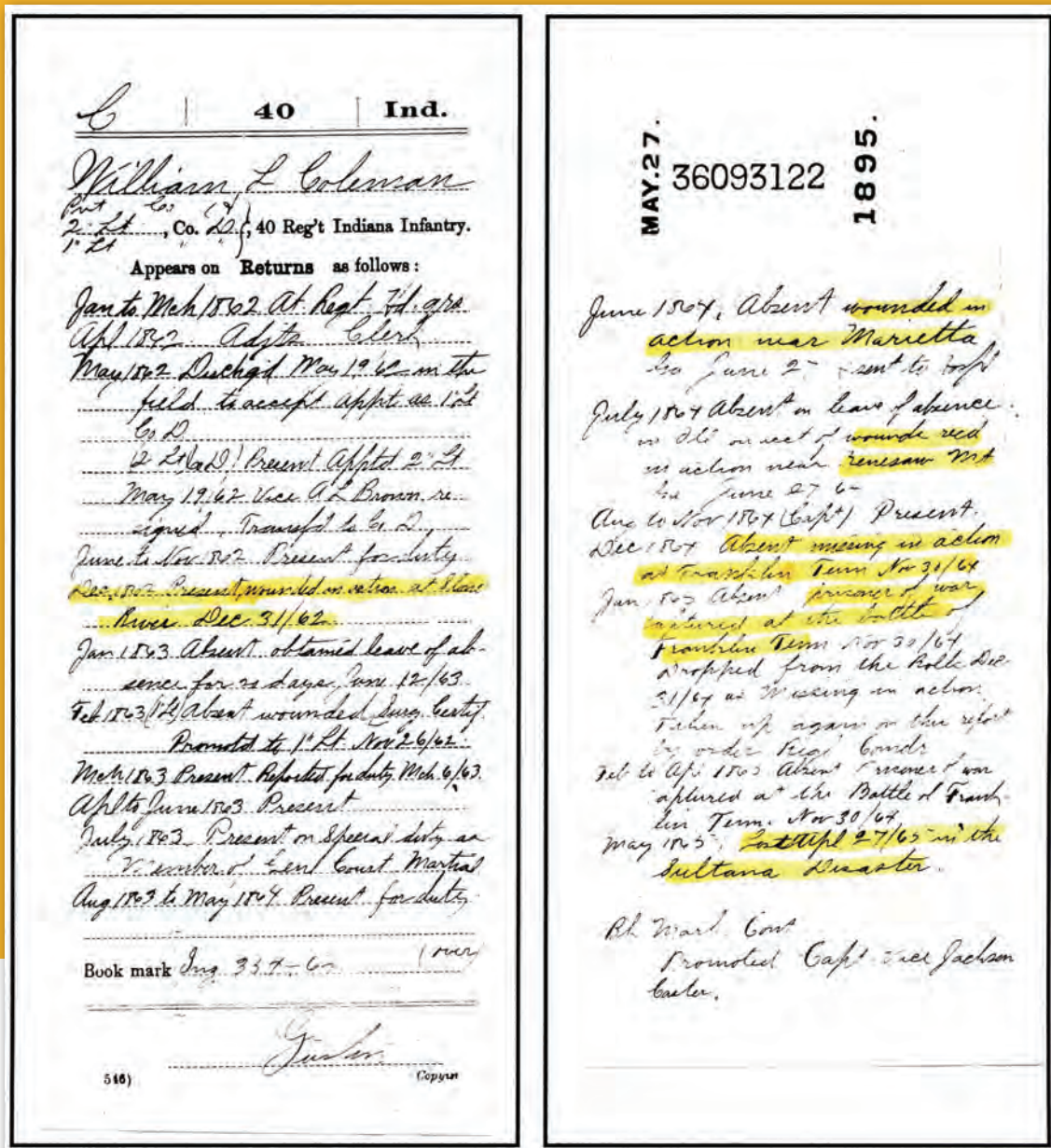
*“The flames burst in great fury in a very few minutes after the explosion on the Sultana. No time was allowed for the people to do anything. Ladies rushed forth from their berths in the night attire, and with a wild scream plunged into the angry flood and sank to rise no more. The pitiful cried of children as they, too, rushed to the side of the wreck and plunged into the water were mingled with the hoarser voices of manhood in the desperate struggle for life. More than 2,000 people were thus compelled to choose between a death by fire and a sleep beneath the wave. Hour after hour rolled*

Figure 7. The burning of the *Sultana* as she appeared in Harper's Weekly on May 20, 1865. Library of Congress.

Figure 5. Copy of the 40th Indiana regimental record for Company D which shows his ranks, a list of battles in which he was wounded, his capture at the Battle of Franklin and his ultimate death on the *Sultana*.



Figure 4. Headstone of Captain William L. Coleman, 40th Indiana Infantry. Courtesy Jeremy Powell, findagrave.com, memorial# 102062147.



away, and the struggle for the great multitude in the river continued. Manhood was powerless. Husbands threw their wives into the river and plunged into the water after them, only to see them sink in death. Some had secured doors and fragments of the wreck and were thus enabled to keep a longer time above the water. Those who were swimmers struck for the shore, where they could find trees and bushes to keep them above the water. Some were carried down by the current until opposite the city, where their cries attracted the attention of the people on the steamers lying at the wharf. Yawls, skiffs, and every available small boat was put into immediate requisition and sent out into the stream to pick up the survivors. A considerable number were thus rescued from a watery grave. One lady with an infant in her arms was forced by the current several miles, and was finally rescued by some of the small boats that were cruising around. She exhibited the most remarkable heroism, still clinging to her precious charge and supporting it above the water until rescued. The small boats from the United States gunboats did good service."

#### Disaster Investigation

Quickly reacting to the disaster, General Cadwallader Colden Washburn, Commander of the District of West Tennessee, issued

Special Order 109 on April 27 establishing a panel to investigate the tragedy. The commission took its first testimony at 11:30 that morning.

On April 30, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton issued Special Order 195, which ordered Brigadier General William Hoffman, Commissary General of Prisoners, to begin a separate investigation.

On January 9, 1866, Captain Frederick Speed's court-martial convened in Vicksburg. Speed was the Assistant Adjutant General of Volunteers, Department of the Mississippi who undertook the temporary job of Commissioner of Exchange for Prisoners. He coordinated the transfer of the prisoners from Camp Fisk, Mississippi to the wharf in Vicksburg where the *Sultana* was docked. After repairs, *Sultana* had been declared sound and she proceeded to Vicksburg.

Speed was charged with "neglect of duty to the prejudice of good order and military discipline." Six months later the court-martial found Speed guilty and dismissed him from the Army. Major General Thomas J. Wood upheld the findings of the court and sent the file to Secretary of War Stanton, who forwarded the case to Brigadier General Joseph Holt, Judge Advocate General of the

MEMORANDUM FROM PRISONER OF WAR RECORDS. No. \_\_\_\_\_

(This blank to be used only for the use of records of said records.)

NAME	RANK	No. of Reg't.	State	Army of Service	Co.	INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM			
						Records of	Vol.	Page	Date
Coleman, W. L. Capt. 40 Ind.	1st Lt.		Ind.		8	10	192		
Captured at _____ 186 _____ continued at Richmond, Va., _____ 186 _____						_____			
Admitted to Hospital at _____ 186 _____						_____			
Released on Board _____ 186 _____						_____			
Paroled at _____ 186 _____						_____			
Re-entered on Board _____ 186 _____						_____			
Copied by _____						_____			

**Figure 6.** Records show Capt. Coleman was confined at Andersonville at an unknown date and later moved to Cahaba. He was sent to Vicksburg in March 1865 to be paroled on April 29th. He perished on the *Sultana* on April 27, 1865.



**Figure 9.** A *Sultana* monument at the Mount Olive Baptist Church Cemetery in Knoxville, Tennessee. Monuments and historical markers to the *Sultana* and its victims have also been erected in seven other cities.

Shew it please the Court. After consuming nearly six long weary months, by the trial of this case, you have the evidence before you for which you are now solemnly called to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused in the grave matter charged against him.

The accused, by the counsel having made a length of good able argument in defense, it is demanded by me, by law, the custom of military Courts and the importance of this case as prosecutor on the part of the United States, that I should make a reply thereto, and while I mean to do this, it must not be expected that I shall travel over the extensive field opened by the remarks of the counsel for defense, not only of events, the actors in this affecting drama, the motives thereof, but in his deep soundings of their <sup>unwise</sup> course of action to draw from their motives by which they are moved to their <sup>unwise</sup> stage at his command. I will try to select out the landmarks, a few prominent points of real and vital interest to the case, for examination by the evidence you the record. Yet while I am obliged to do this, by a stern sense of duty, it may be a superfluous and unnecessary task, producing of nothing as I am fully convinced that each and every member of the Court has as complete and well defined

**Figure 8.** One of the pages in the case investigating the *Sultana* disaster.

There are 647 documents in the court-martial case with testimonies, witness accounts, and statements by the defense and prosecution.

U.S. Army. Holt dismissed the charges and on September 1, 1866, Speed mustered out of the U.S. Army.

The official cause of the *Sultana* disaster was determined to be mismanagement of water levels in the boiler, exacerbated by careening. The *Sultana* was severely overcrowded and top heavy. As she made her way north following the twists and turns of the river, she listed severely from one side to the other. The four boilers were interconnected and mounted side-by-side, so that if the vessel tipped sideways, water would tend to run out of the highest boiler. With the fires still going against the empty boiler, this created hot spots. When the vessel tipped the other way, water rushing back into the empty boiler would hit the hot spots and flash instantly to steam, creating a sudden surge in pressure. The effect of careening could have been minimized by maintaining higher water levels in the boilers. The official inquiry found that *Sultana*'s boilers exploded due to the combined effects of careening, low water level, and a faulty repair to a leaky boiler made a few days earlier. The transcript of the first page of the court case is shown in Figure 8.

Another possible cause for the boiler explosion was reported in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in an article on May 6, 1888. In that article, William C. Streeter, a resident of St. Louis, reported that while he worked as a clerk and assistant keeper in the Gratiot and Myrtle Street prisons, a former Confederate secret service agent and boat-burner, Robert Loudon, claimed he had smuggled a coal torpedo aboard the *Sultana* at Memphis. The coal torpedo was a small explosive device made to look like an ordinary lump of coal, but would explode in a coal furnace, causing a secondary explosion of the boiler. During the Civil War, a broad variety of explosive devices were called "torpedoes." Some sixty Union

steamboats were destroyed by Confederate agents during the war. The sabotage theory was called "wholly baseless" in one source yet given credibility in others. While not impossible, the sabotage theory sounds highly unlikely to me.

#### Aftermath

Because the *Sultana* went down when it did, the disaster was not well covered in the newspapers and was soon forgotten. It is scarcely remembered today. April 1865 was a busy month as the war drew to a close. On April 9, General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia; five days later, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated; on April 26, Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, was caught and killed. That same day General Joseph Johnston surrendered the last large Confederate army. Shortly thereafter, Union troops captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis. The Civil War was over; Northern newspapers rejoiced. News of the dreadful steamboat tragedy was demoted to the back pages. In a nation desensitized to death, 1,800 more did not seem the immense tragedy that it does today.

In 1982, a local archaeological expedition uncovered what is believed to be the wreckage of the *Sultana*. The Mississippi River has changed course several times since the disaster with the main channel now about two miles east of its 1865 position. The blackened wooden deck planks and timbers were found about 32 feet under a soybean field on the Arkansas side, about four miles from Memphis.

Whether the sinking of the *Sultana* was accidental or deliberate, it was a particularly tragic end for Union prisoners of war who had survived incredible deprivation in Southern prison camps, only to be killed when they were so close to home. ☒