

The Evening Star, September 1, 1873, p. 1
The *Wawaset* Tragedy
The Official Report In Full

The following is the official report of the commission who investigated the causes leading to the *Wawaset* disaster:

Washington, D.C., August 25, 1873

John Menshaw, Esq., Supervising Inspector of Steam Vessels, Baltimore, Md.

Sir: Pursuant to your order of the 11th inst., directing an investigation into the cause of the burning on the 8th of August 1873, of the steamer *Wawaset*, and the consequent loss of life occasioned thereby, we have the honor to submit herewith the testimony taken, and with it our report upon the case.

The investigation was commenced on Friday morning, August 15th, 1873, in the office of the supervising inspector, at the United States Treasury department, in the city of Washington, and was continued from day to day and closed on Friday, August 22, 1873, having held seven sessions, embracing in all seven days. Forty-five witnesses were examined, including the inspectors by whom the steamer was last inspected, the officers of the vessel, and several of the surviving passengers. The facts developed by the testimony are briefly as follows:

The *Wawaset* was one of those steamers plying between Washington and Cone river, a distance of about one hundred miles, touching at intermediate points, and owned by the Washington Ferry Company. She was built at Wilmington, in the state of Delaware in the year 1863, and was of 328 90-100 tons burden; was constructed of wood in a substantial manner, and was considered in all respects seaworthy; her boiler was built at Chester, Pa., by Rearney Sons & co., year not known. She was provided with one condensing engine, and all appearance in accordance with law. By her certificate of inspection she was authorized to carry thirty cabin and twenty deck passengers, with fifteen men as her complement of officers and crew; persons legally permitted to be carried on board; her equipments consisted of two good and efficient fire extinguishers (Gardner's), one good steam fire pump worked by steam (Woodward's patent) with suitable pipes leading therefrom and fitted and supplied as required by law, and one good double acting fire pump worked by hand, furnished with 175 feet of good hose with nozzles and couplings complete, all being fitted to suit both steam and hand pumps; 24 fire buckets, 5 axes, 1 life boat made of metal and one of wood, all equipped complete; 75 life preservers, adjustable to the body, each containing six pounds of good cork and having a buoyancy of at least 25 pounds; sufficient and reliable steering apparatus, suitable arrangements for signaling the engineer from the pilot house with steam whistle and signal lights complete; all of which the inspectors confirmed on the stand. The steamer *Wawaset* left Washington for Cone river on one of her regular trips at or about six o'clock on the morning of the 8th of August, 1873; upon approaching Chatterton's landing about sixty-five miles below Washington, between the hours of 11:30 and 12 o'clock a.m. the whistle was sounded and the boat lowered for the conveyance of passengers to the shore, as was usual at this landing, when smoke was discovered issuing from the fireman's room, under the main deck forward, and the alarm was given that the boat was on fire. It is alleged that the flames burst forth with such fury as to leave but little time for any one to obtain life preservers or utilize the life boats. From the same cause the officers of the boat claim to have been unable to render assistance to the one hundred and twenty-five odd passengers on board, hence the deplorable loss of life which ensued, while all the officers, as also the crew, with but one exception, were saved.

We are constrained to believe that the fire raged with fearful rapidity, and that from the position of the passengers they were exposed to imminent peril; but we do not believe the statement of the officers that they did all that could possibly have been done under the circumstances to save the lives of the passenger, which opinion is fully and clearly borne out by the evidence in the case. It would appear from the testimony that the fire originated in the fireman's room, forward of the boiler; that it had been burning some time, and was first discovered by one of the firemen when attempting to enter the room, the opening of the door of which admitted the air to the fire, and thereby caused the vessel to be enveloped in flames and smoke, and driving the engineer from his post,; that there were no means of getting to the after-part of the boat to assist the passengers, and that there was not one of the officers aft at the time the fire was raging; that a lady, supposed to be Miss Reed, ran over the wheel-house, and was caught in the master's arms, who passed her below to the clerk, but she was subsequently lost.

John R. Woods, master of the *Wawaset* at the time of the disaster, testified that he was in the pilot house at the time of the alarm of fire was given; that he did not know where or how the fire originated; that thinking the fire was in the hold, he would go down quietly and put it out, but that in a very short time the flames were at the hurricane deck coming up by the walking beam of the engine, and he "knew that she was gone and that it was impossible to save her," and the only chance was to "beach her as soon as possible." This is his own unprompted statement of what he saw and of what he thought. The saving of the boat seemed to be uppermost in his mind to the exclusion at that time of the preservation of the lives of the passengers, most of whom were helpless women and children. Accordingly, he says, he ordered the pilot to head the vessel for the shore, then very near. Instead, however, of assuming command, and directing passengers to a position on the boat where they might provide themselves with life preservers, or of ordering the crew to prepare the life-boats for use, he took some of the fire buckets with which to throw water on the tiller rope, leaving the passengers to crowd together so as to cut off all chance of escape. He told them to keep cool, and they would all be saved. Just at that time the engine ceased to work, the boat stopped, the supreme moment passed, and with it all possibility of saving life through the appliances on board.

Robert Nash, the engineer, testifies that he was at his post, and herein he is supported by the other officers. Indeed, the evidence of the officers and crew of the steamer *Wawaset* coincide in all particulars; they assert there was no time to do more than was done; no opportunity to save life; that every man was employed in the best manner, wherever he happened to be on board; that boxes, planks, etc., were thrown to those overboard. The hose was laid, but water could not be applied; that all appreciated their own and the danger of the passengers, all that they only barely succeeded in escaping from the burning vessel, while the passengers were unaided in making their escape.

Robert W. Gravitt, the mate; John W. L. Boswell, the pilot; J.W. Wheeler, clerk, and several of the deck hands confirm the testimony of the other officers, and the evidence of some of the passengers was also of a confirmatory nature, while that of other passengers of more intelligence, perhaps, and cooler observation seriously contradict the statements of the officers; these passengers assert that the officers permitted time to be lost; that they made no effort to save the lives of their passengers, especially the women and children; that the hose was not in its proper place; that the metallic life-boat had no davits or falls attached to it and that the other boat was seized by a number of colored men, in the absence of any officer to prevent it, and thrown overboard in such a manner as to cause the loss of all its occupants.

After a careful review of the whole testimony produced before us, we regret to have to acknowledge that the cause of the fire on the steamer *Wawaset* still remains a mystery; but we are of the opinion

that it originated in the fireman's room, under the forward deck,, adjoining the forecastle, and near the back connection of the boiler, and we recommend that inspectors require all bulkheads, boilers, hatches or other woodwork near or around the boilers of all steam vessels to be covered with metal, leaving sufficient space for the air to circulate between such metal coverings and the woodwork as a preventative against future disasters to steamers by fire.

Further we find from his own evidence that John R. Wood was acting in the capacity of master of the steamer *Wawaset* without having a United States certificate of license as such and the evidence also clearly shows that he had not made himself acquainted with the provisions of the act of Congress and the rules and regulations relating to steam vessels, and the duties of the officers navigating them; that he had no organization or discipline whatever in the fire department on board his vessel, expecting, as he said, each officer and crew to assist and do the best they could in case of fire or other emergency; none of the officers were specially designated to take charge of the boats, life preservers, or pumps, and no printed instructions were posted up concerning the manner of using the life preservers or other life saving appliances. As soon as the alarm of fire was sounded confusion reigned on board, no officer to give directions, and no one to distribute the life preservers to the passengers, particularly to the helpless women and children, who were deserted in the hour of their direct extremity.

Captain Wood further confesses that he never examined or tested the fire extinguishers, one of which was illegally removed from the steamer since her last inspection; never called the officers and crew to quarters for exercise in the fire department, as required by law to be done, at least once in each month and in many other respects failed to meet the requirements of the law in his capacity as master or acting master of a passenger steamer.

Robert W. Gravitt, who was acting in the capacity of mate on the *Wawaset* at the time of the disaster, was, like her captain, without a United States certificate or license, and equally as ignorant of the requirement of the laws, rules and regulations governing the steamboat inspection service.

In his own testimony, the chief engineer of the steamer *Wawaset*, Robert Nash, admitted the fact of his trading in truck produce, etc., at different landings when the steamer was running on her regular trips, and particularly on the day of the disaster; the evidence adduced also proved that he was at different times in attendance at the bar of the steamer, during his watch, and when the law positively demanded his presence at his post of duty in the engine room. It was also shown that the hose was not connected with the fire pumps, and that when the alarm of fire was given, Mr. Nash became perfectly paralyzed, and made little or no effort to extinguish the fire and none to save the lives of the passengers. If the hose had been attached to either of the pumps, and one or both of these pumps used in connection with the fire extinguisher, and the steam smothering pipe – the latter of which was under the entire charge of the engineer – we firmly believe the fire on the *Wawaset* could have been put out and the dreadful calamity avoided.

The negligence and misconduct of the chief engineer of the steamer *Wawaset* prior to the burning of the steamer, as well as his unofficer-like conduct after the fire occurred, are, in our opinion, deserving of the severest condemnation and the highest penalty prescribed by law.

We have therefore no alternative than to revoke the license of Robert Nash as an engineer on steam vessels navigating waters within the jurisdiction of the United States, and it is so ordered.

The fire on the steamer *Wawaset* occurred, as will be seen by the evidence, at midday, when all the officers and crew were supposed to be on duty, and at a time when the chances for extinguishing the fire and saving the passengers were far better than if the fire had occurred at night, and yet it is our painful duty to record the sacrifice of some eighty odd souls by that appalling calamity.

As a further safeguard against the recurrence of similar disasters to steam vessels, we respectfully recommend the necessity for inspectors in the various districts, making it a special duty to visit steamers from time to time, and without previous notification sound alarm of fire and call all hands to quarters and in this way ascertain and correct defects in the organization and equipment of such steamers.

We are of the opinion that if the fire department on the steamer *Wawaset* had been organized in accordance with the steamboat act, and the officers and crew instructed in their respective duties, that the life-preservers could have been distributed among the passengers, the boats safely lowered, and the greater portion, if not all the passengers saved.

So far as the general equipment of the steamer *Wawaset* at the time of her last inspection (March 24th, 1873), is concerned, it is in evidence that she was fully up to standard required by the laws and relating to steam vessels, and therefore can discover no dereliction of duty on the part of the inspectors under whose jurisdiction the steamer belonged; we believe they performed their duty impartially and efficiently.

James I. Lowry, inspector of hulls, testified positively to preparing the original certificate of the steamer so as to admit of the carriage of but fifty passengers and fifteen officers and crew, making a total of sixty-five in all, and this evidence was fully confirmed by the subsequent production of the original certificate itself from the files of the Georgetown custom-house. He therefore has no hesitation in declaring that the Potomac Ferry company was running the steamer *Wawaset*, on the eighth day of August, 1873, in open violation of the law, not only as regards the carriage of an excessive number of passengers, but also in employing unlicensed officers, and we earnestly recommend that steps be promptly taken by the proper officers of the government to impose upon said company the extreme penalties of the law for such violations; as also upon John R. Woods, the master, and Robert W. Gravatt, mate of the *Wawaset*, for plying their respective vocations without United States licenses, in defiance of the law.

In submitting this report, sir, we can truthfully say that we have endeavored to discharge the responsible duty imposed upon us with entire impartiality, always keeping in mind the principal object of the law under which the investigation was conducted ___ viz: the preservation of human life on steamer vessels; and we are led to believe that hereafter steamboat owners will make themselves fully and thoroughly acquainted with the act of Congress relating to steam vessels, and then yield a full and ready compliance thereto, equipping them with all life-saving appliances required by law, and in command of men who know and possess the courage to perform their whole duty in any emergency that may arise.

William Rose,
John E. Edgar,
Bureau of Investigation

This report is endorsed as follows:

To the Supervising Inspector General of Steam Vessels:

Sir: I have carefully read all the testimony of the within case of disaster of the steamer "*Wawaset*" and the report of the board of investigation, and heartily concur in the decision of said board.

John Menshaw,

Supervising Inspector

Baltimore, August 29th, 1873.

To the Honorable Wm. A. Richardson, Secretary of Treasury:

Sir: I have read the testimony in the case of steam *Wawaset* disaster, also the report of the board of investigation and concur in the decision of said board.

D.D. Smith

Supervising Inspector General

Washington, August 29th, 1873.

September 1st, 1873

Respectfully referred to the Solicitor of the Treasury.

Wm. A. Richardson

Secretary of Treasury