

The Evening Star, August 13, 1873, p. 4
The Condition of the Potomac Boats

Editor Star: Believing that you desire to inform the public of affairs most vital to them, and irrespective of individuals, we would ask for a close and critical investigation of the condition of the steamers now running on the Potomac. The late terrible disaster at least should arouse our authorities to the necessity for making such investigation. We think that the lives and the comfort of passengers are more to be considered than any tenderness to the officers and owners of boats, however estimable they may be. There should be a close inquiry as to the construction of the *Wawaset*, and to the alleged fact that the wood casings to the boiler were charred to tinder, causing the destruction of the boat. I wish also to speak of the sanitary condition of all the Potomac boats. I say there is not an emigrant ship that floats that will compare in filth with that to be noticed on our river boats. The mattresses and pillow-cases are in a condition to beggar description, dirty and infested with vermin. On one of these boats at least the stench from the water-closets, on the way to the dining saloon, is unendurable.

Now, let us look at the manner in which our river boats are worked, or rather over-worked. A steamer arrives at the wharf at 11 p.m. with 250 passengers taken down on an excursion, and absent some 48 hours. She hurries her excursion party ashore, and in two hours starts again on her regular trip loaded down with another large passenger list, no time whatever having been afforded to clean up or overhaul the boat. The boilers and engines are always on the strain at the highest heat for immediate use, and no opportunity is allowed for cleaning, oiling, testing, etc. The officers and men are overworked in the same way that the machinery is. Worn out with continuous labor, they are kept on the strain to attend to the stoppages at the different landings; and at this season when the tobacco and grain trade is pressing, the work, is more specially onerous. The men so overworked are, in short, utterly unable to place the boat in proper condition.

This practice by greedy owners of overworking boats and men is at the bottom of much of the danger and discomfort to passengers. In conclusion, I would suggest that if our Board of Health have any powers in the premises they should look into the sanitary condition of the river boats.

A Sufferer