

**Steamboat Inspection Service  
Proceedings of the Board of Supervising  
Inspectors of Steam Vessels, 1852-99  
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The steamer *Wawaset*, belonging to the Potomac Ferry Company, caught fire on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, on the Potomac River, about forty miles below Washington, and was entirely destroyed. As nearly as could be ascertained about 82 lives were lost by this sad calamity. The steamer had but a short time prior to the disaster been thoroughly overhauled at Baltimore, and was at the time of the disaster fully equipped with all the life-saving appliances required by law. The case was thoroughly investigated at Washington by William Rose, inspector of hulls at Savannah, and John E. Edgar, inspector of boilers at Norfolk. The steamer's certificate of inspection allowed her to carry but fifty passengers, while it was proven in the investigation that at the time of the burning there were more than one hundred passengers on board. When the fire was first discovered the captain gave orders to run the boat ashore; the breeze being ahead, the flames were driven aft among the passengers there, creating a great panic among them, some of whom took possession of the life-boats, and not knowing how to manage them, they were broken and swamped, and nearly all those in the boats were drowned. The captain and his principal officers, including the engineer, were on the forward part of the vessel and gave very little assistance to the perishing passengers aft. Had the steamer been promptly stopped when the fire was first discovered, and the life-boats lowered, it is believed that all might have been saved, as the life boats were very large and of sufficient capacity to save all aboard of the steamer if the officers had done their duty and attended to their management there were between three and four hundred good cork jackets on board, in position accessible to the passengers, but two of which were used, by a Mr. Emerson, for himself and child, both of whom were saved thereby. The majority of passengers were colored persons who were taken aboard along the route, and were ignorant of the uses of life-saving appliances or steamers. It was clearly proven in the investigation that the officers were criminally negligent in regard to duty and proper discipline aboard the captain was running without a license as such at the time; he has since made application for a license to the local board at Baltimore, and been refused on account of his proven incompetency. The license of the chief engineer of the steamer was also revoked on account of his unofficer-like conduct at the time of the disaster. The board of investigation fully exonerate the local inspectors at Baltimore who made the previous annual inspection of the steamer from all blame in the premises, as the steamer was fully equipped in accordance with the requirements of law.