

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

April 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

### Summary of Board Meeting on March 27, 2021

The board of directors met online via Zoom on the last Saturday of March. Items discussed included the following:

the status of Alcatraz NP (cellhouse now open to the public, but still no public programs); the video project is moving along, with scripts being developed; volunteers will be required to take new training before returning to NPS sites; Fort Point is proposing a volunteer Assistant Supervisor position to help with guiding visitors as they visit the fort; Steve is going to propose to the Veteran's Administration that the statue of Grant be placed inside the Golden Gate National Cemetery; there was a discussion about future activities for FOCWA, such as at the Santa Rosa

Oakland Cemeteries, where Union veterans are buried and can be memorialized. The complete minutes of the meeting will be posted on our website.

The next board meeting will be held on Saturday, May 1, 2021.

### Dates to Remember

- **Saturday, May 1, 2021- FOCWA Virtual Board Meeting 10 a.m.**

Although only board members are required to attend, all members are welcome and will be sent the link to join the meeting

### Alcatraz Visited by the Civil War Trust

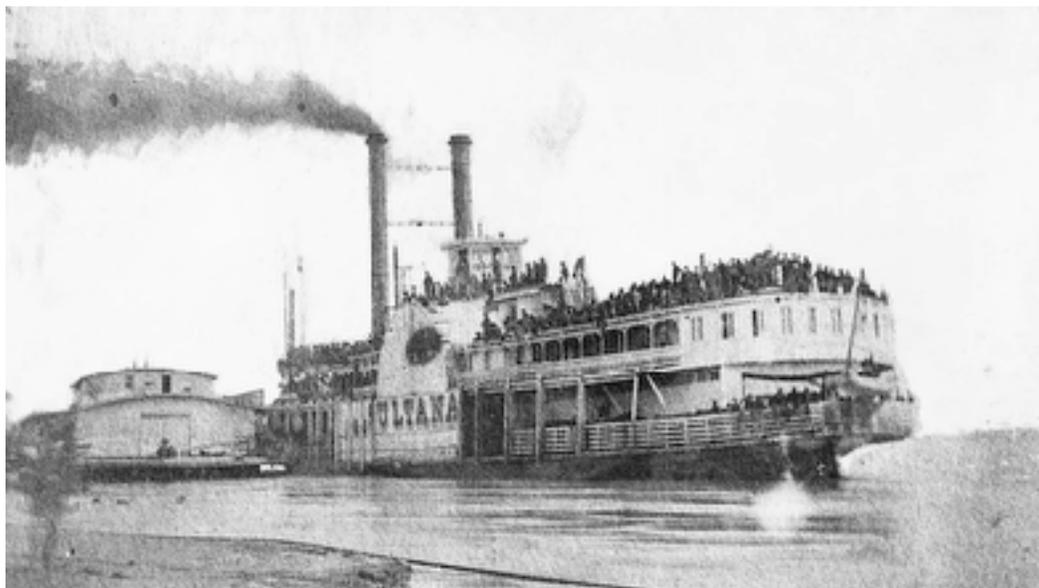
A few years ago Alcatraz was visited by Garry Adelman of the American Battlefields Trust (formerly the Civil War Trust), based in Washington, D.C. This organization is dedicated to the preservation of Civil War battlefield sites, primarily those in the East. But awhile ago the Trust wanted to do a series about California in the Civil War, including Fort Alcatraz, Fort Point, Fort Mason, and the Drum Barracks in Los Angeles. In case you did not see it, here is the link to the video of his visit as he took a tour of Alcatraz: [https://www.facebook.com/americanbattlefieldtrust/videos/10156295561613851/?so=channel\\_tab&rv=playlists\\_card](https://www.facebook.com/americanbattlefieldtrust/videos/10156295561613851/?so=channel_tab&rv=playlists_card)

FOCWA is mentioned often in the video as a preserver of the Civil War history of Fort Alcatraz, and this video was seen around the country and by viewers in Europe!

### The Anniversary of the *Sultana* Explosion

April 27th is the 156th anniversary of the greatest maritime disaster in American history, in which 1800 Union soldiers and civilians were killed when the paddle-wheel steamboat *Sultana* exploded on the Mississippi River. The boat was mostly carrying Union soldiers in various states of health who had been released from Confederate prison camps. Prior its departure from Vicksburg, a mechanic who had been working on one of the vessel's boilers told the chief engineer and the captain that it wasn't safe to operate. Nevertheless, the captain of the vessel, J. Case Mason, made the decision to make the trip to St. Louis anyway and have full repairs made once the boat docked there. He also decided to allow over 2,500 people to board the the boat, even though its legal capacity was 376 passengers. His decision may have been motivated by the

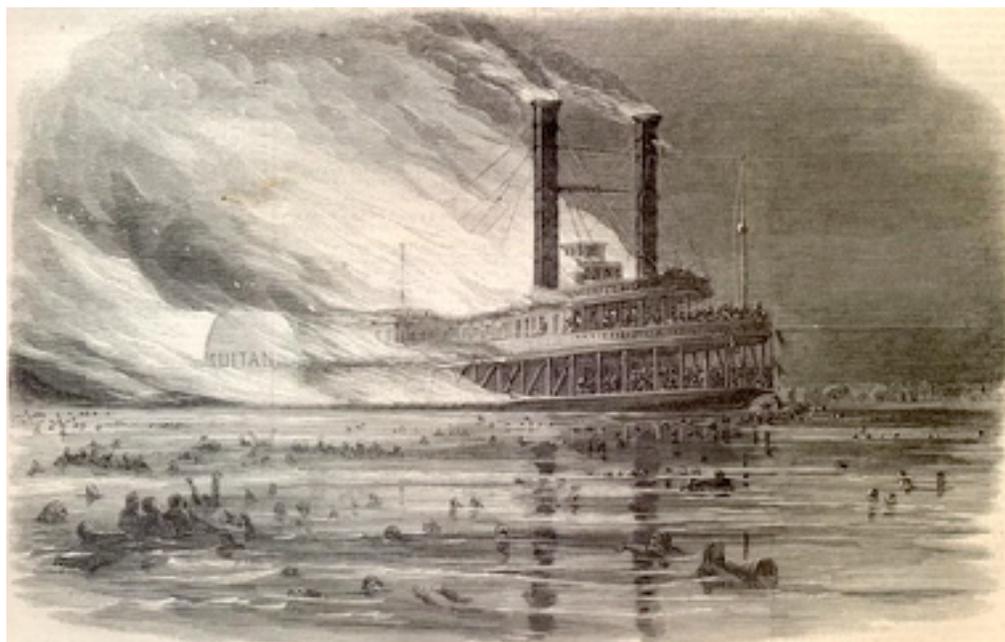
fact that the government was paying \$5 for each enlisted man and \$10 for each officer to be transported. The *Sultana* had covered most of the journey when at 2 a.m. one of the boilers exploded, which caused the other two boilers to explode as well. Hundreds were killed instantly by the debris, steam, and fire. Many were thrown into the cold river water, which was swollen by previous rainstorms and already filled with debris. Then local men, who only recently were in the Confederate army,



The *Sultana* at Helena, Arkansas, loaded with passengers, just prior to the explosion (Library of Congress)

appeared all along the river bank and in boats to rescue the men in the water.

The descendants of the victims of the disaster have not forgotten them, and every year in Knoxville they hold a memorial for the men who died in that event, and for the rescuers who tried to help them.



A lithograph of the *Sultana* disaster in Harper's Weekly, May 1865. (Library of Congress)

Of course steamboats were a common sight on San Francisco Bay in the 1850's and 60's. The first steamboat, the *McKim*, arrived in Sacramento in October 1849, taking 17 hours to make the journey from San Francisco. This was the beginning of regular, daily trips between the two cities; by 1853 twenty-five steamboats were carrying passengers and freight on that route.

Because there was little in the way of boat inspections or regulations in these early years, the greater Bay Area had its share of steamboat catastrophes. In 1864 the steamer *Washoe* had a boiler explosion 35 miles from Sacramento which killed over 80 passengers. The next year the steamboat *Yosemite* was just leaving the Rio Vista wharf when its boiler exploded, with 100 passengers killed. Even though the Steamboat Act of 1852 required boiler inspections and steam safety valves, ferries and freight boats were exempt and inspections were infrequent. It wasn't until the Steamboat Inspection Service was created in 1871 that all steam-driven vessels were required to be inspected and licensed.



The next time you are taking the ferry from San Francisco to Alcatraz, think of the history of sailing ships and steamboats that used to make that same journey, and how much safer and more comfortable these modern vessels are.

## Sources

The *Sultana* story is condensed from Jon Hamilton's story on NPR, "The Shipwreck That Led Confederate Veterans To Risk All For Union Lives"

<https://www.npr.org/2015/04/27/402515205/the-shipwreck-that-led-confederate-veterans-to-risk-all-for-union-lives>

Information on the *Sultana* Monument can be found on the Emerging Civil War site, in an article by Chris Mackowski:

<https://emergingcivilwar.com/2020/04/27/the-unlikely-sultana-monument/>

The Valley Community Newspapers did a short article about steamboats on the Sacramento River in the 19th century:

<https://www.valcomnews.com/steamers-were-plentiful-on-river-during-19th-century/>

If you really want to read about steamboat regulations, you can go here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steamboat\\_Inspection\\_Service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steamboat_Inspection_Service)

"It is something great and greatening to cherish an ideal; to act in the light of truth that is far-away and far above; to set aside the near advantage, the momentary pleasure; the snatching of seeming good to self; and to act for remoter ends, for higher good, and for interests other than our own."

— Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain