

The Evening Star, August 22, 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 resumed this morning at the Treasury department.

Lorenzo Brown, Colored Fireman, Recalled.

Q. Do you know the nature of an oath?

A. Yes.

Q. What does it mean? A. It means kissing the bible.

Q. How many berths were there in the fireman's room? A. Two.

Q. Who occupied them? A. Me and another man.

Q. Did you sleep in the room? A. Not in the summer; it was too warm.

Q. Was there a lock to the room? A. Yes.

Q. Who carried the key? A. There was no key; it was never locked.

Q. Any body could go in? A. Yes, sir.

Q. Do you smoke? A. Never; the other fireman does.

Q. Did you ever see him smoke in that room?

A. No, sir; he was not allowed to smoke there.

Q. Did you keep matches in that room?

A. No, sir; the matches were kept in the engine room.

Q. Were you in that room any time between 6 o'clock and the disaster?

A. No, sir.

Q. Was any one else in there? A. I did not see any one.

Q. Are you certain no matches or lamp was in that room? A. Yes, sir.

Q. Didn't you carry in any waste from the machinery? A. No, sir.

Q. How long were you on watch that morning? A. Six hours.

Q. Did you stay in the room all the time?

A. Not all the time; I generally filled up my fires and then went on deck about twenty minutes.

Q. Were you off watch when the fire broke out?

A. No, sir; would not be off for a half hour.

Q. Where were you when the fire was discovered?

A. On the hurricane deck, oiling machinery.

Q. Did the engineer usually use the fireman on watch to oil the machinery?

A. The other man was up.

Q. Was there anything in the fireman's room that would take fire without a match being put to it?

A. Nothing but the bed.

Q. That would not take fire unless a flame was put to it?

A. No, sir.

Q. Did you ever go in that room after dark? A. Yes, sir.

Q. When you went in that room after dark, did you take a lamp with you? A. No, sir.

John Forman (Colored), Fireman, Recalled.

Q. Do you know the nature of an oath? A. I do.

Q. How did you come to be down stairs before your watch?

A. I had been down about fifteen minutes talking to the deck hands on the forecandle; I knew I would go on watch in less than a half hour, and I went into the fireman's room to get my overhauls, and discovered the fire.

Q. What did you see?

A. I saw the smoke and fire opposite the back connection; back smoke-box we call it.

Q. What was burning?

A. Well, I couldn't say; I didn't stay long enough to see; I went on deck and reported it.

Q. Did you see the other fireman? A. Yes, in the engine room.

Q. Do you smoke? A. Yes.

Q. When? A. Well, when I am off watch; I never smoke on watch.

Q. Do you ever use a lamp in that room? A. No, sir.

Q. When you opened that room what did you think was burning?

A. The side of the room opposite the bed and clothing; it was the board partition.

Q. Have you any idea how that got on fire?

A. I have not, unless it caught from the back connection.

Q. Did you ever feel that partition to ascertain how warm it was?

A. Well, it would sometimes get rather warm.

Wm. O. Saville Recalled

I believe one day I was about the Alexandria boats, Captain Gedney came to me and said, "Has the *Wawaset* been reduced in her certificate?" I said, "I believe not. I am inspector of boilers, and did not think he had reference to passengers.

Q. You told Capt. Gedney the certificate had not been cut down?

A. I told him it had not according to my knowledge.

James D. Lowry

Inspector of boilers, was recalled, and testified as to the true copy of the certificate of inspection in the hands of the board of examiners.

Testimony of Louis F. Clements

Am inspector of customs in Georgetown; was not a passenger on board the *Wawaset*; know nothing of the burning; was on the ferry wharf one day and Captain Gedney called me in and seemed to be troubled because the *Wawaset* had been reduced; I said to him it must be a mistake, he had better see the inspectors and have it fixed; he asked me to send them down if I saw them; I said I would; about a week after I was passing Captain Gedney and I said, "Did the inspectors fix that right?" He said "yes;" I don't know whether he understood my question or not.

Q. Do you know of your own knowledge how the record stands in the Georgetown custom house? A. Fifty.

Q. How did the record stand last year?

A. The record last year stands for one hundred and fifty passengers.

Q. Were you aware that the captain of a steamboat ought to have a license?

A. Well to tell the truth, before this disaster I really did not. I thought his being endorsed as a master was sufficient; I have read the law since and found out my mistake.

Testimony of Joseph R. Spransy.

Am captain of a tugboat. I heard Mr. Clements say last Sunday afternoon that he knew that the papers were aboard the boat for 150 passengers, and that they were recorded in Georgetown for 50.

Lewis F. Clements Recalled.

I did not see the new inspection of the *Wawaset* since it has been put up. The remark I made to Captain Spransy was, that it was my impression that the boat could carry 150 passengers, based upon the fact of the conversation I have related of a previous interview had with Capt. Gedney.

Testimony of Samuel W. Cox.

On the morning after the disaster I went into the Potomac Company's office, and found Mr. Clements and Mr. Saville there; they were talking about passengers on board steamboats. In the course of the conversation Mr. Clements said the *Wawaset* was licensed to carry 150 passengers. I left the office with the impression that both Mr. Saville and Mr. Clements understood that the boat was limited to carry 150 passengers. Mr. Saville did not say so, but Mr. Clements did in his presence.

Testimony of Asa P. Snyder.

Am bookkeeper; reside in South Washington; had been in the habit of going to the *Wawaset* every Sunday evening on business with the bar-keeper; I went one Sunday and couldn't find him, and while on the boat read a certificate allowing her to carry one hundred and fifty passengers; I think I read the certificate since the 24th of March last; I don't think it has been over two months since; I am positive; it struck me forcibly that the boat only being authorized to carry 150 passengers, often carried on excursions five hundred and upwards; I did not know at the time the company had any permit to carry five hundred; I cannot tell how the certificate was dated; don't know whether it was an old certificate of 1872 or a new one of 1873.

Testimony of George A. Sheckels.

I saw Mr. Saville on the Saturday morning after the burning of the boat; I said to him: "Mr. Saville, is it true the *Wawaset* is only allowed to carry fifty passengers?" He said: "That is a mistake, she is allowed to carry one hundred and fifty; she wouldn't make much, a boat of her size, if she was only allowed to carry fifty." I am positive he said she was allowed to carry one hundred and fifty passengers; the conversation took place in the early part of the day in the office of the Potomac Ferry company at the foot of the 7th street wharf.

Testimony of Frank Wolf.

I was sitting in the Potomac Ferry company's office on the day after the disaster; Mr. Saville was then talking about the trouble he had keeping passengers off the Baltimore boats; Mr. Sheckels came in and said: "Mr. Saville, there is a rumor outside that the *Wawaset* is only allowed to carry fifty passengers; how is it?" Mr. Saville answered: "No, sir, that is a mistake; she is allowed to carry one hundred and fifty passengers;" he also said that Captain Gedney had called his attention to the mistake.

Testimony of S.S. Howison

I am President of the Potomac Ferry company; I wish to state that Captain Gedney is left with all matters pertaining to our boats; he called my attention to the discrepancy between the certificates of inspection, and I told him to see Mr. Saville and Mr. Lowry and have it rectified at once.

Captain Gedney Recalled.

At the time the inspection was made did you give any direction to the Inspectors as to the number of passengers you wished to carry?

A. I did not.

Q. Did you direct any one else? A. No, sir.

Q. Where was the captain at the time?

A. He was sick with the small pox; the boat was inspected on the 24th, he died on the 27th of March.

Q. Who could it have been that told the inspector to put in fifty?

A. I don't know; Mr. Boswell, the pilot, was acting captain at the time.

Q. What day did you put up the new certificate on the boat?

A. About four or five days after the inspection was made; the boat made one trip without any papers; I am positive they were put up within a week after the 24th of March.

Testimony Of Ephraim Nash

Am a farmer; reside in Northumberland county, Virginia; was a passenger on board the *Wawaset*; was in the forward part of the boat when the alarm was sounded; I went aft after seeing the smoke; had been there but an instant when somebody came back and said keep quiet, the boat will be beached in a moment; I then climbed up on the deck by the metallic life boat; something was said about lowering the boat, when a deck hand said let it alone; I looked to see if any means were at hand to lower it, and did not; it was shoved overboard and a colored man jumped with it; I then climbed up to the hurricane deck, and found the fire coming up to the walking beam; I then jumped into the bow of the boat and took an empty peach box and jumped overboard a little before the boat stopped and swam ashore; I think on the port side of the hurricane deck passengers could have passed from the aft forward up till the time the boat struck; saw none of the officers attempt to get aft to save the lady passengers; I have no doubt the intention of the officers was good, but saw none of them but Mr. Wheeler attempt to rescue any passengers.

Q. Did you see the engineer in the barroom?

A. I have an impression I did; I am not quite positive of the fact; I could not swear to it; it is a distinct impression on my mind.

Q. Did you see him take liquor at all? A. No, sir.

Q. Do you think after the fire occurred there was a possibility to extinguish it?

A. No, sir; I do not; I think if the doors between the saloon had been closed, so as to have stopped the draft, it would have prolonged the fire until after the boat beached, and it would have mitigated the disaster; if the boat had been stopped, the small boats might have been lowered and life preservers distributed.

Q. Do you think if there had been a fire department aboard that boat they could have done any good with the pumps?

A. I hardly consider myself competent to judge; I saw no negligence, before or after the fire, on the part of the officers of the boat.

George Parker, colored, a passenger, was examined, but his evidence failed to elicit any additional facts.

Captain Gedney Recalled.

The life-boat was on the hurricane deck, aft of the wheelhouse, with a bow and a stern line attached to let it down; have never exercised the men in lowering the boats; a boat was lowered at several landings each trip, and there was no difficulty in getting her up and down.

Tiffany Rich, colored, a passenger, was examined, and testified that his wife and child were burned up on the boat. No new points were developed by the witness.

At 1:30 o'clock the investigation adjourned sine die. Mr. Rose gave notice that the report of the commission would appear at an early day.