

Ruth W. Bursley (- 19 Aug 1895)

The Evening Star, August 20, 1895

Fell Overboard

Sad Drowning of Miss Bursley While on an Excursion

Delay in Lowering the Life Boat

Lack of System Alleged by Witnesses of the Affair

Body Not Recovered

On the up trip of the Macalester last night, bringing the city post office clerks' excursion party from Marshall Hall, Ruth Bursley, the daughter of Lemuel B. Bursley of the pension office, fell overboard and was drowned. The parents and a brother and sister of the unfortunate girl were on the boat. All had enjoyed themselves during the ride and Miss Bursley was in happy spirits all day.

On the way up the two young ladies and several of their friends had seats on the starboard side of the second deck, near the rail, in front of the wheel. The other members of the family were seated some distance away.

The stories of the accident conflict. One is that Miss Bursley sat part of the time on the rail, and that she was requested by her friends not to be so careless. Two ladies noticing her sitting on the rail told her she was courting danger and warned her to get down, but she did not do so. A moment later she seemed to grow dizzy and reel. She let her handkerchief fall, and a second later, with a faint cry, fell over the rail into the rushing waters below just in front of the huge paddle wheel. Some said the young lady was sick from the motion of the boat and was obliged to lean over the rail. Her sister shrieked in alarm and the passengers rushed to the spot. Capt. Blake was found and ordered the boat to stop. The lifeboat was slow in getting into the water, and passengers state that probably twenty minutes elapsed between the accident and the lowering of the boat. Nothing could be found. It is believed the young lady was struck by a paddle wheel and sank at once.

The Leary came up and threw its searchlight over the waters, but nothing was seen. The two steamers waited half an hour, searching all around the place where Miss Bursley fell overboard, but in vain. Mr. and Mrs. Bursley were overcome by the shock and Capt. Blake took them and the weeping brother and sister to his stateroom, where they stayed until the steamer reached Washington.

The story started that it was a case of suicide but of that there was absolutely no sign or proof, and the father of the young lady said he could not believe it was anything but an accident.

Some of the passengers were emphatic in their belief that the life boat had not been lowered as quickly as it should have been, and a good deal of censure was visited upon the management of the steamer. Capt. Blake heard the statements and called the post office clerks, who had given the excursion into the cabin, and explained to them that the engines could not have been stopped sooner than they were, and that boats were lowered as fast as they could be. The captain, who has been a seaman all his life, was quite overcome by the accident. He said that he had done all that he could to rescue the unfortunate girl.

Mr. Croggon's Version of the Accident

Mr. J.G. Croggon of the city post office was an eyewitness of the accident. To a Star reporter today he related the affair as follows:

"I was sitting with the ladies of my family near the young lady who fell overboard, on the starboard side of the boat in front of the paddlebox. I had noticed her for several moments before she disappeared over the side of the boat. She was sitting on the rail, a little girl being on the seat below her. Miss Bursley seemed to be restless, and once she got down from the rail and sat beside her sister. Then she resumed her former position on the rail. She had a handkerchief in her hand, which fluttered overboard. In another second she went backward off the rail. I did not hear her make a cry as she disappeared. The little girl who had been with her fled to another part of the boat, and the ladies who saw the accident gave the alarm by screaming. The place where Miss Bursley sat was directly in front of the paddle wheel, and it was a sheer drop to the water below. She just seemed to topple over, and probably did not have time to utter a word. When she first sat on the rail she was leaning her back against a post. It has been suggested that when she got on the rail a second time she leaned back on the post and missed it."

Delay in Lowering the Life Boat

The accounts of a number of people make it four or five minutes from the time the alarm was given until the steamer was stopped and a still longer time until a small boat was lowered to search for the young lady. As the steamer was running at a rapid rate, they say probably a mile was covered before the boat's headway was checked.

Mr. F.L. White of 609 Florida avenue witnessed the operation of lowering the small boat, and he criticizes the steamboat management very severely for the lack of discipline and system observed in this operation. Mr. White is a sailor, and for eighteen years has followed the sea, in both the government service and the merchant service.

"I think it was fully fifteen or eighteen minutes from the time the alarm was given until the boat was lowered." he said to a Star reporter today. "The boats are carried on the hurricane deck and are swung into the water by davits. These boats, however, were lashed over with tarpaulin to keep out the rain and were tied securely to the deck. Of course it took time to unlash one of them and lower it away, even after a crew had been summoned for it. As the boat was lowered I was standing on the saloon deck, aft of the wheel, and as the boat came down I saw that one of the chocks was attached to its bottom. You know, the boat rests on two heavy blocks of wood with a V-shaped slot cut in them, and one of these had stuck to the keel. Probably it had never been moved since it was painted. I unloosened the chock and that took at least another minute, the boat hanging by the davits meantime.

"Then, when the boat reached the water, it was found that the plug in the bottom was out and the boat was taking water through the hole. Another minute of valuable time was lost in hunting around for the plug. Two colored men and a white man were sent away with the small boat.

"The river boats when they leave the wharf with a crowd of excursionists should swing a lifeboat over the side, with the boat falls cleared away ready for lowering. There are modern appliances for lowering lifeboats, so that they can get into the water within one minute, the steamer's headway making no difference. A portion of the crew should be stationed near one of these boats to man it when called upon. Last night one of the colored waiters who hand around lemonade was put to work helping get out that boat."

The Law in the Case

Under the laws of the United States, river steamers are required to discipline the crew to act promptly in cases of disaster. Section 405 of the Revised Statutes, relating to the steamboat inspection service, provides as follows:

"Upon navigable rivers the captains of all passenger steamers of thirty net tons and over shall be required to maintain a strict discipline, and to organize the officers and permanent crew so as to act with promptness in case of fire or other disaster; and the captain shall cause to be prepared at least two

station bills assigning the officers and permanent crew to definite places; said station bills shall be conspicuously placed under glass near the inspection certificate."

In ocean-going steamers the law requires periodical drills with the lifeboats and fire apparatus.

An Indignation Meeting

After the search for the missing girl had been abandoned last night, and the steamer had proceeded on her way to Washington, the executive committee of the postal clerks in charge of the excursion held a meeting in the cabin and criticized Capt. Blake for not acting more promptly and thoroughly in the efforts to rescue Miss Bursley. The captain defended the conduct

The Evening Star, August 22, 1895

The Dead Given Up

Miss Bursley's Body Floating in the River

Found Near the Fated Spot

Brought to the City on the Police Boat Blackburn

Discussing the Case

The body of Miss Ruth Bursley who was lost overboard from the steamer Macalester a few evenings ago, was recovered this morning from the Potomac river very near the spot where the young lady fell from the boat. The body was brought to the city on the police boat Blackburn and taken to Zurhorst's undertaking establishment to be prepared for burial.

The body was first seen by Dr. Keagh, the family physician of the Bursleys, and Pilot Cheshire of the steamer Harry Randall. Dr. Keagh had gone down the river on the Randall this morning to meet the police boat Blackburn, which left the wharf at 7 o'clock, to be present during the search for the young lady's remains, which was being continued by the police boat and Col. McKibben of Marshall Hall. Just before reaching Bryan Point, the spot in the river where Miss Bursley fell from the steamer's rail, the two watchers in the pilot house discovered the body floating in the water. The Randall proceeded to Marshall Hall, and, after landing, Dr. Keagh, continued some distance further down the river, where the police boat was seen cruising in search of the remains.

Recovering the Body

The police boat was hailed and told where the body had been seen. Officers Dean and Lewis of the police boat, with Gen. Duncan S. Walker aboard, immediately put back to Marshall Hall, where they picked up Dr. Keagh and Col. McKibben. Under full speed the Blackburn proceeded to the spot in the river where the body had been seen floating upon the tide, and soon tender hands had drawn the young lady's remains aboard and placed it in the casket which had been provided for that purpose. There were no visible signs to show that Miss Bursley had been struck by the wheel of the steamer when she fell overboard, and the body was in a good state of preservation.

Arriving at the police boat wharf, the friends of the family removed the body to Zurhorst's undertaking establishment, where it will be prepared for burial. The family were immediately notified that Miss Bursley's body had been found, and arrangements will be made for the funeral. The services over the remains will be private and interment will be made at Congressional cemetery. The coroner was notified of the receipt of the body and will view it some time this afternoon.

In Defense of the Crew

One of the witnesses of the sad accident that resulted in Miss Bursley's death has sent the following statement to The Star:

"It is with surprise and regret, that I observe some rather averse, and, I think unjust criticisms relative to the management of his boat and crew by Capt. Blake after the sad and lamentable drowning of Miss Bursley last Monday night. Now, whether her death was due to suicidal intent or otherwise I am not prepared to say. But as I happened to be sitting within six or eight feet of her when the unfortunate affair occurred. I feel myself in a position to speak authoritatively concerning it, and report that I am surprised at some of the criticisms contained in recent papers. I know Capt. Blake only in his official capacity, but, having traveled extensively, I must say I have never seen any officer I thought more eminently fitted for his position or one evincing a more watchful care over the safety and comfort of his patrons. As above observed, I was sitting within six or eight feet of where Miss Bursley went overboard, being on the star-board side and well forward of the wheel. The accident caused intense excitement. People were running all over the boat, many not knowing what really had occurred, and right here the public should remember that a large vessel running swiftly cannot be stopped, and rounded it, and the search light was playing over the dark water where Miss Bursley had disappeared, the life boat was lowered and manned as quickly as could have been done by any crew, and had it been within the bounds of possibility to save her undoubtedly it would have been accomplished, but, considering the fact that she went over in front of the wheel, it is more than probable that the body after passing under the boat never rose to the surface, and, even if she had, in the pitchy darkness of the night, it would have been a matter of impossibility to save her.

Again I see that Capt. Blake and his crew are greatly censured because they did not throw life preservers over. Consider the fact for an instant that the boat must have run 100 yards before the officers were apprised of what had happened. Now suppose they had thrown every life preserver on the boat into the water, could they have reached Miss Bursley in time to save her? Most assuredly the same current that carried them down would have borne her beyond their reach. No, the whole affair is the result of an unutterably sad and unfortunate accident. Capt. Bursley and family have the warmest and deepest sympathy of the entire community in their hour of trial, but at the same time do not let us allow unjust and undeserved censure and condemnation to be placed upon the conduct of a brave and efficient officer, who did all within his power to save a life, when, I feel, only the Divine interposition of Providence could have availed anything.

Carelessness of Passengers

A correspondent of The Star, who deems the criticisms of the captain and crew unjust, says:

"Certainly the captain cannot be blamed for the unsafe position on the boat taken by grown-up people. Being a frequent passenger on one of the river boats which goes down the river Saturday evenings, I noticed and remarked upon the carelessness of the passengers. Only two weeks ago I called the attention of the captain to a young man sitting outside of the railing, on the very edge of the ship, on a chair tilted back against the wheel house. The slightest lurch on the part of the ship or a sudden movement of the young man would have sent him overboard. To make matters worse, apparently he was asleep. I watched him for some time, until my nerves were tested to the utmost, expecting him to fall over every minute; then, as I said before, I called the captain's attention to him, and he was quickly made to come closer to the rail.

"While such accidents are terrible, I do think it rather unjust to blame the captain for the carelessness of passengers who have reached years of responsibility."

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Miss Bursley Buried

Funeral Ceremonies This Morning--Capt. Blake Exonerated

Funeral services over the remains of Miss Ruth Bursey were held at Congressional cemetery at 11 o'clock this morning, the Rev. A.J. Graham of St. Mark's Episcopal Church officiating. The body was carried from Zurhorst's undertaking establishment to the grave, attended only by the family and immediate friends, and the last rites of the Episcopal Church were administered at the place of interment.

Miss Bursley's family have made a statement in which they exonerate Capt. Blake and the officers of the steamer Macalester from all blame in connection with the unfortunate occurrence resulting in Miss Bursley's death. In view of this fact, the committee of post office clerks which had been appointed to investigate the circumstances of her drowning will take no action in that direction. It is probable, however that a petition will be presented to the supervising inspector general of steamboats asking that an inspection be made to ascertain if all the Potomac excursion boats are properly equipped with life-saving apparatus.