

The Evening Star, August 15, 1873, p. 1
Burning of the *Wawaset*
Official Investigation of the Disaster
Testimony before the Treasury Board Today
Important Evidence of Capt. Wood and others

The official investigation into the causes leading to the *Wawaset* disaster was commenced at noon today, in the rooms of the supervising inspector general of steamboats, in the Treasury department, being conducted by Commodore Rose, of Savannah, and John E. Edgar, inspector of boilers at Norfolk. The proceedings are conducted publicly, and it is the desire of the acting supervising inspector general of steamboats that all interested therein should be present. In the room were Captain Woods, Mr. Nash and son, engineer and assistant; Mr. Wheeler, clerk; the steward, fireman and other officers of the boat.

The First Witness

Examined was James D. Lowry, inspector of hulls at Baltimore, Md. The certificate of inspection of the last inspection was shown witness, which he recognized. On the 24th of March last the *Wawaset* was inspected; complied with the law in every respect; had two good boats, which would carry sixty passengers each. I asked the captain when inspection was made how many passengers he would like to carry; he said thirty, and we placed that number in the certificate; found life preservers in abundance; the pumps and hose were in good order; there were fire extinguishers aboard the boat; the life preservers were distributed all over the boat under the promenade deck; I considered the boat A1 in every respect; I thoroughly overhauled her hull last spring in Baltimore and found everything all right; the boiler hatch was open; perfectly safe and thoroughly shielded; an iron jacket was put around her smoke stack last spring in Baltimore.

Testimony of W.O. Saville.

Am inspector of boilers for the district of Baltimore; I can only say what Mr. Lowry has said about her; three weeks ago I called attention of Mr. Lowry to the distribution of life preservers on the boat; they were in abundance and admirably placed; have been in the back connection of the boiler several times; don't think it possible for fire to have gotten out of there; there was a plenty of room to get around the boilers; the boiler was thoroughly overhauled in Baltimore last March and was perfect; I considered her as unsafe as any steamboat in the district; the Potomac company always complied with my orders, and I have put them to considerable trouble in my official capacity.

Testimony of Capt. J.R. Woods

Was captain of steamer *Wawaset*; was in the pilot-house at the time of the alarm; my papers as master of the vessel were destroyed by fire; the fireman gave me the alarm; he stopped me and said, "Captain, the boat is on fire;" I said, "Keep cool; don't raise any excitement;" I thought I could get down into the hold and put it out without raising any excitement, but in a very few minutes the flames reached the hurricane deck; I saw there was no chance to save her, and ordered her to be beached at Chatterton landing; the machinery refused to work just before she struck; am satisfied no souls were lost forward after she struck; if the bow ropes of the life-boat had not been cut, I am satisfied none in that boat, which was crowded, would have been lost; I had a pilot license when I took command of the boat; it run out last July; I did not get it renewed because I was a licensed pilot; I had no United States license as master; I was ignorant that it was necessary; am registered as a master at the Alexandria custom-house; in case of a fire, under the same circumstances, I would pursue the course I did with the *Wawaset*; I think the fire originated in the fireman's room, and when the door was open it burst out in flames; don't think stopping the boat would have checked the fire; I think if I could have stopped the boat less lives

would have been lost, but it was impossible, as the engineer was driven from his post in an instant; there was no possible way to get to the aft part of the boat to instruct the passengers in the use of the life preservers; no officer was in attendance upon the small boats; the boat was not over six or seven minutes beaching; the boat beached in about 150 yards from shore; there was not over 4-1/2 feet of water; I think she struck on a lump, for when I left she began to swing around; all the attention that was given to the passengers was forward; I assisted a lady who fell on the wheel-house, who ran through the blaze; I passed her below to the clerk to the forward deck; I think that it was Miss Reed; she was lost; I have no idea as to the cause of the fire, unless there was matches in the fireman's room, or some smoking, or a lamp; I don't think any lamps were kept burning there; all the freight was on the main deck; we carried no freight in the hold; there is a door leading from the fireman's room to the boiler room; the communicating hatch and door was closed; don't know who opened that door; I don't think we had over one hundred and twenty-five passengers aboard; there was a great many children, but we kept no register of them; I think our certificate allowed us to carry one hundred and fifty passengers. [Here witness was shown certificate of inspection.]

Q. Did you not know that your certificate only allowed you to carry fifty passengers and fifteen crew?

A. I was under the impression that we could carry 150 passengers; if we only carried fifty, it wouldn't pay for coal; I am satisfied there is a mistake somewhere.

The certificate was shown Mr. Lowry, who recognized it as a true transcript, but stated to the investigating board that Capt. Foulke (since dead) was captain of the boat at the time the inspection was made.

Capt. Woods – I am pretty sure our certificate allows us to carry 150 passengers; I examined the boat before she left port; am satisfied that she complied with all requirements of the law; could not use the pumps during the fire; the fire extinguishers were double cylinder; never had occasion to use them, and they were charged when put on the boat; my orders were to the crew in case of fire to do their best; had no fire organization on board the boat; the axes of the boat were in their place; there were no printed instructions on the boat as to the use of the life preservers; that is something new to me; I never knew it was required; the life preservers were easily accessible to the reach of any grown person; we had between 400 and 500 life preservers on board; they weighed six pounds, and would float the heaviest persons; the life-boat was attached to the davits and in readiness for use; it was thrown overboard; the yawl boat was cut by a passenger; he cut the bow fall; the moment she was cut she tipped, and the bow falling brought the stern up with a smatch and jerked it right out; no one would have been lost in the yawl, had the passenger who cut the bow line left the boat alone until the steamer beached: I have a witness to the cutting of this rope; he is a colored man who was in it and was saved, and he will testify to this effect; only two life preservers were used; a man named Emerson got one, and put one on his little girl; both were saved; all the lives were lost aft; there was probably eight or ten feet of water aft; I won't be positive, however; the tiller of the boat was made of chain and rod with the exception of about ten feet, which was rope; I threw water on the rope during the burning; when I saw the engineer he was on the forward deck; I don't think he was absent from his post at the time the alarm was given; have known him a long while, and always found him faithful.

Wm. O. Saville Recalled.

Have been acquainted with Mr. Nash four years; his character is as good as any engineer I have in my district; he did not drink or dissipate; he is a strictly sober man; never knew him to be under the influence of liquor; never heard of him drinking any; I consider him one of the best engineers in the district.

Testimony of J.W. Wheeler.

Was clerk of steamer *Wawaset*; was on board during the fire. The first indication I had anything was wrong, I was sitting on the promenade deck when a dense volume of smoke came into the saloon; had heard no alarm up till this time; the ladies became excited; I told them to be calm, as we could put the fire out or beach the boat in shallow water; saw ladies attempt to go forward, but were met by the flames and rushed below; I cried, "for God's sake don't go there!" but there was an indescribable panic, which could not be controlled; I assisted several passengers; the first was a Mr. McGuiggan, of the Chronicle office; he handed me a carpet sack; I said to him, "for God's sake don't look after your baggage—look after your life;" I was surprised when I jumped over to find the water up to my neck, and I am satisfied if the engine had not given out we could have beached the boat in two feet of water; I lifted a lady to the hurricane deck, and in a very few minutes she was passed down to me again by the captain; it was Miss Betty Reed, afterwards lost; I assisted several passengers; am satisfied every officer of the boat did all that could be done; captain was on the forward deck, giving his orders, calm and collected, and endeavoring to allay excitement; the boats, as far as I could tell, were kept in proper order; the yawl-boat had been lowered, with oars in her ten minutes before the fire broke out, to land a passenger; as near as I can recollect, about one hundred passengers were aboard, the majority of whom were males, the males were principally in the forward part of the boat, and could not get aft to render any assistance to the ladies; saw no instance of any male passengers attempting to save the females, unless it was perhaps Mr. Reed, who threw planks overboard; saw no one injured by throwing over plans and boxes; saw an old man ashore who said he jumped overboard with two peach boxes in his hand, and complained of a sore back; he thought he had been struck by the wheel; the yawl-boat was lowered to land a passenger at Chatterton's landing.

Testimony of Robert W. Gravatt.

Was mate of the *Wawaset*. Was standing at the hall when the fireman told me the boat was afire. I immediately stretched the hose, and asked Mr. Nash to turn the donkey engine on, but there was such a dense plume of smoke he could not do it. I made an attempt to get aft by going over the hurricane deck, but the flames drove me back. I saw the clerk trying to get ladies forward over the wheel-house. When I jumped over, no one was aboard except the captain; he says to me: "Jump overboard and try and save some of the passengers." I only saw one man jump overboard when the boat was under way, and that was one of the firemen; he was saved. I think everything was done that could have been done to save the lives of the passengers. The axes were on the gangways on each side in their places; there were thirty-six buckets of water on board. I have no license; did not think I required any; did not think boats not going outside of the Potomac were required to have licensed mates.

Testimony of Robert Nash.

I was engineer of the *Wawaset*; I think she was as well equipped as any boat I have ever been on; my department had all the appurtenances required – fire extinguishers, donkey engine, hose attached, etc. ; everything was perfectly safe around the boat; am satisfied nothing could have taken fire around it; was not absent over a half a minute at any one time from the engine room during the day the fire occurred; was not standing over six feet from the engine room when the alarm was given, in sight of my steam and water gauge; after the alarm I ran out on the forward deck to see if the hose was all right, and I could not get back again to the donkey engine; the flames drove me away; did not take any part in saving passengers; I could not get at those in danger as they were aft; I couldn't swim; I jumped over board and caught a peach box, and my son swam ashore with me; I think under the circumstances what was done, was the best that could be done; saw no passengers that were in the water injured by throwing anything over board; saw man that was injured in the back, but he thought he was struck by

the wheel, don't suppose he knows himself; the officers of the boat occasionally traded in produce; I did myself.

Q. Who was in charge of the engine when you did this trading?

A. The foreman was always left in charge, and my son an apprentice.

Q. An apprentice—not a licensed officer.

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Where were you when you first discovered the fire?

A. When I heard of the fire – the alarm – I ran into the engine room and opened the water gauge. I then looked into the hold and saw the flame, and opened the fire extinguisher. I was almost instantly driven out of the engine room by the flames, which in less time than I can tell you, extended to the hurricane deck.

Testimony of John W. Boswell.

Was pilot of the steamer *Wawaset*; is thirty-three years of age; has a United States license as pilot – or had; it was burnt; the fireman was the first one who apprised me of the fire, I says, "Captain, we had better run her ashore;" he says, "Yes," and went below; I headed her for shore, and jumped overboard from the hurricane deck and carried two ladies with me to where they could wade; then got a boat on shore, and got two women in it and landed them; saw three children on the rudder-chains, burned to death; have no idea as to the origin of the fire; saw the captain pass a lady from the upper to the forward deck; saw no male passengers assisting the females; saw no efforts made to get the metallic boat overboard; could not see the boats from the pilot-house—they were at the wheel-house; ??? think we struck in over 4-1/2 feet of water forward; don't think any lives were lost forward after the boat struck, except Miss Bettie Reed.

Testimony of J.W. Reed.

Was passenger on steamer *Wawaset*; reside at No. 520 11th street northwest, in this city; I was standing at forward port gangway, on main deck, when I heard some one say fire, and looked around and saw smoke coming out of the boiler house; I rushed to the forward deck, and the flames immediately after extended to the hurricane deck; I did not attempt to get aft, as I knew there was no chance to get there, although my brother-in-law's family, my aunt, and cousin were there; I begged the passengers not to jump overboard before the boat stopped, as I was satisfied we would beach in shallow water; I am satisfied my cousin would have been saved, had she staid on the hurricane deck until the boat stopped, but she humped in deep water before the boat struck, and was lost; saw the officers of the boat passing water on the tiller rope; Mr. Boswell remained in the pilot-house until the flames drove him away; saw life-preservers; could have reached them easily; I never once thought about getting one, knowing at the same time I couldn't swim; I saw a gentleman ashore who used one for himself and his daughter; don't think from the time I saw the first smoke until the boat beached was over five minutes; never thought wood could burn with the rapidity the boat was consumed; think everything that could have been done was done by the officers of the boat to save the lives of the passengers; I think about 125 passengers were aboard when the fire alarm was given.

Testimony of John Forman

Was fireman on board *Wawaset*; I went below after a pair of overhauls, it would have been my turn on watch in less than a half hour; I opened the fireman's door and saw smoke in the rear of the back connection; I at once reported the fire to the mate, and then to the Captain; don't know what caused the fire; saw nothing in the fireman's room indicating negligence; had not been in the room before that time; there was no oil in the room; I always wash forward; have no recollection of seeing any waste of

any kind ever in the fireman's room; I had not been smoking before entering the room; was not allowed to smoke in the firemen's room; there was a lamp in the room, but it was not lit.

Testimony of Lorenzo Brown.

Was a fireman aboard the *Wawaset*, has been so engaged for ten years; when I heard of the fire I started down the fireman's steps but the flames met me and drove me back; I then tried to get at the donkey engine but could not; I do not smoke; never use tobacco in any way; there are no lamps in the fireman's room; no light at all except at the water gauge; did not see any male except Mr. Wheeler, the clerk, attempt to save any female passengers; it was about ten minutes after the alarm of fire was given before the boat was beached; the oil used in the lamps was lard oil, also for the machinery; used kerosene oil in the lamp in the engine room; it was the only lamp coal oil was used in on the boat.

Testimony of Thomas Lewis.

Was deck hand on the *Wawaset*. [His evidence was mainly corroborative of the previous witness.] He testified that he saved two women by handing them pieces of board which they placed under them, and reached shallow water; had been in the hold 15 minutes before the fire; slept there; did not smoke in the hold; always smoked on deck; the oil used was lard oil and signal oil—lard oil inside and signal oil outside; his room was between the fireman's room and the boilers; he passed the fireman's room just before the fire, but did not go into it.

Testimony of Capt. Samuel Gedney.

I am superintendent of the Potomac Ferry company; used on the *Wawaset* coal oil called signal oil—such oil as is used for signal purposes, and approved by the board of inspectors. The outfit of the *Wawaset* was in good order, so far as life-saving apparatus was concerned; had more than a full complement of life preservers aboard, as some were stowed away in her because it was the best place the company had for storing them, as the store-room on the wharf was damp.

Testimony of Charles Jones.

Was deck-hand on board the steamer; was getting ready to land a passenger when the fire alarm sounded; helped to pour water on the tiller-ropes; remained on the boat until she ran ashore; then jumped over board, swam to the land, and got a batteau and picked up three ladies; saw no oil, waste or anything inflammable on the deck; the boat beached about six minutes after the alarm was given.

Q. And the flames spread very rapidly?

A. I never saw a fire burn so quick in my life; the life-preservers could have been reached by a boy five years old; the port steps were in the yawl that was lowered; the buckets were kept on the hurricane deck.

Wm. Washington, the cook and steward of the boat, was being examined when our report closed. The investigation will be continued tomorrow morning.