

The Evening Star, August 16, 1873, p. 1
Burning Of The Wawaset
Official Investigation of the Disaster
Testimony Before the Treasury Heard Today

The official investigation as to the origin of the fire on board the ill-fated steamer *Wawaset* was resumed this morning at the Treasury department. The first witness examined was Capt. J.R. Woods.

Captain J.R. Woods Recalled

Was not engaged in trading onboard the *Wawaset*; no officer but the engineer did any trading; I passed Miss Reed down from the promenade deck to the clerk of the boat on the forward deck; she was lost; I do not remember of saying that any lady was saved who passed from the aft to the forward part of the boat; I may have said in conversation that I heard so, but I do not remember it.

Testimony of John H. Wise

Resides at the corner of 10th and G streets southwest; was a passenger on board the *Wawaset*; I was talking to the engineer when the fire broke out; a man rushed past us and said, the whole place is on fire down below the engine; I looked and saw the flames; I tried to get aft but could not; the flames were up to the hurricane deck in almost a second; the captain and myself were the last ones who left the boat; he told me to go round the flag pole and jump in the shallow water; was talking to Mr. Nash when the alarm sounded; we were about two feet from the engine room; no person was in the room; the bar room is about five feet from the engine room; the engineer went to the bar-room before the alarm with me and got a cigar; after the alarm was given the only person I saw about the boat was the captain; he told all to keep quiet and directed passengers where to jump over; I threw peach boxes overboard; don't know that I saved any one; know that the box I threw over for myself was picked up by someone else; I think there were some passengers saved who were aft; I saw a colored woman and two white women who were aft that were saved; don't know how or who saved them; had no previous acquaintance with the engineer; never saw him before I went on the boat.

Testimony of Nancy Bayler, Colored.

Reside in Washington; was on the *Wawaset*; was going after my children; can only tell you how I saved myself; I was sitting in front of the engine room when I heard the alarm; I rushed into the ladies' cabin; the people were all rushing into the small boat; I made my way to the wheel-house and hung on by a rod until the flames reached me; I then said "Oh, Lord!" and jumped overboard, because I thought I would rather be drowned than burned up; when the alarm was sounded I was sitting between the engine house and the ladies' saloon talking with another man; he was lost; I went to the guards on the outside; don't know whether the others could have saved anybody or not; I was not looking at them; I saw I had to be burned or drowned, and only looked out for myself; I jumped overboard in deep water and caught hold of a man until my toes touched the bottom; I kept my mouth shut tight and held my breath and did not swallow any water; I was watching the blaze and the water, and I saw one or the other had to take me that day sure, and I thought that I would rather be drowned than burned up, and then I lit out from the boat and jumped overboard; don't know how long I hung on outside; it was all done so quick I didn't have any judgment about it.

After a delay from 11 o'clock until ten minutes past one, awaiting the arrival of witness, Miss Kate McPherson was sworn.

Testimony of Miss McPherson

Reside in Charles county, Md.; got on *Wawaset* at Glymont to go to Chatterton; the boat was lowered to put us off when the alarm was sounded; did not see any men or any of the officers assist the ladies; don't know anything about the cause of the fire; I jumped overboard with my cousin; was on the aft part of the promenade deck when the alarm was given; was carried down the gangway by Mr. Wheeler, did not see any one but Mr. Wheeler, the clerk, attempt to save any ladies; was rescued from the water by Mr. Robert Adams who took me in a boat; don't think there was a chance for others to get aft to assist the ladies; the smoke would have suffocated them; I tried to get forward myself, but could not; do not know of any negligence on the part of the officers; the boat that was lowered to land us, when I reached the gangway was filled with darkies; one white lady had hold of it, and she went under; don't think it was possible for the fire to have been extinguished; the whole boat was in flames in less than three minutes; saw no life preservers on board the boat.

Mr. Rose then called upon any person in the room cognizant of any facts in connection with the burning of the steamer to step forward and testify, but no response was elicited. After another delay J.B. North was sworn.

Testimony of J.B. North

Reside in Washington; was a passenger on the *Wawaset*; after she left Smith's wharf I thought I would go down and pack my things; passing along the lower deck I met a colored man, and he said, "the boat is on fire;" I said, "keep cool, don't make any excitement; as there is excitement enough already; I tried to go aft, but it was impossible; I then began to throw lumber overboard; I looked up to the pilot-house and saw the captain smothered with smoke, passing buckets of water; I jumped overboard and saw a colored woman hanging on to the hawser; I thought at first to go and save her; she was a heavy woman, and thinking we would drown I did not attempt to rescue her; I did rescue a man who cried in distress and placed him to where his feet would touch; was summoned to the coroner's jury; remained at the scene of the disaster until 9 o'clock in the morning; I think the captain did everything he could on his part to save life and allay excitement; did not notice any negligence on the part of the officers or crew before the alarm; saw no male passenger assist the females, they could not, it was impossible to get aft; don't think it was possible to extinguish the fire after the alarm was given; it was like touching gunpowder off; saw life preservers aboard; they were easily accessible; I could have gotten at them, but, being a good swimmer, I never thought of taking one; did not particularly notice the life or yawl boats; did not see much of the crew; did the officers during the fire; am satisfied they did their duty; I don't think it was more than four minutes after I heard the alarm before I jumped overboard; I looked at the walking beams and saw that it had stopped; after I jumped overboard assisted Mr. Wise, who could not swim; the depth of the water where I jumped was over my head; the captain and Mr. Wheeler, the clerk, were still on the boat when I reached the shore; have traveled often on the *Wawaset*; my opinion as a passenger is that she was fully equipped with all live-saving apparatus required; do not know Mr. Nash, the engineer, only by sight; do not know whether he was in his engine room or not at the time of the alarm, paid no attention to him.

At ten minutes before two o'clock, the board adjourned until 10 a.m. on Monday.