

The Evening Star, August 18, 1873, p. 1
Burning Of The Wawaset
Official Investigation of the Disaster
Testimony Before the Treasury Board Today
Graphic Narratives of Survivors

The official investigation into the causes leading to the *Wawaset* disaster was continued 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 First Witness

This morning was Andrew Melville. He testified as follows: Am 32 years of age, live in Washington; was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; was standing on the forward deck when the fire broke out; heard an order given to steer for land; saw someone shut the sliding doors which the decks, and thus no one could get any life preservers; witness commenced to throw over peach boxes, and finally jumped in and seized one of them; was carried under by the wheel of the steamer; when he rose up saw a white woman calling for help and some one pulled her into a boat; witness was in the water about twenty minutes and during that time most of the lives were lost.

Cross-examination:--When the sliding doors were closed the flames burst up amidships; saw the doors were closed to prevent the draft of air through the boat; the effect of closing the doors appeared to have the effect to stop the draft and force the flames to burst through the decks above; noticed a plenty of life-preservers before the doors were closed, but could not see them afterwards; they were out of reach; thinks there could not have been a living soul saved had the boat been stopped when the fire was first discovered; when the doors of the deck were closed the fire had not been seen above three minutes; saw the first smoke issuing from the engine room and it increased very rapidly, there appeared to be no steam with the smoke, but the smoke was without any smell of oils; noticed no negligence on the part of officers of the boat; the boat appeared to be in good condition so far as he knew, and there were plenty of life preservers accessible before the sliding doors were closed; saw but little effort made by officers or passengers to save the ladies and children, witness could give no opinion as to the efforts of the officers in saving the passengers as he was soon in the water when he could see nothing; every one seemed trying to save himself; witness thought many life-preservers might have been thrown out before the doors were closed; knew of only of one being used, this was after he had got ashore; could not see to the stern of the boat from where he was, and therefore saw no one jump overboard from the stern.

Q. "Did you notice any of the officers or employes drinking – or about the bar?"

A. "No, sir."

Q. "Do you know the bar keeper?"

A. "No, sir."

Q. "Would you know him if you saw him?"

A. "No, sir." In the morning witness went to the bar and got a drink of whisky – thinks a colored man waited on him.

Q. "Did you notice the conduct of the engineer at any time during the trip?"

A. "No, sir."

Q. "Did you notice him away from his post?"

A. "No, sir."

Q. "Was there a great deal of excitement?"

A. "There was – much screaming of women and children."

Testimony of Mrs. Laura Taylor.

Mrs. Laura Taylor, of Alexandria, testified that she was a passenger on the boat; before the alarm of fire was given was standing near the engine room; she was looking after her little boy, and went back and took her seat, and afterwards heard the alarm of fire given; witness thought it was on some passing boat – jumped up, and found it was the *Wawaset*; everybody was jumping overboard, and witness jumped overboard too, with her little son, from the stern part, and next the Maryland side of the boat; witness never made a scream or screech at all; before she jumped over she looked for the life-boat, but it was full of colored people, who appeared to have thrown themselves into the bottom of it; the boat was suspended by the side of the steamer; jumped from the railing by the upper saloon deck; does not know how she got saved, and thinks it was by the mercy of God; when she reached the water she was in deep water, and she struck out with her hands; saw but one white gentleman, Mr. Emerson, on the boat; he had a life-preserver; saw no negligence on the part of the captain, engineer, or any one on the boat; could not say that any one was in liquor; know Mr. Nash, the engineer; he was at his post while witness was standing by the engine looking after her little boy; the steamer burned very quick; could smell something like oil or matches; witness could not say from where she was whether the male passengers aided the females in saving themselves; she was compelled to jump overboard or burn; the captain and officers were the last to leave the boat; the boat that picked her up was near the shore; she had got out of the danger; the little boy got her by the neck so tight at one time that she thought she would be lost; saved herself and the little boy; her sister-in-law was on the boat in company with her and was also saved by jumping in and catching hold of the rudder chain; a boat picked her up; the boat burned so quick that the officers could do nothing to save her; her sister-in-law was crying and taking on dreadfully and witness turned to her and said, "for God's sake hush;" the little boy was also screaming at the top of his voice; witness felt just as calm as she ever did; when witness jumped overboard, she had the boy by the hand, and supposed that she held on to him but does not remember; remembers that he got separated from her twice but he caught her each time; did not notice whether or not the officers were getting out the other life boat; saw the boat that had bursted to pieces, after it floated off.

Captain Gedney Was Recalled

And questioned as to the amount of kerosene that he had on board, and said they had no kerosene oil; they had one lamp and one gallon of oil; this was kept in one corner of the wash room; nothing else was kept there; this was all the oil on board.

A Colored Witness.

Moses Gordon, colored, testified that he is a laborer, lives in Washington; was a passenger on the *Wawaset*, on his way to Northumberland county; was on the lower deck when the alarm was given, passing by the engine room; saw no smoke or fire for two or three minutes; saw the life boat lowered, and a rush was made by the colored people for her; got in her himself, and some one cut her bow rope; he, with his sister was in her; saved himself by swimming.

Cross-examined:--Saw no one take any liquor; saw no matches lighted; first saw smoke and in a minute saw a blaze; no effort seemed to be made by the male passengers to save the women; everyone seemed to be for themselves; smelt no oil burning or steam with the smoke; when witness got into the water, swam until he reached a boat and got into it; saw life preservers in great plenty on the lower deck before the fire, but did not think to get one; they were within reach of everybody; witness thinks many more might have been saved if the boat had been stopped, as the wheels turned many under the water; many would have been saved as it was had the life boat been lowered instead of being cut loose;

witness saw the man cut the bow rope; did not know him; the fire was not hot when the boat was cut loose; witness tried to get forward, but could not on account of the smoke; did not notice the large metallic life boat at all; thinks every one in the life boat would have been saved had not the bow rope been cut; and that all would have been saved had the boat been stopped when the alarm was first given; witness' sister was lost.

Engineer Robert Nash Recalled.

Witness had a damper in the smoke stack; it was open; have never been troubled by back draft; the back draft would have to come out of the furnace; to reach the gallows from it, it would have to come out of the furnace six feet; ran into engine room and opened fire extinguisher; saw no flames in hold; have been engineer nine years about the boat; was standing five or six feet from the engine room when heard fire alarm; the smoke boxes and furnaces were cleaned out once a week regularly – every Friday; it had been a week since the cleaning had taken place. The trip was about from ten to twelve hours' run from this city to Currioman; they were making one trip per week, besides about four excursion trips; the effect of a leak in the smoke-boxes would be to create a back draft; there had been no leak there for the past two years; the boxes were as perfect as it was possible to make them, and he was satisfied there was no leak there; does not think the fire originated from the back draft of the boiler but is of the opinion that it came from the firemen's room, for when the door was opened, the flames burst out from it; soon as they found the fire had the best of them they commenced passing the buckets; had the boat been stopped and the doors kept closed, there might have been more lives saved possibly; but the first thought was to beach her as the best thing to be done; the forward hatches were closed and no smoke was visible on fore deck; the quarters for the deck hands were forward of the firemen's room.

Capt. Wood Was Recalled,

And stated that when he stepped out of the pilot house the flames were coming up about the walking beams, and he could send no bells to the engineer; he was afraid to leave the pilot house on account of a change of course; he halloed out for the hands to close the doors to prevent the draft of wind fanning the flames; the metallic boat was on the saloon deck and was lowered by the passengers; all seemed to be panic-stricken, and no orders were obeyed; he did all he could, and his conscience was perfectly clear as to his own duties; his pilot was considerably excited, and he (witness) thought his best way was to beach her.

Testimony Of The Bar-Keeper

Peter McKenney, bar-keeper on the *Wawaset*, testified that he was on the upper deck when the alarm was given; got on the lower deck and found the flames running up the walking beams; went to the saloon, where there was great excitement; told the females to keep cool and go forward; just then the flames burst into the gangway; witness got forward and remained there as long as he could; saw none of the officers take anything to drink on the boat; they were all sober men; asked Mr. Nash, the engineer, to keep an eye to the bar and say to any one who came there that he (witness) would return shortly; this was customary, but the engineer had no interest in the bar and was himself a sober man; when witness left the bar it was his custom to close it; there had been no liquor sold the officers or men that he knew of; witness thought the fire originated in the hold; witness used the same kind of oil in the bar that was used elsewhere on the boat; when witness jumped overboard he could just touch bottom; when he got forward he saw no more of the stern end of the boat, and could not say whether the male passengers or the officers of the boat aided the females; thought the officers did all they could under the circumstances to save life; did not think they could have saved any more lives by stopping the boat; witness could not swim, but felt confident when he jumped overboard that he could get ashore safe; witness was in the habit of seeing the life boats lowered every day, and thought many could have been

saved by them had they been left to properly lower them; the pumps were in good order and the hose kept reeled up generally; saw water thrown on the fire by buckets only; saw no pumps working; heard the engineer say they would not work; the water was thrown on from the hurricane deck; did not see any possibility of extinguishing the fire; never saw the engineer under the influence of liquor in his life; had heard passengers frequently ask him to drink and heard him refuse, saying "All your lives are in my hands;" have known him to take a glass of liquor but never while on duty.

Leonidas Scott, Colored,

Testified that he lives on Capitol Hill; was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; was sitting near the boiler, at the center of the boat, on the left hand side, and had risen and got outside the door, when a colored man came down stairs and in a low tone said "the boat is on fire;" stepped up to see the condition of the fire; Mr. Wheeler came up, and witness said, "where is your hose?" Wheeler said "I can't find them;" witness caught up some buckets, and he and a colored man tried to get some ropes to tie on to them; he was so long about it that witness gave up all hopes of doing anything to save the boat; abandoned the buckets, and went forward in the gangway to get some articles he had left, but the smoke drove him back; heard some gentleman forward say "I can't swim;" witness was about to cut his bull loose which was on the forward deck; Mr. Nash seemed to be paralyzed, he could do nothing, but stood still while the excitement was going on around him; while witness was sitting near the bar-room he saw a young man come up to the bar and saw Mr. Nash set out a black bottle; the young man poured out a large drink, and witness remarked to Mr. Nash that he was astonished to see a young man take so large a drink; this was before the fire alarm was sounded; never noticed Mr. Nash absent except this time; never knew any of the officers to take any drinks on the boat; he thought the officers did the best they could; his opinion was that had the boat been stopped, they would have saved very few of the passengers; he was surprised when he found the hose was not in readiness; had it been in place the fire might have been subdued at that time; witness had been a passenger on the *Wawaset* frequently and everything seemed in perfect order; saw no conveniences for lowering the large metallic boat; had been told that the width of the river at this point was three miles; saw five or six buckets thrown down from the hurricane deck but there were no ropes attached and they could not be used; did not see Mr. Nash do anything towards making any effort to putting out the fire; before the boat landed he tried to save his things but was with Mr. Nash most of the time before she struck bottom; did not see any blaze until she struck; the sliding door was pulled to, which prevented him from seeing in the aft part of the gangway, and could not say whether the female passengers could have been removed forward; could not say that he saw any negligence on the part of the officers; they were all taken by surprise, and all appeared more or less confused, but he thought more might have been done with the life preservers had anybody busied themselves; did not see the hose handled at all, nor any attempt made to stretch the hose across the decks; when witness first saw the smoke it was near the engine room issuing out between the cracks of the steam box covering.

John Scott,

Son of the former witness, testified that he was on board the steamer; was in the bar of the boat after they left Smith's point on his way to Chatterton; some one called out "the boat's afire;" ran back and forth several times from the cabin to the bow; witness jumped up on the rail and some one said, "don't jump overboard yet;" some white man who was very much afraid threw a large box into the water and jumped in afterwards and saved himself; witness threw a peach box over and caught up another and jumped in afterwards and saved himself; the engine stopped some time before the boat struck; saw plenty of life preservers but none were used; did not see much of the officers, but saw some one throwing some buckets down from the hurricane deck, near the pilot house; witness went to the engine room and did not see any one there; after several minutes saw a colored man go in and wipe down the

machinery with a cloth; did not see Mr. Nash while the boat was afire and not until he got on shore; saw no one trying to save the female passengers; saw no hose on the boat; witness was on the forepart of the boat most of the time and in the gangway.

Wm. Emerson,

A butcher from Alexandria, testified that he was on board at the time of the fire; he was on the starboard side near the pilot-house; smelt smoke, and found the boat was burning; went aft where his niece was, and got two life-preservers; saw a crowd of colored persons about the life-boat; saw the bow rope of the boat cut, and all were plunged in together; others jumped in after them; got to the stern end of the boat, and some one tried to get his life-preservers, but had got one of his niece, and put the other one on himself, and got outside on the guards, and dropped his niece in and followed her; after he got in he shoved his niece away from him, with the intention of saving some one else, but finding his niece floating away from him he abandoned the attempt and went to her rescue; after the alarm was given he went below and went forward and aft again before he found his niece; and during that time the passengers could have gone forward, but afterwards they could not have had time to do so; saw Mr. Nash once in the bar room – the witness applied for a lemonade, and Mr. Nash said he had no time to mix it for him, but gave him instead some lemon syrup and his friend took ale which was given them by Mr. Nash; saw none of the officers drink anything; saw Mr. Wheeler assist a lady over the wheel house; saw no attempt to stretch out the hose; saw buckets used; thought he distinguished the smell of oil in the smoke, but did not know the origin of the fire; when the fire was first discovered all had plenty of time to get life preservers, or the officers could have furnished all with them; saw no one attempt to work the pumps; saw some one in the engine room when he went forward to the boiler hatch for his valise; saw life preservers above the shaft, and ranged along fore and aft the gang-way; the color of the bottle used in giving him the lemon syrup was white; did not notice where he drew the ale from; noticed no life preservers on the aft part of the boat; there was great confusion. [Witness here corrected his statement that he saw the rope cut, but said he saw the boat plunge down after the rope was cut.] Saw no fall attached to the large metallic life-boat; when he saw her she was sitting in the stocks under the davits, but he saw no attachments made to her before he went overboard; saw no one smoking or using fire; saw no life-preservers aft of the shaft; was in the social hall, but saw no one smoking there; had the officers distributed the life-preservers at the first moment of the alarm was given, many could have availed themselves of them; but nothing could have been done with the boats, as the colored people had possession of them.

The testimony here closed until tomorrow at 10 o'clock.