

The Evening Star, August 12, 1873, p. 2
Steamboat Disasters

The recent tragedy on the Potomac seems to renew in the public press the agitation of the question how to provide greater security for steamboat passengers. In the case of the *Wawaset*, the appalling loss of life in the placid waters of the Potomac at midday, and at no great distance from the shore, raises a general enquiry whether the same fatal defects may not be lurking in passenger river steamers everywhere. The *New York Star* calls attention to the careless management of the Brooklyn ferries, and suggests danger even in that short passage. A kind Providence, it says, has permitted the boats to be guided safely, and with few accidents, across one of the swiftest currents in the world, but some day a boiler will burst, a boat will sink, a fire break out, and the crowded cabins will be filled with frightened men, suffering women and helpless children. The editor then asks:

“Where will they find the life preservers? Tucked aloft in the narrow passage leading from cabin to cabin, where no one could by any possibility get at them.”

The *New York Express* also comments sharply upon the absurdity of placing life preservers in positions where they are unavailable, as is usually the case.

The *Commercial* says:

“The disaster on the Potomac only brings out with renewed emphasis the utter recklessness which is displayed on the average excursion steamer. These gaily decked crafts are generally crowded to overflowing, and in case of panic no one has or can have, the slightest control over the shrieking women and children. There is no adequate provision for extinguishing fires or saving passengers. There are, perhaps, life-preservers enough for one-quarter of the people, stowed away where nobody can get them, and there are two or three boats slung up as if for ornament rather than use. The consequence is, if a serious accident occurs the loss of a score or ore of lives is almost inevitable. Boats go down our bay almost every day during the summer, filled with joyous pleasure seekers, who are no more secure than those who went down the Potomac on the *Wawaset*.”

The *Boston Globe* referring to our suggestion that light rafts would prove much more serviceable in saving life than boats says:

“Such rafts are much better than boats, which are difficult to launch and more likely to capsize, and they have the advantage over life-preservers that they do not require to be sought out and properly adjusted by passengers. These life-preservers make a great show on our steamers, but they would be practically useless to a great many people, even if in the excitement of disaster they were able to reach them.”

We may add in this connection that rafts capable of sustaining a larger number of people than the same number of boats can be constructed so as to occupy even less space on a steamer than the humbug “life-boats” that make such a deceptive show. These rafts can be launched at a moment’s notice, and no matter how carelessly or hastily tumbled into the water are sure to light right side up and ready for use. There is no such thing as capsizing them. Passengers can leap from the deck upon them, or climb upon them from the water without accident. In short, they are so admirably suited for the work that nothing but the obstinate old-fogy spirit that seems to rule in the line of opposing all new ideas and modern improvements in the way of water travel, could stand in the track of their adoption.

It is well said by the Boston *Advertiser* that it is almost incredible, after the repeated warnings we have had, that no effort is made and persisted in to bring about a reform in the construction and the management of steam-vessels. Hundreds of thousands of lives are entrusted to them every day, and yet we go on building steamers that are certain to burn to the water's edge whenever they take fire, the small boats are still so arranged that fatal delay in launching them is inevitable, the crews are not trained to the use of them, life-preservers are put out of sight, captains neglect to use the lead, in fact all things remain as they were. We are a long-suffering people. Efforts at requiring reforms are but half made, and are opposed by the ship-owners and soon forgotten by the people. If we cannot take passage by a safe boat we take an unsafe one, and trust to luck. The directors of lines reckon on this popular carelessness. They have been careless themselves, and what wonder that their employes are careless to? On land the railroads are constantly making improvements. Safety platforms, brakes, car-heaters, switches and other appliances are getting to be almost universal, and the telegraph and automatic signals are used to prevent collisions. We should be puzzled if we were asked to point out an improvement in steamboat construction or management introduced within the last twenty years. In fact water transportation is not as safe now as it was a score of years ago.