

The Evening Star, August 19, 1873, p. 1
Burning Of The Wawaset
Official Investigation of the Disaster
Testimony Before The Treasury Board Today

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.

Testimony Of Thomas H. Massey

Resides in Westmoreland county, Va.; was a passenger on board the *Wawaset*, after the boat left Liverpool point I lay down on the starboard side of the boat and fell asleep; some one woke me up and said, "Friend, wake up, the steamboat is afire;" I looked upon it as a joke; I could see no smoke; almost an instant thereafter I saw the smoke and flame; went to the hurricane deck and afterwards passed to the forward deck; heard some one say they were arranging the hose to work on the fire; noticed the mate, captain and some of the deck hands using buckets and throwing water on the flames; the captain told the passengers forward after the boat had grounded that it was time to get off; Capt. Woods was the last man on board; was on the starboard side of the boat, forward of the wheel, when the alarm was given.

Q. Did you see any one attempt to man the pumps?

A. No, sir, I did not; my impression is that the fire originated under the forward gangway; this is only my opinion; I can't tell where it had its origin.

Q. How long after the alarm was given was it, do you think, before you saw smoke and flame?

A. I can't tell – it all came together.

Q. Did the officers do their duty?

A. Yes; they did all they could have done.

Q. What did they do?

A. Well, the pilot headed her for shore, the men used the heaving lines and filled the buckets, and the captain and mate both threw water on the tiller ropes; the captain stood on the forward deck and hollered until he couldn't "hollow" any longer, to bring boats in from the shore; don't think if the boat had been stopped any lives would have been saved; I am so confirmed in this opinion that if Capt. Woods had stopped the boat I would have killed him, and would have thought I was doing a justifiable deed; the best thing possible to do was done, and that was beaching the boat.

Q. Did you see any negligence on the part of the officers or crew before the alarm of fire?

A. Not the least.

Q. Were you at any time around the engine house?

A. Yes, before breakfast I was; the bar room is a little forward of the engine room door, on the port side; did not see any of the officers drink at the bar; never saw the engineer at any time out of the reach of the engine; he was a man who seemed to be very attentive to his business; the boat was well supplied with life preservers; they were hanging up between the decks, some in racks, some piled on shelves, and I think some on the floor; they were easy of access; nothing barred the passengers from getting them, except presence of mind; don't think the officers had time to distribute life preservers among the passengers; it would have bothered them considerably to have got round; don't know how the life boat

was fixed; there were davits there, but don't know whether the boat was attached thereto or not; saw cranes there too; think the boat was hung on them; don't know for certain; I won't swear to it.

Testimony of Charles Herron.

Am a farmer; reside in King George county, Md.; was a passenger on board the *Wawaset* just before the boat got to Chatterton, I was standing with my daughter at the gangway to get off; very soon the alarm was sounded, and a rush was made for the boat which was lowered to go to the landing; I got out of the way and went to the forward deck; I was assisted to the hurricane deck by Mr. Wheeler; as soon as the boat struck, I jumped overboard and swam ashore with my child; it was only a few minutes after the alarm was given before the boat was smothered with smoke; I saw Mr. Wheeler help two colored women to the hurricane deck; saw none of the officers except Mr. Wheeler until I got ashore; saw no male passengers assist the ladies; didn't take notice; had all I wanted to do to save myself and child; there were a good many passengers aft when I jumped overboard; am acquainted with the engineer; did not see him at any time during the day over six feet from his engine; never saw any of the officers in the bar-room; did not see the engineer in or about the bar at any time during the day; saw life preservers in slats – plenty of them; could reach them handy; did not see any of the officers assist passengers, because I didn't see any but Mr. Wheeler; he assisted me, and others; when I jumped into the water I swam away from the boat, thinking it best to keep away from those already in the water; have no idea as to the origin of the fire; the yawl boat that was lowered was very much crowded; the passengers were very much excited; Mr. Gravitt, the mate, attempted to keep back the crowd, but could not; don't think there were more than twenty in the boat; would hold more, but they tumbled in every way, head first, backwards, and almost in any shape, so they got in; when the rope broke away in the bow, I saw I had no chance to get ashore in a boat and jumped overboard; did not smell anything like coal oil around the engine house.

Q. From the time the boat was put adrift until the time you left the steamer how long was it to the best of your knowledge?

A. Well, I don't think it was over three or four minutes; have a general knowledge of small boats on steamers; I think if we could have had time to have gotten the boat down a great many passengers would have been saved, but in my judgment, and according to my recollection, the officers did not have the time.

Q. If directly after the boat had been cut an effort had have been made to get the passengers forward do you think they could have been gotten forward?

A. No, sir; I made as good time as any body and the fire met me.

Testimony of R.D. Beckley, Colored.

Reside in Alexandria; am a special agent in the Post Office department; was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; took passage at Alexandria to get to Cone river; the boat left Alexandria at fifteen minutes past seven; when I got to Smith's Point I went to the bar to get a glass of beer; after passing Smith's Point I went to the bar and got another drink; I turned to my left and discovered smoke coming from over the sheathing on the boilers; a colored man soon afterwards ran through the boat and cried "Fire! Fire! Fire!" I went to the aft of the boat and told the ladies to keep quiet, the fire would soon be out; I then went up stairs to get my satchel and could not return the same way I went up; I then went to the lower deck and got a box; heard some one say "don't jump, wait until the boat stops;" when the boat stopped running I, in company with others, jumped over.

Q. Have you any idea of the origin of the fire?

A. Well, I am satisfied I am the first one who discovered the fire, and the smoke issued from the sheathing of the boilers; I am of the opinion the officers could not have got aft; those that were aft could not get forward and those that were forward could not get aft; I don't think the fire could have been extinguished, the time was so short and the flames so rapid.

Q. Are you acquainted with the engineer?

A. Not personally; paid no attention to him at all; am not the author of a letter in the Critic; never heard they had an article with my signature to it.

Q. Who waited on you at the bar?

A. Well, I don't know; I would know him, I think, if I saw him again. [Witness was requested to look around the room and see if he recognized the person who waited on him at the bar. Witness recognized Mr. McKenna as having waited on him; no one else.]

Q. Did you at any time state to Maj. McPhail that the engineer waited on you at any time?

A. Yes, I think I did.

Q. Who was it?

A. The engineer; he served me with a glass of ale.

[Mr. Nash was requested to stand before the witness.]

Q. Is that the man?

A. I think it is; it looks like him; I won't be too positive.

Q. How did you make the assertion to Maj. McPhail if you are not positive.

A. When I went to the bar I saw a gentleman outside who waited on me and Mr. Emerson; I said to him when he came in, "Do you run both these machines; I don't know what his reply was;" I stated that he had better let me run one and him the other; I think the person who waited on me the last time was the engineer; I did not hear any one say in the bar-room the engine will run itself; to the best of my knowledge Mr. Nash served me with the last drink I took; I have not written an article for a newspaper for ten or twelve years; if anybody has signed my name to an article it was done without my knowledge or authority; am positive the fire could not have been extinguished; I attempted to get a life preserver and failed; I couldn't pull it out; did not make much effort, I think if I had given a little more exertion I might have got one; neither the captain nor any officer two minutes after the fire was discovered could have gotten aft without running through flames; there was about 100 passengers aboard, the majority being colored, women and children; did not see the steamer's boats until they were brought ashore; one had its stern broken.

Q. Do you think any more could have been done, more than was done by the officers to save life?

A. To the best of my judgment and belief I do not.

Q. Did you see any of the officers attempt to save passengers?

A. Yes; I saw the captain lower a lady from the upper to the lower deck; also saw the cook making efforts to save the colored women.

Q. Did you attempt to save anybody?

A. No, sir; for reason I couldn't swim myself; I was satisfied I had to either be burned up or drowned, and therefore made all efforts to save myself.

Testimony of James Newman, Colored

Reside in this city; was passenger on the *Wawaset*; was asleep when the boat caught fire; I was awake by the noise and excitement; I was aft and could not get forward, so I jumped overboard and swam ashore; met three colored women in the water and took them to wading water; I jumped overboard before the boat struck; when I jumped over I jumped into a pile of ladies; they were jumping over all the time; was aft, near the water cask when I heard the alarm, outside the ladies saloon; don't think it was possible for the officers of the boat to get aft; I tried to get forward and could not; I saw two white ladies after I got on shore, who went forward, from the saloon, over the wheel-house, and thus saved

themselves; saw no officer of the boat in the bar-room but the bar-keeper; don't think it was possible to extinguish the fire after it broke out; I think the officers did the best they could.

Testimony of Orrin Eddy.

Reside at the corner of 7th and H streets; I was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; was sitting on the forward part of the saloon deck reading; heard some one say the boat is on fire; I passed aft, and from thence went to the saloon deck, where a young lady caught me by the arm and said, do you think there is much danger; just then the clerk came along and said we had better go forward; I took the young lady to the wheel house, and by the assistance of the clerk she was gotten forward; I fell overboard, caused by the jar of the boat when it struck, in about seven feet of water; I have ascertained since that the young lady I assisted was Miss Reed; she was lost, I believe; I think if the officers had been on the saloon deck when the fire broke out, they could have ordered every one forward; if they were in any other portion of the boat, they would not have had time to have gotten there; the smoke smelt something like lubricating oil.

Q. Where you in the bar-room that morning?

A. I was down there once.

Q. Who waited on you?

A. A colored man; the bar-keeper was lying down outside on some sacks.

Q. Do you think there was any possibility of extinguishing the fire after you heard the alarm?

A. Well, I couldn't judge, as the fire was all below; I think if the boat had been stopped there would not have been one half-dozen saved, only those who could swim; I don't think any more could have been done by the officers than was done.

Q. Had there been any more men on the saloon deck besides yourself, do you think the metallic boat could have been launched?

A. Yes, sir, I do.

Q. And by that means as many as the boat would have held would have been saved?

A. Yes, sir; the men who were handling the boat were very much excited and the colored ones were more so than the white ones.

Testimony Of Lewis Woody, Colored.

Was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; I was aft when the alarm was raised; I started to go through the passage-way to go forward, and before I reached the engine room the smoke drove me back; I then climbed up to the hurricane deck, near the wheel-house; there were several ladies there; the clerk told all to come forward; have no idea of the origin of the fire; was in the bar-room once in the morning; the barkeeper waited on me; passed the engine room several times during the morning, and always saw the engineer at his post.

Testimony Of Daniel Ward, Colored.

Was at Chatterton's landing when the *Wawaset* was burning; got a boat out and otherwise assisted to save life; heard Captain Woods call out from the pilot house to the boat to come out and meet him; noticed the yawl before it fell, and saw that it was crowded with passengers.

At one o'clock the investigation was adjourned until tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. The announcement was made by Mr. Rose that it was probable the investigation would be concluded tomorrow.

[Mr. Andrew Melville testified yesterday that he was 53 years old, not 32 years, as the types made it in last evening's Star.