

**The Evening Star, Aug. 15, 1873, p. 4**  
**Manufacturing Prejudice in Reference to the Wawaset Calamity**

To the Editor of The Star:--I think you will agree with me that there seems to be a disposition to prejudge the sad circumstances which has lately caused so much sorrow and distress among us. Even at home we have hints and innuendoes intended to implicate the employees of the boat, and the newspapers abroad, inspired by that prevailing nightmare of prejudice against Washington, are apparently prepared to certify that the burning of the *Wawaset* was a premeditated and cruel device. The only wonder is that our foreign enemies have not charged it direct to the Board of Public Works, and so disposed of the matter comfortably and to their liking.

It seems quite unnecessary that the public mind in our own vicinity should, by daily insinuations, be provoked to prejudge the case, or that the board of investigation should have the work taken out of their hands and a verdict prepared for them on their arrival. We must not infer that the Potomac ferry company have been guilty of any conscious wrong until, by accurate and undoubted proof, it is shown that the *Wawaset* was burned in consequence of something they did or neglected to do. The most that we know or can know is that the destruction of the boat was sudden, and that the time for resorting to the usual safe-guards was limited to a few moments. There were plenty of life preservers; two or three at least for each passenger. Every one who has traveled on the boat knows that she was always well provided with them. That they were not used is not the fault of the captain or his crew. At such a time it was not possible for them to give personal attention to seeing the passengers supplied. When one dispassionately considers the circumstances, it is not so greatly to be wondered as that the proportion of the lost was so great. About half were saved; and nearly in this proportion they were distributed fore and aft of the vessel, while the flames amid ship formed a barrier that prevented escape. The most that the owners are responsible for is the cause and origin of the fire. In reference to this nothing probable or satisfactory is known. That it is so is not so remarkable a circumstance as to justify conviction, nor is it an isolated fact. In the numerous instances recorded of the burning of steamers, the origin of the fires has in nine cases out of ten remained a mystery.

When the steamer *Chagard* was burned many years ago on Lake Michigan, on the western shore, off Sheboygan, the fire was known to have originated in the hold, but where or how was never known. The loss of life was very great, but there was no criminality charged.

More recently the steamer seabird was burned in the same waters, not far north of Chicago, and the loss of life was terrible. The fire in this case did not originate below decks, nor was there any way to account for it except from the report that a cabin boy was seen to throw overboard a pan of ashes, from which a spark may possibly have ignited the deck load.

The danger in traveling upon all steamboats is from fire, and it is an element that inspires terror and distraction whether afloat or ashore. In our cities we employ men who are skilled in the use of costly machinery for subduing it, and we know how difficult it is even for them to succeed in the saving of life or property when both are in jeopardy.

As the origin of fires on land is often and nearly always a mystery, so they may be on the water. The Potomac ferry company did not burn their boat deliberately, and the sacrifice of life was an inevitable consequence, just as it has been on all similar occasions. What advantage is it to the people of Washington to attempt to fix special criminality upon the owners for this their first accident of the kind? It can avail nothing to the stricken hearts who have been suddenly called to mourn the loss of friends,

nor can it avail anything to the future safety of travelers. If it shall be proven that the law has been violated, and this calamity, beyond a peradventure traced to such violation, then it will be time enough to announce a verdict. In the meantime let's be just—patient, and not premature.

C.W.