

The Evening Star, August 30, 1873, p. 1
The Wawaset Disaster
Recommendations of the Commission

The board appointed by the Secretary of the Treasury to conduct the investigation into the cause of the disaster to the steamer *Wawaset* make the following recommendations:--The institution of proceedings against the Potomac Ferry company and the officers of the *Wawaset*. They first take up the case of the ferry company, the evidence conclusively showing that the company employed Capt. Wood and Mate Gravitt, neither of them having a license as required by section fourteen of the act of February 28th, 1871, to provide for the better security of life on board of vessels propelled in whole or in part by steam, and that the company permitted these unlicensed officers to perform duties on the *Wawaset* which only duly licensed officers are allowed to perform. For this flagrant violation of the law, the board earnestly recommend the imposition of the prescribed of the prescribed penalties, as well as against Captain Wood and Mate Gravitt, who are made equally guilty and responsible with the company, the section referred to making it unlawful to employ any person, or for any person to serve as a captain, chief mate, engineer or pilot on any steamer, who is not licensed by the inspectors; and any one so offending shall forfeit one hundred dollars for each offense. It will be seen that both the officers and the company are liable for every trip made – the mate for serving without a license. In the case of Engineer Nash, reference is made to the testimony of numerous witnesses who purchased liquor at the bar, which was served by the engineer. Though duly licensed, and from all the evidence, a competent officer, the board find him guilty of negligence, abandoning his post of duty, tending bar, and engaging in trading at the several landings made by the *Wawaset* on her trips to and from Cone river, thereby endangering the safety of the boat and the lives of the passengers. For this the board revoke his license by authority conferred by section 17 of the steamboat act already referred to, which provides that an engineer's license shall be revoked or suspended upon satisfactory proof of negligence, unskillfulness, intemperance, or the willful violation of any provision of the act.

The controversy as to the right of the *Wawaset* to carry 50 or 150 passengers, as the company claimed, is next considered. After due consideration the board find that the copy of the certificate on file in the Georgetown custom house, limiting the number of passengers to fifty, must be recognized as evidence conclusive of the correctness of the inspector's statement. The company is, therefore, adjudged guilty of further violation of the steamboat act, in taking on board a greater number of passengers than was stated on the certificate, for which the master and company, or either of them, are liable to any person suing for the same, to forfeit the amount of passage money, and ten dollars for each passenger beyond the number allowed. In reviewing the testimony, the board is painfully impressed with the lack of organization on board the *Wawaset*, which adds to the culpableness of the company and its unlicensed officers. The latter are censured for their lack of effort in saving the lives of the passengers and for inefficiency in the emergency. The crew being subject only to the rules of discipline enforced by their superiors cannot be blamed for their conduct, though the evidence shows there was little effort on their part to help the passengers.

In conclusion, they regret that it was impossible to ascertain the cause of the fire, and in the absence of evidence proving that the boat was not properly protected about the boilers, the board do not venture an opinion. The inspectors distinctly state that the boilers were free from contact with any partition, and the requirements of the law in this respect faithfully regarded.

They trust that they have faithfully performed the duties assigned them, and now leave the government to enforce the law enacted to meet just such dereliction as the Potomac Ferry company and the unlicensed officers of the *Wawaset* have been guilty.